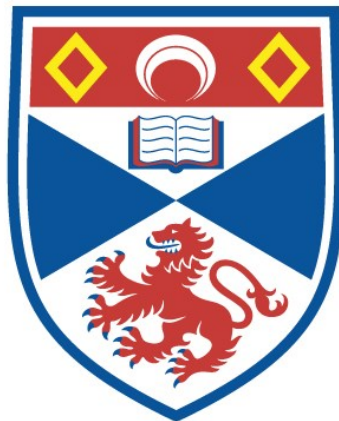# Decaying beauty? Image(s) of the European Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Zhanibek Arynov

A thesis submitted for the degree of PhD
at the
University of St Andrews

2019

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I, Zhanibek Arynov, do hereby certify that this thesis, submitted for the degree of PhD, which is approximately 80,000 words in length, has been written by me, and that it is the record of work carried out by me, or principally by myself in collaboration with others as acknowledged, and that it has not been submitted in any previous application for any degree.

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Acknowledgements

Abstract

This thesis comparatively examines perceived images of the European Union (EU) in two countries of Central Asia (CA): Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The study departs from the point that the literature on Central Asian geopolitics, as well as on EU-CA relations in particular has paid little attention to the role that the Central Asians play in international interactions in the region. Taking a constructivist approach as an umbrella framework, the thesis argues that how Central Asians perceive the EU is an integral part of its identity and its roles in the region, as well as of the outcome of its policy. Therefore, examining the Central Asian perspective to the EU and EU-CA relations should be an equally important aspect of scholarly attention. Having justified the importance of studying perceived images, the thesis goes on to draw from Image Studies to conceptualize the notion of 'image'. It claims that the image is a complex phenomenon consisting of various internal components, but the core of image in International Relations is constituted by two components: (1) perceptions of the Other's *power/capability* and (2) perceptions of whether the Other poses a *threat* or represents an *opportunity*. The empirical analysis of the thesis develops around these two aspects. The objective of the thesis, however, is not just to reveal *what* the perceptions are, but also to answer *how* these perceptions come into being by identifying the factors influencing perceptions. Finally, as images are relative notions and become fully meaningful only through comparison, this thesis also analyzes *self-images* of the EU and reflects on to what extent the EU's *perceived images* contrast to its *self-images*. The thesis concludes by arguing that in many respects, the EU is perceived positively in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. However, this positivity is being slowly diminished as a result of an increasing image of 'Decaying Europe'.

List of Abbreviations

ACP – African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States

BGN/PCGN – United States Board on Geographic Names/ Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use

BOMCA – Border Management Program in Central Asia

CA – Central Asia

CADAP – Central Asia Drug Action Programme

CPE – Civilian Power Europe

DCI – Development Cooperation Instrument

EAEU – Eurasian Economic Union

EEAS – European External Action Service

EECCA – Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia component

EFP – European Foreign Policy

EIDHR – European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights

ENP – European Neighbourhood Program

EPCA – Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

EU – European Union

EUCAM – EU-Central Asia Monitoring

EUEI – EU Education Initiative

EUSP – EU Special Representative

EUWI – EU Water Initiative

GIZ - *Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit*

GSP+ – Generalized Scheme of Preferences +

ICG – International Crisis Group

INOGATE – Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe

IR – International Relations

KG – Kyrgyz Republic

KZ – Republic of Kazakhstan

LGBT(I) – Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender/Transsexual (Intersexed)

NIS – Newly Independent States

NPE – Normative Power Europe

OSCE – Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe

PACE – Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe

PCA – Partnership and Cooperation Agreement

RLI – Rule of Law Initiative

TACIS – Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States

TRACECA – Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia

UN – United Nations

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Chapter I. Introduction

In February 2018, the European Union (EU)[1] and Kazakhstan celebrated the 25th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations. This is a marking point not only for EU-Kazakhstan relationship, but for EU-Central Asia[2] cooperation in general. In 1993, the EU first established diplomatic contacts with the Newly Independent States (NIS) of Central Asia and opened its first delegation to the region in Almaty, Kazakhstan. Since then, the Union has successfully formed as a full-fledged actor in the region with its own distinct agenda.

Yet, it needs to be noted that the EU's formation as an actor in Central Asia has been a gradual process. In the 1990s, Brussels remained relatively passive in the region, providing modest assistance to democratic and economic transformation of the states, because Central Asia still was a distant and unimportant region for the EU (Macfarlane 1999, 2004, Rahr 2000). Such state of affairs started changing in the wake of the conflict in Afghanistan in the early 2000s, as Central Asia suddenly became a critical point for the interests of Western countries, including EU member-states (Matveeva 2006, De Pedro 2009). The region turned into an important foothold for the successfulness of military operations in Afghanistan. The EU's enlargement to the East, as well as its growing energy interests in the region made Central Asia even more important in the eyes of Brussels. As a result, in 2007 the Union launched its Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia (hereafter Strategy), which was a start of a qualitatively new period of the EU's engagement with the region (Schmitz 2008, Melvin 2008a).

The Union upgraded its political contacts with the five countries, establishing new delegations in Bishkek, Tashkent, and Dushanbe, and also proposing new formats of

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[1] Hereafter, this thesis uses 'the EU', 'the Union', and 'Brussels' interchangeably to connote the European Union.

[2] The boundaries of what 'Central Asia' constitutes are still disputed in academia (for the discussion on what 'Central Asia' is see Cummings 2012, 11-33). Yet this thesis employs 'Central Asia' to refer to five states of the post-Soviet Asia – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. There are two reasons for that. First, these five states themselves came to identify themselves as 'Central Asians' in the early 1990s. Second, the EU also understands by 'Central Asia' these five states only.

political dialogue on various issues. It also increased its economic profile in the region, offering more financial support in different sectors. Finally, a cultural dimension of Brussels' engagement also expanded with more students being educated in European countries via European scholarships, as well as more people being involved in cultural events of EU member-states on the ground. In 2019, the EU is expected to introduce a new strategy for Central Asia, which may further develop the relationship between the parties (more discussion on the evolution of EU-CA relations in Chapter IV).

The growth of the Union's profile in Central Asia, accordingly, attracted the attention of external observers and scholars to EU-Central Asia relations. The more Brussels engaged with the region, the more scholarly debate developed around various aspects of its policy. This was especially visible in the post-2007 period with the launch of the Strategy. For example, the project called EU-Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM) was launched, which has been providing analyses of EU-Central Asia relations on a regular basis since 2008 (Spaiser 2018, xv). Moreover, the number of academic works devoted to the assessment of either the Strategy as a whole (e.g. Melvin 2008; Emerson et.al 2010; Warkotsch 2011b; Boonstra and Tsertsvadze 2016), or Brussels' policies in different spheres such as democratization and human rights (Crawforw 2008, Hoffman 2010, Bossuyt and Kubicek 2011), security (Boonstra 2009), energy (Cornell and Nelsson 2008), and education (Axyonova 2013) significantly expanded.

This Introduction does not aim to review this body of literature in detail, as the Chapter IV will provide more discussion on this. What I would like to emphasize here is the point that despite a tremendous increase in last ten years, scholars working on EU-Central Asia relations have predominantly focused only on one part of the bilateral cooperation – the European Union. In other words, this literature has been largely EU-centric so far. Various authors have mainly dealt with what *the EU* intends to achieve in the region, how *the EU* acts towards the region, and with what effect, and also proposed recommendations for what *the EU* could improve to become a more successful actor.

By contrast, only a few studies have paid attention to the perspective of the Central Asian countries in this relationship. As Anceschi (2014b, 3) argues, '[w]hile much has been written on the priorities set by Brussels in its dealings with Central Asia […], limited scholarly attention has been placed so far on the interests prioritised by the Central Asian leaderships in their interaction with the European Union'. He further contributes to this neglected approach by analyzing Kazakhstan's agency in its relationship with Brussels. Another kind of study devoted to the Central Asian aspect is a monograph authored by Chebotorev and Gubaidullina (2013), where they provide an assessment of the implementation of the Strategy viewed by experts and scholars in the region. A similar regional vision to the EU and its policies is also offered by Kassenova (2008) and contributors in Peyrouse (2014). However, these kinds of publications rather come as rare exceptions.

The dominance of EU-centrism in EU-CA literature is not surprising and can be mainly explained by the overlap of two factors. On the one hand, broader literature on Central Asian Studies has traditionally been neglectful of the agency and role of Central Asians in their external interactions. This literature has long been dominated by the notion of the New Great Game, when the five regional countries have been mainly treated as passive objects of the geopolitical game played by external powers (Cuthbertson 1994, Smith 1996, Karasac 2002, Menon 2003). In other words, the focus of Central Asian Studies have been to explore what external players pursue in the region and how. Only relatively recently scholars started largely criticising the great game narrative by arguing that such an approach neglects the agency of the Central Asian states, which are capable of not only being independent subjects, but also of writing the rules of the game that even the most powerful external players have to comply with (Cooley 2012, Edwards 2003).

On the other hand, if one looks at broader literature on European Studies, the emphasis has also been on what kind of international actor *the EU* is. To capture its uniqueness as an international actor, Brussels has frequently been referred to as 'civilian power' (Duchêne 1973), 'normative power' (Manners 2002), 'civilizing power' (Sjursen 2006b), or 'ethical power' (Aggestam 2008), among others. Despite the plethora of notions used to describe

the Union, they are united at least by one commonality – they all tell the story exclusively from the viewpoint of Brussels. Only in the last ten years, as will be discussed in Chapter II, an alternative approach developed within the European Studies, which shifted the focus from the European Union to external actors, and began scrutinizing *what the externals think* of the EU and its role as an international actor (e.g. Holland et al. 2007, Chaban, Holland, and Ryan 2009, Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010b, Barcevicius et al. 2015). Perceptions of others, as argued by those authors, are an equally important aspect of the EU's international actorness.[3] Yet, this emerging body of literature largely neglected perceptions of the EU in Central Asia (see Chapter II for thorough discussion).

Again, it is this overlap of long-lasting tendencies in Central Asian Studies and European Studies that has made the literature on EU-CA to overemphasize the European aspect, while neglecting the Central Asian.

1.1 Research Question(s)

In the view of the foregoing, this study argues that the Central Asian countries are not mere recipients of the agency of external actors, including the EU, but rather 'they are actors in their own right, with their own subjectivity and projection of identity on the international stage' (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2013, 5). They can substantially influence, change, limit, or reject what is promoted externally. Therefore, what the EU (and any other external actor) can or cannot successfully implement in Central Asia does not solely depend on its abilities as an international actor, the strategies it follows, the instruments it deploys, or the amount of resources it spends as the existing literature mainly focuses on, but is also conditioned by the context it operates in. What the EU carries out and promotes needs to be recognized and accepted as legitimate by Central Asians. In this regard, *how Central Asians perceive the EU and its policies plays an equally important role in determining the EU's role in the region, as well as the outcome of its initiatives.*

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[3] The notion of 'actorness' is widely used in European Studies, and generally denotes the EU's ability to act as an international actor on its own behalf. I use 'actorness' and 'agency' interchangeably in this thesis.

Taking this argument as a starting point, this thesis intends to present the Central Asian perspective to the European Union and its policies in the region. In order to meet this objective, the central question of the research concerns the revelation of dominant images and perceptions of the EU in two countries of Central Asia: Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The thesis does not discuss the agency of Central Asian countries in their relationship with Brussels, but only perceptions of this relationship and the EU in general. Thus, the main question to be answered in this thesis is *what are the dominant images of the European Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan*? The notion of 'image', as will be conceptualized in Chapter III, is a complex phenomenon consisting of different internal elements. Therefore, employing the 'image' as a central analytical unit of the thesis opens the door for discussions of different aspects of perceptions of the European Union. What internal elements of 'image' are to be chosen in this study is also identified in Chapter III. In addressing the central question above, three sub-questions further emanate from it:

- *What are differences/similarities between images of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan?* This question is reflective of the comparative approach that the study follows. The aim is not to examine images separately in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but rather to engage in comparative analysis of the cases. The comparative approach is likely to present additional insights that a single-case research can hardly reveal, especially when the research deals with 'relative' concepts such as images and perceptions.

- *What kind of factors shape images of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan?* This sub-question implies that the thesis aims not merely to identify images as such, but additionally to understand the *nature* of those images. This requires an investigation of factors that influence the way the EU is perceived in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Identifying possible image sources, as I argue, is essential for understanding similarities and differences of images in various contexts.

- *How different/similar are perceived images of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan from the EU's own self-representations in Central Asia?* As will be argued in Chapter III, images are *relative* concepts, which implies they are never 'true' or 'false'. Images become

fully meaningful only through comparison. Therefore, for the EU's perceived images in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to acquire a full meaning, they will be compared to Brussels' self-images that it articulates in the region.

While addressing these questions, the thesis's central finding is that in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan the European Union enjoys predominantly favourable images. In fact, *positive images, as I argue, are the EU's main comparative advantage vis-a-vis more powerful players in the region such as Russia and China. However, this positivity in the eyes of Central Asians started changing in a negative direction, mainly due to severe domestic troubles that the Union has been suffering from.* Such a trend demands a strategic action from the EU, if it is to preserve its relative advantage in the region.

As the study is situated at the intersection of three large bodies of literature – Central Asian Studies, European Studies, and Image Studies – the findings also aim to contribute to all three of them. As the Central Asian Studies have mainly been neglectful of the perspective of Central Asians on external actors and geopolitical processes of the region, first and foremost, the thesis seeks to contribute to this gap by offering the view from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to the role that an external actor (the EU) plays in the region. Secondly, despite being traditionally EU-centric, the literature on European Studies has shifted during the last decade to incorporate how external actors perceive the European Union. The research in this direction has significantly expanded in terms of geographic coverage. But, as Chapter II will demonstrate, Central Asia has hardly been the focus of this literature. Consequently, the findings of the thesis can be among the few to contribute to these studies and indicate Central Asia's place in broader literature on external images and perceptions of the EU. Finally, the thesis largely draws from Image Studies to operationalize the concept of 'image'. The application of its conceptual apparatus to empirical study of images in certain contexts (in this case, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan) can potentially enrich it with additional insights and new findings.

1.2 Case Study Selection

Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are the two cases on which this thesis will focus. There are three main reasons that informed the selection of these countries. First, both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are themselves members of another EU-like institution – the Eurasian Economic Union (hereafter, the EAEU). Kazakhstan is one of the founding members of the EAEU, established in January 2015, whereas Kyrgyzstan's membership entered into force in August 2015. Astana and Bishkek[4] remain the only participants of the EAEU so far among the Central Asian states. Moreover, one could argue that they are the two most Russophile countries in the region (more discussion on this is in Chapter VI). In this regard, it would be interesting to see how the most Russia-oriented states of the region perceive the European Union, especially in the context of escalation of political and economic tensions between Brussels and Moscow.

Second, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, at the same time, are the most pro-European countries in Central Asia, who have managed to establish closer relations with Brussels compared to the other three states in the region: Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan (Peyrouse 2014). But still, the depth and structure of Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's relations with the Union are significantly different: Astana being Brussels' closest partner in Central Asia with more focus on economic cooperation; whereas the Bishkek-Brussels cooperation remains visibly underdeveloped (compared to Astana), being more focused on issues of development assistance. Looking ahead, it can be noted that Images Studies consider the bilateral relationship to be (one of) the main source of images (Chapters III, VII). Therefore, one of the puzzles to be solved in this thesis is whether and how the difference between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in terms of their bilateral relations with the EU shapes the way the latter is perceived in the two countries.

The third reason is more subjective and refers to the issues of data access and my knowledge of local languages. In terms of data collection, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are

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[4] Astana and Bishkek are the respective capitals of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Hereafter, the thesis uses the capitals interchangeably to refer to Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan.

arguably the most enabling environments among Central Asian countries. Conducting the same kind of research, for example, in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan would possibly be more challenging given the more restrictive nature of the regimes, especially on topics which include politically sensitive issues such as democracy promotion. Moreover, any research on images and perceptions requires a good knowledge of local languages, as images are normally inferred from narratives. Being from Kazakhstan, my knowledge of Kazakh and Kyrgyz allows me to engage with these languages along with Russian, while in the other three countries it would have hardly been possible due to language difficulties. More discussion on methodology and reflexivity will be found in Chapter III.

1.3 Research Timeframe

As far as the timeframe of the research is concerned, this thesis deals with images and perceptions of the European Union in 2011-2016. This is informed by the desire to incorporate the latest alterations in images of Brussels and reveal present day perceptions. The selection of 2016 can be explained simply by the fact that it was the time when the active phase of fieldwork and data collection ended. As for the selection of 2011, the main argument is that 2010 was the crucial year for all three parties (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and the EU) that potentially influenced cooperation between them.

In 2010, Kazakhstan took over the chairmanship of the OSCE, the period when Astana came closest to Europe/West in terms of its foreign policy direction and compliance with 'European/Western' norms and values (at least rhetorically). However, the pro-European/Western official rhetoric visibly decreased in the post-chairmanship years. Similarly, 2010 was a turning point in Kyrgyzstan's historical development due to the April revolution, when Bakiev's rule was overthrown, and the new government was formed. It is difficult to argue that this significantly changed Bishkek's relations with Brussels. Nonetheless, 2010 still remains a marker year that visibly altered the country. Finally, 2010 was crucial for the EU as it was the first year when the Treaty of Lisbon fully entered into force and the European External Action Service (EEAS) started functioning as the main

diplomatic service of the EU. Moreover, in 2009 and 2010 the EU opened new delegation in the Central Asian countries, significantly expanding its presence.

In other words, all three actors went through some sort of internal transformation in 2010, which could have potentially influenced their international relations. Therefore, the following year, 2011, was chosen as a starting point for the aims of this thesis.

1.4 Thesis Outline

The thesis is organized in a total of eight chapters including this Introduction. Having identified the research question(s), cases to be studied, and research timeframe, the next chapter begins with the discussion of the state of the existing literature on the international actorness of the European Union. Chapter II first surveys scholarly debates on the *sui generis* nature of the EU as an international actor, which mainly focuses on what the EU is, what it does, and how it does it. The section concludes by arguing that these debates have exclusively been EU-centric, thus an increasing number of scholars have been calling to incorporate the 'external' dimension as well: i.e. how the EU's actorness is perceived by outsiders. Then, the chapter goes on to examine the steadily increasing literature on external images and perceptions of the Union. The section also identifies the main gaps in this body of literature and outlines how the current research intends to contribute to them.

Chapter III outlines the conceptual and methodological framework to be applied in studying images of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The first part of the chapter, drawing from constructivism and the recognition approach, proposes the justification for the study of external images and perceptions. It develops the argument that external images are important as they are an integrative aspect of international agency, identity and roles. The chapter then builds on Image Studies to define and operationalise the notion of 'image'. First, it identifies the image's two internal elements that this study focuses on: (1) perceptions of the EU's *power/capability* and (2) perceptions of *threat/opportunity* from the EU. Second, it established the 'perceivers' in this thesis, i.e. those whose images are treated as representing the state (Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan). Third, it proposes the framework for

the examination of possible sources of images. Finally, the chapter also sets the methodology for inferring images.

Chapter IV opens the empirical scrutiny of this thesis by examining the EU's *self-representations* that it communicates to the Central Asian countries. As pointed out выше, one of the additional aims of this study is to analyse how different/similar perceived images of the EU are in relation to its own self-images. Therefore, the analysis of Brussels' self-images is taken as a starting point. The first part of the chapter chronicles the evolution of Brussels' policy performance in the region since its inception, so that the background context of EU-CA relations can be established. The second part, and more centrally for this research, reveals what kinds of images the EU communicates to Central Asia about itself and its policies while engaging with the region.

Having analysed the EU's self-images, the following chapters of the thesis directly engage with *perceived images* of the European Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Chapter V scrutinizes perceptions of the EU's *power/capability* as an international actor, one of the central elements of 'image' in International Relations, identified in Chapter III. It does so by examining the EU's power at two levels: its perceived power as a global actor, and its perceived power as a regional actor in Central Asia. As for Chapter VI, it begins with the argument that what is central for 'image' is not only *how powerful* one actor is viewed to be, but also *for what purposes* one is perceived to use its power. Taking this as a starting point, the chapter focuses on the second internal element of the 'image' this thesis has chosen to be central: perceptions of the EU as offering an opportunity or posing a threat. Finally, Chapter VII analyses possible factors that shape already discussed perceptions of the EU. It does so by dividing them into global-level, country-level, and individual-level factors. The argument is that only the combination of these three levels of image sources is likely to provide a holistic picture of how images and perceptions come into being.

The concluding chapter summarizes the main findings of the thesis. Based on discussions of the previous chapters, it first proposes some ideal-type images of the EU to be found in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It also highlights similarities and differences between

identified images of the Union in the two countries and overviews what kind of factors shape these similarities/differences. The chapter also situates the findings in Central Asia in broader literature on external images and perceptions of the European Union elsewhere. Then, the chapter directly compares how similar/different the EU's self- and perceived images were found to be in the course of this study. It also proposes some suggestions for future research on images of the EU in Central Asia, as well as of other external actors in the region. Finally, the chapter concludes with a brief note on what the EU could do to improve its images in Central Asia.

Chapter II. The European Union and International Images

The European Union's foreign policy, international identity and roles represent one of the most disputed topics in academia. The appearance and strengthening of an international entity such as the EU was a challenge for scholars to conceptualize as an actor, as well as to assess its foreign policy and international impact (Bretherton and Vogler 2006, 35). What is the European Union? Is it already an established actor in world politics? If so, what type of actor is it? What does it do and how does it act? These and many other fundamental questions have been at the heart of an increasing number of studies (see below). Overall, it can be suggested that the more the EU institutionally and geographically expanded, the more scholarly attention it attracted. Initially these questions were scrutinized only from the perspective of the EU; however, the 'external' direction of research, that is how outsiders perceive the EU as an international actor, has been steadily expanding since the mid-2000s. It was generally argued that both 'internal' and 'external' dimensions were equally important while discussing the Union's agency in global politics.

This chapter reviews the academic literature on the European Union's international agency. While doing so, the first section will survey the general debate on European actorness, which has developed around the idea of the EU's *sui generis* nature. The section will conclude by arguing that this literature has been exclusively EU-centric, prompting an increasing number of scholars to call for the incorporation of the 'external' dimension as well, i.e. external images and perceptions of the Union. The second section will briefly introduce the emergence and evolution of image and perception studies in International Relations. It will show that Image Studies emerged as a study of states' foreign policies, based on the assumption that how a state views other states shapes its foreign policy towards them. The third section will focus specifically on images and perceptions of the EU in academia. It will show that in contrast to 'traditional' images studies, the literature on perceptions of the EU takes a different approach in justifying why to study them. It does so by arguing that external perceptions partly shape the EU's international agency, its identity and roles. This section will also identify the main gaps in literature and outlines how the

present research intends to contribute to them. The chapter will conclude by arguing that despite a significant growth of literature concerning the EU's international actorness, of both 'internal' and 'external' dimensions, the question of what kind of international actor the Union is still remains a hotly disputed topic.

2.1 The European Union as an International Actor: *Sui Generis* in the World of States?

The discipline of International Relations has traditionally been dominated by theoretical approaches such as (neo)realism that treat states as the main agents of world politics. In this context, the evolution of the EU into an entity with limited state-like characteristics provoked a question as to whether it could be treated as an independent actor in its own right in the world of states. The literature on this account, both optimistic and sceptical, has been steadily expanding. On the one hand, a group of scholars held a more promising opinion regarding the EU as a strong international actor. Some of them attempted to deal with the very meaning of 'actorness' when applied to the EU (Jupille and Caporaso 1998), whilst others concentrated on Brussels' international identity (Manners and Whitman 1998, 2003), international roles (Elgström and Smith 2006a), foreign policy outcomes and impact (Bretherton and Vogler 2006, Ginsberg 2001), as well as the mechanisms and processes behind its foreign policy (Bickerton 2011, White 2001). Some even went as far as to describe it as a new emerging superpower, though of a different kind (Leonard 2005, McCormick 2007, 2013, Whitman 1998). On the other hand, there was an opposing camp of Euro-sceptics doubtful of the EU's ability to become a successful international actor in the Westphalian system of states. Reasons for this included Brussels' bureaucratic institutions and complicated decision-making process; lack of internal coherence; and scarce capabilities, especially military strength (e.g. Bull 1982, Hill 1993, Hoffmann 2000, Kagan 2002, Zielonka 1998).

To date, the debate regarding the EU as an international actor remains, to an extent, heated. However, the crux of the matter is not whether the EU represents an actor in its own right

or not. As Risse (2011, 192) argues, '[t]he EU's actor-ness in foreign and security policy matters is no longer in question'. The majority seem to agree with this and do not refuse the EU its agency as such. Consequently, today's debate mainly focuses on what kind of actor the EU is, i.e. the EU's nature as an international player. In this regard the Union has regularly been referred to as a *sui generis* entity. Even today scholars can hardly avoid the notion of distinctiveness while discussing the EU's external relations. But what does *sui generis* precisely mean? What makes the Union a distinctive actor? As Elgström and Smith (2006b) summarise, discussion of the EU's uniqueness has focused on three sub-topics: its institutional construction; external goals and values; and the policy instruments at its disposal. In other words, the debate revolves around *what the EU is*, *what the EU does*, and *how the EU does it* questions. The sub-sections below briefly examine each of these issues.

2.1.1 What the EU Is: Unidentified Political Object?

To start with the '*what the EU is*' aspect of the issue, the European Union resembles no actor that we know from history. As a result, it has often been described as an 'unidentified political object' (Delors quoted in Zielonka 2006, 4). It is commonly agreed that the EU is 'neither a state nor a non-state actor, and neither a conventional international organization nor an international regime' (Ginsberg 1999, 432). The EU stands somewhere in between, possessing both state and supra-state characteristics, which makes it 'a multifaceted actor; [… which] can appear to be several different actors, sometimes simultaneously' (Bretherton and Vogler 2006, 22). At the same time, it should be remembered that it is exactly this distinctive institutional structure – one of internal complexity, the absence of a centralized decision-making body, and a lack of coherence and consensus – that undermines its external capabilities and makes it a less effective entity in the world of state actors (Toje 2008, Krotz 2009).

Given the EU's institutional uniqueness, the legitimate question as to the extent one can juxtapose Brussels' foreign policy performance with that of traditional states has been raised. Some argue that the distinctiveness of the Union has often been exaggerated in academia. Thus, 'a considerable fraction of the EU external policy literature has been rather

EU-introverted (or even Eurocentric), because the EU has been insulated from wider IR themes and the foreign policies of other "powers"' (Niemann and Bretherton 2013, 263). The proponents of this view believe that the external policy of the EU 'can be analyzed in pretty much the same way as we can analyze that of any nation-state' (Smith 2002, 1).

However, there are also those who argue in favour of treating the EU's external performance differently from that of states. According to this reasoning, assessing the external performance of the EU based on state-oriented criteria provides a distorted picture of the Union's success (see Marsh and Mackenstein 2005, 248). As Ginsberg (2001, 12) puts it,

> [c]omparing and assessing the EFP as if the EU were a state is a slippery slope. Such a comparison is bound to result in the conclusion that the EU fails miserably as an international actor because it does not have all the assets and sovereignty associated with statehood.

Moreover, it is claimed that the majority of criticism towards the EU arises from exactly this unfair comparison. To avoid a predetermined skeptical conclusion, as suggested, the very institutional uniqueness of the European Union should serve as a starting point while discussing and assessing its external policy and international impact.

2.1.2 What the EU Does: Normative Power?

The second aspect of the European Union's distinctiveness, as mentioned in Elgström and Smith (2006b), relates to '*what the EU does*' question. It is frequently argued that the EU does not simply pursue 'possession goals' associated with its self-interests, but rather it acts towards broader 'milieu goals', that is to shape the whole environment the EU operates in by promoting, *inter alia*, international cooperation, conflict prevention, democracy and human rights, and sustainable development (Smith 2003, 107). In other words, the EU differs from self-interested state-actors by right of its altruistic goals. In this sense, it is exclusively a 'force for good'. Closely related to this point, Ian Manners (2002, 253) has proposed the notion of Normative Power Europe (NPE), defined as 'the ability to define

what passes for "normal" in world politics', which is 'the greatest power of all'. He further writes that '[s]imply by existing as a different [actor] in a world of state […], the European Union changes the normality of "international relations" […]: it changes the norms, standards and prescriptions of world politics' (Manners 2008, 45). It does so by externalizing its own internal norms[5], while acting as an international player. Although these norms are not exclusively European, as Manners argues, they 'represent crucial constitutive factors determining its international identity' (Manners 2002, 241-242).

Despite the increase in the EU's profile as a normative power, a wide range of authors have expressed skepticism at Brussels' 'milieu' goals. For example, it is claimed that the normative dimension of the EU's foreign policy is not necessarily the most important for the EU, and as a result, 'such a narrative […] tends to simplify, overlook and, at worst, fail to account for other equally important rationales behind the EU foreign policy' (Johansson-Nogués 2007, 185). Moreover, others argue that it is an established practice for power-maximizing actors to 'wra[p] their particularist national interests in cosmopolitan or universalist language' (Hyde-Price 2008, 33). Therefore, a detailed analysis of the Union's norm promotion tends to demonstrate the rationally calculated, strategic self-interests behind it (Youngs 2004). Finally, several scholars suggest that even if the external promotion of its values is a primary objective of the Union's foreign policy, this hardly makes it unique, as history has witnessed many similar 'normative' powers, such as the Roman Empire, Stalin's USSR, and the US after World War II (Diez 2005, 620, Risse 2011, 193, Sjursen 2006a, 240). In this regard, the European Union, which simply intends to expand its sphere of influence, is nothing more than a new type of empire (Zielonka 2008, 475, 2006).

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[5] Manners (2002) identifies five 'core' norms (peace, liberty, democracy, rule of law, human rights) and four 'minor' norms (social solidarity, anti-discrimination, sustainable development, good governance) that the EU applies domestically and spreads internationally.

2.1.3 How the EU Does It: Civilian Power?

Lastly, the '*how the EU does it*' part of the EU's distinctiveness also remains a disputed topic. It relates to the way the EU pursues its objectives while acting internationally. In this regard, Duchêne (1973, 19-20) coined the term 'civilian power' (CPE) when he described the then European Community as an actor 'long on economic power and relatively short on armed force'. The concept of CPE is designed to denote the EU's propensity to cooperative relationship with others and, more importantly, use of non-military means towards its external goals (Maull 1990, 2005, Smith 2005). Non-military in this context refers to the diplomatic and economic instruments at Brussels' disposal. Orbie (2008a) elaborates that the CPE is not just about 'soft' means, but more about the way those means are applied. As he writes, '[a]lthough a civilian power does make use of the "stick", for instance through economic or diplomatic sanctions, it generally favours using the "carrot"' (Orbie 2008a, 13). Overall, Karen Smith (2014, 205) concludes that it is exactly the way the EU pursues its international objectives that makes it a *sui generis* actor: '[w]hat it does is less unique than how it does'.

