The EU and Central Asia: Constructing Partnerships on Europe's Periphery?

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Abstract

Central Asia's geopolitical significance, proximity to major powers, and abundant mineral resources make it a region of strategic importance. However, it has received limited attention from policymakers and scholars. The present study addresses this knowledge gap by analysing official discourses of the European Union (EU), Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, specifically focusing on the notion of partnership and its implications for their relationships. As such, this thesis aims to investigate the following questions: How is the notion of partnership constructed in the EU and Central Asia discourses? How does the concept of partnership vary among Central Asian states? The study makes theoretical and empirical contributions. The theoretical contribution of this thesis is twofold. First, it diverges from existing works that discuss specific policy areas, means and deliverables by examining the conceptual foundations in EU-Central Asia relations, which have thus far been overlooked. Second, it contributes to the theorisation of partnership by moving away from studies that overemphasise the role of power rooted in the donor/receiver nature of relations of the EU with third regions. Instead, this research challenges the prevailing notion that the asymmetric nature of EU-Central Asia relations is the primary determinant shaping the interactions of these actors. More specifically, in the case of the EU, the construction of partnership and its approach to Central Asia is increasingly determined by its geopolitical consideration vis-à-vis other dominant actors, namely, China and Russia. In the case of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the study underscores the decisive role played by the policies of their political elites and the economic trajectories these nations embark on in shaping the partnership-building process with the EU. Empirically, through first-hand interviews with the officials of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and the EU, this thesis offers a fine-grained analysis of growing EU – Central Asia relations by exploring partnership dynamics.

Declaration

I confirm that this thesis is an original work authored solely by me. It has not been previously submitted for any degree or qualification at this University or any other institution. All references and sources used in this work have been duly acknowledged.

To the best of my knowledge, I assure that this authorisation does not violate any third party's rights.

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Abbreviations

ACP	African, Caribbean and Pacific
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CA	Central Asia
CACO	Central Asia Cooperation Organisation
CAS	Central Asian States
CPA	Cotonou Partnership Agreement
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organisation
DCI	Development Cooperation Instrument
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
EEC	European Economic Community
EIDHR	European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights
ENP	European Neighbourhood Policy
EP	European Parliament
EPCA	Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement
EU	European Union
GSP+	Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus
ICWC	Interstate Commission for Water Coordination
IFAS	International Fund for the Aral Sea
INOGATE	Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe
IR	International Relations
JAES	Joint Africa-EU Strategy
LEUB Low	Enriched Uranium Bank
LGBT	Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender
MEP	Members of the European Parliament
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organisation
NGOs	Non-governmental Organisations
NSA-LA	Non-State Actors and Local Authorities in Development
OECD	Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development
PCA	Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organisation
SP	Strategic Partnership
TA	Thematic Analysis
TACIS	Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States
TRACECA	Transport Corridor – Caucasus-Asia
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
WTO	World Trade Organisation

Chapter 1- Introduction

1.1. The thesis in a nutshell

Despite the challenges and complexities involved, a notable degree of mutual interdependence exists between the European Union and Central Asia. Since the early 2000s, the EU's engagement with Central Asia has experienced significant developments, marking a departure from the previous perception of the region as a 'terra incognito' in Brussels (Valenza, 2018, p.3). The EU adopted two Strategy Papers for Central Asia between 2007 and 2019, outlining its regional interests and objectives. Furthermore, the EU-Central Asia relations are characterised by a complex web of interactions, including institutionalised dialogues and programmes that address economic, political and human rights-related issues. The EU has a diplomatic presence in all five Central Asian countries, while Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have their embassies operating in Brussels. The intensification of EU and Central Asia relations can be attributed to various factors, including the EU's enlargement in 2004-2007, which expanded its geographical boundaries and brought five Central Asian states into its proximity (Casier, 2012; Fenton, 2015). Additionally, the war in Afghanistan, the EU's energy security needs, and the growing influence of China and Russia further fueled the EU's engagement with Central Asia (Hoffmann, 2010; Spaiser, 2015).

The EU and Central Asia endeavours require considerable resources and efforts from the involved parties. Thus, framing the relations in a mutually acceptable and effective way remains a pressing issue. Historically, the EU relied on its enlargement toolbox and aid relations framework, emphasising conditionality and hierarchy when engaging with its external milieu (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2002, 2004; Korosteleva, 2013). However, these top-down approaches may not be suitable for Central Asian countries, as they lack membership perspectives (i.e. the lure of potential EU membership) and have alternative partners (such as Russia and China) willing to provide support without stringent conditions. Scholars have proposed alternative approaches to anchor EU-Central Asia relations, such as values-based realism (Melvin, 2012) and embedding Central Asia with the Eastern Partnership countries (Gstöhl, 2015).

However, partnership has emerged as a central concept in EU-Central Asia relations, highlighted in the 2007 and 2019 EU Strategy Papers for Central Asia. Yet, a critical knowledge gap remains regarding how the EU, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan perceive and conceptualise partnership. This

thesis aims to address this omission in the literature by examining the discourses of these actors, exploring the meanings attributed to partnership and the influencing factors. Thus, the research seeks to address the following question: How is the notion of partnership constructed in the discourses of the EU and Central Asia? How does the concept of partnership vary among Central Asian states? By researching these questions, the study will provide valuable insights into the conceptualisation of partnership, enriching the discourse surrounding EU-Central Asia relations.

The study shows that while the EU, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan frequently employ the rhetoric of partnership, their underlying motivations for doing so diverge significantly. For instance, the EU uses the discourse of partnership as a strategic tool to distinguish itself from other regional actors. In contrast, for Central Asian states such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, partnership serves as a means to advance their economic relations with the EU and foster progress in this realm. Furthermore, the examination of partnership reveals variations in the broader dimensions and fundamental underpinnings of this concept among the three actors. These differences arise from an intricate interplay of factors, primarily dominated by (1) the presence of influential external actors in Central Asia, (2) mutual perceptions among the actors, and (3) specific elite policies oriented toward the economic development of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Lastly, all three actors overlook the significance of mutual learning in their conceptualisation of partnership. As a result of these differences and the lack of emphasis on mutual learning as a pivotal component of partnership, their approaches remain self-referential, hindering more effective cooperation between the EU and Central Asia.

From a theoretical perspective, the study of partnerships and the analysis of the EU's relations with other regions often discuss power relations rooted in asymmetric donor/receiver identities while highlighting the role of competing norms and interests as driving forces behind cooperation outcomes. However, this thesis contends that a comprehensive understanding of the partnership between the EU and Central Asian states requires considering broader dynamics beyond the power and interest/norms dichotomy. Drawing on insights from rationalist and constructivist approaches in International Relations (IR), this research demonstrates that multiple factors influence the partnership-building process in EU-Central Asia relations. Consequently, this thesis challenges the prevailing notion that the asymmetric nature of EU-Central Asia relations is the primary determinant shaping their interactions. Instead, it underscores the significance of other factors, including the role of political elites and their policies and the perceptions actors hold of each other,

especially in the case of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan when constructing partnership with the EU. By expanding the focus beyond power explanations, this thesis offers a more comprehensive understanding of how these countries engage with one another.

1.2. Significance of the research question and the selected case study

There are various reasons as to why the research question is important. The current global landscape is marked by unpredictable events and conflicts, highlighting the crucial role of effective and equitable partnerships between nations and regions. This is particularly relevant when considering the recent COVID-19 pandemic, where the need for assistance from neighbouring and distant countries became evident. The virus's rapid spread necessitated cross-border cooperation in areas such as medical research, information sharing, and the distribution of essential resources (Jit et al., 2021). During the early stages of the pandemic, Italy became one of the hardest-hit countries in Europe. In response, China, Russia and Cuba sent medical experts, equipment, and supplies to the EU member states (Poggioli, 2020). Similarly, at a later stage of the pandemic, India suffered from a devastating surge in COVID-19, resulting in thousands of deaths. Again, partners worldwide, including Central Asian countries, came together to send a helping hand (Chowdhury, 2021). Without such interstate and global partnerships shown in the case of Italy and India, the response to the pandemic would have been severely hampered, leading to even greater human and economic costs.

Furthermore, the concept of multilateralism, which emphasises cooperation and coordination among multiple nations, is replaced by a multipolar world where power is more distributed and diverse (Mogherini, 2017). Thus, one answer to such a multipolar world is a multilateral approach of seeking partnerships and alliances to navigate the complexities of the global stage (Mogherini, 2017). For example, the case of Russian aggression towards Ukraine demonstrates the importance of such partnerships. Without international cooperation and support, Ukraine would have faced a more challenging situation with limited resources and leverage. These partnerships have provided Ukraine with diplomatic backing, economic assistance, military aid, and avenues for peaceful resolution (Armstrong, 2023). By standing together against international law and territorial integrity violations, countries can send a clear message that such actions will not be tolerated.

The research question also holds practical relevance to EU and Central Asia relations. The EU and Central Asia are mutually dependent on each other. The EU acknowledges that the

interdependence between the EU and the countries of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) makes it vulnerable to developments in Central Asia. Put simply, a stable Central Asia helps ensure a stable Eastern neighbourhood. Simultaneously, Central Asian states face multiple challenges in ecology, economy, and politics. Two-thirds of the region's territory comprises deserts, and the environmental degradation of the remaining arable land is further exacerbated by cotton monoculture (Weinthal, 2002). Additionally, authoritarian political regimes and their firm control over the growing young population unintentionally facilitate the rise of Islamist ideology as a perceived *legitimate* voice of opposition. The stagnant economy is another area where imminent change is necessary. Cooperation with the EU could assist the countries in the region in addressing these issues to a certain extent. Therefore, all parties should find ways to enhance effective partnerships with Central Asian states in addressing shared challenges.

Theoretically, the case study of EU and Central Asia relations is significant for four reasons. Firstly, it provides fertile ground for researchers seeking to understand how the EU engages with the ever-changing and complex outside world as a foreign policy actor. EU officials increasingly recognise Central Asia as an important region for its foreign policy (Interviews 1 and 10). Melvin (2008) characterises Central Asia as the most challenging test for the EU's approach to external relations. Before engaging with Central Asia, the EU's foreign policy was tested on more favourable grounds with states where it enjoyed greater leverage than other powers due to shared European identity, geographical proximity, and historical ties (Melvin, 2008). However, the EU is neither an old boss nor kin nor an immediate neighbour in Central Asia. Therefore, Central Asia offers an opportunity to explore whether the EU is solely a European or a global foreign policy actor. Can the EU compete or cooperate with emerging powers while finding creative ways to win the hearts and minds of Central Asian regimes and populations?

Secondly, according to Fawn, Kluczewska and Korneev (2022), researching EU-Central Asia relations provides an excellent opportunity for policymakers and scholars to investigate how the EU learns about other regions. A crucial aspect of this research addresses the presence of mutual learning in the discourses of the EU and Central Asian regimes regarding the construction of partnership-building processes. Thirdly, the EU and Central Asian states have identified each other as areas of interest for their respective foreign policy thinking. Studying EU and Central Asia relations can shed light on how these two actors position each other vis-a-vis other regions and actors, thus revealing their overall visions of global politics.

Lastly, Central Asia offers an excellent opportunity to study the regionalisation process or the lack thereof. There are two arguments in the literature regarding regionalisation in Central Asia. First, scholars studying the EU's region-making and regionalisation have overlooked Central Asia compared to other post-Soviet regions (Fawn, Kluczewska and Korneev, 2022). Second, Buranelli (2021) argues that debates on regionalisation often view regional integration in Central Asia as a failure of integration rather than considering different forms of politics as explanatory factors. According to Buranelli (2021), the regionalisation concept fails to capture the dynamics of Central Asian international relations, thereby inadequately explaining what is transpiring in the region. Thus, research on EU-Central Asia relations could contribute to the knowledge gap.

1.3. Overview of the argument

In this thesis, I aim to provide a fresh perspective on EU-Central Asia relations by taking a critical approach towards understanding the nature of cooperation. This research advances the argument that the fundamental nature of the relations between these two actors can reveal rich insight into the dynamic processes influencing the interaction between the EU and Central Asia. Thus, rather than focusing on specific policy areas, means, and outcomes, I problematise the nature of relations by deconstructing the concept of partnership as defined by the EU, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan.

Korosteleva's (2011b, 2011a, 2013, 2014) analysis of EU partnership dynamics with Eastern Partnership countries, such as Ukraine, Moldova, and Belarus, has influenced the conceptual foundations of this research. Central to Korosteleva's (2014) characterisation of partnership is the idea that the other must be placed at the core of the relationship. More specifically, she argues that partnership requires self to adjust its behaviour and values to align with those of the other. This process, she suggests, necessitates a thorough understanding of the boundaries and preferences of the partner, ultimately fostering effective cooperation. While this research draws on Korosteleva's conceptualisation, it diverges from her work in several key aspects.

Firstly, Korosteleva's conceptualisation of partnership heavily relies on a single research paradigm rooted in a constructivist approach. Such research often privileges specific aspects of the topic at hand at the expense of the other factors. Thus, it is less able to offer nuanced insights into complex social phenomena (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010a). Accordingly, in Korosteleva's research, the identities of the actors play a pivotal role in her explanation of partnership dynamics. Specifically, her analysis aims to shed light on how the EU constructs the self through the other. In contrast,

this study moves beyond the conventional understanding of the EU's collaboration with other regions, which often dichotomises between rationalist interests and constructivist norms, as commonly observed in the existing literature. Instead, it adopts an eclectic approach (discussed in Chapter 3), which integrates rationalist and constructivist perspectives to illuminate the significance of various factors across multiple levels and the diverse perceptions and rationales among actors within the EU and Central Asia. Consequently, this approach can better explain why the seemingly interdependent relationship, characterised by shared interests and considerable resources, fails to achieve its full potential.

Secondly, a critical distinction between this thesis and Korosteleva's work is the comparative approach to the concept of partnership. While Korosteleva incorporates perspectives from Eastern countries, her analysis centres on how these states respond to the EU's conceptualisation of partnership. In contrast, my research examines how Central Asian actors independently interpret and value the concept of partnership, focusing on their own views rather than reactions to EU perspectives.

Lastly, a significant difference exists between this thesis and Korosteleva's work in conceptualising and operationalising learning about the other, an essential element of the partnership concept. Korosteleva treats learning about the other as a one-way process, which should be undertaken predominantly by the EU. I disagree with this theorisation, as it denies the agency and roles of partner countries in facilitating the learning process. To address this, the thesis adopts the notion of mutual learning. Furthermore, it provides a precise definition of it in Chapter 2 to examine how Central Asian countries learn about the EU and how they facilitate the EU's reciprocal efforts to understand them. By diverging both in research approach and synthesising diverse perspectives, this thesis makes an original contribution to knowledge.

The literature on theorising partnership has largely neglected EU-Central Asia relations and instead focused on the EU's cooperation with African countries (Hurt, 2003; Pirozzi, 2010; Zimelis, 2011; Carbone, 2012; Keijzer and Negre, 2014; Kammel, 2018; Ouma-Mugabe, Chaminuka and Melo, 2018), Eastern Neighbourhood states (Bosse, 2010; Korosteleva, 2011a, 2011b, 2013, 2014; Schumacher, 2014), or strategic partnership with China (Holslag, 2011; Maher, 2016).

Meanwhile, the existing scholarship on cooperation between the EU and Central Asia can be broadly categorised into three distinct groups. The first group of scholars provide an overview of

EU-Central Asia relations by examining specific EU governance initiatives in the region. For instance, this body of research has approached the EU's activities in Central Asia from the aspect of aid development and the promotion of norms, particularly democracy promotion (Kassenova, 2007; Crawford, 2008; Warkotsch, 2009; Kavalski, 2010; Emerson et al., 2010; Axyonova, 2014; Voloshin, 2014; Sharshenova, 2018), migration (Korneev, 2013; Gavrilis, 2011), education (Jones, 2010a, 2010b), and culture (Valenza and Boers, 2018; Valenza, Boers and Cappeletti, 2022).

In general, scholars largely agree that the EU has fallen short of achieving its regional objectives in these domains. These critiques overwhelmingly attribute the EU's failures to what I term *EU-related* factors. There is perhaps no area where scholars are more unanimous in their assessment of the European Union's shortcomings than around democracy promotion: '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' (Voloshin 2014, p. 70). Scholars highlight the ideological contradiction between the EU's norm promotion and hydrocarbon interests (Hoffmann, 2010; Anceschi, 2014; Crawford, 2008). Hoffmann (2010) specifically argues that this prioritisation of energy security undermines the EU's ability to effectively and consistently pursue its normative agenda in Central Asia.

Furthermore, scholars highlight a disconnect between the EU's rhetoric and actions (Warkotsch, 2006) and the ineffectiveness of its policy approaches (Warkotsch, 2011; Peyrouse, Laruelle, and Boonstra, 2012; Axyonova, 2014) as significant detriments to its democracy promotion efforts in the region. In other domains, such as migration, failures are attributed to the EU's ineffectiveness in coordinating with other external actors (Korneev, 2013), as well as the lack of motivation by the local elite to enforce border regulations advocated by external actors (Gavrilis, 2011). Similarly, in the sphere of culture, the EU's attempts to leverage its soft power have yielded mixed outcomes. Scholars argue this is largely due to its inability to adapt initiatives to resonate with local values and preferences (Valenza and Boers, 2018; Valenza, Boers, and Cappeletti, 2022).

However, albeit limited in numbers, few have pointed to non-EU-related obstacles, such as the presence of other powerful actors (Kassenova, 2008; Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017) and the influence of the domestic context (Warkotsch, 2008; Bossuyt and Kubicek, 2011) to explain the limited impact of the EU in the region. Sharshenova and Crawford (2017, p.454) found that China, through its 'alternative development assistance, alternative normative framing of the nature of government, and an alternative development path, none of which place democracy at the core'

indirectly undermines EU's democracy promotion efforts in Central Asia. Meanwhile, the cultural idiosyncrasies of Central Asian states, such as the patronage system of governance that favours strong leaders, create obstacles for the EU to promote its norms effectively (Warkotsch, 2008).

The second group of scholars examine the EU's influence in the region in relation to Russia and China (Spaiser, 2015; 2018; Bossuyt, 2018; Valenza, Boers, and Cappeletti, 2022). While not officially acknowledged by the EU, this strand of literature reports that the Union faces stiff competition from China and Russia across various policy areas (Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017; Fawn, 2021). Regarding development cooperation, Bossuyt (2018) notes that the EU's impact is perceived as lower compared to China's despite spending considerable funds and effort. In the realms of transport, education, and cultural cooperation, the EU similarly faces challenges from Russia and China, particularly from the latter (Fawn, 2021; Valenza, Boers and Cappeletti, 2022). China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) has led to significant investments in transport infrastructure development in Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan (Spaiser, 2015; Bitabarova, 2018; Russell, 2019a), effectively surpassing the EU in this policy area (Fawn, 2021). In the security realm, the EU, compared to Russia and China, plays a minor role (Spaiser, 2015). This is primarily because the EU has not put forth any concrete proposals, such as a regional security structure akin to the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) and Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), and instead focuses on 'soft' security issues like governance and the environment (Spaiser, 2015, pp.96–97). Nevertheless, despite its lesser role in security matters, Spaiser (2015) contends that the EU maintains influence through its positive reputation and emphasis on non-geopolitical areas. Thus, it cannot be considered a marginal actor (Spaiser, 2015).

Lastly, the third group of literature investigates the mutual perceptions held between the EU and Central Asia. This body of research presents the EU's perception of Central Asia (Krivokhizh and Soboleva, 2022; Dzhuraev, 2022), how the EU views itself in the region (Fawn, 2021; Hanova, 2022), and Central Asian views of the EU (Peyrouse, 2014; Bekenova and Collins, 2019; Arynov, 2021, 2022a, 2022b; Gulomova, 2024). Scholars explore the evolving views of the EU in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union, noting shifts from viewing Central Asia as a distant region that was 'outside of its responsibility' (Kavalski and Cho, 2018, p.55) to potential but flawed partners in combating terrorism (Cooley, 2012). However, as Chapter 5 reveals, the EU's views of the region are in flux and, therefore, remain multifaceted, ranging from security threats stemming from Islamic radicalism (Pierobon, 2022) to valuable partners that could help stabilise Afghanistan

(Gulomova, 2024). Furthermore, studies highlight how the EU presents its image in Central Asia as a non-geopolitical actor focused on supporting the development of Central Asian states (Fawn, 2021; Arynov, 2022a). In other words, the EU constructs itself as a development partner whose good governance interventions are welcome in the region (Hanova, 2022). However, Fawn (2021) argues that despite declarations of not having geopolitical interests, the EU often thinks and acts in geopolitical terms in CA, and the findings of this thesis also confirm such an approach by the Union.

In contrast, perceptions of the EU in Central Asia are generally positive among elites, viewing it as a development actor with less geopolitical influence (Arynov, 2021, 2022a, 2022b; Gulomova, 2024). However, there are nuances. First, the EU's development partner role is more pronounced in Uzbekistan than in Kazakhstan, as the former still benefits from the Union's bilateral aid package (Gulomova, 2024). Second, the EU's policies and initiatives remain relatively unknown to the broader public in CA, including the educated section of society (Peyrouse, 2014; Arynov, 2022a). Third, the EU's positive image is perceived in relative terms to China and Russia, whose engagements are predominantly seen through a geopolitical lens (Arynov, 2018; Krivokhizh and Soboleva, 2022). However, notwithstanding the positive image, as this thesis reveals, the EU faces criticism for not being an adequately reflexive partner (Interviews 7 and 16) and for failing to conduct an open dialogue with local actors (Korneev and Kluczewska, 2022).

Despite this body of work on EU-Central Asia relations, notable oversights remain in the literature. As Arynov (2022b) points out, EU-Central Asia relations have primarily been portrayed from the EU's perspective, overlooking the local viewpoint. He argues this does not provide a holistic analysis of EU-Central Asia relations. Likewise, Fawn, Kluczewska and Korneev (2022) note that studies frequently take divergent approaches, focusing either on the EU or Central Asia as case studies for their respective external actions or on various aspects of the relationship, leading to fragmented and narrow lines of inquiry. Indeed, as demonstrated in this section, existing scholarship mainly focuses on policy-specific explanations for EU-Central Asia relations, overlooking conceptual insights into these relations. Furthermore, commentators often attribute the shortcomings in the relationship between these actors primarily to EU-related factors, neglecting others.

Instead of solely focusing on specific policy areas or exclusively examining either the EU or Central Asia, I adopt a broader perspective and critically analyse the conceptual underpinnings of their relationship. Specifically, I will explore the notion of partnership from both the EU and Central Asian perspectives, utilising first-hand interviews and diverse data sources. This approach will

enable me to address the criticism levelled at the current literature by presenting the often-overlooked views from Central Asia and broadening the conceptual scope beyond a narrow focus on either the EU or Central Asia as isolated research subjects.

Furthermore, due to the eclectic nature of my conceptual framework (discussed extensively in Chapter 3), I avoid focusing exclusively on the role of power, which I consider another EU-related factor. In line with most partnership studies analysing the EU's engagements with third regions, Kluczewska and Dzhuraev (2020) have emphasised the significance of power dynamics rooted in aid/donor relations as a hindrance to practical cooperation between the EU and Central Asian states. However, it's crucial to note that Central Asian states differ from other regions in their limited reliance on EU aid for essential socioeconomic development (Fawn, Kluczewska, and Korneev, 2022). Additionally, unlike relationships rooted in colonial ties common in North-South cooperation contexts, EU-Central Asia relations lack such historical foundations, making EU-related factors less central in these interactions. Thus, moving beyond power dynamics and EU-centric perspectives becomes necessary and a way to offer fresh insights into the unique dynamics of EU-Central Asia relations.

The thesis demonstrates that while the official discourses of the EU, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan utilise the concept of partnership, their underlying motivations and interpretations differ significantly. Furthermore, a notable deficiency in all three cases is the absence of mutual learning, an essential element of effective partnership. As a result, the actors tend to approach their relations with one another from self-referential perspectives, limiting the potential for collaboration. Drawing from these findings, the thesis advances two key arguments contributing to a deeper understanding of EU-Central Asia relations. Firstly, I argue that a better understanding of EU-Central Asia cooperation may be achieved by the conceptual foundations of relations between the two actors rather than focusing on separate policy areas. Secondly, the thesis challenges the notion that power, stemming from the asymmetric nature of relations, which is often categorised as an EU-related problem, occupies a central role in the approaches of the EU and Central Asia towards one another. Instead, it argues that in the case of authoritarian states like Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, domestic elite policies and elite perceptions of the other and the trajectory of economic development exert more significant influence over partnership dynamics. Similarly, geopolitical positioning vis-à-vis China and Russia and domestic politics for the EU increasingly shape its approach to Central Asia.

1.4. Contribution to literature

The thesis makes an empirical, theoretical and analytical contribution to existing literature. The empirical contribution to the existing literature on EU-Central Asia relations is two-fold. Firstly, it presents original data from interviews with European and Central Asian elites and experts. A total of 19 interviews were conducted, with a particular emphasis on obtaining the perspectives of high-level elites. While accessing the views of Central Asian elites was challenging, their insights proved to be particularly valuable. Some scholars have touched upon the official opinions of Kazakh and Kyrgyz elites concerning cooperation with the EU (Bossuyt, 2018; Arynov, 2021, 2022b), but the perspectives of Uzbek officials have been largely overlooked, presumably due to difficulties associated with access to them. Moreover, given the relatively limited attention given to Central Asia in broader EU studies, first-hand views and perceptions of EU officials through interviews have not been thoroughly explored either. Thus, by bringing together data from the officials of these three actors, I contribute to increasing original knowledge of the EU and Central Asia scholarship.

The second empirical contribution of this research lies in gathering insights from EU and Central Asian elites and experts regarding their perceptions of immaterial qualities of the relationship, such as their views of the relationship, including interests, shared values as well as material qualities such as dialogue structures, and regional and bilateral instruments. By incorporating the perspectives of high-level elites on both sides, this research allows readers to gain a deeper understanding of the actors' views and perceptions. Additionally, the semi-structured interviews played a crucial role in shedding light on the views of EU and Central Asian elites regarding the importance of mutual learning as a critical aspect of the partnership concept. This aspect is particularly significant as it explores how regions with limited cultural and historical connections approach learning about one another. The insights gained from these interviews provide new and valuable information that contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of previously overlooked aspects of EU-Central Asia relations.

The study makes a theoretical contribution to our understanding of partnerships between the EU and countries with unique characteristics. Previous research has predominantly focused on established states or those with geographical, cultural, or historical connections to the EU, such as those within the ENP, African partner states, and strategic partners like the US and China. In contrast, Central Asia possesses distinctive features, including secular dictatorships, post-

communist governments, and a significant Muslim population. Moreover, the EU's relations with Central Asia diverge from traditional North-South dynamics based on colonial ties and aid dependency observed in other regions (Fawn, Kluczewska and Korneev, 2022). Additionally, the EU does not hold a major player status in Central Asia, as Russia, a traditional hegemon and colonial power, and China, a powerful neighbouring country with increasing influence, play significant roles (Spaiser, 2015). Therefore, this thesis offers new insights to inform the theorisation of partnership by providing insights distinct from those characterising the EU's relations with other regions.

Theoretically, the study also contributes to EU studies from three standpoints. First, the EU's foreign policy actorness comes forth with this study. In particular, the case study reveals how the EU adapts to competition from Russia and China by co-opting the language of partnership based on dialogue and differentiation to distinguish itself and its role. Secondly, the thesis enhances our understanding of institutional differences in the EU's approach to Central Asia, thereby deepening our understanding of this intricate actor. The research uncovers that the European Parliament (EP) places greater emphasis on value-based aspects of the concept of partnership with Central Asian states compared to other EU institutions, such as the Commission and the Council, resulting in a higher level of consistency in its approach. Simultaneously, it reveals that the EP does not base its engagements with Central Asian states on pragmatism, taking into account factors like the EU's leverage and other geopolitical considerations.

On the other hand, both Council and Commission documents demonstrate less strict adherence to shared values and exhibit a more pragmatic approach in their engagements with the region. Furthermore, interviews with EU officials provide additional insights, highlighting even more nuances and pragmatism in constructing the partnership concept with Central Asian countries. EU officials display greater recognition of differences and more tolerance towards the gradual transition of these countries to *liberal* democracies. Additionally, they openly discuss policy outcomes and acknowledge the EU's limited leverage in the region, aspects that are not extensively reflected in official documents. This points to variances in perspectives among actors at different levels within the EU, further adding complexity to the theorisation of EU-Central Asia relations.

Third, the thesis contributes to understanding how the EU learns about Central Asia. It shows that, although the EU's approach to learning about the other is slowly improving, there is still room for improvement. This finding aligns with the previous works of Kluczewska and Dzhuraev (2020),

who have been critical of the EU's lack of knowledge production efforts regarding the region. This is to the detriment of the EU's overall policy and image as it tries to convince others that it is more reflective and considerate than the other actors.

The thesis also contributes to an approach already established in the broader EU literature but only emerging in the body of work regarding Central Asia - perception studies. The literature on perceptions already highlights the importance of actors' views on the EU's policy outcomes (Lucarelli and Fioraminti, 2010). In this thesis, an essential aspect of the research was to capture how the views of the EU of the region have evolved and how this impacts its partnership construction towards the region. For example, the study highlights that the EU's predominant perception of the region as a security threat clarifies its policy preferences, prioritising stability by promoting democratization within the region. At the same time, the perception of the Central Asian countries explained their differing approaches to the terms of the relations with the EU. Uzbek officials view the EU primarily as a development partner who can help them improve specific areas of cooperation and, thus, are more willing to accept conditional relations. Meanwhile, Kazakh leaders viewed the EU primarily as an economic actor. Therefore, they were more assertive in their demand for partnership on equal terms.

Furthermore, the perception held by Uzbekistan that the EU primarily acts as a donor has led to a perspective where the responsibility for mutual learning is seen as resting predominantly with the EU. This view contrasts with the idea of both countries being equal partners, jointly responsible for fostering mutual understanding. By capturing the perceptions that both the EU and Central Asian states hold towards each other, this thesis also contributes to Central Asian studies engaged in understanding the role of the EU as an external actor that is playing a role in reshaping the foreign and domestic policies of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Lastly, Chapter 4 focuses on understanding the process of renewed regionalisation in Central Asia, which scholars often describe as one of the least cohesive regions in the world. Despite the EU having consistently agitated for Central Asian regional integration, scholarship has mostly overlooked regionalisation in Central Asia (Fawn, Kluczewska and Korneev, 2022). By engaging in this aspect of the research, the study revealed a general overlap in the views of regional elites regarding what Central Asia represents geographically and geopolitically, indicating a shared understanding of the region. However, there were also some differences observed. For example, despite sharing a border with Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan did not consider the

conflict-ridden state part of Central Asia. On the other hand, Uzbekistan was the only country among the five Central Asian states that referred to Afghanistan as part of Central Asia in order to garner regional and broader international support to help stabilise this neighbouring country. This is in line with the visions of President Mirziyoyev, who wants to increase the economic potential of Uzbekistan and Central Asia by stabilising Afghanistan and improving connectivity to South Asian markets. These factors highlight the significance of leadership and domestic politics in shaping a state's perception of the region.

Analytically, comparative analysis of the EU and Central Asia perceptions regarding the notion of partnership contributes to decentring EU studies by diverging away from the other works that employ an inside out approach where EU-CA relations are examined through the EU's perspective alone. Keuleers, Fonck and Keukeleire (2016), in their work *Beyond EU navel-gazing: Taking stock of EU-centrism in the analysis of EU foreign policy,* identify three main perspectives to studying foreign policy: inward driven, inside out and outside in. Their stocktake of several hundred scholarly works reveals that many researchers adopt an inward-driven approach where the focus is on the EU and its mechanisms. They also find a considerable amount of inside out approach where the scholars evaluate EU policy implementation in the third regions from the EU perspective. Lastly, their work confirms that very few outside in approaches, meaning the EU foreign policy is analysed from the perspective of the third region, are employed. As a result, such studies result in an imbalanced view of foreign policy that is somewhat distorted, which affects the policies adopted in the future unproductive way (Keuleers, Fonck and Keukeleire, 2016). By adopting an outside in approach to the subject matter, I address such a one-sided analysis of the EU's foreign policy and offer a more rounded explanation of the EU – Central Asia partnership.

1.5. Roadmap: structure of the thesis

In the spirit of inquiry, this thesis is structured as follows. Chapter 2 introduces the conceptual framework utilised in this research and explains fundamental theoretical notions that will later be applied in the empirical analysis. Specifically, it examines the application and definitions of partnership in the fields of development studies and International Relations. Additionally, it explores various typologies of partnerships commonly employed in the European Union's relations with third regions.

Chapter 3 presents the methodology employed in this thesis. Chapters 4, 5, 6, and 7 illustrate the study's empirical findings. Chapter 4 provides a comparative analysis of how the EU and Central Asian states construct the region of Central Asia. Chapters 5 and 6 examine the construction of partnership in the official discourse of the two selected Central Asian states: Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The former focuses on Uzbekistan, while the latter concentrates on Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, Chapter 7 investigates partnership construction in the EU's official discourse. It accomplishes this by tracing the chronological evolution of the concept through official documents, identifying institutional disparities, and examining elite perceptions through semi-structured interviews.

Finally, the last chapter (Chapter 8) weaves together the thesis threads. It compares the findings from the three case studies and concludes the construction of partnerships in the EU, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan discourses. These conclusions are contextualised within the existing literature. Furthermore, the chapter outlines directions for future research.

Chapter 2 - A conceptual framework for partnership

In this chapter, I will present the conceptual framework and propositions that will be evaluated in the case studies of this thesis. The primary objective of this thesis is to assess the conceptualisations of partnership within the official discourses of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and the European Union. The study explores how these actors define and understand the notion of partnership and examines the various factors that influence their conceptualisations. Thus, the partnership concept serves as the analytical backbone of this research.

The conscious choice to use the concept of partnership as a framework for analysis stems from the fact that the EU's two Strategy Papers for Central Asia refer to their relations as a partnership. Moreover, the officials from these three case studies frequently refer to the EU-Central Asia relations as a case of partnership. However, partnership is a broad concept that can encompass various meanings depending on the partners involved and the context in which it was established (Nappini, 2006). Consequently, the type of partnership can differ based on the partners' objectives, content, and cultural traditions (Nappini, 2006). This inherent flexibility and breadth associated with the notion of partnership imply that each partnership can find its specific balance among its elements, tensions, and relations, as there is no singular framework for a successful partnership (Nappini, 2006). Despite the fluidity and expansiveness of the partnership concept, academia has made efforts to concretise and narrow down its characteristics. Therefore, the purpose of this chapter is to present the theoretical discussions of partnership in two distinct fields and provide an overview of the conceptual framework of the thesis.

The chapter will unfold as follows: The first section will present the evolution and definition of partnership within the EU's internal context. The second section will explore the concept of partnership in development studies. Subsequently, the third section will ground the discussion of partnership in International Relations theory. By examining and comparing the concept of partnership from these perspectives, we establish a foundation for the conscious decision to adopt the theorisation of partnership in IR as the basis for our conceptual framework. The penultimate section will delve into the types of partnerships, accompanied by relevant case studies. This is particularly relevant as it provides a glimpse into how the EU instrumentalises the concept of partnership differently depending on its partner states. Finally, the last section will present the conceptual framework by explaining its contents and the rationale behind its eclectic design.

2.1. Defining partnership in the context of EU Structural Funds.

The partnership principle in the EU context was first established in 1989 with regard to Structural Funds (SF), where it was identified as one of the main governing principles (Bache and Olsson, 2001). The main aim of the partnership principle was to guide various stages of structural fund programmes, such as the development, implementation and monitoring (Bache and Olsson, 2001). Since its establishment, its definition has undergone several changes (Bache, 2010). Initially, the narrow definition of partnership was limited to cooperation between the Commission and Member States (Nappini, 2006). Gradually, it became more inclusive, as can be seen in the Council Regulation in 1999 Article 8 (European Council, 1999):

1. *Community actions shall complement or contribute to corresponding national operations. They shall be drawn up in close consultation, hereinafter referred to as the 'partnership', between the Commission and the Member State, together with the authorities and bodies designated by the Member State within the framework of its national rules and current practices, namely:*

- *the regional and local authorities and other competent public authorities,*
- *the economic and social partners*,
- *any other relevant competent bodies within this framework*.

The following definition of partnership in Council Regulation 1083/2006 went even further to include civil society and non- governmental organisations (Nappini, 2006, p.12):

1. *The objectives of the Funds shall be pursued in the framework of close cooperation (hereinafter referred to as partnership) between the Commission and each Member State. Each Member State shall organise, where appropriate and in accordance with current national rules and practices, a partnership with authorities and bodies such as:*

- *The competent regional, local, urban, and other public authorities.*
- *The economic and social partners; any other appropriate body representing civil society, environmental partners,*
- *Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and bodies responsible for promoting equality between men and women.*

The subsequent modification of the partnership concept meant that new kinds of 'multi-level partnerships' were created within the EU, thus 'bringing together national, subnational and

supranational state actors into a process of formal dialogue unique to EU policymaking' (Bache, 2010, p.61). The rationale for including diverse actors was to increase both the legitimacy and the efficiency of policy delivery between the Commission and member states (Bache and Olsson, 2001). However, the inclusion of non-state actors in the partnership remained 'patchy' in practice due to the unwillingness of member states to include them in the policymaking process with the Commission (Bache, 2010, p.62). Nonetheless, over time, partnership in the internal context of the EU has come to mean cooperation among national, regional, state and non-state actors in negotiating the terms of structural fund programmes.

While the partnership principle presented above is relevant to the internal set-up of the EU, other instruments, such as the European Neighbourhood and Partnership Instrument, were gradually being modelled on it (Khasson, 2013). As the EU expanded the orbit of its external action, the partnership principle was further developed to engage with neighbouring countries that fell below the membership threshold (Korosteleva, 2011b). The main aim of the partnership framework was to offset the rigidity associated with enlargement tools of strict conditionality and top-down coordination (Korosteleva, 2013). With the adoption of ENP in 2004, the concept further received some prominence. However, it remained conceptually and methodologically ill-defined (Korosteleva, 2011b). Since then, the Neighbourhood Policy has gone through several modifications. Although the policy documents further elaborated on the notion of partnership and its elements (Korosteleva, 2014), the EU's conceptions of partnership remained inadequate. Therefore, to further define and unpack the substance of the partnership concept, the next section will engage with literature in development studies.

2.2. Partnership in development studies

Although the notion of partnership in international development has been in use since the late 1960s, its use became pervasive only in early 1990 (Crawford, 2003). The earliest use of the term partnership in development assistance occurred in the Pearson Commission report produced in 1969 and later in the texts of several non-governmental organisations (Barnes and Brown, 2011). The Pearson Commission stipulates that partnership should go beyond the practices of information sharing or formal policy dialogue and entail determinate commitments on both sides – the recipient to use aid efficiently and fulfil what is expected of them and the donor side to ensure aid commitment and to appropriately reward good performance (Maxwell and Riddell, 1998). Despite

the efforts of various aid organisations, up to the end of the Cold War, the concept of partnership was dominated by donor countries' geopolitical and economic interests (Fowler, 1998). This inevitably led many scholars and NGOs to criticise aid practices for being coercive, intrusive and as well as being highly dependent on conditionality (Barnes and Brown, 2011). The end of global political power games after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and its Communist ideology allowed the North to redefine the terms and conditions of international development cooperation (Fowler, 1998). Dominated by conditionality for several years, the change in the notion of partnership in international development was initially iterated by the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development Assistance (OECD) development document *Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Co-operation* (Crawford, 2003). The paper emphasised that the responsibility for each country's development lies in the hands of its people and government, meaning the process needs to be locally owned (Crawford, 2003). Other prominent international organisations, such as the World Bank and IMF, adopted the partnership framework in their development relations with recipient countries (Abrahamsen, 2004). Consequently, many international organizations and countries such as Britain and Sweden gradually acknowledged the critical role of local ownership, commitment and homegrown development programmes (Abrahamsen, 2004; Barnes and Brown, 2011).

The proliferation of the partnership concept in the context of North-South relations has sparked intense debates among scholars. Abrahamsen (2004) suggests these discussions can be categorised into two main camps. The first camp holds an optimistic view, supporting the emergence of partnership practices while recognising the challenges involved in achieving genuine partnership. The second camp, on the other hand, approaches partnership with scepticism, perceiving it as mere empty rhetoric used to conceal power asymmetries. It is important to note that Abrahamsen (2004) acknowledges the risk of oversimplification in labelling scholars in this manner. Nonetheless, to organise the available discussions, I have adopted this categorisation.

Maxwell and Riddell (1998), in their review of the rise of partnership concept in various organisations as well as governments in the early to late 1990s, identify two types of partnerships: weak partnerships characterised by policy dialogue and information sharing alone and on the other hand strong partnership containing jointly agreed programmes with multi-annual financial agreements. Maxwell and Riddell (1998) categorise most development relations between the South and North as exercising weak partnerships. The exception was the initial two Lomé Conventions

between the EU and African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries, where aid recipients enjoyed a certain level of power-sharing and contractual aid conditions (Maxwell and Riddell, 1998). While the authors complement the efforts made by leading aid organisations and European governments, they are highly critical of the pitfalls of translating this well-intentioned and timely rhetoric into practice. They touch upon the apparent problems that plague the relationship between aid and recipient countries, such as the donor country taking the lead in determining the terms and criteria for forming partnerships. In the same breath, they admit that it is tough to get the recipient country's involvement in formulating a partnership as they often might feel boxed in by the formula they have helped to create.

In contrast to Maxwell and Riddell, scholars such as Fowler (1998) are not convinced of the concept of partnership that has been increasingly used to define and characterise aid relations between the North, South and East. According to him, in the case of an international organisation such as the World Bank, it is used to cover up the power of a financial organisation that gets to choose and set the terms of the relations. In addition, he is critical of the patron-client, meaning the partnership has gained in international development studies. Essentially, he disparages the aid relations for overusing the term partnership to rebrand their same old framework to look more cooperative and equal. He thinks there is an urgent need to develop an authentic partnership based on 'mutually enabling, inter-dependent interaction with shared intentions', and he qualifies mutually enabling as a continuous process which promotes 'social credibility, development legitimacy, effectiveness, impact, autonomy and organisational viability of both parties' (Fowler, 1998, p.144).

Crawford (2003) is another scholar who is sceptical of partnership practices conducted by governments or international aid organisations in their relations with the South. To prove his point, he develops the notion of genuine partnership with its characteristics and applies them to governance reform in Indonesia. According to him, a genuine partnership needs to have the following elements (Crawford, 2003, p.143): the presence of shared goals and cooperation between external and internal actors, respect for the sovereignty of national actors in determining their policy options, a type of equitable and meaningful relationship shaped by depth and quality, determinate time and commitment necessary to form and sustain strong partnerships. His analysis leads him to conclude that the rhetoric of partnership is mainly developed to allow outsiders to conceal and legitimise their intrusive policies in the domestic politics of recipient countries.

Extending his findings in Indonesia to a broader context, he criticises the partnership trend for failing to change the obvious power asymmetries in North-South relations.

As seen above, development studies offer some valuable points about partnership, such as the importance of joint ownership of the policy dialogues, the actual programmes, and the budget. However, like the EU's neighbourhood policy, the notion of partnership is not well developed in this field either. For starters, while explaining the qualities of partnership, the development scholars do not provide a workable definition of the concept. Each scholar has presented their own version of what qualifies as a partnership by emphasising the role of macro issues such as power. Meanwhile, it is not evident that they agree on what power denotes. According to the above scholars, the concept of power is how actor A can more or less directly get actor B to do certain things (Abrahamsen, 2004). Abrahamsen states this is too narrow of a focus and needs to be broadened to account for how the partnership strategies can be used as a form of power. According to Abrahamsen (2004), by conscripting recipient countries as equal partners who are responsible for and in charge of their own development, donor countries govern through the consent of the recipient countries. Partnerships, in these cases, use strategies from global liberal governance to create 'modern, self-disciplined citizens and states' who are entrusted with ruling themselves accordingly to the norms of liberal democracies (Abrahamsen, 2004, p.1454). Here, the power is neither absent nor it is about dominion or coercion alone, instead, it is about being voluntary and coercive at the same time (Abrahamsen, 2004).

However, even Abrahamsen's conceptualisation of power may fall short in recognising partners' agency. It is essential to consider that Central Asians seem to have their own aspirations, such as seeking participation in the global liberal economy, especially after developing an aversion to a socialist system that lasted for several decades (Interview 5). Understandably, the region may not wish to revisit Marxism or wait for a global system to undergo significant changes (Interview 5) before actively engaging with the world. Therefore, looking at EU-Central Asia relations with power at the centre of the analysis is less than ideal. The subsequent section of this chapter will delve into the theorisation of partnership within the field of International Relations. This theoretical perspective will serve as the foundation and framework for the study, shaping the analysis and exploration of partnership dynamics in the context of EU-Central Asia relations.

2.3. Partnership in International Relations

In IR, scholars view partnership as an instance of cooperation. As such, these terms are used interchangeably (Korosteleva, 2014; Bosse, 2010). Before delving into partnership discussion, it is worth mentioning a couple of critical assumptions in this field. First, scholars of international cooperation theories believe that the global system is anarchic and, therefore, lacks a world government (Dai, Snidal and Sampson, 2010). Nevertheless, they do not perceive anarchy as equalling conflict (Dai, Snidal and Sampson, 2010). Second, states consistently pursue their goals rationally (Dai, Snidal and Sampson, 2010). My literature search on partnership in IR revealed two key finds. First, unlike in development studies, IR scholars agree on the definition of the concept. Second, there is also an agreement on strategies actors can use to achieve successful partnerships.

Partnership is defined as 'when actors adjust their behaviour to the actual or anticipated preferences of others, through a process of policy coordination' (Milner, 1992, p.467). 'Policy coordination, in turn, implies that the policies of each state have been adjusted to reduce their negative consequences for others, whereby cooperation provides the actors with gains or rewards.' (Bosse, 2010, p.1294). The gains achieved via partnership do not need to be of the same value or type if it is mutual (Milner, 1992). Partnership contains two essential elements, one being a process where actors socialise to learn about each other so that they can adjust their behaviour, and second, as a result, this will lead to 'joint ownership of goals and benefits' (Korosteleva, 2013, p.15).

It is worthwhile also to mention what does not constitute a partnership. Conflict or competition is antithetical to partnership, as it entails behaviour geared towards gain reduction for others and an impediment to achieving their desires (Milner, 1992). Other examples of uncooperative conduct include inactivity and unilateral behaviour, which entails disregard by the actors for the impacts of their behaviour on partners (Milner, 1992). Such behaviours do not purposefully seek to inhibit the gains of others, however, they do not contribute toward reducing the adverse outcomes for others (Milner, 1992).

The literature identifies several ways to achieve partnership. First, partnership can ensue when the expectations of involved parties converge, therefore occurring tacitly (Axelrod, 1984). Second, it can happen through negotiations where actors can participate in intense bargaining processes (Oye, 1986). Third, it can occur when a hegemon imposes it on a weaker partner by making them alter their policies (Milner, 1992). However, the hegemon also needs to adjust its preferences and

negotiate mutual gains so it is no longer considered coercion but rather cooperation (Korosteleva, 2014; Milner, 1992). Korosteleva (2014) notes that all three cases highlight the importance of two factors: first, a nascent learning about the other and the value of convergence in gains. She states that a shared sense of values and norms is not vital for an effective partnership to emerge. Instead, they gestate due to long-term partnerships (Korosteleva, 2014). Second, power asymmetries in partnerships are prevalent (Korosteleva, 2014), but this does not mean gains will be unequal (Milner, 1992). Therefore, in partnership, the value of gains matters more than the status of the actors (Korosteleva, 2014).

There are three strategies for achieving partnership: iteration hypothesis (Axelrod, 1984), international regime hypothesis and reciprocity (Keohane, 1986). The iteration hypothesis emphasises the importance of ongoing cooperation that signals a determinate future for the partners involved (Korosteleva, 2013). The international hypothesis puts international organisations at the centre of leading and upholding the best practices and rules of the game (Abrahamsen, 2004; Nappini, 2006). Lastly, reciprocity is often viewed as the standard behaviour needed to induce cooperation between sovereign states or in the realm of international trade (Keohane, 1986). Reciprocity - 'refers to exchanges of roughly equivalent values in which the actions of each party are contingent on the prior actions of the others in such a way that good is returned for good, and bad for bad' (Keohane, 1986, p.8). To further qualify the term, Keohane (1986) focuses on two aspects of reciprocity he identifies to be essential dimensions of the concept: contingency and equivalence. According to him, there needs to be a contingency in reciprocal behaviour where one partner's ill actions result in the other's ill actions. At the same time, there needs to be equivalence in benefits, at least rough equivalence. Keohane (1986) admits that it is impossible to calculate the exact equivalence of benefits as it is impossible to remove power entirely from our lives, hence the term rough equivalence. Who gets more value from cooperating in security programmes between the EU and Central Asia aimed at stemming the spread of drug trafficking and Islamist terrorism?! It is impossible to calculate accurately. He also contends that no relationship, even if it is genuinely reciprocal, is power-free due to the cost of cooperation that affects weak and strong states differently and often, what is valuable is established by the international power structure. However, cooperation still can occur between partners with asymmetrical power relations (Bosse, 2010), given there is an observable adjustment of policies by the strong partner towards the weaker partner (Milner, 1992). Consequently, cooperation emphasises the need for both partners to adjust their behaviour instead of just the weaker one (Bosse, 2010).

Reciprocity can be of two types, one being specific, which contains instantaneous trade-offs, and the second one being diffuse, which entails long-term gains produced via joint commitments and reciprocated trust (Korosteleva, 2013). Specific reciprocity involves an exchange of items of equal value between partners in a 'strictly delimited sequence', and there are no obligations (Keohane, 1986, p.4). If there are any, they are marked (Keohane, 1986, p.4). States engaging in specific reciprocity are not required to take on any obligations toward each other and thus can rely on a tit-for-tat style of behaviour driven by self-interest alone (Keohane, 1986). On the other hand, in circumstances where diffuse reciprocity is present, the equivalence of values is less precise, obligations are necessary, and the sequence of events is not strictly marked (Keohane, 1986). States or actors view diffuse reciprocity as a sequence of actions that continue indefinitely and 'never balancing out but continuing to entail mutual concessions within the context of shared commitments and values' (Keohane, 1986, p.4). They are related in the sense that for the diffuse reciprocity to occur, the specific one needs to be valuable (Korosteleva, 2013). So, initially, concrete benefits are needed to initiate cooperation and they can be driven by self-interest to gain immediate benefits and this recurrent cooperation will slowly generate trust and lead to eventual comment to achieve common goals (Korosteleva, 2013).

There are three critical points worth noting. Unlike in development studies, in IR, power asymmetries are not an obstacle to forming genuine partnerships, provided both actors adjust their behaviour to suit one another and have a rough equivalence of gains. In the case of Central Asia, power is not so easy to quantify. The EU has a larger economy and enjoys significant international influence, as Central Asian elites confirm (Interviews 5 and 11). Yet, due to many willing partners, Central Asian regimes are in an advantageous position whereby they can play off all the interested parties against each other and draw benefits from them for their respective domestic goals (Krivokhizh and Soboleva, 2022). After all, CAS is not courting others for their cooperation.

Second, partnership does not necessitate the partners' convergence of norms and values before forming relations (Korosteleva, 2013). This is a crucial point, as significant cultural gaps exist between the EU and Central Asia (Warkotsch, 2008). Third, in contrast to alternative frameworks where the EU transfers its rules and norms, such as the enlargement strategy and external governance (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig, 2009), partnership in IR requires that the socialisation be a two-way process; therefore, each actor learns about the other. In other words, for genuine

partnership to occur, knowledge of the other is mandatory. The following section introduces the typology of partnership present in the EU's relations with third regions.

