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Central Asian Perceptions of the EU

Insights from ATLAS.ti Analysis of Mass Media in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan

The research explores the perception of the EU in Central Asian mass media, specifically focusing on Kazakhstan and Tajikistan comparatively. Four news agencies, two from each country, were selected, and news articles related to the EU published between 2019 and 2023 were collected. The guiding question for this study is: How is the EU portrayed in mass media in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan? To answer this question, a mixed-method approach was employed, and collected data were analysed using ATLAS.ti, a computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software. The main finding from this analysis is that in Kazakhstan, the EU is predominantly portrayed as an economic powerhouse, highlighting its significant contributions to economic development through initiatives, partnerships, and investments. Tajikistan's media emphasises the EU's role as a security partner and humanitarian supporter, particularly addressing regional challenges originating from Afghanistan. These findings demonstrate that Central Asian mass media primarily regard the EU as an economic power, with limited recognition of its role in security sector reform and trade norms, and its normative power is barely visible in the region.

Keywords: EU, Central Asia, economic cooperation, security partner

Introduction

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the early 1990s, Kazakhstan and Tajikistan emerged as independent nations, embarking on significant political and socioeconomic transformations. Both countries, as transitional post-totalitarian societies, prioritised the establishment of friendly and strategic relationships with global geopolitical actors, including Russia, China, the U.S., and the EU.² Kazakhstan has notably achieved diplomatic success through the establishment of partnerships with the U.S. and European countries. In 2008, Kazakhstan adopted the Path to Europe programme, paving the way for enhanced cooperation with the EU. Tajikistan, adopting an open-door

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² KASSEN 2018: 314.

policy and a multi-vector strategy, similarly emphasises equality and mutual interests in its foreign policy, particularly encouraging foreign investments for economic development.³ Tajikistan faced the challenges of a devastating civil war from 1992 to 1997, leaving lasting implications on its social and economic structures. The EU has become a crucial economic partner for Tajikistan, with a focus on economic, trade, and foreign investment. Tajikistan's commitment to economic collaboration is evident in its recognition of the EU as a crucial economic partner, particularly highlighted in the Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Republic of Tajikistan. This engagement extends to various European institutions, including the European Parliament, the European Commission, the European Council, and the European Investment Bank.⁴

The strategic nature of cooperation is repeatedly stressed in the media. The President of Kazakhstan, as quoted in *Vremya*, highlights the strategic significance of the partnership with the EU, particularly emphasising its role as Kazakhstan's largest trading partner.⁵ Kazakhstan has deepened its ties with the EU through the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement, effective since 1 March 2020.⁶ The EU's Strategy on Central Asia serves as a comprehensive framework for regional engagement, emphasising resilience and prosperity, aligning with Kazakhstan's transition to a green economy and economic diversification. Notably, the EU is a pivotal trade partner for Kazakhstan, representing a substantial portion of its external trade and foreign direct investment.⁷ Similarly, the EU's relationship with Tajikistan has evolved significantly since 1991, with the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement serving as the foundation since 2010. It is important to note that negotiations for an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement commenced in 2023, underscoring the dynamic nature of these relations.⁸

In the broader context of Central Asia, after gaining independence from the Soviet Union, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan pursued distinct foreign policies. Turkmenistan notably adopted a policy of neutrality, while the other four countries implemented a multi-vector approach, balancing relations with various international actors. Russia, a key player in the region, maintained political, economic, and military influence through bilateral relations and regional organisations like the Eurasian Economic Union and Collective Security Treaty Organization. China, with a direct border with three Central Asian countries, emerged as a significant economic partner, engaging in projects such as the Belt and Road Initiative.

The EU's increasing interest in the region, driven by geopolitical considerations, energy resources, and the war on terror in Afghanistan, led to enhanced engagement. The EU established diplomatic relations with all Central Asian countries and played an active role through its Delegations in the region. The economic dimension is a cornerstone of EU–Central Asia relations, with the EU being Kazakhstan's most significant trade partner, representing nearly 30% of its external trade in 2021. The EU's role as a major investor in Kazakhstan, comprising 48% of total gross Foreign Direct Investment flows,

³ RIZOYON 2021.

⁴ Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan 2015.

⁵ *Vremya* 2023a.

⁶ European External Action Service 2023a.

⁷ European External Action Service 2023a.

⁸ European External Action Service 2023b.



underscores the depth of economic collaboration.⁹ The multifaceted trade relationship encompasses exports and imports, with the EU playing a pivotal role in Kazakhstan's economic diversification efforts.

This study undertakes a comprehensive analysis of perceptions of the EU in Central Asia, with a specific focus on media portrayals. The study of perceptions of the EU in Central Asia through media holds significant importance for several reasons, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of international relations, regional diplomacy, and the broader geopolitical landscape. First and foremost, understanding how the EU is portrayed in Central Asian media serves as a barometer for the effectiveness of the EU's diplomatic efforts and its image-building initiatives in the region. Media, as a powerful disseminator of information, shapes public opinion and influences the narrative surrounding international actors. Moreover, Central Asia, with its diverse socio-cultural fabric and historical ties to other major powers like Russia and China, presents a complex environment where the EU seeks to establish its normative influence. A perception study allows for a nuanced analysis of how the EU's values, policies, and partnerships are perceived in the region, providing policymakers with valuable data to tailor their engagement strategies. Additionally, media portrayals play a crucial role in shaping public attitudes toward international actors, influencing public opinion on issues ranging from economic cooperation to political alignment. This, in turn, can impact the broader political climate and potentially influence policy decisions at both national and regional levels. Furthermore, as Central Asia increasingly becomes a focal point for global powers, including Russia, China, and the United States, understanding how the EU is positioned in the media narratives of Central Asian countries becomes essential for comprehending the region's geopolitical alignments.