At the same time, there are also those who perceive the civilian nature of the EU's external relations skeptically. Some authors believe that the narrative on the 'civilian' power of Brussels is merely an attempt to redefine the EU and its role emphasizing its strength, at the same time, neglecting its weaknesses (Hyde-Price 2008, 30). Likewise, Kagan (2002, 5-6) posits that the Union's 'civilian' approach is not a strategic choice, but rather a result of its natural weakness. If the EU had hard power, he argues, it would behave as other powerful actors do. It is further claimed that concentration on a purely 'civilian' foreign policy without a hard military dimension puts Brussels at risk of getting stuck in 'quixotic moral crusades', preventing it from becoming an effective actor capable of protecting its interests and solving security issues (Hyde-Price 2008, 29, Menon 2008, 2013). Therefore, it is suggested that the EU needs to increase its military strength in order to turn itself into a successful international actor. If some authors perceive the strengthening of military power as necessarily undermining the EU's civilian nature (Smith 2000), others correspondingly

believe that the two can coexist, where military power serves to back up civilian capabilities (Maull 2005, Stavridis 2001).

All in all, this continuing academic debate on the EU's international actorness, and the different aspects of its *sui generis* foreign policy, is still far from finding common ground. Recent remarkable events such as the signing of the Treaty of Lisbon and creation of the European External Action Service (EEAS), the Ukraine crisis, the issues with refugee flows, as well as Brexit, seem to have further encouraged debates. However, what unites all of the aforementioned debates is that they all tell the story exclusively from the EU's perspective: how the EU understands and represents itself, how the EU carries out its foreign policy, what its external goals and policy instruments are, what goals it pursues, or how effective its foreign policy practice is.

Without denying the importance of such an "internal" perspective, it needs to be acknowledged that there is also a second aspect: the perspective of externals. An increasing number of scholars have come to acknowledge that one cannot achieve a full understanding of the EU's external policy without considering views from the outside, that is how other actors perceive the Union and its international roles. For example, others' expectations were paramount in Hill's (1993) seminal work on the 'capability – expectations gap'. The idea was that the kind of international actor the EU becomes also depends on the kind of expectations externals have of it. He suggested that the EU did not possess the required capabilities to meet external expectations, thus there was a gap between the two. Similarly, Manners and Whitman (1998) suggested that the Union's international identity is comprised not just of European self-definitions, but also of external actors' prescriptions. On top of that, Marsh and Mackenstein (2005, 247) posited that others' perceptions are arguably more important for the EU than for state actors, since the Union does not possess traditional advantages of statehood, such as a national identity. Therefore, the aim should be to consider both 'internal' and 'external' aspects. As put by Hill and Smith (2011b, 5), 'the very conception of international "actor-ness" depends on bringing "inside" and "outside" into a relationship with each other'. Therefore, external *images* and *perceptions* of the European Union, which hold central importance for the purposes of the current study,

should equally be the focus of scholarly attention. The following section briefly overviews the emergence and evolution of image and perception studies in International Relations. Then, Section 2.3 focuses attention specifically on images and perceptions of the European Union in the literature.

2.2 Images and Perceptions in International Relations Literature

The study of images and perceptions in International Relations first emerged as part of a cognitive-psychological approach to foreign policy analysis in the 1950s and 1960s. It was a new development in International Relations of that period, as the field had traditionally been dominated by rationalist theories, namely by (neo)realism. In general, (neo)realists emphasized the self-interested character of states, and their constant search for power in international relations. An international arena was seen as a 'brutal' terrain (Mearsheimer 1994, 9), where self-interested rational states cared only about maximization of their internal *power* in order to *balance* other states in the system (Waltz 1979, 118). In other words, the concept of power was a central explanatory variable in the rationalist tradition: what states (can) do in relation to each other depends on power relations between them. Power, in turn, was predominantly defined in terms of material capabilities: a state's economic might and military strength (Waltz 1979, 130). Such an understanding of world politics left limited space for non-material factors, such as ideas, beliefs, and images.

At the same time, it is not to claim that ideational factors were altogether absent in the rationalist agenda. For example, Edward Carr (2001), a representative of classical realism, underlined the importance of the third type of power along with military and economic capabilities, and that is power over opinion. However, power over opinion was conceived as supplementary to the main military capacity. Another influential proponent of classical realism Hans Morgenthau (2006, 30) defined power as an actor's 'control over minds and actions' of another actor. This control was said to be achieved by one of the following three types of effects: (1) when the latter intends to gain a profit from the former; (2) when the latter fears losing something to the former; or (3) when the latter respects the former. The

first two effects seem to mainly correspond to the economic and military power of a state, whereas the last effect opens a window to the policy of persuasiveness and earning respect, or the policy of 'prestige' in the words of Morgenthau. He argued that:

> the image in the mirror of our fellows' minds (that is, our prestige), rather than the original, of which the image in the mirror may be but the distorted reflection, determines what we are as members of society (Morgenthau 2006, 84).

Morgenthau underlined the importance of prestige in the struggle for power, but he did not consider prestige as an end in itself. As he suggested, a policy of prestige was about *projecting the power* one owns, or thinks it owns, or wants others to think that it owns with the purpose of impressing them (Morgenthau 2006: 82-84). Despite this theoretical attention to power of opinion, prestige and image, (neo)realists viewed them only in the context of self-interested and rational states that only care about military and economic power maximization. Economic and military strength were still the main notion to explain how international relations operate.

In this context, the growth of image and perception studies[6], as claimed earlier, was a new development in International Relations. Largely drawing from cognitive-psychological studies, this approach endeavoured to shift the focus from mere material factors to ideational concepts as explanatory variables. They argued that states' foreign policies were determined not just by their military and economic capabilities, power relations between them, or internal political structures and bureaucracies, but also by *how actors perceived* their environment, including other actors. For instance, Jervis (1976, 28) posited that 'it is often impossible to explain crucial decisions and policies without reference to the decision-makers' beliefs about the world and their images of others'. Actors do not act towards 'objective' situations, but rather towards 'images' of situations, images that they consider to be a 'reality' (Boulding 1959, 121). Once 'men define situations as real, they are real in their consequences' (Holsti 1967, 16). Taking these assumptions as a starting point, cognitive-psychologists introduced notions such as images (Boulding 1956, 1959);

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[6] Hereafter, I refer to this large body of literature as Image Studies.

perceptions and misperceptions (Jervis 1976); operational codes (George 1979, 1969, Holsti 1970, Walker 1990, 1977); and cognitive maps (Axelrod 1976, Bonham et al. 1978), among others. Of this plethora of concepts dealing with the causal link between cognition and foreign policy conduct, the notion of image in particular is the central focus of this research.

This section does not provide a detailed discussion of what 'image' is, as Chapter III will define it and propose an analytical framework for examination of image. Instead, I would like to briefly mention here that the concept of image in International Relations implicates a system of beliefs that one actor holds about other actors. In broader cognitive-psychological literature, the study of *image* arguably received the lion's share, but it mainly developed in the context of the *image of an enemy* (e.g. Finlay, Holsti, and Fagen 1967, Silverstein and Flamenbaum 1989, Silverstein and Holt 1989). One could argue that the focus on enemy image, on the one hand, was dictated by the then dominance of the (neo)realist theory of IR, as noted earlier, which is built on the assumption that in an anarchical international system, actors cannot be sure about the intentions of other actors, and thus rely only on their own strength. Even if others do not have aggressive attitudes, nothing can prevent them from obtaining aggressiveness later. This makes states constantly alert to possible threats and encourages skepticism of others' intentions (e.g. Waltz 1979). On the other hand, considering the Image Studies' origins in the period of the Cold War, it is not a surprise that early image studies mainly dealt with mutual images of the USA and USSR. As Bronfenbrenner (1961) claimed, their mutual images were exclusively characterized by mirror images of an enemy. Therefore, the literature mainly developed around this issue.

At the same time, it was obvious that the enemy image alone could not explain the whole diversity of international images; thus image scholars started to go beyond enemy image and enlarge the scope of Image Studies (Herrmann and Fischerkeller 1995). In this context, along with the enemy image, Richard Cottam (1977), for instance, mentioned ally, imperial, and colonial images, whereas Herrmann (1985) further identified barbarian, degenerate, and child categories. Similarly, Martha Cottam (1986) added three more images: neutral, dependent ally of the enemy, and dependent of the perceiver's state.

Obviously, this is not an extensive list of possible images. Rather, the overall assumption is that international images can take diverse forms, and the task for scholars is to capture this richness.

In sum, the emergence and development of cognitive-psychological studies shed light on important issues in International Relations, when the discipline was traditionally dominated by focus on material factors such as military and economic capabilities. This new approach demonstrated that non-material factors such as images also play an important role in explaining interactions between states. Again, it is this *causal link between images and foreign policy conduct* that has traditionally been the rationale behind studying international images.

2.3 Images and Perceptions of the EU in Literature

Image Studies emerged and developed as a study of foreign policy conduct. Thus, images have traditionally been treated as independent variables with the power to explain the foreign policy of a state. However, there is a new and rapidly growing body of literature, which offers a different rationale for the importance of studying images. The empirical foci of said literature are external images and perceptions of the European Union. Unlike 'traditional' image studies, it justifies the significance of external images by the EU's international identities and roles. Drawing from social constructivist approaches and recognition theory, scholars of this approach generally argue that the way in which outsiders view the EU is an integral part of its international identity and role. It is claimed that the literature on the EU's international roles and its *sui generis* nature, discussed above, has been

> deeply Eurocentric: it has been developed by European scholars, corroborated by European policy-makers and founded on allegedly European values. Yet, the EU's alleged 'international identity' is not such if its main elements are limited to the opinion of a few European academics and policy-makers. The identity of as complex an animal as the EU is by definition socially constructed in interaction

with the relevant actors involved: the relevant external Others and – in the case of a collectivity – the people belonging to that community (Lucarelli 2013, 430).

In this sense, 'looking at external images means looking at one of the variables [… of] European political identity' (Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010c, 1).

Besides, there is another more practical rationale for studying the EU's external image. It is suggested that while acting externally, the Union (or any other international actor) does not operate in a vacuum. Its foreign policy practice is always a two-way movement; therefore, there is always a receiver to the EU's policy initiatives. The outcome of Brussels policy thus depends not only on how effectively the EU carries it out, which the vast majority of literature focuses on, but also on whether, and how, the receiver accepts proposed policy initiatives. '[W]hat the world thinks of the EU is an important factor in facilitating or opposing the achievements of EU-sponsored policies', as Lucarelli (2013, 430) points out. Therefore, the EU should be recognized as a legitimate, credible, and consistent actor in order to successfully promote and implement certain policies (for more discussion see Chaban, Elgström, and Holland 2006, Elgström 2006, 2007b, Elgström and Chaban 2015, Lucarelli 2007a). This shift of focus in image studies from *foreign policy* to *socially constructed identity and policies* could arguably be referred to, using the words of Jeffrey Checkel (1998), as a 'constructivist turn' in image studies (more theoretical discussion in Chapter III).

Having justified the significance of the study of the EU's external images, the literature goes on to empirically examine how outsiders perceive the Union. Empirical research in this direction has rapidly grown in both quantity and quality since the mid-2000s (see Lucarelli 2013, 2014, Mišík 2013 for general review). Emerging as single-case papers, the study of the EU's external perceptions has risen to complex systematic studies (Chaban and Elgström 2014b). It seems to be possible to categorise this literature into three main groups based on the dimensions taken. Chaban et al. (2013) discovered that perceptions of the EU vary across *geographic locations* as well as across *issue-areas*. It has been further suggested that the EU's images may change over *time* too (Chaban and Elgström 2014b). In

other words, images are (1) location-specific-, (2) issue-specific, and (3) time-specific. The majority of research conducted so far seems to fall into at least one of these three dimensions.

2.3.1 Location-Specific Perceptions of the EU

Initially, the research on the EU's external images emerged as a country- and/or region-focused analysis. The aim was to explore how the Union was viewed in different regions/countries. Pioneering research of this kind was conducted by Martin Ortega and his colleagues. The paper, entitled *Global views on the European Union* scrutinized perceptions of Brussels in South Africa, Senegal, Brazil, Mexico, China, Japan, 'Asia', and New Zealand (Ortega 2004b). The overall conclusion was that the findings 'present[ed] a fairly positive assessment of the EU's new international aspirations and of recent political developments' by outsiders, as a result, '"more European Union" in global affairs [was] welcome' (Ortega 2004a, 117, 120).

Later, another comprehensive and systematic research project was carried out under the leadership of Martin Holland and Natalia Chaban to reveal perceptions of the EU in the Asia-Pacific countries (among others Holland et al. 2007, Chaban and Holland 2008, 2010, Chaban, Holland, and Ryan 2009). The project had an extensive geographical coverage and included over 20 countries from the region. The analysis specifically focused on perceptions of the EU among elite groups (interviews with politicians, media, civil society, business representatives), the general public (opinion polls), and in the local media (media survey). As noted by Lucarelli (2014, 3), an application of 'the standardized methodology allowed the creation of a sort of database on images of the EU in different countries and among different constituencies'. Given the scope of the project, it is difficult to generalize its findings into a single conclusion. Yet it was suggested that in many countries the EU was, first of all, recognized as an economic giant, but was not viewed as a politically competitive actor on a global scale. Moreover, the authors observed that the Union's general visibility as an actor was low, thus they called for more active EU public diplomacy.

Another extensive research project, entitled *The External Image of the European Union*, was directed by Sonia Lucarelli and Lorenzo Fioramonti (Lucarelli 2007b, Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010a, b). In terms of geographical coverage, it contained sixteen country-reports from different parts of the world. The project also presented views from international organizations such as the African Union, the UN General Assembly, and the World Bank, among others. The overall approach taken was similar to that of the previous study. Research mainly focused on four target groups within each country (political elites, public opinion, media, and civil society), and also concentrated on specific issue-areas related to the EU (international trade, promotion of democracy and human rights, conflict prevention, etc.). Its findings were also similar to what had been reported in earlier studies. Firstly, the authors noted limited knowledge of the EU across countries involved; secondly, the EU was mostly recognized as a trade and integrational actor, rather than a political or normative one; and thirdly, a significant gap between Brussels' self-representation and external perceptions was reported to exist.

Beyond these projects, there have been many individual papers examining images and perceptions of the Union in certain regions, *inter alia,* in Eastern Europe and Sub-Saharan Africa (Bachmann and Muller 2015), and in MENA countries (Abbott and Teti 2017). Special attention has been paid to the image of Brussels in its important partner countries such as China (Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2007, Chan 2010), a comparative study of China and India (Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2011, Stumbaum 2012), and Russia (Kaveshnikov 2007, Tumanov, Gasparishvili, and Romanova 2011, Secrieru 2010, Shestopal et al. 2016). A recent study sponsored by the European Union itself comparatively analyzed its perceptions in ten countries with which the EU had established a strategic partnership (Barcevicius et al. 2015).

Therefore, the analysis of the Union's external images and perceptions has been geographically diverse. However, Central Asia is arguably one of the few regions that have remained beyond the interest of scholars. None of the mentioned projects included any Central Asian countries, though several post-Soviet states such as Ukraine (Chaban and Vernygora 2013, Zubko and Rovnyi 2015) and Georgia (Bolkvadze, Muller, and Bachmann

2014, Bolkvadze and Naylor 2015) have appeared in analyses. In this regard, a brief working paper by Peyrouse and his colleagues (Peyrouse 2014), a brief journal article by a group of scholars focusing on framing of the EU in Kazakhstan's newspapers (Ospanova, Sadri, and Yelmurzayeva 2017), and the most recent book by Spaiser (2018) stand out as exceptions when it comes to perceptions of Brussels in Central Asia. As noted in the Introduction, one of the aims of this thesis is to fill this gap in the literature and indicate the region's position related to the issue of how the European Union is viewed.

2.3.2 Issue-Specific Perceptions of the EU

While research was growing in scope, it became clear that perceptions of the EU were 'more nuanced and complex', prompting a call for more issue-specific analyses (Chaban et al. 2013, 434). Some scholars added an issue dimension, i.e. perceptions of Brussels when viewed from a particular issue-area, in addition to an already existing geographic dimension. For example, building on a survey of 274 elites in the Pacific, Southeast Asia and Africa, Chaban et al. (2013) specifically attempted to answer the question of what type of great power (military, economic, diplomatic and/or normative) the EU was perceived to be. Findings suggested that when viewed from economic and diplomatic aspects, the EU was mostly referred to as a great power, whereas a normative dimension was only partly visible.

Moreover, as the *sui generis* thesis has attracted much attention in literature on European foreign policy (see Larsen 2014, Lucarelli 2013), specific focus has further been paid to analysis of the Union's external image as a normative actor. Jain and Pandey (2013, 120) focused on Indian elites' perceptions of the EU as a normative power, discovering that the normative role of the EU was not recognized by Indian elites. Instead, the EU's normative agenda was viewed as 'a way that seeks to undermine the competitive advantage of developing countries'. Bacon and Kato (2013), by contrast, concluded that in the case of Japan the Union had a high profile as a normative actor. Similarly, Holland and Chaban (2011, 297) examined Brussels' image as a democracy promoter in the Pacific, and suggested that there was a serious mismatch between the EU's representation 'of its role as

a promoter of democracy in terms of a "caregiver", a "gardener", or a "Robin Hood"' and perceptions of it by others as a 'watching, guiding and caring (if you obey), but, at the same time teaching, punishing, and even threatening' actor. Beyond normative actor perceptions, perceptions of the EU as a development and humanitarian actor (Holland and Chaban 2010) and energy actor (Chaban, Knodt, and Verdun 2017), for instance, have also been scrutinized by certain scholars. Moreover, Ole Elgstrom's series of studies on perceptions of the EU in different multilateral negotiations seem to also fall under the issue-specific category (Elgström 2007a, b, 2010, 2014).

2.3.3 Time-Specific Perceptions of the EU

Furthermore, scholars working on images suggested that although images are stable concepts, they are not fully static; in other words, images may change over a period of time, especially under the influence of significant events (see Chapter III). At the end of the last decade, the EU experienced serious internal changes triggered by the Treaty of Lisbon and the Eurozone Sovereign Debt Crisis. Following the assumption above, scholars became more and more interested in whether and how these internal issues influenced the way the EU was perceived outside its borders. Thus, a time dimension was added to the analysis of the EU's external images.

In this regard, in 2013, a special issue of the *Baltic Journal of European Studies* edited by Holland and Chaban intended to present 'the latest empirically informed insights into how key Asia-Pacific players have imagined and perceived the EU before and after Lisbon as well as before and after the outbreak of the sovereign euro debt crisis' (Chaban and Holland 2013, 4) . Similarly, the same authors also published two more edited volumes in 2014: one entitled *Communicating Europe in Times of Crisis*, which dealt with perceptions of Brussels in post-Lisbon and post-Eurozone crisis in the tripartite taxonomy of neighbourhood perceptions, perceptions of distant regions, and global-scale reflections (Chaban and Elgström 2014a); and the second entitled *Europe and Asia: Perceptions from*

Afar[7] directly compared perceptions of the Union in pre- and post-crisis periods in 'distant' Asian countries (Holland and Chaban 2014). Moreover, contributors in Barcevicius et al. (2015) also engaged with the time dimension and briefly mentioned the impact the economic and refugee crises had had on how the EU was viewed externally. Despite the diverse geographical coverage of these studies, a common conclusion was that external perceptions of the EU had been negatively affected as a result of its internal troubles. In other words, global skepticism towards the EU was on the rise.

2.3.4 Gaps in the Literature

As a brief review of the empirical literature on external perceptions of the EU indicates, the amount of research in this direction has been gradually increasing, as well as improving in quality. Nonetheless, I would like to identify several common gaps. First, as already noted выше, although European image studies have been geographically diverse, Central Asia is one of the few regions not to have been included in scholars' focus (a few exceptions were mentioned выше). Therefore, one of the aims of this study is to indicate the position of Central Asia in this extensive literature.

Second, existing literature on Brussels' external image and perceptions remains under-theorized. One could mention the application of political communication theories by Chaban, Schneider, and Malthus (2009); the role theory by Benes (2010) and Bengtsson and Elgström (2012); and social identity theory by Lucarelli and Fioramonti (2010a, b). However, most of what they 'propose [is] a short theoretical discussion, or [is] of an explorative nature', where the very notions of 'image' and 'perception' are not clearly defined and theoretically unpacked, but are used rather vaguely (Mišík 2013, 457, see also Chaban and Elgström 2014b). The task for further analysts, as Lucarelli (2013, 439 emphasis in original) suggests, is 'to better connect the *theoretical foundation* and the empirical research in studies on the external images of the EU'. In this regard, this study also intends to avoid the same theoretical broadness and contribute to this theoretical gap.

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[7] The volume also contained some papers from a previously published special issue of *Baltic Journal of European Studies* edited by Chaban and Holland (2013).

In doing so, it will borrow from Image Studies, briefly outlined in Section 2.2 above, 'whose potential has not been fully utilised yet within European studies' (Mišík 2013, 457). In contrast to other approaches, Image Studies offer the operationalisation of the 'image', which could then be applied to the case of images of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (see Chapter III for conceptual framework).

Third, as argued by Hill and Smith (2011b, 5), 'the very conception of international "actorness" depends on bringing "inside" and "outside" into a relationship with each other'. However, the literature on the external images of the EU has extensively treated the 'outside' separately from the 'inside'. Essentially the literature has largely been neglectful of the EU's self-images, in the sense that the two aspects have not been directly compared (for exclusion see Bengtsson and Elgström 2012, Sheahan et al. 2010, Spaiser 2018). In this regard, image theorists argue that the image is a relative concept, which implies that the (in)accuracy of any image is evident only when it is compared to other images. Only through comparison does the image become meaningful (e.g. Boulding 1956, Frei 1986, Jervis 1976). Bringing this to current research, it can be argued that external perceptions of the EU become meaningful only when compared to how the EU views itself. Understanding Brussels' self-perceptions should therefore be a starting point. Accordingly, this thesis intends to not just examine the EU's perceived images in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, but also to directly compare them with how the EU represents itself in the region.

Finally, the majority of studies have merely been interested in *how* the European Union is perceived, while the question of *why* it is perceived in a particular way has remained underexplored (Lucarelli 2013). In other words, the focus has been on images and perceptions *per se*, while the sources of its images attracted a secondary concern only (for exceptions see Tsuruoka 2008, Barcevicius et al. 2015, Keuleers 2015). One could argue that examining sources of images is equally important in order to fully understand their nature. The analysis of image sources may explain similarities as well as differences between perceptions of Brussels across countries and regions. In this regard, the current

study goes further and analyses not just perceptions of the EU as such, but also the factors that shape its images in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

2.4 Conclusion

In sum, there has been an extensive debate about the nature of the EU as an international actor. On the one hand, some scholars tend to argue in favor of the EU as an independent actor in its own right, which is said to represent a *sui generis* entity in the world of states. The Union's uniqueness has mainly been explained in terms of what the EU is, what the EU does, and how the EU does it, in contrast to other state actors. On the other hand, others tend to be skeptical of the Union's ability as a capable international entity due to its institutional complexities and lack of capacity. For them, the notion of uniqueness is an attempt to mask the real weakness of the EU and present it as a strength. Nevertheless, what unites the two camps is that they are both Euro-centric and tell the story exclusively from the EU's perspective. In this context, a new branch of European studies emerged in the mid-2000s and has since been rapidly growing. The foci of this literature are external images and perceptions of the Union. In contrast to 'traditional' image studies, which is interested in how images and perceptions shape foreign policy, this literature justifies the importance of external images of the EU in the idea that the very actorness of the EU, its international identities, and roles, need to be recognized by outsiders to become meaningful. In this sense, whether the EU is an actor in its own right or not, or whether it is a *sui generis* actor or not, is not merely shaped by the EU's internal characteristics, but also by how externals perceive it. Following this assumption, the empirical research on Brussels' external images and perceptions has covered a wide range of geographic destinations, issue-areas, as well as temporal changes. Yet some gaps in the literature were identified выше. The intention of this research is to contribute to the identified gaps by empirically examining images and perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The next chapter will set the theoretical and methodological framework for such an inquiry.

Chapter III. Images in International Relations: Conceptual and Methodological Framework

The previous chapter argued that despite constantly increasing literature on external images and perceptions of the European Union, the majority of studies remain undertheorized. Several scholars suggested that predominantly empirical research needs to be better connected to fundamental theoretical assumptions (Lucarelli 2013, Chaban and Elgström 2014b). One of the possible solutions, as Mišík proposed, would be to borrow from the conceptual apparatus of Images Studies in International Relations, briefly overviewed in Section 2.2, 'whose potential has not been fully utilised yet within European studies' (Mišík 2013, 457). Following this recommendation, this chapter intends to develop a conceptual and methodological framework for the study of images of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

The chapter proceeds in six sections. The first section develops the argument, widely elaborated in European Studies, that external images constitute an integrative aspect of Brussels' international agency, identity and roles. Drawing from the recognition approach (e.g. Taylor 1994), it will be argued that the EU needs to be recognized by outsiders in order to operate internationally. After answering the 'why bother' question, sections two to five will specifically look inside the concept of image and propose the operationalization of this notion. These sections will be informed, as suggested by Mišík (2013) above, by Images Studies. Section two will be devoted to the definition and characteristics of 'image' as used in this study, while section three will unpack the concept of 'image' by arguing that it is not monolithic, but rather a complex entity consisting of various internal components. The section will also identify the internal components of 'image' that this study focuses on. Furthermore, section four will shift the focus from 'image' as such to the *perceivers* of image. By claiming that states are not monolithic entities either, this section will identify whose images the study treats as representing those of states, i.e. of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. As for section five, it will develop a framework for the study of potential

sources of images. Finally, section six sets the methodology for inferring the images of the European Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

3.1 Image as an Integral Constituent of Social Identity

Before defining the concept of image as such, I would like to explain here why one should bother about images. How is the importance of international images justified? What is the rationale behind studying them? This section intends to provide some theoretical answers to these questions. However, in doing so, the section does not resort to 'traditional' Image Studies. As reviewed in Chapter II, the establishment and development of Image Studies was largely linked to foreign policy analysis, when scholars were interested in how images and perceptions held by top decision-makers influence the international behavior of states (Section 2.2).

Instead, I borrow here from a new body of empirical literature on images and perceptions, which has been attracting scholarly attention since the mid-2000s. This literature specifically examines perceptions of the EU in the eyes of the external world (Section 2.3). The main difference of the latter is that it provides a distinct justification for studying images. Unlike 'traditional' image studies concerned with a causal link between images and foreign policy behavior, the literature on the EU's external perceptions argue that how outsiders perceive the EU is a constitutive part of its international agency, social identity and roles. In other words, despite equally employing the same concepts, the literature on the EU's external perceptions has shifted focus from foreign policy analysis to issues of international identity and roles. It is this literature that the current section intends to draw from whilst answering the 'why bother' question.

The concept of identity is central in constructivism. Hereafter, by identity, the reader should understand social identities in Wendt's (1994, 385) classification, which states that they 'are sets of meanings that an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others'. As Wendt further explains, although identity is a subjective self-understanding based on history, culture, and internal beliefs, its meaning partly depends on how other actors

perceive and interpret it. In other words, 'two kinds of ideas enter into identity, […] those held by the Self and those held by the Other. Identities are constituted by both internal and external structures' (Wendt 1999, 224). Similarly, Ted Hopf (2002, 5) postulates that 'the Self and the Other are mutually necessary and so are their identities'. This implies that a social identity is not merely about the Self, but also requires the Other(s) to be constituted.

The necessity of the Other for social identities presupposes that it plays certain roles in shaping the Self's identity. I would like to emphasize here two roles that the Other plays: being a point of *differentiation* for the Self and offering *recognition* to the Self.

On the one hand, it is widely recognized, especially among critical constructivists and post-structuralists (e.g. Campbell 1992, Rumelili 2004, Hansen 2006), that the Other serves as a point of *differentiation* for the Self. There is always the Other, against whom the Self draws a line, thus differentiating itself. In this case, the Other does not need to necessarily have a behavioral relationship with the Self in order to constitute the Self's identity; rather by merely existing, the Other shows the boundaries of what the Self is and what it is not. In the words of Rumelili (2004, 29), '[i]dentities are always constituted in relation to difference because a thing can only be known by what it is not'. The difference of the Other is sometimes referred to as posing a threat to the Self (e.g. Campbell 1992, 73-74), since the Other is an alternative of the Self, which can replace it. However, some scholars argue that a differentiation should not necessarily be threatening. For example, Hopf (2002, 7) suggests that although identities are always constructed through differentiation from or in relation to the Other, they are rarely oppositional. Similarly, Rumelili (2004, 46) argues that differentiation 'does not necessarily lead to a behavioural relationship based on the perception and representation of the other as a threat to self's identity'.

The importance of differentiation from Other(s) has also been widely recognized in relation to Europe. For example, Stråth (2002) posits that the identity of Europe for centuries has been constructed through differentiation from Others like the Muslims in the times of the Crusades, the Indians during the Age of Discovery, and later, the Ottoman Empire and Russia. It is argued that 'Europe can only be realized in the mirror of Others, […and]

Europe does not exist without non-Europe' (Stråth 2002, 396). Moreover, Neumann and Welsh (1991) examine how 'the Turks' or the Ottoman Empire has long been the Other in constituting Europe's collective identity. Similarly, Neumann (1998, 66) demonstrates that 'for the last 500 years, Russia has been Europe's pangolin', the Other, who combined the attributes of both 'monster' and the 'totem animal' for Europeans. Finally, Wæver (2000) argues today's Europe does not necessarily need othering from Russia or Islamic fundamentalists; rather, Europe's current Other is its own past full of rivalry and war. It is this 'mythic' narrative about the European past which is capable of constructing today a common European identity (Wæver 2000, 279).

On the other hand, and more centrally for the purposes of this research, the Other also plays a function of *recognition* in relation to the Self's identity. If the case of *differentiation* above is about Self's definition of Other, the *recognition* is about Other's definition of Self. Charles Taylor, a prominent recognition theorist, claimed that:

> our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *mis*recognition of others, and so a person or group of people can suffer real damage, real distortion, if the people or society around them mirror back to them a confining or demeaning or contemptible picture of themselves. Nonrecognition or misrecognition can inflict harm, can be a form of oppression, imprisoning someone in a false, distorted, and reduced mode of being (Taylor 1994, 25; emphasis in original).

Honneth (1992, 188), similarly affirms that 'we owe our integrity […] to the receipt of approval or recognition from other persons. [M]isrecognition is injurious because it impairs […] persons in their positive understanding of self' (see also Honneth 1995). In other words, according to the mentioned authors, it is recognition by Others, especially by significant Others, that secures the Self's social identity. Furthermore, Fraser (2003, 10) suggests that 'one becomes an individual subject only in virtue of recognizing, and being recognized by, another subject'. However, in contrast to the previous two authors, Fraser treats (mis)recognition in terms of justice and subordination. Being misrecognized prevents a subordinated actor from participating equally in social interaction. Recognition,

consequently, implies overcoming that subordination, and becoming a full participant of social interaction (Fraser 2003, 28-30).