2.4. Types of partnership

Depending on the types of relations, the substance and the role of partnership as a framework for anchoring the EU's relations with other regions can vary significantly. Korosteleva (2013) suggests three-type classifications of partnership when looking at EU external relations with third regions:

- (i) Strategic partnerships are exemplified by relations between the EU and key international players (i.e., the US, Russia, China) driven by interests and equivalence, whereby the concept of partnerships is the central framework of the relations.
- (ii) Aid partnerships, which are often determined and formulated externally by international organisations. Here, the partnership takes a secondary role to other frameworks, such as the EU's external governance that favours one-way rule transfer from the EU to partner countries.
- (iii) Partnership as complementary to EU governance framework, as conceived for the Neighbourhood Policy, where internal and external actors work jointly to implement shared goals.

Strategic Partnership

The increasingly polycentric world is pushing the EU to find effective approaches to building relations with growing numbers of important players (Vieira, 2016). One of the ways the EU is taking on this task is via building strategic partnerships (SP) across different continents (Vieira, 2016). The SP instrument has been gradually used to assert the EU's international presence (Vieira, 2016). The financial crisis in Russia in 1998 led the EU leaders to look for ways to support and help the country through difficult economic and political hardships (Pallasz, 2015). While articulating its willingness to work with Russia, the EU used the term strategic partner for the first time to describe the relations between these two actors (Blanco, 2016). However, there is no agreed or official definition of strategic partnership in literature, as neither the EU nor the scholars have a golden formula for identifying such partners or partnerships (Blanco, 2016).

Nevertheless, the term seems prominent in EU discourse and foreign policy literature. Consequently, the EU has a diverse relationship with all its strategic partners, some being more

institutionalized and thus well-developed, others being weak and directionless (Pallasz, 2015). The EU has strategic partnerships with ten countries and a few regions (Vieira, 2016): Brazil, Canada, China, India, Mexico, Japan, South Korea, Russia, South Africa, and the US. The regional strategic partnerships are with the African Union, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) (Pallasz, 2015). Strategic partnerships are crucial in international cooperation in facilitating bilateral relations (Pallasz, 2015). While the strategic partnership between the EU and the above actors has official status, three other states have de facto status and are thus still considered strategic partners (Pallasz, 2015): Turkey, Australia, and Indonesia.

The SPs between the EU and the countries above were formed sporadically and over time. Therefore, no single official document by the EU defines these strategic partnerships (Blanco, 2016). Since the Cold War, economics has been the basis for forming strategic partnerships (Blanco, 2016). However, the Lisbon Treaty identifies normative convergence and long-term relations as the criterion for developing strategic partnerships with the EU and other states (Pallasz, 2015). Although normative convergence is vital for the EU, large countries such as Russia and China have not accepted such preconditions to cooperation and have insisted on mutual interests and goals as the basis for partnership (Korosteleva, 2014). For example, Russia was initially offered the opportunity to form relations with the EU under ENP. It swiftly refused such a partnership where it would be beholden to the EU's normative governance framework (Korosteleva, 2014). Therefore, in such relations, the role of the partnership approach is substantive and independent of EU governance and relations are driven by mutual interests rather than shared norms (Korosteleva, 2014).

Consequently, at this moment, the main elements of the EU's approach to strategic partnerships consist of promoting trade and investment, seeking out allies to facilitate multilateralism and international cooperation, and mutually solving security matters (Pallasz, 2015). Lately, the strategic partnerships have expanded their focus towards horizontal issues and foreign policy ones such as counterterrorism, climate change and development-related areas (Blanco, 2016; Pallasz, 2015). In sum, strategic partnership is characterised by equality of actors where one is not socialised by the other to their norms and rules. In such partnerships, pragmatism driven by mutual interests is crucial and demanded by partners (Korosteleva, 2014).

Aid Partnership

EU-Africa relations

Korosteleva (2013, 2014) describes relations between the EU and African countries as one based on aid partnership - subordinate to EU governance where strict conditionality prevails while full convergence to EU norms and rules is not expected. In this type of partnership, governance is prominent, while partnership is secondary. Several scholars (Hurt, 2003; Pirozzi, 2010; Farrell, 2010; Carbone, 2013) confirm that aid partnerships are more like aid relationships with evident power asymmetries favouring the EU countries. Current relations between the EU and Africa are based on two different at the same time overlapping discourses of governance and development policy, and through them, the EU aims to increase its regulatory power over African countries (Farrell, 2010). The EU's development partnership with ACP countries has a long history (Stevens, 2006). The ACP countries are deeply dependent on the EU markets for their exports, and at the same time, the EU is one of the primary aid providers (Hurt, 2003). Individual states gain political importance in Europe by being members of the ACP group (Hurt, 2003).

Initial relations between the EU and the African countries originated when colonialism spread during the late 19th Century (Farrell, 2010). After African states gained their independence towards the end of the 1950s, both continents agreed to keep their political and economic ties (Farrell, 2010). This set the stage for Sub-Saharan African states to negotiate their position in regard to cooperation with the European Community through two Yaoundé Conventions (Keijzer and Negre, 2014). Under the Yaoundé Conventions of 1963-1969, formal relations were established between 18 African states and six member states of the European Community, whereby the former were given some preferential trade and aid agreements (Farrell, 2010). The agreements under these conventions were highly institutionalised from the start (Farrell, 2010). Their purpose was to increase the continent's industrialisation and to facilitate economic diversification with the help of free trade agreements as the primary basis for cooperation (Farrell, 2010). Yaoundé Conventions essentially continued post-colonial relations where the power asymmetry favoured the former colonial powers (Hurt, 2003).

The accession of the UK to the European Economic Community in 1973 brought newly independent Commonwealth members into the cooperation framework, creating the ACP group, which widened the geographic scope of the partnership from 18 countries to 79 in the ACP bloc and to 15 member states on the European side (Keijzer and Negre, 2014). Some new member states had no colonial ties to the ACP group and had their national policies alongside the cooperation

framework (Farrell, 2010). There were in total four Lomé Conventions (1975–2000), negotiated at five-year intervals (Lomé II in 1980, Lomé III in 1985, Lomé IV in 1990, and Lomé IV in 1995) between the ACP group and the EU (Hurt, 2003). The agreements under these conventions were considered the most comprehensive, ambitious and based on genuine partnership for several reasons (Carbone, 2012): decisions were jointly reached without imposition; contractual right to aid was introduced where ACP countries would receive funds on a five-year basis regardless of their performance; previous trade regime was replaced with nonreciprocal preferences thus nearly all goods from ACP states could access the EU market without tariff or quota limits. Lomé Convention I was unique in a way that it gave ACP countries an avenue to pursue relations with the EU on a more equal footing (Hurt, 2003).

Two decades later, in 1995, the mid-term review of Lomé IV for the first time brought the human rights clause into the cooperation acquis, thus signifying a change in the partnership dynamic between the partners (Keijzer and Negre, 2014; Hurt, 2003). From then on, the cooperative relations between the EU and ACP group came under further scrutiny and following extended periods of intense negotiations a new partnership agreement was signed in Cotonou in 2000 (Carbone, 2012). The EU's development policy objectives and conditions towards African countries were increasingly predicated on good governance (Farrell, 2010). The Cotonou Partnership Agreement (CPA) started a new stage of a partnership that came with political conditions and full trade reciprocity imposed by the EU (Farrell, 2010). What this meant in practice was that some of the ACP countries deemed unfit to receive special trade benefits could no longer access EU markets without tariffs and aid was contingent on upholding human rights, good governance and democracy (Hurt, 2003). Human rights, democratic principles and the rule of law are 'essential elements' in the Cotonou Agreement and 'violating any of these elements may lead to a suspension of EU assistance and trade cooperation with the concerned ACP country' (Bagoyoko and Gibert, 2009, p.791). The ACP countries perceived these changes as coercion and less of a partnership (Hurt, 2003). The adoption of CPA, which introduced radical changes in trade, foreign aid and political dialogue, signified the end of the preferential treatment the ACP countries enjoyed with the EU (Carbone, 2012). Under the CPA, power asymmetries prevailed again (Hurt, 2003).

In 2007, the EU changed the cooperation framework established under CPA with unilateral strategies towards ACP states as separate regions (Keijzer and Negre, 2014). The newly adopted Joint Africa-EU Strategy (JAES) would only target countries in Africa (Farrell, 2010). The JAES was

meant to promote partnerships predicated on an equal footing. However, once again, it replicated the donor-recipient qualities of the previous cooperation agreement, as Europe was expected to provide most of the resources to implement the strategy's goals (Keijzer and Negre, 2014).

In summary, EU-Africa relations have undergone significant transformations over 40 years. The cooperation between the EU and ACP countries initially centred primarily on trade. However, security concerns were later incorporated due to escalating political violence in Africa. From the beginning, the partnership between the two continents was heavily institutionalized, establishing various legally binding agreements. In the early years following the end of colonial rule, the partnership exhibited elements of cooperation, albeit with persistent power asymmetries favouring the former colonial powers. However, adopting the Lomé agreements helped address some of these imbalances by providing preferential trade arrangements to African, Caribbean, and Pacific states and offering aid without conditionalities. Subsequently, the CPA brought about significant changes to the dynamics of the EU-Africa partnership. This new agreement introduced conditions across all areas of cooperation, thereby reverting to a more traditional donor-recipient relationship. This shift in the partnership meant that the EU was asserting its normative power by promoting its values and agenda, which led to a one-way dialogue and the imposition of conditionality, as perceived by African actors (Pirozzi, 2010).

Partnership complementary to governance

EU and ENP relations

'At the heart of the EU's relationship with surrounding countries lies a fundamental asymmetry of power which feeds the EU-centric nature of the enterprise' (Bechev and Nicolaidis, 2010, p.479). To mitigate this top-down relationship with the neighbourhood countries and to improve legitimacy and policy efficiency on the ground, since its inception, the ENP went through several changes in discourse and in practice where joint ownership, inclusiveness and socialisation were given more prominent roles (Korosteleva, 2011b, 2013; Bosse, 2010). The principle of partnership tool gained traction to complement the EU governance tool in Eastern countries (Korosteleva, 2011a). 'Until recently, the ENP had been tested only on favourable grounds of those partner states who demonstrate a willingness to associate with the EU in one form or another, which is not sufficient to make conclusions about the soundness of the policy and its instruments' (Korosteleva, 2009, p.231).

Korosteleva (2013, 2014) locates relations between the EU and the ENP countries in between partnership-governance nexus. While the EU attempted to advance relations based on partnership, it yielded little result in countries like Belarus (Bosse and Korosteleva-Polglase, 2009). Korosteleva (2013) states that genuine partnership between the actors never really took hold, and often, this was due to the EU's reliance on governance by conditionality to deal with Belarus. When partnership is used alongside governance as a complementary tool, relations seem detrimental. Both Korosteleva (2011a, 2011b, 2013) and Bosse (2010) state that the EU and ENP relations often oscillated between partnership and governance. This only caused further confusion among actors on both sides, resulting in inefficiency on the ground. Korosteleva (2013) argues that Belarus's geopolitical boundaries and domestic culture have been the main obstacle to the EU's policy effectiveness. 'Being sandwiched between two large and competitive neighbours, the EU and Russia, and not being of direct interest to both, Belarus considers its foreign policy priorities carefully' (Korosteleva, 2009, p.236). She found that the EU displayed very little understanding of such geopolitical considerations of the people and the country. Belorussian people and officials were aware of the different benefits of partnering with Russia and the EU and often wished that these two actors would find a way to work together for the better interests of the country (Korosteleva, 2009). The author also mentions that while the EU generally took an anti-Lukashenko stance, his popularity was immense. The people of Belarus were very much aware of his dictatorial rule and the limited freedoms. However, in the absence of a better alternative, they would rather Lukashenko, who gave them peace and stability (Korosteleva, 2014). The EU didn't fully understand the cultural boundary of the strategic thinkers who learnt to live in contentment with their leader (Korosteleva, 2009).

The various geopolitical and cultural boundaries, Korosteleva (2009) argues, could have been mitigated had the EU relied on the substantive use of partnership based on joint ownership and mutual interests in its dealings with Belarus instead of the governance framework. 'The latter, naturally operating from the EU perspective, struggles to account for specifically Belarusian boundaries of order, and by ignoring those, is unable to gain any leverage over the country' (Korosteleva, 2009, p.231). She argues that the external governance approach failed to shift these obstacles because it generally does not consider the other sufficiently. Korosteleva (2013) is keen to argue that the limited changes that have taken place in Belarus are mainly because of mutually agreed areas based on partnership and not due to the governance approach. She found very little evidence of EU rule transfer. Partnership, she argues, is a much more pragmatic approach because

it is apolitical and hence can yield more therefore, it should act independently of the governance framework.

In her work on partnership and governance, Bosse (2010) found that often, when the EU was dealing with Moldova, another one of the ENP countries that experienced limited change, the principles of governance and partnership competed, thus reducing policy effectiveness. She concluded that the policies were effectively implemented in migration and border control areas, where the EU and Moldova identified converging preferences through cooperation. In these areas, she found that the EU made efforts to anticipate and accommodate Moldova's preferences and made some concessions, thus displaying reciprocity. This section examined the types of partnerships in the context of the external EU's relations with different regions. The next section will present the conceptual framework of the thesis.

2.5. A conceptual framework

In this thesis, I build on the conceptualisation of partnership in International Relations for two reasons. First, as discussed earlier, IR scholars such as Keohane (1986), Oye (1986) and Milner (1992) have greater agreement regarding the definition of partnership and the strategies actors can take to form partnerships. This contrasts with development studies, where the conceptualisation of partnership can vary significantly depending on the specific context. Therefore, IR offers a more established, albeit elusive (Milner, 1992, p. 466), framework providing a stronger foundation for understanding partnerships across geopolitical contexts, such as EU-Central Asia relations.

Second, as noted by Lister (2000), Mawdsley (2018), and Bradley (2007), development scholars often critique partnerships by focusing too heavily on power hierarchies, particularly within the framework of North-South development cooperation, which can limit the scope of research. For example, Lister points out that power-focused analyses in development studies tend to capture only macro-level processes, disregarding the importance of local dynamics and discourse. Similarly, Mawdsley critiques development studies for framing partnerships primarily in terms of North-South power hierarchies despite the increasing role of the South in reshaping development partnership narratives. Additionally, Bradley highlights how these partnerships can be shaped by factors like agenda-setting and the involvement of Southern actors, which are often overlooked when power dynamics dominate the analysis. Given the limitations of this one-dimensional focus

on power hierarchies, my research combines Constructivist and Realist perspectives within IR to capture multiple factors that impact cooperation between the EU and Central Asian states.

In IR, there seems to be an agreement among scholars that partnership is defined as 'the process wherein actors adjust their behaviour to align with the actual or anticipated preferences of others through policy coordination' (Milner, 1992, p. 467). Adjusting one's behaviour necessitates learning about the other (Korosteleva, 2013), which can alter one's understanding of the other, leading to changes in political goals or policies (Zyla, 2020). Learning involves gathering and interpreting knowledge for various purposes (Korneev and Kluczewska, 2022). For the EU, a primary function of knowledge production is to enhance the effectiveness of its engagements on the ground (Korneev and Kluczewska, 2022). Korosteleva (2014) highlights that the EU needs to engage in learning that can explain the internal boundaries of the target region.

Smith (1996, p.13) sheds important light on the concept of boundaries, which he defines as a 'disjunction' between the EU and its external environment that exists or can be constructed by the Union. He identifies four types of boundaries such as geopolitical, legal/institutional, transactional, and cultural that can limit partnerships (Smith,1996, p.13-18). The idea of the EU as an 'island of stability' is directly linked to the establishment of a geopolitical boundary that separates it from the chaotic and threatening world (Smith, 1996, p.14). Meanwhile, the institutional/legal boundary refers to a set of institutional frameworks, legal practices, and incentives that the EU deploys to manage its relations with member and non-member states (Smith, 1996, p.15). Transactional boundary is the economic divide created by the EU's customs union and external tariffs, which controls trade with non-members and often leads to negotiations as outsiders try to secure access to the EU's single market (Smith, 1996, p.16). Finally, a cultural boundary refers to differences between the EU community of values and those of partner states (Smith, 1996, p.17). More specifically, differences include 'values-gaps between EU member states' and external actors, stemming from 'the domestic political culture or elite perceptions/values,' which could include 'form of government/regime, state-society relations, transparency and communication, public opinion' (Bosse and Korosteleva-Polglase, 2009, p.147).

In essence, boundaries can be understood as tools constructed and managed by the EU to demarcate both physically and institutionally insiders from outsiders (Smith, 1996). These boundaries can range from more to less formal. Furthermore, they can be easier or harder to permeate (Smith,

1996). According to Bosse and Korosteleva-Polglase (2009), cultural boundaries can create substantial barriers, especially when significant differences exist between the EU and partner states, such as those in Central Asia. This is because while institutional and legal boundaries are more technical and thus somewhat tangible and straightforward, cultural boundaries are not (Smith, 1996, p.17). For example, decreasing legal and financial boundaries between the EU and the outsiders could be addressed by fulfilling certain technical obligations. Meanwhile, closing the value gaps between those who believe in the freedom of speech and those who don't might not be as easy and require longer sustained cooperation.

While Smith's framework is useful for identifying and analysing boundaries between the EU and other regions, critiques by Bosse and Korosteleva-Polglase (2009) highlight its limitations. They argue that Smith's Eurocentric perspective primarily focuses on the EU's role in constructing and extending boundaries, overlooking the reciprocal role of partner states in the partnership. The implication of Smith's one-sided conceptualisation of boundaries means that the onus is on the other to learn about the EU as it is the only actor in the partnership that can erect boundaries. However, countries such as Belarus have demonstrated the ability to establish cultural and geopolitical boundaries that the EU struggles to navigate (Bosse and Korosteleva-Polglase, 2009). As such, Korosteleva (2011a, 2013, 2014) emphasises the necessity for the EU to shoulder the burden of learning about the other to permeate the boundaries of partner states.

By critiquing the Eurocentric perspective of Smith on the EU's relations with the other regions, Korosteleva brings forth the other in the partnership-building process. She argues that focus on the other becomes even more critical in contexts lacking strong incentives, such as EU membership, as seen in Central Asian countries with no prospect of EU integration (Korosteleva, 2013). According to her, focusing on the other by the EU serves two main purposes. First, by including the other in the partnership, the EU can legitimise its efforts and its policies on the ground. Second, prioritising the other helps to select appropriate modes of engagement (Korosteleva, 2014) so that the practical implementation of EU policies is not undermined on the ground (Korosteleva, 2011a). In other words, when the other is appropriately included in the partnership, the EU can select and modify its efforts effectively.

While Korosteleva critiques Smith's conceptualisation of boundaries by highlighting the role of the other in partnership-building, her analysis does not sufficiently address how partner states actively

impede the permeability of these boundaries. As explored in Chapter 5, Uzbekistan, under Islam Karimov's leadership from 1991 to 2015, leveraged its agency to obstruct the EU's efforts to foster deeper mutual understanding, which might have reduced cultural boundaries between the two actors (Axyonova, 2011; Omelicheva, 2015; Peyrouse, 2019). This obstruction took various forms, including restricting independent civil society involvement in human rights dialogues (Axyonova, 2011), limiting EU access to local actors beyond the governmental elite (Peyrouse, 2019), and promoting a version of democracy starkly at odds with EU values (Omelicheva, 2015). Moreover, some researchers have reported challenges in accessing EU officials in Central Asia, further compounding the difficulties of mutual engagement. These actions illustrate how states can not only construct boundaries but also actively fortify them, making them harder for external actors to penetrate.

Building on these insights, my research extends both Smith's and Korosteleva's frameworks. Unlike Smith, I argue that both the EU and Central Asian states are capable of constructing and shifting boundaries. Thus, cooperation between these regions requires learning from both actors. In contrast to Korosteleva, I also recognise the potential for both the EU and Central Asia to create obstacles in this learning process, such as restricting access to critical segments of society that could otherwise foster deeper mutual understanding. Therefore, to address these limitations and better reflect the role of the other in the partnership-building process, I propose the following definition of learning, which I term **mutual learning**: *Mutual learning occurs when partners actively collect and interpret knowledge about each other while simultaneously supporting the learning process about themselves.*

With this new definition in mind, this study aims to encompass both the overall aspects of partnership as outlined by the theoretical framework and the specific ways the other is incorporated into the construction of partnerships. To achieve this, the empirical research will be organised around three key components: the characteristics of partnership, the basis of partnership, and the presence of mutual learning. Through an examination of the characteristics of partnership from the perspectives of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and the EU, the study seeks to gain a comprehensive understanding of how these actors broadly define the concept of partnership and identify potential differences and similarities in their views. Additionally, exploring how these actors construct the basis of partnership is essential because, although traditional partnership theory in IR as conceptualised by Keohane (1986), Oye (1986) and Milner (1992) emphasise mutual interests as

the primary driving force, the EU's relations with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan go beyond this conventional approach. The EU includes shared values of human rights and democracy as an additional basis for partnership with these Central Asian countries. This exploration should provide valuable insights into how these actors conceptualise partnership with one another, considering both mutual interests and shared values.

Lastly, as mutual learning is crucial for understanding the preferences of others, examining it will allow us to thoroughly assess the extent to which each actor includes the other in the construction of partnerships. According to the definition of mutual learning, understanding and interpreting the boundaries of the other is crucial. Therefore, to investigate how mutual learning is incorporated into partnerships, this study will examine the cooperation between the EU and Central Asian states around cultural cooperation, migration and mobility, and people-to-people contact. These areas are particularly significant as they provide access to various stakeholders and facilitate a deeper understanding between partners.

Focusing on different aspects of partnership, such as mutual learning, interests, and values as the basis of partnership, aligns with the broader research approach undertaken in this thesis: eclecticism. Social scientific research remains predominantly organised around specific traditions, each characterised by distinct commitments, terminology, and standards (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010; Zyla, 2020; Chernoff, Cornut and James, 2020). Instead of blending theories, traditional research approaches typically compare and contrast them, hindering a holistic understanding (Chernoff, Cornut and James, 2020). While offering certain benefits, such single paradigmatic research proves ill-suited for studying complex social phenomena (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010). As such, there has been a call for 'creativity' in IR, which broadly stands for 'the exploration of the intersection among different components of a subject rather than fitting only the features that can be plugged into established theories and casting the allegedly less meaningful ones as irrelevant' (Kodabux, 2019). Scholars such as Sil and Katzenstein (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010a, 2010b), Cornut (2015)and Zyla (2020) have emphasised the necessity of integrating elements from diverse approaches for more practical knowledge construction. Analytic eclecticism is a response to this call for multiparadigm research in social phenomena, and this study is a modest contribution to that evolving discourse.

Analytic eclecticism is not a different research model but rather an intellectual approach that researchers can take when conducting studies that involve but don't neatly align with established

research traditions in a particular discipline or field (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010a). 'What we refer to as analytic eclecticism is distinguished by the fact that features of analyses in theories initially embedded in separate research traditions can be separated from their respective foundations, translated meaningfully, and recombined as part of an original permutation of concepts, methods, analytics, and empirics' (Katzenstein and Sil, 2008, p.111). Put differently, in eclectic research, Constructivism, Liberalism, and Realism can be combined to study a problem rather than contrasted (Katzenstein and Sil, 2008; Sil and Katzenstein, 2010b). By combining insights from various theories, researchers can create a more comprehensive analytical lens that accommodates diverse factors influencing political dynamics (Zyla, 2020).

There are two distinctive ways in which adopting analytical eclecticism is helpful in studying EU-Central Asia relations. First, the overarching aim of this thesis is to advance our understanding of EU-Central Asia relations. One way of doing this is to generate new knowledge by offering a comprehensive analysis of the partnership concept. The eclectic approach allows for this without being constrained by traditional research paradigms. Single paradigm research can help narrow down the focus and provide an analytical framework with vocabulary, assumptions and conventions that can be valuable when researching a new phenomenon (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010a). At the same time, traditional research approaches choose concepts that fit around their pre-existing theoretical parameters and omit those that do not (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010a). In the context of EU-Central Asia relations, an eclectic framework avoids relying solely on power and interest-based approaches or identity-based ones to explain the concept of partnership.

Second, 'analytic eclecticism's distinctive utility stems from its awareness of the strength and trade-offs of the approaches established by existing traditions' (Sil and Katzenstein, 2010a, p.414). While realism emphasises material factors (Mearsheimer, 1995), it fails to explain the role of social factors, where constructivism excels (Wendt, 1992; Price and Reus-Smit, 1998). As illustrated in later chapters, the EU insists on including civil society organisations in partnership with the CAS despite causing discord, adversely affecting the EU's realist interests. Constructivism proves particularly useful here, revealing social levers such as how the Union perceives democracy and stability that explain the EU's behaviour. However, constructivism overemphasises subjective knowledge and downplays or disregards the role of material power in state behaviour (Mearsheimer, 1995). According to Mearsheimer (1995), state actors, even when promoting certain norms, do so out of self-interest. Chapter 5 illustrates how norm adoption by Uzbek elites is an attempt to enhance the

country's image for economic investment from the EU and other international actors. In essence, Mearsheimer's argument resonates with the context of Uzbekistan. As such, constructivism alone would not have revealed how the Uzbek elite co-opt the language of human rights norms to fulfil their economic interests.

2.6. Conclusion

It was argued that an eclectic analytical framework that emphasises the advantages of adopting an International Relations perspective on partnership, particularly in the context of EU-Central Asia relations, is better suited for the aims of the thesis. Development studies can offer valuable insights, particularly with regard to the power dynamics that shape partnerships. However, the field's focus on hierarchical power often narrows its scope. In contrast, the IR framework adopted here provides a more consistent foundation, as scholars in this field offer a coherent definition of partnership and more precise strategies for achieving it, even in asymmetrical power contexts.

In development studies, the partnership concept frequently centres on North-South power hierarchies, critiquing partnerships as instruments of control and coercion. However, such analyses often overlook other essential factors, such as local agency and discourse, which can be critical in shaping cooperation between various actors. By contrast, IR scholarship frames partnership as a policy coordination process, allowing for genuine cooperation even where power asymmetries exist. This perspective does not disregard power but instead treats it as a given, thus enabling a more intricate analysis of factors influencing partnership, such as shared values, mutual interests, and reciprocal learning.

Furthermore, the eclectic nature of the conceptual framework builds on IR's broader focus by incorporating elements from both Constructivist and Realist perspectives, which highlight the importance of both material and immaterial factors in the partnership-building process. In particular, the concept of mutual learning proposed in this chapter underscores that effective partnerships require not only policy coordination but also a willingness to engage with the other's cultural and political realities. This multidimensional approach becomes particularly relevant for EU-Central Asia relations, which lack historical close cooperation between the regions, requiring a deeper understanding of the partner's distinct values and interests rather than merely transferring norms or enforcing conditions.

Chapter 3 – Methodology

This thesis aims to understand the construction of partnership in the EU and Central Asian official discourse and to identify the factors that influence this construction. This chapter will present the rationale behind the selection of the methodology adopted for this study and its operationalisation by covering the research design process, data collection and analysis method. It will also outline the ethical considerations and limitations of the research process.

3.1. Research Design: overall approach

The research employed a qualitative case study methodology, which offers a comprehensive understanding of complex phenomena within their natural context by providing in-depth and detailed knowledge about specific cases (Rashid et al., 2019). This approach is particularly well-suited for this study's main objective: to examine and explore how partnership is constructed by three actors, namely, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and the EU. Through the analysis of qualitative data, such as interviews and document analysis, the qualitative case study approach allows for a thorough exploration of the intricacies and dynamics of partnership construction in the context of this study. Meanwhile, thematic analysis was the chosen research method as it is flexible and can capture patterns and themes in data, which aligns with the research questions and goals of the thesis.

The study exploited both primary and secondary data sources. Primary data was collected through 19 in-depth interviews online with pertinent EU and Central Asian officials and experts. Furthermore, primary sources included speeches and statements from high-level EU and Central Asian politicians/officials and official documents from both regions. Secondary data for this study came from various sources, encompassing second-hand interviews and existing scholarly work. MAXQDA software was used for coding and analysis of the data. The coding process relied on both inductive and deductive methods. The former involves generating categories and themes directly from the data, and the latter starts with predetermined codes or categories derived from existing literature, theories, or research questions (Holloway, 1997)

Ethical considerations such as informed consent, confidentiality and anonymity of the interviewees were taken into account throughout the research process. The study also followed strict quality control measures as explained in more detail in a later part of the chapter. The study's limitations

include a small sample size of interviewees, thematic analysis as the research method and the period of the analysis.

3.2. Data–collection strategy

The data collection strategy was divided into two phases: primary and secondary data collection – as they best cover the wide-ranging context of the EU and Central Asia relations.

The primary data was collected through in-depth interviews conducted online with the various pertinent groups: (1) high-level officials from the EU and Central Asian states; (2) civil society representatives; (3) European and Central Asian scholars/experts. The primary purpose of interviews as a research tool is about 'uncovering some kind of knowledge the interviewee possesses' (Bogner, Littig and Menz, 2018, p.18). Drawing on Bogner et al.'s work, I sought to gain three types of specific knowledge (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009, p. 52):

- Technical knowledge, such as specific facts and information about a process governed by rules and routines, for instance, practical knowledge about the EU-Central Asia relations.
- Process knowledge refers to a specific activity the elite or expert is directly involved in or closely associated with.
- Interpretive knowledge comprises the interviewees' subjective perceptions and interpretations of reality.

'Qualitative interviewing requires listening carefully enough to hear the meanings, interpretations, and understandings that give shape to the worlds of the interviewees' (Rubin and Rubin, 2005, p.7). Moreover, according to Daugbjerg (1998, cited in Burnham, 2008, p. 241), the flexible nature of semi-structured interviews 'leaves the investigation open to new and unexpected information', thus leading to new areas of study that might have been otherwise overlooked. As such, I conducted semi-structured interviews to allow for open conversations around a set of core questions, leaving some room for flexibility in the interview process and the opportunity for the participants to express their views in their own words. However, a careful balance was ensured between covering the research aims of the thesis as well as staying open to new knowledge without allowing too much time for irrelevant topics (Burnham, 2008). Feedback was obtained from my supervisors on the content and quality of the interview questions. Additional feedback was sought through pilot interviews conducted with other researchers prior to elite interviews. Based on the theoretical

framework that guides the thesis, sample questions included those centred around eliciting clear-cut facts and those that captured detailed narratives (Bogner, Littig and Menz, 2018, p.2)

Semi-structured interviews are 'often the most effective way to obtain information about decision makers and decision-making processes' (Burnham, 2008, p.231). As the research aims to gain insight into the perceptions and attitudes of the participants on a specific issue, qualitative interviews are highly valuable in this regard. This thesis employed elite interviews as a deliberate choice due to their pivotal role as critical decision-makers in shaping and operationalising EU-Central Asia relations. Elite interviews provide a unique opportunity to gain first-hand insights from individuals directly involved in the day-to-day functioning of these relations. These decision-makers possess a wealth of knowledge and experience that is highly relevant to the subject matter and offer exclusive perspectives that may not be accessible through other sources.

Regarding numbers, Burnham (2008) suggests around 20 interviewees if the principal research method is elite interviewing. Although elite interviewing was not the primary source of data collection in this case, I conducted 19 interviews with those who were directly involved in the EU and Central Asia relations or had expert knowledge of the subject matter. The interviews took place during 2021 and 2022, and the questions were adapted throughout the 12-month process. Follow-up communication occurred via email or phone, and some participants were interviewed a second time. The analysis was refined by seeking feedback from key participants and incorporating their input in a cyclical manner. The interviews lasted between 40-80 minutes and were audio-recorded, where consent was given and fully transcribed. The interviews were conducted in Uzbek, Russian and English, with informed consent obtained from all participants before the interview.

Primarily, I relied on purposeful and theoretical sampling techniques when reaching out to potential interviewees. Purposeful sampling refers to selecting participants according to the 'needs of the study' (Morse, 1991, p. 291, in Coyne). Meanwhile, theoretical sampling indicates that the interviewees are selected according to 'the developing needs' of the research that arise as a result of 'new categories and emergent theories' (Coyne, 1997, p.628). In other words, the initial stage of sampling participants was decided by the knowledge I set out to uncover. However, as the interviews progressed and new enquiries emerged, I sampled new participants. In addition to purposeful sampling, in some cases, the snowball method was also used to extend the list of potential participants, whereby initial contacts help reach out to other key elite or experts who might be appropriate for the study (Burnham, 2008, p.233). Combining these methods led to 'theoretical

saturation' (Sebele-Mpofu, 2020), whereby interview-based data led to 'no additional codes' and no 'further insights' (Hennink, Kaiser and Marconi, 2016, p.15).

In terms of inclusivity when selecting participants, I set out to interview diverse participants to reduce inconsistency and bias from interviewing officials with vested interests in presenting a specific image of their respective countries. First, I selected officials who were directly involved in operationalising the EU and Central Asia relations and those with experience working with these actors, therefore having first-hand knowledge of partnership on the ground. Second, a deliberate attempt was made to reach out to officials with varying degrees of experience (from old to new staff) and those who worked in different departments (Commission, DG international partnership, Uzbek and Kazakh diplomats, MPs and civil society actors, etc.) to capture as wide-ranging perspectives as possible. Third, as the nature of the study was comparative analysis, I made sure to include officials from the EU, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan as much as possible. With regard to experts, I set out to interview both European and Central Asian participants to offer diverse views on the subject matter.

One of the most challenging aspects of conducting interviews with elites versus experts is that the former is notoriously difficult to access due to busy schedules and unstable political environments (Burnham, 2008). Access to EU and Kazakh officials was easier than to their Uzbek counterparts. This may be attributed to Uzbekistan gradually opening up to the outside world, which could make Uzbek officials more cautious and hesitant in granting access to their professional settings. The hesitancy may stem from various factors, such as concerns about disclosing sensitive information or a desire to manage external interactions. Most EU officials responded to a single email. In rare cases, more than two emails were sent. Kazakh elites were equally quick to agree to provide interview access. Meanwhile, it took over six emails, a phone call, and a middle person to help organise an interview with Uzbek officials. Numerous emails and phone calls to Uzbek Foreign Affairs were left unanswered; even an inside contact proved futile. This led to the realisation that finding someone within Uzbek Foreign Affairs willing to speak on EU and Central Asia relations was unlikely. As a result, a decision was made to change direction and reach out to other political officials outside of Foreign Affairs. Fortunately, these officials agreed to participate in interviews, providing an alternative source of valuable insights for the study.

Furthermore, apart from first-hand interviews, primary data sources included the speeches and statements of high-level EU, Kazakh and Uzbek officials gathered from English, Russian and Uzbek

language media sources. Second, I collected a sample of official documents. The corpus of documents on the EU side included strategy papers, progress reports, resolutions, briefings, policy papers, joint statements, and press releases. On the side of Central Asia, official documents such as foreign policy, strategy papers and joint statements. These data were collected from online sources such as official websites of the EU, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan governments, the United Nations, and other international organisations. The data for the EU was collected for 2007-2022, while for Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, it was collected for 2016-2022. The difference in the timeline for capturing EU and Central Asian perceptions accounts for the fact that both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan experienced regime change after 2016. As a result, especially in the case of Uzbekistan, the country has gradually opened up to the EU and the rest of the world. This offered greater access to Uzbek officials and other data sources for analysis.

The documents were selected based on their relevance to the partnership between the EU and Central Asian countries and their availability in the public domain. In my analysis of official documents and statements, I was conscious of potential bias that might be harboured in such sources due to the need to present information in a certain light. Therefore, I paid attention to who produced them and for what purpose. To counter this bias, I sought out unofficial document sources and different language media to scrutinise the collected data. In addition, I used the data from semi-structured interviews to further cross-check the data from documents. The main purpose of this deliberate practice was to triangulate, namely, cross-check data across diverse and multiple sources (Bennett and Checkel, 2012) and tease out a more accurate essence of EU and Central Asian political discourse.

Finally, various secondary data were collected to support the research process and ensure a careful and balanced partnership analysis. This included a range of elements, notably incorporating second-hand interviews with EU, Uzbek and Kazakh elites conducted in multiple languages, including English, Uzbek, and Russian. This linguistic diversity broadened the spectrum of perspectives and added depth to the insights extracted. Additionally, a deliberate effort was made to reference and draw insights from pre-existing scholarly contributions from Western and Central Asian scholars where possible. This deliberate engagement with prior academic discourse provided valuable context, allowing the research to be situated within the broader landscape of existing knowledge.

3.3. Research analysis

After having laid out the data collection strategy, this section presents the specific research method used to analyse the available data – thematic analysis through an interpretivist paradigm.

Thematic analysis through an interpretivist paradigm seeks to uncover significant recurring patterns or concepts in the raw data, highlighting the subjective nature of the data and the significance of the specific context and interpretive perspective. Thus, while thematic analysis serves as a method of data scrutiny, interpretivism provides the philosophical and theoretical basis for shaping the approach to comprehending and construing the data.

To understand the essence of interpretivism in research, it is valuable to contrast it with positivism (Junjie and Yingxin, 2022). Positivism asserts that the natural and social worlds are not fundamentally different, and the same analytical approach can be applied to analyse them (Neufeld, 1993). According to positivism, scientific understanding must solely rely on empirical evidence, including publicly observable objects or events (Neufeld, 1993). Furthermore, positivism emphasises the necessity of logical relationships among objects, aiming to uncover and scientifically validate these relations using rationalist methodologies (Ryan, 2018). The positivist perspective suggests that a singular objective reality exists for any situation or phenomenon, irrespective of the researcher's perspectives or beliefs (Hudson and Ozanne, 1988). As such, positivist theories argue that subjective meanings attached to social phenomena remain beyond the realm of public observation and thus cannot be incorporated into reliable knowledge of the social world (Neufeld, 1993, p.41).

Contrary to positivism, interpretive researchers aim to explore experiences and contemplate various interpretations of specific social contexts to enhance one's understanding and delve deeper into the complexity of human interactions (Cresswell, 2007). Interpretivism, differing from positivism, acknowledges human beings' capacity to construct knowledge of their surroundings through their interactions with other humans with the help of language, objects and practices (Neufeld, 1993; Cresswell, 2007). Interpretivism asserts that in contrast to the natural world, the social world is partly shaped by human self-interpretation (Taylor, 1993, cited in Neufeld, 1993, p.33). Therefore, interpretive approaches, including hermeneutics, phenomenology, and social constructivism, reject that meaning exists independently within the world, separate from consciousness (Neufeld, 1993; Junjie and Yingxin, 2022). As a result, interpretive theorists argue that the scope of study within

social science should encompass the interpretations and definitions provided by human subjects whose interactions constitute the social fabric (Neufeld, 1993). Unlike positivist studies, which assert the validity of universally observable rules across various social settings, interpretive research aims to enrich data by considering contextual factors (Al Riyami, 2015). Thus, subjective knowledge, such as perceptions, thoughts, experiences, and standpoints of humans, matters when examining the social world (Neufeld, 1993; Collet and Mavin, 2018). Accordingly, while positivist scientists emphasise quantitative analysis, interpretivism relies on qualitative analysis (Neufeld, 1993).

While interpretivism can enrich our understanding of the world by appealing to 'subjective meaning' (Neufield, 1994; Clarke, 2009), it is not immune from certain controversies. According to Hay (2002), interpretivism asserts that the world can be viewed from multiple angles, thus rendering it nihilistic. This, in turn, means that research findings of interpretivist theories are less likely to be generalisable as social context varies across places and time (Neufeld, 1993; Clarke, 2009). Second, moral relativism means researchers are less inclined to be ethical because truth has many forms (Junjie and Yingxin, 2022). Furthermore, Hay (2002) argues that social structures are not separate from the researcher's understanding of their actions. Put differently, the researchers' perceptions and values can alter the social world they aim to research. Consequently, interpretivist researchers cannot produce a 'value-free' analysis, unlike positivist theorists whose inquiries often lack reflexivity about contextual factors (Clarke, 2009, p.30)

To deal with challenges associated with interpretivist research, Hay (2002) suggests that social scientists must recognise the normative aspects of their work. This entails making their normative assumptions clear and transparent (Clarke, 2009). In other words, researchers need to engage in reflexivity, defined as 'always a self-monitoring of, and a self-responding to, our thoughts, feelings and actions as we engage in research projects '(Collet and Mavin, 2018, p.377). An important part of reflexivity requires researchers to critically assess their own research methods (Johnson and Duberly, 2000; Collet and Mavin, 2018). This would mean 'being reflexive about our role and relationships with the research context, research participants, research data, and the resulting reports we produce' (Collet and Mavin, 2018, p.389). However, according to James and Vinnicombe (2002), the presence of researcher bias with regard to research methods and data should not be seen as a flaw of the research but rather a valuable source of data in its own regard. Harding (1988)

further argues that by acknowledging these biases, researchers enhance the objectivity of the research they produce.

To a great degree, this chapter, specifically this section, has been an exercise in methodological reflexivity. For example, in terms of the lack of generalisability inherent in conducting interpretivist research, where pertinent, this thesis has explicitly called for caution before transferring the findings to other cases due to contextual factors. Meanwhile, ethical constraints and considerations, including the limited number of participants, reliance on government officials and documents as key data collection sources, and the use of online interviews, have been thoroughly discussed in various sections of this chapter.

However, the identities and normative inclinations of the researcher are also crucial considerations for this research process. As an Uzbek woman deeply committed to feminism and a proponent of the EU, these identities have influenced my research methodology in multiple ways. Firstly, my decision to focus on Uzbekistan and Central Asia, as opposed to other regions, was influenced by my personal background. I was born and raised in Andijan, Uzbekistan. Secondly, I was occasionally overly critical of Uzbekistan compared to other nations. This stemmed from both my civic duty to contribute to the betterment of my country and a perception that it may be more legitimate to critique one's own nation. Thirdly, my feminist perspective prompted me to examine gender discourse within EU-Central Asia relations with particular attention. Moreover, given the EU's emphasis on promoting gender equality in the region, I may have tended to be more sympathetic to the EU over other actors in Central Asia, such as China and Russia.

It's conceivable that had I selected a different case study focusing on other policy areas, my research findings could have diverged significantly, thus underscoring Hay's (2002) assertion that normativity shapes social research. Nonetheless, I deliberately tried to overcome the issues related to my biases. Throughout my writing process, I sought feedback from supervisors and fellow researchers, who pointed out areas for improvement. Furthermore, I purposely choose to integrate thematic analysis into the interpretivist paradigm, a systematic approach to data scrutiny and analysis. Below, I elaborate in-depth on the steps involved in the thematic analysis of qualitative data and how it allows for consistency and coherence, which are vital for the objectivity and ethics of the research process.

Thematic Analysis (TA)

The data collected from primary and secondary sources were analysed using thematic analysis. TA is a qualitative research method that allows researchers to identify, analyse, and report 'patterns within the data' (Braun and Clarke, 2006, p.79). Put differently, it offers a clear process to encode large qualitative data sets (Boyatzis, 1998; Braun and Clarke, 2006). This method can be 'widely used across a range of epistemologies and research questions' (Nowell et al., 2017, p.2) and is particularly useful when the study involves a comparative exploration of people's views and experiences, as was the case with this study (Braun and Clarke, 2006). TA is a flexible method that can be applied to various data sources, including interviews, speeches, and policy documents used in this study (Boyatzis, 1998; Nowell et al., 2017). When conducted consistently and meticulously, TA can produce rich and trustworthy results (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Throughout this research, I rigorously applied a combination of stages of thematic analysis suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006) and Boyatzis (1998):

a) Familiarisation with the data (Braun and Clarke, 2006): The analysis process began with the transcription of the interviews, which were then uploaded together with other written data to MAXQDA, a software program used for qualitative data analysis. Then, I familiarised myself with the data by rereading it several times to comprehensively understand the content.

b) Defining units of analysis and coding units (Boyatzis, 1998) was applied to all the data, such as the EU and Central Asian documents and interview transcripts: in this study, units of analysis were individual interview transcripts and single documents. Meanwhile, regarding coding units, which can be defined as the parts of the analysed data that can be interpreted with respect to the categories, the main focus was on sentences. Then, I moved on to the segmentation phase, dividing the collected data into specific units corresponding to the categories established during the coding process. This step was crucial to ensure that all the data was included and considered in the analysis.

c) Development of the coding scheme (Braun and Clarke, 2006; Boyatzis, 1998): The next stage of my research analysis involved devising a coding system that met the needs of the study. When building categories, I used both a deductive approach, drawing on existing theories and inductively adding new categories stemming from the material. For example, when analysing how the EU and Central Asian states perceive Central Asia, I relied on an inductive method driven by the data. Meanwhile, when looking at how the EU and Central Asian states construct the notion of partnership, the coding scheme was theory-driven and data-driven. At this stage, I also ensured

that each code had a clear name and a good definition and description. I also had an explicit inclusion and exclusion strategy for each code to ensure consistency.

d) Main analysis - searching for themes and interpreting the themes (Braun and Clarke, 2006): The codes were then organised into broader themes, which allowed for identifying patterns and relationships within the data. The themes were developed based on similarities and differences within the data and their relevance to the research questions. The analysis process involved constant comparison, whereby new data was compared to existing codes and themes to ensure consistency and accuracy. The final step in the analysis process involved interpreting the themes by developing explanations and interpretations of the patterns and relationships identified within the data. The analysis process was iterative, with themes being refined and developed throughout the analysis process.

Overall, thematic analysis is a well-established method used in numerous studies across various disciplines (Nowell et al., 2017; Braun and Clarke, 2006). Its application in this study allowed for a detailed exploration of the perceptions and attitudes of the EU and Central Asian officials with regard to partnership, as well as highlighting the complexity and diversity of views within and between the two regions, which is vital given the multi-dimensional nature of EU-Central Asia relations. Thematic analysis was especially appropriate for this study as it allowed for combining inductive and deductive methods, providing a comprehensive and nuanced data analysis. The method enabled me to identify and analyse themes relevant to the research question while also allowing for the emergence of new themes that may not have been previously considered. Meanwhile, using MAXQDA software for coding purposes helps ensure accuracy and consistency.

3.4. Ethical considerations and quality control

The research was conducted under the ethical guidelines of the University of York's Ethics Committee for Economics, Law, Management, Politics and Sociology. The participants were informed about the purpose of the study, the nature of their participation, and their right to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty. The consent of the interviewees was obtained in advance. The participants were also assured of the confidentiality of the information they provided. Their names were anonymised in the research report to protect the privacy and confidentiality of the interviewees. The interviews were conducted respectfully and non-intrusively, with no pressure or coercion placed on the interviewees to answer any questions.

Additionally, the research followed ethical guidelines regarding data collection and storage. All data were stored in password-protected electronic devices and were only accessible to the author. The data were used only for the purpose of this research and will not be shared with any third party. Finally, the study also considered the potential impact of the research on the interviewees and the wider community. The research findings were presented objectively and unbiasedly, and the author did not misrepresent the views or opinions of the interviewees or any other stakeholders.

Quality control was an essential aspect of this research project. Several measures were taken to ensure the accuracy and reliability of the data. Firstly, the researcher conducted a pilot study before the primary data collection process to test the interview questions and refine the research design. Secondly, the interviews were semi-structured to allow for flexibility while ensuring that key topics were covered. Thirdly, the researcher transcribed and translated all interviews manually, which enabled her to check the accuracy of the data and identify any potential misunderstandings or errors. Finally, the researcher used MAXQDA software to facilitate the coding process and ensure consistency in applying codes to the data.

Limitations

The research faced several limitations. First, 'the gold standard of the interview situation certainly is the face-to-face interview' (Bogner, Littig and Menz, 2018, p.15). However, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, interviews were conducted online. While this made it possible to reach geographically dispersed participants, it also limited the opportunities for face-to-face interaction and observation, which might have resulted in more nuanced data. Second, the study focuses solely on the official discourse of the EU and the Central Asian states. As such, the reliance on official documents and statements may also present a limitation as they may not fully reflect the views of all relevant actors or may be subject to political bias. Third, one of the main limitations was the availability and access to primary sources, particularly in the case of Uzbekistan, such as officials from Uzbek Foreign Affairs who play a crucial role in the everyday functioning of EU-Central Asia relations.

While efforts were made to ensure a diverse range of interviewees in this study, it is essential to acknowledge the potential for biases in the data collected. The limited number of participants who are official representatives of their respective governments introduces the possibility that their perspectives and narratives may align with their governments' official stances or interests. Various

factors can influence this alignment, including the participants' roles, responsibilities, and obligations as government officials.

Fourth, using a thematic analysis method and relying on MAXQDA software for the coding process may have some limitations. While the thematic analysis method is flexible, allowing for identifying key themes and patterns in the data, its flexibility can be its Achilles heel. When conducted with less rigour, the flexible nature of thematic analysis can lead to inconsistency when themes are being developed from the available data (Holloway and Todres, 2003). Meanwhile, using coding software, such as MAXQDA, in research can introduce rigidity and potentially prioritise the coding phase over other stages of the research process (St John and Johnson, 2000). Finally, when examining the EU's construction of partnership, the study focused on the time period of 2007-2022. Meanwhile, Central Asian official discourse was examined between 2016-2022. Thus, the study may not fully capture the evolution of EU-Central Asia relations consistently. Future studies could explore additional periods or alternative research methods to provide a more comprehensive understanding of this complex relationship.

3.5. Conclusion

This thesis aims to explore how the notion of partnership is constructed in the official discourse of the EU and Central Asian states. Therefore, it appears that qualitative data collection tools are the most appropriate to meet the needs of the study. The combination of primary and secondary data sources provided sufficient data for the analysis. Thematic analysis of collected data with the help of MAXQDA software allowed me to conduct my research analysis systematically and consistently. Ethical considerations were at the heart of the study throughout the different stages of the research process.

The thematic analysis of qualitative data in the form of semi-structured interviews of research participants, the study of critical official documents together with speeches and statements of various elite were highly suitable for examining how the notion of partnership is constructed in the official discourses of the EU, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. It was crucial to include a variety of sources to obtain valuable and rich analytical insight into the notion of partnership and reduce possible bias present in qualitative research. In particular, data such as official documents, speeches and statements of officials across the EU, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan offered an opportunity to generate valuable data. In the case of the EU, the official documents allowed me to capture the

chronological shifts in the conceptualisation of partnership and the factors that induced these changes. This would have been less possible with other data sources, such as semi-structured interviews. The documents also allowed me to capture the institutional differences. Meanwhile, the elite speeches and statements of all three actors offered the chance to tease out information omitted in overtly formal official documents and provide individual takes on the research question. For example, the importance of the identity of the self and the other when conceptualising the notion of the partnership was only perceptible in elite speeches and statements rather than official documents.

As to the semi-structured elite interviews, they nicely complemented the already collected data from the other sources. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to fill in the gaps where vital information was missing to generate a coherent sense of the notion of partnership in the perception of the subject countries. In fact, through quite open semi structures interviews, I captured essential details such as the impact of unilateral aid on the equality of partnership, the role of conditionality in the partnership-building process and how individual representatives perceive the role of shared values in building effective partnerships. This method effectively captured the perceptions of the main actors who routinely take part in the day-to-day operations of the EU and Central Asia relations. It also provided an insider perception of Central Asian officials, which is currently lacking in the literature. Overall, the triangulation of data across various data sources allowed reaching the depth of the meaning necessary to tell the whole story of the notion of partnership in the official discourses of the EU, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. It also allowed for increasing the research validity by identifying biases where possible.

In terms of method, thematic data analysis with the help of MAXQDA software was efficient and helpful in identifying patterns of meaning from primary and secondary data. The main aim of this thesis was to systematically identify, analyse and tease out patterns of similarities and differences in the way the official discourse of the EU, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan about the construction of partnerships. It allowed for systematic and rigorous encoding of qualitative data, which this study used. In particular, it enabled me to identify differences and overlaps concerning specific aspects of the partnership notion.

Chapter 4 – Defining Central Asia: comparing the EU and Central Asian perceptions

This chapter examines how the EU and the CAS define Central Asia. The rationale behind defining Central Asia is threefold. Firstly, since the main focus of this thesis is to understand the nature of EU-Central Asia relations, then the logical starting point should be to define Central Asia from the perspectives of both actors. Secondly, partnership presupposes that the EU understands the other, and the comparative analysis will allow us to reveal to what extent this is the case. Thirdly, understanding how the EU perceives Central Asia is crucial for analysing its subsequent construction of partnership in later chapters, enabling a more comprehensive analysis of the subject matter.