The EU has been described with various terms such as civilian, soft, and normative power over time. Among these, the concept of Normative Power has sparked considerable debate among researchers and has significantly influenced the EU's self-identification on the global stage. Ian Manners popularised the notion of the EU as a Normative Power, arguing that its ability to shape the behaviour of others by exporting its values distinguishes it as a unique actor in world politics.¹⁰ Article 2 of the Treaty of the European Union explicitly states that "the Union is founded on the values of respect for human dignity, freedom, democracy, equality, the rule of law, and respect for human rights",¹¹ extending to the EU's external relations as articulated in Article 21, which mandates that "the Union's action on the international scene shall be guided by the principles which have inspired its own creation, development, and enlargement",¹² highlighting democracy, the rule of law, human rights, and related principles as guiding pillars. In both the 2007 EU strategy to Central Asia and its updated version in 2019, the European Union is committed to promoting its norms within Central Asian countries through bilateral and multilateral channels. The 2007 strategy outlined primary areas of cooperation, including economic development, trade and investment, energy,

⁹ European External Action Service 2023a.

¹⁰ MANNERS 2002.

¹¹ European Union 2016.

¹² European Union 2016.



and transport links, and addressing common threats and challenges. Additionally, softer value-based clusters such as human rights, rule of law, good governance, democratisation, youth and education, and intercultural dialogue were emphasised.¹³ These themes were further refined and expanded upon in the 2019 strategy. The latter updated strategy integrated all previous themes into three interconnected and mutually reinforcing priorities: partnering for resilience, partnering for prosperity, and enhancing collaboration.

Kazakhstan and Tajikistan have been selected as case studies due to their distinct positions in the spectrum of EU engagement in Central Asia. Kazakhstan, as the region's economic powerhouse, stands out as the EU's main trade partner among the Central Asian nations. Its economic significance, marked by substantial exports to the EU and diversified trade relations, presents a compelling case for examining the depth and dynamics of EU–Kazakhstan economic ties. On the other hand, Tajikistan, while not a major economic player, has received the most developmental assistance in the region from the EU, particularly for post-civil war rehabilitation efforts. The aid flows to Tajikistan underscore the EU's developmental and diplomatic engagement, reflecting a commitment to fostering stability and growth in a country that has faced socio-economic challenges. By contrasting these two Central Asian nations, the case study aims to provide a comprehensive perspective on the multifaceted nature of EU relations in the region, spanning economic cooperation with Kazakhstan and developmental assistance to Tajikistan.

This research aims to address the following key question: How is the EU portrayed in mass media in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan? This involves conducting an in-depth exploration of the prevailing themes, narratives, and overall framing of EU-related topics within the media landscape of these Central Asian countries. The study specifically focuses on articles published after June 2019 until the end of 2023 on the websites of four selected news agencies, with 2019 chosen as a pivotal date marking the adoption of the new EU–Central Asian Strategy.

Literature review

In recent years, research on external perceptions of the EU has gained attention in European foreign policy studies, highlighting the importance of moving beyond the traditionally dominant European-centric views of the EU's role in global affairs.¹⁴ The majority of EU external perception studies primarily focus on questions such as EU partners' views of its role in global politics and how these external perceptions compare to EU's self-representation.¹⁵ In this respect, Larsen suggests that studies on the EU's external perception provide valuable insights into the ongoing debate about whether the EU can be considered a normative power.¹⁶

¹³ HOFFMANN 2010: 95.

¹⁴ LUCARELLI 2014: 11.

¹⁵ OSPANOVA et al. 2016.

¹⁶ LARSEN 2014: 897.



Among the many research projects in EU foreign policy, the work of the following research projects is noteworthy to mention when examining studies on the EU's external perceptions. The National Centre for Research on Europe, led by Chaban and Holland, at the University of Canterbury, pioneered early research in this area. The Centre has conducted a major research initiative since 2002, aimed at identifying, measuring, and comparing perceptions of the EU across Asia-Pacific countries.¹⁷ *The EU through the Eyes of Asia: Media, Public, and Elite Perceptions in China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Thailand*, edited by Martin Holland, Peter Ryan, Alojzy Z. Nowak, and Natalia Chaban, examines the perception of the EU in six Asian countries: Hong Kong, China, Japan, Korea, Singapore, and Thailand.¹⁸ Their work employs methods such as semi-structured interviews, surveys, and media content analysis to explore perceptions of the EU across economic, political, and cultural dimensions. The study results indicate that the EU is widely acknowledged as a leading economic power in Asia. However, its political influence is often underestimated, and perceptions differ across the various countries and regions examined. As noted in the 2019 study by Holland and Chaban, this variation in perception arises because "every location tells a unique story of the EU, shaped by local priorities, self-visions, and cultural filters, as well as by the EU's actions and global contexts".¹⁹ The authors concluded that the "EU needs to rethink how it is being perceived by its constituency and to make a greater effort to explain its actions".²⁰