The concept of recognition is also important for Alexander Wendt. Emphasizing the centrality of recognition for social identities, he distinguishes between *thin* and *thick* recognition. Thin recognition, as in Fraser above, enables an actor to become an independent subject of community, whereas thick recognition is not just about being a recognized subject, but also 'being respected for what makes a person special or unique' (Wendt 2003, 511). Applied to the case of the EU, this implies that the Union needs *thin recognition* from externals to be considered as an actor on its own behalf and be able to interact with other actors, and it needs *thick recognition* to be considered not just as one actor among many, but a unique one, *sui generis* 'force for good' or a normative power.

Furthermore, as repeatedly pointed out by the authors above, non-recognition or mis-recognition by others may cause harm and distortion. In this case, the Self has either to 'reanalyse [its] existing self-concepts even though such reanalysis may be painful and, in some cases, vigorously resisted' (Horrocks and Jackson 1972, 88), or to 'reinscribe the identity' to re-explain its self-understanding to the Other in order to articulate an intended identity and play a role it intends to play (Rumelili 2004, 37-38).

The argument developed in the Introduction speaks to this literature on constructivism and recognition. I argued that what kind of actor the EU can be and what policies it can successfully implement in Central Asia depends not only on Brussels' abilities as an international actor, but also on how the EU and its policies are interpreted by Central Asians (see p.4). The countries of Central Asia have agency to substantially influence, change, limit, or reject the role that the EU wants to play, as well as policies it wants to promote. Therefore, the EU needs to be *recognized* as a credible and legitimate actor for its agency, intentions, and policy initiatives to be 'correctly understood' and accepted. In case of 'subordination' and 'misrecognition', as the authors above suggest, this prevents the Union from being able to participate in social interaction with Central Asia and to successfully promote desired policies.

It is in this sense that perceptions of the European Union held by Central Asians play a significant role in shaping the EU's agency in the region. Understanding those perceptions, thus, is an important aspect of understanding the EU's general profile. This is the main rationale that drives the conduct of this study.

3.2 Defining International Image

Although the aforementioned constructivist argument on social identity and international roles has been frequently used in literature to justify the importance of studying images and perceptions of the EU, this approach has rather been applied as a general framework that has fallen short of further theorization of the very concepts of 'image' or 'perception'. They are not clearly defined nor theoretically unpacked, but used vaguely. Therefore, the task still remains to develop a '*theoretical foundation*' of what an analyst understands while using these notions (Lucarelli 2013, 439, emphasis in original, see also Mišík 2013). In other words, a starting point should be the very concept of 'image'. In this context, it is possible to refer to Image Studies, 'whose potential has not yet been fully utilised within European studies' (Mišík 2013, 457). What Image Studies offer us is the operationalisation of 'image'. It provides us with clear answers to what the image is, what it consists of, and where to find it. While still following the constructivist assumption that external images communicate back to social identity and international roles, I build on the conceptual apparatus of Image Studies in order to make sense of the 'image'. Then, the developed theoretical and conceptual framework will be applied to empirical analysis of images of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in later chapters.

Generally, an image is a system of beliefs that an actor holds about itself and the external world and believes to be true. Images are 'perceptual filters that organize our environment and enable us to predict and respond to that environment' (Cottam 1994, 10). Images provide a sense of clarity in a complex world. In this sense, they are necessarily oversimplifications of reality (Scott 1965, 80). Although the concept of image may theoretically refer to anything in a broader environment (for example, an image of

situation), in the context of International Relations image is particularly utilized to denote the way one international actor views another actor.[8] Actors' images of each other are only one aspect of their complex belief systems. However, 'they are generally regarded as central or "master" beliefs' in International Relations (Shimko 1991, 12). It is this meaning of image that the reader should understand in the context of this thesis.[9]

The concept of image is a central analytical unit of the current study. Images represent 'patterns or configurations of coherent beliefs about the character, intentions, motives, and emotions attributed to or associated with the outgroup as a whole' (Alexander, Brewer, and Livingston 2005, 782). Sometimes the notions of *image* and *perception* are used interchangeably, especially in the literature on EU's external images. Although they are closely related concepts, some authors argue that a distinction between the two needs to be made. If *images* refer to preconceived 'conscious pictures, descriptions of foreign countries', *perceptions*, on the other hand, are concepts influenced by or inferred from pre-existing images (Herrmann 1985, 31). That is to say 'image provides the frame and the lenses through which the external world is […] perceived' (Whiting 1989, 18).

Wang (2000) summarizes three main characteristics of images that have been widely acknowledged in literature. First of all, images are *selective* concepts in a sense that they are 'derived from selective interpretation of history, experience, and self-image' (Whiting 1989, 18). Once formed through selection, they further selectively filter new incoming information. It is argued that much of the incoming stimuli is left unnoticed and totally ignored, especially when new information contradicts an actor's pre-existing beliefs. Jervis (1976, 143) argues that 'we ignore information that does not fit, twist it so that it confirms, or at least does not contradict, our beliefs, and deny its validity'. Similarly, Deutsch and Merritt (1965, 134) claim that existing images work as 'screens' that, first, ignore most incoming messages; second, influence the interpretation of these messages, which are not 'completely ignored, rejected or repressed'. Contrarily, if incoming stimuli are favourable

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[8] The focus in Image Studies has been on images of state actors; therefore, the concept has sometimes been used as a *national image*. Despite a state-centric development of the literature, its general conceptual framework is still applicable to the case of the European Union.

[9] Hereafter, the notions of 'image', 'perceived image', and 'external image' are used interchangeably.

to the actors' existing beliefs, they are easily accepted and integrated into their knowledge structure (Boulding 1956, 13). On the other hand, the degree of selectivity does not solely depend on the content of incoming stimuli, that is to what extent it suits or contradicts existing images, but also the credibility of the source may also affect how a new stimulus is processed. Sometimes a perceiving actor may rely heavily on some sources blindly accepting any message sent by them, and, by contrast, sometimes they may reject any message independently of their content if they see the source as highly untrustworthy (Jervis 1976, 122-23).

Selective resistance to new information leads to another characteristic of images: *stability.*[10] It is a common claim that images are highly stable beliefs. At the same time, that is not to assert that they are fully static. Images may be time-specific, as discussed in Section 2.3, and change over-time in the process of continual interaction with incoming stimuli. Yet, they are highly resistant to such alterations. Holsti (1967) theorizes that images consist of peripheral (less important) and central (the most important) beliefs. Similarly, Snyder and Diesing (1977) distinguish between two levels of image components: background (long-term) and immediate (situational). Central or background images, as they argue, are more stable, whereas periphery components are comparatively less resistant to incoming stimuli. When new information influences the peripheral or situational components of the image, this may cause a limited and insignificant alteration in overall image structure. But, sometimes new stimuli may also affect central beliefs, bringing revolutionary change and reorganizing the whole structure of the image. In this case, an image holder fully reconsiders its image and adopts the change. If day-to-day 'cumulative' events usually cause the first effect, 'spectacular' events such as wars and revolutions are more likely to cause the final effect (Boulding 1956, Deutsch and Merritt 1965, Jervis 1976, 291-96).

Finally, and more centrally to this research, images are *relative* categories. It is unfeasible to check the extent one's image corresponds with outside 'reality', as an image can be

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[10] The most stable and 'closed' images are also referred to as *stereotypes*. Some authors even use these notions interchangeably claiming that '[a]ll images are stereotyped in the trivial sense that they oversimplify reality' (Holsti 1967, 19).

compared only with another image, but not with 'reality' (Boulding 1956, 165). Jervis (1976, 409) follows the same argument while claiming that 'no formula will […] reveal what image is correct'. The relativity of images implies that the task for the analyst is not 'to evaluate to what extent the perceptions are matched by objective evidence from the real world', but rather to examine the 'accuracy' or 'inaccuracy' of images – that is 'the degree of match or mismatch to be observed when juxtaposing perceptions, self-perceptions and meta-perceptions' (Frei 1986, 279). This is to say that images cannot be categorized into 'true'–'false' or 'accurate'–'inaccurate' dichotomies in absolute terms, but only relatively when compared with alternative images. Following this argument, the objective in scrutinizing perceived images of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is not to assess to what extent they correspond to 'reality', but rather to understand how accurately the EU is perceived in relation to its own self-representations. That is why inferred *perceived images* of the EU will be juxtaposed with its *self-images*.[11] It is only through comparison that images become meaningful.

While analysing international images, the analyst encounters, *inter alia*, two important questions that must be clarified from the very beginning. The first issue refers to the internal components of images, i.e. what is to be *perceived*. The image is not a monolithic concept, but rather consists of various internal components and attributes. It is analytically unfeasible to identify and examine every single component of the image, thus one should decide which components or dimensions are to be focused on. In other words, one needs to look inside the concept of image (Herrmann 1985, 26, Zhang 2012, 15). The second question relates to *perceivers* of images, i.e. whose images one is talking about. Generally speaking, the perceiver is a state(s) in this study – Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. But how should a state be viewed? If some authors treat states as unitary actors, others argue a state should rather be viewed as consisting of different internal groups, too. So, the task would be to identify which internal group's image is examined as representing that of the state. The following two sections engage with these questions and identify the *perceived* and the *perceiver* in the present study.

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[11] The notions of 'self-representation', 'self-perception', and 'self-image' are used interchangeably.

3.3 The Perceived: Power/Capability and Threat/Opportunity

A widely acknowledged fact among scholars is that images are not monolithic concepts, but rather are complex entities consisting of various internal components. Scott (1965, 72) defines an image 'as a totality of attributes that a person recognizes (or imagines) when he contemplates that nation'. The more attributes the image has, the 'richer' or more 'complex' it becomes, whereas a 'poorer' image is built on fewer attributes and details. Thus, more information about the object is likely to lead to a more coherent/accurate image of that object. He further argues that these attributes can be categorized into cognitive, affective, and action attributes.[12] The cognitive component implies the knowledge of inherent characteristics of a perceived actor, while the affective component represents the perceiver's feelings of like or dislike towards an object. Finally, action attributes denote how the perceiver views his/her responses to an object. The current study intends to focus only on the cognitive aspect of the EU's perceived image, as the aim is to understand the content of the EU's perceived image, rather than the degree of like/dislike or the behavioral aspect.

The cognitive aspect of image is also a complex notion, which needs to be further broken down into components. Daniel Frei (1986, 12-13) explains that '[j]ust as one requires three dimensions for describing the size of the room in which one is sitting (length, height and width), so one also needs a number of dimensions for exploring the "space" of the intellectual construct called "conflictive cognition"'. However, it is by no means an easy task to identify all these components and decide exactly which of them would best explain the image. In this uneasy situation, as Richard Cottam's (1977, 43) illustrative analogy explains, the 'analyst is like a chemist who is allowed to determine the component parts of water by observation only'. In other words, the task for the researcher is to infer by mere observation that two parts hydrogen and one part oxygen form water as we know it. A starting point for this kind of inquiry would be the periodic table of pure elements. Unless

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[12]   Scott (1965) was not the first scholar who defined the images on this line. For example, Boulding (1959:120-121) also argued that an image 'must be thought of as the total cognitive, affective, and evaluative structure' of a perceiving actor.

one has this table of elements, any discussions about chemical characteristics of water would be meaningless (Cottam 1977, 43). Similarly, a starting point for studying images should be to identify which internal cognitive elements are important to understand images. Obviously, image itself is more than the sum of its separate parts, but the breakdown of its internal dimensions makes the image an analytically observable concept (Shimko 1991, 13).

The literature on Image Studies provides rich discussions about the internal dimensions of images. Depending on specific research aims, different authors have utilized various image dimensions, sometimes overlapping, but sometimes diverging. A comparative summary of dimensions used by different authors can be found in **Table 3-1** (adapted from Zhang 2012, 27).

Table 3-1: Image Dimensions Studied in the Literature

Authors	Applied Image Dimensions			
	1	**2**	**3**	**Other Dimensions[13]**
Boulding (1959)	Strength/ Weakness	Friendliness/ Hostility	-	Geographical space
Holsti (1962)	Strength/ Weakness	Friendliness/ Hostility	-	-
Scott (1965)	Perceived Power	Benevolence/ Malevolence	-	-
Cottam (1977)	Capabilities	Threat/ Opportunity	-	- Cultural Distance; - Decisional style; - Locus of decision making; - Interaction of domestic forces
Snyder and Diesing (1977)	Resources and military forces (and willingness to use them)	-	- Long-range aims; - Specific aims	- Probable strategy; - Diplomatic style; - Meta-perspective

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[13] Dimensions mentioned in this column have been applied only by a few authors depending on the precise aims of their research. These dimensions remain out of the scope of this study; therefore, they are not discussed in detail.

Herrmann (1985)	Capabilities	Threat/ Opportunity	-	- Culture
Cottam (1986)	Capabilities (Military and economic)	Threat/ Opportunity	-	- Cultural Sophistication; - Domestic policy; - Supportiveness; - Flexibility
Frei (1986)	Capabilities	-	- Aims; - Motives underlying aims	- Choice of strategies; - Structure of adversary; - Predictability and trustworthiness; - Meta-perspective
Shimko (1991)	Capabilities	-	- Intentions, Goals, Objectives; - Motivation	- Strategy and Tactics; - Decision process; - Meta-perspective

As the table demonstrates, some dimensions have only been used by one or a few authors, while others can be found in almost every author's conceptualization.

The first column shows that all mentioned scholars consider one's perception of the other's *power/capability* as an essential part of image. As Image Studies emerged during the Cold War, the argument has also been in the Realist tradition that how much power the opposite side has is the main concern for states in anarchical international relations. Some authors working on the EU have also focused on external perceptions of the Union's power as an international actor (e.g. Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010b). But they justified the importance of studying the EU's perceived power not by other actors' concern about Brussels' power, rather to see whether the EU is recognized by them as a capable international actor in its own right.

The second and third columns are closely related. They are designed to combine the perceived power/capability of one actor with its perceived *intentions and goals*. Scott (1965, 74) argues that 'the perception of a nation as strong and weak can probably be expected to interact with the judgement of its intentions (benevolent or malevolent) in determining the action component of the image'. In other words, not only perceived power

is important, but for what purposes the other intends to use its power is also a vital dimension of the image. *Intentions, goals and motivation* in the third column, however, consider only one side of the coin – the intentions of the perceived actor. The authors in the second column, by contrast, propose a double-sided approach. The point is that instead of making a judgement about the other's goals only, it is more important to what extent the other's goals are compatible with those of the perceiver. What is paramount is not the perceptions of what the other intends to achieve as such, but rather to what extent the other's wants converge with or diverge from one's own aims. Therefore, an actor makes a judgement about whether the other's intentions represent *a threat* or *an opportunity* for him (Zhang 2012, 30-32). In this sense, perceptions of threat/opportunity in column two are relational.

Other dimensions mentioned in column four have also been studied by several scholars. Some authors highlighted cultural distance, decisional style, strategy, and meta-perspective. However, they have not been commonly applied, but have rather been mostly used in the context of certain studies depending on specific research aims.

This study also focuses on two dimensions of images only: (1) *perceptions of the EU's power/capability* and (2) *perceptions of whether the EU represents an opportunity or poses a threat*. The reason for doing so is twofold. On the one hand, in choosing these two elements I heavily rely on existing literature. As discussed above, the absolute majority of authors working on images have treated these two components as necessarily important elements. As Herrmann (2013, 340) puts it, 'concentrating on these two dimensions of [the image] is a parsimonious way of describing perceptions of others'. On the other hand, focusing on these two elements speaks to the objective of this research too, which is, firstly, analyzing whether the EU is perceived as a capable actor of its own (perceived power), and, secondly, whether Central Asians perceive the EU exclusively as a power for good, as the Union itself projects (perceived threat/opportunity). Yet, it needs to be noted once again that selecting these two dimensions is not to deny the importance of other elements in Table 3-1, which may equally be significant depending on specific research purposes.

The two sub-sections below elaborate on what the reader should understand by power/capability and threat/opportunity, respectively.

3.3.1 Perceived Power/Capability[14]

The concept of power has been one of the most discussed topics in International Relations throughout its development as a field of study. Nevertheless, it still remains a highly contested concept. What power is and how to measure it is still a disputable question. In this regard, scholars of Image Studies have mainly interpreted 'power' in the Realist understanding of the concept (see ниже). The reason for this was twofold: on the other hand, Image Studies appeared and mainly developed during the Cold War period, when the (neo)realism was the dominant theory of the time (for review of 'power' in Realism see Schmidt 2005); and on the other hand, and closely related to the previous, Image Studies mainly focused on mutual perceptions of the US and the USSR. In this relationship, the (neo)realist interpretation of power was more important.

In Realism, power is perceived as 'the immediate aim' for states (Morgenthau 2006, 29). In all circumstances states intend to maximize their own power to become relatively more powerful than other actors in the system. It is claimed that 'calculations about power lie at the heart of how states think about the world around them' (Mearsheimer 2001, 12). That is to say, what states think about other states is largely determined by their estimations of others' power. As noted in Chapter II earlier, Realists tend to define power in terms of material *resources*, i.e. the more material resources a state has, the more powerful it becomes. For example, Waltz (1979, 130) argues 'the political clout of nations correlates closely with their economic power and their military might'. Similarly, Mearsheimer (2001) distinguishes between latent power and military power. Latent power implies the socio-economic aspect of a state's capability like wealth, technology, and population, which is conceived to be a base for the state's military power. Morgenthau (2006, 122-162) also emphasizes national character, national morale, the quality of diplomacy, and the

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[14] The notions of power and capability are used interchangeably.

quality of government as additional elements of national power along with economic and military resources. However, military capability still remains paramount for him.

Image Studies mainly drew from this realist conceptualization of power. While examining perceptions of state's power/capability, authors have mostly dealt with how one views the other's military power. For instance, Herrmann (1985, 35) writes that 'capability judgements will be made on the basis of empirical estimates of industrial and resource base, armed forces, equipment, training'. Similarly, Shimko (1991, 20-21) claims that he is 'interested in perceptions of relative military capabilities', whereas Cottam (1977, 64), the same as Morgenthau above, supplements military capability with perceptions of national morale and quality of government.

In the context of the current thesis, this conceptualization of power purely in realistic and military terms seems insufficient. I can see two reasons for that: first, making a judgement about one's power based solely on military capabilities is less relevant today than it used to be in the past; second, it seems even less applicable when one discusses the capability of the EU from a military point of view, as the EU is not and does not position itself as a military power (for criticism of the EU's miliary power see Kagan 2002, Hyde-Price 2008) .

This study applies an alternative conceptualization of power, which is the 'relational power' approach.[15] This approach treats power not as a material *resource* that an actor possesses, but rather as *influence* that it has in relation to other actors. In other words, power is conceived as the ability to influence the behavior of other actors (see Baldwin 2002 for review). Proponents of this approach assert that power cannot be understood and measured in overall terms. To make sense of an actor's power, one needs to specify dimensions of power, and, first of all, its *domain* and *scope*. As Baldwin (2002, 179) puts it, 'a meaningful specification of a power relationship must include scope and domain'. The *domain* reflects the very meaning of 'relational', because understanding power as influence

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[15] Again, it is still acknowledged that 'power' is a highly contested and multifaceted concept, and the 'relational power' approach is just one interpretation of it. For an overview of alternative conceptualizations see, for example, Guzzini (1992, 2016), and Barnett and Duvall (2005). Yet, this thesis applies the 'relational power' approach, mainly due to the fact that it offers a coherent operationalization of 'power' by identifying power's *domain* and *scope*, which is useful for the purpose of this study.

presupposes the existence of an object that the influence is exerted on. As objects of power may change, so too does the extent of influence. In this regard, it is argued that 'a state may have a great deal of influence in one region of the world, while having little or no influence in other parts of the world' (Baldwin 2002, 178, Dahl 1968, 408). Therefore, before 'analyzing' or 'measuring' power, one needs to identify the context over which that power is exercised.

The *scope*, on the other hand, refers to the issue-specific nature of power. One needs to identify not only the object of power, but also in what issue areas the actor has an influence over the object. The general argument is that 'individuals or groups who are relatively powerful with respect to one kind of activity may be relatively weak with respect to other activities. Power need not be general; it may be specialized' (Dahl 1968, 408). Measuring power in overall terms is like comparing athletes from different fields: 'How is one to compare a golfer, a swimmer, an archer, a runner and a weightlifter?' (Baldwin 2002, 181). This kind of comparison is meaningless without a specific reference to the type of sport and what is to be compared (see also Dahl 1976, 35). Similarly, power should also be measured within a particular issue-area. In this case, an analyst confronts the 'task of justifying his particular selection of issues through which power is analyzed' (Frey 1971, 1082). This thesis also identifies and focuses on specific *domain(s)* and *scope(s)* of the EU's perceived power.

To begin with domain, two different contexts of EU's (perceived) power will be considered. Firstly, the study focuses on the EU's power in the *global context*. The purpose is to reveal whether the Union is recognized in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as a global actor in its own right, able to influence and compete with other powerful actors. This approach has been common in the literature on the EU's external perceptions. For instance, contributors to Holland et al. (2007), Chaban and Holland (2008), and Lucarelli and Fioramonti (2010b) have studied Brussels' power and role as a global actor. Secondly, the chapter also treats the Union's perceived power in a particular *regional context*, in this case, the region under scrutiny being Central Asia. The intention here is see if the EU's power is perceived to extend to the countries of Central Asia. In contrast to the global context, the

literature on external perceptions of the EU has rarely focused on the EU's perceived power in particular regions and/or countries.

As for issue-areas (scope) of the EU's perceived power, here the study draws from the continuous academic debate in European studies, which develops around the issue of whether the EU is an *economic* power, *political* power, or *normative* power. Chaban et al. (2013) argue that fluctuations in perceptions of the EU's global power depend on these issue-areas. Those who view the EU as a great power emphasize its economic might, whereas sceptics of the EU's international actorness refer to its lack of political and military capabilities, and those who stand in between focus on the normative power of the Union. As Chaban et al. (2013, 435) claimed, '[t]hese contrasting images of the EU are partly due to variations in thematic focus – that is, specific issues to which scholars are directing their research'.

As economic, political, and normative aspects have been central to the EU's power in literature, this study also follows the same path.[16] However, the *normative* aspect has been replaced by the notion of *soft* power. My fieldwork revealed that the concept of 'normative power' was hardly known and used neither by interviewed elites nor media samples in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Instead, the notion of 'soft power' was frequently cited in relation to the EU. As the aim of the thesis was to reveal the *perceptions of others*, it seemed important to use notions with which the objects of this study were more likely to be familiar. Therefore, during the early stages of field research 'normative power' was replaced by 'soft power' as a third dimension of the EU's perceived power. On the other hand, one could argue that normative power and soft power are overlapping concepts to an extent, in the sense that both denote the importance of attraction. But 'soft power' is treated as a broader concept than 'normative power'. For example, Jhee and Lee (2011, 52-53)

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[16] A military power dimension is excluded from the discussion. The reason is that if one examines the EU's perceived military power, it can be assumed with a very high probability that the image is likely be that of a weak actor (absence of military power). Moreover, the Union itself tends to avoid positioning itself as a military power, consequently, a military component is unnoticeable both in European external rhetoric and action.

theorize that 'normative' power, along with 'affective' power,[17] are two internal dimensions of soft power. Therefore, it is believed that this change does not significantly affect the findings of the research.

In the context of this research, the economic, political, and soft power dimensions need to be understood in their broader all-encompassing meanings. I do not specifically define them and identify their internal constituencies. Rather, their internal 'building blocks' are inductively inferred from collected data through coding. Again, the reason is that the thesis deals with *perceptions of others*, and it is important to understand what the objects of the study identify as constituent of the EU's economic, political, and soft power, instead of imposing pre-defined categories upon them.

3.3.2 Perceived Threat/Opportunity

Shimko (1991, 15) claims that 'if we asked decision makers to identify the most important thing one can know about an opponent's foreign policy, its ultimate objectives would probably be at the top of the desired knowledge list'. However, as claimed выше, what is important is not what the other actor is seen as intending to achieve, but whether that actor's intentions are viewed as diverging from or corresponding to one's own objectives. Based on this, a perceiving actor makes a judgement: if goals are perceived to be compatible, the other is viewed as representing an opportunity; by contrast, if goals are recognized as incompatible, a perceiver is likely to view the other as a threat (see **Figure 3-1** below) (Herrmann 1985, Herrmann and Fischerkeller 1995). It is also this perception of *threat* and *opportunity* that is central to international images, along with the perceptions of *power/capability* discussed previously.

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[17] By 'affective' dimension the authors mean all traits such as cultural richness, education, or scientific advancement that make an actor attractive in the eyes of others, whereas 'normative' dimension refers to an actor's ability to shape international norms (Jhee and Lee 2011, 52-53).
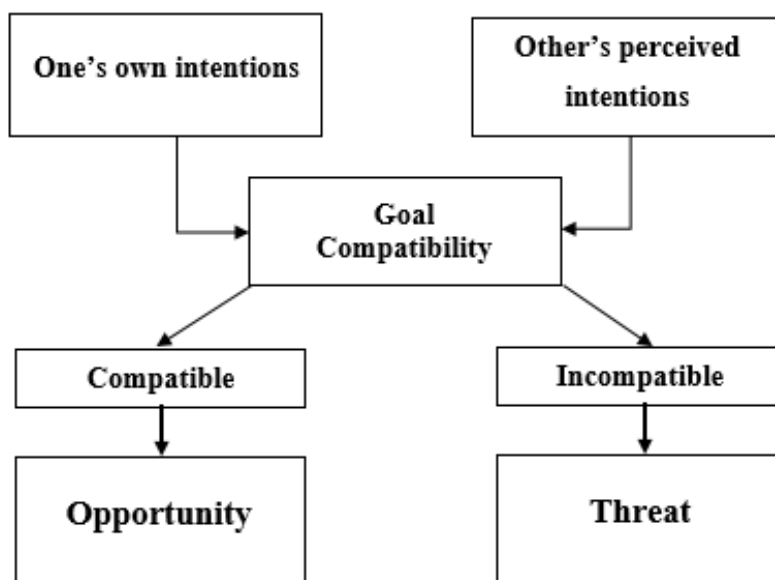
Figure 3-1: Goal Compatibility and Threat/Opportunity (author's figure)

The focus on threat/opportunity partly speaks to Stephan Walt's (1985) *Balance of Threat* theory. As he argues, '[a]lthough power is an important factor in their [states'] calculations, it is not the only one. Rather than allying in response to power alone, it is more accurate to say that states will ally with or against the most *threatening* power' (Walt 1985, 8-9; emphasis in original). That is to say, what is important is not power *per se*, but for what purposes that power is used, whether for threatening or beneficial purposes.

The 'perception of threat' has been widely studied in International Relations (for general discussion see e.g. Baldwin 1971, Cohen 1978, Stein 2013). However, the very notion of 'threat' is not clearly defined, but is rather used broadly to denote a potential harm and danger that one actor may anticipate from others. Similarly, in the context of this study, a threat should be understood as Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's perceptions of the EU as a harmful and disadvantageous international actor for them. By contrast, an opportunity needs to be interpreted as perceptions of a beneficial and advantageous relationship with a perceived actor. Once again, internal elements or the content of threat and opportunity is inductively inferred from collected data.

The study follows this conceptualization and examines whether the European Union is perceived as posing a threat or representing an opportunity in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Chapter VI). What should be noted is that the perceptions of threat and opportunity may be issue-specific. One actor may be simultaneously viewed as both a threat and an opportunity depending on a particular issue area. Therefore, the intention is not to reveal one generalized perception of the EU as either a threat or an opportunity, but rather to try to understand whether these vary across different issue-areas, and if so, how they vary.

3.4 The Perceiver(s): Intermediate Elites and the Media

The previous section has dealt with *the perceived* of this study, now this section goes on to identify *the perceiver(s)*, which is an equally important aspect while analyzing international images. In general, the thesis engages with images of the European Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In this sense, the perceivers are states: Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. However, scholars rarely treated states as monolithic entities and seldom claimed to examine images at the state level. One exceptional example of this kind is Herrmann's (1985) *Perceptions and Behavior in Soviet Foreign Policy.* For the analytical purpose to simplify the study, he introduced the notion of a 'prevailing view', that is a 'generally accepted construction of reality' in a state, which might not necessarily be in line with the personal image held by any particular leader (Herrmann 1985, 29). The prevailing view was designed, as the author suggested, to capture the most visible image at the state level, while ignoring internal alternative narratives. Even in this case the author did not to deny that states might have internally competing images of the same object depending on the particular perceiver.

In fact, a more common approach in Image Studies has been to treat states as entities consisting of diverse internal groups. In this case, the task for the analyst is to look into a state and select a particular internal group(s), whose images are to be focused on. In the first place, studies of *top decision-makers' images* have found recognition among scholars. The argument is that a state's foreign policy is mostly determined by top decision-makers,

and therefore understanding their images may lead to understanding a state's international behaviour. A successful application of this approach can be found in Shimko's (1991) *Images and Arms Control*. The focus of his empirical analysis was the images of the Soviet Union held by five key leaders in the Reagan Administration, including the president himself. He first analysed how these five figures viewed the Soviet Union, then went on to discuss how images influenced their policy stances on arms control policy towards the USSR. A second alternative has been to examine the images held by *less influential elites* as opposed to high-ranking decision-makers. For instance, Wang (2000) introduced the concept of 'intermediate elites' (those who influence decision-making indirectly) and scrutinized Sino-American mutual images held by the intermediate elites of both sides, whereas Shambaugh (1991) concentrated on perceptions of the United States in the eyes of 'China's American Watchers', as he called Chinese experts and academia working on US matters. The final approach to be mentioned is the *general public* as the main perceiver. Boulding (1959) argued that despite decisions being made by top decision-makers, they are under certain obligations to take the perceptions of the public into consideration, especially in democratic societies (see also Zhang 2012, 17). For instance, Alexander, Levin, and Henry (2005) applied this approach to reveal the Lebanese public's images of the United States.

As for the literature on perceptions of the EU, the most common approach so far has been a combination of middle-ranking elite, the media, and public discourses. In other words, authors have tried to examine the EU's perceived images from the three aforementioned perspectives, often within the same country (e.g. Holland et al. 2007, Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010b). The main shortcoming of this kind of study is that each perspective is discussed in isolation from the other. This seems to provide a more fragmented picture of perceived images, as, instead of having a more integrative country-focused discussion, these studies risk ending up with three different and poorly-connected results. 'In reality', as Wang (2000, 31) claims, 'the boundaries among these three categories is by no means fixed'.