Defining regions is by no means an easy task given they 'are socially and politically constructed and reconstructed, their nature is contingent and open to interpretation' (Hemmer and Katzenstein, 2002, p. 575). To succinctly and comprehensively grasp the essence of Central Asia as perceived by the EU and the CAS, the comparative analysis revolves around three main axes: (1) it seeks to identify institutional differences within the EU in perceiving Central Asia, (2) it focuses on contrasting perceptions of Central Asian states with the EU's, (3) timewise, it follows a chronological order with a staggered starting point. The EU's perception of the regions is traced between 2007 and 2022 as it coincides with adopting the first and latest partnership Strategy for the region. Meanwhile, the analysis of Central Asian perceptions will focus on the period between 2016-2022. This is because the period has seen an intense regional identity construction by the countries of Central Asia compared to the stagnant decade in regionalisation leading up to 2016 (Cornell and Starr, 2018). In addition, the difference in the timeline for capturing EU and Central Asian perceptions accounts for the fact that both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan experienced regime change after 2016. As a result, especially in the case of Uzbekistan, the country has gradually opened up to the EU and the rest of the world. This offered greater access to Uzbek officials and other sources of data for analysis. The last section will present the concluding remarks.

The chapter demonstrates that the EU and Central Asian states share commonalities and differences in their perception of the region. Both sides identify Central Asia as a geographical space, a geopolitical entity, and an emerging regional actor. However, a significant divergence arises

from the CAS political leaders, who also view the region's geopolitical significance and actorness in global terms rather than regional terms. Furthermore, the findings suggest that although Central Asia has long been viewed as a security threat to the EU, political changes in the region have resulted in a shift of perception. As reflected in official discourse, the EU now recognises Central Asia's economic potential and growing regional influence. The chapter unfolds in three steps. First, it presents a brief history of Central Asian regionalism. Next, it discusses the main findings, highlighting the overlapping and diverging perceptions. Finally, the concluding remarks will be presented.

4.1. Post-Soviet history of Central Asian regionalism

Melvin (2012) argued that grouping Kazakhstan with Tajikistan lacked a political rationale and that the concept of Soviet Central Asia would lose coherence over time. Similarly, Romanowski (2016) suggested that the EU should focus on bilateral relations rather than intra-regional cooperation in Central Asia to achieve meaningful outcomes. However, despite these reservations, the EU persisted with its regional approach. Recent efforts by Central Asian leaders to promote regional rapprochement have vindicated the EU's stance and its emphasis on intra-regional cooperation in the region (Cornell and Starr, 2019). This section examines past and current developments surrounding regional cooperation in Central Asia. It explores how the increasing efforts towards intraregional collaboration among Central Asian countries have validated the EU's regional perspective.

Questioning 'the very existence of the Central Asia region' (Cornell and Starr, 2018, p.7) might make sense if one were to disregard the attempts of the CAS to form regional organisations soon after the collapse of the USSR. Despite being described as one of the most disintegrated regions of the world (Anceschi, 2017), Central Asia has a history of regionalism dating back to the early 1990s. Central Asia, which denotes a region, is a new term. Throughout history, Central Asia has been known by various names like Turan, Turkestan, Transaxonia, and Middle Asia (Rakhimov, 2010), often given by external actors (Cornell and Starr, 2018). However, in 1993, during a presidential summit meeting in Tashkent, the five states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan declared *Central Asia* as the designated regional name (Olcott, 1994). This highlights the nascent identity construction practised by the CAS soon after gaining independence. Moreover,

there have been numerous instances of regional integration in the region, as shown in Table 4.1 below, which presents purely regional structures established by the Central Asian states.

Table 4.1. Central Asian regional structures

Name	*Years active*	*Member States*	*Function*
CACO - Central Asia Cooperation Organisation	1994 - 2005	Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan	CACO aimed to create economic and political unions among the member states
IFAS - International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea	1993 - Present	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan	the main organisation for intra-regional water cooperation
Semipalatinsk Treaty	2006 - Present	Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan	the treaty legally binds all five states not to manufacture, acquire, test, or possess nuclear weapons

(Modified from source: Cornell and Starr, 2018)

After gaining independence, Central Asian states embraced their sovereignty and nationalism and recognised the importance of regionalisation (Cornell and Starr, 2018). Before Russia's involvement in the region, the Central Asian states made significant progress in establishing structures for regional integration in the period leading up to 2005 (Cornell and Starr, 2018). In 1994, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan took the first practical step towards regional integration by signing a treaty to establish a single economic union between them (Rakhimov, 2010). While Turkmenistan remained neutral and abstained, Kyrgyzstan joined later that year, giving birth to the Central Asian Union (Cornell and Starr, 2018). This regional structure proved successful, fostering mutual coordination in security matters among its members (Cornell and Starr, 2018). It facilitated communication between the emerging militaries of member states and played a crucial role in organising joint exercises with NATO forces under the Partnership for Peace initiative (Cornell and Starr, 2018). Tajikistan joined after four years in 1998, and the regional structure was renamed the Central Asian Economic Union (Cornell and Starr, 2018). In 2001, the name of the regional structure changed again to Central Asia Cooperation Organisation (CACO), which lasted till 2005 (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2012). However, the CACO was eventually incorporated into the Eurasian Economic Community due to intentional efforts by Russia to divide the region (Cornell and Starr, 2018).

Central Asian countries also set up regional environmental institutions to improve cooperation around water. Weinthall (2002) states that rather than resorting to violence over water scarcity,

the Central Asian states established regional institutions and signed agreements to resolve water usage issues peacefully. As early as February 18, 1992, the agreement 'Cooperation in the Management, Utilisation, and Protection of Water Resources of Interstate Resources' was signed by all the five states of Central Asia (Rahaman, 2012), which aimed to maintain past water practices and quantities from the Soviet era (Wegerich, 2011). This agreement led to the formation of the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC), which is responsible for allocating water quantities to each CAS country (Bernauer and Siegfried, 2012). The decisions of the ICWC are binding in all five countries, and it also facilitates capacity building, research coordination, and information exchange (Rahaman, 2012). The following year, in March 1993, the CAS established a new institutional framework to address environmental challenges related to the Aral Sea and its surrounding zones (Weinthal, 2006). This led to the creation of the International Fund for the Aral Sea (IFAS), entrusted with collecting funds from the CAS and financing regional program activities (Rahaman, 2012). Over time, IFAS evolved to absorb ICWC and the Interstate Commission on Sustainable Development, becoming the primary organisation for intra-regional water cooperation in Central Asia by 1999 (Janusz-Pawletta, 2015).

Despite the early efforts of the CAS at regionalisation, establishing lasting and unifying regional cooperation has been difficult due to both external influences, such as Russia, and internal disagreements (Cornell and Starr, 2019). Russia played a disruptive role in the region's integration ambitions by merging the CACO with the Eurasian Economic Community, where Russia dominated (Cornell and Starr, 2018). The CACO was the only regional structure that did not include an external power (Cornell and Starr, 2018). Internal factors have also contributed to the challenges of regional integration. The diversity in national interests and economic development, combined with the rivalry between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, has hampered regional cooperation (Rakhimov, 2010).

'Thwarted in their desire to form a purely regional union without outsiders' (Cornell and Starr, 2018, p.29), the leaders of the CAS made another attempt at regionalisation. In 2006, they signed the Semipalatinsk Treaty, declaring their countries as nuclear-weapons-free zones (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2012). The regional leaders negotiated and agreed upon this treaty without any foreign actors (Cornell and Starr, 2018). By doing so, the treaty effectively prevented major powers from using the region for nuclear weapons-related activities, safeguarding the unity of the region in this regard (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2012). The signing of the Semipalatinsk Treaty marked the first time

the CAS presented a unified front on the international stage (Cornell and Starr, 2018). In the subsequent year, Kazakh President Nazarbayev proposed the formation of a new Central Asian Union, but it was only accepted by Kyrgyzstan and rejected by Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2012). Unfortunately, the period after 2007, coinciding with the EU's first comprehensive strategy for the region, saw stagnation in regionalism in Central Asia (Cornell and Starr, 2018).

The CAS had weak economic ties for many years, negatively impacting Central Aisa's growth (CA 2019c). However, 'a new reality' has emerged in the region, and the CAS have embraced regional integration again (CA 2018d, p.41). Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are again leading the resurgence of regional cooperation in Central Asia (Cornell and Starr, 2018; CA 2019k). Central Asian states now view the region's cultural, political, and economic potential as a common resource that requires collective efforts for effective utilisation (CA 2018d, p.41). The commitment to regionalisation is evident in official discourse and practice. While Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan express their interest in strengthening relations with other countries in the region, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan prioritise regional cooperation in their foreign policies (CA 2015, 2017j, 2017k, 2020d). Uzbekistan's foreign policy explicitly states that the region of Central Asia is its main priority, aiming to maintain security and stability by amicably resolving outstanding issues with other states (CA 2017j; Tulyakov et al., 2022). Similarly, Kazakhstan's foreign policy focuses on consolidating its leading positions and promoting long-term interests in the Central Asian region (CA 2020d).

Moreover, in 2018, for the first time in a decade, a meeting of the heads of Central Asia was held in Astana, initiated by Uzbek President Mirziyoyev without the presence of a foreign power (Cornell and Starr, 2018). A second consultative meeting of Central Asian states took place in Tashkent in 2019 (CA 2019l). These meetings serve as platforms for CAS presidents to address pressing regional issues and explore new avenues of cooperation, becoming an annual event. The CAS leaders' renewed commitment to regional integration bodes well for greater regional collaboration and progress.

Pursuing regional unity has not been mere rhetoric, as evidenced by practical steps taken by the CAS to address pressing issues. Longstanding water-sharing disputes between upstream and downstream countries have been largely resolved, with Uzbekistan no longer opposing the hydro energy ambitions of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (EU 2019a; Mamatova, Ibrokhimov, and Dewulf,

2016). Moreover, border demarcation disputes have seen progress, with Uzbekistan engaging in negotiations with all Central Asian states and reaching final agreements with Kazakhstan (Sakenova, 2023). Cooperation has also bolstered trade turnover among the five states (CA 2017h). Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have also agreed on eighty-five per cent of border demarcation and delimitation negotiations (CA 2017h). The trade turnover among the five states has also been steadily growing because of renewed regional cooperation (CA 2017h). These are only a few examples of increased cooperation among the CAS. The political leaders have pledged to strengthen their relationship in the future (CA 2019l). Growing regional cooperation among the five states is intensifying regional identity construction, and the next section of the chapter will present the main research findings in this regard.

4.2. Constructing Central Asia through the eyes of the EU and the CAS

Unpacking the essence of Central Asia from the perceptions of the CAS and the EU has revealed some caveats. First, Central Asia represents several things to both actors: a geographical space, a geopolitical entity, and a regional and global actor. Second, there are instances where the perceptions of the EU and the CAS intersect and diverge. Geographically, both actors identify five countries as the core of Central Asia. Geopolitically, the EU perceives it as having a regional significance. Meanwhile, the CAS perceive a global significance. Whereas both actors view Central Asia as a regional actor, the CAS also perceive a global actorness quality to the region. Third, the views of the EU have evolved over time as it socialised with the partner countries..

Central Asia as a geographical space

First and foremost, Central Asia represents a geographical location for both actors. There is a broad consensus across the EU institutions and officials as to what geographical space the Central Asian region occupies. They identify Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as the main states that account for the region of Central Asia. This is true in the case of official documents and discourse in practice (EU 2007a, 2017a, 2017b, 2019b). The only exception is the European Parliament which views Mongolia as part of the region because the country ‘shares many cultural, historic and economic aspects with the former USRR republics of Central Asia’ (EU 2020, p.2). Figure 4.1 below envisages Mongolia as part of the Central Asian region as per the EP.

Fig. 4.1 Mongolia displayed as part of Central Asia.

Since 2008, the European Parliament has advocated for the inclusion of Mongolia in the EU's strategy towards the countries collectively known as Central Asia, which includes Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (EU 2008a). The view of the European Parliament in this regard has remained consistent over time. For example, the European Parliament Resolution for the year 2016 called on the EU 'to involve Mongolia on an ad hoc basis in certain aspects of the European Strategy for Central Asia' (EU 2016). Interestingly, despite not being officially included in the EU strategy papers and policies for the region, the Parliament's standing delegations currently classify Mongolia as part of Central Asia (EU 2020).

Cornell and Starr (2019) propose a broader regional definition for Central Asia, which includes the South Caucasus, Xinjiang, and Afghanistan. However, it is important to note that the official position of the political leaders in the region differs from this perspective. The South Caucasus and Xinjiang are not considered part of Central Asia in the discourse of Central Asian states. For example, the foreign policy concepts of Central Asian states or the speeches of the region's leaders do not even mention Mongolia or Xinjiang at any stage (CA 2015, 2017j, 2020a, 2020b; Tulyakov et al., 2022).

However, the case of Afghanistan is more complex. While both the EU and Central Asian states acknowledge the importance of events in Afghanistan for the wider region and include Afghanistan in some regional meetings, projects, and programs when necessary, the official discourse of the EU does not refer to Afghanistan as a Central Asian state (EU 2007a, 2019b; Mogherini 2019b). In this regard, the latest EU strategy for Central Asia has made it a priority to support trilateral cooperation between the five states, the EU and Afghanistan (EU 2019b). Nonetheless, the latest EU strategy for Central Asia prioritises supporting trilateral cooperation between the five Central Asian states, the EU, and Afghanistan (EU 2019b).

Meanwhile, Central Asian states have also been actively involved in integrating Afghanistan into regional processes in various sectors, indicating their deep engagement with the country's regional dynamics (CA 2019a, 2020f). Central Asian integration efforts are driven by the shared goal of achieving stability, prosperity, and sustainable development in the region (CA 2016b, 2019g, 2019h, 2019i, 2019j, 2020c). Central Asian leaders recognise the crucial role of Afghanistan in realising these objectives (CA 2017b, 2018a, 2018b).

Prime Minister of Tajikistan Rasulzoda stated that security and stability in Central Asia are closely linked to developments in Afghanistan (CA 2019d, p.28). Similarly, Uzbekistan's foreign policy remarks that 'a stable and prosperous Afghanistan is a guarantee of the regional security in Central Asia' (CA, 2017j). Therefore, the situation in Afghanistan is viewed by Central Asian leaders to have 'a direct impact' on their region (CA 2019c). However, there is a divergence among Central Asian countries when it comes to whether Afghanistan is part of the region or not.

The case of Uzbekistan is especially noteworthy here. When compared to the other four countries, Uzbekistan constructs Afghanistan as a Central Asian state. This is visible in discourse in practice and in the country's official foreign policy paper. The political leaders of Uzbekistan state that Afghanistan is 'historically, geographically and geopolitically adjacent to the region' (CA 2017i, p. 7), thus, 'an integral part of Central Asia' (CA 2020e). President Mirziyoyev, at the international conference on Afghanistan in Tashkent, highlighted that for millennia, Uzbeks and Afghans lived, developed, and created in the same culture and civilisational space without political borders (CA 2018b). Therefore, Uzbekistan views Afghanistan 'to be a historical part of the culturo-civilizational space of our region of Central Asia' (CA 2018f, p.24). Equally, the foreign policy concept of the Uzbek government classifies Afghanistan as part of Central Asia, therefore highlighting it as a priority area for its external action (CA 2017j): 'Uzbekistan's policy in Central Asia is aimed at

ensuring peace and stability in the region, addressing the key problems of regional security, including contribution to the settlement of the situation in Afghanistan'. The Figure. 4.2 envisages Afghanistan as part of the region.

Fig. 4.2 Displays Afghanistan as part of Central Asia

Meanwhile, when you look at the discourse of the other Central Asian countries, Afghanistan is constructed as a separate state from the region (CA 2017f). The following passage by the Kazakh Minister of Foreign Affairs at the UN conveys this quite clearly (CA 2018g, p.4): 'We are also concerned about the threat posed by narcotics production in Afghanistan and recognise the importance of close coordination between Afghanistan and Central Asian States'. Similarly, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan reference Central Asia and Afghanistan as separate entities (CA 2018a, 2019e). Meanwhile, Turkmenistan, which shares a border with Afghanistan, refers to it as Central Asia's 'closest neighbour' (CA 2019i).

Uzbekistan's construction of Afghanistan as part of the region is not so surprising. The Uzbek elites believe that a stable and secure Afghanistan is important for Uzbekistan to develop its economy and trade (Aripov, 2021a; Komilov, 2021). As a double landlocked country, Uzbekistan prioritises accessing international transport corridors to help reduce costs for its goods to reach other regions (Aripov, 2021a). The trans-Afghan corridor is vital for Uzbekistan to connect to South Asian markets. To that end, the Uzbek government has shown a 'relentless' desire to work with the

incumbent Taliban government by hosting them in the country (Umarov and Murtazashvili, 2022) and sending aid to Afghanistan on more than one occasion (Aripov, 2021b).

Despite the varying views on whether Afghanistan is officially part of Central Asia, the Central Asian states actively engage in the country's reconstruction and development. They believe in integrating Afghanistan into regional political, economic, and security processes (CA 2017d, 2017f, 2018a, 2018d, 2018e, 2019c). Each country is contributing in different ways to support Afghanistan's progress. Tajikistan, with its long border with Afghanistan, is focused on improving transport links to serve as an energy bridge between the two countries, and it is actively involved in the Central Asia - South Asia Electricity Transmission and Trade project, providing electricity and essential commodities to the Afghan people (CA, 2019d, p.28). Tajikistan is also investing in training and professional development for Afghan personnel in various sectors (CA, 2017a, p.12). Similarly, Turkmenistan, in collaboration with international partners, is working on establishing a power supply line and fibre-optic communications network while providing training to Afghan specialists in different fields (CA, 2018e, p.2). Kyrgyzstan is contributing to the reconstruction by rebuilding road and railroad networks in Afghanistan and facilitating connections to neighbouring countries like China, Iran, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan (CA, 2018h, p.26). Moreover, Kyrgyzstan is promoting the establishment of a three-way Kyrgyzstan-Tajikistan-Afghanistan agricultural-industrial consortium to foster economic integration (CA, 2018h, p.26).

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, like other Central Asian states, have also made significant contributions to supporting Afghanistan's development. Kazakhstan has allocated fifty million US dollars to educate Afghan students at Kazakh universities, with 500 students already graduated and another 500 expected to enrol (CA, 2018g, p.3). Meanwhile, Uzbekistan has taken concrete steps to integrate Afghanistan into trade, economic, and infrastructural relations with other Central Asian states. Uzbekistan has established a new power transmission line, Surkhan-Puli Khumri, to increase the electricity supply to Afghanistan and is also involved in building railway roads within Afghanistan to improve its transit potential (CA, 2018b). Additionally, Uzbek universities have trained and educated over a hundred Afghan personnel (CA 2018b).

In sum, the EU and the CAS agree on what countries comprise Central Asia's core. There is, of course, a possibility that the perceptions and preferences of the CAS might change, especially towards Afghanistan. The only way to ensure that the EU is not blindsided in this regard is to keep engaging with the other and being reflexive of the changes on the ground. The following section

will focus on exploring how the EU and the Central Asian states view Central Asia's geopolitical identity, where their views intersect, and where they diverge.

Central Asia: a geopolitical entity?

First and foremost, Central Asia is perceived by the EU as a geopolitical region with strategic value, attributed to its geographic location, abundant mineral resources, and emerging economic potential. This perspective has remained consistent over time and is shared by various EU institutions. However, when comparing this view with the perceptions of the Central Asian states, there are both areas of agreement and disagreement. Both the EU and the Central Asian states recognise the region's geopolitical significance, but they differ in the extent of that significance. Central Asian leaders view their region as having global geopolitical importance, while the EU considers it to have a broader regional significance. In this section, we will explore the gaps in perceptions between the EU and the Central Asian states, examine the reasons behind these differences, and analyse how these perceptions evolved over time. Table 4.2 below provides a snapshot of the existing and changing views of the EU towards the region.

Table 4.2. The evolution of the EU's perceptions of Central Asia as a region

Names	*2007 - 2022*	*2016 - 2022*	*Description*
A Crossroad	X	X	a bridge that links the West and the East
Source of extra energy	X	X	has the potential to meet the energy needs of the EU
Security threat	X	X	poses security challenges to the EU's own security
Market Opportunity		X	offers 70 million consumer market potential for the EU businesses
Regional actor		X	Central Asia can solve pressing regional issues

(Source: my own compilation from primary data)

A Crossroad

Central Asia's historical role as a bridge that brought together the Far East and the West, Russia and South Asia, as well as its future potential to revive this role, has been consistently highlighted by the EU in official papers and speeches (EU 2008c, 2019c; Mogherini 2018b; Burian, 2019c). The first

line of the EU's 2007 Strategy for Central Asia states that 'Central Asia has a centuries-old tradition of bringing Europe and Asia together' (EU 2007a, p.2). And, once again, it can serve as 'a connection along the silk road' (EU 2015c) therefore, 'become a transit region for the increasing traffic flows between the EU and Far East' (EU 2008c). Central Asia is essentially seen as an essential link, 'a crossroad' for connecting major world powers (Mogherini, 2018c). This is one of the primary perceptions of the EU regarding the region.

For the EU, Central Asia's role of linking Europe and Asia bears strategic importance. There are two reasons why being a crossroad is significant for the EU. First, 'The region holds an important potential as cross-roads for the transit of energy resources' (EU 2012, p. 23). The EU is seeking to establish a secure and stable energy route through the region. Second, with the adoption of the EU's global strategy on Europe and Asia, Central Asia's connectivity 'security and stability' has become 'an important element of building connectivity' between these continents (Burian, 2019b). Thus, in the eyes of the EU, the region increasingly 'even more than in the past is a crossroad between Europe and the Far East, between Russia and the Far East' (Mogherini, 2018b).

However, this raises an important question: What does such conceptualisation mean to the other? Kavalski and Cho (2018) argued that by designating the region with the role of a bridge, the EU positions it on the fringes of its other more important initiatives. According to them, the region is 'merely a refuelling station' for the EU to reach its primary strategic regions (Kavalski and Cho, 2018, p.54). In other words, the EU would not have engaged with Central Asia had it not been for the other actors it wished to connect with. The data from the region reveals a convergence between the EU and the CAS in this regard with one caveat. Whereas the EU perceives the region as a bridge mainly between itself and Asia, Central Asian leaders view it as a global link that has the potential to connect the major parts of the world.

First and foremost, it is discernible from the view of the Central Asian countries that the crossroad role of the region is perceived as a substantial aspect of its identity: 'Being in the heart of Eurasia, the region is the bridge connecting Europe and the Middle East, South and East Asia' (CA 2017h, p.1) therefore, historically it has 'contributed to promoting dialogue and interaction of world cultures, languages and religions for thousands of years' (CA 2017g). To celebrate this historical heritage of the region, Uzbekistan, in cooperation with UNESCO, expressed the wish to host the international forum titled *Central Asia at the Crossroads of World Civilizations* in the ancient city of Khiva in 2021 (CA 2020e). So, in this regard, the EU and Central Asia agree.

Second, to Central Asian leaders, the transit potential of the region represents an invaluable asset (CA 2018f, 2019h, 2019i, 2019j). The leaders of the CAS reiterate that the region has an unfulfilled 'huge transport and transit potential' (CA 2019h) that can connect the EU with East Asia and 'North with the South'(CA 2017i). Thus, such 'unique transport and communication potential' (CA 2017g) means 'interest towards Central Asia from the external economic and political centres' are growing steadily (CA 2019i). To the CAS, fulfilling the transit potential of Central Asia by 'creating interconnected regional transport system, which ensures the shortest access to seaports and new external markets' will revive the role of the region as 'a global transit corridor' that connects 'South Asia, China and Europe' (CA 2019l, p. 4).

Third, the EU's view of the region is evolving in response to changes on the ground (EU 2017c, 2019a; Burian, 2019b). Throughout the ten-year relations with Central Asian states, the EU hardly referred to or acknowledged the region's economic potential. This is not so unusual considering the endemic corruption and unwilling political leaders, such as the previous president of Uzbekistan, left very little to be desired by the business community of the EU. However, the regime change in Uzbekistan and renewed interest in regional integration by the CAS have resulted in a change of view by the EU. Since 2016, Central Asia is increasingly seen not only as a region that 'can be a gateway between Europe and the Far East' but also as an economic partner (EU 2017b). This is because Central Asia's 'young and fast-growing population of 70 million inhabitants' presents the EU with 'significant market opportunities' (EU 2019a). In other words, the region represents a positive value to the EU in its own right through its market potential. Thus, the EU is pledging to bring 'significant quality investment' if the Central Asian leaders carry out reforms to make the region business-friendly (Mogherini, 2019b).

By acknowledging the economic potential of Central Asia and investing in the region, the EU and the Central Asian states can move beyond viewing it solely as a transit point and instead create lasting economic impact and growth for the people in the region. This will contribute to making Central Asia a thriving economic partner for the EU and ensure a mutually beneficial relationship. The next section will explore another dimension of Central Asia's geopolitical significance.

Source of external energy

The strategic importance of Central Asia is further heightened by its abundant energy resources (EU 2008a, 2008b, 2010, 2011, 2019a), a key issue in the relations between the EU and the region (EU 2016). With significant hydrocarbon resources and a favourable geographical location for

transport routes to European markets, the Central Asian region is seen as a potential source of energy security for the EU (EU 2007b, 2011). The EU seeks stable, secure, and reliable energy partners, and Central Asia, particularly Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, as the main energy exporters, holds vital potential in this regard (EU 2010). Establishing a direct route from the Caspian Sea region to Europe is a priority for the EU, and cooperation with Central Asian countries is seen as a key element in achieving this goal (EU 2010).

However, some scholars, like Hoffmann (2010), have criticised the EU's energy interest in Central Asia, arguing that it may contradict the EU's values-based foreign policy. Despite this concern, two points need to be considered. First, the EU has been transparent about its energy and human rights cooperation in its regional Strategy Papers (EU 2007a, 2019b). The two-year consultation period prior to adopting the 2019 Strategy allowed for input from Central Asian states, including private actors (Burian, 2019b). This would have been the perfect opportunity to express discontent with the energy and value promotion policies of the EU. Instead, the five states have agreed to renew their relations based on the strategy. The deputy foreign minister of Kazakhstan, Roman Vassilenko (2019), called the strategy 'visionary' for taking an inclusive approach that incorporated some of the proposals made by his country. This demonstrates that the EU's intentions were openly discussed and accepted by the Central Asian leaders. Therefore, one must recognise the agency of the leaders of the CAS when it comes to choosing to commit themselves to further their relations with the EU, given the transparency of its interests towards the region.

Second, Central Asian leaders fully know the region's energy potential and geopolitical significance when engaging with external actors like the EU, China, and Russia (CA 2017g, 2019i). Energy exports represent a significant source of revenue for Central Asian countries, helping to boost economic growth and development (Kavalski and Cho, 2018). As such, they view the energy appeal positively and acknowledge that external powers will naturally show interest in the region due to its rich energy and natural resources (CA 2017g, 2019i). For example, leaders expressed the view that 'Possessing significant energy and natural resources, unique transport and communication potential, Central Asia possesses geopolitical significance' (CA 2017g). On another occasion, Turkmen president Berdimuhamedov, at the second consultative meeting of the heads of Central Asian states, remarked that it is only 'natural' that the hydrocarbon qualities of the region attract external actors (CA 2019i). Similarly, the Uzbek president stated that the region is rich in minerals, and the 'interests of world powers intersect' in Central Asia (CA 2017h, p.1). Moreover, in recent

years, China has become a major energy partner of Central Asia, surpassing Russia (Laruelle and Peyrouse, 2012). Therefore, energy cooperation with the EU presents a viable opportunity for Central Asian states to broaden their energy export options and economic ties.

Security threat!

Security concerns of the EU were one of the main drivers for creating the region's first fully-fledged foreign policy strategy (Boonstra and Tsertsvadze, 2016, p.11). This is because there is a uniform perception amongst EU officials and institutions that the region represents a clear security threat to Europe (EU 2007a, 2010, 2012, 2017a, 2017b, 2019a; Burian, 2019c). Central Asia, while offering mineral resources to the EU, is also a region that possesses 'security challenges linked to foreign fighters and radicalisation towards violent extremism, which compound already existing threats to stability posed by water and border disputes, drug trafficking and organised crime and conflicts in the wider region, especially in Afghanistan' (EU 2015b, p.6). Therefore, the region carries 'significant importance' (Burian, 2019c) for the EU 'notably in terms of security' (EU 2010, p.2). The security threat perception of the EU has also dictated its primary objective for Central Asia, which is to support the stability and security of the five states (EU 2007a, 2019c). The common belief among the EU institutions and officials is that the potential destabilisation of the region 'could have disastrous consequences for the entire region and could also affect the EU and its Member States in many ways' (EU 2015b). According to the EU, the potential and prolonged destabilisation of one of the five Central Asian states could threaten the EU's security, energy supply, and economic and business investments (EU 2007a, 2010; Burian 2018).

The EU's regional security concerns can be broadly categorised into two. First, the proximity of Central Asia to Afghanistan makes the region vulnerable to many challenges, such as the spillover from the long-running conflict there, including organised crime, illegal migration, and drug trafficking (EU 2012). If these threats were to destabilise Central Asia, according to the former EUSR Burian, the EU would be the first to suffer the consequences of such an event (Burian, 2018). This is a legitimate concern as the countries of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan share borders with Afghanistan. This has become particularly problematic due to the withdrawal of international troops from Afghanistan in 2014 (EU 2015b). While the long-running conflict is a significant challenge for the wider region that could destabilise Central Asia, a much more substantial threat is drug trafficking from the region to Europe (EU 2012). This impacts the EU directly. The geographic location of the CAS means that it is situated between or close to

Afghanistan, Pakistan and Iran, as well as having access to China, Burma, Laos and Thailand, which make up the largest producers of illegal drugs in the world (EU 2007b, p.5). At the same time, it has access to profitable European markets via Russia (EU 2015a). Unfortunately, the collapse of the Soviet Union has contributed towards Central Asia emerging as a major international drug trafficking centre (EU 2007b).

Second, the growing phenomenon of violent Islamist extremism and radicalisation in the region directly and indirectly impacts the EU (EU 2015a, 2015c, 2019a, 2019c; Burian, 2019a). In the past few years, Islamist terrorists from the region have carried out terror attacks both in Central Asia and Western cities. In July 2018, four tourists lost their lives in Tajikistan due to an attack by a member of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria terrorist group of Tajik origin (Kramer and Callimachi, 2018). Similar attacks by the Central Asian terrorists were carried out in Stockholm, St. Petersburg, and New York. The region is home to a 'significant source of foreign fighters' actively participating in the wars across the Middle East (EU 2019a). It is estimated between 2000 - 4000 fighters from the region have left their secular homelands to join extremist groups in search of establishing a caliphate (International Crisis Group, 2015). Therefore, 'counterterrorism and preventing violent extremism in Central Asia are crucial to the EU's own security' (EU 2019a). The EU's security concern in this area has resulted in the establishment of a post for a security and counterterrorism expert specialising in Central Asia in 2019 (EU 2019b). At this stage, it is important to mention that the five CAS states are still reasonably stable in the face of a conflict-ridden neighbour and growing radicalisation in the region.

The EU and Central Asian states agree regarding the types of security threats in the region (CA, 2016b, 2018h, 2018e, 2019f). Similarly to the EU, the leaders of the CAS 'share the view that the security and development of Afghanistan and the whole region are closely interrelated' (CA, 2018h, p.25). They also understand that illicit drug trafficking is 'another threat that has a significant impact on the adoption of measures to ensure stability and security' in Central Asia and beyond (CA, 2018h, p.27). Lastly, just like the EU, Central Asian states view the fight against terrorism as 'one of the most important issues on the regional agenda' (CA, 2018e, p.1). However, here exists a crucial gap in the perceptions of the EU and Central Asia when it comes to the security threats in the region. Whereas the EU views security threats in terms of impacting the wider region, the political leaders of Central Asia see them as affecting the globe. The difference in views stems from two gaps in perceptions:

First, whereas the EU predominantly perceives security issues through regional terms, the CAS are much more likely to perceive them in global terms. According to the political leaders of the CAS, 'Terrorism and extremism, together with transnational organised crime and illicit drug trafficking, undermine international peace and security, aggravate conflicts, and destabilise entire regions' (CA 2019d, p.28). They view these challenges as threatening the entire 'civilised world' because they 'transcend national borders and political and ideological doctrines' (CA 2016a, p.2). This view is especially prominent towards terrorism and Afghanistan. To the leaders of the CAS, terrorism is 'a phenomenon threatens to undermine the entire system of global security and its political and moral foundations' (CA 2017e, p.17). Similarly, the resolution of the Afghan conflict is viewed as a struggle 'for our common security, for a world without terrorism, fanaticism and violence' (CA 2018b).

For Central Asian leaders, there is a valid rationale behind characterising security threats as global issues. By doing so, they are actively seeking to maintain international support and momentum to combat these serious problems: 'we believe firmly that Afghanistan must remain at the centre of the global agenda and that our shared determination to promote peace should not weaken' (CA, 2018i, p.23). More importantly, 'The international community must step up its efforts to fight terrorism, extremism, and related problems' (CA 2017c, p.6). As well as seeking international collaboration, the CAS leaders are projecting global actorness of the region by contributing towards their resolution (this will be addressed in the next section).

Second, Central Asian states perceive the region as being more than just crucial to Eurasia (CA 2017g, 2017i, 2018c). To them, in contrast to the EU, Central Asia represents a globally significant geopolitical entity. According to the CAS, 'Stability in Central Asia is a factor not only of regional, but also global security' (CA, 2017i, p.25). Consequently, 'the security of Central Asia is inseparable from global security' (CA, 2017g, p.1). To the leaders of the CAS, the geostrategic value is further growing whereby 'Central Asia is no longer a periphery of world politics' and 'the region attracts the increasing attention of the global community and key actors of international relations' every year (CA 2019b).

It is possible that the EU views the geopolitical significance of Central Asia in regional terms rather than global due to not sharing immediate borders with the CAS. The EU perceives the region in relation to its eastern neighbourhood rather than itself (EU 2007a, 2007b)). The EU views itself as not an immediate neighbour of Central Asia but 'a partner further afield' (EU 2015b, p.7) or 'Neighbours of EU Neighbourhood' (EU 2007b, p.7), therefore requiring 'a certain level of

engagement' (Romanowski, 2016, p.10). Consequently, in the geopolitical scale of the EU's external action, the region is 'too distant' and 'not a priority' (Romanowski, 2016, p.2). Had Central Asia been considered as an immediate neighbour, one could argue that its geopolitical significance could have reached the 'global' status for the EU.

Whether one agrees that the region is indeed a geopolitical entity of global significance or not, this creates a certain level of policy implications for the EU and Central Asia relations. First, Central Asian states will have expectations that match the geopolitical value of the region. In other words, the engagement from the EU should have weight and zeal, thus signifying that it understands Central Asia's 'real' value. While the CAS might have accepted the primary construction of the EU – a transit region at the beginning of the relationship - this might no longer suffice. Thus, treating the region primarily as a 'refuelling station' might be counterproductive in the long run. In practical terms, this could mean a more determined and streamlined approach to its diplomatic presence in the region. For example, it took the EU nearly thirty years to complete its diplomatic presence in each Central Asian state. Turkmenistan was the last country where the EU opened its delegation in July 2019.

Furthermore, the EU scrapped the position of the EU Special Representative for the region in March 2014 due to budgetary and institutional considerations (Boonstra and Tsertsvadze, 2016). Fortunately, the EU remedied the problem by reinstating the position shortly after. This kind of meandering by the EU does not send the right signal to the other who perceives itself as an important geopolitical entity. Another area where the EU could do better is to increase the level of engagement by the member states in the region. For example, the EU could not find one willing member state that would lead its Education initiative in the region (Interview 2).

Second, by viewing Central Asia as a region with global geopolitical value, political leaders of the CAS are creating conditions for different powers to form partnerships in the region, whereby they would be working towards a common goal of supporting its development. This is very much in line with the multi-vector foreign policy of the partner countries. The EU is keen to state that it values the CAS's needs and interests. In this regard, the EU has failed to achieve any notable results. While the region's security is in the interests of Russia and China as border countries, one can understand the EU's apprehension to cooperate with them. However, the EU could seize the opportunity to collaborate with other international actors, especially with its allies such as the US, Japan, and India. These powers actively seek to form meaningful relations with Central Asian states via their C5+

set-up. To this day, nothing concrete has materialised in jointly addressing security challenges among these actors. For instance, Korneev's (2013) study revealed a proliferation of numerous donors, including the EU, actively involved in supporting Central Asian states in matters of migration and border security. Paradoxically, instead of collaborating to tackle common challenges and address the pressing issues that partner states wish to resolve, these actors often compete with one another or duplicate efforts (Korneev, 2013). Central Asia requires a more streamlined and coherent approach to addressing its complex challenges. The presence of myriads of uncoordinated programs scattered across the region, driven by actors pursuing their individual agendas, is far from ideal.

Central Asia: an actor?

A decade-long relationship between the EU and Central Asia has resulted in the evolution of perceptions towards the other by the former. As was discussed previously, from a geopolitical perspective, Central Asia represents a security threat that ought to be contained with the help of the EU's policies. It also means a source of external energy that can meet the EU's energy security needs and a crossroad that can take the EU to the East Asian countries. The region's economic potential has recently caught the EU's business radar. Interestingly, from 2016 onwards, there was another shift in the EU's discourse and practice towards the region. In addition to being a geopolitical entity, the EU and the Central Asian countries increasingly view the region as an emerging regional actor (EU 2019a,; Burian, 2019a; Mogherini, 2019a; Borrell, 2020; CA 2017g, 2018a, 2018f, 2019b, 2019i). However, the leaders of the CAS also see a globally active region, which stems from the gaps in perceptions related to how these two actors perceive the security challenges impacting Central Asia (CA 2017g, 2018a, 2019b, 2019l). The below paragraphs will discuss this further in detail.

Mori (2016) argues that the major powers are embarking on a new Great Game to control the region and keep each other in check. The Great Game, in the context of Central Asia, refers to the competition for influence over the region between the British Empire and Russian tsardom in the XIX century. On the contrary, the EU reiterates that it does not view Central Asia as 'a grand chessboard for a new Great Game' (Borrell, 2020) . Instead, the EU values Central Asia as a 'more independent and stronger partner' (Mogherini, 2018b) who plays a 'key role' in addressing pressing regional challenges such as the peace process in Afghanistan (EU 2019c, p.3). In this shift, Central

Asia represents an emerging regional actor whose interests need to be considered by external actors when cooperating in the region on Central Asian matters (Burian, 2019b).

The EU's perception of Central Asia's regional actorness is most prominent in relation to Afghanistan (EU 2019a; Mogherini 2018a, 2018b; Burian, 2019a, 2019b). Central Asia is no longer perceived just as a potential victim of destabilisation occurring from Afghan conflicts and the transporter of these into Europe. Instead, it is increasingly seen as a stabilising partner who can take an active part in the Afghan peacebuilding and reconciliation processes – 'we see a very positive potential of countries in the region' to support 'the process of negotiations reaching a potential political solution' in Afghanistan (Burian, 2019b). This was especially evident in the discourses of the European Parliament, High Representative Mogherini (2018a, 2018b), and the EU special representative Peter Burian (Burian, 2018, 2019b). Central Asian states became important and vital regional actors and partners who could play a role in achieving a political solution in Afghanistan and contribute to the country's economic revitalisation (Burian, 2018). The shift means Central Asia is no longer a political construct but an actor carrying out real processes. Thus, the support of the CAS for Afghanistan is seen as 'critical' for the EU's goals for political reconciliation in the conflict-ridden state (EU 2019a). This change is a sign that, for the time being, the representation of the CAS is evolving towards a better direction, as the region is now less of a security threat but more of a partner who will help address the existing challenges. To that end, Central Asian states accept the role of a regional actor. Thus, they are in agreement with the EU:

'There is no doubt that the United Nations resolution acknowledges the formation of Central Asia as a single consolidated region, the countries of which — and I would like to put special emphasis on this — are capable through their joint efforts of solving common regional problems and ensuring prosperity, well-being and a worthy future for their population of 70 million people' (CA 2018f, p.24)

Central Asian leaders are no longer passively watching other actors solve the issues that exist in their countries. The five states are consistently reiterating, both in regional meetings and in the presence of the international community, the 'primary and key role of the states of Central Asia' in solving pressing challenges affecting the entire region (CA 2019l, p.1). However, when contrasted with the EU, Central Asian partner states also claim that the region is actively contributing towards resolving pressing challenges of 'regional and global politics' (CA 2019b). As a result, 'Central Asia is becoming a global stakeholder' (CA 2019c), whose states 'play a significant role in addressing

contemporary issues related to enhancing international security' (CA 2017g). In other words, Central Asia is acting in the international system. Thus, as well as being a regional actor, Central Asia is also a global actor. In this regard, a significant gap exists in constructing the region between the EU and Central Asia. The main reason behind this divergence in perception is that the CAS are much more likely to view security-related issues, such as the Afghan war and extremism, as global issues, as mentioned in the earlier section of the chapter. By characterising these issues as global and taking part in solving them, logically, they view themselves as global actors.

It must be noted here that the global actorness perception of the CAS did not occur in a vacuum. It is rooted in practical reality. First, when it comes to Afghanistan, Central Asian countries are continuously stirring up global engagement to settle the Afghan conflict by organising international events in their home countries. For example, Turkmenistan hosted a conference on regional economic cooperation on Afghanistan in the capital city of Ashgabat, which took place on November 14-15, 2017 (CA 2019l, p.2). In 2018, Kazakhstan hosted a debate at the UN Security Council on *Building regional partnerships in Afghanistan and Central Asia* (CA 2019l, p.2). On the 26th and 27th of March, 2018, Uzbekistan hosted an international conference on the *Peace process, security cooperation and regional connectivity* in Afghanistan, which gathered leaders from the CAS and wider region, including the EU, China, Russia and many other countries (Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2018). More than a dozen international organisations also took part. During the conference, the President of Uzbekistan offered to host negotiations between the Afghan government and the Taliban leaders (Radio Free Europe, 2018b). In the same year, another critical regional conference, *Empowering Women in Afghanistan,* was held in the city of Nur-Sultan, Kazakhstan (CA 2019l, p.2). These are only a few examples of the practical action Central Asian states are pursuing.

Second, in terms of tackling Islamic extremism, Central Asian states are equally taking a proactive role by aiming for policy reform at a global level and calling for multilateral cooperation. Collectively, Central Asian states co-authored the UN General Assembly Resolution Titled Enlightenment and Religious Tolerance, which was successfully adopted in December 2018 (CA 2019b). The resolution is looking to facilitate 'peace, mutual respect, tolerance and integration, the purpose of which is to strengthen and ensure religious freedom, protect the rights of believers and prevent discrimination' (CA 2019b). In May 2019, the government of Tajikistan held a high-level conference on an international and regional partnership to tackle terrorism and its financing

through illicit drug trafficking and organised crime in the capital city of Dushanbe (CA 2019d, p.28). The main objective of the Dushanbe process was to provide a crucial platform for detailed dialogue and best practices for the participants within the framework of the work of Heads of Counterterrorism Agencies of the UN Member States (CA 2019d, p.28). Similarly, Kazakhstan has also been doing its part in terms of contributing towards the international fight against terrorism. Since 2017, Kazakhstan has been formulating a code of conduct for achieving a world without terrorism to speed up the work on the international terrorism convention (CA 2017d, p.30). As well as that, the country has allocated 300,000 USD for the implementation of the United Nations Global Counterterrorism Strategy in Central Asia (CA 2017d, p.30).

In sum, the examples above, albeit modest, are clear signs that Central Asian leaders are no longer passive victims of destabilising factors in and out of the region. Instead, they are capable actors addressing these challenges on their own terms.

4.3. Conclusion

The comparative analysis undertaken in this chapter has yielded valuable insights into the definitions and conceptualisations of Central Asia from both the EU's and CAS's perspectives. The EU and Central Asian states construct Central Asia as a geographical space, regional actor and geopolitical entity. This convergence is a positive sign as it emphasises the EU's reflexivity in the partnership and the recognition of the importance of the CAS perspective. It also highlights the relevance of policies where their views converge, fostering cooperation in these areas. However, there are also notable gaps in the perceptions of these actors that need to be brought forth.

In contrast to the EU's perspective, Central Asian political leaders perceive the geopolitical significance and actorness of the region in global terms rather than merely regional ones. In other words, the CAS attribute greater importance to the region compared to the EU. This disparity results in different views by these actors regarding how external parties should engage the region. While the EU may prioritise other regions and relegate Central Asia to a peripheral position, as evidenced by its indecisive and delayed diplomatic presence, Central Asian leaders might perceive this approach as undervaluing the region's true importance. CAS leaders consider Central Asia as a key player in global affairs. Therefore, in response to the EU's approach, Central Asian leaders may seek proactive partnerships with actors who recognise and appreciate the region's global

significance. Consequently, the EU's hesitation and limited focus on the region may lead to missed opportunities.

To foster a more effective and mutually beneficial partnership, the EU would need to consider and understand the evolving perceptions and aspirations of Central Asian states. By acknowledging Central Asia's strategic relevance on the global stage as perceived by the CAS, the EU can develop a more coherent and proactive strategy for the region. This would enhance the EU's standing and influence in Central Asia and foster a mutually beneficial relationship that addresses the region's specific needs and interests. This, in turn, will contribute to promoting stability, prosperity, and cooperation in this dynamic and significant part of the world.

Chapter 5 – Uzbekistan's construction of partnership with the EU

This chapter explores how Central Asian states construct the concept of partnership, focusing on Uzbekistan. Unlike Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan receives bilateral aid from the EU through financial and technical assistance. Theoretically, this provides an opportunity to examine the construction of partnerships in a 'less equal' setting. Specifically, it enables us to dissect how the dynamics of donor-recipient relationships, as discussed in previous studies, influence the Uzbek regime's capacity to cooperate efficiently with the EU. Consequently, it allows us to question assumptions centred around power when examining EU-Central Asia relations and tease out other factors detrimental to effective cooperation between the regions.

Additionally, by studying Uzbek-EU relations through the deconstruction of the notion of partnership, one can better understand the agency of countries such as Uzbekistan, which are at the intersection of changing power centres across the world characterised by the rise of China and the descent of the Western powers. Uzbekistan appeals to major powers in the region for different reasons. The EU sees Uzbekistan as a valuable partner for security and stability in Afghanistan, while China sees it as crucial for its Belt and Road Initiative. Russia views Uzbekistan's participation in the Eurasian Economic Union as contributing to its vision of maintaining regional influence. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan has expressed interest tostrengthen cooperation in all three directions by following its foreign policy principles.

Furthermore, examining Uzbekistan as a case study can provide valuable insights into the factors that shape the bilateral dynamics of Uzbek-EU relations. Specifically, by exploring the perspective of the Uzbek elites on EU-Uzbekistan relations, we can develop a comprehensive understanding of how the EU navigates the challenges and opportunities it encounters in the region. The EU faces obstacles in establishing itself as a prominent player in Uzbekistan, particularly when compared to Russia and China. These two countries share a common interest in limiting Western influence in Central Asia, benefit from geographical and historical advantages, offer more significant financial and military aid, and possess a more centralised and focused approach. Conversely, the EU's multi-institutional nature and emphasis on political reform may pose challenges. However, it is worth noting that the EU enjoys a more positive image among the elite (Interview 11) and the general population in Uzbekistan compared to other actors (U-Report, 2020). One can better understand

how the EU has addressed its disadvantages and capitalized on its advantages by delving into the perceptions of the Uzbek elites regarding the relations with the EU.

The chapter's findings show that Uzbekistan's construction of partnership and its overall approach to relations with the EU are less impacted by the presence of aid/donor nature of relations than by the country's incumbent elite policies and priorities. While the EU's donor role affects some aspects of the relations, it has a marginal impact compared to other factors. Geopolitics also factor into the Uzbek elite construction of partnership. However, it is subservient to the overall vision and direction of the elite policies, mainly related to improving the country's economic trajectory.

Accordingly, this chapter will analyse how the partnership with the EU is constructed in official elite discourse, using thematic analysis as the research method in line with the rest of the thesis. Primary interviews, official documents, speeches, and statements of the high-level elite will be used as relevant data sources. The chapter will take the following form. The initial section will juxtapose Uzbekistan's relations with the EU, China and Russia. Next, the discussion of the main findings will be presented. The last part of the chapter will offer the concluding thoughts.

5.1. Uzbekistan and the EU relations alongside Russia and China

Central Asia is a region where major powers such as the EU, China, and Russia have intersecting interests in promoting stability and security (Kavalski, 2007; Spaiser, 2015). However, trilateral cooperation has not materialized in the past, and with the recent invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, the future of three-way cooperation looks bleak. This is a missed opportunity, as regional elites in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are willing to support cooperation among these powers (Vassilenko, 2017; Norov, 2020). Consequently, the approaches of the EU, Russia, and China to tackle issues in the region have been divergent and sometimes conflicting. This section of the chapter will examine how these powers have engaged with the region, focusing on Uzbekistan.

The EU's gradual engagement with Central Asia has been driven by the region's energy resources and proximity to Afghanistan (Spaiser, 2015). In the case of Uzbekistan, the latter is more relevant than the former to the EU's interests. However, as discussed in Chapter 4, the EU's perception of the region is evolving from being exclusively associated with a security threat to a regional actor with growing economic and political potential. Uzbekistan-EU relations began with the signing of a Memorandum of Understanding on April 15, 1992, followed by the opening of the Uzbek Embassy in Brussels in January 1995 (D.Khakimov, 2021e). The EU's diplomatic presence as an EU

Delegation was established much later in 2011 (Gazeta.uz, 2016). In the 1990s, the EU's approach to Uzbekistan and the region was characterised by reticence (Melvin, 2008), as the perception was that the region was 'outside of its area of responsibility' (Kavalski and Cho, 2018, p.55). As a result, Uzbekistan's relations with the EU were covered by the one-size-fits-all Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) programme for all post-Soviet states (Plottka, 2015) rather than a specific program tailored to the country's needs. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan was eager to engage with EU member states, but this was not reciprocated (Warkotsch, 2008; Melvin, 2008). However, the EU attempted to increase its visibility in the region by introducing the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), a bilateral instrument for strengthening relations with the Central Asian states, which Uzbekistan ratified in 1999 (Rakhimov, 2015). However, both TACIS and the PCA generally failed to achieve the EU's objectives in Central Asia (Kavalski and Cho, 2018), and the EU remained 'invisible' in the region (Bossuyt, 2015, p.227).

The 9/11 attack on the US increased the strategic importance of Central Asia for the EU (Bossuyt, 2015; Fawn, 2021). As a bordering state of Afghanistan, Uzbekistan became a more visible partner in the fight against terrorism, as it provided a military base for German troops in its territory (Bossuyt, 2015). However, in 2005, relations between the EU and Uzbekistan deteriorated considerably in reaction to the Andijan Massacre, whereby the Uzbek regime forces killed hundreds of protesters (Melvin, 2008; Ismailov and Jarabik, 2009). In the aftermath of this bloody event, the EU demanded an independent inquiry, which was swiftly refused by the Uzbek regime (Axyonova, 2015). As a result, the EU suspended the PCA with Uzbekistan, imposed travel sanctions on the 12 officials who had a role in the massacre, and put an arms embargo on the country (Ismailov and Jarabik, 2009). To this day, the Uzbek political elites remain 'unhappy' about the sanctions imposed by the EU (Interview 9).

In 2007, the EU adopted its first strategy for Central Asia, demonstrating its growing interest in the region. Uzbekistan, as the most populous country bordering all other Central Asian countries, was crucial to the vision of the 2007 Strategy, which aimed to improve stability and security through good governance. Despite the lifting of the sanctions two years after the adoption of the 2007 Strategy, only one of the nine demands was fully met by the Uzbek regime (Axyonova, 2015), and the hope that this would lead to more productive relations with Tashkent was not realized (Boonstra, 2011). The nine demands mainly insisted on allowing independent inquiry into the massacre, release of human rights defenders, fair trial for those arrested during the protest and

overall improvement to human rights situation in the country and cooperation with the EU in this regard (Axyonova, 2015). Tashkent's uncooperative and unpredictable attitude towards the EU persisted under the presidency of Islam Karimov (1991-2016) (Ismailov and Jarabik, 2009). However, the arrival of the new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, in 2016 marked a positive change in Uzbek-EU relations. 'While the EU is traditionally not seen as a major actor in Central Asia' (Winn and Gänzle, 2022, p.10), the Uzbek elite under the new president sees it as a 'key partner' of Uzbekistan (Aripov, 2021b).