The edited volume *Shaping the EU Global Strategy: Partners and Perceptions* in 2019 by Natalia Chaban and Martin Holland explores the impact of shifting global power dynamics in the 21st century on the EU's influence. It addresses the challenges faced by the EU, including internal crises such as migration, the Eurozone crisis, and Brexit, which have impacted its global reputation. These crises, together with shifts in global power, have introduced new challenges in shaping the EU perception. The volume explores how the media, decision-makers, and the general public perceived, interpreted, and received these crises in the EU's ten strategic partner countries. These partners include the USA, Canada, Japan, South Korea, Mexico, and the five BRICS countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa. The research is based on two primary sources: media content analysis conducted between April and June 2015 and public opinion surveys completed by September 2015.²¹

Another important contribution came from the GARNET project, coordinated by Lucarelli and Fioramonti, which broadened the research scope to include various global regions. GARNET, a Network of Excellence on Global Governance, Regionalisation, and Regulation: The Role of the EU, was funded by the European Commission's 6th Framework Programme. The project brought together 42 leading research centres and universities and was coordinated by the Centre for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation at the University of Warwick.²² Within the GARNET network, a comprehensive survey on the *External Image of the European Union* was conducted, with working papers released

¹⁷ CHABAN–HOLLAND 2008: 4.

¹⁸ HOLLAND et al. 2007.

¹⁹ CHABAN–HOLLAND 2019: 21.

²⁰ HOLLAND et al. 2007: 24.

²¹ CHABAN–HOLLAND 2019.

²² Centre for the Study of Globalisation and Regionalisation 2010.



in two phases over different years. The research report from the first phase, published in 2007, focused on the following countries: Canada, Brazil, Australia, China, India, Japan, Egypt, and South Africa. The project conducted surveys to capture public opinion, elite views, and media coverage, and also analysed the perspectives of civil society organisations to assess how the EU is perceived in these nations. The findings from this phase indicated that knowledge of the EU was limited, particularly among certain groups, such as civil society and the general public in the countries studied. The research demonstrated a clear gap between the EU's self-presentation and how it is perceived outside Europe, especially in the Global South. Generally, the EU is seen as an important economic power, a supporter of multilateralism, and a valuable strategic partner. It is also regarded as a model of regional integration and, in some cases, a potential counterbalance to the dominance of the United States. The study found that the EU is rarely perceived as a normative power.²³ The report for the second phase of the project, *The External Image of the European Union*, was published in 2009. This phase focused on how the EU is perceived in a range of countries, including Israel, Iran, Mexico, Palestine, Russia, Lebanon, the United States, and Venezuela. In addition to these countries, the study also explored the views of international and regional organisations such as the African Union, Al Jazeera, the UN General Assembly, national representations in Brussels, and the World Bank. The authors used the same methodology as in the previous phase, while also incorporating documentary sources and interviews to better understand the perspectives of international and regional actors. The findings largely mirrored those from earlier studies, highlighting both commonalities and differences in how the EU is perceived across the countries and organisations analysed. The authors concluded that there is a notable gap between the EU's self-perception and how it is viewed by public, government elites, civil society groups, and the media in countries outside of Europe.²⁴

In addition to the broader transnational projects, several country-specific studies have provided valuable insights into how the EU is viewed around the world. These studies highlight both unique national perspectives and common themes across different regions, using methods like content analysis, focus groups, interviews, and surveys. The EU's image varies widely by region, with differing levels of awareness and opinion in each. While global awareness of the EU has generally increased, it remains relatively low in many areas. Across these studies, the EU is often seen primarily as an economic power, known for its role as a major trade partner, large market, and key source of foreign investment.²⁵ However, the idea of the EU as a normative power is not as widely recognised or visible in these perceptions. Chaban et al. observed that while the normative dimension was considered completely absent in interviews in the Pacific region, it was somewhat visible in Africa and Southeast Asia, alongside environmental

²³ LUCARELLI 2007a.

²⁴ FIORAMONTI–LUCARELLI 2009: 540.

²⁵ LUCARELLI 2007b.



and developmental dimensions.²⁶ Studies conducted by Morini et al.²⁷ and Olivier and Fioramonti²⁸ indicated that the EU was not perceived as a normative power in Brazil, China, India, Russia, and South Africa. Similarly, in New Zealand, while the EU was acknowledged as an important partner, its image as a normative power was overshadowed by its economic significance and historical ties.²⁹