Returning to the focus of the present study, the general perceivers in this thesis, again, are the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic. However, the intention is not to operate at the state level and reveal one prevailing view of the EU in these countries (see Herrmann 1985 above), but rather to treat a state as an internally heterogeneous entity, which implies that there are many different perceivers within the state. The task here is to identify which internal actors will be chosen as perceivers. On this account, I draw on Entman's (2003) cascading activation model. The model basically explains how frames spread within a society across the top and bottom levels. According to the model, frames first travel from *high-ranking decision-makers* at the top level to '*other elites*', as Entman (2003, 419) calls them, such as members of parliament and staffers, ex-officials, experts (I use the term 'intermediate elites'; see a definition of this notion ниже), and then travel on to the *media* – both at the intermediate level. Intermediate level actors, in turn, deliver frames to the general public at the bottom level. However, it is not just a one-way top-down movement, as the general public also feeds back to the intermediate level actors, and they indirectly influence top-level decision makers (see **Figure 3-2**). Therefore, the frame travels across society in a circular process.
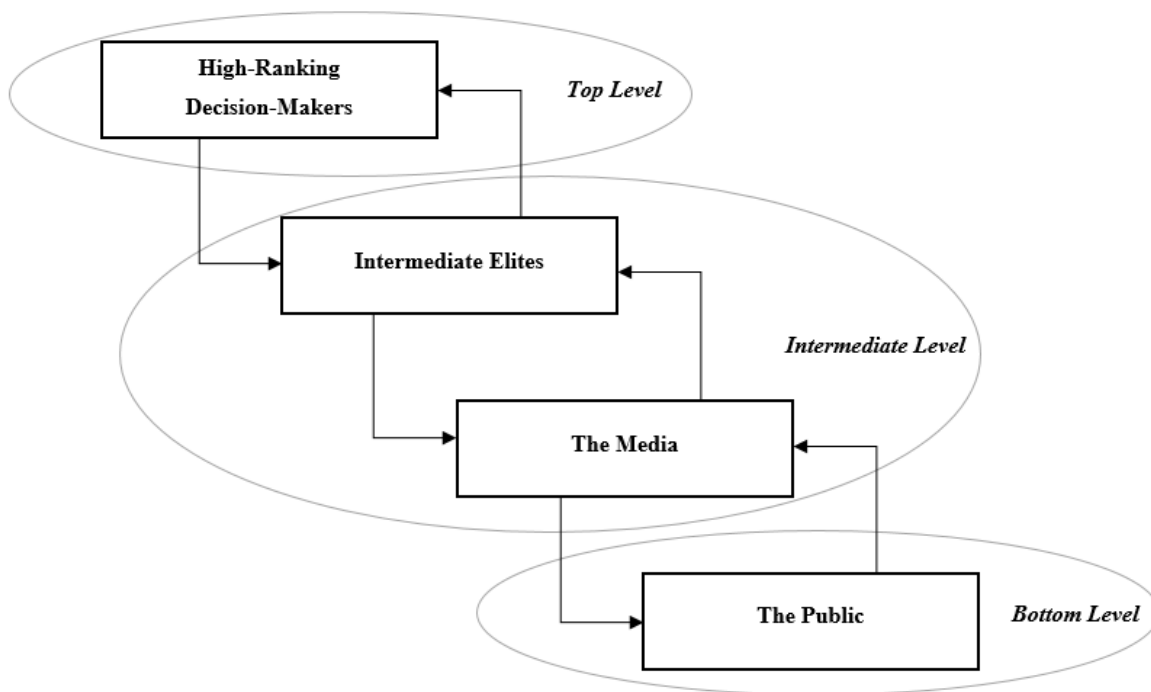
Figure 3-2: Three Levels of Perceivers (adapted from Entman 2003, 419)

What is applicable in this model is that society is divided into three main levels: top, intermediate and bottom, i.e. three levels of perceivers. The model also speaks to 'perceivers' in the pre-existing literature, surveyed in previous paragraphs. Among these three, the *intermediate level* (intermediate elites and the media) is chosen as the main perceiver(s) in the framework of this study. There are three main reasons for this choice.

Firstly, the intermediate level serves as an important transmission belt between top decision-makers and the general public at the bottom. Actors at the intermediate level may have significant influence on how the general public perceives a particular object. At the same time, through different communication channels they may also indirectly influence those at the top level. Intermediate level actors are the main agenda setters and opinion shapers in society.[18] In this sense, images held by intermediate level actors may arguably be more representative of a state in general. Secondly, the EU itself identifies intermediate level actors as its main target group in Central Asian countries (EU-10-EU official; EU-6-EU official).[19] The EU's activities as well as communication policy in the region are mainly directed towards intermediate elites and the media. As a result, we may expect actors at the intermediate level to be more likely to possess more knowledge of the EU and its policy implementation, and thus are more likely to have more comprehensive images (than the general public). Finally, the issue of data access is also important. For instance, it is comparatively more challenging to accurately examine images held by top decision-makers in countries like Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan due to relatively closed political systems as well as a lack of open data sources, especially on relatively less important topics like the EU. Similarly, a study of the general public's images requires the conduct of extensive surveys and opinion polls, which are more time- and financial-resource-

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[18] Possibly, this relates more to democratic societies than authoritarian. But still, even in (soft) authoritarian states (Schatz 2006) we cannot fully dismiss the role of intermediate level actors in setting the agenda in society.

[19] Hereafter, conducted interviews will be referenced in this format. First, 'EU' indicates interviews conducted with people related to the European Union. Second, a number ('10' and '6') refers to ordinal number of an interview. Third, 'European official' indicates an interviewed person's position.

consuming. By contrast, intermediate level actors are more accessible and approachable in terms of data collection.

As demonstrated in **Figure 3-2**, the intermediate level should be conceived as consisting of *intermediate elites* and *the media*. The term 'intermediate elite' is used in relation to

> those people who usually are not directly involved in national foreign policy decision-making but, who nevertheless, are influential in forming the images held by the general public. This group also provides perceptual information concerning the other country to top decision-maker (Wang 2000, 31).

Representatives of this group 'have gained their knowledge by virtue of their position and experience in the community, their established networks of relationships, their ability to express themselves orally, and their broad understanding of their community' (Shensul et al. quoted in Chaban et al. 2013, 434). As mentioned above, Entman (2003) includes within this category, *inter alia*, members of parliament, ex-officials, and experts. Similarly, it has been common to consider middle-ranking politicians, experts, civil society representatives, journalists, and businessmen as belonging to the intermediate elite while examining perceptions of the EU among them (e.g. Holland et al. 2007, Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010b). Following this approach, this study also focuses on four groups of intermediate elites: (1) middle-ranking politicians such as (former) members of parliament, (former) diplomats, well-known political figures, including opposition leaders; (2) scholars/experts; (3) journalists; and (4) civil society representatives (more discussion in Section 3.6.3 below).

Another perceiver at the intermediate level is the media, which in this study is the printed media. Similar to intermediate elites, the media also operates at the medium level, functioning as a bridge between top and bottom levels. On the one hand, it greatly influences public opinion on a given issue as it has an agenda-setting role, that is 'influencing the salience of attitudes toward the political issues' (McCombs and Shaw 1972, 177), and a framing role, that is 'how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences' (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007,

11). On the other hand, arguably, media may feed back to what top level actors think of an object. Three printed newspapers in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have been chosen to represent the media images of the EU in these countries (more details in Section 3.6.3 below).

One point worth mentioning here is that one may reasonably point out the difficulty of treating the identified four groups of intermediate elites as well as the media as belonging to the same category of perceivers. This means that, for example, the intermediate level politicians may have different perceptions from civil society representatives; or that what scholars/experts think of the EU may not necessarily reflect how the printed media portrays it. Nevertheless, what unites them all, as noted earlier, is that all these actors seem to belong neither to the top level nor to the bottom level, but rather all operate as a liaison between the two. Consequently, it seems possible to eliminate their objective internal differences for an analytical purpose and treat them as one category: intermediate level perceivers. In this case, the intention is not to treat images and perceptions of the EU among intermediate elites and the media separately, rather these two are combined throughout the discussion. In other words, the focus is on *images* as such spread across the intermediate level, rather than on *actors* at this level.

3.5 Image Sources

As mentioned in the Introduction, the objective of this study extends beyond a mere analysis of what the EU's images are. Along with this, the thesis also intends to understand *what kinds of factors shape* the Union's identified images in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. One could argue that knowing the sources of images is equally important in order to fully understand their nature. The analysis of image sources is likely to explain similarities as well as differences in images of the European Union across countries and regions (Barcevicius et al. 2015, 16).

In this regard, the absolute majority of research on images in general, as well as on images of the EU in particular, has normally been interested in *how* one actor is perceived, whereas

the question of *why* it is perceived in a particular way remained underexplored (for exceptions see Tsuruoka 2008, Chaban and Magdalina 2014, Keuleers 2015). As claimed by Tsuruoka (2008, 2), despite 'a growing number of works on external perceptions of the EU […] most of them only describe the state of perceptions in each country and stop short of exploring how such perceptions are shaped' (see also Lucarelli 2013). Nevertheless, this is not to say that the literature has nothing to offer in this regard. Although the study of image sources has not been extensively elaborated, some conceptual insights have still been offered by several authors. However, they stand out as rare exceptions.

For example, in Image Studies, Boulding (1956, 6) argued that the 'image is built up as a result of all past experience of the possessor of the image'. In a similar way, Jervis (1976, 217) also claimed that 'history is an important factor in determining the images'. Another more detailed attempt to conceptualize the sources of images was made by Richard Cottam (1977). He proposed his own 'analytically useful categorizing' of the sources of images, which included historical experience; defence and grandeur interests; politically relevant values; the perceiver's role interests; and, finally, his socialization patterns (Cottam 1977, 60). Furthermore, Scott (1965) suggested distinguishing between two categories of image sources: on the one hand, images are shaped by 'psychological correlates', which denote factors belonging to the personality of perceiving individuals such as awareness of an object or personal values; on the other hand, images are also influenced by 'social correlates', which are factors that result from a perceiver's social interactions with a perceived object as well as with third actors. These two categories were treated not as competing and mutually exclusive, but rather complementary to each other. These proposed conceptual insights in Image Studies, however, fell short in offering a comprehensive analytical framework.

More recently, the literature on perceptions of the EU proposed a few more systematic approaches to the study of image sources. In this regard, Michito Tsuruoka was among the pioneering scholars, who enquired not only into what the EU's perceptions are, but also 'how external perceptions of the EU are shaped' (Tsuruoka 2008, 3). He developed an analytical framework that suggested studying the sources of images by categorising them

into *exogenous* and *endogenous* sources.[20] *Exogenous* sources refer to 'factors emanating from the EU', i.e. inseparably linked to the Union and its internal/external policy. Consequently, if the EU performs well, as Tsuruoka further continued, this will be a source of positive perception; its failure, by contrast, will be a source of skeptical perception. *Endogenous* sources, on the other hand, refer to factors unrelated to the EU; rather, they are existent 'in the third countries on which the EU has little influence' (Tsuruoka 2008, 9-10). These factors function as filters, which any EU-related information runs through.

Further developing this idea, Chaban and Magdalina (2014) suggested that image sources can be not just exogenous and endogenous (or as they call them, EU-specific and location-specific, respectively), but also *global* factors. Global factors in their explanation directly refer neither to the EU, nor to the country under the study, but rather reflect generic processes in international relations. For example, they observed that overall power shift from '"the West to the rest" […] was the leading reason for the EU being seen as [a] less important' international actor in some countries of the Asia-Pacific region[21] (Chaban and Magdalina 2014, 213).

However, what both works neglected is the idea that very often images and perceptions are subject to the intrinsic characteristics of the perceiving individual. By only focusing on global, EU-specific, and location-specific factors, these works overlooked the 'lowest' level: how the idiosyncrasies of individuals influence the way the Union is perceived. To fill this gap, Keuleers (2015) proposed a multilevel analysis framework that focused on how *country level* as well as *individual level* factors influence images, but missed the *global level*, which is equally important. Finally, Barcevicius et al. (2015) complemented this multilevel framework by joining the *global*, *country*, and *individual* level factors together in their analysis of the perceptions of the Union in the ten countries that the EU had established a strategic partnership with. This tripartite focus, as argued, provides a more holistic and detailed picture of image sources by ensuring that all levels influencing perceptions are taken into consideration (Barcevicius et al. 2015, 16).

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[20] These categories are developed when viewed from the perspective of a perceiving actor.
[21] Power shift from the West is treated by authors as a generic global process.

Given the lack of alternative approaches, the mentioned approach seems to be the most suitable for the purposes of current research. Accordingly, this thesis will scrutinize sources of images of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan by categorizing them into *global*, *country,* and *individual* level sources (Chapter VII).

Firstly, while studying images in International Relations, scholars have been mainly resorting to *structural/global level* factors as possible sources of images (Alexander, Levin, and Henry 2005). Indeed, structural level factors greatly contribute to how actors view each other. Most commonly, it has been argued that 'images must be seen as products of interaction among nations and among their nationals' (Kelman 1965, 23). The main point is that actors learn about other actors in the process of direct interaction. Actors not only develop their images of each other through interaction, but also sustain, change, and transform them during further contacts.

The emphasis on social interaction largely coincides with what structural constructivists like Alexander Wendt propose. For example, Wendt (1999, 36) claims that 'actions continually produce and reproduce conceptions of Self and Other, and as such identities and interests are always in process'. His example of interaction between *Alter* and *Ego* is designed to capture exactly this point. At the same time, Scott (1965, 95) additionally argues that '[m]ore commonly, international images are developed in complete absence of contact with the object […,] perhaps indirectly through acquaintances'. This is not to deny the importance of direct contact, but rather to complement it. Applying this idea to the case of the EU in Central Asia implies that Central Asians may learn about Brussels not only through direct interaction with it, but also indirectly from the EU's internal and external affairs unrelated to Central Asia, as well as from their own interactions with other actors than the EU. This point will be equally considered, while analysing structure/global level sources of images of the Union in Chapter VII.

Secondly, some authors have argued that although actors learn about each other in the process of social interaction, how the 'learning' proceeds largely depends on the *domestic context* of a perceiving actor. What actors have internally is likely to influence how they

interpret other actors externally. In this regard, domestic history, culture, and values have often been reported to be relevant (e.g. Cottam 1977, Barcevicius et al. 2015, Tsuruoka 2008).

In a similar way, some critics of the Wendtian constructivism have also suggested that identities (conceptions of Self as well as Other) are largely shaped by domestic factors. Before entering into any social interaction with others, actors 'have long interacted with their own societies [to develop] expectations about the meaning of Other States' actions' (Hopf 2000, 373). Similarly, a change in conceptions of Self and Other, as argued, are more likely to occur as a result of domestic processes (see also Doty 2000, Hopf 2002, Zehfuss 2001, 2002). Given these points, the thesis also acknowledges the importance of domestic-level factors in shaping images and will include them in discussion in Chapter VII.

Third, Alexander, Levin, and Henry (2005, 44) suggest that in cases when research on images deals with images held by individuals, the analyst should integrate individual-level image sources into the research framework in order to get 'a more complete picture of the factors driving international images'. That is to say that, although global and country level factors create general conditions for perceptions of external actors, they may still vary depending on individual level factors (Keuleers 2015). As one category of perceivers in this study are intermediate elites, the individual-level analysis of image sources is also applicable for this research. Therefore, I will also use the sample of conducted interviews with intermediate elites in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to examine what kind of individual-level factors are likely to shape their perceptions of the EU.

Overall, Chapter VII, which deals with sources of the EU's images in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, will follow this framework and identify *global*, *country*, and *individual* level factors that shape images. The final point needs to be acknowledged. It is commonly agreed that as images are highly complex concepts, so are the factors shaping images. Cottam (1977, 60), for example, states that the sources of 'an individual's world view are [also] manifold', therefore it is always a challenging task to analytically identify all possible factors that contribute to the formation of one or another image. Consequently, any enquiry

in this direction cannot avoid being to a certain degree interpretive and 'suggestive', as Scott (1965, 84) puts it. Given this, the thesis does not pretend to reveal every single source of images of the EU nor to establish a causal link between images and possible sources. Rather, the discussion on sources of images is likely to rest on my interpretations. It is also acknowledged that some potential sources of images may also be overlooked, as maintained in the course of discussion in Chapter VII.

3.6 Methodology of the Research

As outlined in the Introduction, the primary goal of the thesis is to reveal the perceived images of the EU in two countries of Central Asia – Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, the thesis intends to compare its perceived images to Brussels' own self-representations that it communicates to the region. Finally, the thesis also aims to understand the nature of images and perceptions of the Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, i.e. to analyse sources that shape identified images. In view of these objectives, the final section sets out the methodology for inferring the EU's perceived images as well as its self-images.

The thesis follows the interpretivist approach and is based on qualitative research methods as the most appropriate methods for the objectives of this study. The interpretivist approach stresses that meaning does not exist independently "out there", but rather it has a socially constructed nature, which implies any participant of society, as well as any researcher, may have their own construction and interpretation of meaning. As Schwandt (1994, 125) claimed, 'what we take to be objective knowledge and truth is the result of perspective. Knowledge and truth are created, not discovered by mind'. In qualitative research a researcher acts as a 'bricoleur', whose task is to make a bricolage: 'a complex, dense, reflexive, collagelike creation that represents the researcher's images, understandings, and interpretations of the world or phenomenon under analysis' (Denzin and Lincoln 1994, 3). In other words, a researcher presents his own 'constructions of the constructions of the actors [he] studies' (Schwandt 1998, 222). The central purpose of qualitative research,

therefore, is not to explain the phenomena, but rather to understand how the meaning of the phenomena is constructed (Robson 2011). An emphasis on constructions and interpretations, in turn, presupposes a special attention to language, narratives and their contextual meanings, which is essential for the examination of images and perceptions.

3.6.1 Inferring Images from Narratives

Literature on images has proposed two possible ways for drawing inferences about images and perceptions. On the one hand, images can be inferred from *what actors do*, as they do not act towards objective reality, but rather towards images that they consider to be a reality (Boulding 1959, 121). In this sense, behavior serves as an indicator of perception. This approach, however, has not been widely applied by scholars.[22] One could argue that it is analytically difficult to identify what the image is by merely observing the behavior of actors, as establishing a direct link between the two is always a challenging task (see Feklyunina 2009, 21). Moreover, in the context of this research, this is further complicated by the fact that the study examines images and perceptions held by intermediate level actors. As noted above, intermediate level actors do not have direct access to the decision-making process, and consequently, it is unfeasible to check to what extent images held by actors at this level are likely to influence the international behaviour of the states under study.

On the other hand, images and perceptions can also be inferred from *what actors say*. As Feklyunina (2009, 21) puts it, 'being deeply rooted in collective consciousness, [images] are present in statements made by decision-makers, in official documents, and in various texts'. That is to say written and spoken texts can be a primary indicator of images (Shimko 1991, 43). In this regard, the main issue is the selection of texts for analysis. Given the difficulties of applying the behavioral approach, this study follows the second path and

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[22] One example of the application of this approach is Richard Herrmann's (1985) *Perceptions and Behaviour in Soviet Foreign Policy*, where the author, first, infers from narratives *a prevailing image* of the US in the Soviet Union, then supplements it with the analysis of the Soviet Union's strategic behaviour.

infers perceived images and self-images of the European Union from narratives, which can be found in both written and spoken texts.

3.6.2 Qualitative Content Analysis

While inferring images from various texts (including official and public statements of top-decision makers, personal interviews with elites, published academic and non-academic literature, media texts etc.), analysts have predominantly applied content analysis as a method for textual inquiry. For example, Thomas Carney claims that 'content analysis is the techniques to use if the task is to assess someone's image of reality' (cited in Shimko 1991, 43). However, there seems to be a slight disagreement in the literature on whether *quantitative* or *qualitative* approaches to content analysis best serves the purpose of this kind of inquiry. Quantitative content analysis is preferred for its systematic fashion that enables the researcher to empirically identify and describe similarity, difference, frequency, or absence of specific contents, and themes in large amounts of raw textual data; whereas qualitative content analysis intends to provide a deeper interpretation of data rather than a mere systematization and classification (Morgan 1993, Mayring 2015, Drisko and Maschi 2015). If a quantitative approach aims for 'objectivity', a qualitative approach is (partly) subjective, as the meaning of 'the content is determined by the researchers' judgement' (Burnham et al. 2008, 259). However, some authors have questioned the validity of this distinction between quantitative and qualitative. Krippendorff (2004, 16) posits that 'all reading of texts is qualitative, even when certain characteristics of a text are later converted into numbers'. From this point of view, as he further continues, quantitative analysis cannot be reduced to mere 'numerical counting analysis', while qualitative analysis cannot avoid some quantitative categorization and systematization (Krippendorff 2004, 87). This implies that they are complementary. 'It is by moving back and forth between these approaches that the investigator is most likely to gain insight into the meaning of data', as put by Holsti (1969, 11). Similarly, Shimko (1991) claims these approaches are not incompatible and uses them in conjunction with each other in order to examine the images of the Soviet Union held by key decision-makers in the Reagan Administration.

The present study applies *qualitative content analysis* to infer the self- and perceived images of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Again, the application of the qualitative approach does not automatically abolish the use of some sort of quantification to systemize and categorize the data. However, the aim is not just to present quantitatively systematized data, but rather to provide a deeper and more sophisticated interpretation of the meaning that the data may contain. In doing so, the analysis will look for narratives referring to the EU's *power/capability* and *threat/opportunity* in the data, as these aspects of images have been identified as the main focus of this research (see Section 3.3 above). Accordingly, based on the conceptual framework of the thesis, these categories are identified *deductively* prior to data sampling and collection. Using deduction at this point allows systematic and comparable categories across cases (the EU, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan) to be produced. At the same time, sub-categories under each deduced category are developed through bottom-up *inductive* coding in order to infer 'perceptions of others'. For example, if the EU is perceived as an opportunity (deduced category), then the issue of what kind of precise opportunity it represents is induced from the data. This equally relates to other sub-categories. The use of (partly) inductive categorizing is one of the main strengths of qualitative content analysis (Morgan 1993).

3.6.3 Data Sources

As highlighted earlier, although the central focus of research is *perceived images* of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, it additionally deals with Brussels' *self-images* so as to juxtapose the two, as images become fully meaningful only through comparison. Consequently, this sub-section indicates sources of data for inferring EU's both self-images and perceived images, respectively. The data was mainly collected during the three rounds of fieldtrip to Astana and Almaty, Kazakhstan (September-December 2015), to Brussels, Belgium (March-April 2016), and to Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan (May-July 2016). Additionally, I made a short trip to Almaty and Bishkek to complement the data in June 2017.

Data Sources for Self-Images

To start with the EU's self-images, three categories of written and spoken texts were gathered and analysed to reveal self-images. The first category includes official documents issued by the EU and its various institutions such as treaties, strategy papers, reports, and official press releases. These documents are easily accessed through websites of the EU's various institutions. Although the central focus is on documents related to EU-CA relations, analysis also includes other documents that do not directly relate to Central Asia, but still remain important for the EU and its external policy, examples being the Treaty of Lisbon in 2009 or the EU's Global Strategy of 2016. As for the timeframe, the majority of collected texts belong to the period of 2011-2016, with the exception of EU documents of strategic importance such as the EU Strategy for Central Asia, which refer to the pre-2011 period (see Introduction for the timeframe of the research).

The second category of texts unites speeches and secondary interviews of EU officials at both central and local levels. As in the previous case, the focus is on texts related to EU-CA cooperation. Speeches and secondary interviews are also systematically obtained from websites of EU institutions. Besides, the search through the *LexisNexis* database and a basic internet search further helped to obtain additional samples of texts not found on the EU's official websites.

The final category of textual data for the EU's self-images represents in-depth semi-structured primary interviews with EU officials and diplomats of EU member-states,[23] serving on Central Asia related matters. Interviewed officials include those working at central institutions of the EU in Brussels, at the local EU Delegation in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as well as at local embassies of EU member-states in these countries. In total, 22 interviews were conducted with mentioned categories of EU officials and European diplomats in Brussels, Astana, and Bishkek (see Appendix II for the list of conducted interviews and interview questions). These interviews will be referenced in the following

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[23] Hereafter, 'EU officials' refer to those who work in EU institutions, whereas 'European diplomats' refer to diplomats working for EU member-states.

format: EU – Ordinal number of interview as it appears in Appendix II –Interviewee's professional position, i.e. either EU official or European diplomat (see Footnote 23).

Data Sources for Perceived Images

When it comes to perceived images of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the focus of research, as discussed earlier, is on images held by actors at the intermediate level, i.e. intermediate elites and printed media. Consequently, data comes from two sources.

To begin with, semi-structured in-depth interviews are used as a primary data collection method for images held by intermediate elites. Four categories of elites have been identified as belonging to intermediate level elites: politicians (P), scholars/experts (S/E), journalists (J) and civil society representatives (CS) (see Section 3.4 above). Overall, 53 and 35 elite representatives were interviewed in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, respectively (see **Table 3-2**). The selection of interviewees is informed by the expertise that a potential interviewee might obtain on European affairs given his/her professional position. In most cases, interviewees had a direct contact with the EU and with its various institutions and/or programs/projects. The full list of conducted interviews can be found in Appendix III-A.

Table 3-2: Number of Conducted Interviews with Intermediate Elites in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Intermediate Elite Categories	Number of Interviews	
	Kazakhstan	**Kyrgyzstan**
Politicians	18	12
Experts/ Academia	16	9
Journalists	9	6
Civil Society	10	8
Total	**53**	**35**

Looking at the table, one may reasonably point out the difference between interview numbers conducted in the two countries. There are two main reasons for this. The first reason is that finding potential interviewees on European affairs was more difficult in Kyrgyzstan. The EU seemed to be a relatively less visible and less interesting topic in Kyrgyzstan, and it was consequently more challenging to identify potential 'European watchers' in the country. If identified, in some cases, it was impossible to get their consent for interviews due to, as they normally claimed, the low level of their expertise on EU and/or lack of interest in the subject matter. The second reason might correlate with the season when the field research in Kyrgyzstan was carried out. It was summer 2016 (May – July), when some potential interviewees were unavailable due to seasonal vacation and holidays. By contrast, the field research in Kazakhstan was carried out in September – December 2015, arguably one of the busiest periods of political cycle in the country.

In addition, the reader may also highlight a slight imbalance in the number of interviews across the four elite groups in each country. For example, the number of interviews with politicians in Kazakhstan was 18, whereas journalist interviews were half that number. Similar variances can be observed in the case of Kyrgyzstan too. Ideally, the number of interviews in each group should have been equal in order to provide a balanced representativeness to each group. On the other hand, it can also be argued that the number of conducted interviews with journalists (9 in Kazakhstan, 6 in Kyrgyzstan) gives at least the necessary minimum of representativeness to the group when compared to the total number of interviews. Moreover, the fact that the intention is not to compare the groups of interviewees with each other, but rather to treat them as a whole, i.e. intermediate level elites, further allows the seriousness of this imbalance to be eliminated. Similar to interviews with EU officials, interviews with Kazakh/Kyrgyz elites will also be referenced in the same format: KZ/KG – Ordinal number of interview as it appears in Appendix III-A – Interviewee's professional position (P (politician); S/E (scholar/expert); J (journalist); CS (civil society)).

In designing interview questions, semi-structured interviews were given a priority over structured and unstructured interviews, as structured interviews, on the one hand, would

restrict the qualitative nature of data, whereas unstructured interviews would be less likely to produce comparable data. By contrast, semi-structured interviews were designed to ensure more subjectivity from participants and to avoid any restrictions and impediments to the natural flow of interviewees' thoughts. At the same time, the same basic questions were asked in semi-structured interviews across the two countries, which provided cross-national comparability of the data. The interview questions were constructed with the aim of inferring perceptions of the EU's *power/capability* and *threat/opportunity*, as pointed out earlier. The list of interview questions is provided in Appendix III-B. Finally, interviews were conducted in Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Russian depending on interviewees' preferences.

The second source of data for perceived images of the EU comes from newspaper samples in the two countries. As noted above, the media is also treated as an intermediate level actor along with intermediate elites (see Section 3.4). In gathering media samples, the most important question to be clarified was which newspaper(s) were to be selected. One obvious option seemed to be the selection of newspapers based on two dichotomies: (1) pro-governmental-oppositional newspapers (2) in Kazakh/Kyrgyz–in Russian. However, the pro-governmental–oppositional dichotomy raised some difficulties, as it was not always clear to what extent the 'oppositional' newspapers were oppositional, especially in Kazakhstan. The media sphere is predominantly state-controlled in Kazakhstan. Although the situation is better in Kyrgyzstan, the country has also been experiencing negative developments recently. For example, Kazakhstan scored 85 out of 100 in the Freedom of the Press 2017 Index, whereas Kyrgyzstan performed comparatively better with a score of 67.[24] However, both scores belong to the category of 'not free' states (Freedom House 2017). Taking this into account, initially four newspapers were selected in each country. But after a survey of selected oppositional newspapers: *Zhas Alash* and *Svoboda Slova*[25] in Kazakhstan, and *De Facto* and *Asaba* in Kyrgyzstan,[26] I realized that the EU had not been a popular topic in these newspapers. All four newspapers were published on a weekly basis,

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[24] A higher score implies more control from the state.

[25] *Svoboda Slova* changed owners in 2010, which further raised doubts about its oppositional direction.

[26] Hereafter, BGN/PCGN (United States Board on Geographic Names/ Permanent Committee on Geographical Names for British Official Use) System is used for transliteration of words in Kazakh, Kyrgyz, and Russian.

were shorter in terms of news coverage, and mostly pertained to domestic issues. As a result, it was impossible to collect a satisfying number of samples that would allow for the systematic inference of the images of the EU. Therefore, it was decided to replace the mentioned newspapers with one alternative newspaper in each country with a more 'neutral' political stance. The main criterion, nevertheless, was the overall outreach and circulation of the selected newspaper.

Based on these aspects, two pro-governmental newspapers and one private newspaper were selected for each country: in Kazakhstan the pro-governmental *Egemen Qazaqstan* in Kazakh and *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* in Russian, and the 'neutral' *Express-K* in Russian were selected; whereas in Kyrgyzstan, *Erkin Too* in Kyrgyz and *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* in Russian were chosen as pro-governmental newspapers, and *Vecherniy Bishkek* in Russian as a more 'independent' newspaper (see **Table 3-3**). The timeframe for the selection of samples was 2011-2016.

Table 3-3: Selected Newspapers in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

	Newspapers	Political Orientation	Language	Periodicity	Number of Samples
Kazakhstan	*Egemen Qazaqstan*	Pro-Governmental	Kazakh	Daily	158
	Kazakhstanskaya Pravda	Pro-Governmental	Russian	Daily	236
	Express-K	Neutral	Russian	Daily	288
					Total: 682
Kyrgyzstan	*Erkin Too*	Pro-Governmental	Kyrgyz	Weekly	49
	Slovo Kyrgyzstana	Pro-Governmental	Russian	Weekly	124
	Vecherniy Bishkek	Neutral	Russian	Daily	89
					Total: 262

Overall, 682 and 262 articles were gathered from the abovementioned newspapers in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (see **Table 3-3**). I do not provide the full list of all collected media samples in the thesis, but they are available upon request. Yet Appendix IV still provides the list of those samples referenced in later chapters of the thesis.