Consequently, Uzbekistan has shown a greater willingness to carry out political reforms, bringing the actors closer together under President Mirziyoyev's leadership (Cornell and Starr, 2019). High-level visits between the two have significantly increased (D. Khakimov, 2021c), and Uzbekistan was granted Generalised Scheme of Preferences Plus (GSP+) status in 2021, allowing goods from the country to enter the European Market without tariff (D. Khakimov, 2021d). In 2022, negotiations concluded on the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) between Uzbekistan and the EU, which will replace the outdated PCA (EEAS, 2022d). The Uzbek elites highly regard both GSP+ and the EPCA that will anchor the relations going forward (D. Khakimov, 2021d, 2021e; Aripov, 2021a; 2021b; interview 11).

However, the foreign policy changes under Mirziyoyev towards the EU and other states, for that matter, should not be interpreted as an expression of geopolitical balancing or bandwagoning (Vanderhill, Joireman and Tulepbayeva, 2020), often referred to as multivectorism, vis-à-vis any great powers. Despite initial speculations, Uzbekistan under Mirziyoyev has neither aligned exclusively with Russia and China nor balanced them against Western powers as Karimov did (Dadabaev, 2019a, 2019b). Instead, Uzbekistan has shifted away from the politically motivated policies of the past towards a more balanced and inclusive foreign policy (Dadabaev, 2019b). This nuanced strategy focuses on economic gains and regional stability, with Mirziyoyev emphasizing enhanced ties with neighbouring countries to reconstruct Uzbekistan's internal and regional identity, boost prosperity, and reduce poverty, which is often cited as a root cause of terrorism (Dadabaev, 2019a, 2019b, 2020). For instance, he recognises the value of Russia's vast market for Uzbek goods and the importance of Chinese investment while seeking technological partnerships with Japan and South Korea (Dadabaev, 2019a, 2020). This functionalist approach to cooperation leverages the strengths of different international partners to drive Uzbekistan's economic development (Dadabaev, 2019a).

Three factors characterise the EU's approach to Central Asian countries. First, the EU has maintained a 'value-based approach with human rights rhetoric' since the start of relations with the Central Asian states (Romanowski, 2016, p.9). This means closer ties with Uzbekistan are conditioned on the country's upholding of human rights and democracy, as outlined in the 2007 Strategy. Second, unlike the countries of the Eastern Partnership, such as Ukraine, Georgia and Moldova, Central Asia is not geographically part of Europe. Therefore, the EU has never given the Central Asian states any hope that they would become EU member states (Makarychev, 2020, p.9). Third, for most of its engagement with the region, the EU's policies have lacked content that could generate more interest from the CAS (Kavalski and Cho, 2018). More specifically, compared to other post-soviet countries such as Russia and Ukraine, Central Asia states have received a 'fraction' of commitment from the EU both in financial terms and from the point of policy engagement, which has resulted in a lack of motivation by the CAS to engage more seriously with the EU (Kavalski and Cho, 2018, p. 65). These aspects of the EU's engagement with the Central Asian states stand in direct contrast to the approaches of Russia and China.

Russia is a 'key regional power' in Central Asia (Winn and Gänzle, 2022, p.4) and has engaged with the Central Asian states in two phases (Juraev, 2014). After the collapse of the USSR, Russia neglected the region (Peyrouse, Laruelle and Boonstra, 2012) but still held unrivalled influence in Central Asia (Hynek, 2021). However, Russian engagement in the region grew substantially in the 2000s with Vladimir Putin's rise to power due to an increase in oil prices (Juraev, 2014).

For Russia, the region represents a 'vital geopolitical and geo-economic interest' as its destabilization could usher in increased drug trafficking and Islamist threats to its territory (Spaiser, 2015, p.91). Thus, maintaining regional security is a more pressing issue for Russia than for the EU. At the same time, Russia needs Central Asian states 'to confirm its great power status' by keeping the region under its influence (Spaiser, 2015, p.94). In addition to broader security concerns, Russia is also interested in the region's energy resources, including gas in Uzbekistan, where Russian companies have positioned themselves more favourably than EU or Chinese companies (Hynek, 2021). The investigative journalism by independent media outlet Ozodlik Radiosi revealed that Russian influence on Uzbekistan's energy security has sharply increased since President Mirziyoyev took office, with Russian and Uzbek 'insiders' obtaining control of hundreds of oil and gas fields through clandestine agreements (Ozodlik Radiosi, 2022). In addition, the Uzbek gas network's main

storage facility has also been given to a little-known Russian firm with commercial links to the EU-sanctioned Russian individual Timchenko (Ozodlik Radiosi, 2022).

Security remains the primary reason for Russia's involvement in the region (Peyrouse, Laruelle and Boonstra, 2012) and its ability to act as a security guarantor and offer hard power, such as military assistance, weapons sales, and anti-terror partnerships, sets it apart from the EU and China (Stronski and Ng, 2018; Winn and Gänzle, 2022). Russia uses political pressure to keep the Central Asian countries under its influence (Stronski and Ng, 2018). Integration into its regional organisations, such as the Collective Security Treaty Organisation, is one way Russia seeks to exert its influence on the CAS in security matters (Spaiser, 2015; Peyrouse, Laruelle, and Boonstra, 2012). While Uzbekistan joined the CSTO in 2006, it left the organisation twice in 2007 and 2012 (Laurelle and Peyrouse, 2012; Dzhuraev and Muratalieva, 2020). Russia's economic influence in the region is primarily exerted through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) (Fawn, 2021), which aims to create a single market for its member states in Eurasia (Russell, 2019b). Kazakhstan was a founding member, while Kyrgyzstan joined later in 2015 (Dzhuraev and Muratalieva, 2020). Uzbekistan, however, has thus far resisted joining. As the most populous country in the region, its membership is vital for other CAS to gain the benefits of a single market under the EAEU (Stronski and Ng, 2018).

Under Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's foreign policy had been a source of 'pain' for Russia due to its unwillingness to join Russian-led multilateral organisations and its tendency to switch loyalties to the West (Juraev, 2014, p.86). This is because Karimov often viewed Russian interests in the country with 'suspicion' (Ozodlik Radiosi, 2022) and consequently showed little interest in being part of supranational institutions to preserve its 'genuine independence' (Karabayeva, 2021, p.21). This changed under Mirziyoyev, and Russia found a 'willing partner' in Uzbekistan (Ozodlik Radiosi, 2022). Until the latest invasion of Ukraine by Russian forces, the official discourse of Uzbekistan indicated that they might in the future join the EAEU (Khakimov, 2020). One of the main reasons for Uzbek rapprochement towards the EAEU is predicated on the fact that joining the organisation would benefit millions of Uzbek migrants and their families who live and work in Russia (Khakimov, 2020). Unsurprisingly, under Mirziyoyev's presidency, the Uzbek regime has abstained from criticizing the Russian invasion of Ukraine and has thus far not voted against the interests of the former colonial power in the UN setting (Putz, 2022).

China's involvement in Central Asia, initially slow (Hynek, 2021), has significantly increased in the last two decades (Spaiser, 2015), making China a 'central geopolitical and economic power of the region' (Murphy, 2016, p.3) and challenging Russia's dominant role (Spaiser, 2015). China's interest in Central Asia stems from two main drivers: the region's potential as a source of transport and energy supplies (Peyrouse, Laruelle, & Boonstra, 2012) and its importance in stabilizing China's Xinjiang region, which is home to the Uyghur minority with separatist ambitions (Marantidou and Cossa, 2014). To avoid the region becoming a separatist haven, China perceives Central Asia as a critical partner, given the close cultural, ethnic, and religious ties between Uyghurs and Central Asians (Kavalski, 2007; Peyrouse, 2016). Compared to Russia and the EU, China's Central Asia strategy is 'more cohesive' (Peyrouse, Laruelle, & Boonstra, 2012, p.11). Unlike Russia, China avoids putting political pressure on the CAS and contrary to the EU, it expresses no demands for political reform in return for its engagement with the countries (Stronski and Ng, 2018, p.9). China has multiple tools to bring Uzbekistan closer to its orbit of political influence. China's influence on security is growing, albeit more modestly than Russia, through the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and various bilateral agreements (Romanowski, 2016).

Furthermore, China has invested heavily in infrastructure development in Central Asia, mainly through its Belt and Road Initiative , which aims to build economic corridors across Eurasia and beyond (Stronski and Ng, 2018). Central Asia is a critical region in the BRI, as it offers a potential land route for Chinese exports to Europe and access to the region's natural resources (Fawn, 2021). Although Uzbekistan does not border China, it is a crucial node for the BRI as two routes pass through the country (Burna-Asefi, 2022). For Uzbekistan, China presents an opportunity to address its transportation and connectivity challenges, and there has been a mutual effort to intensify relations, especially since Mirziyoyev's rise to power (Burna-Asefi, 2022). As a result, in 2022 alone, Uzbekistan signed numerous agreements with China on infrastructure and investment projects totalling $16 billion (Reuters, 2022). While Russia remains Uzbekistan's top trading partner (Burna-Asefi, 2022), bilateral trade with China has grown significantly, reaching almost $9 billion in 2021 (Bonesh, 2023). Table 5.1 gives a glimpse of trade shares between the two partners.

Table 5.1: Top trading partners of Uzbekistan and the EU for the year 2021

Uzbekistan	*Total trade %*	*EU*	*Total trade %*
1 Russia	17.5	1 China	16.2
2 China	16.5	2 The USA	14.7
3 Kazakhstan	9.3	3 United Kingdom	10.0
4 EU 27	9.0	74 Uzbekistan	0.1

(Source: European Commission, 2022)

Undoubtedly, the EU's efforts to establish itself as a significant actor in Uzbekistan and the region face challenges due to the presence of Russia and China. The BRI could benefit the EU by weakening Russia's standing in the area and providing funds to improve connectivity and infrastructure in countries like Uzbekistan (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p.66). However, China's approach to Central Asia, lacking transparency and disregard for the rule of law, goes against the EU's interest in supporting sustainable development in the region (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p.66). Several factors disadvantage the EU more than China and Russia in Uzbekistan. Firstly, these two actors share the common goal of keeping Western influence at bay in Central Asia (Stronski and Ng, 2018). Secondly, as immediate neighbours with historical and linguistic ties, Russia and China hold a more significant geopolitical advantage in Uzbekistan than the EU (Winn and Gänzle, 2022). Thirdly, the EU cannot compete with the military and financial aid provided by Russia and China to the Central Asian states (Cornell and Starr, 2019). Finally, the EU's multi-institutional nature and its insistence on political reform make it less appealing than the other two actors (Bossuyt, 2018). However, these negative factors are not invincible and susceptible to regional geopolitical changes.

Russia's erratic behaviour towards Ukraine has alienated some influential Central Asian elites (Kassenova, 2015; Stronski and Ng, 2018), allowing China to increase its influence in the region. As a result, cooperation between Russia and China is being replaced by geopolitical competition between China and Russia (Marantidou and Cossa, 2014). However, China still needs to win the hearts of the Uzbek population, whose view of China has been negatively affected due to its treatment of the Uyghurs (CAB, 2022 and interview 3). Moreover, China's assistance is not entirely free of conditions, as its loans for infrastructure projects require the use of Chinese materials, equipment, technology, and services (Burna-Asefi, 2022). Also, China’s debt-trap approach to cooperation and connectivity does not lead to the economic independence of the CAS (Bossuyt,

2018; Sahajpal and Blockmans, 2019, Interview 19). On the contrary, it creates a dependency on China, creating mistrust and worries among the local populations and elites in Central Asia (Sahajpal and Blockmans, 2019; Bossuyt, 2018).

Uzbekistan, due to its economic and transport-related challenges, is particularly susceptible to the Chinese debt trap (Burna-Asefi, 2022), and this should somewhat inform the political message of other actors to the Uzbek regime (Sahajpal and Blockmans, 2019). Meanwhile, the EU still has advantages, such as its positive image among the elite and the Uzbek population (U-Report, 2020; interviews 3,11 and 17). However, a positive image on its own is not sufficient as the EU must create policies reflecting Uzbek political and cultural boundaries (i.e., differences in how these two actors view state security and the role of civil society actors in the partnership and cooperation around education). This would help the EU somewhat reduce its disadvantages, such as the geographical distance, the lack of historical ties and its marginal player status compared to the other regional actors. The following sections present Uzbekistan's official construction of its partnership with the EU.

5.2. Characteristics of partnership

One of the most frequently mentioned characteristics of partnership, according to the Uzbek elite discourse, is that it should be mutually beneficial (Khakimov, 2017, 2019; O. Khakimov, 2021; Komilov, 2020, 2021; Mirziyoyev, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d). This principle is believed to be of universal application by the Uzbek elite, who consider the European Union as one of ‘one of Uzbekistan's main international partners’ (D. Khakimov, 2021e). As such, Tashkent emphasises the importance of ‘developing mutually beneficial cooperation with the EU in both bilateral and regional settings’ (Aripov, 2021b). At the same time, ‘Uzbekistan is always ready to develop mutually beneficial partnerships with all countries of the world and global organisations’ (Mirzoyoyev, 2021d). The concept of mutual benefits implies the presence of common interests that lead to gains for both partners. The Uzbek elite considers trade as ‘the basis of mutually beneficial partnership’ between Uzbekistan and the EU (D.Khakimov, 2021e). While gains do not need to be of the same value or type if they are mutual, what is essential is that there is a rough equivalence of benefits (Keohane, 1986).

However, regarding trade, the benefits tilt towards Uzbekistan more than the EU. For one, the EU has a much larger market size than Uzbekistan. As Table 5.1 above shows, the EU was Uzbekistan's

4th largest trade partner, with a 9.0% total trade share, while Uzbekistan ranked 74th with a 0.1% total trade share in 2021. While the Uzbek elites acknowledge the EU as a significant player with the second-largest market in the world, they emphasise that trade relations also benefit the EU (Interview 11). For instance, Ambassador Khakimov noted that the GSP+ benefits both Uzbekistan and the EU as the Uzbek side can provide European markets with quality products (D. Khakimov, 2021d). As of April 10, 2021, Uzbekistan received GSP+ status, allowing 6200 goods from the country to enter the EU market duty-free (D. Khakimov, 2021c). However, this is a unilateral preferential treatment, therefore most beneficial to Uzbekistan rather than the EU. Moreover, an important aspect of the trade relationship between these two partners is developmental in character as it involves unilateral assistance from the EU to Uzbekistan (Khakimov, 2019). Currently, Uzbekistan is in the process of joining the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and the EU has allocated five million Euros and provided technical assistance to support the country (D. Khakimov, 2021b)

As well as trade, many other sectors mutually benefit Uzbekistan and the EU. These include education, environment, knowledge transfer, regional security and connectivity. Regional security and connectivity have become the focal point of Uzbekistan's foreign policy under President Mirziyoyev, with a particular emphasis on security cooperation around Afghanistan, which has become even more critical since the US withdrawal and the return of the Taliban to power (Aripov 2021a). As was mentioned in Chapter 4, the Uzbek elites view the stability of Afghanistan as crucial for the economic development of Uzbekistan and Central Asia as it provides access to South Asian markets (Aripov, 2021a; Komilov, 2021). As such, Uzbekistan has been constructing two significant projects, a 760 km railway and a power transmission line, to enhance connectivity between Central Asia and South Asia (Umarov and Murtazashvili, 2022). While there was trilateral cooperation involving the EU, Central Asian states and Afghanistan before the return of the Taliban, this is no longer the case. The EU's leverage in Afghanistan has decreased since the return to power of the Taliban, and the EU expects the Taliban to respect human rights and form inclusive governments as a condition for cooperation (Brzozowski, 2021). This is a legitimate expectation as the Taliban has pledged to do so and thus far failed to deliver on its own promises, especially regarding respecting women's basic rights to education and work (Al Jazeera, 2023). This failure has increased the EU's reliance on Uzbekistan concerning Afghanistan and may potentially impact the EU's leverage in the country (Interviews 2 and 3).

Another critical characteristic of partnership, as per the Uzbek elite discourse, is the emphasis on equality with the EU (Khakimov, 2019; Komilov, 2021; interview 11). According to O. Khakimov (2021), 'the expansion of equal relations with other actors is favourable for any country'. As such, Uzbekistan is interested in strengthening and developing relations with the EU based on 'equality in all directions' (Khakimov, 2019). Therefore, 'equal and balanced relations with the EU and its member states' is a foreign policy priority for Uzbekistan (Komilov, 2021). The Uzbek elite also emphasises the role of legal documents in ensuring equality with the EU (Interview 11). However, two factors are important to consider here - the nexus between aid partnership and equality and between conditions and equality arising from cooperation around shared values such as human rights and democracy between the EU and Uzbekistan. The latter will be discussed in a later section.

Regarding the former, it is crucial to consider the nature of the relationship between the partners, which is based on unilateral aid from the EU to Uzbekistan. Currently, the EU and its member states are Central Asia's largest development assistance providers (EEAS, 2022b). The OECD definition of development assistance entails 'flows of official financing to developing countries provided by official agencies, which have a clear development or anti-poverty purpose and are at least partially concessional in nature, with a grant element of at least 25 per cent' (OECD, 2015, cited in Bossuyt, 2015, p. 223).

Although China provides development assistance to Central Asia, it falls short of qualifying as a development donor as per the definition of 'traditional donors' such as the EU identified by the OECD (Kassenova, 2009, p.7). One of the main reasons is China's development assistance to Central Asia fuzzies the distinction between development loans and foreign investment (Bossuyt, 2015, p.224). Most of China's assistance to the region comes in the form of low-interest soft loans without grant elements (Bossuyt, 2015). Furthermore, unlike Western donor assistance to Central Asia, Chinese assistance is guided by its own development interests and needs rather than the aid receivers, entailing concrete benefits for the donor (Kassenova, 2009; Bossuyt, 2015). Moreover, the Chinese specifically favour and employ the phrase South-South cooperation instead of development assistance to distinguish themselves from Western donors by signifying their commitment to equality and non-interference in their approach to development and, at the same time, to mitigate significant power imbalances between China and the countries that receive its financial support (Kassenova, 2022). Table 5.2 presents bilateral aid from the EU to Uzbekistan.

Table 5.2. Aid from the EU to Uzbekistan for the period of 2007-2024

Year	*Areas*	*Amount*
2007 - 2013	Poverty Reduction $	EUR 38.6 million
2014 - 2020	Rural Development	EUR 168 million
2020 - 2024	Democratic governance & digital transformation Inclusive, digital and green growth Development of a smart and eco-friendly agri-food sector	EUR 76 million

(Source: European Commission, 2023)

As shown in Table 5. 2, Uzbekistan will have received significant funds from the EU between 2007 and 2024. Additionally, the country benefits from EU regional programs and funds that focus on various areas, including the rule of law, environment, human rights, migration and asylum, and energy (EEAS, 2021). Although the aid assistance is unilateral from the EU to Uzbekistan, according to the Uzbek elite discourse, this does not affect the equality of relations, nor does it result in perceived superiority or inferiority between the partners (Interview 11). The EU is a 'big partner' and a 'big donor' to Uzbekistan (Interview 11). However, 'I don't think European Union feel superior toward Uzbekistan or Uzbekistan feels less kind of equal' because of unilateral aid (Interview 11). Moreover, the Uzbek political elites appreciate and seek out EU assistance where they see fit (Narbaeva, 2019; Fazilov, 2021; interviews 11 and 17;). For example, compared to the Kazakh elites, Uzbek officials perceive the EU primarily as a reform and development partner providing financial and technical funds (Komilov, 2019; 2021; Fazilov, 2021).

Meanwhile, Kazakh officials are much more likely to highlight that the EU is an economic partner, an area that does not benefit from an aid partnership (Arynov, 2021). Instead, Kazakh officials reiterate that they are more interested in equal collaboration with the Union rather than the EU's financial contribution to the country's development (Baymukhan, 2021). On the other hand, among the Uzbek elite, the EU's actorness is more pronounced in reforming the political, social and economic sectors than in Kazakh official discourse (Komilov, 2019, 2021; Fazilov, 2021). In comparison, during her latest visit to Brussels, the Deputy Prime Minister of Uzbekistan asked the EU to 'support' projects that develop female entrepreneurship in the country (Narbaeva, 2019). In other words, unlike the Kazakh counterparts, the Uzbek elites do not downplay the significance of the EU's assistance, nor do they wish to reduce unilateral aid to the country. Given this, one could argue that if the Uzbek elite perceived that the aid relations were negatively impacting the equality between partners, they would logically refrain from seeking such assistance (Interview 17).

Kyrgyz diplomat Jomart Ormonbekov argued that the EU's dominant donor status meant that Kyrgyzstan did not perceive the union as an equal partner (as cited in Kluczewska and Dzhuraev, 2020). However, the Uzbek elites take a different stance. What explains the Uzbek elites' ability to balance the EU's donor status against the equality in the partnership? To begin with, the Uzbek elites emphasise that equality between states is enshrined in the UN Charter (Interview 11). As such, Uzbekistan views itself as an 'equal actor in international relations' (Tulyakov, 2021) regardless of the country's economic power, size and its aid receiver status (Interview 11). Next, Uzbek officials emphasise that the EU is helping the country deal with issues such as the environment which are global in nature and not caused by the Uzbek regimes (Interview 7). Thus, all countries need to come together to help Uzbekistan because the key environmental problem it confronts is not the fault of the country (Interview 11). This challenge concerns the Aral Sea, one of the largest lakes in the world, which has been shrinking at a fast pace since the end of the 1970s as the result of diversions for irrigated agriculture, which necessitated the stoppage of flows from Amu Darya and Syr Darya into it (Bernauer and Siegfried, 2012). The development of water structures in the Aral Sea Basin was motivated by the Russian Empire's desire to cease the import of expensive cotton from the USA and instead produce its own cotton for export (O'Hara, 2000). The transformation of Central Asia into a cotton producer resulted in the devastation of the Aral Sea, which shrank to 10% of its original size, thus causing catastrophic environmental problems (Micklin, 1998). But this is not the whole story. After achieving autonomy, each Central Asian state acquired the power to decide its economy (Guo et al., 2016). Downstream countries such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan continued with cotton harvesting, which meant more water use and further shrinkage of the Aral Sea (Weinthal, 2006). As such, Central Asian countries have also played a role in the degradation of this environmental disaster. Moreover, the EU contributes financially and technically towards other internal issues centring on improving democracy, corruption and human rights, which are not caused by external actors. Thus, the aid assistance is not limited to areas that are the fault of external actors.

According to Uzbek elites, another vital aspect of the partnership is reflexivity, which involves 'respecting and considering each other's interests' (Khakimov, 2019) and understanding the factors on the ground (Norov, 2016, 2018; D. Khakimov, 2021b, 2021d; Fazilov, 2021; interview 11). The overall perception of the Uzbek elites is that there is a reflexiveness in the relationship, and the EU is a reflexive partner towards the country (Komilov, 2019; Aripov, 2021b; interviews 3 and 11). The

EU and Uzbekistan 'understand each other's demand' (Aripov, 2021b) because 'we are partners, we are following them, they are following us, we are trying to find and identify common areas of mutual interest and potential cooperation' (Interview 11). In a bilateral setting, the EU is 'quite responsive when it comes to practical assistance to Uzbekistan' (Interview 11) and is 'well aware of the processes taking place in our country' (D. Khakimov, 2021b). For example, 'during the meetings, the European partners tell us that they are closely monitoring the fundamental transformations taking place in Uzbekistan, and are ready, if necessary, to provide assistance in those areas and directions that will be of interest to the Uzbek side' (D. Khakimov, 2021b). Even in sensitive areas such as the promotion of Lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) rights, 'they definitely understand us, otherwise, we will be having all the troubles that might arise in our bilateral relations' (Interview 11).

According to Uzbek officials, institutional frameworks such as dialogues and legal documents play an important role in partnerships because they enable and maintain reflexiveness. In the first place, institutionalised dialogues are essential because 'cooperation is primarily a dialogue' between partners (D. Khakimov 2021b). The dialogue structures between Uzbekistan and the EU 'are one of the best examples of the systematic institutional framework, we have all the necessary mechanisms' (Interview 11). Equally, regional high-level dialogues between Central Asia and the EU 'have proven themselves well' as they allow for the timely exchange of positions on important matters around the stability and security of the region (Aripov, 2021b). Table 5.3 contains the current bilateral dialogue structures between Uzbekistan and the EU:

Table 5.3. Institutionalized dialogues between Uzbekistan and the EU

Cooperation Council	ministerial level
Cooperation Committee	senior official level
Sub-Committee on Justice, Home Affairs and Human Rights	technical level
Sub-Committee on Development Cooperation	technical level
Sub-Committee on Economic, Trade and Investment Relations	technical level
Human rights dialogue	ministerial level

(Source: EEAS, 2022c)

The dialogue structures between Uzbekistan and the EU are based on joint ownership, allowing for officials from both sides to exchange views on relevant issues without prioritizing one agenda over

the other (Interviews 1, 9 and 10). This provides for reflexiveness in Uzbek and EU relations. While bilateral institutional dialogues accurately reflect the nature of relations, Uzbek officials find the current PCA inadequate as it was signed in 1996 and does not reflect the current realities on the ground (D. Khakimov, 2021b, 2021d; O.Khakimov 2021). Today, 'European Union is much bigger in terms of membership but also more efficient and stronger economically and politically' (D. Khakimov, 2021d), and Uzbekistan under President Mirziyoyev is going through large-scale reforms (O. Khakimov, 2021). There is a need for a new agreement that takes into consideration these changes so that it 'aligns the interests' of Uzbekistan and the EU to the realities of today (Interview 11). As such, the Uzbek side requested to initiate negotiations for a new Enhanced PCA launched in November 2018 (O. Khakimov, 2021). After several negotiations between the Uzbek government and the EU, the document was concluded in July 2022 (EEAS, 2022c). The Uzbek elites believe that the EPCA will upgrade relations to a new level (Interview 11; O. Kahkimov, 2021; Fazilov, 2021) and will serve as an important instrument for building equal and mutually beneficial partnership between Uzbekistan and the EU (Aripov, 2021b).

The experts agreed that the EU is a reflexive partner compared to China and Russia and has grown more reflexive as it has learned about the others in the region (Interviews 2, 3 and 17). However, there are instances where the EU falls short (Interviews 7, 12 and 16; Peyrouse, 2019; Kluczewska and Dzhuraev, 2020). The EU is criticised by scholars such as Peyrouse (2019, p.7) for failing to take into consideration the local context, concepts and values on the ground in areas such as education. For instance, through numerous education assistance projects, the EU promoted Western-style concepts such as 'student-centred learning', which was at odds with the 'teacher-centred' approach widely used in Central Asia (Peyrouse, 2019, p.7). As a result, this led to a lack of local ownership, therefore, the impact of the EU in the education sector has been 'below expectations' (Peyrouse, 2019, p.6). Additionally, there is a perception that the EU's approach to partnership with Central Asia is too global, promoting concepts such as gender equality that may not be understood well by the local population (Interview 7). Uzbekistan needs more material help in the form of quality learning spaces, not difficult concepts that people don't even understand (Interview 7).

The lack of reflexiveness in certain areas is down to several issues - first, institutional factors that impact cooperation between the EU and local civil society actors. Local civil society actors can positively contribute to knowledge exchange between the partners, leading to more reflexiveness (Interviews 2 and 3). Although one EU official emphasised that the procedure for a grant application by civil society is straightforward (Interview 1), experts on the ground disagree (Boonstra and Hale,

2010, interviews 2 and 3). Civil society in Central Asia has to go through 'complicated and lengthy procedures' to obtain EU grants (Boonstra and Hale, 2010, p.13). There is a concerted effort by some EU Delegations 'to train civil society personnel on how to write proposals and reports' (Boonstra and Hale, 2010, p.13), and this is commendable. However, such efforts also can create problems whereby the grant process starts favouring the same actors who have had application experience and leave out 'community-originated' organisations that 'have newly evolved from grass-root initiatives' that lack expertise and capacity (Axyonova and Bossuyt, 2016, p.8). Thus far, only a minuscule number of community-originated organisations have succeeded in building the institutional ability to meet the demands of the EU grant process (Axyonova and Bossuyt, 2016). Consequently, local forms of civil society choose to work with other external actors with easier funding processes (Interview 2).

Another factor that hinders policy relevancy in Uzbekistan-EU relations is the lack of 'trust' (Interviews 7 and 16). According to some interviewees, the EU is less willing to give ownership to local actors than countries like Turkey (Interview 7). The complicated grant application process is not the main obstacle; instead, the lack of trust insists one of the civil society actors in Uzbekistan (Interview 16). According to the representative from local civil society in Uzbekistan, when he applied for the EU non-state actor grant, his organisation lost out twice to Western organisations (Interview 16). When he sought an explanation, it was stated that the EU trusted Western organisations to minimise corruption (Interview 16). This sentiment is supported by literature suggesting the EU tends to work more with Western NGOs, neglecting local civil society actors crucial in Uzbekistan (Keijzer and Bossuyt, 2020).

However, as with most things in partnerships, developing trust, which then leads to reflexiveness, is a two-way process. The EU is accountable to taxpayers (Interview 9). Hence, funds need to be accounted for, necessitating a certain level of bureaucracy (Boonstra and Hale, 2010, p.13). At the same time, corruption is an endemic problem in Uzbekistan. Every aspect of Uzbek life, from education, health care, and security to politics, is replete with corruption. According to Transparency International, in 2022, the country came in 126th place out of 180 countries in the rank of corruption globally (Transparency International, 2021). President Mirziyoyev (2021c) acknowledged the negative impact of endemic corruption on the reforms he is conducting in the country. The fight against corruption is the responsibility of the Uzbek elites, not the external actors and the more they tackle this problem, and the more trust will come from the external actors.

Moreover, it is the responsibility of the host countries to allow for partnerships to form between different segments of society and external actors. Instead, Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan, have previously restricted the EU's access to local stakeholders (Peyrouse, 2019), contributing towards non-reflexive policies. The following section discusses the basis of partnership as per the Uzbek official discourse.

5.3. Basis of partnership

As discussed in Chapter 2, while highlighting the role of mutual interests and shared goals, the theory of partnership in IR does not refer to shared values as vital for partnerships between different actors. However, as partners collaborate, shared values develop over time due to ongoing socialisation and cooperation (Korosteleva, 2014). At the same time, 'contestation of norms is at the centre of international affairs', and Central Asia is a region where various powers, including non-Western ones such as China and Russia, actively engage in norm contestation through norm diffusion (Lewis, 2012, p.1234). Therefore, the theory of partnership will need to grapple with the inclusion of shared values in building partnerships in most case studies, and EU-Central Asia relations certainly represent such a case.

While mutual interests have driven relations between Uzbekistan and the EU forward for the past thirty years, values such as human rights, democracy, and the rule of law have also been emphasised in the EU's discourse on partnership with Uzbekistan (Interviews 4, 9 and 19). The bilateral agreements, including the PCA and regional instruments such as the 2007 and 2019 EU Strategies for Central Asia, all reference these values (Crawford, 2008; Warkotsch, 2011). Furthermore, the recent EPCA signed in July 2022 between Uzbekistan and the EU strongly focuses on 'shared values of democracy and the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms' (EEAS, 2022d). Thus, one should not discount value-based relations as non-partnerships straightaway. Instead, what might be worth probing is the implication of values for the other in the partnership as per the focus of this thesis. Accordingly, this section aims to explore how the Uzbek elites perceive the foundation of partnership, focusing on the values component of the relationship and what the inclusion of values means for their relations with the EU.

The values component of the cooperation between Uzbekistan and the EU falls under the umbrella term of democracy promotion. Sharshenova and Crawford (2017, p.465) define democracy promotion as a 'conscious effort by international actors to promote a particular regime type abroad,

that is, a liberal democratic polity'. The EU uses three types of democracy promotion mechanisms in Central Asia, as shown in Table 5.4 (Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017):

Table 5.4. Democracy promotion mechanisms

Types of mechanism	*Instruments*	*Application in Uzbekistan*
Democratic empowerment	EIDHR DCI NSA-LA	+
Normative suasion	Political dialogue Human rights dialogue	+
Strategic calculation	Positive & negative conditionality	+

(Source: Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017)

Democratic empowerment entails working with local actors such as civil society, independent media or youth organisations to bring liberal reforms in the target country (Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017). However, its effectiveness in heavily authoritarian countries such as Uzbekistan is questionable because there is a serious lack of pro-democracy groups (Boonstra and Tsertsvadze, 2016). Civil society in the entire region is considered frail (Ziegler, 2016). Another important point about the democratic empowerment mechanism is its interaction with the other two mechanisms. Democratic empowerment does not fit well with the strategic calculation of the elites, who do not see the benefit in allowing non-state actors to promote democracy due to the perceived threat they pose to regime security (Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017). For example, Western actors' insistence on including non-state actors in political processes has created friction with Central Asian states (Lewis, 2012, p.1222). Thus, the EU is setting itself up for a difficult challenge from the get-go. Regarding norm suasion, democratic empowerment is equally ill-fitted as it aims to support capacity building rather than persuade non-state actors to see the legitimacy of proposed values (Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017). This implies that the EU either only works with those who are already persuaded of the values of democracy and human rights (Axyonova and Bossuyt, 2016; Keijzer and Bossuyt, 2020), thus leaving out the ones that need to be persuaded or ignores the conceptual differences when it encounters them.

Two EU instruments support pro-democracy groups in Central Asia (Axyonova and Bossuyt, 2016): (1) the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR); (2) Non-State Actors and Local Authorities in Development (NSA-LA). The former assists civil society through various democracy and human rights projects (Tsertsvadze and Boonstra, 2013) and the latter seeks to strengthen non-state actors' capacities and increase their participation in governance processes in the target countries (Axyonova and Bossuyt, 2016). The overall objective of both of these

instruments is to increase the influence of non-state actors in the realm of domestic policies (Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017). However, despite such substantive objectives, the EIDHR and NSA-LA remain underfunded in Central Asia (Tsertsvadze and Boonstra, 2013). While democratic empowerment may face significant challenges in Central Asia, it remains an essential mechanism for promoting democracy and human rights in the region.

Normative suasion is the second mechanism used by the EU in Central Asia to promote democracy, and it relies on the notion that actors are 'motivated by internalized identities, norms, and values' and will choose the most legitimate and appropriate course of action given various options (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004, p. 675). Advocates of this mechanism aim to persuade the target government to adopt democratic norms through socialisation (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004; Warkotsch, 2008; Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017). Therefore, normative suasion relies on the 'power of better argument' where continuous dialogue convinces the socialisation objects of the legitimacy of the promoted concepts (Warkotsch, 2008, p. 241). The power of better argument excludes lecturing or demanding that the other adopts the promoted norms (Warkotsch, 2008, p. 241). Instead, it argues for the legitimacy of 'rules and the appropriateness of behaviour' through persuasion rather than coercion via conditions and 'complex learning' on the side of the target government (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004, p. 675). Complex learning should then lead to the redefinition of beliefs and values (Tonra and Christiansen, 2004; Börzel and Risse, 2012). This mechanism is more prevalent in parts of the world where the EU has low leverage due to the fewer tangible incentives it has to offer (Börzel and Risse, 2012, p. 8).

In the case of Uzbekistan, the EU employs instruments such as political and human rights dialogues to make a legitimate case for the values inscribed in bilateral and regional agreements (Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017). The former is conducted on a regional basis, and the latter is carried out on a bilateral basis in conjunction with civil society seminars, which are held in between official meetings (Boonstra, 2011; Axyonova, 2011). However, it is difficult to assess how successful these dialogue structures have been in persuading the Uzbek regime to adopt liberal democratic principles due to a lack of clear objectives and assessments that can measure their effectiveness (Axyonova, 2011).

It has been mentioned that regional (Interview 5) and bilateral dialogues for value-based cooperation are conducted on a joint ownership basis (Interviews 1 and 9). Thus, from a partnership

point of view, normative suasion does not pose conceptual friction as both actors are free and can socialise each other into their norms. More specifically, through the power of continuous and critical dialogue, each actor could use persuasion (an essential mechanism of socialisation) to convince the other to accept their own concepts and rationale that shape the essence of what human rights and democracy entail. Whether this is an ideal outcome is, of course, a different issue, but at least from the partnership point of view, there is an opportunity for joint ownership to manifest in the EU-Central Asia relations.

One crucial factor that can impact the efficacy of normative suasion is underlying similarities or differences in the socio-cultural boundaries of the two partners (Warkotsch, 2008). Thus, the absence of shared cultural traits between Uzbekistan and the EU has been one of the main obstacles to effective normative suasion, particularly with regard to values such as 'authoritarianism and personalism', which are significant political and social values for the Uzbek people (Warkotsch, 2008, p.245). This is especially true concerning personalism, which embodies political practices in Uzbekistan where 'leaders create personality-based patron-client networks that consolidate power through the dispensing and withholding of political and material incentives to followers' (Warkotsch, 2008, p.245). Personalism might be perceived as a case of corruption for Western actors. However, for the elite in Uzbekistan, it appears to serve the population (Warkotsch, 2008). Moreover, competing norms from third parties such as the SCO, China, and Russia could undermine the efficacy of normative suasion to promote certain values (Lewis, 2012; Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017). For example, organisations such as the SCO, with its underlying principles of non-interference and prioritizing state security over upholding human rights, provide the elite of Central Asia with the support they need to secure authoritarianism in their respective countries (Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017). Therefore, selecting socialisation mechanisms actively while learning about the other is necessary to ensure their effectiveness.

Another important factor for the success of normative suasion is the presence of other democracy promotion mechanisms such as strategic calculation. At the heart of strategic calculation lies the assumption that target states are 'pragmatic, rational actors' who will weigh the cost and benefits of adopting democratic rules and act accordingly (Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017, p.465). For instance, Lewis (2012) notes that the absence of economic or military incentives hindered the ability of the Organisation for Security and Cooperation in Europe to convince domestic elites to embrace liberal reforms through normative suasion. Strategic calculation mechanisms rely on

conditionality instruments, frequently referred to as the 'stick and carrot' approach (Smith, 2003, in Veebel, 2017, p.15) and aim to induce reforms (Zimelis, 2011, p.398). According to Schmitter, conditionality 'implies that foreign actors require from a sovereign state that it installs or consolidates democracy before benefiting from a promised advantage, which supposes that this state will be sanctioned or deprived of foreseen reward if it does not comply with external decision-making requirements' (Ethier, 2003, p.100).

Conditionality can take on positive and negative forms (Bazerkoska and Dokmanović, 2017). The former is a reward-based approach that involves 'the promise of a certain benefit in return for the fulfilment of a predetermined condition' (Bazerkoska and Dokmanović, 2017, p.113), while the latter is a punitive approach aimed at rectifying a situation where a specific obligation was not upheld (Veebel, 2017). Positive conditionality includes benefits such as economic, security, and military assistance and a political association (Warkotsch, 2011; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008; Zimelis, 2011). Negative conditionality, on the other hand, involves 'imposing sanctions such as reducing, suspending, or terminating benefits if the state in question does not comply with the criteria' (Veebel, 2017, p.15). In most cases, the EU relies on positive conditionality over negative, as non-compliant governments are 'simply refused' EU benefits rather than punished with harsh sanctions (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008, p.190).

The effectiveness of EU conditionality in promoting democratic changes in third countries depends on several factors. Firstly, the adoption of democratic rules and processes is costly for target states (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008, p.191) and therefore, higher incentives can make political conditionality more effective (Anastasakis, 2008, p.365). However, big incentives alone cannot guarantee success, and consistency in applying conditionality is crucial (Börzel and Lebanidze, 2017). Consistency refers to the absence of conflicting objectives of the EU, such as democracy promotion versus stability and security interests (Börzel and Lebanidze, 2017). Lastly, for political conditionality to be effective, it must be credible in rewarding compliance and denying incentives when non-compliance occurs (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008). Unfortunately, the EU's conditionality approach in Uzbekistan suffers from several issues that impede its ability to bring about change in the country.

Firstly, the EU's application of conditionalities lacks consistency in the region (Warkotsch, 2011; Crawford and Kacarska, 2017). For example, despite serious human rights violations occurring in all five Central Asian countries, the EU used conditionalities such as aid and travel sanctions only

in the case of Uzbekistan (Crawford and Kacarska, 2017)Secondly, the current PCA between Uzbekistan and the EU offers minimal incentives and low credibility of the threat to withhold them (Warkotsch, 2011). Thirdly, the EU suffers from the security-democratisation dilemma in Uzbekistan and the region, as its security interests (Schmitz, 2008; Boonstra and Denison, 2011) and commercial concerns have weakened its position on democracy and human rights in the country (Crawford, 2008). For example, the EU implemented negative conditionality on Uzbekistan only once, after the Andijan massacre, which included travel visa bans against Uzbek officials, an arms embargo, and the suspension of the PCA (Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017). However, negative conditionality failed to bring intended changes as the Uzbek government did not carry out any reforms due to it (Boonstra and Denison, 2011; Ismailov and Jarabik, 2009). Instead, the Uzbek regime used it to its advantage to set out its conditions for partnership with the EU (Schmitz, 2009). By the end of 2009, all negative conditionalities were lifted mainly because of Uzbekistan's strategic importance to the war in Afghanistan, with Germany vigorously agitating for the weakening of EU sanctions despite Uzbekistan failing to meet the terms of conditionality (Schmitz, 2008).

The debate surrounding the use of conditionality in partnerships can be summarised as a tension between the ethics of partnership and the benefits of using conditionality. Korostelelva (2014, p.11) argues that conditionality 'infringes on the notion of partnership, premised on mutual reciprocity of interests, values and gains, thus defeating the rhetoric of cooperation from the start'. Similarly, Bechev and Nicolaidis (2008) discuss the inherent tension between conditionality and ownership, which derives from asymmetric relations between the actor who sets the conditions and the receiver. They suggest the EU should focus on a partnership approach that gives local actors space and agency to decide the incentives' contents (Keane, 2005, p.248).

On the other hand, proponents of conditionality argue that it is necessary to avoid boosting authoritarian governments and to promote democratic and human rights reforms in partner countries (Godfrey, 2021). They suggest that only when the CAS become democratic will they be 'reliable partners' for the EU (Tsertsvadze and Axyonova, 2013, p.2) and that this will lead to 'stable and prosperous relations' between the two regions (Boonstra, 2011, p.5). Ultimately, the debate comes down to balancing the values of partnership and mutual respect with the practical benefits of using conditionality to promote positive change in partner countries.

Regarding efficacy, Schimmelfenning and Scholtz (2008) state that political conditionalities have different impact levels and in autocratic countries such as Uzbekistan, they are at their lowest. For

instance, Zimelis (2011) found that the EU aid conditionality in ACP countries was ineffective at bringing policy reforms. However, the EU has successfully used conditionality to induce change during its eastern enlargement to Central and Eastern European countries, so it can be effective in some cases (Schimmelfennig and Sedelmeier, 2004). The experts on Uzbek and EU relations were divided on the idea of conditionality being appropriate and effective for partnership. One expert argued that conditionality in partnerships means partners are 'not talking as equals' (Interview 3). Furthermore, while conditionality at a 'formal level' whereby you can make partners sign international treaties can happen, such imposition will not necessarily lead to 'societal acceptance' of human rights and democracy (Interview 3). On the other hand, other experts think that positive conditionality can induce change on the ground (Interviews 3, 8 and 17). For example, external pressure was very effective in eradicating child labour in the cotton fields of Uzbekistan (Interview 17).

Nonetheless, it seems there is no one-size-fits-all approach, and the appropriateness and effectiveness of conditionality will depend on various contextual factors. Indeed, the Uzbek political elite attitude towards a partnership based on values of human rights and democracy has gone through an evolution of its own. During Islam Karimov's presidency, Uzbekistan was viewed as a difficult partner (Boonstra, 2011), and Central Asia overall had minimum resonance for EU democracy promotion efforts (Bossuyt and Kubicek, 2011). To illustrate this point further, compare the difference between the previous and present statements of the current Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan, Vladimir Norov, about cooperation in human rights with the EU. In the past, Norov stated that Uzbekistan would only cooperate with the EU 'in the spirit of equality, mutual respect and pragmatisms' and that the EU must consider the 'different history of the region, its cultural traditions, and the mentality of people' when devising policies related to democracy and human rights for Uzbekistan (Lobjakas, 2009). Therefore, the EU should avoid interfering in Uzbekistan's 'domestic affairs' (Rettman, 2007) as 'we are sides in a dialogue between equal partners' and 'the European Union has no right to oversee the situation' (Lobjakas, 2009).

However, Norov's recent discourse reflects the changing attitudes of the Uzbek regime towards value cooperation with the EU: 'Uzbekistan wants to move forward to join the ranks of developed democracies, through shifting from a strong state to a strong civil society. In this respect, Uzbekistan puts in efforts to make cooperation with the EU mutually beneficial' (Norov, 2016). Furthermore, Norov received EU High Representative Joseph Borrell in Tashkent in 2022 and expressed his

commitment to democratic reforms after the use of excessive force by the Uzbek forces to quell the protest in Karakalpakistan against the government (Powell, 2022)

In other instances, high-level Uzbek officials supported the inclusion of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law in constructing a partnership with the EU (Interview 11; Komilov, 2021; Fazilov, 2021). Suppose previously, the EU's emphasis on values in its relationship with Uzbekistan was seen as interference in its domestic politics. It is now perceived as a natural aspect of their relationship. This is because the multidimensional nature of the partnership between Uzbekistan and the EU means that it covers significant areas, including 'human rights, democracy, freedom of speech, and protection of labour rights' (Interview 11). Thus, regarding partnership, 'one side of the coin is the interests of the country or the mutual interests of the two partners, and another is shared values' (Interview 11). In this construction of partnership, the EU is no longer an outsider who intervenes in the country's internal matters. Instead, it is 'an important partner in the formation and strengthening of democratic institutions, development of parliamentarism and support of civil society' for Uzbekistan (Komilov, 2021). If in the past, the Uzbek political elite did not wish to justify themselves to the EU, now they deem it essential to 'conduct regular talks with representatives of European countries, providing them with objective information about the reforms in Uzbekistan' (Tulyakov et al., 2022, p.100). Today, the Uzbek political elites also express appreciation for the support of the EU in this regard (Komilov, 2019) and pledge to work with the union 'in promoting human rights' not only in Uzbekistan but also in the region of Central Asia (Fazilov, 2021).

The change in Uzbek political discourse towards the inclusion of democratic values can largely be explained by the arrival of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, who has altered the course of foreign and internal policies of the country. In foreign policy, Uzbekistan has moved away from an 'isolationist' approach prevalent during the first presidency of Islam Karimov (Aripov, 2021a). Instead, the Uzbek regime has embarked on a new identity-building process that portrays the image of the country as a global actor subscribing to universal norms/values promoted by the UN (Interview 11; D. Kahkimov, 2021d, 2021e; Mirziyoyev, 2021a, 2021c, 2021d). In this context, the EU is considered a 'normative power' (Manners, 2002) that promotes universal values (Khakimov, 2019; Interview 11).

To obtain GSP + status, the Uzbek government was expected to fulfil and uphold 27 international obligations related to the protection of human rights (D.Khakimov, 2021b). Uzbek elites expressed

that the country is not 'only subscribed but also fully committed to implementing' the 27 obligations listed in the GSP+ agreement because of the country's 'general commitment and aspiration within the global framework of global values' (D.Khakimov, 2021d). Therefore, neither the values nor the conditions set in the documents, such as GSP+, are perceived as something specific to Uzbek – EU relations but a feature of the global political system (Interview 11), nor are they inappropriate (Komilov, 2020). In other words, according to the Uzbek elites, values associated with human rights are universal (Mirzyoyev, 2021a, 2021c, 2021d; interviews 7 and 11), and obligations to fulfil them are commitments rather than conditions set by the EU.

The emphasis on the universality of norms rather than their contestation, as was the previous position of the Uzbek regime (Lewis, 2012), starkly contrasts the prior findings of some scholars. Omelicheva (2015, p.136) argued that the Uzbek regime has developed and promoted 'their own rhetorical and ideological substrata of democracy' that differed from those the EU and the West promoted. Furthermore, the norms are now seen as fluid rather than static, whereby new values associated with democracy, such as 'freedom of speech', 'human rights', 'rule of law' and 'gender equality', are being formed and becoming an essential part of Uzbek lives (Mirziyoyev, 2021c).

The change in attitudes towards the inclusion of values in relations with the EU is closely tied to the internal politics of New Uzbekistan, spearheaded by Mirziyoyev, based on the liberalization of the economy and attracting foreign investment (Mirziyoyev, 2021b, 2021c; D. Khakimov, 2021a). As per the logic of strategic calculation, actors weigh up the costs and benefits of certain actions and decide accordingly. The EU's incentives in inducing agreement from third countries to carry out political reforms have been well documented in Europeanization and enlargement literature (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008). Despite the EPCA and GSP+ containing conditionality clauses that require Uzbekistan to fulfil certain obligations related to human rights and democracy, they are perceived as beneficial for the country (Mirziyoyev, 2020; D. Khakimov, 2021a; O. Khakimov, 2021; Interview 11). This is because the Uzbek political elite perceives that value cooperation with the EU has direct and indirect benefits for Uzbekistan. In other words, the 'carrots' offered by the EU in exchange for democratic and human rights reforms are seen as adequate.

Uzbek officials view both the EPCA and the GSP+ as vehicles for enhancing the partnership between Uzbekistan and the EU. The EPCA is seen as a tool to take the relationship to a new level by increasing interaction across various areas of cooperation (Aripov 2021b; Fazilov 2021; O. Khakimov 2021). Meanwhile, the GSP+ is expected to significantly increase trade volume by allowing tariff-free access to the EU market for 6200 Uzbek goods, double the number permitted

under the previous GSP agreement (D. Khakimov, 2021c). For Uzbekistan, the GSP+ is particularly significant as it could help the country balance the expensive cost of transportation due to the lack of access to seaports owed to its landlocked status (O. Khakimov, 2021). Furthermore, removing tariffs is expected to increase exports to the EU, especially in the textile industry, by $300 million a year (D. Khakimov, 2021b). The GSP+ also means improving the competitiveness of Uzbek industries in the global market by introducing modern standards and technologies and acquiring the necessary knowledge and skills to improve the quality of goods (O. Khakimov, 2021). However, it is too early to say how successful the GSP+ will be in delivering increased trade volume. Kyrgyzstan's experience with GSP+ has shown that it requires further collaboration and assistance from the EU, and the absence of business networks between the country and the EU business community has also been a limiting factor (Chekirova, 2020). Therefore, being granted the GSP+ scheme is only the start of the process, which still necessitates further assistance from the EU to Uzbekistan (Interview 17).

Cooperation around shared values of human rights and democracy with the EU indirectly enhances the international image of Uzbekistan. Realistically, the country's elite understands that reforms are necessary to attract external actors for investment and partnership, again tied to elite policies raising the country's economic prospects (Mirziyoyev, 2020; 2021a). 'Abusing human rights harms' the country's international reputation and hinders its investment appeal (Mirziyoyev, 2020). Meanwhile, Uzbekistan's commitment to values under the GSP+ enhances its position as a 'reliable' economic partner for the EU and other global powers (D. Khakimov, 2021c). More specifically, strengthening Uzbek-EU relations under the EPCA and accession to GSP+ demonstrates that it is liberalizing and reforming (Interview 17; Aripov 2021a). This calculation by the Uzbek elite mirrors the Kazakh regime's tactic of engaging in positive image construction to legitimize its rule at home and abroad by suggesting shared values and paths with the EU (Bekenova and Collins, 2019, p.1201). However, according to Anceschi (2014), the Kazakh authorities only pay lip service to democracy and human rights without implementing fundamental changes. To what extent this is also the case with Uzbekistan will be revealed in due course.