The perception of the EU in Central Asia remains relatively underexplored compared to other regions of the world. Fortunately, this gap is beginning to be addressed, as scholars from Central Asia and beyond have increasingly focused on this topic in recent years. Zhanibek Arynov has conducted in-depth studies on how the EU is perceived in Central Asia, particularly in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In his article *Opportunity and Threat Perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan*, Arynov examines intermediate elites' complex and shifting views toward the EU. He explains that these perceptions are "highly complex and issue specific", meaning that the EU is seen as either an opportunity or a threat, depending on the situation and the topics at hand.³⁰ The results show that the EU is seen as a model of "European standards", representing high quality in areas such as economic development, political institutions, and social welfare in both countries. However, despite these positive views, Arynov highlights persistent concerns about the EU's normative agenda among intermediate elites. While some of these elites value European democracy, especially its emphasis on transparency and the rule of law, others fear that it could undermine societal cohesion. Furthermore, the EU's promotion of "non-traditional" values, such as the rights of sexual minorities, is often perceived by intermediate elites as a challenge to local cultural and moral norms.³¹ In addition to Arynov's work, the article of Ospanova et al. *Mass Media Perception of the European Union in Kazakhstan* investigates how the EU is portrayed in Kazakhstan. Their analysis examined the content of news articles from four major national newspapers: *Yegemen Kazakhstan*, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, *Zhas Alash*, and *Vremya*. The results of their findings show that the media in Kazakhstan generally portrays the EU positively.³²

While studies like those by Arynov and Ospanova et al. provide valuable insights, the literature review reveals significant gaps. Research on the EU's perception in Central Asia has primarily focused on Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, leaving the EU's perception in other Central Asian countries largely unexamined. Addressing these gaps is crucial for understanding the EU's influence and effectiveness in the region. This research aims to contribute to filling this gap in literature to some extent.

²⁶ CHABAN et al. 2013.

²⁷ MORINI et al. 2010.

²⁸ OLIVIER-FIORAMONTI 2010.

²⁹ HOLLAND et al. 2005.

³⁰ ARYNOV 2022: 738.

³¹ ARYNOV 2022.

³² OSPANOVA et al. 2016.



Research methodology

This study employed a mixed methods approach to thoroughly explore how the EU is depicted in Central Asian mass media, combining both quantitative and qualitative analyses to ensure a comprehensive understanding.

Data collection

To assess the EU's image in mass media, four news websites were selected – two from Kazakhstan and two from Tajikistan. To maintain neutrality, one news agency funded by the government and one independent news agency were chosen from each country. Two of the selected news agencies, *Kazinform*³³ and *Khovar*,³⁴ are state-funded and hold prominent positions in their respective countries, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan. *Kazinform*, as the leading state information agency in the Republic of Kazakhstan, has earned international recognition and provides official information on the activities of the President's Administration, Parliament, Government, regional authorities, and national financial and industrial structures. Meanwhile, *Khovar*, as the central news agency in Tajikistan, plays a vital role in disseminating information related to domestic and foreign affairs, encompassing political, economic, social, and cultural aspects. On the independent front, *Vremya*³⁵ represents Kazakhstan and *Asia-Plus*³⁶ represents Tajikistan. *Vremya* is a republican daily socio-political newspaper in Kazakhstan, serving as an independent platform for news dissemination. In contrast, *Asia-Plus* stands as an independent media group in the Republic of Tajikistan, comprising three distinct entities operating under one brand: An Information Agency, a Publishing House, and a Tele-Radio Company. These independent agencies contribute to a pluralistic media landscape, offering perspectives beyond the official narratives and providing diverse insights into political, economic, social, and cultural developments in their respective countries. The distinction between state-funded and independent agencies adds a crucial layer to the analysis, allowing for a nuanced examination of media portrayals of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The focus was on analysing coverage related to the EU and individual EU member states. Keywords associated with EU–Central Asia relations, such as EU, European Union, European Commission, European Council, EU Delegation, and Euro, were used for the search. Over one thousand articles in Russian language were collected from the websites, with Russian versions preferred due to the predominant use of the language in both countries. After thorough review, 966 articles were selected for further analysis.

³³ See: <https://en.inform.kz/>

³⁴ See: <https://eng.khovar.tj/>

³⁵ See: <https://time.kz/>

³⁶ See: <https://asiaplustj.info/en>



Data analysis

The research employed computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software – ATLAS.ti, to facilitate efficient coding and data management. This paper followed a six-step generic qualitative data analysis method proposed by Creswell.³⁷ The process began with data preparation, organising collected data from the news agencies into separate folders. In the second step, all articles were read, and those where the EU was not the main focus were excluded. The remaining documents were then added to the ATLAS.ti project, totalling 966 documents. The third step, which is a more important part of the research, involved a coding process that included segmenting sentences or paragraphs into categories and labelling them with terms.³⁸ News articles were grouped based on their sources – news agencies into the following groups: *Kazinform*, *Vremya*, *Khovar*, *Asia-Plus*. Firstly, based on the general coverage topic of news, all articles were coded into EU–Central Asia relations, EU–bilateral relations (EU–Kazakhstan and EU–Tajikistan), EU–Foreign Policy, and EU–internal affairs. Then, each related paragraph of a news article to the topic of research was coded based on the coverage. In the fourth step, code groups were created to capture the areas of relationship coverage. The final two steps of the analysis involved presenting the findings in a narrative and interpreting the data, which will be elaborated in the subsequent sections of this article.

The European Union in the eyes of Kazakhstani and Tajikistani mass media

In this section of the paper, the main findings of the research about EU perceptions from the perspectives of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan's mass media are presented. After carefully reviewing news articles from four different media sources in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, a total of 966 articles were selected for further analysis and coding. Specifically, 352 articles were collected from *Kazinform*, and 110 articles were obtained from *Vremya*, making a total of 462 articles analysed from Kazakhstani news websites. Additionally, 286 news articles were gathered from *Khovar*, and 218 articles were sourced from *Asia-Plus*, bringing the total number of articles analysed from Tajikistani media to 504. In Figure 1, the percentage of news related to the EU collected from four news articles shows that 47% of the analysed articles are from Kazakhstani news websites and 53% of them are from Tajikistani media.