Media samples were selected on the basis of a reference to the EU, its institutions, its internal and external policies, key leaders and representatives, its various programs and policy initiatives, and in some cases, its reference to larger Europe too. Again, it is notable that the number of selected samples in Kazakhstan was significantly higher than in Kyrgyzstan. The first reason for this is the topicality and visibility of European affairs in the Kazakh media, which pays more attention to EU-related issues than the Kyrgyz media.[27] The second reason is that all selected Kazakh newspapers are published on a daily basis, while two newspapers in Kyrgyzstan are weekly periodicals (*Erkin Too* and *Slovo Kyrgyzstana*). Moreover, Kazakh newspapers normally exhibit greater scope in their news coverage. These factors, arguably, are likely to increase the potential number of articles on EU-related matters. Finally, samples from *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and *Express-K* in Kazakhstan were obtained from available online archives, which simplified the search and allowed all related articles to be found automatically by using the key word *'Euro'*[28]; whereas in Kyrgyzstan this was only the case with *Vecherniy Bishkek*. The other newspapers (*Egemen Kazakhstan* (Kazakhstan)*, Erkin Too* and *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* (both Kyrgyzstan)) did not have properly functioning websites or online archives at the time of the field research. Therefore, the samples were collected from hard copy archives, which might further influence the number of found samples, especially in Kyrgyzstan.

The final point worth mentioning about media samples is that while coding the samples it was not always possible to obtain categories related to the EU's power/capability and threat/opportunity. This was not an issue with elite interviews, as the interview questions

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[27] The reasons for this will be explained in Chapter VII, which will argue that the imbalance in visibility is caused by the depth of Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's bilateral relations with the EU.
[28] 'Euro' is a root word for all other words such as 'Europe', 'European' etc. It was assumed that any article related to European affairs would contain at least one mentioning of 'Euro', therefore 'Euro' was chosen as the key word for online archival search.

were initially designed to infer perceived power/capability and threat/opportunity. By contrast, selected media samples might cover various aspects of the EU, including, but not limited to, power/capability and threat/opportunity aspects. Therefore, not all media samples were helpful in inferring the aforementioned two components of the image. As a result, some media samples were left unused due to their lack of appropriateness to the central focus of this research.

3.6.4 Methodological Limitations

While applying content analysis for inferring images, two main limitations associated with this have been widely reported by different observers. The first relates to the issue of *validity*, and most commonly while dealing with images and perceptions, the validity of data (Frei 1986, 19). This refers to the question of whether collected data can really be used for inferring intended images. In the case of interviews, one may question the extent that publicly uttered narratives are likely to reveal the elites' 'genuine' perceptions of others. Interviewees may simply hide their thoughts while communicating publicly. This kind of limitation is always present, and therefore, '[w]e can only minimize but not eliminate the problem of validity' (Wang 2000, 44). To increase the validity of data, it is suggested employing the strategy of *triangulation,* that is, combining several sources of data for the same inquiry. This study addresses the problem of validity by combining data obtained from different categories of intermediate elites (politicians, scholars/experts, journalists, civil society) and different newspapers (pro-governmental–neutral, Kazakh/Kyrgyz language–Russian language). Similarly, official EU documents, speeches made by EU officials, and secondary interviews, as well as the author's primary interviews with EU officials and European diplomats are used in combination to infer the Union's self-images. Such a combination of different sources is believed to partly increase the validity of data for inferring the EU's self- and perceived images.

The second issue often associated with content analysis is the problem of *reliability*, which 'refers to whether or not another researcher, examining the same material and following the same coding rules, would arrive at the same results' (Shimko 1991, 54). In other words, the

reliability is about replicability of the research. However, the issue of reliability only relates to the quantitative approach to content analysis, which aims to reveal 'objective' reality independently from the researcher's position. By contrast, in qualitative research the concept of replication is problematic, as the researcher's own interpretations are a crucial component of inquiry. This does not necessarily imply that a qualitative study be unsystematic. To partly satisfy the issue of reliability in qualitative research, it is suggested to make the research process as transparent as possible by 'describing and analyzing process in as much detail as possible when reporting the results' (Elo and Kangas 2008, 112). This is likely to provide the reader with satisfying answers to questions related to methodology, thus increasing the degree of plausibility and trustworthiness of the final outcome (see also Silverman 2006, 282-283). The present section aimed to provide as much information as feasible about the methodology of the research to make the process transparent.

Finally, I would like to briefly mention how my own position as a researcher affected the research process. Being from Kazakhstan, I was more familiar with the country and already had an extensive list of potential interviewees prior to traveling to the field. I also knew some people who assisted me in establishing contact with my interviewees. As a result, it was easier for me as for a 'local' in terms of access to respondents. By contrast, I was hardly familiar with Kyrgyzstan's political context prior to traveling there and hardly knew people who could help with getting in touch with interviewees. This can be another reason why the amounts of collected data in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan were different. Furthermore, what I also noticed was that in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan when potential interviewees knew that I was a 'PhD student', it was more difficult to continue further dialogue. My assumption was that normally a 'student' is not treated seriously in these countries, therefore, I had to introduce myself as a 'researcher' rather than a 'student'. In a few cases, I also noticed that being from a 'Western university' was a privilege, especially in Kazakhstan, where I was not viewed merely as a 'researcher from Western university', but also a researcher who had been granted the Bolashaq scholarship. Finally, during my field research in Kyrgyzstan, I was affiliated with the OSCE Academy in

Bishkek. It was another privilege for me in establishing contacts with interviewees as the 'OSCE' is generally respected in the country.

Having outlined the main conceptual and methodological framework of this research, the following four chapters go on to employ this framework in the empirical analysis of the EU's self- and perceived images. Chapter IV starts from self-images of the EU, whereas Chapter V and Chapter VI respectively deal with the EU's perceived power/capability and perceived threat/opportunity in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Based on these two chapters, Chapter VII examines the sources of EU's images and perceptions in two countries. Finally, Chapter VIII concludes with the main findings of the research, and outlines prospects for further research.

Chapter IV: The European Union in Central Asia: Interests, Policies, and Representations of Self

The history of the EU's engagement with Central Asian countries begins in the early 1990s. Throughout this period, the Union has risen to become a fully-fledged external actor with its own profile in the region. Consequently, today, the discussion develops not around the question of whether the EU represents an actor in its own behalf in Central Asia, but rather around the extent of its successfulness and effectiveness as an actor. The present chapter aims to unpack this 'European profile' in Central Asia by examining the EU's engagement with the region. In this regard, the chapter's objective is twofold. On the one hand, the intention is to chronicle the evolution of Brussels' policy performance in the region since its inception to establish the background context of EU-CA relations. Doing so, it is argued, is important for understanding later discussions on the EU's self- and perceived images. To fulfil this objective, the chapter predominantly draws from secondary literature and combines it with primary sources, including the author's interviews with European officials.

On the other hand, and more centrally for the purpose of this research, the chapter reveals the EU's self-representations in the region.[29] This implies that the question to be answered is not just *how the EU's policy in Central Asia has developed over time*, but also, and more centrally, *what narratives the EU has propagated about itself* while engaging with the region. The departure point for doing this is the argument that images are relative concepts that become fully meaningful only when compared to other images (Chapter III). In the context of this study, it implies that perceived images of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the central concern of the thesis, become fully meaningful only when they are juxtaposed with how the EU views and represents itself. Therefore, understanding Brussels' self-images should be the starting point of discussion. To reveal the EU's self-representations, this chapter employs qualitative content analysis of EU-produced texts

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[29] The notions of 'self-representation', 'self-perceptions', and 'self-image' are used interchangeably.

between 2011 and 2016[30]: among others EU strategy papers, press releases, reports, and primary and secondary interviews with EU officials (Chapter III).

One point needs to be clarified. It is acknowledged that an actor's foreign policy performance and its rhetorical practice are two aspects of the same process. On the one hand, rhetorical self-representations construct an actor's agency and shape its policy; on the other hand, policy performance feeds back to an actor's self-representations. This implies that the two aspects are closely intertwined. Therefore, the separation between the EU's actual policy and its rhetorical practice in two parts of the chapter is only driven by an analytical purpose. The chapter proceeds in three main parts. Section 4.1 discusses the evolution of Brussels' policies in Central Asia in three chronological phases. Section 4.2 then examines Brussels' rhetorical practice, identifying the most salient representations of Self projected towards Central Asia. Finally, the findings of the chapter will be summarized in Section 4.3.

4.1 The evolution of EU's engagement in Central Asia

2018 marks the 25th anniversary of the establishment of the official relationship between the European Union and the Central Asian countries. For convenience, the 25 year long history of the EU-CA relationship can be divided into three main phases (e.g. Efegil 2010; Anceschi 2014b). This chronological order is based on the main changes in Brussels' policy agenda towards the region. The first stage coincides with the first decade of bilateral relations from 1991 to 2001, characterized by limited EU interest towards the region. The second stage is conceived as a short transitional period between 2002 and 2006, when the EU came to pay more attention to the region due to emergent circumstances such as the war in Afghanistan, the increased importance of alternative energy suppliers to the EU, and internal turbulence in some of the Central Asian countries. This led to the third stage, which

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[30] As mentioned in Chapter III, although the timeframe of the research is 2011-2016, the analysis also includes other fundamental documents beyond this period such as the EU Strategy for Central Asia of 2007 or the Lisbon Treaty of 2009.

began in 2007 with the launch of the EU Strategy for a New Partnership, which could arguably be referred as a qualitatively new period in EU-CA relations. While examining below the evolution of Brussels' involvement in Central Asia, the chapter follows this chronological order.

4.1.1 First Decade of EU-CA Relations: An Invisible Actor in a Remote Region

In relation to Central Asia the EU has been regularly described as 'a latecomer in Central Asia's Great Game' (Delcour 2011), a 'late actor in an unstable region' (Aubert 2012, 4), 'late to the party' (Cameron 2009, 31), and 'slow to emerge' (Laruelle and Peyrouse 2013, 58). This is because Brussels paid the newly independent states of Central Asia limited attention throughout the 1990s. The region mainly remained *terra incognita* for members of the European Union (Delcour 2011, 92).

The low profile of the EU during the 1990s, as Efegil (2010) points out, is usually explained in literature by the overlap of several important factors. First, the EU was weak as an institution with uncertainty as to its international identity and roles. Moreover, it underwent a serious internal transformation in the 1990s due to the signing of the Maastricht Treaty in 1992 and the enlargement in the mid-1990s. Second, the Union's focus was concentrated on Europe due to German reunification, the transformation of Central and Eastern European, and the Baltic States, and instability in the Balkans. Third, EU member-states were more concerned with Russia (and Ukraine to an extent) than with other the newly independent states (NIS) of the former Soviet Union, as the political, economic, military importance of Russia was crucial to the stability of not just the post-Soviet countries, but also of Europe. In this context, Central Asia had the image of a 'remote and relatively stable region' (Delcour 2011, 92).[31] As a result, it was perceived as a

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[31] Relatively stable in comparison to the Balkans, for example. Similarly, International Crisis Group (2006:1) cited a European observer, interviewed for the purpose of the study on EU-CA relations, who also underlined the relative stability of Central Asia by claiming that 'Central Asia is anonymous in the West because it's been relatively stable. If it becomes unstable, it will no longer be anonymous, and people will ask why we weren't interested earlier'.

region lying outside of Brussels' area of liability, prompting the Union to avoid a position of leadership and responsibility in the region (Kavalski 2012, 91-92).

Here one needs to acknowledge that the EU's reportedly low profile in Central Asia was a relative notion in the sense that the Union was an invisible actor only in comparison to other, more active, players like the US, Turkey, or Russia. Consequently, although the EU was a *relatively passive* player in Central Asia during the 1990s, it was not totally ignorant of the region. EU member states established official diplomatic relationships with the Central Asian countries, with Germany being the only European country with embassies in all five countries.[32] As for the European Commission's Delegation to the region, it was established in Almaty in 1994, with two small offices in Bishkek and Dushanbe. There was also the Europe House in Tashkent, albeit with no diplomatic status.

Moreover, the Union did articulate its main interests in the region and act towards those interests, though with limited persistence. Brussels defined its prime objective as a maintenance of stability, which could be achieved, according to the Union, through (1) the development of democratic institutions, (2) promotion of economic reforms, and (3) the reduction of scope for conflict (Commission of the European Communities 1995, 9). These aims were treated as interconnected and mutually dependent (see also MacFarlane 1999). At the same time, the EU clearly understood that it would not be easy to transform states with Soviet heritage into new entities with market economies and respect for democratic principles. Therefore, the stated 'sophisticated and ambitious' objectives were recognized to have a long-term character, and would be successful 'only if backed by a strong European political and economic presence in the region' (Commission of the European Communities 1995, 13).

The first step in this direction was the inclusion of Central Asian countries in the programme of Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS), the EU's main instrument throughout the 1990s. Although TACIS was

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[32] For discussions of the EU-CA relations from the German perspective see Laumulin (2002).

implemented in all twelve post-Soviet republics[33], the EU made a clear categorization within the participants by priority: Russia and Ukraine on the one side, and the remaining ten countries on the other (Bossuyt 2010, 98). Davis and Dombrowski (2000, 72) postulate that 'donors do not aid all potential recipients equally; they prioritize the countries that receive aid according to strategic, foreign policy, and commercial interests'. From this perspective, Russia and Ukraine were undoubtedly more strategically important for Brussels, and they consequently received more assistance than the other participants. For example, from 1991 to 1999 Russia received almost 31%, Ukraine 11%, and the five Central Asian republics combined 7.7% (around €324 million) of all allocations under the TACIS (European Commission 2000b, 61).

As the next step, the EU concluded the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with TACIS participants, including the Central Asian states, in the second half of the 1990s.[34] The texts of PCAs once again confirmed their objectives of consolidating democracy and completing the transition into market economies. In general, the PCAs provided a framework for dialogue between the EU and CA republics. Texts of PCAs were almost identical in the cases of CA countries, arguably demonstrating that the European Union perceived Central Asia as a coherent region with more or less similar countries (Delcour 2011, 95). However, Central Asian PCAs, again, had substantial differences from those of Russia (and Ukraine): in terms of institutional framework for cooperation, and both the horizontal width and vertical depth of cooperation areas (Matveeva 2006, 85).

The first decade of the EU's engagement with Central Asia was further made notable by the launch of several inter-regional programmes in the transportation sector, namely the

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[33] TACIS was the analogue of the 'Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies' (PHARE) programme, which was designed for Central and Eastern European countries as a pre-accession program to join the EU. The Baltic states of Latvia, Lithuania, and Estonia also joined the PHARE and were considered separately from the other twelve post-Soviet republics.

[34] The PCAs with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were signed in 1995, and entered into force in 1999 for an initial period of ten years. In 2015, Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian country to sign the Enhanced PCA (EPCA) with the EU, which is a new-generation agreement. The PCA with Tajikistan was signed only in 2004 due to the civil war, and entered into force in 2010. As for Turkmenistan, the PCA was frozen by the EU because of democracy and human rights issues in the country. Now, the Interim Trade Agreement between the EU and Turkmenistan serves as a framework for bilateral relations

Transport Corridor Europe-Caucasus-Asia (TRACECA) and Interstate Oil and Gas Transportation to Europe (INOGATE) programmes. The former aims to improve transportation systems, provide alternative routes, and stimulate trade between the participant states as well as between the states and the EU, whereas the latter specifically concentrates on the transportation of oil and gas from the energy-rich countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus to the European market in order to diversify energy supply to the Union. Both programs excluded Russia, which held control over transportation routes of Central Asia. This demonstrates that in order to secure its interests, the EU intended to develop alternative corridors that would bypass Russia (Matveeva 2006, 86-87).

Overall, the first decade of the EU's engagement in Central Asia revealed the lack of strategic approach in Brussels' policy making (MacFarlane 2003, 2004, Rahr 2000). Efforts appeared to have fallen short of identified objectives. The EU itself recognized that despite 'a relevant contribution' of EU efforts, the transition of Central Asian countries towards democracy, human rights, and market economies had been much slower than expected and hoped for (Directorate General 1A 1997). Although Brussels became one of the largest donors in the region with a total of €944.4 million spent between 1991 and 2002, 'this cumulative amount conceal[ed] the paradox' that the Union remained a rather invisible actor in Central Asia (Bossuyt 2010, 101, see also Laruelle and Peyrouse 2013, 65). The EU itself identified several reasons for this in its *Strategy Paper 2002-2006 for Central Asia:*

- too many priorities and programs;
- scarcity of allocated resources;
- lack of organization and coordination by the EU;
- lack of ownership from Central Asian countries.

Brussels also announced that further assistance would take into account the experience of 1991-2001 and identified limitations to improve the efficiency of its policy initiatives in the region (European Commission 2002, 3).

4.1.2 Transitional Period of 2002-2006: New Century – New Agenda?

The new century brought a new agenda to the EU's policy *vis-à-vis* Central Asia. The region, which was previously paid limited attention by the Union, suddenly became an area of increasing interest for Brussels in the early 2000s. Such a growing EU interest is also commonly explained by an interplay of several factors related both to Central Asia and the European Union (e.g. Matveeva 2006, De Pedro 2009).

First of all, the events of 9/11 and the subsequent international campaign in Afghanistan increased the EU's attention not only to Kabul, but also to bordering Central Asia. EU member-states began cooperating with the countries of the region to use their military bases and airspace due to their proximity to Afghanistan. This increased the importance of Central Asia to European countries, and as a consequence, the region 'acquired a brand new geostrategic relevance' (De Pedro 2009, 116). Secondly, the EU enlargements of 2004 and 2007 and the establishment of the European Neighbourhood Program (ENP) brought the EU closer to Central Asia. Central Asia was not a distant and remote region anymore, but rather became 'the neighbor of neighbors', which demanded more attention from Brussels (see Gstöhl and Lannon 2014). Thirdly, some relatively stable countries of Central Asia had begun to show signs of institutional fragility by the mid-2000s, threatening the relative stability of the entire region, which further attracted the attention of external players. The relevant cases include the Tulip Revolution of 2005 in Kyrgyzstan[35] and the Andijon uprising of 2005 in Uzbekistan[36]. Finally, the EU was increasingly looking for alternative suppliers of energy resources amidst gas disputes between Russia and Ukraine in the mid-2000s. Obviously, Central Asia was among potential contributors to the diversification of the European energy supply. All these factors led the EU to pay more attention to the region, which logically continued with the launch of the Strategy in 2007 (third period, see ниже).

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[35] The Tulip Revolution took place in March-April 2005 and led to the fall of Askar Akayev, the first president of the country.

[36] In May 2005, the Uzbek government used force to suppress an uprising in Andijon, killing several hundred mostly unarmed civilians.

What was notable in the post-2001 period was the shift of policy priorities in the Brussels agenda. In its *Strategy Paper 2002-2006* the EU recognized that the events of 9/11 had 'a significant impact' on Central Asia, and therefore 'led to widespread re-evaluation of political and foreign policy priorities' of the EU (European Commission 2002, 4). As a result, a process of 'securitization' took place in the region: Central Asia started being viewed as a potential source of threats and instability to the EU itself; but not traditional threats, rather unconventional threats such as terrorism, drug trafficking, organized crime, illegal migration, regional conflicts, and state failure (Czerniecka and Heathershow 2011). They were referred to in the European Security Strategy as 'more diverse, less visible, and less predictable' (Council of the European Union 2003, 3).

To tackle these issues, the EU further continued its financial assistance to Central Asian countries. It allocated €50 million per year to security and (economic, political, social) stability purposes in Central Asia (European Commission 2002). New EU initiatives were introduced, BOMCA (Border Management Program in Central Asia) and CADAP (Central Asia Drug Action Program) being the most notable of these (see Gavrilis 2009). Although these programs are recognized to have brought some positive outcomes, a high level of corruption, the sheer number of unofficial border crossings, and the low salaries and miserable working conditions of border guards have been reported as impeding factors of these security projects (ICG 2006, 13-14). Moreover, some commentators emphasized the security/development nexus, arguing that security issues could not be addressed purely in terms of financial and technical assistance. Rather, security projects should be integrated with development projects, since the causes of unconventional threats are often linked to poverty (Matveeva 2006, 98-99). Despite Brussels' rhetorical acknowledgment of this, the EU has fallen short of 'fully specify[ing] the complexities of the development–security link or giv[ing] many clues on how this is to be articulated in practice' (Youngs 2008, 421). Finally, the EU's security efforts did not necessarily find support from local authorities. Kimmage (2008) claims that Central Asian authorities had a different conception of 'security challenges' than that of the EU. For the former, security, first of all, concerned the security of ruling regimes. Consequently, local governments spent more resources for

combating 'threats' such as political pluralism and democratic transformation, rather than drug trafficking or illegal migration. As a result, the EU's overall security policy seemed to have obtained limited outcomes. In the words of some observers, it 'ha[d] the effect of providing material and symbolic resources to the region's authoritarian regimes without addressing the fundamental political issues' (Czerniecka and Heathershow 2011, 94).

Another factor which accelerated the EU's involvement in Central Asia was the former's energy interests in the region.[37] If the security issues related to Afghanistan solely dominated Brussels' policy agenda in the early 2000s, by mid-decade energy had become a top priority for the Union (Youngs 2009, 105). On the one hand, the oil price crisis, prevailing since 1999, had made the energy issue more urgent than before (European Commission 2000a); on the other hand, gas disputes between Russia-Ukraine and Russia-Belarus raised more questions as to Russia's reliability as an energy supplier (ICG 2007, 33). Given that 'reliable, affordable and sustainable flows of energy […are] key element[s] for economic development' (European Commission 2006, 1), it is reasonable to infer that the EU was looking for ways of energy diversification. The resources of the Caspian basin were expected to partly solve this issue. As the EU acknowledged, in order to diversify its energy sector it had to engage 'with producer, transit and consumer countries to produce results' (European Commission 2006, 3). Therefore, in November of 2004 the 'Baku Initiative' was launched, designed to bring the Caspian producers (and their neighbors), the Black sea transit countries, and the European consumers together under one framework.[38] One of the declared aims was energy-sector reform, designed to use the EU's internal market as a template and bring legal and technical standards of the region closer to those of Europe (Youngs 2009, 105). The Commission stated elsewhere that 'actors not playing by the same market rules' were 'risks' to the EU's energy security (European Commission 2006, 1); therefore, the reform was a way of reducing those risks. An additional objective

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[37] If the EU's security policy was more targeted at Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan than at Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, the latter two countries (and Uzbekistan to a lesser degree) were the main objects of the Union's energy policy.
[38] Participants of the 'Baku Initiative' are Azerbaijan, Armenia, Bulgaria, Georgia, Iran (observer), Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz Republic, Moldova, the Russian Federation (observer), Romania, Tajikistan, Turkey, Ukraine and Uzbekistan.

was to facilitate the secure transportation of resources to Europe. In return for the safety of supplies, the Union provided countries with investment and funding (Bahgat 2006, 971). Likewise, the Baku Initiative was also intended to provide new impetus to TRACECA and INOGATE, which were brought under its framework (Bossuyt 2010, 170).

However, Brussels experienced difficulties accessing Central Asia's energy market and transporting energy to the European market. These difficulties included the landlocked position of the region; expensive transportation; Russia's dominance of the energy sectors in the area; and a propensity to overestimate energy reserves (ICG 2007, Cornell and Nelsson 2008). Likewise, China was also actively involved in the energy geopolitics of the region, which made the EU's access to resources even more difficult. These obstacles demanded a 'strong, coherent, and unified energy strategy' from the EU, which would include issues such as building a common European energy policy, the de-Russification of Caspian energy, and a policy to tackle China (Larsson 2008, 24-25). In these difficult circumstances, just the fact of bringing Central Asian and Caucasian suppliers, the Black sea region transit countries, and European consumers together under the framework of the Baku Initiative was sometimes evaluated as a success in itself (De Jong and Wouters 2011, 13).

Furthermore, the rise of Brussels' security and energy interests in the region has been increasingly reported to weaken its stand on the issues of democracy and human rights. The more the EU became involved in the security/energy sector of Central Asia, the more it was accused of neglecting democracy by various observers, including civil society organizations. Nevertheless, the Union repeatedly confirmed, at least rhetorically, the primacy of the democratic transition of the Central Asian states. Despite this, the EU's financial support for this sphere remained moderate. Only €2 million and €4 million were allocated to Central Asian countries under the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR) in 2005 and 2006, accordingly (Youngs 2009, 113). On top of that, the Union's response to the tragic events of Andijon in 2005 was widely criticised for its delay, softness, and ineffectiveness. It was the main test for the EU's human rights policy in Central Asia (ICG 2006, 20).

Overall, despite a comparatively active policy from 2002 to 2006, the EU still remained a relatively weak actor in Central Asia and suffered from visibility issues. As a result, in June 2005, the Council of the European Union appointed a special representative of the EU (EUSP) for Central Asia in order to overcome identified obstacles.[39] Along with the Union's general objectives of providing security, stability, and democratic transformation, the EUSP's mandate stipulated special attention be paid to 'enhancing [the] Union's effectiveness and visibility in the region [...] by developing and maintaining close contacts with governments, parliaments, judiciary, civil society and mass media' (Council of the European Union 2005). A special representative had to act as the 'voice' and 'face' of the Union in CA, transforming the former into a 'more active, more coherent and more capable actor' in the region (Council of the European Union 2009). Generally, there were certain expectations that the EUSP would be able to increase the EU's political visibility, consolidating and expanding its position in the region (Boonstra et al. 2012).

4.1.3 The Strategy: New Approaches to Old Objectives

In 2007 the European Union launched its Strategy for Central Asia. The German presidency was reported to have been a driving force behind it (Schmitz 2008). As highlighted by several EU officials, the purpose of the Strategy was to anchor the EU's attention to the region and serve as an overall guideline for the EU and its member-states' policies (EU-9, 12, 15 – EU officials). The adoption of such a document was commonly viewed as 'a real breakthrough' in EU-CA relations, the beginning of a new, arguably better, period of engagement by Brussels in Central Asia (Kassenova 2008, 122). The Strategy has been widely referred to as the EU's 'most ambitious project' (Melvin 2008c, 5) or 'strongest statement' (Warkotsch 2011d, 1) so far. It is 'more than a policy expression in which just a few objectives are outlined, but less than an extensive and detailed strategy that would ideally be accompanied by an action plan and measurable benchmarks' (Boonstra and

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[39] There have been four EUSPs and one special envoy for Central Asia since 2005: (1) 2005-2006 - Jan Kubiš of Slovakia; (2) 2006-2012 - Pierre Morel of France; (3) 2012-2014 - Patricia Flor of Germany; 2014-2015 - special envoy Janos Herman of Hungary; (5) from 2015 - Peter Burian of Slovakia.

Tsertsvadze 2016, 4). The Strategy was a logical continuation of the EU's increasing interests in the region since the early 2000s. As a result, it is difficult to assert that it stipulated a completely new policy agenda, rather a core of European objectives largely remained the same: 'peaceful, democratic and economically prosperous Central Asia' (Council of the European Union 2007, 4). But what the Strategy did was to trigger 'a remarkable increase of activity' (Schmitz 2011, 11). The document brought all EU efforts under one framework and introduced new formats for further cooperation.

Having identified stability and security as its main interests, the Strategy goes on to specify several areas of cooperation that need 'a strengthened EU approach' (Council of the European Union 2007, 7). As Kassenova (2008, 124-128) argues, the emphasized areas could be grouped into two categories. The first category consists of issues 'that are fairly straightforward and imply a clear action plan with easily identifiable objectives' such as youth and education, economic development, trade and investment, intercultural dialogue, and (partly) combating common threats. It is in these areas that Central Asian governments are more open to cooperation and less likely to oppose the EU's activities. The second category represents a challenge for the EU due to the lack of clear-cut aims, insufficient EU efforts, competition from other external actors, and the unwillingness of CA countries to cooperate. First and foremost, the issues of human rights and democratization, and the strengthening of energy and transport links belong to this group.

Brussels started the implementation of the Strategy in a bid to increase its visibility and political clout in Central Asia. In this respect, the EUSP's role, briefly mentioned выше, was very important. Moreover, the Union expressed a desire to widen its diplomatic presence across the region, and as a result, three separate EU delegations were established in Tajikistan (2009), Kyrgyzstan (2010), and Uzbekistan (2012); and in the Europa House in Turkmenistan (2008). The EU also intensified official contacts with its Central Asian counterparts. Under the framework of the Strategy a regular regional political dialogue at the Foreign Minister Level was proposed. Besides, different formats of dialogue such as security forum/dialogue or human rights dialogue were also established.

The Strategy also proposed several new initiatives designed to deepen cooperation in specific areas. The first, the 'European Education Initiative' (EUEI), was introduced with the aim of raising educational standards in Central Asian countries, particularly in higher education and vocational education training. (see Axyonova 2013, Merrill and Dukenbaev 2011, Jones 2010). Going forward, it is worth mentioning here that the majority of Central Asian experts seem to agree that it is within this education sphere that the EU has succeeded the most (Chebotarev and Gubaidullina 2013). Another flagship initiative was the Rule of Law Initiative (RLI). Its main objective was legal and judicial reform in Central Asia, implemented through political dialogue, the provision of technical assistance, and experience sharing (see Isaacs 2009, Schuster 2011). Similarly, the EU paid special attention to the environment and water management under the framework of the pre-existing EU Water Initiative (EUWI) – namely its Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia (EECCA) component. The aim was to improve water management in the region based on experience European countries had already had (Partzsch 2011, Lipiainen and Smith 2013).

Furthermore, the Strategy presupposed increases in development assistance for identified objectives in the region. If previously the TACIS had been the main instrument of the EU's assistance to Central Asia, in 2007 it was replaced by a new instrument: the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI). Compared to TACIS, DCI was a global-scale instrument concentrating on democratization, human development, and poverty reduction, rather than on the transition to a market economy (Urdze 2011, 24). The amount of allocated assistance for 2007-2013 was €750 million, which was significantly higher than in previous periods (for detailed breakdown of assistance see Tsertsvadze and Boonstra 2013, Boonstra and Hale 2010). This amount rose by 56% (€1 068 million) for 2014-2020. However, the latest increase should not necessarily be interpreted as a sign of Central Asia's increasing importance to the Union. Despite this growth of support in absolute terms, as EU officials note, Central Asia's share still remains comparatively lower than in other regions (EU-8, 9, 13, 15 – EU officials).

All in all, the adoption of the Strategy has remarkably intensified the EU's engagement in Central Asia. However, the question as to the extent to which the EU's post-2007 policy has achieved its stated goals still remains open. The EU itself has constantly reviewed the Strategy's implementation.[40] In such review reports, we read that the Strategy has stipulated 'an unprecedented level of engagement between the EU and Central Asia', intensifying political contacts, economic relations and EU's development assistance (Council of the European Union 2010, 4). Similarly, the report from 2012 asserts that 'much progress has been made in achieving what the EU set out to do in 2007', going on to specify what exactly has been achieved in each area of cooperation (European Commission 2012, 1).

At the same time, the EU has highlighted the negative aspects of implementation too. Brussels recognizes that Central Asia is not always receptive to EU initiatives. Several challenges to the Union's policy have been identified, *inter alia,* the lack of regional cooperation and low interest of local governments in reform, especially in political reform. Similarly, factors such as the extreme level of corruption, lack of good governance, and the administrative bureaucracy in Central Asian states have been reported as having a negative impact on the outcome of EU's development assistance projects (EU-8, 12, 13 – EU officials). On top of that, several drawbacks from the EU-side have also been underlined, among others:

- limited amount of EU assistance;
- lack of coordination by the EU;
- lack of administrative resources at EU Delegations;
- visibility problems (see Council of the European Union 2010, European Commission 2008, 2012, European Court of Auditors 2013).