Although the Uzbek elite stance towards cooperation around shared values of human rights and democracy has changed, this does not mean there is a complete alliance between the EU and Uzbekistan with regard to the role of shared values in the partnership-building process. Unlike the EU officials (Interviews 1, 9, 10 and 14), the Uzbek elites do not view that without shared values,

genuine or long-term partnerships will not emerge (Interviews 11 & 7). Instead, like Kazakh elites (Interview 6), they view cooperation around human rights and democracy as one of the dimensions of partnership with the EU. The following section will explore whether mutual learning is part of Uzbekistan's elite partnership construction.

5.4. Mutual learning

By its very nature, partnership indicates the presence of the self and the other. As such, the successful formula for the partnership-building process involves learning about the other's needs, interests and values (Korosteleva, 2014). This becomes especially relevant given the lack of historical, cultural, geographical and linguistic ties between Uzbekistan and the EU. However, learning about the other should not be a one-way process as often assumed when studying the EU relations with the third regions. Instead, the other should also actively support learning about itself. Put differently, there needs to be mutual learning whereby Uzbekistan learns about the EU and simultaneously supports learning about itself. This kind of conceptualisation of the learning process acknowledges the agency of the other and their responsibility towards it. Accordingly, this section examines to what extent mutual learning is perceived as a necessary element of partnership with the EU in Uzbek political discourse.

The recognition and understanding of Uzbekistan's agency in the mutual learning process are especially relevant because of the value-based cooperation component of the relations with the EU. Norm diffusion literature acknowledges the agency of all actors involved in value-based cooperation. According to Krook and True (2010), international norms often do not have a fixed content, enabling parties to fill in the gaps. Thus, in some cases, Wiener (2008) argues that through constant engagement, norm promoters and norm receivers can develop the meaning of the norms through socialising with each other. In other cases, the objects of norm promotion can resist the spread of promoted norms by third parties (Bloomfield, 2016). This can be done by restricting domestic exposure to the norms promoted by external actors (Vanderhill, 2017). However, Acharya (2004) claims that the objects of norm promotion neither accept nor reject international norms. Instead, norms can be given a differing meaning from those promoted by the external actors to suit the local environment (Acharya, 2004). By doing so, they wish to protect their sovereignty from those who might be able to dominate them (Acharya, 2011).

However, the above scholars of norm diffusion do not sufficiently capture the agency of authoritarian countries in the process. Relying on Lachlan's theory, Lewis (2012) and Epstein (2010)

suggest that during norm promotion, not only values and ideas are contested, but also the identity of the self. The localisation arguments, they argue, underemphasised the extent to which dialogical engagement between partners also challenges and transforms identities. In other words, norm takers could become norm promoters and vice versa through cooperation around values. For example, some scholars have argued that as well as the EU and the OSCE, actors such as the SCO, China and Russia are also diffusing their concepts anchored in the supremacy of sovereignty and subordination of human rights to security and stability (Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017; Lewis, 2012). Therefore, in Central Asia, norm diffusion is no longer a unilateral process conducted by liberal democracies but also by authoritarian actors, including the Central Asian countries themselves (Lewis 2012, p.1228).

Although the turn to understand the role of illiberal actors in norm diffusion is commendable, it still focuses on external actors rather than local actors as possible norm promoters in Central Asia. Indeed, Uzbekistan has exercised its agency overwhelmingly in opposition to the norms and values promoted by the EU in various ways: through restricting independent civil society participation in human rights dialogues with the EU (Axyonova, 2011), by limiting general access to local actors who are not part of the government elite (Peyrouse, 2019), by developing its narrative on democracy that is in stark contrast to what the EU has promoted in the region (Omelicheva, 2015). However, at a discursive level, the Uzbek political elites are adopting a norm-promoter identity, as seen in President Mirzyoyev's (2021a) commitment to promoting universal human rights enshrined in international documents rather than their authoritarian versions.

One could argue that mutual learning is less relevant since Uzbek elites have adopted the language of universal norms and values, which align with the EU-promoted concepts. However, this change in official rhetoric has not been adopted by the broader public of Uzbekistan, nor has it closed all the perception gaps between Uzbek and EU officials regarding concepts that anchor value-based cooperation. For instance, gender equality is a solid term in Uzbek political discourse (Mirziyoyev, 2020, 2021a, 2021c, 2021d; Narbaeva, 2019) and is an integral part of cooperation with the EU (EU, 2019b). However, various gender assessment studies agree that harmful cultural norms and practices persist in the wider society, and they have increased across the region since the collapse of the USSR (Asian Development Bank, 2018; Rapic, Kirey and Naimova, 2019). In all five countries, ‘girls learn that they are second-class citizens early on’ (Rapic, Kirey and Naimova, 2019, p.8), and in Uzbekistan, cultural norms emphasizing women's roles as primarily mothers and wives determine their life path regarding education and labour (Asian Development Bank, 2018, p.8).

According to the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB) survey, 82% of Uzbek females and 80% of males believed that men make better political leaders than women (FES, 2016b).

Meanwhile, the figure for the same poll was 12% for females and 17% for males in Western Europe (FES, 2016b). The same survey found that 93% of Uzbek females vs. 90% of males believed that women should do household chores even when the husband is unemployed, while only 12% of their Western counterparts agreed with such a statement (FES, 2016b). These findings indicate that despite emphasizing gender equality in Uzbek political discourse, harmful cultural norms and practices persist in Uzbek society.

There are other instances of conceptual gaps between the Uzbek and EU officials, which cause obstacles to cooperation around human rights and democracy. For example, civil society and governance have different meanings to the EU and Uzbek officials (Bossuyt, 2022; Kluczewska and Dzhuraev, 2020; interview 3). The EU's definition of civil society, which has a neoliberal and technocratic view of civil society organisations, differs from the local forms of civil society organisations with informal self-governance structures found in Central Asian countries (Bossuyt, 2022). This difference in perception is problematic as it hampers cooperation between the EU and local forms of civil society in Uzbekistan (Interview 3). This is an area where the Uzbek government could exercise its agency and take the initiative to promote mutual learning to bridge the gap. However, mutual learning and policy areas that facilitate it, such as people-to-people contact, education, and cultural cooperation, have yet to take their rightful place in Uzbekistan's official construction of partnership with the EU.

In the context of Uzbekistan-EU relations, the Uzbek political discourse fails to acknowledge the significance of people-to-people contact as an essential area of cooperation and a mechanism to promote mutual learning. For instance, a conference on connectivity hosted by Uzbekistan in 2022 should have provided an opportunity to address this issue, but the focus was on strengthening trade and transport links, scientific knowledge exchange, and developing digital capacity. The speech of the Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan omitted the need to improve human exchange between the country and the EU altogether (Norov, 2022). Similarly, the Development Strategy of Uzbekistan for 2022-2026 scarcely refers to improving people-to-people engagement between the EU and the country, and when it does, it remains elite-driven: ‘Expand cooperation with European countries through high-level visits’ (Tulyakov et al., 2022, p.97). Since adopting the EU’s first strategy for Central Asia in 2007, high-level contact between the regions has increased substantially

(Warkotsch, 2011, pp.105–106). However, such dialogues are top-down and exclude other segments of society, limiting opportunities for mutual learning (Melvin and Boonstra, 2008). While increasing elite interactions are welcome, scholars and experts agree that people-to-people contact needs to go beyond high-level ministers and bureaucrats to understand the local perspective (Boonstra, 2011, p.20; interviews 2, 3, 17 and 19).

On the ground, most travellers between the regions are bureaucrats and consultants, and more Europeans are travelling to Uzbekistan than vice versa (Kluczewska and Dzhuraev, 2020, p.247). According to the Uzbek State Statistics Committee, in 2022, the highest number of Uzbek tourists to the EU member state country was Germany, which amounted to only 7,100 people (Statistics Agency, 2022). In comparison, the highest number of EU tourists to Uzbekistan in the same year were German citizens, which came at 17,700 and was followed by 11,000 French citizens (Statistics Agency, 2022). Although the Uzbek authorities introduced visa-free travel for EU countries in 2019 (Putz, 2019a), costly and tedious bureaucratic processes remain for Uzbek citizens, including an average visa cost of 80 Euros, additional fees for private visa application agencies, and a lengthy list of required documents (Schengen Visa Info, 2023). Yet, unlike their Kazakh counterparts, the Uzbek political elite discourse does not publicly mention easing these restrictions to ensure more equitable human exchange between these actors, at least for certain groups of professionals such as researchers, artists, etc. The lack of emphasis on increasing people-to-people contact is a missed opportunity for mutual learning and a more comprehensive understanding of each other's perspectives.

The other areas that could facilitate mutual learning between the EU and Uzbekistan are cultural cooperation, mobility and collaboration in education and research (Interviews 7, 17 and 19). However, cultural cooperation to promote learning between partners is absent in Uzbek political discourse. Cultural cooperation is referenced as an add-on to other areas of collaboration with the EU without enjoying particular emphasis or recognition in its own right as a means to strengthen mutual understanding and close perception gaps between Uzbek and EU officials.

Student mobility and education can promote the values and ideas of partner countries, as evidenced by research showing that post-Soviet countries with higher student mobility into Europe and the US perform better in terms of democratic development (Longhurst, Nitza-Makowska and Skiert-Andrzejuk, 2022; Chankseliani, 2018). However, the discourse around education cooperation with the EU among the Uzbek political elite is insufficient and mainly focused on developmental issues

(D. Khakimov, 2021d; Komilov, 2021). 'The EU and European partners can play a unique role in supporting the improvement of the education system in our country, increasing quality and coverage' (Komilov, 2021) as well as help tackle growing religious radicalisation among the youth of Uzbekistan (Norov, 2018). While the EU can assist in upgrading the education quality in Uzbekistan, it is unclear how they could help combat the growing problem of religious fundamentalism, given their own struggles. Therefore, discourse around education cooperation must include two-way socialisation to achieve shared values. Student mobility from Uzbekistan to European countries is minimal, as depicted below in Figure 5.1:

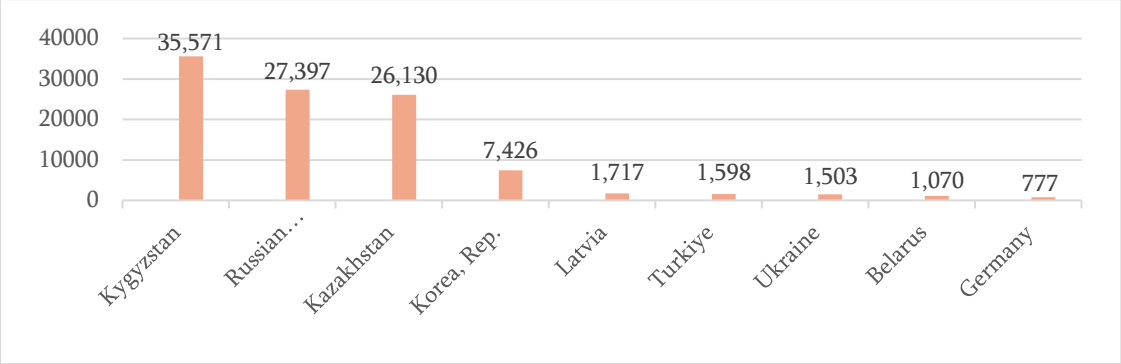


Figure 5.1. The number of students from Uzbekistan studying abroad *(Source:* UNESCO Institute for Statistics, 2023)

Figure 1 above shows that only Latvia and Germany were among the top ten EU countries for students from Uzbekistan. This is despite the data showing a high desire among Uzbek youth to study in European countries (U-Report, 2020). Economic factors are the main obstacle to student mobility, as most students from Uzbekistan cannot afford to study abroad without external sponsorships (Sadullaeva, 2022). The Uzbek government provides very little funding support for students studying both at home and overseas, leading to a situation where most students from Uzbekistan who study abroad are privately funded (Alimukhamedov, 2020). Meanwhile, Russia offers state-funded scholarships that cover tuition and living expenses, along with well-established policies for recruiting Central Asian students (Chankseliani, 2018). The current state of student and staff mobility between Uzbekistan and the EU is primarily covered by the EU-funded Erasmus+ program. Overall, student and staff mobility exchange for the entire region of Central Asia, Uzbekistan and the EU is depicted below.

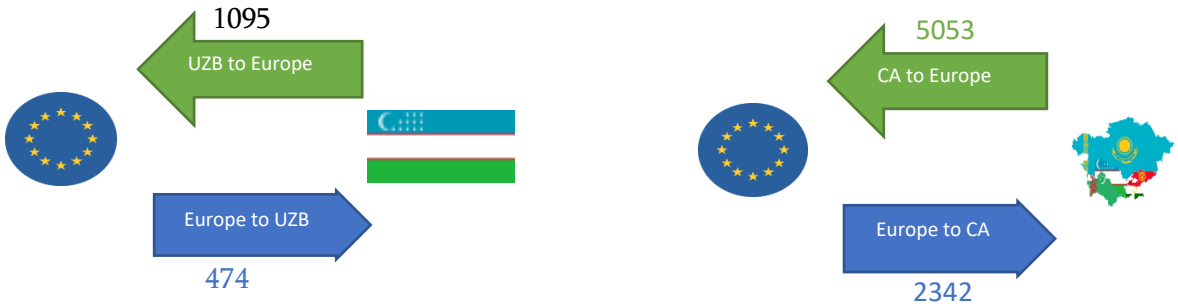


Figure 5.2. Student and staff mobility, 2015-2019
(Source: European Commission, 2020)

As shown in Figure 5.2, Uzbekistan has only contributed 22% of the overall student mobility from Central Asia to Europe despite being the most populous country in the region. In addition, according to Axyonova (2013), mobility from the region to the EU suffers from a class problem as it often benefits students who can access language and other tuition courses that allow them to pass the selection process. This is problematic as it exacerbates the region's class divide and fosters mutual learning between the same groups of people (Axyonova, 2013). This limits the potential for mutual understanding and hinders the partnership-building process. Additionally, this unbalanced mobility may result in a brain drain, detrimental to the country's progress (Axyonova, 2013). To address these issues, the Uzbek government could make preparatory exam courses more affordable and accessible to those who cannot pay and offer job guarantees to those who return home. Furthermore, Uzbekistan should focus on improving the quality and attractiveness of its universities to international students (Kluczewska and Dzhuraev, 2020). By doing so, the country can ensure that its students have greater access to higher education and contribute to the country's development while promoting mutual learning with partner countries.

Student mobility is not the only way to promote mutual learning between Uzbekistan and the EU. Research collaboration is equally important (Interview 8), especially given the lack of think tanks in the region and the need for 'more knowledge on Central Asian societies' (Boonstra et al., 2018, p.10). Moreover, there is a severe lack of modules in higher education that teach Central Asians about the EU, highlighting the need for Uzbekistan to actively promote learning about itself and the EU (Kluczewska and Dzhuraev, 2020). However, the utility of research cooperation in bridging cultural or conceptual gaps in Uzbek political discourse is not recognised nor emphasised (Interviews 17 and 7). Unsurprisingly, this contributes to poor research cooperation between Uzbekistan and the EU, which already suffers from several other problems. To begin with, research on EU and Central Asia relations is often commissioned by the European Commission (Kluczewska

and Dzhuraev, 2020). While this is valuable in its own right, the research angle is less than ideal as it is skewed towards understanding the EU in Central Asia rather than the EU and Central Asia together (Kluczewska and Dzhuraev, 2020, p.246). Furthermore, existing EU-funded programs such as Horizon do not reflect the realities on the ground in Uzbekistan (Interview 17). Horizon is a competition-based program open to research collaboration worldwide, but Uzbekistan loses out due to a lack of competitiveness and scarce state funding (Interview 17; Alimukhamedov, 2020). Additionally, research cooperation between Uzbekistan and external actors, such as the EU, is concentrated in Tashkent, leaving out the rest of the country (Alimukhamedov, 2020).

Two other programs that offer mutual learning opportunities are the European Union Visitors Programme and the Sakharov Fellowship (EEAS, 2023). These programs are funded by the EU, thus again underscoring a lack of action by the Uzbek government to promote mutual learning. In the case of the former, the EU Delegation in Tashkent selects young leaders from the country to travel to Brussels, Strasbourg and Luxembourg to meet officials to get better acquainted with how the Union and its institutions operate (EEAS, 2023). Usually, two leaders are selected from Uzbekistan (EEAS, 2023). Meanwhile, the Sakharov Fellowship offers human rights defenders from Uzbekistan and other non-EU countries to participate in a two-week intensive programme in Brussels and Venice (EEAS, 2023). During this period, the participants enhanced their knowledge of EU and international human rights frameworks, policies and mechanisms (EEAS, 2023). Unfortunately, the numbers are meagre as only 14 human rights defenders are selected from non-EU countries per intake (EEAS, 2023).

The absence of mutual learning in the construction of partnership in Uzbek political discourse can be mainly attributed to the lack of emphasis on recognizing and addressing gaps in perceptions between partners. Vital conceptual differences detrimental to relations are publicly not acknowledged, creating the illusion that there is no need for mutual learning. For instance, the Uzbek political discourse around cooperation with the EU rarely refers to Uzbek forms of civil society actors, such as *mahalla,* that could be incorporated into certain policy areas between these actors. For example, Bossuyt and Daveltova (2022) propose that the mahalla, a traditional Uzbek community-based organisation, has the potential to play a significant role in bolstering societal resilience. This makes sense, given resilience is one of the flagship principles of the EU mentioned in its 2019 Strategy Paper for Central Asia.

For mutual learning to take its rightful place in the partnership-building process, recognizing gaps in perceptions and addressing them are imperative. When asked about the differences in perceptions, the elites state that it is only natural as these are different actors located on other continents (Interviews 7 and 11). Meanwhile, the solutions to bridging these gaps are not thought out, and the burden of improving engagement is expected to be shouldered by the EU rather than Uzbekistan (Interview 7). As mentioned, people-to-people exchange, whether around education or research cooperation, remains unilaterally supported by the EU. This could be explained by the prevailing image of the EU among the Uzbek elites as a donor/reform partner who should do more for the relations. Here again, mutual learning could help to build a more nuanced image of the EU in the eyes of the partners that goes beyond being a donor (Kluczewska and Dzhuraev, 2020). For now, mutual learning remains driven by the EU and has thus far not become a substantial part of the partnership-building process in Uzbek elite discourse and practice on the ground. The next section presents the concluding remarks.

5.5. Conclusion

The chapter examined how the Uzbek political elites constructed the notion of partnership with the EU. The findings suggest that Uzbekistan's construction of partnership and its approach to relations with the EU is overwhelmingly influenced by the incumbent elite policies and perceptions. According to the findings, when it comes to the basis of partnership, the Uzbek elites view the role of mutual interests as imperative for partnership with the EU. Trade, security, and connectivity are the primary areas the Uzbek elite perceives as mutually beneficial due to President Mirziyoyev's internal policies that aim to liberalize the country's economy. Meanwhile, they perceive cooperation around shared values of human rights and democracy as one aspect of multidimensional cooperation with the EU. This starkly contrasts how the EU officials view shared values as essential for the emergence of genuine partnership and sustainability of long-term cooperation with Central Asian states.

The Uzbek discourse also emphasises equality and reflexiveness between partners as being important for partnership with the EU. However, the Uzbek elites mention that unilateral aid from the EU to Uzbekistan does not impact equality between partners. They argue that aid funds from the EU benefit areas such as the environment, which is a global issue, and equality between states is guaranteed under the international norms to which both the EU and Uzbekistan subscribe. While

the Uzbek political discourse emphasises that the EU is a responsive and reflective partner, the evidence suggests that there are areas where the EU policies are only partially reflexive due to EU and Uzbek-related problems. Lastly, the Uzbek construction of partnership does not adequately include mutual learning, an important element of partnership. As a result, Uzbek officials do not recognise the detrimental role the conceptual gaps play in the partnership-building process with the EU. Logically, this means there is no need or urgency to address them in the relations. As a result, the concept of partnership remains unable to reflect and mitigate the nuances of Uzbek and EU relations.

Chapter 6 – Kazakhstan's construction of partnership

This chapter examines Kazakhstan's elite discourse to gain insights into the essence of partnership. Specifically, the focus is on Kazakh-EU relations, which stand out from Uzbek-EU relations, making them an intriguing case study for understanding the concept of partnership. Unlike their Uzbek counterparts, the Kazakh elite has consistently shown a greater willingness to strengthen ties with the EU since gaining independence, and this is exemplified by Kazakhstan being the first Central Asian country to ratify the EPCA with the EU (Interview 4).

Another distinguishing aspect of Kazakh-EU relations is the level of interdependence between these actors. As an upper-middle-income country, Kazakhstan ceased to receive bilateral aid from the EU in 2014, but it has become the EU's largest trade partner in Central Asia. Additionally, Kazakhstan holds significant importance as the region's primary energy partner of the EU. With the Russian invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Kazakh energy resources may become even more crucial for the EU, potentially impacting the Union's limited leverage.

Furthermore, Kazakhstan's geographical proximity to Russia and China gives it strategic significance for both nations. Compared to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan has more deeply intertwined relations with Russia and China. Notably, Kazakh-Russian cultural and economic ties are much stronger, with Kazakhstan being a founding member of the Russian-led Eurasian Economic Union and hosting a significant Russian minority. The extensive use of the Russian language in Kazakhstan also contributes to Russia's soft power influence. Balancing loyalty to Russia with deepening ties to the EU requires calculated decisions to maintain a multi-vector foreign policy.

Regarding China, Kazakhstan's strategic importance lies in overall security and energy security. China directly imports oil from Kazakhstan and has substantial stakes in the Kazakh oil sector. Moreover, China's growing economic influence in Kazakhstan is notable. Additionally, Kazakhstan's role in hosting the largest Uyghur diaspora outside of China and the Kazakh minority facing internment camps in Xinjiang emphasises its significance for Chinese security compared to Uzbekistan.

The central argument of this thesis is that power asymmetries in EU-Central Asia relations are not the primary determinants of partnership construction, as this case study suggests. Additionally, I contend that Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy is not a central factor in its approach toward

the EU. While these factors may have some impact, the thesis argues that the Kazakh elite's policies, economic trajectories, and perceptions of the other and the self play more significant roles in shaping how partnerships are conceptualised and determining their overall approach to the EU.

Accordingly, the chapter's structure is as follows: a brief history of EU-Kazakh relations is presented in the first section, followed by applying the conceptual framework outlined in chapter two to Kazakh discourse to understand the characteristics and basis of partnership. The chapter further explores the element of learning about the other before presenting concluding remarks on the findings. The empirical data is limited to speeches and statements of the Kazakh elite from 2017 to 2022, supplemented by primary interviews conducted by the author between 2021 and 2022. 6.1. A brief overview of Kazakhstan-European Union relations

The EU and Kazakhstan relations are arguably one of the most developed in the region. Kazakhstan was the first country until 2010, when the EU established its sole delegation in Central Asia (Patalakh, 2018b). Kazakhstan was also the first country in the region to ratify EPCA with the EU. As the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, Roman Vassilenko (2017) put it, 'I don't think there is another country which has signed such an 'enhanced agreement' with the EU. Furthermore, both sides regularly engage in high-level visits, further strengthening their bilateral ties. On November 25, 2021, the president of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart-Tokayev, visited Belgium and met with high-level officials such as Council President Charles Michel and Belgian Prime Minister Alexander De Croo (Satubaldina, 2021). This visit was followed by subsequent high-level visits from Kazakhstan to the EU in 2022, including Senior Chief of Staff of President Suleimenov, Human Rights Commissioner and Ombudsperson Azimova, and Special Representative of President of Kazakhstan Kazykhan (Turkstra, 2022). In parallel, the EU Special Envoy to Central Asia, Tehri Hakala, met with President Tokayev in Kazakhstan on February 8, 2022 (Schmitt, 2022).

Kazakh officials emphasise that the EU is a valuable strategic partner with whom they wish to deepen further relations (Interview 6; Baymukhan, 2021; Tokayev, 2022a). Equally, Kazakhstan positions itself as the 'main partner' for the EU in Central Asia (Tileuberdi, 2020). The EU and Kazakhstan are keen to build a 'stronger partnership' (EU, 2019b, p.1), and solid grounds exist for this. Instability in Afghanistan and the ensuing energy crisis in the West should increase Central Asia's relevance to the EU. Meanwhile, Kazakhstan shares two strategic borders with China and Russia (Tjia, 2022). As such, a relationship with the EU can counter Kazakhstan to the influence of its authoritarian Chinese neighbour and erratic Russian ally (Interview 1).

However, the road to genuine partnership is impeded by various factors. Internally, in 2022, Kazakhstan experienced one of the worst violent unrest since its independence, sparked by increased fuel prices (Sorbello, 2022). It started in the western provincial areas on January 5 and soon spread to large cities such as Almaty (Sorbello, 2022). The unrest led to the death of 150 people and the arrest of 5,000 people (Mellen, 2022). The Kazakh government blamed the bloodshed on an 'organised terrorist assault' (Iddrisov, 2022) and gave 'shoot-to-kill' orders after week-long violence (Mellen, 2022). President Tokayev (2022b) defended his actions by claiming that all was done in the nation's interests. The EU responded by calling for Kazakh authorities to uphold their commitment to respecting the human rights of their citizens (Council of the European Union, 2022). Consequently, cooperation around human rights and democracy remains a contentious issue for the EU and Kazakhstan.

Externally, Russian forces' ongoing invasion of Ukraine since February 2022 has caused unexpected geopolitical challenges for the EU and Kazakhstan. The relations between the EU and Russia have hit an all-time low, and the time has come for the former to wean itself of Russian fossil fuels. In this context, Kazakh energy resources might become even more critical for the EU, thus possibly further diminishing the Union's already small leverage in the country.

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan, 'a true bridge builder' (Kuspan, 2019) of international relations whose approach to external affairs is about 'connecting Russia and the European Union', is walking on its own tightrope (Kuspan, 2020d). Wedged between its loyalty to Russia partly due to its EAEU membership and deepening relations with the EU, Kazakhstan has to make calculated decisions to keep its bridge to these actors intact. To date, Kazakhstan has avoided voting against the interests of Russia in the UN (Putz, 2022). Kazakh government has also appeared alongside four other presidents of Central Asian countries at a victory parade in Russia in 2023, showing their support for Putin (Pantucci and Arduino, 2023). At the same time, Kazakh authorities have reassured their European partners by pledging not to help Russia and Belarus to sidestep the EU sanctions on the territory of Kazakhstan (Suleimenov, 2022). Previously, Central Asian countries assisted Russia in avoiding Western sanctions imposed after the annexation of Crimea in 2014 (Pantucci and Arduino, 2023).

However, there seems to be one winner amidst the chaos emanating from the Ukraine war and subsequent Western sanctions on Russia - China. While being cautious of Russia's preeminence around politics, security and cultural affairs in Kazakhstan and Central Asia, China has been

increasing its engagement across the economy and energy cooperation in Kazakhstan and Central Asia (Bitabarova, 2018). Russia, realizing it cannot compete with China's economic prowess, has accepted Chinese inroads into the economy of Central Asia (Pantucci and Arduino, 2023). However, Russia does express occasional dissent regarding China's economic advancements, as seen in its obstruction of the economic component of the SCO in Central Asia (Bitabarova, 2018).

The growing presence of China has implications for both Kazakhstan and the EU. Scholars have argued that China facilitates a resource-dependent economy in Central Asian countries, such as Kazakhstan, by destroying their 'industrial fabric', which is crucial for creating jobs (Peyrouse, 2016, p.17). Furthermore, other scholars have noted that past Chinese projects have contributed to the corruptive practices of Kazakh elites, leading to Sinophobia among the populace (Laurelle and Peyrouse, 2012; Rastogi and Arvis, 2014). Despite such concerns, Kazakhstan has sought to cultivate strong relations with China, which has become an 'indispensable partner, creditor and investor' (Kukeyeva and Dyussebayev, 2019, p.296). Kazakhstan and China signed 52 investment projects totalling over $21 billion in 2015 (Sochnev, 2022). Chinese practices that facilitate fossil fuel extraction and corruption among the ruling regime are hardly in the long-term interest of Kazakhstan and are simultaneously contradictory to the EU's policies that aim to support sustainable development in the country. However, whether the EU will be able to capitalise on the possible tension between China and Russia due to the former's ever-expanding incursion into the region or the negative impacts of Chinese investments in Kazakhstan will be revealed in due time.

The Kazakh-EU bilateral relations started in 1991 after the collapse of the USSR (EEAS, 2022b). The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, which came into force in 1999, provided the legal framework for bilateral relations (European Commission, 2022). After several years of negotiations, it was replaced with the EPCA, which the European Union and Kazakhstan signed in December 2015 (Tursunov, 2020). The EPCA came into force on March 1, 2020, and it governs 29 areas of cooperation between the two actors (EEAS, 2022b). Regional cooperation was initially based on the EU's first Strategy for Central Asia, adopted in 2007 (EU, 2007a). However, it has also been replaced by the latest EU 2019 Strategy for the region. Table 6.1 summarises the overarching documents between the European Union and Kazakhstan:

Table 6.1. The main documents between Kazakhstan and the EU

Document names	*Active years*	*Ratified by*	*Format*
PCA	1999-2015	EU & Kazakhstan	Bilateral
EPCA	2015-Present	EU & Kazakhstan	Bilateral
EU Strategy	2007-2019	EU & CAS	Regional
EU Strategy	2019- Present	EU & CAS	Regional

(Source: EEAS, 2022a)

Both bilateral and regional documents make provisions for cooperation in various sectors broadly categorized into economic, trade and energy as well as development. The following passages will provide a detailed account of cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan in these areas.

Economic and trade cooperation

The EU and Kazakhstan have well-established economic and trade relations. The EPCA provides the legal basis for trade and economic relations covering issues such as trade in services, capital movement, raw materials and energy, government procurement and intellectual property (EEAS, 2022b). Trade relations also benefit from institutionalized dialogues in the form of the Cooperation Council, Cooperation Committee in Trade Configuration and Customs Sub-committee (EEAS, 2022b) (The former is a high-level dialogue that provides a platform for discussion on the progress of the implementation of the EPCA (EEAS, 2022b). The latter two allow for technical discussions on trade, investment and customs (EEAS, 2022b). In addition to these institutional dialogues, a high-level EU-Kazakhstan Business Platform was launched in the summer of 2019 (Anon, 2021). This platform brings together Kazakh authorities, business representatives and the EU Heads of Mission, making direct dialogue possible (Anon, 2021).

The EU mainly imports fuel and mining products from Kazakhstan, which amounted to €12.6 billion in 2020 (EEAS, 2022a). Meanwhile, the EU exports to Kazakhstan include machinery and transport equipment, chemicals and manufactured goods (EEAS, 2022a). In 2020, EU goods exported to Kazakhstan were worth €6 billion (EEAS, 2022a). However, as a founding member of the Russian-led EAEU, Kazakhstan is obliged to conform to some restrictive trade rules, such as raising tariffs on European goods, which essentially hampers trade with the EU (Mogildea and Grămadă, 2017). Despite predictions that war in Ukraine and the subsequent Western sanctions on Russia expected to impact Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan, negatively due to its EAEU membership, this has not materialized, and money from Russia to the region has, in fact, increased (Pantucci and Arduino, 2023).

While traditionally, Russia has been the leading trade partner of Kazakhstan since its independence in 1991 (Rakhimov, 2015), things are changing. Trade with China is growing steadfastly (Bitabarova, 2018). Serik Zhumangarin, deputy prime minister and minister of commerce of Kazakhstan, predicted that by 2030, China may surpass both the EU and Russia regarding trade turnover (Gizitdinov, 2023), further increasing its political influence. Table 6.2 below presents Kazakhstan's latest trade figures with the EU, China and Russia.

Table 6.2. Kazakhstan's trade figures for 2022 with the EU, China and Russia

	EU	*China*	*Russia*
Total Exports (USD)	29.8 billion	13.1 billion	8.78 billion
Total Imports (USD)	10.4 billion	10.98 billion	17.34 billion

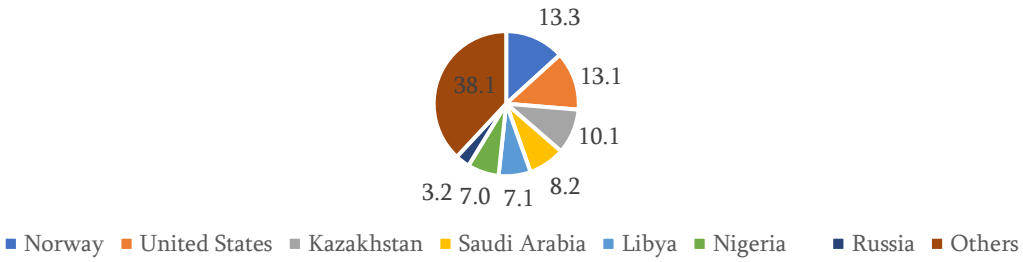
(Modified from source: OEC; Trading Economics, 2023)

As seen from Table 2, the EU remains Kazakhstan's leading trade and investment partner for the time being, as approximately 40% of Kazakhstan's external trade is conducted with the EU. Meanwhile, EU trade investments constitute 48% of the country's foreign direct investment (Kuspan, 2020a).

Energy and transport cooperation

Due to the nature of goods imported into the EU from Kazakhstan, the energy cooperation between these actors is of particular significance. The Kazakh economy largely relies on the export of raw materials in the forms of oil, Uranium, coal and other types of raw materials (Kukeyeva and Dyussebayev, 2019). More than 70% of Kazakhstan's oil is exported to the EU (EEAS, 2022b). The KMG, a Kazakh national oil and gas company, manages the refining, trading and retailing of significant EU-based assets in South-Eastern Europe and countries of the Eastern Partnership (EEAS, 2022b). The pie chart 6.1 below presents the EU oil imports by partner countries for the first quarter of 2023.

Fig. 6.1 First quarter of 2023 oil imports for the EU by countries



(Source: Eurostat, 2023)

The energy cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan goes beyond purely commercial ties. The EU provides technical support to Kazakhstan to facilitate the establishment of competitive energy markets and sustainable use of energy resources (EEAS, 2022b). Additionally, Kazakhstan is the largest supplier of Uranium to the EU's nuclear industry, meeting approximately 21% of the Union's demand (EEAS, 2022b). As such, Kazakhstan has benefited from high-level political and substantial financial support from the EU to create the Low-Enriched Uranium Bank (LEUB) (EEAS, 2022b). The main aim of the bank is to allow countries with peaceful nuclear programs to access low-enriched Uranium if they cannot on commercial markets or any other way (Putz, 2019b) (. The International Atomic Energy Agency owns and controls the LEUB (Putz, 2019b). However, it is operated by the Kazakh state under its national legislation (EEAS, 2022b).

To multiply energy import channels and assist Central Asian states to enter European and world markets, the EU established two important projects (Kassenova, 2019). First, the Transport Corridor – Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) was established in 1993 to create an alternative route to Moscow-controlled commercial and energy transit systems (Harangozó, 2019; Cornell and Starr, 2019). Second, Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe (INOGATE) was established in 1996 to create legal systems for energy markets and security around the Black Sea and Caspian countries (Peyrouse, 2016; Cornell and Starr, 2019). TRACECA was significant in the sense that it was one of the first projects that aimed to restore the historic crossroad role of Central Asia (which the Central Asian elite highly regarded, as was discussed in Chapter 4) by an external actor (Cornell and Starr, 2019). In the framework of TRACECA, the EU carried out approximately 60 technical assistance and investment projects worth €120 million in various sectors, including constructing and modernizing railroads and highways (Cornell and Starr, 2019; Rakhimov, 2015). However, despite the EU's upbeat assessment of the achievements of TRACECA and INOGATE, scholars agree that both these projects, while making some difference, have fallen short of fulfilling their overarching

objectives of political-economic transition and transport-infrastructure connectivity (Peyrouse, 2017; Kassenova, 2019). As such, TRACECA 'has been nearly forgotten' (Kassenova, 2015, p.2), and INOGATE was terminated in 2016 (Cornell and Starr, 2019).

China, with its 'focused, pragmatic and well-financed policy in Central Asia' has created a challenge both for the EU and Russia (Kassenova, 2015, p.2) as it has come to dominate interrelated fields of energy and transport infrastructure in Central Asia (Peyrouse, 2016; Bitabarova, 2018). From 1997 to 2012, most Chinese projects in Kazakhstan, precisely 20 out of 28, were focused on fuel-related and connectivity-related initiatives (Tjia, 2022). Consequently, Chinese companies have come to possess substantial stake in the oil sector of Kazakhstan, and China has built its first international oil pipeline that directly transports Kazakh oil to its territory (Bitabarova, 2018). Furthermore, China has completed the three lines, namely A, B, and C, of the construction of the Central Asia-China gas pipeline that traverses Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, ultimately reaching Khorgos in China's Xinjiang region (Bitabarova, 2018). China's strong emphasis on oil extraction in Kazakhstan has made the country overly reliant on resource exports. Chinese investment in the oil sector has not significantly improved Kazakhstan's oil extraction and refinery capabilities (Tjia, 2022). This situation underscores that China's involvement in the oil sector does not necessarily benefit the long-term future of Kazakhstan's economy.

Through BRI symbolically launched in Kazakhstan by Chinese leader Xi in September 2013, China has come to dominate transport infrastructure projects in Central Asia (Fawn, 2021; Kembayev, 2020). This is not incidental as Kazakhstan, due to its strategic location, offers the shortest route for China to connect with Europe (Kembayev, 2020). Moreover, Kazakhstan possesses a strategic advantage over its Western neighbours, such as Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Pakistan, due to its vast flat land areas and relatively well-developed transport infrastructure (Bitabarova, 2018). Under the framework of BRI, China is building a series of roads, bridges, tunnels and railroads across Central Asia to connect the region to Europe (Stronski and Ng, 2018). Kazakhstan has also received $27 billion from BRI to complete transport infrastructures and hubs across the Sino-Kazakh border (Richard Ghiasy and Jiayi Zhou, 2017). The number of projects under BRI is too long to list. However, noteworthy is the completion of the Korghos-Aktau railway corridor in 2015, which functions as the primary commercial hub under the auspices of BRI in Eurasia (Ghiyasi and Zhou, 2017).

In response to Chinese infrastructure projects, in 2014, Kazakhstan proposed to link up its domestic

development project, Nurly Zhol, to BRI, thus showing significant interest as well as an agency (Bitabarova, 2018; Tjia, 2022). Nurly Zhol aims to link up connectivity, infrastructure and industrial cooperation with the BRI (Bitabarova, 2018). Kazakhstan has earmarked $9 billion to implement Nurly Zhol (Russell, 2019a)The complementary nature of Nurly Zhol and BRI has made the Kazakh ruling regime particularly receptive to Chinese projects in Kazakhstan (Stronski and Ng, 2018). More specifically, the Kazakh regime views BRI as an essential source of investment for the realization of its own domestic reforms and development, given the shortage of capital due to the sharp fall in oil prices since 2014 (Bitabarova, 2018) At the same time, integration of Nurly Zhol into BRI has been positively received by China (Kukeyeva and Dyussebayev, 2019). This underscores the growing dependency between Kazakhstan and China regarding economic and infrastructure areas, which the EU will have to be mindful of going forward.

Development cooperation

The EU has supported Kazakhstan since its independence in 1991 and has funded over 350 bilateral programmes worth 185 million Euros (EEAS, 2022a). As of 2014, Kazakhstan became an upper-middle-income country (Cornell and Starr, 2019). Thus, it no longer qualifies for bilateral funds allocation from the EU's Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) (Cornell and Starr, 2019). The EU's bilateral aid to Kazakhstan thus far has focused on capacity building of regional and local governments and civil society, justice sector reform, and strengthening public sector capacity to initiate social and economic reforms (EEAS, 2022a). The last bilateral programmes focused on transitioning to a green economy and judicial reforms were completed in 2018 (EEAS, 2022a). However, Kazakhstan still benefits from financial and technical support through regional and thematic instruments and programs (EEAS, 2022b). From 2014 to 2020, the EU assigned 454.2 million Euros for the entire Central Asia (EEAS, 2022b). Kazakhstan can request financial and technical support through various EU instruments, as shown in Table 6.3 (EEAS, 2022b):

Table 6. 3. The EU financial and technical instruments for Central Asia

Names of instruments	*Technical*	*Financial*
European Instrument for Human Rights & Development (EIHRD)	x	x
The Instrument for Stability and Peace	x	x
The Nuclear Safety Instrument	x	x
The Partnership Instrument	x	x
DCI (only through regional allocation)		x

Source: (EEAS, 2022b)

In addition to these instruments, the EU funds several thematic regional programmes that address urgent issues facing Central Asian states, including Kazakhstan. Diagram 6.2 below presents a snapshot of the regional development programs between the EU and Kazakhstan (EEAS, 2022b, 2022a):

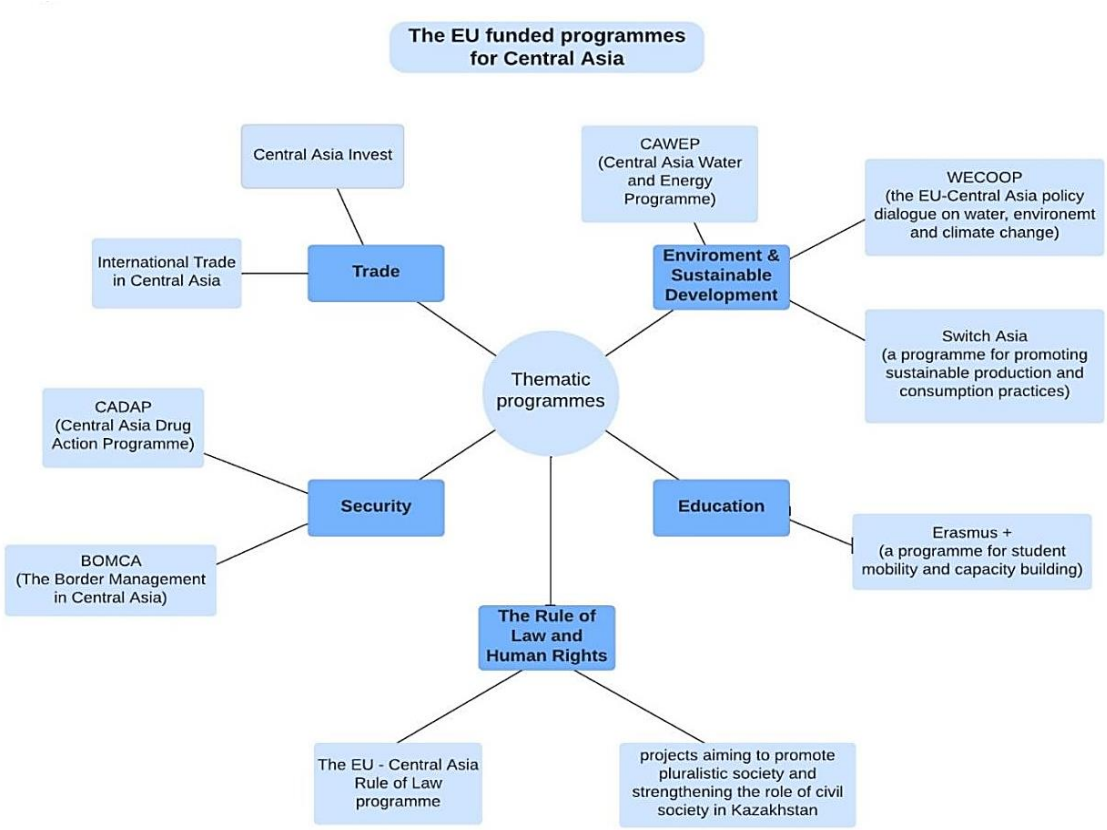


Figure 6.2. The EU-funded programmes for Central Asia ***(Source: EEAS, 2022b)***

As per Figure 6.2, the EU and Kazakhstan cooperate in different sectors, including economy and trade, education, security, the rule of law and human rights, water, environment and climate

change. Some areas, such as security, environment and trade, benefit from more than one EU-funded programme in Central Asia. In addition, the EU and Kazakhstan assisted one another in tackling issues related to COVID-19. Kazakhstan sent humanitarian aid to Hungary and Italy (Tleuberdi, 2021). This was reciprocated by the EU and member states, who have made €123 million available to fight COVID-19 in Central Asia (EEAS, 2022b). In July 2020, part of this fund, which amounted to €3 million, was used to establish the Central Asia COVID-19 Crisis Response Solidarity Programme with a primary focus on Kazakhstan (EEAS, 2022a). This two-year program was intended to address various needs of Kazakhstan, starting with the immediate challenges and slowly moving towards recovery, preparation and building the resilience of the country in the face of the pandemic (EEAS, 2022a). The next section will present findings on how the Kazakh elite constructed the partnership with the EU.

6.2. Characteristics of partnership

Kazakhstan does not have a specific strategy paper for the EU. Despite this, the Kazakh elites have a particular notion of partnership. When constructing partnership with the EU, first and foremost, the Kazakh elite discourse emphasises equality and mutual benefits: 'Few could have predicted the extent to which EU-Kazakhstan relations would grow and diversify. What some may initially have seen as a relationship of asymmetric assistance has become one of genuine partnership, based on innumerable overlapping interests and mutual benefits' (Tokayev, 2021). Similarly, an official at the Kazakh embassy in Brussels characterised the cooperation with the EU as a 'win-win situation' for both actors because they contribute to each other's interests, development and ambitions (Interview 6).

As per the Kazakh discourse, equality between the EU and Kazakhstan presupposes the presence of 'mutual respect' (Tileuberdi, 2022). On February 11, 2021, the European Parliament passed a resolution on Kazakhstan criticizing several human rights-related issues, such as a 'worrying deterioration in the general situation of human rights and a crackdown on civil society organisations in Kazakhstan' (European Parliament, 2021). In response to the critical stance of the European Parliament, Kazakh elite members such as Kuspan (2021) called for a respectful attitude from her European colleagues towards Kazakhstan. Similarly, Azimova (2021) emphasised the need to ensure that the dialogue between partners remains 'respectful and constructive'. In practice, this would mean that dialogues are conducted on an equal basis, as 'No country deserves the role of a

silent disciple hearing only moral teachings' (Azimova, 2021). According to some elites, such unequal dialogue that lacks mutual respect 'will not benefit anyone' (Azimova, 2021).

The emphasis on equality and mutual benefits in partnership with the EU is unsurprising, considering that Kazakhstan's foreign policy framework and overall approach to international relations firmly embody these principles. The pivotal role played by Nazarbayev, the first president of Kazakhstan, in shaping the nation's foreign policy approach has been well-documented (Patalakh, 2018b; Vanderhill, Joireman and Tulepbayeva, 2020; Karabayeva, 2021) which, in turn, greatly influences its partnership with the EU. According to Karabayeva (2021, p.28), leaders like Nazarbayev have significantly impacted the nation-building processes, state identities, and international behaviour of Central Asian countries. The notion of equality linked to the 'personal ideas' of Nursultan Nazarbayev (Patalakh, 2018b, p.23) became a constitutive element of Kazakhstan's identity (Karabayeva, 2021), which ultimately fed into the country's approach to regional and global relations, including with the EU. In his essay, the first president of Kazakhstan Nursultan Nazarbayev (2020), stated that during his 29-year-long presidency, his external policy has been about establishing 'equal partnership' with all the states in the world.

Furthermore, the foreign policy concept for 2020-2030 underscores the importance of a 'multi-vector' approach to foreign affairs (CA, 2020d, p.1). This term, which has come to characterise Kazakh foreign policy, was introduced by Kazakhstan's then-foreign minister and current president, Tokayev (Cornell and Starr, 2019, p.25). The essence of multivectorism lies in fostering 'friendly, equal, and mutually beneficial relations with all states, interstate associations, and international organisations', including the EU, China, Russia, and the US (CA, 2020d, p.1). Moreover, 'multivectorism' is centred on unequivocally affirming and safeguarding state sovereignty to prevent dependency on any of the Great Powers, including the EU, thus striving to maintain independence and avoid becoming a client state (Vanderhill, Joireman and Tulepbayeva, 2020, p.980). Therefore, by adopting a multi-vector approach, Kazakhstan seeks to maintain independence while engaging with various global actors on multiple fronts (Collins and Bekenova, 2017). However, while scholars and Kazakhstani elites have commonly characterised Kazakh foreign policy as multi-vector (Kembayev, 2016; Nurgaliyeva, 2016; Patalakh, 2018b; Vanderhill, Joireman and Tulepbayeva, 2020), its significance in Kazakh-EU relations should not be overstated.

Multi-vector foreign policy is about maintaining independence and identity by strategically forming friendly relations with powerful countries that can influence a given country (Ambrosio

and Lange, 2014; Nurgaliyeva, 2016; Patalakh, 2018a). Strategic engagement, the overarching approach of multi-vector actors, can be categorised into balancing or bandwagoning (Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva, 2020). The former refers to smaller states cooperating with other states to decrease the hegemon's power (Tan, 2020). In contrast, the latter is about aligning with the powerful state (Schweller, 1994). In Kazakhstan's context, scholars such as Tjia (2022) contend that multivectorism has materialised in both balancing against and bandwagoning with various powers, including China, Russia, and the US. According to Tjia (2022), these strategies aim to minimise losses, maximise gains, and preserve Kazakhstan's identity and autonomy. However, Vanderhill, Joiremand and Tulepbayeva (2020) argue that Kazakhstan's use of multi-vector foreign policy goes beyond those two approaches and includes omni-enmeshment.

According to Vanderhill, Joiremand and Tulepbayeva (2020, p.780), 'Multivectorism, as a form of omni-enmeshment, involves several factors, including clear assertion and protection of state sovereignty to avoid becoming a client state of any of the Great Powers, but especially of Russia, given its historical role as a colonial power in the region'. They argue that Kazakhstan has consistently worked to establish connections with all the major powers instead of adopting a direct strategy of balancing or bandwagoning, which could limit the state's autonomy. This approach extends beyond mere hedging of bets to avoid aligning with specific alliances (Vanderhill, Joireman and Tulepbayeva, 2020). Instead, Kazakhstan strategically aims to involve the major powers in intricate exchanges and mutually beneficial relationships with the region by creating regional institutions such as the EAU and SCO and pursuing multilateral strategies (Vanderhill, Joireman and Tulepbayeva, 2020).

There are grounds for doubting the utility of Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, especially as a geopolitical tool, in its relations with the EU. First, multi-vector foreign policy necessitates the presence of great powers or those that can at least balance the influence of Great powers (Vanderhill, Joireman and Tulepbayeva, 2020). Despite some of the EU officials' claims in this thesis that it can balance or act as an alternative power to Russia and China (Interviews 1, 9 and 10), there is no evidence to substantiate such claims. For example, nothing in Kazakh discourse delineates the EU as capable of acting as a bulwark or balancing against Russia or China in Central Asia (see Chapter 4 for a detailed analysis of how the Central Asian states perceive the EU). The Kazakh elite and the wider population generally do not perceive the EU in geopolitical terms. Instead, compared to China and Russia, the EU is perceived as a benevolent economic partner (Arynov, 2021, 2022a)

and valued for its technical knowledge that could modernise the Kazakh economy (Patalakh, 2018b).

Furthermore, the EU, through its policies, has not shown that it considers Kazakhstan or Central Asia a strategically important enough region (Melvin, 2008; Kavalski, 2007; Kavalski and Cho, 2018) to warrant substantial military actions (Patalakh, 2018a) or diplomatic mediation. Instead, the EU reiterates its non-geopolitical regional aims in Central Asia (Fawn, 2021). Lastly, it's important to note that the EU lacks a security framework like the CSTO or SCO, which could effectively counter potential aggression from external actors (Patalakh, 2018b). In contrast, Russia has demonstrated its capability as the sole actor capable of deploying military forces within Kazakh territory to prop up the regime, as evidenced by its intervention during the violent protests that occurred in January 2022 (Umarov and Gabuev, 2022). Consequently, the EU is considered a 'minor security actor' compared to Russia (Spaiser, 2015), which contrasts with the anticipated role it would play in safeguarding Kazakh sovereignty within the framework of multi-vector foreign policy.