³⁷ CRESWELL 2009: 172.

³⁸ CRESWELL 2009.



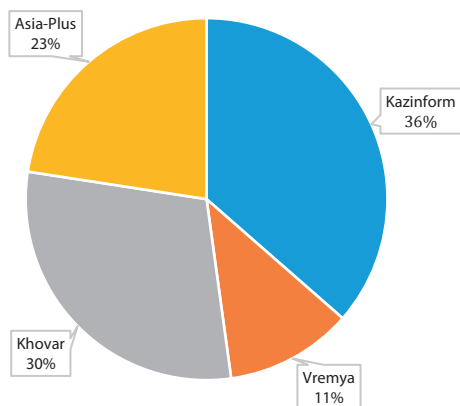


Figure 1: The percentage of selected news articles from four news websites

Source: compiled by the author based on the ATLAS.ti database

All the documents collected from various sources were categorised into four groups based on their content. The initial coding focused on the coverage of different aspects of news articles. Specifically, 83 articles were coded under “EU–Central Asia” for coverage related to the regional relations between the EU and Central Asia. Another 182 articles fell under “EU–Kazakhstan”, concentrating on news related to the bilateral relations between the EU and Kazakhstan. Similarly, there were 188 articles coded under “EU–Tajikistan” for coverage of bilateral relations with Tajikistan. In total, both countries had 370 news articles covering bilateral relations. Overall, 453 articles covered a mix of regional and bilateral relations. Furthermore, the analysis revealed extensive coverage of the EU’s foreign and internal policies across all media sources. Specifically, 128 news articles addressed the EU’s foreign policy, while 386 articles delved into the internal policies of the EU within the context of selected Central Asian media. In this paper, mostly articles coded as “EU–Central Asia”, “EU–Kazakhstan”, and “EU–Tajikistan” were used for further detailed analysis.

The analysis of coded content from four prominent mass media sources in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan reveals several prominent themes in their coverage of relations with the EU. A comprehensive examination of news articles identified key areas of discussion, providing valuable insights into the priorities and dynamics of EU engagement in these Central Asian nations. In Figure 2, the ten most discussed areas of cooperation are presented, based on the results from the ATLAS.ti database. In the subsequent subsection of this part, the most discussed areas of the relationship in mass media will be examined in detail, with citations to articles from all four news agencies.



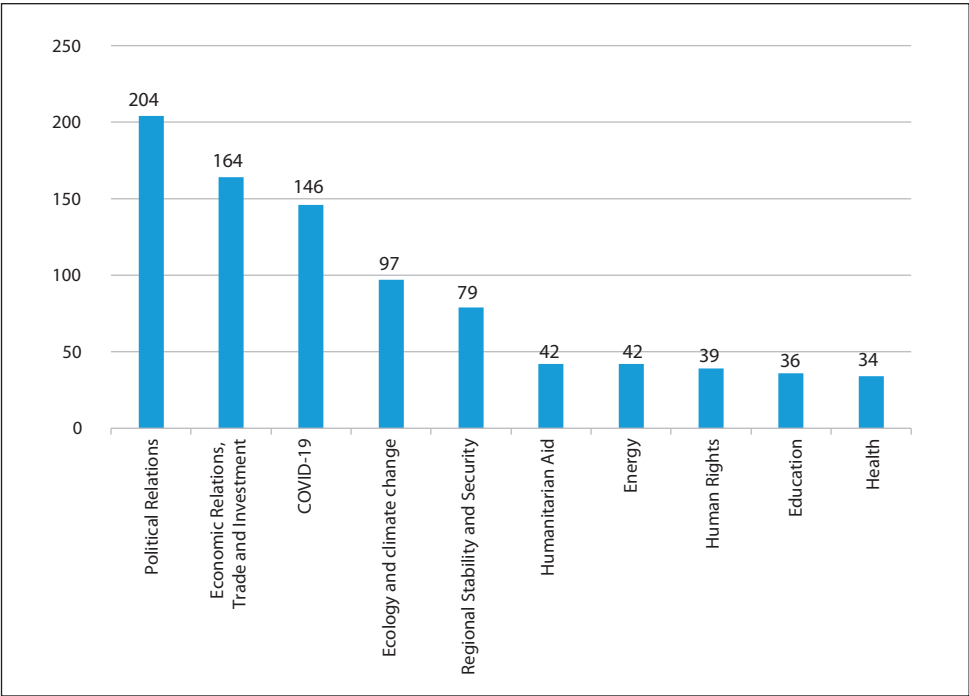


Figure 2: The ten most discussed areas of cooperation based on news articles from four news agencies, ranked by the number of applied codes
Source: compiled by the author based on the ATLAS.ti database

Political relations

Political relations emerge as a central theme in both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, with a total of 204 news articles dedicated to this category. This focus underscores the significance of political dynamics and diplomatic ties between the countries and the EU. In Kazakhstan, political relations garnered 102 news articles, mirroring a parallel emphasis in Tajikistan’s media.