As can be noticed, the main drawbacks the EU itself identified as hindrances to its policy in Central Asia were no different from those identified after the first ten years of its involvement (see на стр. 78). In other words, although the EU has been increasingly

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[40] There have been three Progress Reports (2008, 2010, 2012) and two Council conclusions (2015, 2017) on the implementation of the Strategy.

intensifying its presence and activities in Central Asia, almost the same issues have been limiting the overall effect of its initiatives for over twenty years.

In contrast to the EU's own evaluations, observations by independent commentators have been more critical of the EU's Strategy and its implementation (e.g. Melvin 2008a, Emerson et al. 2010, Warkotsch 2011b, Chebotarev and Gubaidullina 2013, Boonstra and Tsertsvadze 2016). Although it is commonly agreed that the Strategy was a step in the right direction, its implementation has been 'the severest test' for Brussels and its capabilities as an international actor. It is argued that the initiative has come rather late. The Central Asia of the mid-2000s was significantly different from that of the early 1990s, as strong domestic and international opposition to some of the EU's initiatives had already arisen by the time the Strategy was adopted (Melvin 2008c, 5-6). On top of that, the Union's attention to Central Asia was also distracted by other more important issues such as the signing of the Treaty of Lisbon and the establishment of the European External Action Service (EEAS); the economic crisis; and the war between Russia and Georgia (Boonstra 2011b). These problems are coupled with more recent developments, such as Russian aggression in Ukraine, the refugee crisis, and Brexit. In this context, the overall results of the implementation have been 'of limited to no impact' (Boonstra and Tsertsvadze 2016, 4). The EU, consequently, still remains an 'invisible' (Fumagalli 2008) and 'marginal player […] operating significantly below its potential' (Melvin 2012, 1).

The way the Strategy was written as well as its formulation of Brussels' agenda has raised questions. A point of criticism has been the vagueness and grandiosity of its stated objectives. For example, Kassenova (2015a, 1) claims that '[l]acking clear goals and ways to achieve them, [it] was not a strategy in the conventional sense of the word'. Similarly, Boonstra (2011a, 1) argues that there is a 'deficit within the EU in defining and articulating its interests in the region'. Interviews with Central Asians, conducted for this research, further confirm this. The majority of Central Asian stakeholders still have questions regarding what exactly the EU is trying to achieve in the region (see Chapter V). The seven priority areas identified in the document only seem to complicate the issue. In this regard, the Strategy has not been helpful enough to provide an explicit answer to the question. As

one Kyrgyz expert put it, 'I previously had quite a few questions about the EU's aims, but since they published the Strategy I have even more questions' (KG-12-S/E).

The vagueness of its objectives is further complicated by the modest financial and other resources available. Though financial assistance to the region has considerably increased, it is spread across too many focal areas. Each area does not receive enough support to make visible change. Some programs and projects seem to be specifically designed just to 'tick all the assistance boxes' (Emerson et al. 2010, 96), implying they 'do little to advance Europe's [overall] position in the region' (Melvin 2012, 5). It has therefore been proposed to 'focus on [a] fewer areas where it is possible to achieve a meaningful impact' (Boonstra and Tsertsvadze 2016, 13).

Another disputable question related to the EU's policy is the compatibility of its various interests, i.e. its normative and interest-based agenda. This is arguably the sphere where the EU's policy in Central Asia is questioned the most. The core of criticism is that the EU readily abandons the issues of democratization and human rights in Central Asian countries when its other interests are at stake. In the words of Crawford (2008, 172-173), 'the EU may like to present itself as a normative actor in the world, yet its actions are increasingly those of a realist power, where norms are sacrificed to interests' (see also Hoffmann 2010, Warkotsch 2006, 2011c, Melvin and Boonstra 2008, Voloshin 2014, Cooley 2008). These interests have been reported to be security and energy related. The EU has thus been called to produce a more principled and consistent policy when it comes to its normative agenda in order to avoid a rhetoric-reality gap. On the other hand, it has also been argued that the EU is not in a position to 'democratize Central Asia alone', therefore it should 'adopt a gradual, less dogmatic approach to these issues' (De Pedro 2009, 128). After all, it is the pragmatism of the EU that allows it to have the level of cooperation it currently has with Central Asians, and pragmatism should remain at the heart of EU policy-making in future as well (Anceschi 2014b, 2018).

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that there is 'the surprising absence of any consideration of the regional geopolitical context [in the Strategy], which is extremely

complex and dynamic as the interests and actions of the major global actors converge on Central Asia' (De Pedro 2009, 120-121, see also Kassenova 2007). In other words, the Strategy does not elaborate on the roles of other players, most notably Russia and China, and on how that can influence the EU's own position. The EU, obviously, cannot ignore them, especially today, in the wake of EU-Russia tensions and the development of the Russian led Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), as well as China's Belt-Road Initiative. These factors shape the geopolitical context in the region significantly. Moreover, Central Asians themselves seem to welcome broader cooperation between China, Russia, and the EU in the region (KZ-25-P). One example here is Kazakhstan's constant attempts to establish an official dialogue at the EU-EAEU level. However, the European side still remains hesitant regarding any official dialogue. Brussels is skeptical of the EAEU, its seriousness, and its ultimate goals (EU-7, 12, 15, 17, 18 – EU officials). Instead, it prefers bilateral level cooperation with Central Asian members of the EAEU. For example, Brussels signed the EPCA with Kazakhstan[41] and launched negotiations on the EPCA with Kyrgyzstan[42]. As claimed by European officials, it was Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan who demonstrated more interest in updating an agreement with Brussels. In the case of Kazakhstan, the country wanted the agreement to be signed as soon as possible, as it 'had more symbolic rather than practical meaning for the country, possibly in order to balance the Eurasian Economic Union' (EU-12-EU official). This indicates that Central Asians view the EU as an important direction in their multi-vector foreign policy, a potential counterbalance against Russia and China. Therefore, the EU needs to take this into account while developing its own agenda. This does not necessarily entail competition with Russia or China. The nature of such a relationship has the potential to be cooperative, as there is enough room for all sides, especially in areas of shared interests such as security and stability (Warkotsch 2011a, Lain 2017).

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[41] Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA), signed in December 2015, is a new generation agreement between the EU and Kazakhstan, which replaced the old PCA and considerably enlarged the framework for cooperation, especially economic cooperation (see Kembayev 2015).

[42] During the author's field trip to Brussels and Kyrgyzstan in spring-summer of 2016, the Kyrgyz diplomats were already expressing an interest in a new agreement with the EU, similar to that of Kazakhstan. However, as EU officials claimed, the majority of EU member-states had little interest in discussing such a document with Kyrgyzstan (EU-12-EU official). Nevertheless, the EU's position since then seems to have changed. As a result, it launched the negotiation process on a new agreement with Kyrgyzstan in October 2017.

Despite extensive critique, the Council conclusions of 2015 once again confirmed the validity of the Strategy and of its aims (Council of the European Union 2015). As has been repeatedly pointed out, 'having this kind of strategy, even with the exaggerated aims, is much better than not having any at all' (EU-12-EU official). Finally, the Council conclusions from 2017, ten years after the adoption of the Strategy, called for a new strategy for Central Asia, inviting the European Commission to come forward with a proposal by 2019. It has been suggested that the new document needs to take into account the new reality of the region (Council of the European Union 2017). The new conceptual document is expected to be introduced in the second half of 2019, which may open a new page of EU-CA relations.

4.2 Representations of Self: the EU as a Distinct Actor in Central Asia

The previous section provided an overview of the EU's engagement in Central Asia since 1991. The focus was on the evolution of the EU's interests and policy initiatives in the region. Providing the historical background and establishing the context for further discussions on the EU's self- and perceived images was the main objective. Having reviewed Brussels' policy practice and its progressive development, the current section now moves on to examine the EU's rhetorical practice in Central Asia. It intends to reveal the EU-produced official narratives surrounding and defining its engagement with the region. In this context, the aim is to understand how the EU tries to represent itself and what kind of self-images Brussels communicates to the region. In contrast to the previous section, which considered 25 years of bilateral relationship, this section mainly focuses on post-2010 narratives (see the Introduction for the timeframe).

Overall, it is argued that 'the self-representations of the Union cannot be dismissed as simply "rhetorical" [as] rhetoric is a performative act' in itself (Lucarelli 2006b, 3-4). Rhetorical self-representations construct, establish, and justify an actor's agency in a given context, thus, shaping its interests and policies. Policy performance, on the other hand,

feeds back to an actor's representations of self. In this sense, it is a circular process, where both policy performance and rhetorical practice are constitutive and indivisible parts of the EU's overall engagement with Central Asia. Given this, making a separation between the two in this chapter is driven only by an analytical purpose.

The examination of the Union's self-images will focus on two components: how the EU positions itself in terms of (1) its *power/capability* and (2) its intentions, i.e. whether it represents itself as a *threat* and/or an *opportunity* for the region. These two aspects were identified as being central to the analysis of international images (Chapter III). Accordingly, the first sub-section below shows that the EU rhetorically represents itself as a truly global actor, but distinct from other global players. The second sub-section demonstrates that the EU expectedly positions itself exclusively as offering an opportunity from which to benefit, and discusses the content of 'opportunity' as projected by Brussels.

4.2.1 The EU as a Distinct Global Actor

As discussed in Chapter II, academic literature remains highly divided in terms of whether or not the European Union should be treated as a global actor able to make a difference in world politics. On the one hand, some commentators claim that the EU is already a truly global actor, though different in nature from other global actors (e.g. Manners 2002, Leonard 2005, McCormick 2007). On the other hand, others remain skeptical of Brussels' ability as an international actor due to its lack of political and military capabilities (e.g. Kagan 2002, Hyde-Price 2008, Zielonka 1998). When it comes to the EU's own rhetorical self-representation, it becomes obvious that today's Brussels continuously positions itself as an already established *global actor*. As put by Bengtsson and Elgström (2012, 106), '[t]he EU sees itself as a […] great power, with the interest, capacity, and obligation to impact on developments in the various empirical settings'.

The idea of the EU as a global actor has long been an important component of its general self-representation. The Security Strategy of 2003 stated that 'the European Union is

inevitably a global player' (Council of the European Union 2003, 1). In 2016, the EU launched a new *Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy.* The very title of the document is meant to once again indicate that Brussels' foreign policy is global in scope. In the text of the strategy we read that the EU 'will engage responsibly across Europe and the surrounding regions to the east and south [and] will act globally [and] will be a responsible global stakeholder' (European Union 2016, 8). Commenting on the Strategy, the High Representative Mogherini further states that the EU sees itself and wants others to see it 'as a reliable global power, a credible security provider, an indispensable trade and economic partner, a peace-builder, a defender of human rights and enabler for civil society, and a force for merit-based human development' (Mogherini 2017). At the same time, it is framed that the EU's quest for a global role is not just a matter of its intentions to become influential, but rather is shaped by demand from outsiders. In other words, the EU is wanted and expected by the external world to play a greater role: 'wherever I travel, our partners expect the European Union to play a major role', therefore, 'the world need[s] a strong European Union' to contribute to worldwide stability and prosperity (Mogherini 2016, 3). This narrative is designed to represent the EU as not just a self-interested global actor, but also one who pursues altruistic common interests.

Lucarelli (2006a, 51-52) argues that as a global actor '[t]he EU recognizes that it has global responsibilities, but accepts a greater burden only in its neighbourhood'. However, it is also suggested that a self-representation of a global actor demands the EU to be active not just in its immediate neighborhood, but also in 'out-of-Europe' regions such as Central Asia (Kavalski 2012, 92). In this context, an engagement with 'out-of-Europe' regions is 'instrumental' for Europe in the sense that they 'play a role for European ambitions to become a significant player on the international scene' (Olsen 2004, 81, 97). In other words, it can be argued that the Union's engagement with regions like Central Asia is not merely dictated by its 'objective' interests such as stability, security, and energy, but also demanded by its self-perceived role as a global actor. 'As a global player we [the Europeans] have an ambition to be present in many regions including Central Asia', as put

by an interviewed EU-official (EU-6-EU official). Central Asia is thus not a unique destination that Brussels has urgent interests in, but rather one among the many that serve the EU's quest for a global role. For example, it can be argued that what the EU mainly carries out in Central Asia (security, stability, and democratization) is not something specific to the region, but a small projection of the EU's foreign policy agenda at the global level. A similar agenda is promoted across a variety of other regions too: in Africa, Latin America, or South Asia, albeit with certain contextual adaptations. As put by another EU official, 'we assist Central Asian countries not because we have special interests there, but because *we do this all over the world*' (EU-13-EU official).

Furthermore, while representing itself as a global actor the EU also communicates the image of a *distinct* and *unique* player than other actors.[43] This brings us to the point discussed in Chapter III that '[i]dentities are always constituted in relation to difference because a thing can only be known by what it is not' (Rumelili 2004, 29). Chapter III mentioned that, for example, Stråth (2002, 391) posits that for centuries Europe's identity has been constructed by differentiation from the Muslims during the Crusades, the Indians during the Age of Discovery, and the Ottoman Empire and Russia later on. Similarly, Neumann and Welsh (1991) examine the role of the Ottoman Empire as a differentiation point for Europe, whereas Wæver (2000) argues that it is Europe's own past that today's Europe intends to differentiate itself from. More recent literature further suggests that the EU's uniqueness today is usually constructed against the United States (Diez 2005, Scheipers and Sicurelli 2007).

In the particular context of Central Asia, first of all, it appears to be Russia, and then China, that the Union constructs its identity against. The collected data allow at least three main aspects to be identified, which are frequently articulated to establish the EU's distinctive identity. The first aspect that makes it different from Russia and China is that the Union claims to have comparatively less influence in the region. Although the EU diligently represents itself as a global actor, Brussels acknowledges that, in Central Asia, Russia and

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[43] The notion of 'uniqueness' is well documented in the literature on European studies (see Chapter II).

China are objectively primary actors given their geographic proximity and political, economic, and cultural (relates to Russia) leverage. Therefore, the EU accepts that its role in the region is that of a *secondary actor* in comparison to Russia and China. As commonly articulated by EU-related officials, 'of course, we do not have the role [in Central Asia] that Russia has in terms of security and alliances, or China has in terms of finance and investments' (EU-3-European diplomat); or 'the EU is distant from Central Asia, which means that it cannot compete with neighboring powers like Russia and China in geopolitical terms. The EU cannot even be compared to the USA. We play a very similar role to that of Japan' (EU-5-EU official). The self-image of a secondary player also has practical implications, because if it is a secondary actor, as claimed, the EU should not be expected to maintain the same level of engagement with the region, and therefore, should not be compared to Russia or China in terms of political and economic performance (EU-14-EU official). At the same time, despite being a secondary player, the Union positions itself 'as a balancing power in the region, […] establishing and giving the opportunity to our partners to diversify their relationship' (Burian 2017b). As claimed another EU official, 'we accept that Russia is the main partner in the region, but we do not want Russia to have a monopoly there' (EU-15-EU official).

Secondly, despite the idea of a 'balancer', the EU represents itself as a *benign actor with no geopolitical intentions*. This is another trait regularly articulated to make the Union distinct from other external actors in the region.[44] As recently articulated by Peter Burian (2018), 'the European Union has no hidden and geopolitical ambitions [in Central Asia]. Our main interest in Central Asia is security and stability. We are ready to cooperate with all those who are genuinely interested in the stability and prosperity of Central Asia'. This rhetoric also is not something intrinsic only to the Central Asian context. For example, Kratochvil (2009, 13) demonstrates that 'the image of the EU as a benign actor is prevalent' in the Union's rhetoric towards its immediate neighbors too (see also Bengtsson and Elgström 2012). Similarly, Sheahan et al. (2010) observes a discourse of benign partner in the EU's

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[44] One could argue that the self-representations of a 'balancer' and a 'benign actor with no geopolitical intentions' are inconsistent with each other. Balancing may unavoidably contain elements of competition with others. Nevertheless, both are articulated parallelly, with the latter being more frequent and salient.

relations with ACP countries.[45] However, this rhetoric of benignness becomes particularly relevant in the Central Asian context. As discussed in the Introduction, Central Asian geopolitics has long been dominated by the discourse of the New Great Game, when any major external power is viewed through the prism of competition for dominance. The EU has been insistent on denying the applicability of such narratives in relation to itself. It repeatedly claims that Brussels does not participate in any kind of 'game' and does not think in terms of geopolitical categories in Central Asia. Speculations that the Union's policy activities in the region may have any hidden agendas are commonly denied. Rather, everything it offers is genuinely designed to contribute to long-term development and the stability and security of the region, which is also in the interest of regional countries as well as other external players. As the High Representative, Mogherini (2017) stated, 'the European Union's relations with the countries of Central Asia are not about competing with other countries or powers; our engagement is aimed solely at making the lives of the people who live there better'. This articulated benevolence of the EU, again, is meant to set the Union apart from other external actors in the region (Russian and China) and establish it as a distinct kind of actor. As added by one interviewed EU official,

> we are different from Russia and China in Central Asia. Of course, we all have common interests in security and stability in the region. But our shared interests end there. We do not have geopolitical aims like Russia and China, we do not want to rule Central Asian countries (EU-11-EU official).

Thirdly, and closely related to the previous point, the EU's uniqueness compared to other external actors is articulated to be principles of equality and partnership that it adheres to while engaging with the Central Asian countries. The EU does not act from the position of 'strongest'; rather, a dialogue is the foundation of the EU's foreign policy. Again, in the words of High Representative Mogherini (2015), '[p]artners are equal, have to be. And the partnership is as strong as each of the partners is. We need strong powers, not to be the strongest part of partnership'. In the text of the Strategy for Central Asia one similarly reads that 'in implementing the [Strategy's] goals and objectives […] the EU will be guided by

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[45] ACP countries - the African, Caribbean and Pacific Group of States.

the principle[s] of equal dialogue' (Council of the European Union 2007, 4). Moreover, EU officials and European diplomats continuously assure that 'the EU proposes, but never mentors or imposes' (EU-3-European diplomat); or 'the EU always demonstrates a great respect for the wishes of Central Asians. This is how the European Union is a distinct actor' (EU-2-European diplomat). At the same time, it is often argued that although the Union emphasizes the equality of partnership, a closer look at its rhetoric reveals 'the EU's belief that it is primarily the Union itself who should define the contents' of any partnership (Kratochvil 2009, 7). Similarly, in the Strategy for Central Asia it reads that it is 'the EU [who] is willing to share [its] experience and expertise', but not equally exchanging; it is the Union who intends to make the 'countries of the region reliable partners for the EU', but not to be mutually reliable; and it is the Union who needs to raise 'the concerns felt by the EU as regards the human rights situation in the countries concerned' (Council of the European Union 2007). That is to say that even in the context of proclaimed equality, the EU still positions itself as '*a normatively superior, potent leader*' (Bengtsson and Elgström 2012, 98; emphasis in original).

In sum, today's European Union greatly represents itself as an already established, but *distinct*, i.e. less influential, benign, and respectful (when compared with Russia and China), *global* actor in Central Asia. This self-image of a global actor serves as a meta-image, meaning that Brussels' other conceptualizations of Self, discussed below, derive exactly from this idea of the EU as a global actor.

4.2.2 The EU as an Opportunity for Development

As a global actor, the EU declares 'a strong sense of responsibility' for the developing world and the determination to 'act globally to address the root causes of conflict and poverty, and to champion the indivisibility and universality of human rights' (European Union 2016, 17). As a responsible global actor, the EU articulates that it has something to offer other developing regions, including Central Asia. Moreover, as a distinct kind of global player, what it offers is intrinsically benign and is always meant to be beneficial to

receiving actors. The Union positions itself not as an *egoistic* actor pursuing its own interests, but as an *altruistic* one ready to propose and give more to others than it receives from them. In the words of one EU official: 'we are in Central Asia not for our selfish interests. Many Central Asian countries cannot offer much to the EU. What can we get from Kyrgyzstan, for example? We are there to assist them' (EU-12-EU official). A closer look at EU-produced official documents and statements in Central Asia further confirm that the EU represents itself as an actor who gratuitously *shares*, rather than *gains*. For example, in the text of the Strategy for Central Asia we repeatedly read that the EU will 'share', 'offer', and 'support' the countries in the region, leaving the impression that it is mostly a one-way movement, where Central Asians merely belong to a receiving part. In general, it is articulated that everything that the EU shares, offers, and supports in the region 'can make a difference for the better' (Barroso 2013a). The EU represents itself exclusively as proposing *an opportunity for the development* of the region.

The EU's self-image as a 'power for good' is not a surprise, however. Several studies in other geographic contexts have also confirmed that the EU represents itself as a partner for development (e.g. Bengtsson and Elgström 2012, Sheahan et al. 2010). Moreover, it has been argued that it is one of Brussels' central role conceptions. In this sense, Central Asia is not a unique context. But the question remains: what is the content of *opportunity* that Brussels offers to Central Asia? From analysis of the Union's rhetoric in the region, it is possible to infer at least four aspects where Brussels sees itself as offering an opportunity for development: the EU as a *model*; a *leading donor*; a *commercial partner*; and a *norm promoter*.

First of all, the EU represents an opportunity in terms of being a *model* to learn from. As Nicolaïdis and Howse (2002, 768) claim, 'the notion of Europe as a more advanced model on a linear trajectory has pervaded [… the] European discourse'. In practice, the idea of being a model is applied to the EU enlargement policy 'through the requirement that candidate countries implement the *acquis* in its entirety, and through the conditionalities inserted in the plethora of association agreements' (Bretherton and Vogler 2006, 54; emphasis in original), as well as to its Neighbourhood Policy, where the Union acts as a

superior model which 'can teach others and invites them to adopt its norms and practices' (Kratochvil 2009, 19). Similarly, a frequent reference to the European model or European experience as something beneficial for receivers can be observed in the EU's Central Asian rhetoric too. We read in the Strategy that 'the EU is willing to share experience and expertise' (Council of the European Union 2007, 2); or in the Council conclusions that Brussels intends to share 'European standards, experience and best practices in specific sectors' (Council of the European Union 2015, 7); or we frequently hear from EU officials that 'the EU is really a source of interesting experience and solutions' (Burian 2017a); or that 'the EU that might be a little bit further away, but that certainly has to offer a lot in terms of experience and expertise' (Flor 2013). This 'European experience', in this context, does not normally have a fixed meaning referring to something specific, but is rather used as a broader notion to denote everything positive that comes from the EU. Nevertheless, it still remains possible to identify some areas where the EU mostly represents itself as a model. Firstly, it is the EU's experience of regional peace/stability and cooperation/integration building that Central Asians can learn from. Secondly, the European model/experience may denote the path of its political and economic development that the countries in the region are offered to draw from, including political liberalization, the open market, or European technical standards etc. Finally, the European experience may refer to more specific issues such as the regulation of trans-national rivers or border management, where the Union is said to have massive expertise to share. Furthermore, the rhetoric of being a model is normally supplemented by the narrative that Brussels acts on the basis of equality and partnership, pointed out earlier, and that it never imposes, but instead proposes its model: 'It is possible to learn about the mistakes we did, and maybe do things more efficiently using this accumulative experience. However, we don't want to push certain models – the countries need to choose the best kind of option, best kind of solution' (Burian 2017a), or 'it is simply not possible nor is it advisable to translate the European model directly into a model for other parts of the world' (Bouchez 2012), in the words of a few EU officials in the region.

Secondly, the EU represents, as articulated, an opportunity in terms of being *the leading donor* in the region. The role of the EU as a worldwide donor of development assistance is fixed in its founding treaties.[46] This profile, arguably, is one of the most salient aspects of Brussels' rhetoric while acting externally. Narratives like the EU as 'the provider of half of the development aid in the world' or 'the largest donor worldwide' are present throughout EU-produced texts. Similarly, in the Central Asian context it is often communicated that '[t]he EU is heavily engaged in Central Asia as one of the leading donors' (Council of the European Union 2010, 21). A special emphasis is made every time the Union increases the amount of donor assistance to the region. If the Strategy was proud to declare that the EU would 'double the financial means for assisting Central Asian states' for 2007-2013 (Council of the European Union 2007, 3), later on, the increase by 56% for 2014-2020 has also been widely advertised by the EU as a step further in becoming the sole biggest donor. The narrative of leading donor is normally supplemented by various statistical data (e.g. absolute amount of assistance, number of projects completed etc.), designed to make it even more impressive. The self-image of a generous donor is also consistent with the previously mentioned idea that the EU is a global actor that gratuitously gives rather than gains. Different EU officials on the ground particularly reiterate that EU 'funds are provided in the form of *grants and are not subjects for refund*' (De Montis 2015; emphasis mine). Although the self-image of a donor is highly visible at the regional level, its overall salience seems to vary when it comes to individual states in Central Asia. For example, if one compares the cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, it is in the latter case where the EU mostly positions itself as a donor at the country-level, whereas in the case of Kazakhstan the rhetoric of donor is normally mentioned in the context of regional cooperation only. This can be observed, for instance, from the agenda of bilateral meetings. If in EU-Kyrgyzstan high-level meetings development assistance is usually a top issue at the table, in the case of EU-Kazakhstan official meetings, the topic normally remains untouched.

The third aspect where Central Asians can potentially benefit from the EU is said to be the economic sphere. The EU positions itself as *a commercial partner*: the biggest single

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[46] For example, see the Treaty of Lisbon, Articles 159-164.

market ready to provide access for Central Asians; an important trade partner interested in increasing bilateral trade turnover; and the biggest investor ready to invest in the economies of the countries in the region. 'The EU is the second global economy. We are the largest global market and the leading foreign investor in most parts of the globe. The EU has achieved a strong position by acting together with one voice on the global stage, by playing a key role in removing barriers to trade', as stated by the former EU ambassador to Kazakhstan (Hristea 2017). However, as in the previous case, the salience of the Union's self-image as a commercial partner varies across countries. For example, in Kazakhstan, the EU behaves as an already *established* commercial partner for the country. Given the high-level of economic relations between the two parties, the EU's rhetoric in Astana is mainly built around economy-related issues. The narrative that 'the EU has progressively become Kazakhstan's leading trade partner, with about 40% of [its] total external trade, […] the top investor in Kazakhstan, accounting for about half of total foreign direct investment in the country' (Barroso 2013a) remains an ever-present component of speeches and press releases of the EU. By contrast, in Kyrgyzstan the EU positions itself not as an established, but as a *potential,* commercial partner, given the low level of current economic relations. As articulated, Kyrgyzstan has the full potential to increase its economic benefits from the Union through different incentives that the EU is ready to provide. In the words of Barroso (2013b),

> I believe that our trade relations may also be further enhanced in the near future and therefore we have touched upon the advantages of the European Union reformed Generalised Scheme of Preferences. I am certain that an improvement of the business and investment climate will also boost trade and investment, in benefit of citizens and companies in Kyrgyzstan.

Finally, the EU presents its promoted values as another important sphere from which Central Asians can benefit[47]. Again, the external promotion of the Union's internal values

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[47] The EU's role as a promoter of norms has arguably been the most discussed aspect of its foreign policy. One example is Manner's (2002) 'normative power' concept (see Chapter II for more discussion).

is fixed in its founding treaties.[48] Lucarelli (2006a) argues that the promotion of values is at the heart of the EU's *telos* as an international actor. Consequently, *the norm promoter* has been one of the most salient self-representations of the Union globally, as well as in Central Asia. Despite the ongoing debate in literature as to whether Brussels compromises its values in favor of hard interests in Central Asia (see выше), at least in its rhetorical practice the EU has always been certain and consistent about the importance of the value aspect. It is constantly articulated that the long-term political and economic development of any country depends on the values of democracy, human rights, the rule of law, and good governance (Council of the European Union 2007, 7). The promotion of values is therefore framed not as an imperative driven by the Union's objective to impose its way of life on others, but rather as an altruistic intention to contribute to the long-term development of the region. Moreover, the Union even denies that it promotes 'European' values, insisting on the 'universality' of these values. To legitimize them as 'universal', Brussels frequently refers to the UN and the OSCE, the organizations that Central Asian states voluntarily joined and 'subscribed to [their] values, standards and commitments' (Council of the European Union 2007, 1). 'We believe that democracy and human rights are universal values that should be vigorously promoted around the world', as put by a former head of the EU Delegation to Kazakhstan (Jousten 2011). In general, it is communicated that the acceptance of these values will only bring positive change to the region.

As can be concluded, the EU communicates that cooperation with the Union only represents an opportunity for Central Asian states. Central Asians can benefit from the Union's rich experience in various spheres, from provided donor assistance, from (potential) commercial ties with Brussels, and from its promoted values. But the extent to which this opportunity is employed is said to depend on Central Asians too. The EU articulates the principle of joint ownership, that is the idea that the final outcome of cooperation with the Union is also a matter of Central Asians' willingness and responsibility to cooperate. 'We can help but at the same time we believe national ownership and regional leadership […] are crucial elements of the success of our

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[48] For example, see the Treaty of Lisbon, Article 1a.

endeavours' (Burian 2015). The principle of joint ownership is also consistent with the EU's self-representation as a power that proposes, but not imposes.

4.3 Discussion and Conclusion

The chapter examined the European Union's engagement with Central Asia. In doing so, it pursued two main objectives. The first section chronicled the evolution of the EU's 25-year-long policy performance in the region to establish a background context of EU-CA relations for further discussions on the EU's self- and perceived images. But more centrally, the second part of the chapter revealed how the Union represents itself and what kind of self-images it communicates to the region while engaging with it. The rationale for doing so was said to be the fact that the EU's perceived images in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which is the central focus of this thesis, become fully meaningful only when they are compared to how the EU views and represents itself. Therefore, understanding the way the EU represents itself to the region had to be a starting point before examining its perceived images in these countries.

What can generally be noticed from the overview of the EU's policy performance is that the EU's involvement in Central Asia has had a steadily increasing trajectory since the early 1990s. Its policy in the region has been gradually improving in terms of both quantity and quality. At the earliest stage, the EU did not have a clear vision of the region and of its role there, and as a result its policy in Central Asia was arguably an extension of what had been mostly designed for Russia, Ukraine, and other members of the former Soviet Union. The situation started changing at the dawn of the new millennium, when, due to several factors related both to the EU and Central Asia, Brussels came to articulate its interests in the region more clearly, that is security, (political, economic, social) stability, and energy. This logically led to the launch of the Strategy in 2007, which was the next upward step in Brussels involvement in the region. Finally, the EU is currently discussing the adoption of a

new conceptual document for the region, which can potentially be another step towards even more increased engagement.

At the same time, it should also be acknowledged that the EU's steady increase has not made the Union one of the leading nor the most influential actors in the region. The EU's overall rise in Central Asia has been relative to Brussels' own past, but not relative to the other great powers in the region, first of all, Russia and China. By comparison to these actors, the EU still remains a second-tier player at best. On the other hand, the EU itself does not seem to view Central Asia as a key destination of its strategic interests. Without denying Brussels' certain interests in the region such as security, stability, democratization, and energy, one should, however, recognize that the EU's engagement with the region has been partly driven by its (self-prescribed) role as a global actor. It is this role of a global actor that makes the EU active in relatively less important regions like Central Asia, not the exclusively urgent importance of the region to Brussels. Again, this is not to deny that the EU has certain interests in Central Asia; rather, it is to claim that even given all its interests, the region also remains, at best, a secondary concern for Brussels.