Second, within the broader narrative of Kazakhstan's multi-vectorism, the role of the EU tends to be marginalised or dismissed in the literature (Ambrosio and Lange, 2014; Patalakh, 2018b). Scholars often emphasise the significance of managing relationships with Russia, China, and the US to safeguard Kazakhstan's sovereignty (Vanderhill, Joireman and Tulepbayeva, 2020; Tjia, 2022). More specifically, scholars have argued that multivectorism in Kazakhstan is mainly employed to counter Russia (Ambrosio and Lange, 2014; Jarosiewicz, 2016; Nurgaliyeva, 2016). There are grounds for such assertions. Ambrosio and Lange (2014) argue that due to historical ties, power dynamics, and ethnic factors, Russia is potentially the only country that could claim Kazakh territory compared to China or other countries in the region. Indeed, Russia, under Putin, has pushed 'the boundaries of Kazakhstani sovereignty' by questioning the existence of Kazakh statehood prior to the independence of the country (Vanderhill, Joireman and Tulepbayeva, 2020, p.981). Moreover, numerous studies have highlighted growing apprehensions among the Kazakh elite regarding the sovereignty of their nation, particularly in the wake of Russia's aggression in Ukraine in 2014 (Kuchins, Kourmanova and Backes, 2015). Some argue that these concerns have been exacerbated by Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 (Dumoulin, 2023).

In response to these challenges, scholars argue that the relationship between China and Kazakhstan serves as a 'potential hedge against Russian power and influence' rather than Kazakhstan's ties with the EU or other more distant entities (Ambrosio and Lange, 2015, p. 556). China's strategic interest

in securing hydrocarbon resources from Kazakhstan through land routes allows Kazakhstan to diversify its economy and thus reduce its dependency on the former colonial power (Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva, 2020). However, relying on China as a counterbalance to Russia poses its own challenges for Kazakhstan. Despite the economic benefits that Kazakhstan and other Central Asian nations enjoy from collaboration with China, they also share concerns with Russia regarding the potential political implications of China's expanding economic influence (Kembayev, 2020, p.210). This concern is evidenced by Kazakhstan's implementation of measures such as restricting Chinese land leases for agricultural investment and tightening visa procedures for Chinese travellers (Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva, 2020; Kembayev, 2020, p. 210).

Ironically, as Kazakhstan grapples with the need to counterbalance growing Chinese influence, it finds itself reinforcing its privileged relations with Moscow and actively contributing to the establishment of the Eurasian Economic Union (Kembayev, 2020). Consequently, multivectorism evolves into a strategic tool wherein Kazakhstan leverages its relationship with China to counterbalance Russia's influence while simultaneously using its ties with the former colonial power to offset China's growing influence (Kembayev, 2020). Kazakhstan's membership in SCO further underscores its diplomatic balancing act between Russia and China, ensuring it avoids picking between the two major powers (Vanderhill, Joireman, and Tulepbayeva, 2020).

Thirdly, echoing Patalakh's (2018b) argument, this thesis maintains that characterising Kazakhstan's relationship with the EU as a geopolitical expression of multi-vector foreign policy overlooks the core nature of Kazakh-EU relations, which centres around the economic development vision of the Kazakh elite. As discussed in Chapter 4, Kazakh elite discourse overwhelmingly prioritises economic partnership with the EU over other aspects of their relations. Moreover, as Kembayev (2016, p.202) and EU officials (Interviews 1,4 and 9) have emphasised, Kazakhstan's failure to support democracy and human rights remains the primary obstacle to advancing Brussels-Astana relations. This starkly contrasts with Kazakhstan's purported pursuit of closer ties with the Union as a possible bulwark against Russia. This, in turn, lends support to arguments questioning whether the EU is indeed a participant in Kazakhstan's balancing act vis-a-vis China and Russia.

The second trait frequently underscored by the Kazakh elite when constructing a partnership with the EU is mutual trust. The elite discourse states that Kazakhstan has 'built strong relations with the European Union based on trust' (Tileuberdi, 2022). Kazakh officials emphasise that Kazakhstan,

as a ‘trusted partner’ (Kuspan, 2020b, 2020c), has proven itself to be ‘exceptionally reliable’ for the EU when cooperating on various issues (Tokyaev, 2021). At the same time, the EU is also seen as a ‘reliable’ partner of Kazakhstan by the country’s officials (Kuspan, 2019). The literature on Kazakh elite perceptions also confirms that compared with China and Russia, the EU enjoys greater trust from the country's officials (Arynov, 2021).

According to the Kazakh official discourse, the trust between the EU and Kazakhstan finds expression in various aspects of their relationship. To begin with, the signing of the EPCA, considered 'the first one of its kind in the region' (Kuspan, 2020b), is viewed as a significant event that has elevated the partnership between the EU and Kazakhstan to a whole new level (Vasssilenko, 2017; Tokayev, 2021; Tleuberdi, 2021). This achievement was made possible due to the 'trustful relations' established between the two actors (Kuspan, 2020d). Additionally, according to Kazakh officials, the expression of trust between the EU and Kazakhstan is evident in their ability to foster a 'reliable partnership in ensuring global and regional security, dynamic trade cooperation, as well as strong political ties’ (Tileuberdi, 2022). In sum, trust has played an essential role in deepening and strengthening the partnership between the EU and Kazakhstan with bilateral and global matters.

Third, for relations to be a partnership, they must be broad and inclusive of various actors (Interview 6). Specifically, partnerships should go ‘well beyond a purely commercial bond’ (Tokayev, 2021). While trade and energy cooperation is often mentioned by the Kazakh elite when referring to relations with the EU (Ospanova, Sadri and Yelmurzayeva, 2017), the official discourse is keen to stress that economic relations are not ‘the sole foundation of Kazakh-European relations’ (Kuspan, 2020c). In recent years, the relations ‘have quickly expanded to include collaboration across a whole range of societal and political issues’ such as green technology, education and improving gender equality around politics (Tileuberdi, 2020).

Regarding inclusivity, partnerships should involve various state and non-state actors working together (Interview 6). Currently, Kazakhstan works not ‘only with European Commissions we also work with European Council, with European Parliament. So, it is very like a broad approach, so that is why we are allowed to use this word partnership’ (Interview 6). Moreover, ‘as a country, we are not limiting ourselves to meeting officials. We also meet NGOs not only in Brussels but also online on a regular basis’ (Bektaev, 2021). Inclusivity in the form of collaboration between scholars, scientists, artists and tourists is seen as a net positive benefit that strengthens relations between the

two partners (Tursunov, 2020; Tokayev, 2021; Interview 6). Therefore, Kazakhstan liberalized the visa regime to encourage more 'people-to-people contact' to diversify the partnership between the EU and Kazakhstan (Interview 6).

However, there is merit to inclusivity concerning non-state actors. Literature on civil society asserts that such organisations face pressure and persecution by the Central Asian states, including Kazakhstan (Ziegler, 2016; Fawn, 2021, p.14). The persecution of civil society actors was the main ground for the EP resolution on Kazakhstan passed in 2021. In addition, Central Asian countries have created parallel versions of civil societies loyal to the state authorities and promote conservative values approved by the officials in the countries (Ziegler, 2016). This partly stems from how the Kazakh elites perceive 'Western style' non-state independent organisations as threatening regime security (Ziegler, 2016). In other words, there are conceptual gaps regarding non-state actors between the EU and Kazakhstan, and this impacts what kind of actors should be included in partnerships (this will be addressed in more detail later in this chapter).

While equality, mutual trust and inclusivity are abstract concepts, the discourse of the Kazakh elites features tangible structures in the form of legal basis and institutionalized dialogues as being integral to the partnership with the EU. In general, the literature highlights that the presence of contractual relations and institutionalised frameworks display the certainty necessary for establishing enhanced long-term partnerships between involved parties (Bosse, 2010). A similar view is expressed by the former Kazakh ambassador Kuspan (2020a), who remarked that the EPCA ‘marks the beginning of a brand-new stage of Kazakh-European relations and pro-opportunities for building up full-scale cooperation in the long term’. As well as that, as per the Kazakh discourse, legal basis and institutionalised dialogues offer a support system that concretises the abstract features of a partnership. These structures provide a scaffold for supporting trust, equality and inclusivity between partners.

The legal basis of relations between Kazakhstan and the EU demystifies the nature of relations for both sides by giving it an official status (Interview 6). The ‘notion of partnership’ is firmly embedded in the language of EPCA (Interview 6). The EPCA stipulates that the agreement ‘establishes an enhanced partnership and cooperation’ between the EU and Kazakhstan (CA, 2016c, p.8). Its implementation will be based on ‘dialogue, mutual trust and respect, equal partnership, and mutual benefit’ (CA, 2016, p.8). From the language of the EPCA, one can see that ‘both Kazakhstan and the EU see it as a partnership’ (Interview 6).

As well as that, legal documents such as the EPCA offer a 'positive framework' (Tileuberdi, 2020) and a 'format for expanded cooperation' (Vassilenko, 2017) between the EU and Kazakhstan that includes so many sectors. In particular, the EPCA contains a specific format for dialogues in politicized areas such as human rights that makes it clear how both actors should conduct themselves in the partnership. In 2021, Kazakh human rights ombudsman Azimova (2021) and Kuspan (2021) criticised their European counterparts for conducting dialogues with Kazakh political exiles without including Kazakh officials when discussing issues pertinent to Kazakhstan. Azimova (2021) stated that dialogues should be carried out as stipulated by the EPCA with 'mechanisms of consultation, mediation, including in a trilateral format: EU – Republic of Kazakhstan – civil society, including on participation in state policy development. We are not talking about narrow consultations or exchanges of views with persons in conflict with the law' (Azimova, 2021).

However, more importantly, the legal basis equalizes relations between the EU and Kazakhstan (Interview 6; Tursunov, 2020). The EPCA is 'a big demonstration that it is two-way cooperation' because, as a process, it was an exercise in joint ownership (Interview 6). The EPCA took eight rounds of negotiations from 2011 to 2014 between the officials from Kazakhstan and the EU (Tursunov, 2020). On the EU side, the European External Action Service was appointed as the head coordinator for the negotiations (Tursunov, 2020). However, officials from various Directorate - Generals of the Commission and other institutions of the EU were also involved in the process (Tursunov, 2020). On the Kazakh side, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs coordinated the country's positions (Tursunov, 2020; interview 6). Consequently, as a product, the EPCA became an agreement that incorporated both partners' visions, agendas, interests and preferences (Interview 6).

Another essential structure for a partnership is the presence of institutionalized dialogues between partners. Table 6.4 below contains the types of dialogues between the EU and Kazakhstan (EEAS, 2022b):

Table 6.4. Institutionalized Dialogues between Kazakhstan and the EU

Name	*Format*	*Level*
Cooperation Council	Bilateral	Foreign Ministers
Cooperation Committee	Bilateral	Deputy Foreign Minister
Human rights Dialogue	Bilateral	Minister or Deputy Minister
Customs Sub-Committee	Bilateral	Technical level
Inter-parliamentary dialogue	Bilateral	Chair or Vice Chair
Subcommittee on Energy, Transport, Environment and Climate Change	Bilateral	Technical level
Justice and Home Affairs Sub-Committee	Bilateral	Technical level
The EU-Central Asia Ministerial	Regional	Foreign Ministers

(Source: EEAS, 2022a, 2022b)

In general, the sentiment in this passage captures the views of Kazakh officials regarding the significance of the dialogues in partnerships (Bektaev, 2021): 'we believe in constructive dialogue, in transparency, and once you have that, you have a sound basis for establishing good relations with the global society'. Regarding the EU and Kazakhstan relations, as per the Kazakh discourse, regular and effective high-level dialogue played a vital role in building a durable foundation for developing a two-way partnership (Tursunov, 2020). According to the Kazakh elites, in relations with the EU, the role of dialogues is threefold. First, institutionalized dialogues help maintain equality between the EU and Kazakhstan (Interview 6). This is because institutionalized dialogues allow for the sides to update each other on salient matters such as 'our agenda, just what is important for us, what are our great concerns so just to present our vision' of the future in a consistent manner (Interview 6). As can be seen in Table 6.4, several dialogue structures bring together officials from the EU and Kazakhstan. Depending on the importance of the dialogue, they are attended by high, mid and technical-level officials to represent the interests of their respective countries. The way these institutionalized dialogues operate is 'all about diplomacy' (Interview 6). They are run on a joint basis whereby it is co-chaired or chaired alternatively by the officials from the EU and Kazakhstan (Interviews 1, 6 and 9). The agendas are agreed upon in advance through back-and-forth communication between the delegated coordinators of the EU and Kazakhstan (Interviews 1 and 6). The only exception is the regional dialogue format of the EU-Central Asian Ministerial, as the EU is asked to finalize the agendas for the meeting (Interview 1). This is because the host country from Central Asia tries not to step on the toes of the other states because these countries do not

share grounds on some issues (Interview 1). For example, countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, being members of the EAEU, might not feel comfortable openly discussing issues concerning Russia (Interview 1 and 9). Thus, Central Asian elites believe it is better if the EU finalizes common agendas for regional dialogues. However, this arrangement is preferred by the CAS. Therefore, it is not evidence of the EU imposing its will on the partner states.

Second, institutionalized dialogues are seen as an important instrument for addressing differences between partners. The Kazakh official in Brussels stated that 'in any situation, in any relations, there can be serious challenges' and that 'we try to avoid these pitfalls' with the help of dialogues (Interview 6). When the European Parliament resolution on Kazakhstan was published in 2021, the response by the Kazakh elite was criticizing the absence of dialogue before the release of the resolution (Azimova, 2021): 'we must honestly admit that before the adoption of this document, there was no comprehensive dialogue at the decision-making level'. This is given the fact that 'there is an attitude of the state authorities for dialogue' and such dialogues are 'already part of institutionalized structures both under regional EU-Central Asia interaction and bilateral EU-Kazakhstan cooperation under the EPCA' (Azimova, 2021). In this case, the Kazakh elite remarked that there should have been a dialogue between sides to address the concerns raised by the European Parliament before releasing such a one-sided document (Azimova, 2021; Bektaev, 2021). Third, institutionalized dialogue meetings 'show us that the EU is a very good listener' and 'it is a good partner' who wants to understand what is 'needed and try to come up with solutions' (Interview 6). In other words, institutionalized dialogues build trust because it shows that the partner, in this case, the EU, is committed to finding common solutions with the other. The next section looks at the basis of partnership.

6.3. Basis of partnership

The Kazakh official discourse consistently highlights the role of joint interest as the basis of partnership (Tileuberdi, 2021; Tokayev, 2021; interview 6). This is because 'when you have a common agenda, you can communicate and collaborate proactively on different subjects' (Interview 6). The overall discourse of the Kazakh elites in relations with the EU emphasises that the interest of their country is well represented (Interviews 6 and 15). The EU is 'listening to Kazakhstan' and 'trying to accommodate our needs and interests because as the EU side understands that if they would ignore Kazakhstan's needs', the country would not be building a partnership

with the Union (Interview 6). This is also true when cooperating with the EU on a regional basis (Interview 15). The EU's 2019 Strategy Paper contains many regional issues of particular interest to Kazakhstan and the entire region (Interview 15).

The number one common interest and mutually beneficial area of cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan, often highlighted by Kazakh officials, is trade and economy (Vassielnko, 2017; Kuspan, 2019, 2020b; Tileuberdi, 2020; Tokayev, 2021). This is because 'Europe remains our main economic partner' as 'there are now over 4,000 companies with European participation and 2,000 joint ventures operating in Kazakhstan' (Tileuberdi, 2020). This is consistent with the existing literature. Ospanova, Sadri and Yelmurzaeva (2017) found that the official Kazakh mass media highlighted trade and the economy's role when discussing the relations with the EU more than any other sector. Trade relations between the partners benefit the Kazakh economy more than the EU. Kazakhstan is the EU's 33rd biggest trade partner in the world, representing 0.7% of the EU's overall trade in goods worldwide (EEAS, 2022b) . Meanwhile, the EU is Kazakhstan's biggest trade partner. Nevertheless, Kazakh official discourse emphasises that over 70 EU companies enjoy 'a favourable tax, visa, and employment regime' made available by Kazakhstan (Tokayev, 2021). Thus, it is also beneficial for the EU.

Closely related to trade, energy cooperation and transport connectivity are important areas of mutual interest. According to Kuspan (2020c), the Kazakh energy sector has become 'one of the safest sources of oil and gas for the bloc'. As a result, gas and oil from Kazakhstan are 'helping meet Europe's energy security challenge' (Tileuberdi, 2020). Meanwhile, the connection of Central Asian countries to the trade routes of the wider world is advantageous to both the EU and the region itself (Vassilenko, 2017). In particular, 'modern transport links across our country are enhancing trade with China' for both actors (Tileuberdi, 2020). Cooperation around transport seems to be an area Kazakhstan wishes to upgrade relations even further by actively realizing new projects with the EU (Kazykhan, 2021). However, compared to China, the literature underscores the poor performance of the EU in this regard, as was mentioned in the earlier section of the chapter (Peyrouse, 2017; Kassenova, 2019).

The prioritisation of the economy over other aspects of EU relations is strongly influenced by the elite's policies and dedication to economic development before politics (Collins and Bekenova, 2017; Patalakh, 2018a, 2018b; Karabayeva, 2019). While Uzbekistan under President Mirziyoyev is following the Kazakh path of economic development by opening up to the world, the distinguishing

feature of Nazarbayev's presidency is that he was one of the first in Central Asia to show dedication to the idea of economic modernization (Ambrosio and Lange, 2014). Nazarbayev's speeches consistently emphasise the importance of a competitive and open market economy (Nazarbayev, 2012; Patalakh, 2018a) as the 'the foundation of a flourishing and dynamically developing society' (Nazarbayev, 2006). The Kazakh government's association with specific economic targets further exemplifies their commitment to prioritizing economic development over democratic ambition (Collins and Bekenova, 2017b, p.8). Additionally, economic reforms in Kazakhstan serve a dual purpose: to advance national development and as a crucial element in enhancing and legitimizing the Kazakhstani elite (Jarosiewicz, 2016). This dual role results from the social contract between the regime and society, wherein peace, stability, and relatively high income are provided in return for acceptance of the prevailing authoritarian rule (Jarosiewicz, 2016).

Increasingly, the environmental cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan is also highlighted by the officials of Kazakhstan as an area of mutual interest. According to former Kazakh ambassador to the EU Aigul Kuspan (2020b), 'the greatest overlap' between her 'country's reform efforts and current major EU policies is the ambition to create a future-proof, green economy – mirrored in the EU's far-reaching Green Deal', launched by Commissioner von der Leyen in 2019 (Tamma, Schaart and Gurzu, 2019). Kazakhstan 'took a very robust stance to come up to carbon neutrality by the middle of the century'; thus, 'we strongly believe that the EU Green Deal initiative is a great opportunity to join our efforts (Kazykhan, 2021). And for Kazakhstan, the EU offers 'great expertise and great potential' for helping the country to achieve its ambitious goals (Kazykhan, 2021).

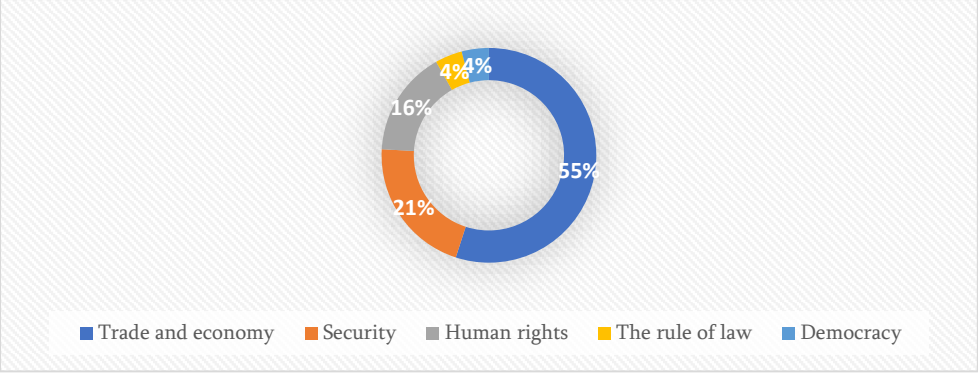
As of 2023, Kazakhstan ranked 62 out of the 192 UN member states in the Sustainable Development Goal Index, surpassing all other Central Asian countries (Sachs, Lafortune and Fuller, 2023). On the other hand, Uzbekistan secured the 69th position (Sachs, Lafortune and Fuller, 2023). Nonetheless, considering Kazakhstan's economy's dependency on resources and growing relations with China and even the EU, where economic ties are primarily centered around oil, achieving sustainable development goals becomes challenging for the country.

While the above sectors represent less politicized areas, the Kazakh elite thinks that value-based cooperation around human rights and democracy is also of mutual interest for Kazakhstan and the EU and, therefore, not imposed (Kuspan, 2020b; Tileuberdi, 2020; interview 6;). The officials often remark that the democratic reforms are something the Kazakh government are willingly doing (Kuspan 2020b; Interview 6; Baymuhkan 2021; Azimova 2021). This is because 'foreign policy

succeeds only when internal policy is successful' (Baymukhan, 2021).

From the point of partnership theory, a value-based corporation's voluntary aspect is essential but insufficient. There are other aspects of value-based cooperation that partners need to grapple with. Firstly, the role of values in the partnership needs to be clearly defined, and they need to be consistent. Although the official discourse of the EPCA emphasises that the shared value of human rights and democracy serves as a fundamental basis for the partnership between these actors, the discourse among the Kazakh elites may not necessarily align with this sentiment. A careful analysis of the Kazakh elite's reasoning suggests that incorporating values in the partnership does not necessarily signify that values are indispensable for establishing or longevity of genuine partnerships. A Kazakh official in Brussels stated that values are interconnected with some interests therefore, they should be included in the partnership with the EU (Interview 6). For example, security, a secure region is a value and an interest simultaneously (Interview 6). Broader regional security, including the peace process in Afghanistan as well as food and energy security across the globe, was pointed out as a shared value and interest between the EU and Central Asian states (Interview 6). If we were to unpack this rationale, values are there simply because they are related to some interests but not because they can provide mutual ground for fostering or sustaining long-term partnerships. Moreover, when I quantified the word frequencies in Kazakh official discourse, as shown in Figure 6.3, values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law were mentioned significantly less than the other areas such as trade, economy, and security.

Figure 6.3. The word frequency in Kazakh discourse according to the issue area



(Source: Own calculation of word frequencies of Kazakh discourse)

As per pie chart 6.3 above, the Kazakh discourse contained 55% emphasis on trade with the EU versus only 16% on human rights, 4% on the rule of law and 4% on democracy. In other words, value-based cooperation is not high on the agenda when it comes to the partnership with the EU.

Therefore, one can argue that value-based cooperation is not integral to the relations between Kazakhstan and the EU.

Secondly, value-based cooperation requires the involved parties to address the mechanisms responsible for upholding those values. These mechanisms can involve both positive and negative conditionalities and critical resolutions, which were extensively discussed in Chapter 5. Although Kazakhstan does not benefit from bilateral aid, reducing the leverage of negative conditionalities such as aid sanctions, the EU can still suspend parts of the EPCA, therefore cooperation with Kazakhstan if there are severe human rights violations (Interview 9). On the one hand, the Kazakh elite knowingly agreed to the principles and rules outlined in the EPCA, which took several years of negotiations between the two parties (Tursunov, 2020; interview 6). The EPCA is fundamentally based on the premise that both parties are legally obligated to uphold the specified values in the agreement.

However, on the other hand, the utilization of these mechanisms by the EU towards Kazakhstan appears to cause friction and disagreement between the partners. In the case of Kazakh-EU relations, negative conditionalities such as aid or economic sanctions have not been used thus far, even when the Kazakh police killed 16 unarmed protestors in the Zhanaozen region (Ziegler, 2016). The Kazakh official thinks that, in general, conditionalities in partnerships should be avoided because ‘we see more possibilities in our cooperation’ and that through effective dialogue, the partners can flesh out discrepancies that lead to the use of such mechanisms (Interview 6). There are already several institutionalized dialogues that can help us cooperate on various issues, and Kazakhstan is actively trying to approach the EU through them to communicate ‘our great concerns’ (Interview 6).

In contrast, critical resolutions have been passed, and it has only been a one-way process exercised by the EU without reciprocation from Kazakhstan. While theoretically, there is no impediment preventing Kazakh authorities from passing similar resolutions against the EU, the Kazakh regime has thus far not done so, as the elites hold a different stance on such mechanisms in partnerships compared to the EU officials. Particularly regarding critical resolutions, the disapproval from the Kazakh elite is evident and pronounced. They perceive such resolutions as patronizing 'moral teachings' and consider them to be ineffective tools (Azimova, 2021) that hinder the promotion of equality and trust between partners (Kuspan, 2021).

Kazakh officials' viewpoints regarding mechanisms underpinning value-based cooperation with the EU diverge from those of Uzbek officials, as the latter appears to be more receptive to such mechanisms. The difference can be attributed to two main factors. First, it relates to how Kazakh officials perceive the EU and their own country in the context of their interactions. Unlike the Uzbek elite, Kazakh high-level officials primarily view the EU as an economic partner (Kuspan, 2019; 2020c; Tileuberdi, 2020; Baymukhan, 2021; Tokayev, 2021; Kazykhan, 2021). They emphasise economic and trade relations and security cooperation with the EU rather than focusing on developmental aspects of the partnership (Interview 1; Baymukhan, 2021). In contrast to their Uzbek counterparts, Kazakh elites appear to downplay the significance of the EU's assistance in their partnership. For example, when discussing areas of development cooperation, such as education, which benefit from unilateral regional EU funding, Kazakh elites are quick to emphasise the country's self-sufficiency and reject the need for 'EU money' (Baymukhan, 2021). This finding is consistent with previous studies, such as Arynov (2021), which suggest that the intermediate elites of Kazakhstan also highly value the EU's economic influence.

However, it does not mean that Kazakh elites completely disregard developmental cooperation with the EU. They believe the EU can help Kazakhstan tackle challenges like climate change and sustainable development (Kazykhan, 2021). Nonetheless, Kazakh officials also emphasise their contributions to the EU's development (Interview 6), positioning themselves as a reliable and trusted partner on regional and global security (Tileuberdi, 2022), addressing the EU's energy security challenge (Kuspan, 2020c; Tileuberdi, 2020), creating favourable trade conditions for European companies (Tokayev, 2021), and improving EU-China trade through transport links (Tileuberdi, 2020). This highlights a reciprocal relationship where both the EU and Kazakhstan contribute to each other's development. By viewing the EU primarily as an economic partner and presenting themselves as a development partner for the EU, Kazakh officials establish a relationship based on equal status. Consequently, they do not see the EU as an authority that can impose instructions or penalties on Kazakhstan for failing to meet certain obligations related to democratic and human rights reforms.

The second factor contributing to the difference in viewpoints is the respective economic trajectories of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. While both countries share an interest in modernizing their economies through collaboration with the EU, Kazakhstan has made remarkable strides in this endeavour. As early as 1997, Kazakhstan's elite prioritised economic modernization and global

integration (Ambrosio and Lange, 2014), acknowledging the EU's instrumental role in facilitating this progress (Patalakh, 2018a). The EU's expertise was pivotal in Kazakhstan's successful accession to the WTO in 2015 (Russell, 2019b), further consolidating its position as an economically integrated nation. Conversely, Uzbekistan is still collaborating with the EU to achieve comparable economic modernisation goals. Moreover, Kazakhstan's economy significantly outpaces Uzbekistan's development and advancement, evident from superior economic indicators and global competitiveness rankings. Table 6.5 below illustrates this disparity:

Table 6.5. A comparative look at Kazakh and Uzbek economies

Indicators	*Kazakhstan 2022*	*Uzbekistan 2022*
Gross Domestic Product (GDP)	$220.62 billion USD	$80.39 billion USD
GDP per Capita	$11,243.7 USD	$2,255.2 USD
Economic Freedom Index	Ranked 71st out of 176 economies	Ranked 109th out of 176 economies

(Modified from source: The World Bank, 2023)

As can be seen from the table above, the figures underscore the considerable discrepancy in economic development between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, which undoubtedly influences their respective perspectives on EU cooperation. While Kazakhstan has achieved significant economic progress, Uzbekistan is still realizing its modernization goals. This economic advantage implies that Kazakhstan is less reliant on the European Union to achieve its economic objectives of modernization and integration into the global economy as much as Uzbekistan. Consequently, Kazakhstan may not require the EU's expertise and experience to the same extent, which could explain its ability to assert itself and resist the EU's criticisms regarding its human rights record.

Finally, and more importantly, Kazakhstan and the EU need to address issues that stem from gaps in perceptions regarding the concepts underpinning value-based cooperation between the regions. In practice, this would entail mutual learning about one another through people-to-people contact, mobility and cultural cooperation. The next section will address this in detail.

6.4. Mutual learning

The views and perceptions of Central Asians are slowly being captured through academic literature and surveys of international organisations such as the Central Asian Barometer and EBDR. Unsurprisingly, Central Asian governments do very little to understand the needs and perceptions of their populace. However, emerging literature looks at the perceptions of the Kazakh elites

regarding the EU and its regional policies as possible factors that impact the relations. There is an agreement among scholars that overall, the EU is perceived positively by the elite compared to other significant actors such as Russia and China (Ospanova, Sadri and Yelmurzayeva, 2017; Bekenova and Collins, 2019; Arynov, 2018, 2022b). However, the positive image of the EU shifts to negative when concerned with the EU's normative agenda among the region's elite (Arynov, 2021).

According to Arynov (2022b), one of the reasons behind such a shift is that there are significant conceptual gaps between the Kazakh officials and the EU regarding specific values that form a part of the partnership. Arynov (2022b) found that most Kazakh elites who took part in his study expressed that democracy, human rights, and cultural values in the form of same-sex relations and family structure associated with the EU or the West were considered unsuitable for Kazakh society. Specifically, democracy promoted by the EU countries is perceived as a destabilizing force, as in the case of Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan (Arynov, 2022b). In addition, the elites expressed that *European democracy* promoted individual rights above anything else. According to them, this was in stark contrast to Kazakh society, which prioritized collective interests over individual rights to ensure order and stability in the society. As a result, the officials also argued that the Kazakh state was developing its own model of democracy that suits the country and rejected EU efforts to promote a universal version of these concepts (Arynov, 2022b). In the case of Kazakhstan, such perceptions were not limited to the Kazakh officials but also extended to other segments of society, such as the educated young students at the universities (Arynov, 2022a). He noted a similar train of perception in these groups who questioned the suitability and the universality of values promoted by the EU in the region.

Arynov's findings were previously echoed by Omelicheva (2015), who argued that there is a stark difference in the concept of democracy between the EU/US and Central Asian ruling regimes and populations. According to her, 'the ideas, beliefs, and practices promoted by the United States and the EU' regarding democracy promotion in Central Asia 'lack cultural compatibility, salience, consistency, and credibility for Central Asians' (Omelicheva, 2015, p.134). She states that the ruling regimes of Central Asia promote their model of democracy that is compatible with the cultures of their respective countries while rejecting the one promoted by the EU and other Western actors. In Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, 'A strong state personified by a strong leader' has become the core of the democratic model promoted by the governments (Omelicheva, 2015, p.136). The state authorities in countries such as Kazakhstan emphasise that their model is more suitable for the

region because it has a high potential for instability while portraying Western democracy as dangerous for Central Asia (Omelicheva, 2015). The study also found that the ideas of democracy promoted by the governments of Central Asia resonated with the populations of the region. This was especially so in the case of Kazakhstan, where most of the survey and focus group respondents rejected the universal concepts of democracy and supported the model promoted by their respective governments with a strong leader as the head of the nation (Omelicheva, 2015).

The gaps in perceptions between the EU and Central Asian countries go beyond the broad concepts of democracy. Arynov (2022b) found that the Kazakh elite considered the role of NGOs as destructive and destabilizing and that democracy should be promoted through state authorities. Similarly, Ziegler (2016) argued that the views and approaches of the Central Asian ruling regimes and the Western countries regarding civil society were more opposing than different. According to him, the Western views of civil society are based on the contestational nature of these actors, whose important function is to reduce and restrain the authoritarian qualities of societies (Ziegler, 2016). Meanwhile, the regimes of the CAS think that civil society should be working with the government while being subordinate to it (Ziegler, 2016). Therefore, the 'contestational' characteristics of non-state organisations prompted by the West are viewed as damaging to the stability of the region (Ziegler, 2016, p.555). The disparity in perceptions regarding civil society might explain why its inclusion in the partnership is considered significant in EU official discourse but not in the Kazakh discourse. The differing perspectives of the two sides regarding the role and importance of civil society contribute to this divergence in perception.

While acknowledging the significance of Arynov and Omelicheva's findings, mentioning a few important critical caveats is essential. Firstly, on the one hand, Arynov's (2018) research uncovered that the European model of democracy is viewed at odds with the Kazakh social and political culture. On the other hand, he also found the prevalence of perspective among Kazakh elites who, despite raising doubts about the European democratic model, acknowledged the universal nature of fundamental principles that underpin democratic and human rights norms. Literature has long engaged in the topic of the universal and relative conception of democracy. Sen (1999) argues that the concept of democracy is a universal value and refutes the notion of cultural idiosyncrasies or presumed predispositions imposed by our historical background. According to her, democratic values can be categorized into three aspects. Firstly, human life has an inherent significance, as everyone desires freedom and the ability to exercise their civil and political rights. Secondly,

democracy is instrumental in allowing people to voice their concerns and assert their political demands. Thirdly, it serves a constructive function in shaping values, as democratic practices enable citizens to learn from one another and assist society in determining its values and priorities. Sen (1999) argues that these merits are not limited to specific regions and that cultural arguments should not undermine or restrict the universal value of democracy.

One does not need to go far to find support for Sen's argument that culture or historical context is not a constraint to the idea that democratic value is a universal one. For example, Kyrgyzstan in Central Asia, despite its social and political culture rooted in the socialist system for nearly 70 years, has successfully, albeit not fully, managed to establish a semi-democratic government in the past. Melvin (2007, p.2) stated that in Kyrgyzstan, conservative values and social structures, such as the prevalence of clan-based alliances, did not impede the emergence of 'political pluralism and a vibrant civil society' but rather the interests of the ruling elite.

Likewise, Beetham (2009, p.294) contends that democracy's universality stems from its core principles, which revolve around 'popular control over government' and political equality, demanding a connection with fundamental elements of political decision-making and human nature. These aspects encompass both the capacities and limitations inherent in political processes and human behaviour. Importantly, these factors are universal in scope and extend beyond national borders. As a result, if a democratic form of government is deemed appropriate in one place, it logically follows that it should be deemed appropriate everywhere.

Mattes and Bratton (2007) also conducted a study challenging the idea that cultural values or social structures solely determine attitudes toward democracy. They argued that Africans form their attitudes towards democracy based on their understanding of its nature and functioning, indicating that such attitudes are shaped by knowledge and learning rather than predetermined by cultural or social factors. Rather than solely relying on cultural values or social positions, Africans actively learn about democracy and incorporate that knowledge into their political attitudes and beliefs.

There are also competing arguments against the universality of democracy. In their work, Schmitter and Karl propose that democracy is a multifaceted concept capable of encompassing various meanings and institutional arrangements (as cited in Kurki, 2010). They further argue that the specific interpretation of democracy depends on the prevailing socioeconomic conditions and the state's practices. In other words, the understanding and implementation of democracy can vary

based on the social, economic, and political context in which it is situated. Moreover, numerous surveys provide empirical evidence that people worldwide understand the meaning of democracy differently (Osterberg-Kaufmann, Stark and Mohamad-Klotzbach, 2020). Various factors impact these understandings. For example, according to Zhang and Meng (2018), cultural and political influences have substantially shaped Chinese elites' perceptions and interpretations of democracy in the Chinese context. Chinese officials primarily comprehend democracy through the lens of the Confucian tradition of 'minben', which emphasises the responsibility of officials to listen to the people and enact benevolent policies on their behalf (Zhang and Meng, 2018, p.644).

Secondly, it is crucial to critically assess the authenticity and legitimacy of the Kazakh regime's purported democratic model, as revealed by Omelicheva's findings. Some authors argue that non-democratic regimes intentionally exaggerate their adherence to democratic principles to legitimize their rule in the eyes of the public (Brunkert, 2022). This approach often disregards the fundamental principles and processes that are the foundation of democracy (Brunkert, 2022, p.2). A notable example of this phenomenon can be observed in China, where the Chinese Communist Party government actively promotes its own version of democracy to conceal its authoritarian nature and protect itself from potential pressure for democratic reforms (Lu and Shi, 2015). In terms of Kazakhstan, Brunkert (2022, p.4) categorizes it as one of the countries that 'oversell' democracy, which essentially means that official claims of democratic rule in the country do not translate into practical implementation of democratic governance. The data from various sources support Brunkert's claim. To meet the objectives of political reforms, the Kazakh government developed a 'listening state' concept, which will work toward building a more transparent state that will 'embrace the growing culture of debate, opposition, and dialogue' (Tokayev, 2021). Recent legislative changes the Kazakh government passed include 'enhanced protections for women, prisoners, and against threats such as cybercrime and trafficking' (Tokayev, 2021). In addition, the 'very progressive' laws passed by the Kazakh state oversee peaceful assembly, legislation surrounding elections and the conduct of NGOs and civil society (Kazykhan, 2021).

Despite such declarations made by Kazakh elites above regarding human rights and democratic reforms, the practical execution of these principles is severely lacking. A noteworthy example is the issue of gender equality, with Kazakhstan ranking 62nd out of 146 countries in 2023 (World Economic Forum, 2023). While certain advancements have been made in areas such as enhancing women's participation in the economy, education, and access to equitable healthcare, there is still

a substantial gap in women's political involvement, as indicated by Kazakhstan's ranking of 103rd out of 146 countries (World Economic Forum, 2023). Meanwhile, in terms of other democracy indicators, Kazakhstan equally scores poorly. Table 6.6 below presents the overall figures about Kazakhstan's commitment to upholding human rights and democracy.

Table 6.6. Kazakhstan's democracy indicators

	2022	*2023*
Civil society (out of 7)	1.5	1.25
Democracy score (out of 7)	1.36	1.32
Civil liberties (out of 60)	18	- (not provided_
Political rights (out of 40)	5	- (not provided

Source: (Freedom House, 2023)

Table 6.6 shows that Kazakhstan's democracy score declined from 1.5 in 2022 to 1.25 in 2023. This decline can be attributed to the handling of the peaceful protest that escalated into violence in January 2022. The aftermath of the protests resulted in the imprisonment of hundreds of individuals, including some who had participated in peaceful protests (Freedom House, 2023). These events and the subsequent actions taken by the Kazakh regime have had a negative impact on the country's democracy score (Freedom House, 2023). Furthermore, the right to peaceful assembly, which falls under civil liberties, continues to be tightly regulated by the government of President Tokayev in Kazakhstan as restrictions are imposed on who can participate in protests and where such assemblies can be held (Freedom House, 2023). These limitations on the freedom of assembly demonstrate the ongoing control exerted by the government over this fundamental democratic right.

These discrepancies in rhetoric and practice around upholding human rights and democracy of the Kazakh regime are essential to note because they are bound to impact the mutual trust between Kazakhstan and the EU. Kazakhstan has taken upon itself obligations under international documents such as the UN human rights charter and OSCE Helsinki Final Act to uphold the democracy and human rights of its citizens. More relevant than that, the EPCA, which frames the bilateral relations between Kazakhstan, states that 'Respect for democratic principles and human rights as laid down in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, the OSCE Helsinki Final Act and the Charter of Paris for a New Europe, and other relevant international human rights instruments, and for the principle of the rule of law, underpins the internal and international policies of both

Parties and constitutes an essential element of this Agreement' (CA, 2016, p.10). Therefore, the agreements between the EU and Kazakhstan and international documents create an expectation for the EU that its Kazakh partners will honour their commitments. In fact, during interviews conducted for this project, EU officials frequently emphasised the importance of the Kazakh regime's commitment to these agreements as the foundation for a value-based partnership between the EU and Kazakhstan (Interview 9).

Thirdly, it is crucial to closely examine the legitimacy of the Kazakh model of democracy among the public. A sociological survey conducted by the Friedrich Elbert Foundation in 2016, focusing on Central Asian youth, revealed that the EU enjoyed a favourable image in the region, particularly in Kazakhstan (FES, 2016a). The younger generation preferred the EU's development path for their respective countries over that of China, the US, Iran, Turkey, and others. It is worth noting that the EU's development path is inherently connected to the values it upholds, such as democracy and human rights.

Furthermore, a series of protests that erupted on January 2, 2022, although initially triggered by rising fuel prices, quickly escalated into broader political demands across Kazakhstan. By January 4, citizens from different parts of the country were united in calling for dismantling the regime established by former President Nursultan Nazarbayev (Sorbello, 2022). They advocated for establishing a parliamentary republic as a new form of governance and sought to end the pervasive corruption that plagued the nation (Sorbello, 2022). These protests prominently featured the popular chant 'Shal ket!' (Old man, go away!), referencing Nazarbayev, who, despite stepping down as president, retained significant power as the head of the Security Council (Mellen, 2022). The demonstrations symbolized widespread discontent with Kazakhstan's oppressive authoritarian government and the prevailing corruption that resulted in the concentration of wealth among a select group of political and economic elites (Bilefsky, 2022).

Finally, the group of elites who form the basis of Arynov's (2021, 2022a, 2022b) research findings need closer scrutiny. The participants interviewed by Arynov are specific types of elites he defines as intermediate elites who occupy a middle ground between high-ranking elites and the broader public. They are not the primary decision-makers like the high-level elites, and this matters in the context of an authoritarian state such as Kazakhstan, nor are they representatives of the general public.

The critical discussions around Arynov and Omelicheva's findings indicate that gaps in perceptions around democracy and human rights are not set in stone. As the January protest shows, even in authoritarian nations such as Kazakhstan, the diffusion of norms propagated by the regime cannot be viewed as omnipotent. At the same time, one cannot entirely disregard these gaps in perceptions because they exist and have the potential to create obstacles on the ground regarding the legitimacy and ownership of joint policies by Kazakh officials (Omelicheva, 2015; Peyrouse, 2019). Thus, addressing such gaps first by acknowledging their existence and salience through discourse, to begin with, and then moving to practice is imperative if the partners wish to build a genuine partnership beyond empty rhetorical commitment to reforms. As a result, this should lead to learning about the other, which can promote mutual understanding between partners with different views on central concepts.

However, a careful look at the overarching documents between the EU and Kazakhstan reveals that they do not mention gaps in perceptions regarding concepts of democracy and human rights, therefore creating the illusion that they are shared values between the EU and Kazakhstan. Equally, while the public rhetoric of the Kazakh elite often remarks on the benefits of democracy and observing human rights in Kazakhstan (Omelicheva, 2016; Kluczewska and Dzhuraev, 2020), they rarely refer to conceptual gaps or the need to alleviate them for the sake of building a genuine partnership. Unfortunately, the issue of gaps in perceptions is further diluted because the Kazakh elites have an inconsistent view of them, and their relevance is seen as not important. On the other hand, a senior Kazakh official characterised Kazakhstan as 'the most westernized country in Central Asia' that shares a lot of values with the EU countries (Suleimenov, 2022). This makes the EU think that there might not be a need to gestate shared values.

On the other hand, Kuspan (2021) criticised her European counterparts for failing to consider Kazakhstan's 'understandings' and 'specifics' when being critical of the country. According to her, there is a 'Kazakh way' of doing things in the country that the European counterparts disregard (Kuspan, 2021). While this study does not aim to dispel what the Kazakh way means in its totality, a preliminary deduction can be made from the available data. It can be understood as balancing political reforms against the security and stability concerns of the state. In other words, 'while encouraging political debate and diversity', the government is 'rightly doing so at a sensible pace while taking no risks with the security of our citizens' (Tileuberdi, 2020). The concerns of the Kazakh officials are not entirely misplaced, as Evsikov and Shafir (2011) argued that sometimes

external powers such as the West would ignore the security concerns of Central Asian countries when promoting human rights values and governance-related reforms. However, from the perspective of the EU, this type of inconsistency on the side of the Kazakh officials means that it is not entirely clear where the shared values between the partners end and where the Kazakh values start.

Furthermore, Kazakh officials think that differences are just mere factors because they exist even within the EU member states (Interview 6). The official referred to the lack of agreement regarding the Istanbul Convention between Western European and Central Eastern European member states. The Istanbul Convention establishes legal guidelines to safeguard women from violence (Council of the European Union, 2023). It encompasses a wide array of actions, spanning from gathering data and promoting awareness to implementing laws that criminalize various forms of violence targeted at women (Council of the European Union, 2023). Additionally, it incorporates provisions for supporting victims and offering assistance services while addressing gender-based violence concerning asylum and migration matters (Council of the European Union, 2023). While this might be a legitimate argument, it hardly means the differences need not be addressed or resolved as they create obstacles for specifically Kazakh-EU relations.

The inconsistencies towards gaps in Kazakh discourse and failure to recognise their impact on relations means mutual learning has not yet taken its place in the partnership-building process. Kuspan (2021) remarked that 'for a genuine and constructive dialogue, its participants must know and understand each other well'. It needs to be noted here that, in general, the EU is seen as an actor who is reflexive to changes on the grounds, therefore, aware of the political shifts taking place in the country as it tries to work with both national and regional, state and non-state actors to be better informed about the country (Interviews 6 and 15; Kazykhan, 2021). Yet, according to Kuspan (2021), the EU and Members of the European Parliament MEPs still need to do more learning about Kazakhstan's political culture, and she urges her European colleagues 'to always keep in mind the special civilizational mission of Europe. One of its main features is the respect for other cultures by studying and understanding them' (Kuspan, 2021). She further claims that 'among the MEPs, there are about 100 people who have been to Kazakhstan, who know our people well and respect our values. But at the same time, most of the deputies have a very rough idea of our country' (Kuspan, 2021). Kuspan's comments indicate that learning about the other is somewhat present in the

Kazakh discourse. At the same time, it has not been incorporated into the areas that could foster this important partnership element.

Education, mobility and culture can present opportunities for partners to promote mutual understanding between the EU and Kazakhstan (Interviews 2, 12 and 18). However, these sectors are often seen as a supplement to cooperation rather than core joint interests. As a result, their potential for fostering mutual understanding is completely underemphasised. On occasions when mentioned, it remains inadequate. The argument here is that promoting and progressing mutual understanding between the EU and Central Asia needs to be a targeted approach. Currently, this is not the case in the Kazakh discourse. Overall, Kazakh authorities' attitude toward improving people-to-people contact and mobility is positive as it strengthens relations between the two actors (Tursunov, 2020; Tokayev, 2021). However, it is concentrated on education, which emphasises 'contacts between scientists, scholars, and students under various programs, such as Erasmus+' (Baymukhan, 2021). This is partly because Kazakh authorities are keen to learn from their European peers' expertise in science and technology (Baymukhan, 2021). However, mutual learning between partners must go beyond technical knowledge exchange among students and extend to other segments of society.

Regarding mobility, the Kazakh government's golden visa scheme, which allows European nationals to visit the country without acquiring visas before travelling, is a commendable policy action. As one official put it, currently people to people-to-people contact has not gone beyond the educational sphere and visa liberalisation should help somewhat address it (Interview 6). However, the idea that a couple of weeks-long travel to Kazakhstan by groups of tourists can effectively contribute to mutual learning is questionable. Cultural cooperation as a possible ground for fostering mutual ground is altogether absent. As such, at this stage, it is not obvious that the elite wishes to facilitate learning about the other through general people-to-people contact and specific areas of cooperation.

6.5. Conclusion

The main focus of this chapter was to analyze how the Kazakh elite constructed their partnership with the EU through discourse. According to the Kazakh elite, a partnership entails equality and mutual benefits, demonstrated by respect between partners and joint interests leading to mutual gains. They also emphasise the importance of broad cooperation areas and the inclusion of various

state actors. Concrete attributes like legal agreements and institutionalized dialogues are also mentioned to solidify the partnership status and facilitate effective communication.

In contrast to European counterparts and like Uzbek officials, Kazakh elites prioritize joint interests, particularly economic cooperation, as essential for partnership-building. Meanwhile, shared values are not considered a crucial factor in forming partnerships and mechanisms such as conditionality and critical resolutions, which anchor cooperation around shared values, are viewed as detrimental to the partnership with the EU.

The similarities between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in prioritizing economic development can be explained by their elite policies. Both countries highly value cooperation with the EU to benefit their economies. However, differences arise from their perceptions of the other and their economic trajectories. Kazakhstan views the EU primarily as an economic partner, while Uzbekistan sees the EU's actorness in terms of its contribution to developmental aspects of cooperation, allowing room for compromise. Furthermore, the countries' economic trajectories significantly impact how they construct their partnership. Kazakhstan boasts a much more developed economy compared to Uzbekistan. Consequently, Kazakhstan no longer relies on the EU for the modernization and diversification of its economy, granting it the leverage to demand a partnership on more equal terms. This economic advantage shapes the dynamics of their relationship and allows Kazakhstan to assert its position in the partnership with greater confidence and independence.

Finally, like Uzbek officials, Kazakh elites also overlook mutual learning in their partnership construction. This is unfortunate, as conceptual gaps exist between Kazakh and EU officials regarding democracy and human rights. Recognizing these gaps and their impact on the efficiency of relations should prompt both partners to learn about each other and foster mutual understanding. Unfortunately, the discourse of the Kazakh elite lacks a consistent approach to acknowledging these gaps or the need for mutual learning. Consequently, the current form of partnership construction is unlikely to lead to a genuine partnership between the actors in the near future.

Chapter 7 - The EU's construction of partnership

The cooperation between the EU and Central Asia encompasses political affairs, economic relations, education, and culture, with substantial financial and personnel resources devoted to implementing EU policies in the region. However, this endeavour presents formidable tests for the EU's approach to external relations, as engagements are complex, multi-level, and multidimensional (Melvin, 2008). The EU must balance its energy interests with promoting democracy and human rights to ensure long-term stability in the region while managing finite resources and facing competition from Russia and China.

In response to these challenges, the EU has recognised the limitations of traditional approaches that rely on strict conditionality and one-way rule transfer. Consequently, the EU has embraced the concept of partnership as a framework for its relations with Central Asia. As a concept, partnership promotes an inclusive and collaborative approach that considers the needs and interests of the partner countries. By adopting such an approach, the EU can position itself as a genuine and equal partner, leading to enhanced cooperation and ultimately contributing to the successful development of partnerships with Central Asian states. However, the question arises as to whether the EU's partnership conceptualisation indeed places the partner countries at the forefront. As such, the aim of this chapter is to deconstruct the extent to which the EU's partnership conceptualisation brings the other - the Central Asian states - to the fore and to explore the factors that influence this construction.

The findings suggest that while the EU employs partnership discourse to include partner states in the process, it appears to be primarily motivated by countering geopolitical constraints posed by China and Russia. Consequently, the EU's partnership seems less about cultivating long-term relationships with Central Asians and more about confronting the growing influence of other actors in the region. Accordingly, this chapter will follow this structure to achieve the research aims: First, a background of EU-Central Asia relations will be provided. The subsequent sections will delve into the partnership construction, as revealed through document analysis of papers issued by EU institutions between 2007 and 2019. Following that, elite perceptions of the partnership concept will be presented. Elite interviews were conducted with high-level EU officials based in Brussels and the EU Delegations in Central Asia between 2021 and 2022. The final section will offer concluding remarks.

7.1. A brief overview of EU-Central Asia relations

During the decade following the collapse of the Soviet Union, international engagement in Central Asia was largely neglectful (Kavalski, 2007). The Central Asian states sought support during this time to facilitate their political and economic transition, showing a willingness to engage with external actors such as the European Union (Melvin, 2008). Initially, China hesitated to involve itself in Central Asia due to concerns about Russia, which was recovering from the Soviet Union's collapse, while the region displayed little interest in dealing with its former colonial power (Melvin, 2008). Meanwhile, the EU and the West generally exhibited indifference, limiting their cooperation primarily to developmental endeavours by providing aid and assistance to the Central Asian States (Matveeva, 2006).