Both *Kazinform* and *Vremya*, as media outlets in Kazakhstan, cover the political relations between Kazakhstan and the EU, highlighting key events, and diplomatic engagements. In term of similarities, both media outlets extensively cover official visits, diplomatic meetings, and discussions between Kazakh representatives, including President Tokayev, and EU officials. This includes interactions with the Vice-President of the European Commission, European Parliament members, and EU ambassadors. Both sources emphasise the importance of agreements and partnerships between Kazakhstan and the EU. The entry into force of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement



is highlighted in both *Kazinform* and *Vremya*, underscoring its significance in various areas of cooperation.³⁹ Both media outlets maintain a positive tone in their coverage, emphasising the importance of the relationship, mutual respect for sovereignty, and the commitment to furthering cooperation in various fields.

In terms of differences, *Vremya* seems to provide more in-depth coverage, offering detailed insights into diplomatic discussions. *Kazinform*, while covering similar topics, might focus more on official announcements and high-level summaries. *Vremya* places additional emphasis on the symbolism of events, such as the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations, portraying them as evidence of the aspiration to expand cooperation. *Kazinform*, while covering similar events, may present them more straightforwardly. *Vremya* includes a broader regional context, highlighting the commitment to dialogue between Central Asia and the EU. *Kazinform*, while covering regional aspects, may place a slightly greater emphasis on bilateral Kazakh–EU relations.

In Tajikistan, *Khovar*, extensively covers the political relations between Tajikistan and the EU, emphasising key diplomatic engagements and high-level meetings. The media underscores significant diplomatic meetings, particularly those involving Tajikistan's leadership such as President and Foreign Minister, with EU officials.⁴⁰ *Khovar* extensively covers diverse areas of cooperation, spanning politics, economics, and culture. The emphasis is on the constructive and multifaceted nature of collaboration, highlighting shared interests and mutual benefits.⁴¹ The media places notable importance on the regional context, especially in relation to Central Asia. Reports highlight meetings involving multiple Central Asian states and the EU, indicating a broader regional approach to cooperation. *Khovar's* comprehensive coverage reflects a positive and cooperative tone in the political relations between Tajikistan and the EU. The media highlights multifaceted cooperation across political, economic, and regional dimensions, with a particular focus on addressing shared challenges in Central Asia, including those arising from Afghanistan.

Asia-Plus extensively covers the political relations between Tajikistan and the EU, focusing on key developments and diplomatic activities. The media reports on visits by high-ranking EU officials to Tajikistan, such as the visit of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia. These visits are highlighted as opportunities to discuss important aspects of cooperation and development in *Asia-Plus* news.⁴² *Asia-Plus* provides insights into the negotiations between the EU and Tajikistan for an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. The focus is on enhancing cooperation in politics, trade, economics, governance, rule of law, and human rights.⁴³

³⁹ Kazinform 2020a.

⁴⁰ Khovar 2019a.

⁴¹ Khovar 2019b.

⁴² Asia-Plus 2019.

⁴³ Asia-Plus 2023a.



Economic relations, trade, and investment

Economic relations, trade, and investment constitute the second most discussed theme in the mass media of both countries, with 164 articles devoted to this category, and it is coded as “Economic relations, Trade, and Investment” in the ATLAS.ti programme. In the economic domain, Kazakhstan emerges as a regional powerhouse, showcasing robust ties with the EU, while Tajikistan appears to be steadily expanding its economic collaboration. Within Kazakhstan, the media particularly emphasises economic relations, with 93 news articles delving into the substantial economic ties between the EU and Kazakhstan. Similarly, Tajikistan expresses its interest in developing economic relations through 71 news articles.

Kazakhstan’s media, represented by *Kazinform* and *Vremya*, consistently emphasises the country’s economic prowess and its pivotal role in EU–Kazakhstan relations. *Kazinform*’s coverage on “Economic relations, Trade, and Investment” provides insights into Kazakhstan’s economic ties with the EU. *Kazinform* underscores Kazakhstan’s robust economic relationships, spotlighting the EU as a significant contributor to foreign investment and trade partnerships, shaping the nation’s economic trajectory. According to *Kazinform*’s news report, over \$330 billion in foreign direct investment has flowed into Kazakhstan since independence, with more than half originating from EU member states.⁴⁴ The media underscores Kazakhstan’s standing as the leading trade partner for the EU in Central Asia, with a substantial share, ranging from 30% to 50% of Kazakhstan’s foreign trade turnover attributed to EU collaboration.⁴⁵ Key trade partners within the EU include Italy, the Netherlands, France, and Greece.⁴⁶

Vremya’s coverage underscores the significance of Kazakhstan’s economic relations with the EU, emphasising sustained trade turnover, strategic partnerships, and substantial EU investments in Kazakhstan’s economy. According to *Vremya*’s informations, the strategic partnership is underscored by Kazakhstan being the first country in Central Asia to sign an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU back in 2015.⁴⁷ The EU’s significant investment in Kazakhstan’s economy, totalling \$160 billion, solidifies its position as the largest investor in the country.⁴⁸ This economic engagement has resulted in Kazakhstan holding the distinguished status of being the EU’s leading trading partner in Central Asia, with a total bilateral trade volume of \$24 billion in 2020.⁴⁹ The growth trajectory continues, with the trade turnover exceeding \$20.2 billion in the first half of 2023, reflecting the sustained nature of economic interactions.⁵⁰ Notably, Italy stands out as a significant partner, with an annual trade turnover of about \$15 billion.⁵¹

⁴⁴ Kazinform 2019.