The third point to be mentioned is that although the chapter has framed the case as the EU's engagement with *Central Asia,* one should realize that this is an oversimplification to the extent that each Central Asian country has its own structure of relationship with the EU. The EU has come to realize that Central Asian countries differ from each other in significant ways, and consequently, its policy in recent years has been more country-specific. This may imply that the findings in one country cannot necessarily be generalized in others, and ideally each country should be treated separately if the aim is to obtain not horizontally wider, but vertically deeper insights of the EU's policy in the region.

As for the second part of the chapter, it dealt with the European Union's rhetorical practice that surrounds its actual policy, and revealed how the EU positions itself in terms of its power/capability as an international actor and the threat/opportunity that it represents to others. What first attracts attention is that the EU tries to project the image of an already established global actor. As mentioned earlier, this self-image of a global actor partly

demands from the EU be active in relatively distant regions like Central Asia. The Union communicates that as an external actor it is able to assist in the diversification of multi-vector foreign policies in the countries of Central Asia against other major powers. At the same time, the EU persistently differentiates itself from the other external players in the region. The image that Brussels intends to communicate is that of a distinct and unique global actor. The EU's uniqueness in the Central Asian context is constructed, first of all, against Russia, and then against China to a lesser extent. They are both represented as more influential and self-interested actors, with geopolitical interests to dominate over the region, and are assertive in their actions. By contrast, the EU is said to be a less ambitious secondary actor with benign and altruistic interests, and with no geopolitical ambitions in the region. Moreover, the EU projects itself as taking a soft and respectful approach and following the principle of equality while engaging with Central Asians. The elements of the EU's distinctiveness from Russia and China are illustrated in **Figure 4-1** below.
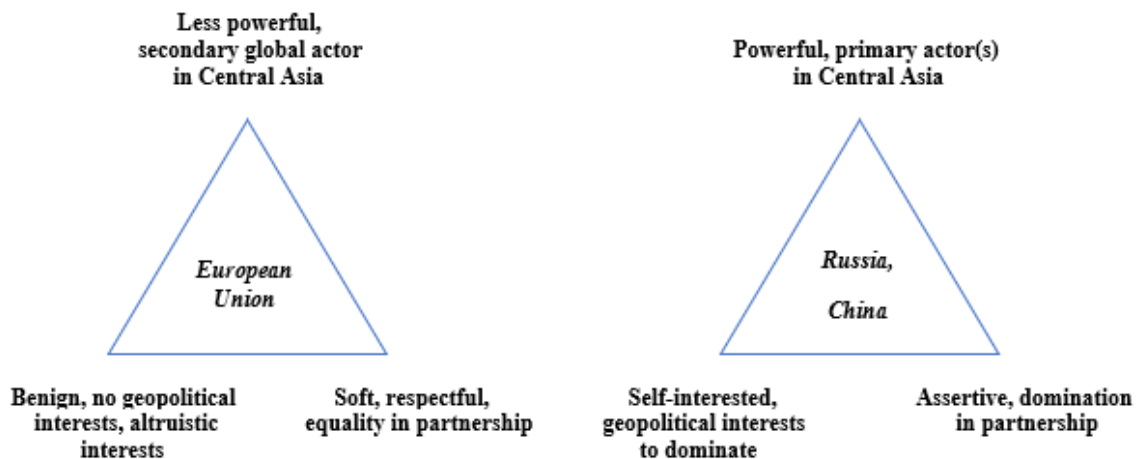
Figure 4-1: Attributes of the EU's image as a distinct global actor in Central Asia (author's figure)

The rhetoric of uniqueness seems to play at least two important roles for the EU. Firstly, as already mentioned, the Other(s) plays a constitutive role in the construction of the Self's identity. That is to say the EU's very agency in Central Asia is established by the rhetoric of uniqueness. Secondly and more importantly, Brussels intends to avoid the skepticism and suspicion that the actors it differentiates itself from receive from the Central Asian

countries. One could speculate that the level of suspicion towards the 'big three' in Central Asian countries is quite high (see Chapter V). Therefore, by setting itself apart from Russia and China, the Union intends not to be associated with the same kind of suspicion. That is meant to increase the EU's legitimacy and the acceptance of its presence and proposed agenda by Central Asians.

Furthermore, the chapter also discussed whether the EU projects itself as a global actor offering an opportunity or posing a threat. Unsurprisingly, self-representations of Brussels are solely about its image as a 'power for good'. As a global actor, the EU is framed offering an opportunity for the development of Central Asian states. The self-image of opportunity seems to be mainly constructed around four major elements, albeit with certain variances in salience across Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The EU is articulated as being beneficial in terms of being a model, equally salient in both countries; a donor, more visible in Kyrgyzstan than Kazakhstan; a commercial partner, more visible in Kazakhstan than Kyrgyzstan; and a norm promoter, equally salient in both countries (see **Figure 4-2** below). However, the extent to which the countries of the region benefit from the proposed opportunity is said to partly depend on themselves.
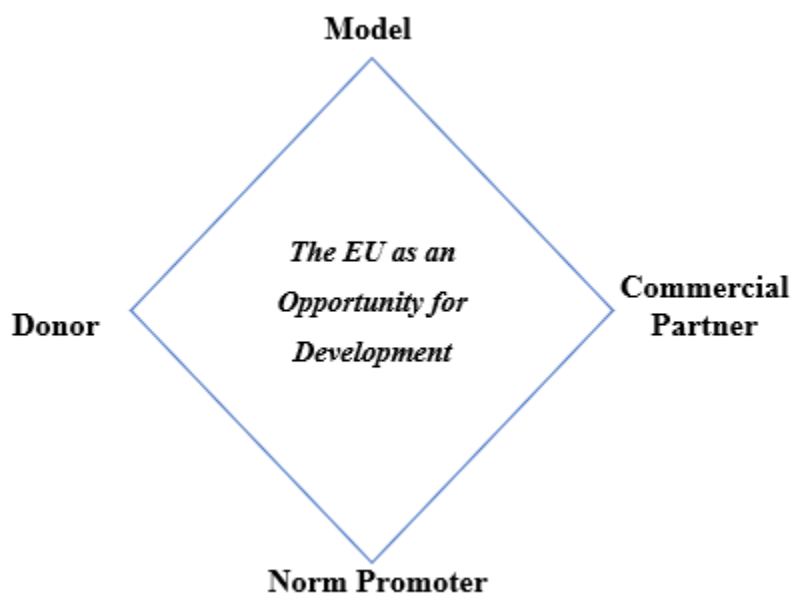
Figure 4-2: Attributes of the EU's self-image as an opportunity for development (author's figure)

The final point to be mentioned is that the way the EU represents itself to Central Asia seems to be no different from how it represents itself at the global level. In this sense, the identified self-images of the EU are not unique to the Central Asian context. As put by one EU official, 'the European Union does not have a message specifically designed for Central Asia' (EU-5-EU official), but rather what the EU 'speaks' about in Central Asia seems to be an echo of Brussels' global rhetoric. Again, what this implies is that Central Asia is not a special region that the EU pays special attention to. Rather it still remains a relatively distant and less important area for Brussels.

Having scrutinized the EU's self-representations, the next two chapters will discuss how these self-images are perceived and interpreted by receivers of the message, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Chapter V will examine perceptions of the EU's power/capability as viewed in these two countries, whereas Chapter VI will elaborate on whether the Union is perceived as posing a threat or offering an opportunity.

Chapter V: Perceptions of the EU's Power/Capability in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

This chapter of the thesis starts the analysis of the perceptions of the European Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. As conceptualized in Chapter III, images are not monolithic concepts, rather, they are complex entities with a variety of internal components. Drawing from Image Studies, Chapter III identified two main dimensions that constitute the core of perceived images in International Relations: (1) how the object's *power/capability* is perceived, and (2) whether the object is perceived as offering an *opportunity* or posing a *threat* to one's own state. Following this conceptualization, the study analyzes these dimensions in two separate chapters. The present chapter examines the first component and focuses on perceptions of the EU's power/capability[49] as viewed by Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Chapter III also argued for a 'relational power' approach to be used in this study. This approach defines power as *influence* that an actor has in relation to other actors (see Baldwin 2002 for review). Proponents of this approach assert that power cannot be understood and measured in overall terms. To make sense of an actor's power one needs to specify the dimensions of power; in the first instance, its *domain* and *scope*.

To begin with, the very meaning of 'relational power' presupposes the necessity of identifying a domain, that is the context within which one's relative power is assessed. It is argued that 'a state may have a great deal of influence in one region of the world, while having little or no influence in other parts of the world' (Baldwin 2002, 178, Dahl 1968, 408). Therefore, the first task is to identify the context(s) before 'measuring' an actor's relational influence. This chapter examines the Union's perceived power in two domains. Firstly, the chapter focuses on the EU's power in a *global context*. The reason for doing so is to reveal whether the Union is recognized as a global actor in its own right, capable of influence and competition with other powerful actors. Secondly, the chapter also treats the

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[49] As mentioned in Chapter III, 'power' and 'capability' are used interchangeably.

Union's perceived power in a particular *regional context,* the region in this case being Central Asia. The intention here is to see if the EU's power is perceived to extend over the countries of Central Asia (see Chapter III).

As for the scope of power, it is further argued that in any given context one's power cannot be assessed in overall terms; rather, it needs to be specified. The notion of scope is designed to capture this issue-specific nature of power. As suggested, 'individuals or groups who are relatively powerful with respect to one kind of activity may be relatively weak with respect to other activities. Power need not be general; it may be specialized' (Dahl 1968, 408). This means that while assessing one's power in a particular domain, an analyst also needs to deal with the 'task of justifying his/her particular selection of issues through which power is analyzed' (Frey 1971, 1082). For issue areas specific to the EU's power, Chapter III identified *economic power*, *political power*, and *soft power* as the foci of this study. The selection of these three issue areas is the reflection of a continuous academic debate in European Studies as to whether the EU is an economic, political, or normative power. However, the normative power dimension was replaced with the soft power dimension during my field trips to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (see Chapter III). While coding and analysing the collected data, I particularly looked for narratives referring to the EU's economic, political, and soft power at both global and regional domains.

Following the identified framework, the chapter proceeds in four parts. The first section will scrutinize the EU's perceived power as a global actor across three issue-areas, i.e. its economic, political, and soft power. It will demonstrate that perceptions vary depending on the issue areas in question: economic giant, influential soft power, but politically intermediate actor. Section two then will shift focus from the global to the regional context, analysing perceptions of the EU's power as a regional actor in Central Asia. This section will argue that in a particular context of Central Asia, Brussels is seen as a regional actor with limited capabilities. In addition, the section will also discuss perceived reasons for the EU's low profile in Central Asia. The third section will elaborate on an evolving perception of 'dying Europe'. It will claim that although the EU is recognized as a capable global actor, albeit with limited influence in Central Asia, its general influence is simultaneously

perceived as being in decline due to recent internal issues within the EU. Finally, section four will provide a summary and conclusion of the findings.

5.1 The EU's Perceived Power as a Global Actor

This section analyses perceptions of the European Union's power/capability as a *global actor* in terms of its *economic*, *political*, and *soft power*. But what should one understand by economic, political, and soft power? This chapter does not specifically define these notions nor identify their internal dimensions. Rather, they all are used in broad all-encompassing meanings, and their analytical components are inductively inferred from the collected data. The intention in applying a bottom-up approach is to give salience to the 'voices' of Central Asians themselves and reveal what *they perceive* constitutes power, instead of assigning them to predefined analytical categories. This is especially important when the study deals with the perceptions of others.

5.1.1 The EU's Perceived Economic Power

The European Union's economic performance has always been at the center of academic literature. Authors tend to mostly emphasize economy related issues while discussing the EU's international capability. Duchene's (1973) notion of 'civilian power', for instance, was designed to highlight the economic aspect of the EU's might, instead of understanding power in a purely militaristic sense. Bretherton and Vogler (2006, 87-88) claimed that '[t]he growing economic presence of the European Union has ensured that, in many respects, it can be regarded as a great power, rivalling and even exercising a form of trade duopoly with the United States'. Similarly, Marsh and Mackenstein (2005, 241) wrote that the Union's 'economic presence can be felt at every level, from the sub-state through to the international and the global'. The literature on external perceptions of the Union also suggests that the EU is mostly associated with economic achievements and perceived as an economic giant (e.g. Chaban et al. 2013, Lisbonne-de Vergeron 2007, Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010b; see Chapter II for the literature review on this). These findings suggest

that the economic might of the Union has been the least questioned aspect of its tripartite capability as an international actor.

Central Asia is no exception from other regions when it comes to perceptions of the Union's economic power. In both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the EU is perceived as an 'established, recognized, and equal global actor' (KZ-47-J), where its very agency and profile as an international player is predominantly linked to its economic capability. The very idea of the 'European Union', in the first instance, is associated with economic success. The EU is described as 'a union of twenty-eight states attempting to become more competitive through economic integration' (KG-1-P). It is articulated that

> when treated separately, the economies of European member-states are not competitive enough. […] But the *cumulative* effect of a *joint* economy – when twenty-eight member-states provide one *kopeyka*[50] each in order to raise twenty-eight – makes it one of the three economic centers in the world' (KZ-10-S/E).

Similarly, *Egemen Qazaqstan* (2015d), for example, writes that

> [d]espite the different economic levels of member states, *collectively* the EU is the wealthiest economic union in the world, which unites more than five hundred million people. Its *joint* GDP constitutes of more than fifteen trillion dollars. It almost equals that of the USA, which represents the biggest world economy.

The emphasis on 'cumulative', 'joint', or 'collective' in given quotes serves as a reference to the source of the Union's economic power: integration. In other words, it is through integration that relatively weaker European states have been able to transform into a powerful economic actor together. As a result, the EU is often referred as 'a new economic phenomenon' (KG-3-S/E), or 'a powerful gravitational center of the world economy' (KZ-3-S/E).

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[50] *Kopeyka* is 1/100 of the Soviet/Russian Ruble, the analogue of a 'penny'. *Kopeyka* is often used in Russian to signify a very small amount.

The 'proof' of the European Union's economic power is usually articulated in *comparative* and/or *superlative* forms. They are complementary rather than mutually exclusive categories. The first denotes cases when the EU is compared to other international actors to demonstrate that it is, at least, performing equally well in terms of economics. First of all, the EU is commonly compared with the US and China in this fashion (e.g. KZ-16-P; KZ-27-P; KZ-28-CS; KG-1-P; KG-5-J; KG-17-P). The very fact that Brussels' economic potential is compared with the economically wealthiest states in the world suggests that the EU is already perceived as belonging in the same category. In some cases, the EU is referred to not as a mere economic equal to the US and China, but even more powerful than both. In the words of some interviewees, 'the EU has already proven that it is economically powerful and competitive. It has more potential than the USA' (KG-6-P); or 'the EU can beat all its competitors including the USA and China owing to its technological development, progress and human potential' (KZ-13-J).

Another type of 'proof' of the EU's economic might comes in the form of superlative adjectives used to describe it. The Union is frequently referred to as the 'leading', 'biggest', 'richest', 'wealthiest', and 'most developed'actor.[51] These superlative narratives are normally backed by various statistical data related to the EU's economic performance: among others, the absolute size of its GDP, market capacity, investment potential, technological development, and competitive currency, which are designed to illustrate the dominance of the Union's economic capability. For example, a Kazakh journalist described the EU as 'the *most developed* region […with] the population of 500 million people, […producing] 23-25% of the world economy, and […owning] *highly advanced* technology' (KZ-49-J), whereas a Kyrgyz politician similarly referred to it as 'the *biggest* integrational success of the countries that unite a 500-million-people market and control one third of world production' (KG-7-P).

In this respect, one aspect of the Union's 'superlative' economic power is particularly visible in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This is the perceived *highest* level of living

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[51] These superlative adjectives repeatedly appear in interview materials, as well as in media samples.

conditions present in EU member states. It can be assumed that the reason why it is particularly visible is that in contrast to dull figures such as GDP or investment potential, the 'European quality of life' is not an abstract and 'invisible' category projected only in numbers, rather it is something tangible that can be directly observed and compared. This aspect may lead to more affective perceptions of the EU in comparison to other categories. As a result, today's Europe is exceptionally perceived as a region where all citizens fairly benefit from the economic development of their respective countries. It is believed that Europeans live in easy circumstances and enjoy effective social protection. As often articulated,

> [an] admirable aspect of this union, which attracts the whole of humankind, is that people living there are socially protected. […] For example, America spends only 11% of its GDP on social spheres, whereas in Europe this indicator is 26%. As a result, even though the wealth of the average American is higher than that of a European, Europeans are ahead of Americans in terms of quality of life (*Egemen Qazaqstan* 2014).

The European quality of life is perceived as an ideal that all other countries should attempt to achieve, but is, at the same time, distant and unachievable for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan given local realities. The reason for skepticism is not just the limited economic capabilities of these countries in comparison to EU member states, but, more importantly, the absence of fair distribution of national wealth in society, since 'a big economy does not automatically presuppose better life for citizens', as one respondent in Kazakhstan put it (KZ-2-S/E). From this angle, the high living standards present in European states is recognized as the outcome of targeted policy efforts by European governments. The fact that member states as well as potential candidates for membership must fulfill certain requirements with regard to living conditions is seen to demonstrate that the Union works for the benefit of its people. As claimed by some of the interviewees, 'the EU is a project for solving people's social problems. Therefore, we see an equally high level of living conditions in all [European] member states' (KZ-9-J); or 'Europe is a place where people's well-being is a top priority for the state' (KG-6-P).

Finally, it is worth mentioning that there is at least one more element that has come to symbolize the EU's economic might, and that is the Euro. This perceptual pattern has also been reported in several other countries, where the European currency was among the top spontaneous images the Union was immediately associated with (e.g. see the contributors in Holland et al. 2007). Similarly, the Euro frequently appears as an immediate association with the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan too. The Euro is recognized as a demonstration of Brussels' successful economic performance. Likewise, it symbolizes the fact that a European currency has been capable of challenging the long dominance of the American dollar. In this regard, for example, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* (2014b) writes that

> today the Euro is the second biggest reserve currency in terms of utilization. The number of people officially using the Euro mirrors the US population - 330 million. In total, the Euro is used in more than 50 countries with a total population of half a billion people. We can agree that this is truly impressive. According to statistics from 2013, the cash circulation of the Euro constituted more than 950 billion euro, making it the currency with the largest cash circulation in the world (even more than the US dollar).

However, the lingering crisis in the Eurozone seems to have undermined this positivity, which is especially visible in Kazakhstan. As a result, a moderate skepticism towards the Eurozone, and generally towards the EU's economic performance, can be observed today (Section 5.3.1 below).

5.1.2 The EU's Perceived Political Power

As already mentioned выше, the notion of 'political power' is not specifically defined in this section. Rather, it is used in a broader sense to denote the EU's ability to act as a unanimous political actor and react to (geo)political issues, both domestically and internationally. The EU's political capability, or more precisely the lack of it, is also well documented in academic literature. There have been extensive doubts as to the EU's ability to become a (geo)politically influential actor (see Chapter II). The Union is commonly referred as an economic giant, but a political dwarf. This also seems to mirror perceptions

of the Union in third countries. As Grant (2009, 1) neatly puts it, '[t]alk to Russian, Chinese or Indian policymakers about the EU, and they are often withering. They view it as a trade bloc that had pretensions to be a power but has failed to become one because it is divided, slow-moving and badly organized'. The empirical findings of the literature on the EU's external images in several countries and regions further suggest the same conclusion: Brussels is viewed as a (geo)politically weak entity (e.g. Lucarelli 2007b, Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010b, Holland et al. 2007).

Returning to the case of Central Asian states, although the EU is perceived as one of the major international actors, more credit, as noted earlier, is given to its economic rather than political potential. However, this is not to say that the EU is entirely rejected in its agency as a (geo)political actor. Rather, in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, it is recognized as an already established (geo)political actor, albeit less politically, than economically influential. It is often articulated that

> the EU crossed the line of being a mere economic actor long ago. Taking into account its common foreign policy, the EU represents a fully-fledged political actor. Maybe it is not as powerful as the US. Nevertheless, we can see that in terms of being a subject of international relations the EU plays a more important role than its individual member-states (KZ-31-S/A).

Brussels thus possesses the required attribute of political actorness, that is the ability to actively participate in international (geo)political processes. In this regard, the EU's reaction to the recent Russian-Ukrainian conflict is commonly referred to as an example of Brussels (geo)political capability.[52] This implies that what is questioned is not the very agency of the EU as a (geo)political actor, but rather the extent to which it is able to compete with other global players.

In terms of (geo)political capability, it is not just the US and China that the EU is commonly compared to, but comparisons with Russia are equally frequent as well. If in

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[52] However, there are also those who see the Russian-Ukrainian conflict as revealing shortcomings of the EU as a (geo)political actor.

economic terms, as noted earlier, the EU is perceived as the equal of these actors, then from a (geo)political aspect the Union is viewed as an inferior to the US, China, and Russia. As some respondents put it, 'the EU is a political actor. But, to be honest, I do not perceive it as capable of competing with the US, Russia or China' (KZ-28-CS); or 'Brussels cannot politically compete with Washington, Beijing or Moscow in its own right. It possesses more economic influence than political' (KG-3-S/E). Three perceived reasons why the EU remains (geo)politically inferior can be extrapolated from the gathered data: *institutional complexity*; *lack of unity*; and *over-dependence on the US*.

Firstly, it is commonly agreed that the EU's ability to compete equally with other global actors is undermined by the *complexity of its institutional structure*. The EU is viewed as a highly bureaucratic actor with a multi-level decision-making process. This factor puts it in a disadvantageous position when compared to state-like actors, as decision-making within the EU requires more time and effort. This hampers Brussels' ability to be an impulsive actor capable of responding to its internal and external environment immediately. It is perceived as 'a big giant that moves too slowly' (KG-21-CS). Another interviewed scholar/expert similarly claimed that 'while the EU is still discussing the issue, other actors will have already reacted to it' (KZ-46-S/E). At the same time, it is notably acknowledged that this is a natural and unavoidable condition for the EU and any other entity of its kind, since the very idea of political integration on the basis of equality presupposes complexity of decision-making. As put by one of the respondents,

> it is true that they [Europeans] discuss longer, they debate longer, and only then make slow decisions. But this is provoked by the very principles of the EU, because of its decision-making process demands endorsement at all levels. It is a part of their democracy (KZ-3-S/E).

Secondly, it is believed that such institutional complexity is only exacerbated further by the *lack of internal consensus* within the EU. When it comes to (geo)political matters, the EU is not recognized as a monolithic and unanimous actor, but rather a complex cohort of myriad and sometimes contradictory voices. Brussels' political ability is believed to depend

on whether or not, and how fast, these different voices come together. This implies that 'when all member-states have a common position on the issue, the EU becomes a very capable political actor. But with the advent of sensitive and conflicting issues, the common voice is diminished by the voices of separate member states' (KG-5-J). In this context, several member states are particularly singled out as either strengthening or undermining European unity. For example, Germany and France are often referred as driving forces behind the European project. They are the two central leaders cementing the Union and its unity as a single actor. Without their efforts 'the EU would not be as consolidated as it is today' (KG-14-CS); or 'the EU is more unanimous when Germany pushes certain decisions' (KZ-39-J). By contrast, other member states such as the UK or Greece are mentioned as inhibitory parts that weaken European unity. The UK is often referred to as having a separate agenda from the Union: 'despite being a member of the EU, England implements an independent policy'[53] (KZ-46-S/E); or 'after recent declarations of British leaders I do not think that the EU is a unified single actor anymore'[54] (KG-6-P). Similarly, Greece is also often mentioned as challenging the EU's (economic)/political unity and future, mainly in the context of the financial and economic problems it has been suffering from (see Section 5.3.1).

Finally, the EU's (geo)political *over-dependence on the US* is also often mentioned as another important factor undermining its political capability. Very often European foreign policy is seen as, if not a direct continuation of American politics, then at least as being highly influenced by the US. Some respondents in both countries were quick to state that 'European foreign policy is more successful when it coincides with rather than contradicts American aims' (KZ-30-S/E); or 'they [Europeans] should develop their own policy instead of always looking back to the US' (KG-26-J). Others went as far as claiming that 'the EU has failed to demonstrate it has a separate foreign policy from that of the US' (KZ-10-S/E); or 'I am always surprised how the US alone is able to rule twenty-eight European countries. European countries follow the US on everything it says' (KG-26-J). Moreover, the Union is

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[53] 'England' is frequently used as an equivalent to 'UK' by interviewees.
[54] Here the reference is made to internal political debates in the UK prior to the United Kingdom European Union membership referendum in 2016.

perceived as being involved in various conflicts 'owing to American tips' (KG-4-P). In other words, it is the US that makes the EU support the initially American aggressive foreign policy in many parts of the world. The cases of the Arab Spring and the Russian-Ukrainian crisis are normally mentioned as examples of when the EU had no choice but to follow the US into destabilizing these regions. For instance, in *Vecherniy Bishkek* (2014) of Kyrgyzstan we read that

> Europe is not interested in the destabilization [of Ukraine], because if a civil war starts, its consequences will overflow into Europe too. […] The last reactions of EU leaders, especially Germany, demonstrate that they are ready to accept the Russian point. […] Obviously, the negative development of the issue is to a certain extent beneficial for the US. This critical situation is also beneficial for the American economy and the Federal Reserve System in order to strengthen the position of the American dollar.

Paradoxically, this perceived over-dependence on the US seems to have a positive aspect for the EU too. The image of the EU as a mere American follower implies that any perceived aggressiveness and negativity related to its (geo)political behavior is also mainly attributed to the US. In other words, it is the US that pushes the EU to commit 'destructive' actions, as the EU would not behave in such a 'damaging' way on its own. As put by one respondent, 'obviously, the EU is not doing this [sanctions against Russia in the context of the Ukrainian crisis] by itself. It is the US that dictates this to Europe' (KG-28-J). Nevertheless, the over-dependence on the US is perceived as a negative moment for the EU, since this undermines the very idea that the EU can be an independent (geo)political actor of its own. Therefore, Brussels is expected to develop a more independent foreign policy in order to avoid association with American aggressiveness and failure, and to become a truly independent international player.

5.1.3 The EU's Perceived Soft Power

The final dimension of the EU's capability to be examined is its perceived soft power in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Soft power is broadly defined in line with Joseph Nye's

definition as the power of attraction (Nye 2004). The EU's attractiveness in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is undisputable. The very idea of the EU, or Europe in general, seems greatly appealing[55]. From the perspective of soft power, the EU is not compared to any other actors, but is rather referred to as the most attractive one. In the words of the respondents, 'the EU is a leading actor in terms of soft power' (KZ-35-S/E); or 'nobody doubts that the EU is the most admirable actor' (KG-2-P). Similar to previous cases, internal components of what constitute the EU's soft power are inductively inferred from collected data. Three perceived sources of the Union's soft power can be identified. They overlap with what Joseph Nye mentioned to be the three pillars of soft power: *culture*, *political values*, and *soft foreign policy* (Nye 2004, 11).

To start with, *culture* is a highly visible and attractive aspect of the EU's soft power. The EU, or Europe in general, is frequently referred to as the core civilization driving world history, and consequently, its culture is seen to have made a positive contribution to global, cultural enrichment. European culture is described as the richest and most attractive both vertically and horizontally. Vertically, it is perceived to have historically deep roots and originate from ancient times; horizontally, it embraces diverse cultural aspects like literature, architecture, music, and painting. 'The very word "European Union" is associated with a certain aristocratism. It is a cultural center for me', as put by one of the respondents in Kazakhstan (KZ-46-S/C). In the words of another respondent, 'we used to receive culture and some traditions from Europe; we grew up on European authors. I have only positive attitudes towards Europe' (KG-28-J). However, it should be noted that culture is mostly associated with a wider Europe rather than with the European Union directly (see Footnote 55).[56]

Another attractive aspect of Brussels' perceived soft power is its *political values* which are broadly understood as democracy and human rights. However, there is a visible

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[55] The notions of 'European Union' and 'Europe' are frequently used interchangeably in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Chapter VII will discuss in detail how 'Europe' contributes to the image of the 'European Union'.
[56] The recent study carried out in ten Strategic Partner countries of the EU similarly concludes that culture 'is a very vibrant and appreciated topic among the general public, [… but] culture is much more associated with Europe and/or individual EU Member States than the EU as a whole' (Barcevicius et al. 2015: 57-58).

polarization in both Kazakh and Kyrgyz societies in terms of whether or not these values are necessarily a positive aspect to be admired. Chapter VI will discuss this perceptual division in more detail and how the notion of 'European values' is generally perceived and interpreted. Here I briefly mention that, despite this division, the dominant view is that the adherence to values of democracy and human rights is another important feature that makes European countries attractive. How the EU member-states follow democratic principles in their internal political life, how human rights are defended, and how European citizens enjoy equality is recognized as an appealing achievement of European countries. 'In fact, the first association that I have of the EU is with democratic institutions, human rights, and a universal system of values' (KZ-16-P); or 'we do not have to necessarily talk about the EU in economic terms. The EU is more than an economy. First of all, [it is] about human rights and democratic political systems' (KG-13-S/E), as articulated by some interviewees. From this viewpoint, 'European' values are expected to be *adopted* in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan too.

Finally, *foreign policy* conducted by the EU also positively contributes to its soft power and overall attractiveness. In this context, 'soft' is frequently referred to as the way the EU behaves in the international arena. The Union is perceived as a less assertive and aggressive international player that 'tries to avoid prescribing its vision to others as, for example, Russia does' (KZ-13-J). It is often articulated that 'in the context of other global players, the EU can be conceived as the softest actor [which] is never involved in conflicts' (KG-3-S/E). This makes it a more trusted player, and one with benign intentions in the eyes of perceivers (this aspect is also elaborated in Chapter VI). On the other hand, this softness of foreign policy is also seen as a source of the EU's inability to compete equally with other great powers. That is to say, the EU's attractiveness may also become its weakness, or *vice versa.* As neatly put by a Kyrgyz respondent, 'to a certain degree it is good that the EU is a soft actor. On the other hand, this does not allow one to view it as something strong, a counterbalance to others, or a leading great entity' (KG-9-S/E). Nevertheless, the perceived softness of EU foreign policy remains an aspect that earns it positive external attitudes.

5.1.4 Summary

The examination of the EU's perceived capability as a global actor has demonstrated that there is no denial in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that the EU is already an established global player, but the extent to which it is influential varies across issue areas. From an economic perspective, the common idea in literature that the EU is an '*economic giant*' is confirmed by inferred perceptions. In both countries, Brussels is recognized as one of the leading economic powers in the world, capable of being an equal competitor with the US and China.

As for political power, the EU has often been referred to as a 'political dwarf'. However, this image of 'dwarf' does not seem to coincide with how the EU is perceived in Central Asian states. Here I follow Roy Ginsberg (2001, 9), who claims that '[a] political dwarf would have no international influence. […] The EU instead is an economic superpower and a partially developed political actor: more than dwarf and less than a superpower'. That is to say, the EU is an *intermediate political actor*. This claim seems to more accurately capture the perceptions of the Union's political power in Central Asian countries. It has already been discussed earlier that the EU is already recognized as an established (geo)political actor in its own right. But what makes it 'intermediate' is that it is still regarded as inferior to the US, Russia, and China due to its institutional complexity, internal heterogeneity, and over-dependence on the US.