Following the dissolution of the USSR, the EU's relations with Central Asia were framed under the development assistance program - TACIS, which included all five Central Asian states. Although the program aimed to provide technical tools for the economic transition from a socialist system to a market economy, it lacked clear political priorities and resources to make a substantial impact on the ground, thus failing to increase the EU's presence in the region (Kavalski and Cho, 2018). However, in 2007, two developments occurred in the EU's approach to Central Asia. First, the EU adopted its first comprehensive foreign policy document titled *The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership*. Although the 2007 Strategy came relatively late, it signalled a significant advancement in relations with Central Asia (Melvin, 2008; Kavalski and Cho, 2018). Motivated by the region's strategic importance, considering its proximity to the EU's border and the recognition of its growing energy capabilities, the 2007 Strategy was both value and interest-based (Hoffmann, 2010). It aimed to promote the rule of law, human rights, good governance, and democratization while also hoping to cooperate with Central Asia to enhance European energy security and stabilize energy markets in the region (Hoffmann, 2010).

Second, the TACIS programme, which primarily targeted post-Soviet states, was replaced by the EU's worldwide DCI (Kluczewska and Dzhuraev, 2020). To support the objectives of the 2007 Strategy, the DCI allocated 750 million Euros from 2007 to 2013, with an increased amount of 1028 million Euros for the subsequent phase of 2014-2020, marking a 56% rise compared to the previous period (Boonstra, 2015).

The 2007 Strategy states that when working on a regional basis with Central Asian states, differentiation will entail 'respecting their difference' (EU 2007a, p.18). At the same time, when cooperating bilaterally, 'The EU will balance its policy approaches in Central Asia, according to the differing needs of every country and to the performance of each country' (EU 2007a, p.6). It also means 'addressing specific priorities identified by each country' and being reflexive to the suggestions 'put forward by the Central Asian states' (EU 2007a. p.8). Such rhetoric by the EU indicates that the other is included in the partnership to some extent. Accordingly, the 2007 Strategy identified regional and bilateral areas for cooperation with the corresponding aid budget. Table 7.1 below displays the EU aid breakdown for regional policies in Central Asia.

Table 7.1. EU's regional assistance for 2007-10 (30% of the total funds)

Regional policies	*Budget*
Education	€25,000,000
Environmental sustainability and water	€16.2,000,000
Transport	€15,000,000
Border management	€16,000,000
Energy	€22,000,000

(Source: European Commission, 2007, cited in Emerson et al., 2010, p.92)

As seen from the table, the 2007 strategy identified border management, education, energy, environment and water for cooperation in terms of regional cooperation. These areas were selected because they are commonly shared by the CAS, requiring a regional approach vis-a-vis the EU. The EU development budget also reflected this policy approach, whereby a 70/30 ratio was used for the benefit of differentiated bilateral relations (Tsertsvadze and Boonstra, 2013). Table 7.2 below displays the breakdown of EU funds for the CAS:

Table 7. 2. EU's bilateral assistance for 2007-10 (70% of total funds)

Countries of Central Asia	*Budget*
Uzbekistan	€32.8,000,000
Kazakhstan	€44,000,000
Kyrgyzstan	€55,000,000
Tajikistan	€66,000,000
Turkmenistan	€22,000,000

(Source: European Commission, 2007, cited in Emerson et al., 2010, p.92)

Meanwhile, bilateral cooperation prioritised policy agendas chosen by each Central Asian country (EU, 2007a). As well as that, the EU identifies two vital areas for bilateral cooperation. The first one is poverty reduction, which the EU looked to address by supporting social sector reforms and schemes to raise rural living standards. The second priority areas for bilateral cooperation were selected as the 'promotion of good governance and democratic processes and the strengthening of public institutions coupled with the implementation of core investment and trade reform policies' (EU, 2007a, p.19). The 2007 Strategy states that the details of these programmes would be cooperatively identified with each country in Central Asia by taking into account facts on the ground.

Despite the EU's dedicated efforts and substantial resources invested in operationalizing relations with Central Asia since the collapse of the USSR, its visibility and influence in the region remain limited (Boonstra, 2015). Several EU Progress Reports conducted between 2007-2019 analysed the impact of the Strategy, and its policies document the minimal changes the EU has attained in Central Asia. The view from the region further affirms this state of affairs (Peyrouse, 2014; Bossuyt, 2018; Arynov, 2022a). Scholars have identified several impediments to effective EU and Central Asia cooperation.

One of the key obstacles is the EU-related issues, such as the hesitance to cooperate intensively with Central Asian states (Melvin, 2008; Kavalski, 2007; Kavalski and Cho, 2018; Şahin and Duğen, 2015). The EU's lack of commitment and reluctance to assertively engage with the region, partly driven by its post-Cold War identity crisis and fear of antagonizing Russia, have hindered its leadership role in Central Asia (Kavalski, 2007). Compared to China and Russia, the EU's approach to Central Asia has been perceived as timid and minimal (Melvin, 2008). Another major impediment is the competition between the EU's norms and interests. The EU's prioritization of realist objectives such as security, commercial interests and energy resources over human rights and democracy promotion has been criticised (Crawford, 2008; Hoffmann, 2010; Şahin and Duğen, 2015). Furthermore, some have pointed to the discrepancy between the EU's rhetoric and actions (Warkotsch, 2006), the ineffectiveness of EU's policy approaches and instruments (Warkotsch, 2011; Peyrouse, Laruelle and Boonstra, 2012; Axyonova, 2014). Specifically, the 2007 Strategy was criticised for having too many priority areas with little funds to address them, limiting their impact on the ground (Peyrouse, Laruelle and Boonstra, 2012). In addition, the EU's policy mechanisms,

such as positive and negative conditionality, have been inconsistently applied, undermining its efforts in areas such as democratization and human rights (Warkotsch, 2011).

The presence of multiple actors, notably China and Russia, with differing normative strategies further complicates cooperation (Kavalski, 2007). China's substantial financial contributions without political conditions, alternative normative models, and emphasis on central government empowerment undermine the EU's reform agenda and appeal to undemocratic regimes (Sharshenova and Crawford, 2017). Russia, like China, seeks to maintain the region's authoritarian status quo to preserve its influence (Valenza, 2018). Consequently, this has put the regimes of Central Asian states in an advantageous position as they have been able to pick from many suitors without having to reform in return (Şahin and Duğen, 2015; Rakhimov, 2015).

Finally, domestic constraints within Central Asian countries pose additional challenges for the EU (Bossuyt and Kubicek, 2011; Warkotsch, 2008). The level of openness and liberalization in a country influences how the EU approaches its democracy promotion policies, with more open countries receiving direct and overt efforts, while less open countries receive indirect attempts (Bossuyt and Kubicek, 2011). Additionally, Warkotsch (2008) identifies cultural differences as hindering socialisation between the EU and Central Asian states. These factors further complicate the EU's cooperation with Central Asia.

Despite these obstacles, the EU has remained steadfast in its engagement with Central Asia. In 2019, the EU adopted a new Strategy, *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership*. The 2019 Strategy also envisages both bilateral and regional relations with the countries of Central Asia and retains the old objectives of the 2007 Strategy. Thus, the criticisms of the 2007 Strategy, such as reducing priority areas and clarifying the interest versus value approach of the EU, remain unaddressed (Kluczewska and Dzhuraev, 2020). In sum, while the engagement between the EU and Central Asian states intensifies, many challenges remain, necessitating a more effective approach to cooperation from both sides. The next sections examine how the notion of partnership evolved from 2007-2019 in the EU official documents.

7.2. Construction of partnership in the EU official documents 2007-2019

Between 2007 and 2019, the EU institutions produced several important documents, including the 2007 and 2019 *Strategies*, *Progress Reports* and *European Parliament Resolutions*. The thematic analysis of these documents revealed that the EU characterises its relations with Central Asia as a

case of partnership. However, the official documents fail to define the concept and its elements. While the EU discourse in these documents makes room for the other in the partnership-building process, it is sporadic and inconsistent. Substantive inclusion of the other, which entails including the partner states in every step of the partnership-building process, in the EU official discourse was not perceptible throughout the relations. The paragraphs below present the main findings, starting with the 2007 Strategy.

2007 Strategy

The 2007 Strategy is a lengthy document that outlines many aspects of cooperation between the EU and Central Asia. While missing the opportunity to define the central concept of the relations, the Strategy does well in explaining the basis of the partnership. The 2007 Strategy states that the relations between these regions are based on 'common interests' (EU 2007a, p.4) that are key to ensuring a 'long-term partnership' between the regions (EU 2007a, p. 12). The rhetoric of common interests signals the inclusion of the other in the relationship equation. The EU views the areas of stability, security and prosperity as mutual interests with Central Asian counterparts that require a 'common response' (EU 2007a, p.3). The main reason behind characterising these issues as areas of mutual or common interest is because they directly impact the region and 'indirectly' impact the EU (EU 2007a, p.4). These shared interests are further broken down into policies such as regional economic development, border management, migration, organised crime and international terrorism, drugs and human trafficking (EU 2007a). Energy security is also highlighted as an area of special interest for the EU and Central Asia. This is because the EU needs to secure energy sources independent of Russia. At the same time, strengthening the local energy market will also improve investment conditions, benefiting the CAS (EU 2007a). In turn, these priorities are accompanied by objectives and concrete actions. This is helpful as it shows the commitment of the EU to take things beyond the rhetoric on paper with partner countries. Overall, the language of mutual interests coupled with common response is very much in line with the theory of partnership. Therefore, this part of the EU's rhetoric does not pose conceptual ambiguity or contradictions.

As well as shared interests, the 2007 Strategy states that value-based cooperation around human rights and democracy is 'essential' for the partnership to come to 'full fruition' (EU 2007a, p.2). According to the EU, adherence to the values means the CAS will become 'reliable partners' (EU 2007a, p.5). Therefore, it is stated that the EU will 'pursue its objectives of ensuring the promotion and protection of human rights throughout the world, as well as Central Asian states' (EU 2007a,

p.9). In other words, values are considered the second basis of the EU and Central Asia partnership. However, including these values in its relations with the CAS has been less than straightforward for the EU from the start. This is because, for the EU, striking a 'balance of priorities between energy/security and democracy/human rights represented an often-intractable issue for EU policymakers' in their dealings with Central Asia (Melvin, 2008, p.6). The Strategy was adopted under the initiation and coordination of the German Presidency of the EU Council. Tensions between values and interests caused a heated debate within all political levels of the EU at the development stage of the Strategy (Schmitz, 2008). At the time, Germany operated an air-force base in Uzbekistan to support its military mission in Afghanistan (Crawford, 2008). As a result, Germany was less in favour of giving a central role to values when dealing with Central Asian states, especially Uzbekistan (Schmitz, 2008). Meanwhile, the proponents of value-led foreign policy insisted on the firm incorporation of human rights in the Strategy (Schmitz, 2008).

Although the policies surrounding values could only represent the 'minimal consensus among member states' because of the disagreements around the role of values vis-a-vis interests, the document was finalised (Graubner, cited in Anceschi, 2014, p.2). The 2007 Strategy settled on the values of human rights, the rule of law, good governance, and democratization as the basis of partnership. To that end, it was envisaged in the document that the EU would 'step up support for the protection of human rights' mainly by entering a 'structured, regular, result-oriented human rights dialogues' with the states in the region (EU 2007a, p.7). Thus, the human rights dialogue was given a prominent role in promoting these values. With the help of these dialogues, the EU planned to raise human rights issues with each state of Central Asia. The EU also highlighted the need to cooperate with the CAS to develop an active civil society to promote human rights and democracy in the region.

While shared interests are part of the partnership concept as per the theory, values promoted by the EU are not (Korosteleva, 2014). However, it might be so that cooperation between partners may no longer be possible without value promotion playing a specific role. This is because 'contestation of norms is at the centre of international affairs' (Lewis, 2012, p.1234). As stated in Chapter 5, Central Asia is a region where various actors, including the CAS, actively engage in norm contestation through norm diffusion (Lewis, 2012). According to Lewis (2012), Central Asian countries are becoming the norm diffusers themselves rather than just being an objects of norm diffusion. Lewis (2012) found that Central Asian states are socialising the EU into their own versions

of autocratic values by forcing the EU to adopt a more palatable and less political language when discussing difficult topics. Two things are important here to note. First, it seems both actors are engaging in norm diffusion. Therefore, there is a degree of reciprocity. This impacts the way we view the agency of Central Asian states when it comes to norm promotion. Second, the reality of international politics dictates that value promotion is an inevitable part of many modern-day relations. This, in turn, means that the theory of partnership will have to grapple with norm promotion in most case studies, and the EU and Central Asia relations certainly are one of them. Thus, one should not discount value-based relations as non-partnership straightaway. Instead, what might be worth probing is the implication of values for the other in the partnership as per the focus of this thesis.

Fittingly, the role of values versus interests in the EU and Central Asia relations has generated interest on the side of academic scholars. Crawford claimed that 'the statements of lofty principles serve to legitimise the ongoing 'cooperation' with authoritarian and semi-authoritarian rulers' (Crawford, 2008). He further argued that the EU projects a normative power image while it is just a realist power that seeks to ensure its interests over norms and values. In other words, the EU is not genuinely promoting values such as human rights and democracy. Hoffmann (2010) argued that the EU's interests compromised its value promotion in the region. A group of scholars noted the difficulty of the task at hand (Melvin, 2007; Kassenova, 2008; Boonstra, 2011). It was claimed that 'advancing the EU's interests in Central Asia while also remaining true to the Union's values will clearly be a tall order' (Melvin, 2007, p.1). The difficulty lies, on the one hand, in balancing the liberal goals of the promotion of democracy and human rights and realist interests of securing access to the region's energy reserves and, on the other hand, how to engage and not to 'lose' the region without becoming too soft on local authoritarian regimes (Kassenova, 2008, p.3).

Despite such difficulties, another group of scholars (Melvin, 2007; Melvin and Boonstra, 2008; Boonstra, 2011; Melvin, 2012; Tsertsvadze and Axyonova, 2013) argued for continued value promotion. One of the reasons was that 'if the EU is to remain a serious global actor, it will have to find ways to reconcile the imperative of engaging in difficult regions beyond the immediate European neighbourhood' while upholding its values and pursuing its interests simultaneously (Melvin, 2007, p.1). In his later works, Melvin (2012, p.2) lamented how values were side-lined when 'the EU decided to shift from placing them at the political core of the EU's engagement to compartmentalising these issues in projects and set-piece dialogue mechanisms, to allow progress

on other issues to proceed'. To rectify this, he argued, the EU needs to 'place support for genuine political reform and the protection of human rights along with a comprehensive approach to security at the heart of the Strategy' (Melvin, 2012, p.1). More specifically, Melvin and Boonstra (2008) argued that this could be done through the EU incorporating values into the political dimension of the relationship. Boonstra (2011) went further by suggesting that human rights, the rule of law and good governance should be incorporated into all the areas of the 2007 Strategy instead of being kept as a separate issue. In the long run, it was claimed that a strong stance by the EU on 'democratic and human rights commitments would be mutually beneficial for the sides involved as it would raise the profile of countries such as Kazakhstan on the global stage as a county 'rooted in democratic principles' and 'the EU would gain a more reliable partner' (Tsertsvadze and Axyonova, 2013, p.2).

While these authors have raised some relevant points, the focus is very much on the EU and its actions in Central Asia. The other is missing from such analysis. Partnership as a framework for relations is about bringing the other to the fore. Therefore, looking at the issue from both perspectives is necessary. When reading the 2007 Strategy, one sees that there seems to be no ideological conflict in pursuing mutual interests and values for the EU. It is as if interests and values exist in a symbiotic relation (EU 2007a, p.5): 'The EU strongly believes that strengthening the commitment of Central Asian countries to international law, the rule of law, human rights and democratic values, as well as to a market economy will promote security and stability in Central Asia'. In other words, promoting values will positively impact the EU's interests in the region's stability. As a result, the logical conclusion of such rationale is to devise policies that pursue values and interests concurrently. Therefore, this part of the partnership concept is not contradictory or problematic when looking at the matter from the EU's point of view. However, if we were to look at the inclusion of values from a Central Asian perspective, one fails to see the other in the EU's thought process.

First, the 2007 Strategy states that 'bilateral cooperation will be of special interest' as it will 'strengthen' the EU's ability to respond to the individual needs of the five Central Asian states. At the same time, 'the intensity of the cooperation will reflect the commitment to transition and reform of each country' (EU 2007a, p.6). This is especially pertinent to the reforms in governance and the rule of law, human rights and democracy. This reads like there might be a consequence if the values are not respected, indicating a conditionality-like arrangement. However, the wording

here is so opaque that one is left guessing what that would entail and whether it is reciprocal. For example, it was stated that the objectives of human rights dialogue should include 'discussing the issues of mutual interest' and 'raising the concerns felt by the EU as regards the human rights situation in the countries concerned' (EU 2007a, p.7). The first part is consistent with the partnership rhetoric. The latter reads more like human rights dialogue is only for the EU to express its preferences, therefore missing the other from the process.

Second, despite the values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law being seen as the 'central element' of relations with the region by the EU (EU 2015a, p.20), details of these values remained unclear in the 2007 Strategy (EU 2007a). This general grouping of very broad values leaves us in the dark in terms of exactly what specific areas are aimed for cooperation between the partner countries. What is included in the concept of human rights? How about the very broad concept of democracy? The only exception is the rule of law, which received some elaboration, such as supporting core legal reforms in the judiciary and creating commercial and administrative law legislation. First, by clarifying what is expected, the EU can allow partners to know and anticipate its preferences. Second, this allows for adjusting one's behaviour, an essential element for building partnerships.

Third, the EU takes these values as given, but why? What is the relevance of these values for partnership with the region other than what the EU believes the adherence to them by the CAS will bring stability to Central Asia? In the long run, these values could bring long-term stability to the region, which is the genuine belief of the EU. It is arguably true that countries that respect the rights of their citizens are less prone to chaos and instability in the form of violent revolts. However, the EU should still include the other even if such reasoning has its merit. Are these values incorporated into the Strategy because the partner states share them? By missing the other when weaving these values into the partnership, the EU fails to consider a cascade of questions that arise with their inclusion in the 2007 Strategy such as: For example, what should happen if the partner countries interpret the meaning and the role of values entirely differently? The next section looks at the presence of mutual learning in the EU's concept of partnership.

Mutual learning

The literature emphasises the significance of learning about the other in order to minimise negative impacts on the partner states and foster a successful partnership (Korosteleva, 2013, 2014).

However, Korosteleva's concept of learning about the other falls short, as it overlooks the significant role of the other in this process. Learning about the other requires active involvement and deliberate contribution from both partners. In other words, it should be a mutually reinforcing process whereby the other actively participates by creating conditions that facilitate the exchange of knowledge through material contributions, such as providing mechanisms and instruments for learning about themselves. While the 2007 Strategy acknowledges the notion of mutual learning, it has not been fully integrated into the partnership-building process in the EU's official discourse with the CAS.

The 2007 EU strategy rhetoric mentions the establishment of a European Studies Institute in Central Asia, which seemed like a positive step toward promoting learning about the EU. However, the 2007 Strategy lacks any indication that learning about the Central Asian partner would be reciprocated or considered an essential part of the relationship. One could argue that the 2007 Strategy is the first of its kind, and such pitfalls are to be expected. At the same time, this should have also been the catalyst for thinking that there has never been deep cooperation between the two regions. Therefore, there needs to be active learning to promote mutual understanding should differences in perceptions occur between partners.

Three potential areas can promote mutual understanding between the EU and the CAS. The first such area is cooperation in education. However, from the analysis of the EU's rhetoric, it is quite clear that the EU does not perceive education as an instrument to promote learning about the other or itself (EU 2007a). Instead, the main objectives of the EU in this policy area remained one of addressing the failing education system of the region. The EU states that it will support adapting the education systems of Central Asian countries to the demands of the globalised world.

On the one hand, the EU's focus on improving the education system in Central Asia is well-founded, given the region's highly problematic educational landscape, characterised by a significant lack of funding at all levels (Emerson et al., 2010). The educational system, once clearly articulated by the Soviets over 70 years ago, which promoted equality, achievement, and national dedication, has now been lost (Silova, Johnson and Heyneman, 2007). While each country faces its own set of education-related challenges, they all struggle to replace the educational purposes of the past with their own visions (Silova, 2009).

This deterioration of the education system has manifested in various ways (Deyoung, 2006; Silova, Johnson and Heyneman, 2007). There is a shortage of educational supplies and textbooks, a decline in teachers' salaries, impacting their quality of life and degraded infrastructure with limited access to utilities like heating, water, and electricity. The quality of the curriculum has also diminished, while corruption within the higher education system has become endemic, affecting equality of access to education. In Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, political indoctrination has further undermined the education systems (Silova, Johnson, and Heyneman, 2007), eroding the value of state schools in the eyes of society and leading to increased dropout rates (Anderson and Heyneman, 2005; Silova, 2010). Moreover, many schools and programs offering vocational education and experience have become obsolete or shut down (Anderson and Heyneman, 2005). Consequently, the region is facing a rise in poorly educated young adults (Anderson and Heyneman, 2005).

On the other hand, this is a one-dimensional approach to the issue. In partnerships, one needs to continuously learn about the material and immaterial qualities of the other. Surprisingly, the priority area of education did not intend to tackle increasing or improving mutual understanding between the regions. The EU does express that it wishes to cooperate in terms of student and academic exchange. However, it is not made clear in the 2007 Strategy that it wishes to do so to promote mutual learning and understanding between the regions. Education cooperation in the form of student exchange and staff mobility is a perfect way to encourage socialisation among the elite of the country, which can positively contribute towards strengthening the partnership in the future. Such perception is completely absent in the discourse of the 2007 Strategy.

The second area where mutual socialisation can occur is through intercultural dialogue, and the EU's recognition of this as one of the seven priority areas in the 2007 Strategy is commendable. Given the historical lack of meaningful cultural cooperation between the regions, it is indeed a necessary and novel focus. However, the substance of the rhetoric in this regard is inadequate. The 2007 Strategy allocates only a meagre paragraph to intercultural dialogue, despite its significance as a priority area (EU 2007a, p.17): ‘The diversity of religions and centuries-old traditions of peace and tolerance constitute a valuable heritage in Central Asia. Moderate and tolerant Islamic thinking respecting the constitutional secular principle is a hallmark of Central Asian countries. The EU highly values Central Asia's peaceful multi-ethnic and multi-cultural coexistence of various creeds. Building on this, the EU will promote dialogue within civil society and respect for freedom of religion’.

The mentioned paragraph merely offers a generic description of the region, providing little insight into the concrete cooperation that will take place in this area. It appears the EU ran out of ideas when discussing intercultural dialogue, leading to a lack of clarity and direction in the Strategy. There is a notable absence of specific objectives to promote the socialisation of the two cultures and foster a better mutual understanding between the regions. Instead, the paragraph primarily focuses on promoting freedom of religion in the region, addressing another issue the EU aims to 'fix'. This approach reveals a broader problem in how the EU perceives the other – as a region perpetually in need of assistance and improvement. Consequently, the policies regarding cultural cooperation fail to hit the mark.

The third potential area for cooperation that could facilitate learning about the other is people-to-people contact through mobility and migration of various sectors of society. However, the EU's conceptualisation of partnership does not use these areas to promote learning between the actors. First, the notion of mobility does not feature in the Strategy. Second, the discourse on migration is limited to strengthening the borders within Central Asia. Thus, it is very much security-predicated as it appears under the header of 'combatting common threats and challenges' (EU 2007a, p.16). The discourse of the EU in this area is characterised by one of supporting Central Asia to build a 'modern border management' system aimed at reforming border guard services within the region (EU 2007a, p.16). Specifically, the EU will aim to help combat human trafficking, drugs and arms trafficking to and from Afghanistan.

These are all appropriate and relevant as the countries of Central Asia face challenges in the areas where the EU wishes to help, and they seem to be more receptive to cooperation in this area than others (Interview 2). Furthermore, it is also contended that as a foreign policy actor, the EU is not free of its interest, whether to secure its borders from all kinds of transnational crimes and challenges emanating from Central Asia or elsewhere. However, it is quite telling that the issue of migration and mobility in the context of the EU and CAS does not promote socialisation among some sectors of society, given that these regions have rarely done so in the past. This is not an advocation for mass migration to either side, as socialisation can be rolled out slowly and selectively by targeting specific groups of the region. Alas, such a perspective is not at all present in the concept of the partnership of the EU with Central Asia. The next sections of the chapter will trace the changes related to the notion of partnership in the EU's official rhetoric through progress reports and European Parliament resolutions.

EU Progress Reports

From 2008 to 2016, the EU issued four progress reports, with the initial one released in 2008, followed by subsequent ones in 2010, 2012, and 2016. As the relationship developed, these reports maintained a focus on mutual interests, but there was a noticeable increase in the emphasis on values. However, the attention given to mutual learning was inconsistent throughout this time frame, leading to a weakened understanding of the concept of partnership. As such, the progress reports failed to address the conceptual inadequacies present in the 2007 Strategy, perpetuating the issues and limitations in these subsequent documents. The section below will summarise the findings, highlighting the changes and developments observed over the years.

After the first year of adopting the 2007 Strategy, the EU Commission and the Council jointly released a progress report to assess achievements and plans going forward. It must be noted that the very act of producing progress reports was done to allow the EU to adjust its approach and behaviour to adapt to the changes on the ground. This shows some level of reflexiveness on the part of the EU towards the partner countries. Overall, the progress reports maintained the role of the interests and values as the basis of partnership with Central Asia. However, the progress reports gave values a more prominent role: 'A greater effort should be made to promote human rights and democratisation' (EU 2008c, p.14). Similar emphases were expressed by the 2010 progress report, which identified the areas of human rights, democracy, and the rule of law as the key areas that needed 'reinforced efforts' going forward (EU 2010, p.6). Meanwhile, remaining progress reports also looked at the values as 'key priorities' between the regions, which called for the EU 'to maintain a sustained engagement' (EU 2012, p. 19) and from the CAS 'a genuine commitment' (EU, 2015a, p.18).

The consistent emphasis on values resulted from the EU's observations and experiences on the ground. Throughout the eight years, the assessment of the EU noted minimal changes in human rights, democracy and the rule of law. It was stated that 'Overall progress on the ground has been limited and, in some instances, a regression can be observed. The situation in areas such as freedom of expression and the media, freedom of assembly and association, fairness of the judicial systems, or adequate space for civil society and political participation have not improved significantly' (EU, 2010, p.5). On top of that, 'The events in Kyrgyzstan 6-8 April 2010 illustrated the importance of respecting human rights, democratic values and the rule of law for the stability and prosperity of

the region. These events confirmed that the decision of the EU to give added emphasis to its efforts in this area is timely and necessary' (EU 2010, p.10). This is about a bloody revolt by the people of Kyrgyzstan against the corrupt rule of then-president Kurmanbek Bakiyev, who was, as a result, overthrown (Hiro, 2010). Incidentally, President Bakiyev came to power after the 2005 tulip revolution with the promise of fighting widespread corruption and nepotism in the country (Hiro, 2010). Subsequent progress reports continued to express similar concerns across most of Central Asia, noting that 'overall developments in the region have not been as good as hoped for' (EU 2012, p.35) and that the 'human rights situation remains a source of concern across most of Central Asia' (EU 2015a, p.16).

As a result of the issues on the ground, the reasonable course of action for the EU was to strengthen its commitment to its value promotion in the region. On the one hand, this was the EU adapting its policies by being reflexive towards the events in Central Asia. On the other hand, it was a very EU-centric approach as, over the years, the EU's rhetoric remained the same when faced with the indifference or reluctance of the partner countries towards cooperation in the areas of democracy, human rights and the rule of law. For example, as a response to the low level of engagement displayed by the partners, the EU thought there was a need to make human rights dialogues more results-oriented and inclusive (EU 2010, 2012, 2015a). The language of inclusivity was about engaging civil society actors in the promotion of these values in Central Asia. This was despite recognizing that there were differences between the EU and Central Asian states in the perception of such actors: 'Civil society is increasingly perceived as a threat, and legislative reforms have recently been introduced that would limit access to funding, notably from foreign sources' (EU, 2015a, p.18). Despite such awareness, the EU called for continued funding and direct engagement with these organisations (EU 2015a). As well as that the progress reports also thought that the EU needs to 'support implementation by sharing EU experiences' (EU 2012, p.19). In other words, in the face of reluctance and disinterest, the EU maintained the same approach of sustained engagement through dialogue over the years. The thought process of gestating a shared understanding of notions with different meanings for the partner states was not perceptible in any progress reports. This was not accidental, as the rhetoric of partnership did not adequately reflect mutual learning. The following sections will trace the elements of partnership in progress reports.

Mutual learning

The initial progress report of 2008 did not prioritize mutual learning as a fundamental aspect of the partnership with Central Asian states. Moreover, the potential role of education and intercultural dialogue in fostering mutual understanding received limited attention in the progress report. The focus on education mainly revolved around supporting the reformation of the struggling education system in the region. However, as the relations progressed, there was a shift in the EU's perception of cooperation in education with the Central Asian states. The EU began to view educational cooperation as an avenue to enhance mutual understanding. The 2010 progress report highlighted that the establishment and expansion of an academic mobility program for Central Asian students and scholars 'contribute significantly to increased mutual and inter-cultural understanding between citizens in the EU and Central Asian countries' (EU 2010, p.11). Furthermore, for the first time, the EU acknowledged the importance of helping the partner states learn about the Union , aiming to foster better understanding between the regions. The EU recognised that its actions and identity were not well understood in Central Asia, stating that the 'visibility of EU actions in Central Asia as well as the understanding of the EU as such in the region is unfortunately still limited' (EU 2010, p.25). To address this knowledge gap, the EU expressed its commitment to promoting understanding of itself in Central Asia by establishing EU Studies Centres in the region (EU 2010, p.13).

The rhetoric of mutual cultural understanding, mainly through student exchange, also persisted in later progress reports: 'The exchange of students and scholars has contributed significantly to increasing mutual and inter-cultural understanding between citizens in the EU and Central Asian countries' (EU 2015a, p.20). This represented a positive shift in the EU's discourse and signalled progress in the conceptualisation of the partnership. However, despite this promising shift, the progress reports failed to fully develop the newfound focus on education to promote better understanding between the countries. As a result, education cooperation continued to be viewed through the lens of development cooperation, primarily focusing on improving the quality of education policies in the region. The potential of education as a vehicle for enhancing mutual understanding between the EU and Central Asia was not fully explored, leading to missed opportunities for deeper and more meaningful collaboration.

Intercultural dialogue equally remained the least developed priority area between these two actors under the auspices of the progress reports. The main task of the progress reports was to review the priority areas to establish the results of cooperation and look for ways to improve the outcomes

where it was poor. Therefore, intercultural dialogue, the 7th priority area for cooperation between the regions, should have received some scrutiny like the other policies. Instead, this priority barely received a mention in the rhetoric of the EU progress reports of 2008, 2012 and 2015. These progress reports failed to critically review the achievements and shortcomings of the policies surrounding intercultural dialogue. The only exception was the progress report of 2010, which displayed a shift in how the EU thought about intercultural dialogue.

Albeit minimally, the 2010 progress report featured two noticeable changes in how the EU saw the role of intercultural dialogue in relations with Central Asia. It was stated that 'The first three years of Strategy implementation have demonstrated the importance' of intercultural dialogue between the regions for 'promoting better mutual understanding through the various cooperation activities and the regional initiatives, especially in the areas of education, the rule of law and the environment' (EU 2010, p.24). As a result, 'further reflection is needed on how to develop our engagement on this cross-cutting issue in all areas of the Strategy' (EU 2010, p.10). One of the ways to develop this in practice, as per the progress report, was that 'regular gatherings of EU and Central Asian academics and intellectuals could be organised' (EU 2010, p. 13). What can be deduced from the rhetoric of the 2010 progress report is that the EU finally realised that intercultural dialogue could foster a better understanding between these regions, thus bringing the other to the fore. Second, intercultural dialogue is not a single-issue policy. Thus, it can have a positive impact on all other areas of the EU's engagement with the region. Unfortunately, the subsequent progress reports failed to capitalise on such a thought process. Thus, cooperation in this area was further shelved to obscurity in the EU official discourse.

The migration and mobility policies remained under the same common threats and challenges header. Therefore, just like the 2007 Strategy, the language remained one of securing Central Asia across all progress reports. The policies were unidimensional and focused on 'creating open but at the same time secure borders' (EU 2008c, p.12) that allow for harmony between labour demand and supply. Therefore, the critical actions seen by the EU were to promote both national and regional border management 'with a special focus on illegal migration issues and trafficking in human beings' (EU 2012, p.18). The final progress report of 2015 also sustained the rhetoric of migration and mobility under the rubric of common challenges and threats, thus indicating no change in this regard.

In conclusion, the progress reports did not bring about significant changes in conceptualising the partnership between the EU and Central Asian states. Although there were instances of new ideas that could have contributed to solidifying the elements of the partnership, these were not further developed in subsequent documents. As a result, the progress reports failed to fully grasp the potential gaps in perceptions and their impact on policies. This could stem from two possibilities: either the EU does not fully understand or recognise the significance of these gaps, or it simply views them as minor factors within the relationship. The first possibility implies that the EU might not fully comprehend the extent to which differing perceptions can impact the partnership. It may not fully appreciate the importance of addressing and bridging these gaps to foster a more effective and harmonious relationship with Central Asian states. The second possibility suggests that the EU might acknowledge the existence of gaps in perception but consider them minor concerns compared to other aspects of the partnership. This perspective might downplay the significance of these gaps, leading to a lack of proactive efforts to address them. Whichever the case may be, the failure to recognise and address gaps in perception reflects a potential deficiency in the EU's approach to the partnership. The following section examines how the European Parliament conceptualises the notion of partnership.

European Parliament Resolutions

The resolutions of the EP offer a more precise and coherent understanding of the notion of partnership between the EU and Central Asian countries in three ways. Firstly, the EP clearly delineates the role of values compared to interests and how they should interact, especially in situations where there might be potential conflicts between them. This enables the EP to have a more coherent approach to understanding what should happen when specific values are not upheld in the partnership. This clarity ensures that the EP's perspective on the relationship remains consistent and principled. Secondly, the EP also clarifies the ownership of the values in the partnership. Thirdly, unlike other EU institutions, the EP's rhetoric of partnership acknowledges and addresses the gaps in perceptions that may exist between the EU and Central Asian countries.

Unlike the official rhetoric of the Commission and the Council, the European Parliament takes a more straightforward and explicit stance regarding the role of values vis-a-vis interests in the conceptualisation of partnership with Central Asian countries. For the EP, values are considered the primary basis of the partnership. In its first resolution after the adoption of the 2007 Strategy,

the European Parliament clarified its position on handling potential conflicts between values and interests (EU 2008a, p.10): 'close cooperation with those countries in respect of Central Asia is very important where interests coincide without conflicting with human rights concerns'. Therefore, 'whereas the EU insists on the need for, and has a clear interest in seeing progress towards, greater stability and rising levels of economic', in Central Asia, the EU still 'must always uphold its commitment to mainstream human rights in all agreements with third states and to promote democracy through coherent policies and the use of the means best suited for those purposes' (EU 2008a, p.2). In particular, it underscored that 'the existence of the human rights dialogues should not be used as an excuse for excluding human-rights-related questions arising in other fields of cooperation or for not engaging in further action' (EU 2011, p.4). Moreover, the EP's resolutions consistently called for the integration of values into all aspects of the EU's relations with Central Asia. To that end, the EP also urged for consistency among the EU institutions, calling on the Council and the Commission to maintain a united front on human rights issues and make democracy, good governance, the rule of law, and human rights an integral part of the Central Asia strategy (EU 2008a, p.8).

The European Parliament's emphasis on values as the primary basis of partnership with Central Asia remained unchanged throughout the years of cooperation under the 2007 Strategy. The EP once again emphasised that it was in the interest of the EU to strengthen 'its bilateral and multilateral relations with all the Central Asian countries, on the basis of common shared values' (EU 2016, p. 5). Moreover, the EP went beyond just highlighting the significance of values and called for an EU-Central Asia strategy 'that is not based on geostrategic interests but is designed to develop a participative and democratic society, characterised by freedom of association for trade unions and an active civil society, and to boost gender equality and the empowerment of women, especially in rural areas' (EU 2016, p.15). The EP's consistent emphasis on the values over the years was matched with an equally clear stance on how to uphold them.

The rhetoric of the EP regarding how values should be upheld was more explicit and overt compared to other EU institutions. The EP insisted that the EU's engagement with Central Asian states 'must be differentiated and conditional, depending on measurable progress in the fields of democratisation, human rights, good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, the rule of law and the fight against corruption' (EU 2011, p.11). The 'conditional and incentive-based approach' should not only be limited to bilateral relations but also applied to regional cooperation

to attain better outcomes (EU 2016, p. 6). Specifically, the EP emphasised that EU funds should 'be disbursed only in countries demonstrating a genuine commitment to poverty alleviation, equal and sustainable socio-economic progress' (EU 2016, p.15).

Moreover, the EP stressed that the disbursement of EU funds should be based on performance and achievements, 'depending on measurable progress' made by the Central Asian states in upholding the values outlined in the 2007 strategy (EU 2016, p.7). In cases where the EU made budget support available to countries like Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the EP called for 'robust and objectively verifiable conditions' to be set for continuing such programs and 'that this must be accompanied by more stringent criteria, including a strong reform agenda and effective anti-corruption measures' (EU 2016, p. 16).

The EP was also better at characterising the values underpinning the partnership. At the beginning of the relations, EP referred to values as being 'European values of democracy, the rule of law and human rights' (EU 2008a, p. 6). This changed throughout the relationship to 'universal values such as democracy, respect for human rights and the rule of law, and common challenges' (EU 2011, p. 2). At one point, the values were also called 'common values' (EU 2011, p. 11). Then, it shifted to 'shared values' (EU 2016, p. 22).

As mentioned at this section's beginning, the EP displays a clearer and more coherent conceptualisation of partnership. By clarifying that values constitute the primary basis of the partnership, EP allowed the other to understand better what is expected during the relationship. However, despite this clarity, there are certain shortcomings in the EP's approach that affect the inclusion of the partner states in the partnership-building process. Firstly, while explicit and straightforward, the EP's conditional approach does not appear to be mutual. It gives the EU significant coercive power over the other by insisting on stringent conditions, potentially leading to an imbalanced relationship. This lack of a mutual conditional approach does not leave room for the other's preferences and needs to be adequately considered.

Second, the changing characterisation of the values causes confusion. Conceptually, the change from European to universal to shared is somewhat acceptable. If the EU conceives the values mentioned in the 2007 Strategy paper as universal, then they are not imposed, at least from an ideological point of view. If they are shared or common, then the other is present in such conceptualisation of partnership. However, it is not exactly obvious why the changes happened.

Did the shift in the way the EP saw the values in reaction to the events on the ground, hence, due to the other? Nothing in the documents indicated the CAS's widespread adoption of these values. In fact, the latest European Parliament Resolution points out the opposite picture (EU 2016, p. 8): 'Regrets that overall respect for democratic standards, human rights and fundamental freedoms has not yet reached an acceptable level; regrets that the human rights situation overall remains worrying'. Given this, what to make of the changes in the discourse of the EP? Was it a genuine effort to bring the other to the partnership-building process?

Thirdly, the EP acknowledges the possibility of conceptual gaps between the EU and Central Asian countries. However, its approach to addressing this issue remains EU-centric. The EP states that socialisation through 'people-to-people contacts and exchange programmes in science, business and education' (EU 2011, p. 6) can contribute toward 'promoting positive mobility and intercultural dialogue between the EU and Central Asia' (EU 2016, p. 13). Consequently, 'bringing the two cultures closer together' (EU 2016, p. 13). This kind of reflection indicates that the European Parliament might be willing to put the other at the centre of the partnership. However, awareness of differences is not sufficient on its own. One also needs to think about solving the existing problem in a way that leads to bringing the other into the partnership-building process. Unfortunately, EP believes there is a 'need to explain and promote the EU concept of security in the event that it differs from theirs' (EU 2011, p.3) rather than considering the other's perspective and finding common ground to bridge the gap effectively.

In summary, while the European Parliament presents a more explicit vision of partnership with Central Asia based on values, it still falls short of fully including the other in the process. The EP's conditional approach lacks mutual consideration, changing characterizations of values create confusion, and its response to conceptual gaps remains EU-centric. This indicates the need for a more inclusive and collaborative approach to partnership-building with Central Asian countries. The next section will discuss the notion of partnership in the 2019 strategy paper of the EU.

2019 Strategy

The 2019 strategy was adopted in response to the changes happening in Central Asia. This is in itself a sign that the EU is not neglecting the other entirely. The document is shorter than its predecessor, and it claims that it seeks to build a 'stronger, modern and non-exclusive partnership' (EU 2019b, p.2). The explicit language of *non-exclusive* partnership is a welcome gesture from the

point of Central Asian states who profess to have 'purposely built good relations and strong economic ties with countries, big and small, to the east and west, south and north' and wish to continue in the same spirit (Idrissov, 2015). Additionally, the document retains differentiated regional and bilateral approaches to policies. The 2019 Strategy states that 'While respecting the aspirations and interests of each of its Central Asian partners, as well as maintaining the need to differentiate between specific country situations, the EU will seek to deepen its engagement with those Central Asian countries willing and able to intensify relations' (EU 2019b, p.2). However, despite the talk of non-exclusivity and differentiated approaches, the core meaning of partnership remains largely unchanged, and the document does not substantially address the conceptual inadequacies surrounding values, gaps in perceptions, and learning about the other. The following sections will examine the basis and elements of partnership, highlighting the presence and lack of changes in these aspects.

The 2019 Strategy equally falls short of defining the notion of partnership and its elements. In terms of the basis of partnership, there was no conceptual backsliding on the side of the EU over the decade. The 2019 Strategy highlighted the role of 'strong mutual interests' as the basis of relations between the regions (EU 2019b, p.1). Such rhetoric is consistent with the other EU documents and the theory of partnership. The areas of common interests remained the same except for trilateral cooperation with and around Afghanistan, receiving a more prominent role in the new Strategy. However, the policy priorities were arranged under three main headers (EU 2019b, p.2): Partnering for Resilience, Partnering for Prosperity, and Working Better Together. Under Partnering for Resilience, the focus was on addressing socio-economic issues, security challenges and promoting democracy, human rights, and the rule of law, along with addressing climate change, environmental issues, and migration. Partnering for Prosperity involved cooperation in creating an investment-friendly climate, developing the private sector, supporting youth, and enhancing research and intra-regional trade. Working Better Together aimed at strengthening the partnership's architecture through increased political dialogue and civil society involvement (EU 2019b, p.2).

The 2019 Strategy stated that 'respect for human rights will therefore remain an essential element of the EU's bilateral relations with the countries of the region' (EU 2019b, p.3). This time, the specifics of human rights were mentioned, thus addressing the previously neglected question of what values: 'with a focus on freedom of expression (including media pluralism), freedom of

association, women's rights, children's rights, the rights of minorities and fight against discrimination and prevention and eradication of torture' (EU 2019b, p.3). There was a marked emphasis on cooperation around gender: 'The EU will promote – including through the integration of the UN Agenda for Women, Peace and Security in the relevant aspects of EU cooperation – gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, whose potential to engage in social, economic and political life remains largely untapped in the region' (EU 2019b, p.4). Gender was also incorporated into different policy areas, such as security cooperation. It was stated that when cooperating with Central Asian states around building the resilience of the local population towards violent extremism, the EU would aim to be 'gender-sensitive' (EU 2019b, p.6).

However, the incorporation of values yet again lacked explicit ownership, leaving questions unanswered about whose values would be promoted and how potential conceptual gaps would be addressed. The EU's conceptualisation of partnership remained internally focused, not fully considering the perspectives and understandings of the Central Asian states. As a result, the conceptual inadequacies of the previous 2007 strategy persisted. The next section will explore the elements of the partnership to shed further light on the EU's approach to cooperation with Central Asia.

Mutual learning

The 2019 Strategy mentions that 'Given the significant differences between the Central Asian countries in their socio-economic development stages and models, the EU will focus on the most acute vulnerabilities, building on existing strengths and concentrating efforts on those areas where it can make a difference' (EU 2019b, p.3). This paragraph illustrates how the principle of differentiation remained a staple part of the EU's approach to Central Asia. This helped the EU contextualise its policies and actions, adjusting its behaviour towards the partner countries. However, the differentiation principle remained incomplete. Once again, it focused on the material qualities of the countries. After a decade-long relationship, cultural boundaries and their possible impact on the cooperation between the two regions should have been recognised. This reflected the EU's failure to learn about partner states effectively over the decade of partnership.

In the area of education, which to some extent has come to mean an instrument that can promote mutual understanding, the 2019 Strategy fails to expand or at least reiterate this value. Education cooperation mainly revolved around technical know-how and upgrading school systems rather

than promoting broader mutual learning. Meanwhile, people-to-people contacts through education were limited to exchanging technical knowledge, missing an opportunity to foster deeper cultural exchanges and understanding.

Unlike the 2007 Strategy, this time around, the new document mentioned mobility as one of the priority areas (EU 2019b, p.5): 'With the aim to improve the management of the migration and mobility within the Central Asian region, and to create the conditions for enhanced people-to-people contacts between the citizens of Central Asian countries and those of the EU and other partner countries, strengthened cooperation will focus on addressing irregular migration in full respect of human rights. This will imply cooperating on border management, readmission of irregular migrants and the reintegration of the returnees, addressing the root causes of irregular migration through promoting vocational training'. However, the content of this paragraph captures the incoherence and non-committal approach of the EU towards the issue of enhancing learning about the other through mobility and migration. The EU's rhetoric turns people-to-people contact into a development programme whereby the EU will assist the countries with the causes of illegal migration. The tackling of illegal migration can be a separate priority from improving mobility between the partner countries to improve people-to-people contact. However, in the EU's conception of partnership, mobility remains a security issue.

However, there were some positive aspects around cultural cooperation discourse. The EU expressed that it would 'develop cultural cooperation with the region to promote partnerships, co-productions and exchanges in the fields of cultural and creative industries, intercultural dialogue and cultural heritage preservation' (EU 2019b, p. 14). Furthermore, 'the EU will promote the mobility of artists and culture professionals through exchanges, training and residencies, while mobility and exchanges in sport could also be encouraged'. There are two positives worth mentioning here. First, the substance of the EU's rhetoric corresponds to what cultural cooperation should be about. It is not about 'fixing problems' in Central Asia but about actual cultural collaboration. Thus, the rhetoric of cultural cooperation is coherent. Second, there is a talk of artists' mobility, which in turn increases people-to-people contact, thus enhancing mutual understanding. Now, what remains to be seen is whether this shift in rhetoric will translate into practice. The next section of the chapter presents the EU elite construction of partnership.

7.3. EU elite construction of partnership

Semi-structured interviews conducted with EU officials in Brussels and the Delegations in Central Asia played a crucial role in addressing the conceptual gaps that document analysis alone could not resolve. These interviews provided three valuable insights into the partnership concept through candid discussions with various officials.

First, according to Korosteleva (2011b), the absence of a well-defined partnership concept in the case of ENP resulted in conceptual inconsistencies among EU officials in Brussels and those in Delegations. However, this study did not identify conceptual inconsistencies among EU officials based in Brussels and Central Asia despite the lack of a clearly articulated notion of partnership and its elements in the official documents that frame the relations between the two regions. The EU officials unanimously expressed that partnership should be voluntary and free from imposition (Interviews 1, 9, 10, 14 and 19). More specifically, partnerships should function like a 'negotiation' (Interview 9), whereby both sides should make concessions as the EU does not seek to force cooperation (Interview 19). Instead, it collaborates with those interested in working with the EU (Interviews 10 and 19).

According to EU officials, to prevent one actor from imposing on the other, partnership should be a 'jointly owned process' (Interview 13) that addresses shared interests and concerns (Interviews 1 and 10). The agenda should be jointly owned because collaboration becomes challenging if a party feels 'strategically imposed' (Interview 10). Even in areas of potential differences and disagreements, such as human rights dialogues, the process should be jointly owned, allowing partners, including Central Asian counterparts, to criticie the EU (Interview 10). The interviews with Central Asian officials confirmed that during human rights dialogues, they are also critical of the EU's handling of migrants in its territory (Interview 5). However, despite the EU's official emphasis on joint ownership, applying the principle in EU – Central Asia relations has been and is less than straightforward. As was mentioned in the earlier section of the chapter, human rights dialogues initially did not envision joint ownership as it was established to allow the EU to raise concerns regarding the violation of human rights by the Central Asian partners. However, the EU's hands were forced to accept the Central Asian agency to criticise the Union during these dialogues. The Uzbek government refused to participate in the dialogues unless they were carried out on the equality principle, thus allowing Uzbekistan to criticise the EU's human rights track record (Axyonova, 2011).

Furthermore, the presence of joint ownership around development cooperation between the EU and Central Asian states is less than adequate. Analysing the three stages of policy cycles (Keuleers, Fonck and Keukeleire, 2016) - agenda setting, implementation, and evaluation - reveals that genuine joint ownership, as reflected in elite discourse, is primarily limited to the agenda-setting stage of development cooperation with Central Asian states (Interviews 9, 13 and 14). In this regard, a genuine shared ownership process appears to be present, as corroborated by Central Asian officials (Interview 11). However, beyond that, Central Asian partners must accept and adhere to the conditions set by the EU (Interview 9). Specifically, they must acknowledge the EU's prerogative to oversee joint program implementation, monitoring, and evaluation, given that the funding originates from the EU (Interview 9).

The EU Delegation directly manages the procurement and contractor selection of the implementing entity, which then bears responsibility for compliance with 'EU rules' (Interview 9). The partner states are then informed of the selected implementing body (Interview 9). The EU officials state that Central Asians have not objected to such cooperation arrangements or the implementing agencies chosen by the EU (Interviews 10 and 13). However, it remains unclear how they could object if they are required to agree to the conditions and rules set by the EU (Interview 9). Partner states can only be in charge of the implementation phase of the programmes and policies that fall under Budget Support, which entails direct money transfers from the EU to partner states (Interview 9). Even then, these states are accountable to the EU as they must fulfil specific criteria and are subject to conditionality attached to upholding shared values of human rights, democracy and the rule of law. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are eligible for Budget Support from the EU. Furthermore, there is no joint monitoring or evaluation program between the EU and Central Asia (Interview 9). One Kyrgyz official emphasised the need for joint monitoring, enabling partners to address the inefficiencies of aid cooperation more effectively (Interview 5). Currently, it is solely the EU that handles this responsibility.

According to EU officials, another significant aspect of partnership is the centrality of dialogue (Interviews 1, 9, 10 and 14). Elite discourse highlights several crucial functions of dialogue. Firstly, dialogue helps establish a common agenda and address joint interests (Interview 19). Partners should be able to discuss topics directly related to them and shared issues such as Afghanistan (Interview 10). Secondly, dialogue serves to diffuse tensions between partners. Consistent and effective dialogues allow for frank discussions during difficult moments, facilitating issue resolution

(Interview 9). Additionally, dialogue allows one to reflect on differences and prevents hasty resorting to negative measures (Interview 14). For example, when the European Parliament requested sanctions against a Kazakh official, the EU Commission opted for critical dialogue instead of punitive measures (Interview 9).

The third crucial function of dialogue in partnerships is to foster a commitment to progress human rights and democracy reforms (Interviews 9,10 and 14). When issues arise, continuous dialogue is employed to raise concerns and work towards improvement (Interview 10). For instance, in the 2022 Uzbek elections, irregularities were reported by EU observers (Interview 10). Instead of severing the partnership, the EU maintained an open dialogue, listening to the Uzbekistan government and reminding them of their commitment to democracy and human rights (Interview 10)

Furthermore, similarly to official documents and in contrast to the views of Uzbek and Kazakh officials, EU elites unanimously emphasise that partnerships must include both top-down and bottom-up actors (Interviews 9, 10, 13 and 14). State actors alone are insufficient, and creating 'dedicated spaces' to involve civil society actors is essential in partnerships (Interview 1). This is because the EU has a strong commitment to civil society in general (Interview 14), and one cannot solely rely on governments to know what is happening on the ground (Interview 1). However, the role of civil society in the partnership is limited to information gathering and consulting as per EU officials, as they are not involved in decision-making processes regarding EU-Central Asia relations (Interview 9).