⁴⁵ Kazinform 2020b.

⁴⁶ Kazinform 2020b.

⁴⁷ Vremya 2021a.

⁴⁸ Vremya 2021b.

⁴⁹ Vremya 2021b.

⁵⁰ Vremya 2023b.

⁵¹ Vremya 2023c.



President Tokayev recognises this economic dynamism, praising the development of trade, economic, and investment ties with the EU.⁵²

On the other hand, Tajikistan, as portrayed by *Khovar* and *Asia-Plus*, is gradually making strides in economic ties with the EU. Reports from *Khovar* outline the trade turnover between Tajikistan and the EU at \$173 million for nine months of 2019.⁵³ While this figure is notably smaller than Kazakhstan's, it reflects a positive trend in Tajikistan's economic relations. The media highlights the EU's investments in Tajikistan, covering areas such as joint ventures, projects, and economic programmes totalling around €89.3 million.⁵⁴ The news text also brings attention to Tajikistan's potential entry into the EU's Economic Benefits Programme (GSP+), which grants customs privileges for Tajik goods and products entering the EU territory.⁵⁵ *Khovar's* analysis provides a detailed insight into the economic relations between Tajikistan and the EU, covering trade turnover, joint ventures, direct investments, and collaborative projects.

Asia-Plus provides insights into the economic relations, trade, and investment dynamics between Tajikistan and the EU. *Asia-Plus* highlights the initiation of talks between the EU and Tajikistan to develop a new comprehensive framework, known as the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement. These negotiations are deemed a significant milestone in EU–Tajikistan relations, with a focus on enhancing interaction in politics, trade, economics, governance, rule of law, and human rights.⁵⁶ *Asia-Plus* quotes the European Council President emphasising the substantial role of the EU Member States as the largest source of foreign direct investment in the Central Asian region, contributing over 40% of foreign direct investment.⁵⁷

Comparatively, Kazakhstan's more mature and developed economic relations with the EU are evident. Its status as a major recipient of EU's Foreign Direct Investment, a substantial trade partner, and a hub for EU investments underscores its economic leadership in the region. Meanwhile, Tajikistan, with a smaller economic footprint, is progressively expanding collaboration with the EU, showcasing potential growth and mutual benefits.

Regional security and stability

Regional security and stability emerge as crucial topics, with a total of 79 articles across both countries. This theme is especially pronounced in Tajikistan, where around 59 news articles, coded as “Regional Security and Stability”, emphasise the significance of EU–Tajikistan relations in the security sector. Given Tajikistan's extensive border with Afghanistan, maintaining security is a top priority for the nation.

The texts from *Kazinform* and *Vremya* shed light on the collaborative efforts between Kazakhstan and the EU in the realm of security and stability. *Kazinform's*

⁵² Vremya 2021b.

⁵³ Khovar 2019c.

⁵⁴ Khovar 2019c.

⁵⁵ Khovar 2019b.

⁵⁶ Asia-Plus 2023a.

⁵⁷ Asia-Plus 2023b.



report emphasises the positive experience gained by Kazakhstan and the EU in their international interactions, specifically highlighting joint efforts in the anti-nuclear track and the pursuit of regional stability and security.⁵⁸ *Vremya's* coverage extends beyond Kazakhstan and delves into the broader Central Asian region. The EU's commitment to supporting Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan in preventing extremism and religious radicalisation is underscored.⁵⁹ This support is detailed as an allocation of €4 million by the European Commission for various initiatives, including media support, civil society organisations, and public action to counter violent extremism.⁶⁰ This collaboration extends to addressing transnational organised crime, human trafficking, drug trafficking, and cybersecurity threats.⁶¹

The security and stability discourse in *Khovar* and *Asia-Plus* publications highlights the commitment of Tajikistan and the EU to jointly combat global threats, particularly focusing on border security with Afghanistan and ongoing collaboration in programmes such as Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA) and Central Asian Drug Action Programme (CADAP). *Khovar* reports discussions on various security aspects, including the fight against terrorism, extremism, drug trafficking, and strengthening protection along the Tajik–Afghan border.⁶² *Asia-Plus* underscores the EU's support for peace, security, and regional cooperation, emphasising areas such as border management, counterterrorism, organised crime prevention, climate change mitigation, and disaster risk reduction.⁶³ Joint statements and meetings between EU and Central Asian representatives, especially focusing on the implications of the situation in Afghanistan, underpin the commitment to security and sustainability in the broader region.⁶⁴

While both sets of media outlets, *Kazinform* and *Vremya* from Kazakhstan, and *Khovar* and *Asia-Plus* from Tajikistan, underscore the importance of regional security, there are differences in the depth and specificity of their coverage. Tajikistani media delve deeper into the nuanced aspects of security cooperation, providing more intricate details on joint efforts and specific programmes. Kazakhstan's media, while highlighting its positive role in regional security, tends to provide a broader overview without going into as much detail.