EU officials recognise the existence of a lack of trust between Central Asian states and civil society actors favoured by the EU. The EU perceives this mistrust as one of the main obstacles to the progress of relations (Interview 9). However, it appears that EU officials do not consider the possibility of alternative forms of civil society that are present or favoured by the Central Asian states. This oversight suggests a need to incorporate and engage with the civil society actors preferred by the Central Asian states in the partnership-building process. For example, Bossuyt and Davletova (2022) make a case for the EU to move beyond its conceptualisation of civil society actors, which are often neo-liberal and accept different forms of community-based actors such as mahalla prevalent in Uzbekistan. They argue that, by acknowledging local forms of civil society, the EU could contribute towards a genuinely sustainable future of societies in Central Asia.

The second finding is that the EU officials demonstrated a consistent approach regarding the role of shared values and a pragmatic outlook towards conditionality and partnership outcomes in the region, which could not be inferred from the document analysis. The EU officials were united in thinking that values and interests are equally essential for partnership. Unlike the Uzbek and Kazakh officials, the EU officials did not emphasise economic relations as the basis of common interests between the regions. After all, neither Kazakhstan nor Uzbekistan are major trade partners of the EU. While there are 'bigger strategic' concerns than Central Asia, such as Russia, China, ENP, Iran and radical Islam, the region is relevant for all these concerns (Interview 10). Thus, security cooperation will remain the core basis of common interest between the EU and Central Asia for the foreseeable future (Interview 9). The EU's prioritisation of security and stability in its relations with Central Asia is shaped by its views of the region as a security threat that needs to be contained, as was unpacked in Chapter 4.

Meanwhile, EU officials emphasise the significance of shared values as the core basis of partnership, particularly when compared to the views of Uzbek and Kazakh officials (Interviews 4, 9, 13 and 14). According to EU officials, shared values will always underpin the partnership between the EU and Central Asian states, as the EU is a treaty-based organisation with a legal responsibility to promote these values (Interviews 13 and 4). They believe that shared values serve as a fundamental framework for sustainable and meaningful collaboration between the EU and Central Asian states, as evident in the EU's more developed relations with Uzbekistan than Turkmenistan (Interviews 14 and 19). The EU officials define shared values as those agreed upon through international agreements within organisations like the UN and OSCE, encompassing principles such as human rights, the rule of law, and democracy (Interviews 4, 9 and 19). In this sense, the EU officials are somewhat justified because, at least on paper, these actors have signed themselves up to respect specific values. However, the officials also recognise resistance to some of these values on the ground, such as the issue of LGBT rights, due to cultural differences (Interviews 9, 10 and 14). Therefore, they know that achieving complete alignment with shared values may not be possible for Central Asia (Interview 10).

Despite these challenges, EU officials maintain the belief that forging a genuine partnership without shared values would be difficult (Interview 14). However, they also acknowledge the need for sensitivity and understanding regarding cultural differences and the gradual progress towards shared values in the region (Interviews 9 and 10). Given the importance of shared values for the

emergence of deeper partnerships (Interview 4), reconciling differences on the ground becomes imperative. EU elites believe that critical statements and conditionality can effectively bridge the gaps in upholding shared values. By leveraging criticisms (Interview 9), the EU aims to push for reforms, considering that Uzbek and Kazakh officials are concerned about their international image (Interviews 1 and 4). It is worth noting that Central Asian countries prefer to emphasise their achievements rather than focusing on what is lacking (Interview 4).

Furthermore, EU officials assert that partnership with the EU, whether at the regional or bilateral level, necessitates conditionality (Interviews 9, 10, 14 and 19). However, the discourse among the EU elite demonstrates a more pragmatic approach than the official documents in the form of EU Parliament resolutions. According to the EU elites, conditionality should function as an incentive (Interviews 1 and 19) and be flexible, avoiding excessive punitive measures that could harm partnerships (Interview 4). They advocate for increased engagement through dialogue and discussion (Interviews 9, 10 and 19) since there may be instances where partner states are unable to meet certain conditions (Interview 4).

The third finding highlights that in contrast to the official documents and their counterparts in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, EU elites are more candid about the differences in perceptions. While shared values remain fundamental to cooperation, there are conceptual differences between the EU and Central Asian states due to cultural contexts, and these differences need to be taken into account in the relations (Interviews 10 and 14). For instance, EU officials admit that the EU finds a presidential system worrying (Interviews 4, 14 and 19), whereas Kyrgyzstan associates it with eradicating corruption (Interview 14). Furthermore, EU officials acknowledge that countries like Uzbekistan will not transition into a 'liberal democracy' like the EU as it still operates as a highly paternalistic patronage system (Interview 10).

However, despite acknowledging these differences, there appears to be a lack of serious consideration among EU officials when addressing them comprehensively. For instance, the interviews reveal that the EU elite's concept of partnership does not emphasise the potential of mutual learning between partners to bridge these conceptual gaps. As a result, policy areas that could foster mutual understanding, such as cultural cooperation and people-to-people contact, are not given priority by EU officials who believe that funds should be allocated elsewhere (Interview 10). Moreover, visa facilitation for Central Asians travelling to the EU is viewed as challenging and politically sensitive due to opposition from Member States (Interview 10). While this study focused

on tracing the presence of mutual learning in the EU's official discourse, the EU's practice on the ground does not fair any better (Interview 12; Korneev and Kluczewska (2022). According to Korneev and Kluczewska (2022), although the EU has exhibited certain changes in its approach to learning about the region over three decades through complex knowledge generation, its actions continue to be more symbolic rather than a sincere effort to integrate that knowledge into its policies in the region. Therefore, in discourse and practice, mutual learning has not taken its place in the EU's approach to Central Asia.

What explains how the EU constructs partnership with Central Asia?

The EU's construction of partnership with Central Asia is influenced by domestic and internal cultural factors, particularly in areas such as opposition to people-to-people contact through mobility and migration from the region and the inclusion of civil society actors in the approach to relations. However, a more significant role is played by geopolitical positioning in relation to China and Russia.

EU officials are aware that the Central Asian states have 'other options' (Interview 10) and that China and Russia will continue to be significant partners for them (Interviews 1, 4, 9 and 10). EU officials also acknowledge the limited impact their financial resources can have (Interview 14) and the reduced leverage they possess, considering the presence of these powerful actors (Interview 10). Nevertheless, the EU recognises the importance of preventing the region from falling completely under the influence of these actors (Interview 1). As a result, the EU adopts a partnership approach grounded in principles such as non-imposition, dialogue, joint ownership, and flexible conditionality. Through these principles, the EU aims to position itself as the 'good guy' distinct from Russia and China, which is genuinely committed to supporting the progress of Central Asia. By projecting itself as the 'good guy', the EU seeks to offer an alternative pole of power to the dominant presence of Russia and China in the region (Interviews 1, 4, 10 and 14).

EU officials differentiate the Union by highlighting its role as a good partner that does not engage in practices like 'debt-trapping', manipulation, or 'disinformation', unlike other regional actors (Interview 19). China employs the debt trap strategy in Central Asia, with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan being particularly susceptible. These countries rely significantly on China, as around 50% of Tajikistan's foreign debt and 40% of Kyrgyzstan's foreign debt is owed to China (Russell, 2019b). In 2021, President Japarov of Kyrgyzstan expressed concern that the country would lose

valuable assets if it failed to repay certain loans from China within the designated timeframe (Radio Azzatyk, 2021). Meanwhile, there has been a notable presence of Russian disinformation campaigns throughout Central Asia to promote the Kremlin's perspective on the conflict in Ukraine (Altynbayev, 2022).

Furthermore, the EU officials assert that 'The EU is probably the only one which is sincere in the neighbourhood' (Interview 1) as it wants to support Central Asia's 'progress, regionalisation and prosperity' (Interview 4) by being reflexive towards the wishes and interests of the countries in the region (Interview 9). In contrast, they assert that it is not in the interest of China or Russia that 'Central Asian states stick together' (Interview 1). Furthermore, EU officials claim that Central Asian states do not want to be overly dependent on China or Russia and, therefore, desire alternative options (Interviews 1, 10, 14 and 19). While 'we are careful about telling them who they can partner or not partner with' because the EU does not like to impose (Interview 10), it is in their interest to have options like the EU to counterbalance China and Russia (Interviews 1 and 4). At the same time, the EU leverages its image as an alternative power to induce change regarding human rights and democracy. Central Asian states benefit from the EU's presence, which is vital for counterbalancing China and Russia (Interview 9). By cooperating with the EU and adopting its norms and standards, including human rights norms, the Central Asian states can improve their international image and attract more external investment (Interviews 1, 4 and 10).

7.4. Conclusion

The chapter examined the construction of partnership in the official discourse of the EU by analyzing pertinent documents that frame EU and Central Asian relations for 2007-2019 and conducting elite interviews. The documents allowed for a chronological tracing of the evolving concept of partnership in the EU's official discourse, while the interviews provided a more nuanced analysis of partnership.

In the context of the history of international political relations, the cooperation between the EU and Central Asia is relatively new, providing an opportunity for improvement and development. Central Asia's region is dynamic and calls for a contextualized approach, including the other in every step of the partnership-building process. The elements of partnership, such as mutual learning, need to be robust and well-developed to achieve meaningful and long-lasting cooperation. Currently, the EU's conceptualisation of partnership in official discourse with Central Asia appears

to fall short of fully considering the partner countries at the forefront. The findings suggest that the EU's construction of partnership with Central Asia is influenced by domestic and internal cultural factors, particularly in areas such as opposition to people-to-people contact through mobility and migration from the region and the inclusion of civil society actors in the approach to relations. However, a more significant role is played by geopolitical positioning with regard to China and Russia. The EU seems to use partnership discourse to counteract geopolitical constraints China and Russia pose. As a result, the EU's partnership may be less about including partner states in the partnership-building process and more about combatting the growing influence of other actors in the region.

Chapter 8 – Conclusions

Central Asia embodies the broader geopolitical changes in international politics, namely the interaction between ascending China and descending Western powers who are no longer at the centre of power relations. Its strategic salience, notably its proximity to Russia, China, and Afghanistan, mineral resources, and crossroads potential between Europe and Asia, carries geopolitical significance for the EU and other major powers. As such, the region increasingly finds itself amid intersecting interests, policies and programmes of powerful regimes of the world. Some have referred to the burgeoning competition between the EU, China and Russia as a return of the Great Game to Central Asia. There is some merit to such an analysis. Thus far, the three actors have not cooperated even in areas such as security and connectivity, where they have common interests. On the other hand, the critics of the Great Game theory argue that such an optic of Central Asia fails to recognise the agency of the states in the region. Indeed, as Cooley put it (2012, pp.8–9): 'the Central Asian states, even the weaker ones, are not passive pawns in the strategic manoeuvrings, but important actors in their own right'. Therefore, it is crucial to move beyond the simplistic analysis of winners and losers and delve deeper into the dynamics at play in Central Asia.

This thesis contributes to this aim by investigating the construction of the notion of partnership in the European Union, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan discourse and the underlying factors that impact its formation. The research aims to delve into the specific ways these actors articulate and shape the concept of partnership, exploring the reasons and motivations behind their discourses. Thus, it asks the following question: How is the notion of partnership constructed in the discourses of the EU, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, and what accounts for the differences?

The rationale behind investigating the question at hand is twofold. Firstly, partnership plays a central role in framing EU relations with Central Asian states, yet a significant gap exists in understanding how these three actors perceive it. Secondly, analysing the notion of partnership within the context of EU-Central Asia relations can enhance our understanding of how the EU, as a foreign policy actor, adjusts to changing power dynamics in regions where it lacks hegemonic influence. Moreover, this case study can provide insights into how less powerful regions navigate power dynamics amidst competing interests. For instance, the Central Asian states' neutral responses to Russian aggression in Ukraine and their engagement with China, despite its debt-trap

approach, highlight the complex decision-making processes and agency of these regions with less power.

To investigate the subject matter thoroughly, this study utilised the partnership theory (Axelrod, 1984; Keohane, 1986; Milner, 1992; Korosteleva, 2014) in international relations as a basis for analysis. The goal was to create a conceptual framework that would aid in conducting a thorough comparison of partnership construction as described in the official discourse of the European Union, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. With this in mind, the conceptual framework was used to analyse the fundamental aspects of partnerships, including their key characteristics, basis, and significance of mutual learning in building effective partnerships. Additionally, an examination of the mutual perceptions between the EU and Central Asian states was carried out to gain insights into their respective approaches to partnership construction. Finally, thematic analysis, a research method that analyses qualitative data such as interviews, speeches, and official documents, was used to identify themes and patterns in the data and provide a detailed analysis. The study relied on MAQXDA software to support the analysis phase of the research.

This case study of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is a deliberate choice as it allows us to analyse two states that possess shared and unique characteristics. More specifically, it gives us the opportunity to challenge assumptions that prioritise the role of power to explain the dynamics of EU and Central Asia relations. With authoritarian governance structures, the political elites play a crucial role in shaping domestic policies in both states. In addition, the elites of both countries favour deeper economic relations with the EU over other areas. Furthermore, both countries adopt a multi-vector foreign policy approach, strategically cultivating relationships with major powers such as China, Russia, and the EU to draw benefits for their respective economies (Krivokhizh and Soboleva, 2022).

However, there are notable differences between the two nations, particularly regarding their economic trajectories and their relations with the EU. Kazakhstan, classified as a middle-income country, is more prosperous than Uzbekistan and no longer qualifies for bilateral aid from the EU but still benefits from the EU's regional development instrument. On the other hand, Uzbekistan, a low-middle-income country, receives bilateral and regional aid from the EU. Put differently, Kazakhstan is economically stronger than Uzbekistan and has less asymmetric relations with the EU from the point of development cooperation. At the same time, the EU is Kazakhstan's most significant economic partner, which is not the case with Uzbekistan. Traditional approaches to examining the EU's partnership with third regions would highlight the asymmetry rooted in

aid/donor relations as an influential factor to explain the differences in how these countries approach their relations with the EU and, in turn, the EU's approach to Central Asian states. However, the findings of this thesis indicate that power dynamics rooted in asymmetry fail to explain the EU and Central Asia relations fully. Instead, in the case of the EU, geopolitics primarily influences the construction of partnership and consequently shape its approach to Central Asia. In contrast, for Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, political elite policies and their perceptions of the EU, together with the current economic trajectories of these countries, play more significant roles.

The study uncovered three key findings regarding the construction of partnerships in the official discourse of the EU, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. Firstly, while the official documents lack a coherent articulation of partnership, this did not result in a contradictory formulation of partnership concepts in the discourses of officials from the EU. Secondly, while all three actors employ the language of partnership, the notion of partnership holds distinct meanings for each actor, and their underlying rationales differ significantly. Thirdly, the discourses of all three actors lack a focus on mutual learning in the partnership-building process. The absence of mutual learning suggests that their approaches to partnership are primarily self-referential rather than actively seeking to understand and incorporate the perspectives and interests of the other party.

8.1. Summary of findings

This section examines how Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan construct partnerships with the European Union. Additionally, we explore the perspectives of the EU on the notion of partnership with Central Asia. Through this analysis, this section aims to highlight the similarities and differences in the accounts of these three actors. Partnership entails the absence of conflict, competition, inactivity, and unilateral behaviour by the involved parties. Instead, partnership is characterised by anticipation, coordination, and mutual concessions, rather than a one-way process of rule transfer often seen in the case of the EU's external governance framework commonly used in the context of Eastern and Southern Partnership. Thus, partnership is defined as the process of – 'when actors adjust their behaviour to the actual or anticipated preferences of others, through a process of policy coordination' (Milner, 1992, p.467). 'Policy coordination, in turn, implies that the policies of each state have been adjusted to reduce their negative consequences for others, whereby cooperation provides the actors with gains or rewards' (Bosse, 2010, p.1294). However, gains do not need to be the same type or equal as long they are mutual and there is a rough equivalence (Milner, 1992).

There can be an asymmetry between partners as long as the stronger actors also try to adjust their behaviour towards the other (Korosteleva, 2014).

Overwhelmingly, the theorisation of partnership and its arguments focus on understanding how power operates between partners (Maxwell and Riddell, 1998; Fowler, 1998; Crawford, 2003; Abrahamsen, 2004). This is also true in the case of studies that aim to examine the EU's partnerships with the third regions (Hurt, 2003; Zimelis, 2011; Nitoiu, 2011; Miyandazi et al., 2018; Kotsopoulos and Mattheis, 2018). However, the latest studies of the EU's partnership turned their attention to the significance of the 'local' through examining constitutive elements of cooperation such as local ownership (Keane, 2005) and resilience (Juncos, 2017). This has somewhat addressed Lister's (2000) criticism that too many scholars overestimate the role of power in partnership, missing the impact of other important factors.

Korosteleva (2011a, 2011b, 2013, 2014) further advanced partnership research in two critical ways. Firstly, unlike other scholars in EU studies, she focused on examining the concept of partnership itself rather than its constituent elements. Secondly, she directed her attention towards the *local* by exploring a crucial aspect of partnership: learning about the other, which had been largely overlooked in partnership research. Considering the political power shifts occurring in the EU's neighbouring regions and the inability to offer Eastern Partnerships the most enticing incentive of membership, Korosteleva made a compelling argument that effective partnerships require prioritising the understanding and knowledge of the other party.

However, while this represents a valuable shift towards exploring understudied aspects of partnership, Korosteleva's conceptualisation of learning about the other overlooks the partner's agency in two ways. Firstly, her research fails to adequately address the importance of mutual learning, emphasising that it is not solely the EU that needs to acquire knowledge about the other, as the other party should actively engage in a reciprocal learning process. Secondly, in addition to learning about the other, partners must also facilitate the other party's learning about themselves by providing access and resources. The learning process is greatly enhanced when both parties contribute to the mutual knowledge exchange. Therefore, while building upon Korosteleva's work, this thesis expands the notion of learning about the other to incorporate these two critical factors and employs the phrase *mutual learning* to represent the aims of the thesis more accurately. Consequently, with the help of a conceptual framework, this study examines the essential characteristics of the partnership concept, its foundation, and the presence of mutual learning in

the official discourses of the EU, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan. The study revealed three key findings.

The first finding is despite the lack of a coherently articulated notion of partnership in the official documents of the EU, the officials did not have contradictory notions of partnership. This finding differs from Korosteleva's (2011b) work, which found that the absence of a coherently developed notion of partnership in EU conceptual and strategy papers with Eastern Partnership states meant that EU officials in Brussels and those in Delegations held contradicting and ill-developed understandings of the concept. According to her, the EU officials did not recognise the tension between the frameworks that relied on one-way rule transfer and rigid conditionality versus partnership based on equality and joint ownership of the relations.

The second finding revealed that the comparative analysis of the Kazakh, Uzbek and EU discourses revealed that partnership entails different things to three actors with some overlaps. The Kazakh elites highlight the role of equality and mutual trust as essential aspects of partnership with the EU. Equality, according to Kazakh officials, partnership entails the absence of bilateral aid in Kazakh-EU relations, thus supporting the claim of President Tokayev (2021) that 'what some may initially have seen as a relationship of asymmetric assistance has become one of genuine partnership, based on innumerable overlapping interests and mutual benefits'. Meanwhile, Kazakh elites believe that trust between partners has played an indispensable role in developing relations with the EU. More specifically, Kazakh discourse states that the EU's relationship with Kazakhstan stands out from its relationships with other Central Asian states due to the presence of mutual trust as a distinctive factor.

While the Uzbek elites underscore the role of equality in partnerships like their Kazakh counterparts, they do not view bilateral aid as a case of asymmetric relations: 'I don't think European Union feel superior toward Uzbekistan or Uzbekistan feels less kind of equal' because of unilateral aid (Interview 11). Unlike the Kazakh officials, the Uzbek elites do not downplay the aid aspect of the relations with the EU, publicly express gratitude for EU funding, and seek assistance where they see fit. Moreover, encoding of the Uzbek elite discourse revealed a greater emphasis on reflexivity, which involves respecting and considering each other's interests, as a vital aspect of the partnership.

In contrast, the central aspect of partnership per the EU discourse is that relations need to be voluntary, and neither side should impose on the other. Therefore, both partners should make concessions through negotiation rather than imposition when differences occur. Furthermore, according to the EU official discourse, the relations must be jointly owned to prevent one side from strategically imposing on the other. However, in the EU's official discourse, joint ownership is limited to discussing issues concerning the partners and setting agendas for common policy areas. For example, Central Asian partners have no involvement in operationalising programmes that the EU funds. In other words, the EU takes complete charge of implementing agreed agendas and selecting third-party implementers. According to EU officials, it is the EU's prerogative as a funder to implement the joint programmes correctly.

However, the most significant difference emerges regarding the role of shared values, such as respect for human rights and democracy in partnership. Unlike the EU, the Kazakh and Uzbek discourses do not consider shared values essential for partnership building. They perceive shared values as one aspect among many within the multidimensional nature of EU and Central Asia cooperation. Meanwhile, EU officials perceive shared values as a non-negotiable requirement for establishing genuine cooperation between partners. The officials of these three actors also have diverging views with regard to mechanisms that anchor shared values. These mechanisms include public criticism and conditionalities. Kazakh officials view the EU's public remarks and criticism of Kazakhstan's human rights records by the EU as evidence of unequal relations and interference in the country's internal affairs. They also argue that conditionalities should be avoided as they harm the relationship. As such, they are less inclined to include criticisms and conditionality tied to shared values as part of their conceptualisation of partnership.

By contrast, there has been a notable transformation over time in Uzbek attitudes towards mechanisms that support the promotion of shared values between Uzbekistan and the EU. The Uzbek elites are more accepting of criticism and conditionalities related to human rights and democracy. However, this was not always the case. Under Islam Karimov's regime, Uzbekistan rejected the idea of cooperating with the EU on human rights and democracy, viewing it as an unequal basis for cooperation. This demonstrates that Uzbek officials previously aligned themselves with the Kazakh perspective on equality in partnerships. However, the current regime in Uzbekistan has adopted a different approach, recognised the significance of shared values and highlighted the EU as a crucial development partner capable of contributing to their internal

democratic and human rights reforms. Moreover, Uzbek elites acknowledge that partners may request specific conditions to be met for certain benefits. Consequently, Uzbek officials are more open to conditionality within the partnership than their Kazakh counterparts. As an illustration, Uzbek officials have publicly expressed their willingness to fulfil and implement 27 conditions related to human rights outlined in agreements such as the GSP+ to secure preferential tariffs for Uzbek goods and gain access to European markets.

The EU's official view of public criticisms and conditionalities that anchor shared values with Central Asian countries reveal further differences. The EU elites viewed these public criticisms as a leverage mechanism to push for results rather than infringing on equality between partners, given Uzbek and Kazakh partners are concerned about their international image (Interview 9). Conditionality is also considered the norm in partnerships with the EU, especially when the Union is the aid donor. However, EU officials emphasise the importance of prioritising dialogue before resorting to conditionalities in all cases. Furthermore, the EU prefers to use positive conditionalities such as incentives rather than negative ones like sanctions because they perceive the latter to be detrimental to partnerships. Nonetheless, EU officials clarify that both types of conditionalities should remain on the table in their relations with Central Asia if severe human rights abuses occur.

Another significant difference among the partners emerged regarding the role of non-state actors in the partnership-building process. Kazakh and Uzbek officials view the partnership as a top-down process, focusing on connections between government branches rather than involving non-state actors like civil society organisations. In contrast, the EU officials emphasised that partnerships should involve top-down and bottom-up actors. This is because EU officials believe one cannot rely solely on government officials to know what is happening.

Lastly, all three actors viewed the role of institutionalised dialogues as the cornerstone of partnerships. However, there were distinctions among them about the role of such dialogues in EU and Central Asia relations. Kazakh officials believe dialogues ensure equality by preventing one party from dominating the agenda. At the same time, the Uzbek elites see them as essential for accurately reflecting Uzbekistan's economic interests and wishes. Meanwhile, the EU officials viewed dialogues as preferable to criticisms or punitive measures such as conditionalities between partners (Interviews 10 and 14). Thus, one significant function of dialogues in EU partnerships is to remind partners of their international obligations and encourage their commitment to human rights and democracy rather than maintaining equality and reflexivity in the relationship.

The third important finding of the thesis is that mutual learning is not adequately emphasised in the official discourse of all three actors when conceptualising partnership. Incorporating mutual learning into a partnership involves two steps. Firstly, the actors must recognise potential gaps and disparities in their perception of key concepts that underpin their relations. In this regard, the Kazakh discourse demonstrates a relatively better understanding than the Uzbek discourse, as they acknowledge the differences in political conduct between Kazakhstan and the EU. On the other hand, the Uzbek elites do not publicly address these differences in their discourse on EU relations. Meanwhile, EU documents overlook the possibility of conceptual gaps with partner states regarding human rights and democracy. In contrast, EU officials are more aware of these differences and their underlying reasons. For instance, EU officials acknowledge that the political history of Central Asian states under the Soviet Union might contribute to their suspicion of non-state actors and their reluctance to involve them in the partnership. There is also an understanding among EU officials that Central Asian countries, due to their cultural context, may not fully adopt liberal democracies similar to the EU.

The second step involves recognising that cooperation in specific areas, such as people-to-people contact, cultural exchange, education, and research collaboration, can foster mutual learning. However, the official discourses of the EU, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan inadequately incorporate mutual learning in these areas. Notably, the potential of cultural cooperation to promote mutual understanding is absent from the official discourses of all three actors. Similarly, the significance of people-to-people contact in fostering mutual understanding is not adequately emphasised. The Kazakh discourse mainly focuses on educational exchanges, but it could be argued that an educated segment of the population is already exposed to differences to a greater extent. On the other hand, the Uzbek discourse completely overlooks the significance of people-to-people contact as an essential area of cooperation and a means to promote mutual learning. Meanwhile, the EU's default approach to addressing conceptual differences relies on engaging in critical dialogue, public criticisms and conditionalities rather than fostering mutual understanding through intercultural dialogue, people-to-people contact, and education.

8.2. Explanatory factors shaping the notion of partnership in each actor's discourse.

Numerous scholars have extensively analysed the concept of partnership between the European Union and various regions, overwhelmingly remarking on the presence of conditionality and

unequal relations as the expletory factors determining cooperation outcomes. These factors can be broadly regarded as EU-related impediments to effective partnerships. However, EU-Central Asia relations present a more intricate scenario. Firstly, what sets EU-Central Asia relations apart is their distinctive nature, defined by a lack of historical, cultural, and geographical ties, distinguishing them from other cases. Secondly, the Central Asian countries do not exhibit significant interest in the EU's most attractive incentive—membership—nor seek exclusive partnerships with other parties. Thirdly, the EU acknowledges its limited regional influence and, as a result, necessitates greater flexibility and consideration towards its partner states. Thus, neither the EU nor the EU-related factors can fully account for the differences in how these three actors conceptualise partnerships and the overall dynamics of EU-Central Asia relations.

The constructions of partnership in the case of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are predominantly shaped by political elite policies, elite perceptions of the EU and economic trajectories of the countries. Uzbek and Kazakh conceptualising of partnership identifies economic relations as the main basis of mutually beneficial relations. This is driven by the elite policies which primarily aim to develop the economies of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. However, these countries have different economic trajectories, accounting for the differences in the Uzbek and Kazakh partnership construction.

In the case of Uzbekistan, the construction of a partnership with the EU underscores the principle of reflexivity, which entails awareness and consideration of the country's specific needs, namely economic goals. Additionally, Uzbekistan is more willing to cooperate around democracy and human rights and accept conditionality and criticisms as part of the partnership concept with the EU. The rationale behind this is that by aligning with the EU through a partnership framework, Uzbekistan aims to leverage the resources and expertise of the EU to bolster its economy and trade ventures as well as improve its international image, with the latter being consequential on the other. The single most influential catalyst for such a rationale is related to Uzbekistan's political leadership. Since Mirziyoyev assumed power in 2016, there has been a shift in Uzbekistan's domestic and external politics. Domestically, the country is aggressively pursuing economic reforms and externally, the elites are actively constructing the country's image as a global actor by conducting open and constructive foreign policy. However, these policies are interrelated as they aim to improve the country's economic position, and the EU is relevant for both goals. Uzbekistan is keen to access European markets, attract European investments, and establish trade agreements

such as the EPCA. At the same time, cooperation around shared values with the EU allows the Uzbek regime to present itself as a global actor that upholds universal human rights, enhancing its international reputation and increasing its credibility in the eyes of the international community, thus bringing in more economic investments.

Related to the economic elite policies of Uzbekistan, regional dynamics arising from the geographical locations of these two actors also shape the partnership discourse of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan with the EU. Unlike Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan is much more susceptible to regional instability emanating from Afghanistan. Uzbek officials believe that the success of internal politics of economic prosperity, to a great degree, depends on the stability of Afghanistan. Therefore, to seek international support, Uzbekistan is the only country in Central Asia that refers to Afghanistan as part of the region, as shown in Chapter 4. As such, the EU's support for regional stability and connectivity is vital for the economic policies of Uzbekistan.

Meanwhile, by highlighting equality and trust in the partnership with the EU, Kazakh officials aim to position Kazakhstan as an equal partner to the EU while simultaneously distinguishing the nature of Kazakh-EU relations from those of other countries in the region. Although Kazakh elites undoubtedly emphasise economic ties with the EU like Uzbek counterparts, Kazakhstan is at a different economic trajectory and image construction stage from Uzbekistan. Due to its mineral resources, Kazakhstan has already achieved middle-income country status and has signed an important political and trade agreement with the EU. Moreover, literature has shown that the Kazakh political elites have been engaging in international image construction with the help of the EU for quite some time (Anceschi, 2014; Collins and Bekenova, 2017). Thus, it is at a different stage of image construction, namely, an equal partner to the EU. Both these factors mean Kazakhstan can resist the critical engagement of the EU in its internal affairs.

The perceptions of the Uzbek and Kazakh elites of the EU also influence their conceptualisation of partnership. For Uzbekistan, the EU is primarily a development and reform partner. Meanwhile, the Kazakh elites view the EU as an economic partner and often downplay the EU's regional aid to the country. The former implies an unequal status between partners; one is already at the desired destination, helping the other. Therefore, there is a space for teaching and possibly critical engagement in such relations. For example, the Uzbek official discourse stresses the importance of informing the EU of the reforms it is conducting. In contrast, the Kazakh discourse suggests an equal partnership where both parties contribute to each other's development. Kazakh elites state

that Kazakhstan and the EU contribute to each other's development. In other words, the partnership between Kazakhstan and the EU is a 'win-win' (Interview 6). Meanwhile, Uzbek discourse is less likely to stress how the country will help develop the EU.

For the EU, the partnership discourse is a vehicle to geopolitically position itself with regard to China and Russia in Central Asia. The EU aims to counterbalance the influence of these rivals in the region. However, as the strategic significance of Central Asia to the EU's security and stability increases, the EU faces limitations in comparison to Russia's provision of traditional security assistance to Central Asian governments and China's financial resources. To address this challenge, the EU employs principles such as non-imposition, joint ownership, and dialogue to shape its image as a benevolent actor. This portrayal positions the EU as a 'good-guy' genuinely committed to supporting the progress of Central Asia (as supported by Interviews 1, 4, 10, and 14). This good-guy image helps the EU to offer itself as an alternative pole of power with distinguishing positive qualities compared to Russia and China. Simultaneously, the EU uses its supposed good-guy image as leverage to steer the Central Asian countries to cooperate in economic and human rights reforms.

The EU's construction of partnership is further influenced by the EU's perception of the region. The EU primarily perceives the region as a security threat that can destabilise its own and neighbourhood territory rather than a trade partner. Therefore, the EU prioritises stability and security in its relationship with the region through promoting democracy and human rights. Consequently, economic and trade relations are not prioritised in the same way as by the Uzbek and Kazakh regimes.

Lastly, domestic politics impact the EU's approach to partnerships. Within the EU's domestic landscape, a sense of accountability exists for its taxpayers, who are keenly interested in how their money is spent. Therefore, the EU's insistence on upholding human rights as a condition for funding stems from this accountability to its population. This accountability also explains why joint ownership of initiatives is limited to agenda-setting, as the EU needs to ensure that funds are allocated and used in specific ways, warranting proper financial accountability. As a result, the EU often chooses to collaborate with Western-style civil society organisations that can meet the established criteria for fund accountability rather than local non-state actors. Furthermore, domestic politics within EU member states, including concerns regarding increased migration, constrain promoting people-to-people exchanges with regions such as Central Asia through liberalising or easing visa processes.

In all three cases, cultural context is another factor influencing how the EU, Uzbek, and Kazakh officials perceive partnerships, particularly concerning shared values and the inclusion of non-state actors in relations with the Union. The EU considers human rights, democracy, and civil society as integral to the security and stability of Central Asia. Within the EU's cultural context, civil society plays a critical role in holding authorities accountable and shaping the political landscape, making their promotion of human rights and democracy essential. On the other hand, Kazakh and Uzbek officials prioritise state and regime security as the primary guarantor of stability in their countries and view *Western-style* civil society actors with suspicion. These differences also explain why the perception of partnership remains elite-driven in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, with limited people-to-people exchanges in other parts of society. The influence of cultural factors in how these three actors construct partnerships underscores the importance of mutual learning in EU-Central Asia relations.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The findings of this study suggest that political discourses are more than rhetorical devices. They can be instrumental in unpacking the intricacies of inter-state relations and the factors that impact them. This study presented three main findings by analysing the official discourses of the EU, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. First, while each actor uses the notion of partnership, their rationale varies. Second, the meaning of partnership differs from one actor to another due to several factors such as domestic, geopolitical, cultural, and perception of the other. Third, in all three discourses, mutual learning is not included in the partnership construction. The policymakers of the European Union and Central Asian countries must carefully consider the differences in the partnership construction between the two regions, as these differences have significant implications for the effectiveness and success of their cooperation efforts. By understanding and addressing these disparities, policymakers can facilitate more robust partnerships.

Firstly, the divergent constructions of partnership reflect the distinct political, economic, and security interests of the European Union and Central Asian states. Policymakers must recognise and respect these divergences to build trust and facilitate meaningful collaboration. Ignoring or downplaying these differences can lead to misunderstandings and disagreements. Secondly, acknowledging the disparities in partnership construction enables policymakers to tailor their approaches and strategies accordingly. European policymakers, for example, may emphasise democracy, human rights, and normative values, while Central Asian policymakers may prioritise

economic development, stability, and security. By recognising these variations, policymakers can design policies and initiatives that address both sides' specific needs and concerns, leading to more effective and mutually beneficial outcomes. Moreover, understanding the differences in partnership construction helps policymakers anticipate potential challenges and barriers to cooperation. It allows them to address issues arising from contrasting expectations and priorities proactively. Finally, by engaging in open and transparent dialogue, policymakers can bridge the gaps between their respective partnership constructions and work towards finding common ground. This can involve compromise, flexibility, and the willingness to learn more about the other to accommodate the particularities of both regions.

Ultimately, by acknowledging and addressing the differences in the construction of partnerships, European and Central Asian policymakers can foster more robust and effective partnerships. This requires active listening, open-mindedness, and a commitment to understanding and respecting the perspectives and interests of each region. By doing so, policymakers can build trust, enhance cooperation, and work towards shared goals, thereby maximising the potential for successful partnerships between Europe and Central Asia.

8.3. Contribution to literature

The study makes discrete but valuable contributions to the theoretical and empirical literature by examining the foreign policies of the EU, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan. Empirically, the study provides original data from interviews conducted with European and Central Asian elites and experts. A total of 19 interviews were carried out, focusing on obtaining insights from high-level elites. While gathering the perspectives of Central Asian elites posed challenges, their contributions proved invaluable. While a few scholars have touched upon the official opinions of Kazakh and Kyrgyz elites regarding cooperation with the EU, the perspectives of Uzbek officials have been mainly overlooked, probably due to difficulties in accessing them. Furthermore, given the relatively limited attention given to Central Asia in broader EU studies, there has been a lack of thorough exploration of EU officials' first-hand views and perceptions through interviews. Therefore, by amalgamating data from officials representing these three actors, this research significantly contributes to enhancing original knowledge in the field of EU and Central Asia scholarship.

This study makes a valuable theoretical contribution to the conceptual framework of partnership by adopting an International Relations perspective and explicitly focusing on the region of Central

Asia, which has been largely neglected in partnership research. The EU-Central Asia relations differ from the typical aid partnerships often examined in Development Studies. Traditional studies in this domain focus on power dynamics exerted by dominant actors. However, unlike the North-South dynamics observed in other regions, EU-Central Asia relations do not involve a historical colonial relationship. In addition, the presence of Russia as a traditional hegemon and colonial power and China as a powerful neighbouring country introduces a unique dimension to EU-Central Asia relations. The study goes beyond the conventional power dynamics framework by considering factors such as leadership, domestic politics, and partners' perceptions. This broader perspective allows for a deeper understanding of the dynamics in EU-Central Asia partnerships, moving beyond a simplistic power-centric analysis.

Theoretically, the study contributes to EU, Central Asia and regionalisation studies. The contribution to EU studies is threefold. Firstly, it enhances our understanding of the foreign policy approaches of the EU in its near neighbourhood. By examining the EU's engagement in Central Asia and its competition with China and Russia, the study demonstrates how the EU strategically employs the partnership discourse to differentiate itself as a benevolent actor focused on supporting the interests and aspirations of Central Asian countries. This sheds light on the EU's efforts to establish its presence and influence in the region while navigating competition with other major powers. Secondly, the study enriches our comprehension of the complex nature of the EU by presenting the perceptions of multiple institutions and actors. By analysing the evolving views of different EU institutions on Central Asia and their relations with the region over a decade, the study highlights the multi-institutional and multi-level character of the EU. This contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of the EU as a complex actor with diverse perspectives and interests within its institutional framework. Thirdly, the study explores the role of mutual learning in the EU's official discourse by utilising document analysis and elite interviews. By investigating this aspect of EU-Central Asia relations, the study enhances our understanding of how the EU learns about new regions.

With respect to Central Asia studies, the study dedicates considerable attention to foreign and domestic policy strategies of Central Asia. It explains how the EU, as an external partner, impacts the political processes in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Chapter 4 enhances our understanding of the evolving regionalisation in Central Asia, a region often characterised as lacking cohesion. The study uncovers a shared comprehension among

regional elites concerning Central Asia, indicating a consensus on the matter. However, variations were also observed due to the interplay of leadership dynamics and geopolitical factors that influence the regionalisation process. For instance, despite Tajikistan and Turkmenistan sharing borders with Afghanistan, the elites of these countries do not perceive Afghanistan as a constituent part of Central Asia. In contrast, the Uzbek elites consider Afghanistan an essential component of Central Asia, driven by Uzbekistan's internal policies aiming to access South Asian markets through Afghanistan. This underscores the political elite's significance in shaping Central Asia's regionalisation.

Lastly, the thesis made an analytical contribution to EU-Central Asia studies by presenting the perceptions of both the EU and Central Asian actors. A scholarly gap exists in offering the views of the Central Asian elite and societies. By providing detailed views of Central Asian elites regarding the partnership concept and their perceptions of the EU, this study contributed to closing this gap.

Limitations and future research

Despite the valuable contributions made by this study, it is essential to acknowledge its limitations. Firstly, the generalizability of the findings to other case studies needs to be critically examined due to the unique dynamics of EU and Central Asia relations. Thus, it is necessary to highlight the specific aspects of the research process and the uniqueness of EU-Central Asia relations.

During the study, one limitation arose from the constraints beyond the researcher's control. The analysis of partnership construction was conducted over a staggered time frame due to the availability of data on the EU's official discourse, covering the period from 2007 to 2022. However, limited data and access to officials willing to participate in the research constrained the examination of Uzbek and Kazakh discourse from 2016 to 2022. Although this did not hinder the study from drawing valuable insights, a more extended analysis period would have provided a richer understanding of changes and shifts over time. Additionally, the study primarily focused on the elite construction of partnerships, which restricted the scope of research by not including a broader range of actors. Moreover, the research employed thematic analysis as its methodology, capturing the available data within the boundaries of this approach. Other research methods, such as discourse analysis, may offer further insights and enrich our understanding of how these actors construct partnerships. Critical discourse analysis, for instance, is better suited to unveil power relations by analysing how language is utilised to uphold or challenge hegemony in a given case

study. Therefore, discourse analysis would be a recommended research method if one aims to identify dominant ideologies within the discursive strategies of various states.

Regarding the unique aspects of EU-Central Asia relations, it is noteworthy that Central Asia is not a colonial subject of the EU member states, which often characterises North-South ties. Furthermore, the region lacks significant cultural and linguistic similarities with the EU and does not have a geographical proximity that would grant the EU substantial leverage. Moreover, Central Asia's proximity and importance to other significant actors, such as Russia and China, allow it to leverage the interests of these powers for its benefit, which sets it apart from other smaller regions. These factors significantly influence the power dynamics in EU-Central Asia relations, making them unique.

By acknowledging these limitations and understanding the uniqueness of EU-Central Asia relations, future research can build upon these findings and explore additional dimensions to enhance our understanding of this complex partnership. To begin with, a deeper exploration of the topic could involve gaining more access to different levels of elites in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. While this case study primarily focused on investigating the notion of partnership as perceived by high-level elites based in the capital cities, obtaining insights from elites across various groups and regions could provide additional perspectives. Another potential area of investigation is to examine how Central Asian states construct partnerships in their relations with other regional actors, such as China and Russia. This thesis has already highlighted that these actors, mainly through organisations like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation, promote conflicting concepts compared to the EU. Therefore, it would be valuable to understand how these countries navigate and balance their commitments to different partnership models in their relations with the EU, China, and Russia.

Additionally, examining the role of political leaders in emphasising the importance of shared values in building partnerships would provide useful insights. In specific instances of EU-Central Asia relations, there were periods when intensified efforts to enhance cooperation in human rights and democracy promotion by the EU occurred. Similarly, the ascension of Mirziyoyev to power in Uzbekistan altered the discourse of collaboration with the EU in this regard, despite geopolitical dynamics remaining unchanged, such as the presence of China and Russia. Further studies could give us insights into how certain countries' leadership competes with other significant factors, including regional and global geopolitics in domestic and foreign policy contexts.

Further studies could explore whether the EU employs a similar strategy through the discourse of partnership when competing with China and Russia in other regions. These potential research directions can expand our knowledge and contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of EU-Central Asia relations, addressing the existing gaps and nuances in perception, practice, and societal dynamics.

8.4. Implications of the discourses of partnership for the relationships between the actors

Kazakh and Uzbek official discourses recognise the importance of their relationships with the EU for their domestic and foreign policies. Similarly, the EU acknowledges the crucial role that stability, security, and prosperity in the Central Asian region have in directly or indirectly impacting its territory. However, while all three actors use the language of partnership, their partnerships' content, objectives, and priorities differ, reflecting their distinct political, economic, and security interests. This divergence challenges building closer ties and cooperation, affecting regional power dynamics and beyond.

The varying perceptions of partnership among these three actors could negatively impact the EU's image in the region and its ability to utilise its image to compete with other states and distance itself from its previous reputation as an imposing and inflexible actor. The EU portrays itself as a genuine and reflexive partner committed to fostering stability, security, and prosperity in the region rather than engaging in geopolitical games. The countries in the region broadly accept this perspective. Therefore, the EU's ability to self-reflect and adapt its behaviour based on feedback from its partners is crucial to maintaining its image as a reflexive partner. However, if the EU disregards the concerns of Central Asian countries regarding issues like equality and values, its reflexive image may be jeopardised. Furthermore, trust in its partnerships could erode if the EU's partners perceive its partnership discourses as primarily driven by its interests rather than a genuine desire for cooperation and mutually beneficial relationships. This might be detrimental to the emergence of long-term partnerships and further increase the influence of China and Russia in the region.

From the perspective of Central Asian states, aligning their notion of partnership with the EU brings various benefits. Central Asian elites recognise the value of the EU and the areas in which it can benefit them. They increasingly understand that the region's sustainable development and green economic growth can benefit from the EU's expertise. However, the EU clearly states that shared

values are essential for closer relations. Genuine cooperation regarding shared values will keep the EU member states interested (Interviews 1 and 19) and ultimately benefit the countries in the long run by bringing in the much-needed aid money to the region, the EU know-how and European economic investment these actors desire so much. Furthermore, the EU has been the only genuine supporter of regionalisation in Central Asia. The five landlocked states cannot escape their geography and need each other. A stronger Central Asia is better together rather than divided amid growing geopolitical competition. The EU's willingness to enhance the agency of Central Asia as a region rather than individual disconnected countries presents a valuable opportunity that Central Asian regimes should consider embracing. Moreover, ignoring the growing anxiety of their population concerning increasing Chinese influence (CAB, 2022) is hardly beneficial to the longevity of the regimes of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Finally, the divergent interpretations of partnership have significant implications when selecting appropriate mechanisms for relations, especially considering the limited resources which need to spread across various areas of cooperation between the EU and Central Asia. This impacts both the EU and Central Asia equally. For example, the EU relies on civil society actors to promote democracy in Central Asia. Meanwhile, Central Asian regimes mistrust such actors and object to their involvement in the partnership-building process. Despite this, the EU has previously opted to bypass the regimes and directly collaborate with these actors. However, this approach did not receive a positive reception from the Central Asian partner countries, resulting in a deadlock. At the same time, as per the EU discourse, the ill-treatment and exclusion of civil society actors by Central Asian states are hampering closer relations between the regions. Given these challenges, it is worth questioning the wisdom of the EU's approach to partnership and the Central Asian regimes' disregard for recognising the importance of civil society in the EU's external action. It would be more advantageous for partner countries to recognise the differences in their understanding of partnership and work towards developing a viable version of this concept. In practice, this would entail genuine efforts by the partners to promote mutual learning, which the three actors do not include as a critical partnership element. By doing so, they can formulate policies and select mechanisms that genuinely benefit all parties involved.

Appendix A: List of interviewees

Interview 1 Online interview with an EU official, 22 March 2021.

Interview 2 Online interview with a European expert, 14 September 2021.

Interview 3 Online interview with a European expert, 26 March 2021.

Interview 4 Online interview with an EU official, 25 March 2021.

Interview 5 Online interview with a Kyrgyz official, 11 June 2021.

Interview 6 Online interview with a Kazakh official, 14 May 2021.

Interview 7 Online interview with an Uzbek official, 21 May 2022.

Interview 8 Online interview with a European expert, 23 March 2021.

Interview 9 Online interview with an EU official, 16 April 2021.

Interview 10 Online interview with an EU official, 14 September 2021.

Interview 11 Online interview with an Uzbek official, 01 July 2021.

Interview 12 Online interview with a European expert, 26 April 2021.

Interview 13 Online interview with an EU official, 03 May 2021.

Interview 14 Online interview with an EU official, 16 April 2021.

Interview 15 Online interview with a Kazakh official, 14 May 2021.

Interview 16 Online interview with an Uzbek civil society representative, 29 July 2022.

Interview 17 Online interview with an Uzbek expert, 05 July 2022.

Interview 18 Online interview with a European expert, 08 September 2021.

Interview 19 Online interview with an EU official, 24 March 2021.

Appendix B: Consent and Ethics forms

Informed Consent Form

The EU and Central Asia: Constructing Partnerships on Europe's Periphery?

Dilafroz Gulomova

This form is for you to state whether you agree to take part in the study. Please read and answer every question. If there is anything you do not understand, or if you want more information, please ask the researcher.

Please tick box

Have you read and understood the information leaflet about the study?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Have you had an opportunity to ask questions about the study?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Have you had your questions answered satisfactorily?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Do you understand that the information you provide will be held in confidence by the researcher?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Do you understand that your participation is voluntary and that you are free to withdraw at any time, without giving reasons; and should you withdraw your participation none of the information provided will be used and no record of your participation kept?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Do you understand that the information you provide may be used in future research?	Yes ❒ No ❒
Do you agree to take part in the study?	Yes ❒ No ❒

If yes, do you agree to your interviews being recorded? *(You may take part in the study without agreeing to this).*	Yes ❒ No ❒
This research will guarantee anonymity wherever possible. At no point will your name, position or any other personal details appear in the research outputs. However, this research may require mention of your institution or body. Given this information, do you consent to proceed?	Yes ❒ No ❒

Name (in BLOCK letters):

Signature:

Interviewer's name: Dilafroz Gulomova

Date:

Participant Information Sheet

Background

The University of York would like to invite you to take part in the following research project,

Before agreeing to take part, please read this information sheet carefully and let us know if anything is unclear or you would like further information.

What is the purpose of the study?

The EU and Central Asia are committed to a long-term partnership and this research aims to help policymakers improve cooperation between these regions. In order to do so, the study will examine recent EU-Central Asia (CA) relations under the framework of *The EU in Central Asia: The Strategy for New Partnership.* The main purpose of the research is to evaluate to what extent the recent EU-CA relations reflect 'partnership' in rhetoric and in practice. The project seeks to reveal potential gaps and whether this impacted the relations between EU and Central Asia.

Why have I been invited to take part?

This study will be carried out by myself, Dilafroz Gulomova, a PhD candidate in the Politics Department at the University of York. You have been invited to take part because your official position, knowledge, expertise, and/or involvement on the subject matter are deemed to be of relevance to the empirical study of this research. If you decide to take part, the process will take between 20-40 minutes.

Do I have to take part?

No, participation is optional. If you do decide to take part, you will be given a copy of this information sheet for your records and will be asked to complete a participant information form. If you change your mind at any point during the study, you will be able to withdraw your participation without having to provide a reason.

On what basis will you process my data?

Under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the University has to identify a legal basis for processing personal data and, where appropriate, an additional condition for processing special category data.

In line with our charter which states that we advance learning and knowledge by teaching and research, the University processes personal data for research purposes under Article 6 (1) (e) of the GDPR:

Processing is necessary for the performance of a task carried out in the public interest

Special category data is processed under Article 9 (2) (j):

Processing is necessary for archiving purposes in the public interest, or scientific and historical research purposes or statistical purposes.

Research will only be undertaken where ethical approval has been obtained, where there is a clear public interest and where appropriate safeguards have been put in place to protect data.

In line with ethical expectations and in order to comply with the common law duty of confidentiality, we will seek your consent to participate where appropriate. This consent will not, however, be our legal basis for processing your data under the GDPR.

How will you use my data?

Data will be processed for the purposes outlined in this notice.

Will you share my data with 3rd parties?

No. Data will be accessible to the project team at York only.

How will you keep my data secure?

The University will put in place appropriate technical and organisational measures to protect your personal data and/or special category data. For the purposes of this project, we will create a password-protected and encrypted folder that will be kept at the University's central storage to ensure your data is always stored securely. To further increase the safety of your data, the researcher has devised a detailed Data Management Plan, which will be followed at all stages of the project.

Information will be treated confidentiality and shared on a need-to-know basis only. The University is committed to the principle of data protection by design and default and will collect the minimum amount of data necessary for the project. In addition, we will anonymise or pseudonymise data wherever possible.

Will you transfer my data internationally?

No. Data will be held within the European Economic Area in full compliance with data protection legislation.

Will I be identified in any research outputs?

Your anonymity is important to us and this research will guarantee it wherever possible. However, the research may require mention of your institution or body, which could lead to your identification. At no point will your name, position or any other personal details be used during this research.

How long will you keep my data?

Data will be retained in line with legal requirements or where there is a business need. Retention timeframes will be determined in line with the University's Records Retention Schedule.

What rights do I have in relation to my data?

Under the GDPR, you have a general right of access to your data, a right to rectification, erasure, restriction, objection or portability. You also have a right to withdrawal. Please note, not all rights apply where data is processed purely for research purposes. For further information see, https://www.york.ac.uk/records-management/generaldataprotectionregulation/individualsrights/.

Questions or concerns

If you have any questions about this participant information sheet or concerns about how your data is being processed, please contact xx in the first instance. If you are still dissatisfied, please contact the University's Acting Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@york.ac.uk.

Right to complain

If you are unhappy with the way in which the University has handled your personal data, you have a right to complain to the Information Commissioner's Office. For information on reporting a concern to the Information Commissioner's Office, see www.ico.org.uk/concerns.

The researcher can be contacted at the address: *Mrs Dilafroz Gulomova: dgw509@york.ac.uk*

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Appendix C: Tables & Figures

TABLES

FIGURES

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