When analysing the co-occurrence of codes related to regional stability and security with other topics, a clear pattern emerges, highlighting the paramount importance of security in the Central Asian context. In the ATLAS.ti programme, co-occurrence coding involves assigning one sentence or paragraph to multiple codes based on their coverage. In Figure 3, the co-occurrence of codes related to “Regional Stability and Security” with other security-related codes is shown, according to a figure generated by ATLAS.ti. The code for regional stability and security is frequently associated with discussions about the situation in Afghanistan, efforts in fighting against terrorism and extremism, and

⁵⁸ Kazinform 2020a.

⁵⁹ Vremya 2019.

⁶⁰ Vremya 2019.

⁶¹ Vremya 2020.

⁶² Khovar 2019a.

⁶³ Asia-Plus 2019.

⁶⁴ Asia-Plus 2022.



initiatives like CADAP and BOMCA. This pattern underscores the heightened focus on security concerns, particularly given the challenging circumstances in Afghanistan. Central Asian countries express a keen interest in collaborating on security matters, as evidenced by their involvement in initiatives such as CADAP and BOMCA. These projects aim to enhance security cooperation and border management capacities in the region. Notably, Tajikistani mass media stands out in applying the code for “Regional Stability and Security”, highlighting a specific emphasis on security discussions within this country. This heightened attention is likely influenced by Tajikistan’s extensive border with Afghanistan, making regional stability and security a top priority. The cooperative efforts and initiatives in the security sphere underscore the shared commitment among Central Asian nations to address challenges emanating from the situation in Afghanistan, with a collective focus on combating terrorism, extremism, and strengthening regional security frameworks.



Figure 3: ATLAS.ti-generated figure showing the most co-occurring codes of Regional Stability and Security with other security-related codes

Source: compiled by the author based on the ATLAS.ti database

Diverse areas of cooperation

In addition to the most discussed codes analysed above, other areas of relationship are also widely discussed in Kazakhstan’s and Tajikistan’s mass media. Reflecting global concerns during the period when news articles were published (2019–2023), Covid-19 emerged as a focal point in media discussions. A total of 146 articles across both countries addressed the effects of the pandemic on EU internal and external policies. Environmental considerations, specifically ecology and climate change, feature prominently in both Kazakhstan’s and Tajikistan’s media. With 31 articles in Kazakhstan and 66 in Tajikistan, the media extensively covers discussions on environmental issues and collaborative efforts with the EU in this sphere. Humanitarian aid and energy cooperation share equal attention in media discussions, with 42 news articles dedicated to each area. Tajikistan’s media places a stronger emphasis on humanitarian aid, with 32 articles highlighting the EU’s support to Tajikistan in this sphere. Meanwhile, energy cooperation remains an area of mutual interest for both parties.



The analysis also explored the following areas of relations: human rights (39), education (38), water resources and management (32), agriculture (29), logistics and transportation (23), cultural relations (22), digitalisation (18), counter-terrorism and extremism (17), rule of law (15), border management (15), tourism (12), research cooperation (9), civil society (7), and sport (6). These areas were discussed to varying degrees, indicating different levels of development in specific areas of relationship and demonstrating the region's level of interest. These numbers of codes illustrate the level of visibility of different areas of the EU's relationship with Central Asian countries in mass media. This suggests that Central Asian countries primarily perceive the EU as a political and economic ally in the region, while the normative power aspect, crucial to the EU's foreign policy direction, remains scarcely visible.

Conclusions

In conclusion, this research has undertaken a comprehensive exploration of the media landscapes in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, focusing on the portrayal of the EU in the post-June 2019 period. The study has revealed a multifaceted narrative that captures the intricate dynamics of EU engagement in Central Asia, emphasising geopolitical interactions, economic cooperation, and regional security.

Analysing the perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, based on the information provided by four different mass media sources, reveals several key themes. In the Kazakhstani media, particularly in *Kazinform* and *Vremya*, the EU is consistently depicted as a significant player in the country's economic landscape. The economic partnership is highlighted through various dimensions. First and foremost, the economic ties between Kazakhstan and the EU are underscored by substantial investments. This financial infusion has not only positioned the EU as a major economic player but has also solidified its status as a crucial contributor to Kazakhstan's economic growth. Furthermore, the EU is presented as Kazakhstan's largest trading partner, accounting for more than 40% of the country's foreign trade.⁶⁵ This statistic reinforces the depth of economic integration between Kazakhstan and the EU, emphasising the mutual benefits derived from this robust trade relationship.

Turning to Tajikistan, as reflected in media outlets such as *Khovar* and *Asia-Plus*, the focus is more diplomatically oriented. The EU is consistently portrayed as an essential international partner, with emphasis on strategic cooperation. In the Tajikistani media, the EU is frequently described as an "important strategic partner" and "important international partner".⁶⁶ The EU is recognised as an essential partner contributing to the country's economic development. Tajikistan expresses interest in attracting foreign investment in priority areas of its national economy, social development, and environmental protection.⁶⁷ Tajikistan's media emphasises the EU's role as a security

⁶⁵ Vremya 2023e.

⁶⁶ Khovar 2019b.

⁶⁷ Khovar 2023.



partner and humanitarian supporter, particularly addressing regional challenges originating from Afghanistan.

These findings demonstrate that Central Asian mass media primarily regard the EU as an economic power, with limited recognition of its role in security sector reform and trade norms, and its normative power is barely visible in the region.

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