Finally, in terms of soft power, the EU is, once again, recognized as an *influential actor* given its highly attractive economic model, rich culture, admired values, and gentle foreign policy. The perceived attributes of the EU's economic, political, and soft power are summarized in **Figure 5-1**.[57]

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[57] It needs to be acknowledged that notions such as 'dwarf', 'giant', or 'intermediate actor' have no reliable and 'measurable' characteristics against which one or another actor could be compared. Rather, they are subject to interpretations. Therefore, the classifications of the EU made above also need to be seen as my interpretations.

Economic Giant
- As powerful as the US and China
- Successful Integration
- GDP, Trade, Investment, Technology etc.
- High Living Conditions
- Euro

The EU
as a
Global Actor

Influential Soft Power
- Attractive Culture
– Admired Values
– Soft Foreign Policy

Intermediate (Geo)Political Power
- Already established, but inferior to the US,
  China, or Russia
- Institutional Complexity
- Lack of Internal Consensus
- Overdependence on the US

Figure 5-1: Attributes of the EU's perceived power/capability as a global actor

5.2 The EU's Perceived Power as a Regional Actor in Central Asia

Having scrutinized how the EU's power/capability as a *global actor* is perceived, this section goes on to examine the Union's perceived power as a *regional actor in Central Asia*. In the global context, the EU is said to be recognized as an already established global player, albeit with some variance of its power across issue areas. This perception presupposes the EU's ability to exert some influence on global processes and (partly) compete with other great powers such as the US, China, and Russia. When it comes to the regional context, however, the EU does not seem to enjoy the image of an influential actor capable of participating in and shaping processes in Central Asia. In other words, its global power is simply not perceived to extend to Central Asia. The first sub-section below briefly discusses the extent to which the EU is viewed as a powerful and capable actor in the

region. In doing so, it focuses, again, on the economic, (geo)political, and soft power aspects of the EU's regional capability. The second sub-section will elaborate on perceived reasons preventing Brussels from being a powerful actor in Central Asia. Finally, the findings will be summarized in the last sub-section.

5.2.1 'Partly Capable' in Kazakhstan and 'Incapable' in Kyrgyzstan?

In contrast to the EU's perceived power as a global actor, existing literature hardly examines how the European Union is viewed with regard to its region- or country-specific capabilities. Central Asia is no exception. In general, Chapter II mentioned that despite the geographically diverse nature of literature on the EU's external images, Central Asia is one of the few regions that has remained beyond scholarly interest. In this regard, one exception is a brief EUCAM Working Paper authored by Sebastien Peyrouse and his colleagues. They argue that the EU is perceived as 'barely visible in Central Asia; that it is unknown to the population; that it has complex bureaucratic procedures; and that it has ambitions greater than its actual leverage' (Peyrouse 2014, 12). In other words, their findings indicate that the EU is rather viewed as an actor with limited power and influence in Central Asia.

The data collected for this research also supports similar conclusions. Its capability as a regional actor in Central Asia is predominantly doubted and criticized. However, a closer look reveals that a perceptual difference between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan exists in terms of how powerful/powerless they perceive the EU to be. If in Kyrgyzstan the Union's perceived regional influence can be summarized as that of an 'incapable' actor, in Kazakhstan it is still possible to refer to Brussels as a 'partially capable' regional actor. This difference is mainly due to the fact that the EU's regional influence tends to be assessed from these countries' own perspectives. As the EU is more visible and active in Kazakhstan, Kazakhstan accepts it as a 'partly capable' actor; by contrast, the EU is hardly

visible and has modest relations with Kyrgyzstan, and, therefore it is viewed as an 'incapable' regional player.[58]

This difference can be observed from perceptions of the EU's economic influence in the region. In Kazakhstan, the EU represents its biggest trade and investment partner. This fact repeatedly appears in data samples, such as 'the EU remains the main economic and investment partner of Kazakhstan' (*Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* 2013b). Chapter VI will discuss this aspect in greater detail by arguing that the EU, first and foremost, is viewed as representing an economic opportunity for Kazakhstan. What I would like to briefly emphasize here is that, as a result of its significant economic presence, the EU is recognized as an influential regional actor in Kazakhstan in terms of economic influence. This contrasts with data from Kyrgyzstan, where the Union is not seen as an economically active and powerful regional actor due to underdeveloped EU-Kyrgyzstan economic relations: 'I don't feel the economic presence of the EU in Kyrgyzstan. I can't accept it as an economically powerful actor here' (KG-22-P). Again, this aspect will be further developed in Chapter VI.

As for the perceived (geo)political power of the EU as a regional actor, it is also possible to observe a slight difference between Kazakh and Kyrgyz perceptions in terms of how powerful/powerless the EU is. However, what unites them is that the EU is equally referred to as a 'weak' regional (geo)political actor in both countries. As put by some respondents,

> when we are invited to talks about the European Union, I personally do not spend much time preparing for the event. You do not have to necessarily be an expert or conduct research to say something about the EU's policy [in Central Asia], because the conclusion *a priori* is the same – the EU is a weak player (KZ-10-S/E);

or 'the EU is an objectively weak actor. It has no influence to shape the main geopolitical processes in the region' (KG-4-P). At the same time, a closer look at data collected in the two countries reveals that the meaning of 'weak' varies between the two cases. A 'weak actor' in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan appears to be a relative category in the sense that

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[58] The role of bilateral relations in shaping perceptions of the European Union is discussed in Chapter VII.

it acquires meaning only by comparison with other regional actors. It is in the context of other actors that the Union is referred to as a 'weak' (geo)political actor. In Kazakhstan, the EU is commonly listed after Russia, China, and the US as the fourth most influential geopolitical actor. So, it is perceived as 'weak' in comparison to the 'big three'.

> No matter how economically powerful the EU is, it is still too far and does not share borders with Central Asia. […] Russia, China, even distant America have more influence in Central Asia than the EU. The EU can work here only indirectly. It is impossible to perceive the EU as a powerful actor in the region (KZ-8-J).

As for Kyrgyzstan, the notion of 'weak' does not only imply that the EU is inferior to the 'big three' in terms of its political influence, but countries such as Turkey, and, to an extent, Kazakhstan also frequently appear in the data to be more influential than the European Union. As a few Kyrgyz respondents stated, 'the EU looks weaker than Russia and the US. I would put it after Russia, China, the US, and Turkey' (KG-6-P); or

> for Central Asia, and for Kyrgyzstan in particular, the EU stopped being even on the list of the top five external actors. We could say that the EU was the fourth powerful political actor at some point in the past. But today Turkey, or even Kazakhstan is more important to us than the EU. […] The EU became an invisible and marginal actor occupying a secondary role (KG-3-S/E).

Again, this suggests that even if the EU is equally referred to as a 'weak' regional (geo)political actor in both countries, the degree of perceived weakness varies between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Finally, it is difficult to separately develop a discussion on perceptions of Brussels' soft power as a regional actor. This is because there is no obvious boundary between the global and regional domains when it comes to soft power. Without any region- or country-specific conditions, the EU is still recognized as an actor admired culturally, attractive in terms of political values, and soft in foreign policy conduct (see Section 5.1.3 above). At the same time, the EU's perceived soft power does not seem to visibly influence the fact that the EU

is generally viewed as a 'partly capable' or 'incapable' regional actor in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, respectively.

5.2.2 Perceived Reasons of the EU's Weakness in Central Asia

This sub-section focuses on perceived reasons why the EU's overall power and influence as a regional actor in Central Asia remains limited. Despite the varying extent of perceptions of the Union's power as a regional actor, the perceived reasons in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan coincide to a large extent. Overall, at least six perceived explanations for why the EU has limited influence in Central Asia can be identified. These categories repeatedly re-appear in the data collected in both countries.

Lack of Well-Defined Agenda and Strategic Vision

One of the main reasons why the EU has limited influence in Central Asia is seen to be the fact that the Union itself lacks a clear agenda and strategic vision of its role in the region. The majority of interviewed elites in both countries, even those directly involved in EU-related professional activities, expressed doubts as to whether they fully understand what the EU wants to achieve in Central Asia, and whether it has a clear strategy towards its objectives. 'I personally find it difficult to comment on the EU's policy here. Ask me about the US or Russia, and I will tell you. Their policies are well formulated. But the EU?!' (KG-11-S/E). From this aspect, the EU is regularly juxtaposed, again, with Russia, China, and even the US, who are perceived to have well-articulated interests in Central Asia, and complex strategic visions as to how to achieve them. By contrast, the EU's policy is described as 'situational, responsive and non-conceptual' (KZ-25-P). As put by another respondent, 'official visits [from the EU] regularly occur, certain documents are regularly signed, but there is no complex policy behind them' (KZ-37-P).

Even the adoption of the Strategy in 2007 seems to have brought little change in this regard. Although the EU itself is keen to regularly emphasize the role of the Strategy as a successful initiative that has increased the EU's profile, there is little perceived enthusiasm

in both countries toward the Strategy and its implementation. Surprisingly, the two most common answers to the question about the Strategy were 'I've never heard about it' or 'I heard about it, but I do not remember what it was about'. What needs to be emphasized here is that the majority of interviewed elites were those who had some direct or indirect relations to EU-related initiatives. This implies that even the most informed elites seem to have little knowledge of the Strategy. Moreover, even the minority who possess some knowledge of the Strategy express predominantly skeptical views. Although the adoption of this kind of document is recognized as a positive development, how it is written and, more importantly, how it is implemented raise more questions than answers in both countries. 'Looking at the Strategy, I did not understand what their intended aims were' (KG-12-S/E), claimed a Kyrgyz respondent. The Strategy is generally perceived as 'a stock declaration of certain intentions that do not necessarily have to be followed and practiced' (KZ-8-J), and as a result, 'it was pretty clear from the very beginning that we should not expect obvious changes [from the Strategy]' (KG-3-S/E).

Shortage of Available Resources

The lack of a clear agenda, as viewed in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, is coupled with the shortage of economic and political leverage that the EU has in the region. The Union is perceived as lacking the instruments and means to back up its declared priorities and push certain policies. It is often claimed in the region that 'the European Union's desires do not coincide with its resources' (KZ-6-S/E; also KZ-10-S/E; KZ-27-P; KG-8-S/E; KG-17-P; KG-31-S/E). What the EU as a unified actor mainly does in Central Asia is perceived to be small-scale projects, technical assistance, training etc., which are too specific and narrowly targeted and, therefore, doomed to be inconspicuous. Even if the Union successfully implements such projects, their 'results cannot be directly observed or physically touched' (KG-25-J).

> A large share of European financial allocations to Kyrgyzstan is spent on seminars and training. Of course, experience exchange plays some kind of positive role. But what we need is infrastructure. I was in Bangkok. I saw a bridge there very similar

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to what I had previously seen here, in Brussels. When I got closer I noticed a plate saying the bridge had been built by the European Union. This is what visibility is, this is a real result that you can see and touch. Unfortunately, the EU does not invest in this kind of infrastructure in Kyrgyzstan (KG-35-P).

From this aspect, the EU is unfavorably compared to China, which invests in grandiose and large-scale infrastructure projects. Even in Kazakhstan, where the EU is the biggest trade and investment partner, China's activities seem to be more visible. 'The EU has been systematically providing [to Kazakhstan] financial support. But we can't compare that to what China has been doing here. In the case of China, we are talking about billions [of dollars]' (KZ-10-S/E), as claimed by a Kazakh interviewee. Arguably, this juxtaposition can be explained by taking into account the fact that the EU's trade and investment relations are not always associated with the EU as a unanimous actor, but rather with its member states (see the following sub-section). What is directly associated with the Union is, again, various grants and technical assistance projects, which have low visibility.

Competition Between Member States

The competition between EU member states is repeatedly referred to as yet another factor undermining the EU's position as a regional actor in Central Asia.[59] The EU's policy in Central Asia is sometimes viewed through the prism of its member states, rather than through the EU as a single actor. As a result, some EU member states become more visible than the Union itself. This is especially obvious in Kyrgyzstan. This is because the EU as an institution is more active and visible in Kazakhstan. The cooperation at the EU-Kazakhstan level is comparatively well developed, and as a result there is relatively more recognition of the EU as a single actor. Nevertheless, even in Kazakhstan one may sometimes hear that European countries simply pursue their own national interests, but not a common European vision:

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[59] Section 5.1.2 above has already discussed that the lack of internal unity is perceived to be one of the factors preventing the EU from globally competing with the US, Russia, or China in terms of its (geo)political capabilities.

Even if we talk about common European policy, member-states have their own national interests. If a company is German, it works for Germany; similarly, a French company works for France. Even if they declaratively have one common European idea, concrete contracts are signed with individual national states (KZ-37-P).

This is even more evident in Kyrgyzstan. The relationship at EU-Kyrgyzstan level is considerably less intense as opposed to Kazakhstan. Consequently, there is less space for the EU to be a visible actor in Kyrgyzstan. Rather, the EU's policy is largely associated with the activities of its member states, especially those of Germany and *Deutsche Gesellschaft für Internationale Zusammenarbeit* (GIZ). As put by one respondent, 'despite the EU's self-adopted position as a unified actor, I cannot see that. What I see are individual states. For example, Germany acting as the *smotryashchiy* [watchdog] of the other European countries' (KG-12-S/E). This suggests that in Central Asia the EU competes with its own member states for visibility, and quite often loses the competition.

Poor Public Communication

The EU's poor communication policy is perceived as further limiting its already scarce visibility. The Union is frequently criticized for having underdeveloped public relations or public diplomacy activities in both countries. Brussels is said not to provide sufficient information support for its policies and projects, and as a result, what it does in the region is, for the most part, not noticed by target groups, let alone the public at large. 'I find information [about the EU] only if I purposefully search for it from special web-sites' claimed a Kyrgyz expert (KG-9-S/E), which simply implies the EU hardly ever appears in the public domain for people to see and follow the main directions of its policy. As another interviewee posited, 'the EU's oversight is in its lackluster informational strategy. In informational space we would rather discuss Russia or China. Consequently, neither my colleagues nor I accept the EU as one of our main partners despite the fact that it is one of them' (KZ-46-S/E). Moreover, it is further articulated that even the EU's success stories usually remain under-communicated and thus unnoticed. 'Some states are able to present

even their small projects as great success stories, whereas it is exactly the opposite with the EU. Despite the EU doing much, it is unable to demonstrate that', a Kazakh expert opined (KZ-6-S/E). This implies that the EU's problem is not just in its policy initiatives as such, but also in the way they are presented and promoted.

Lack of Will and Interest

Another perceived reason for the EU's relative passivity in Central Asia is the lack of Brussels' will and interest to be active in the region. It is commonly acknowledged in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that the region does not belong to the EU's sphere of immediate interests; rather, it is a remote region for the Union. As a result, the EU is perceived as unwilling to invest much resources and attention to such a distant region. 'We [Central Asians] cannot criticize the EU because of our peripheral importance to them. In order to criticize we should first explain why they need us. But we act on the premise that they need us by default. That is an unacceptable position' argues a Kazakh interviewee (KZ-36-S/E). Similarly, a Kyrgyz respondent further elaborated: 'we should probably not criticize the EU so much as we realize that we are not a priority region for them. […] The EU has neither the time, nor resources, nor interest to fully devote itself to Central Asia' (KG-32-S/E). In other words, the EU is viewed as remaining comparatively weaker in Central Asia not just because of its inability to develop a more active policy, but also because of its unwillingness to do so.

Difficult Regional Context

Finally, it is equally acknowledged in both countries that the relative weakness of the EU is not just the Union's fault, but also a result of the difficult political context in Central Asia. As articulated, what the Union is trying to achieve in the region demands more cooperation from local governments. In this regard, Central Asia is not the best possible environment for the EU's declared intentions and policies. Local governments are sometimes recognized as limiting and making the EU's efforts more difficult in the region because of their

reluctance and/or *inability* to cooperate. *Reluctance* mostly refers to Brussels' democratic activities, when local governments are perceived to artificially build various administrative barriers against such initiatives. As for *inability*, it is acknowledged that the inefficiency of local governments to cope with provided support, their poor policy performance, and high levels of corruption raise serious barriers to European policy effectiveness. 'The movement is two-way. For now, one side [Central Asia] is not functioning properly' (KG-20-P); or 'everything hinges on ourselves rather than the Europeans' (KZ-48-J), as briefly suggested by some respondents. In this context, it is also often argued that instead of erecting additional barriers against the EU, it is the Central Asians who should move towards closer ties with the EU and be more interested in cooperation: 'we must invite them [Europeans], not the other way around. […] They lose nothing if they are not present in Central Asia, but we do lose out significantly' (KZ-37-P).

5.2.3 Summary

This section scrutinized the EU's perceived power/capability as a regional actor in Central Asia. In this regard, two main points can be summarized.

Firstly, the EU's power as a great regional actor is doubted equally in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, the extent of how powerful/powerless the EU seems to vary between the two countries. In Kazakhstan, the EU is still recognized as a 'partly capable' actor due to the EU's substantial economic influence in the country; and is viewed as (geo)politically inferior only to the 'big three' countries. As for Kyrgyzstan, the EU is viewed as an 'incapable' regional actor, as it is not perceived to be an active player either economically or (geo)politically. Nor is it often listed among the top active actors able to shape regional processes (see **Figure 5-2** below).

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Figure 5-2: Attributes of the EU's perceived power/capability as a regional actor in Central Asia

Kazakhstan

Influential economic power
- Biggest trading and investment partner

Partly Capable

Weak (Geo)political actor
- Inferior to Russia, China, and the US

Influential Soft Power
- Culture
- Political values
- Foreign policy

Kyrgyzstan

Weak economic actor

Incapable

Weak (Geo)political actor
- Inferior not only to Russia, China, and the US, but also to Turkey and Kazakhstan

Influential Soft Power
- Culture
- Political values
- Foreign policy

Secondly, the data in both countries further allowed the main perceived reasons of its regional weakness to be identified. The results are illustrated in **Figure 5-3** below. Overall, given its perceived weakness in Central Asia, a more active EU is desired in the region, as will be elaborated in Chapter VI.

Lack of Well-Defined Agenda

Shortage of Resources

Competition between Member-States

Perceived Reasons of the EU's Weakness as a Regional Actor

Poor Communication

Lack of Will and Interest

Difficult Regional Context
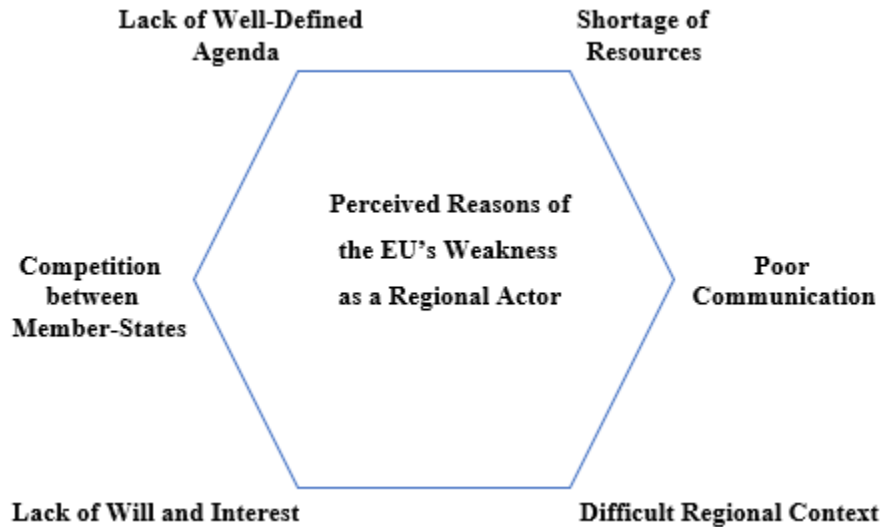
Figure 5-3: Perceived Reasons of the EU's Weakness as a Regional Actor in Central Asia

5.3 'Decaying Europe' Thesis: Rising Image Ambiguity?

Chapter III mentioned that images are highly stable concepts, but they are not totally static. It is commonly agreed in Image Studies that although existing images work as screens that filter and ignore the majority of new incoming stimuli, images may still change in the process of continual interaction with new information. Especially 'spectacular events' as dubbed by Deutsch and Merritt (1965), such as wars and revolutions, are more likely to bring an alteration to existing images (see also Jervis 1976, Boulding 1956). In the literature on the EU's external perceptions, the Eurozone debt crisis, and later, the refugee/migration crisis have normally been treated as 'spectacular events' that have negatively changed perceptions of the EU in third countries (see Chapter II for the review).

The same tendency can also be observed in the cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The previous sections revealed that despite being viewed as a regional actor with limited influence in particular in Central Asia, the European Union is still recognized as an economic giant, influential soft power, and intermediate (geo)political actor in the global domain. However, this perception of a powerful global player seems to have begun to change negatively mostly due to the aforementioned economic troubles and migration/refugee crisis.[60] A narrative has appeared that constructs the image of a 'decaying Europe', one that is declining economically, politically, demographically, culturally, and morally[61]. To clarify, this is not to say that this narrative implies that the Union is already a *weak* global actor, but one *in decline*. What also needs to be emphasized is that this narrative brings us to another substantial difference between perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: the overall salience of this narrative is considerably higher in Kazakhstan than in Kyrgyzstan. Arguably, the main reason for this relates to the extent of attention the EU attracts in each country. This point will be elaborated in Chapter

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[60] Arguably, Brexit in 2016 has also contributed to negative perceptions of the EU's power. However, the collected data do not allow an equally detailed discussion to be developed on how Brexit has impacted perceptions of the EU, as all elite interviews in Kazakhstan and the majority of interviews in Kyrgyzstan had been conducted before Brexit happened in June 2016.

[61] These categories are inductively inferred from the collected data. 'Economic', 'political', 'demographic', and 'cultural' aspects of perceived decline are discussed below in this chapter. But the 'moral' aspect will be discussed in detail in Chapter VI, as that better fits the structure of Chapter VI.

VII by arguing that Kazakhstan has highly developed relations with the EU. Therefore, the Union's general visibility is greater in Kazakhstan, including the visibility of its negative aspects. By contrast, Kyrgyzstan's cooperation with the EU remains modest, thus, EU-related issues are hardly present in its internal discourse. This also created a disproportion in terms of how much data about the EU were collected in the two cases (see Chapter III). A significant part of the discussions in this section will thus only refer to Kazakhstan.

The two sub-sections below aim to examine the cases of the economic troubles and the refugee/migration crisis in the EU respectively, and to identify how they have impacted perceptions of the EU's power/capability in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The findings will be summarized in the final sub-section.

5.3.1 The European Economic Crisis

The narrative of the economic crisis in the EU has become one of the most powerful elements that contributes to current perceptions of the European Union. This has already made visibly negative impact on how the Union's capability is assessed in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Although articulated less explicitly in Kyrgyzstan, one can still find some claims, both in elite interviews and media samples, that today's Europe is suffering from severe economic issues. For example, *Erkin Too* (2012b) writes that

> the current situation of Europeans greatly resembles living conditions in Kyrgyzstan. […] This resemblance, I would answer, is that the Europeans have also started economizing. Once developed European countries […] recall former prosperity with nostalgia. People who used to have their breakfast, lunch and dinner exclusively in the best cafes and restaurants, who used to buy new cars every three years, who used to spend their time travelling - today have to count every single euro and economize on everything.

Similar narratives were commonly found in elite interviews too. Ednan Karabayev, a former minister of foreign affairs, for instance, writes that 'the fact that Europe is unable to solve the financial problems of tiny Greece, whose GDP constitutes only 1.5% [of total

European GDP], does not reflect the EU's best side' (*Vecherniy Bishkek* 2015a); or as put by another respondent, 'today the EU is unsuccessfully trying to extinguish the fire of economic crisis. The question is whether they will be able to fully solve the problem in the near future' (KG-32-S/E; also KG-4-P; KG-17-P; KG-24-CS, among others). What these narratives demonstrate is the perception that Europe's economic wellbeing is in steady decline, and more importantly, that the EU has found itself unready for such a challenge. A moderate skepticism in the EU's future can be observed as a result.

In Kazakhstan, the narrative of the EU's economic decline is even more visible and powerful than in Kyrgyzstan. This can be observed from the frequency of references to the economic crisis by interviewed elites as well as the media. The interviewed Kazakh elites were more likely to note that the European countries were 'being shattered by the economic crisis' (KZ-10-S/E). As figuratively put by another respondent,

> the EU is a union for economic development and prosperity. But today European countries are suffering from a severe economic crisis. I associate them with old men; old men who have already used all resources, who are tired, and who lack the power to perform as well as they used to in the past (KZ-12-P).

As for the Kazakh media, issues related to the economic crisis in the Eurozone have attracted a significant amount of media attention, becoming the hottest topic on European matters in Kazakhstan during the timeframe of this study (2011-2016). For example, in 2012-2013 *Egemen Qazaqstan* had a special rubric called 'The World and Crisis', where lengthy articles reviewed the economic condition of the EU and its member states on an almost weekly basis.[62] We observe a similar splash of attention on the EU during the same period in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* as well as in *Express-K*. In this context, narratives on regular demonstrations, mass unemployment, worsening social services, and growing poverty in Europe have become inseparable elements of the media discourse on the EU's current economic power.[63] What these narratives do is to construct a pessimistic image

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[62] 2012 and the first half of 2013 was one of the peaks of the crisis in the Eurozone.
[63] These are the categories that constantly re-appear in media samples in Kazakhstan.

regarding the present and future of the EU's economic well-being. It is often articulated that an economically prosperous Europe is a matter of the past:

> The sweet life in France is over. Life in Madrid is also far from its previous ideal. The crisis has fundamentally changed living conditions in the whole of Europe. Products, services, labour and living standards are becoming worse and worse. The good old times will never return again (*Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* 2015e).

In Kazakhstan, the economic crisis is mostly perceived via the lens of events unfolding in Greece.[64] It is hence sometimes referred to as a 'Greek crisis' as well. Interestingly, there are two separate and competing lines explaining the causes of economic troubles in Greece/the EU. On the one hand, some argue that Greece itself is to be blamed for the economic slowdown because of its faulty economic and financial policy. From this angle, Greece is perceived as too dependent on external financial flows, while its economy is unable to independently provide basic needs to its people. The Greeks as a nation are described as 'lazy' by comparison to other Europeans. Consequently, Greece's financial demands on the EU are recognized as illegitimate. For example, *Egemen Qazaqstan* (2012) writes that

> the Greeks do not want to follow the requirements [of the EU] despite financial support from the Eurozone. Then who is going to pay for their debts if the Greeks have until recently been living an unconcerned life? Should other states pay for Greece's mistakes in the end? […] It can be called a Greek *chantage*.

In this context, the role of other European member-states is recognized as positive, especially that of Germany as a savior of the European Union. Germany's performance as a donor, financially helping Greece and pushing others to do the same, is greatly appreciated. Although the debate surrounding the Eurozone crisis and the Greek problem considerably undermines the overall positivity of Brussels, the fact that member states have a sense of

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[64] Unfortunately, the data gathered in Kyrgyzstan does not allow this to be confirmed or denied in the case of Kyrgyzstan. Although a very few references to Greece were found in the data, they seemed to be insufficient to make a generalization to the same degree as in Kazakhstan.

collective responsibility for other members and assist each other in the times of crisis is seen as a highly positive momentum.

On the other hand, not Greece, but the unfair economic architecture of the European Union is blamed as the main cause of economic difficulties in Athens:

> According to experts, the process of European integration was based on the voluntary colonization of small states by more developed countries. Access to the Eurozone has limited its [Greece's] industrial development. […] The Greek economy had been based on the export of oils, wines, tobacco and tourism. As a result of its membership in the Eurozone, today only one sector has survived out of four – tourism. […] In such a case, Eurozone members must compensate to the Greek economy as they led Greece to its current troubles. They colonized the Greek economy and should therefore share its difficulties' (*Egemen Qazaqstan* 2013).

In this context, the EU is framed as a union of economic inequality and compulsion, where weaker states have to follow the rules imposed by economically stronger members.

Overall, whatever the perceived cause of economic decline is, there is a consensus of opinion in Kazakhstan (and less visibly in Kyrgyzstan) regarding the significant consequences the crisis has brought to the once-developed European countries. In addition to obvious social-economic consequences, it is further believed that the negative effects may extend beyond the purely economic sphere, and endanger the very existence of the EU as such:

> The economic basis of the EU, which until recently seemed strong and monolithic, has been revealed to be a house of cards that could crash at any time. The fall of any single 'card' will lead to the crash of the whole European 'house' (*Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* 2012b).

5.3.2 The Refugee/Migration Crisis

Another 'spectacular event' that has considerably impacted perceptions of the EU's capability and contributed to the 'decaying Europe' narrative is the refugee/migration crisis, which reached its peak in the second half of 2015. Similar to the previous case, this aspect is more salient in Kazakhstan than Kyrgyzstan. As noted earlier, one reason might be the fact that the EU as such is much more visible in Kazakhstan, so any important issue related to the EU is correspondingly more likely to receive more attention in Kazakhstan than Kyrgyzstan[65] (see Chapter VII). On the other hand, it should be noted that field research in Kazakhstan concurred with the peak of refugee flows to Europe in the fall of 2015. This might explain also why the issue was increasingly salient in interviews with Kazakh elites. By the time field research was conducted in Kyrgyzstan in mid-2016, the topic's urgency had passed, and it was less present in discourse on European affairs. It is therefore worth noting that the disproportion in visibility of the issue might also have been caused by a 'subjective' factor specific to this research.

Barcevicius et al. (2015, 57) found that the migration crisis caused third countries to re-evaluate their perceptions of the European Union. This also relates to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In both countries, the EU has come to be frequently described as an 'unable', 'unprepared', 'divided', or 'paralyzed' actor in the context of this crisis.[66] It is often argued that the refugee/migration problem 'has fundamentally altered normal European life' (*Egemen Qazaqstan* 2015f). But how exactly has this impacted on Europe? The collected data allow to identify certain aspects, where the crisis is believed to bring about the most damaging consequences to the EU. Two types of such consequences can be inferred from Kyrgyzstan (political and security consequences), whereas in Kazakhstan this list can be further extended to include two additional implications (demographic and cultural consequences).

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[65] This is particularly obvious in the cases of Kazakh and Kyrgyz media: the Kazakh media extensively reported on the refugee/migration issue during its hottest periods in 2015, whereas the Kyrgyz media was largely neglectful of the topic.

[66] These are some words that are repeatedly used to describe the EU during this crisis in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Firstly, in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the refugee/migration issue is recognized to have had *political consequences* for the EU in the sense that it has increased the Union's internal heterogeneity. The Union is perceived as lacking internal consensus on how to tackle the issue due to the different visions and interests of member states. Consequently, the EU's international position as a single actor is seen to be in further decline. For example,

> Migrants have been actively laying siege to the Old World since the beginning of the year, but they [the Europeans] have not decided what to do with them… Although it is cramped [in Europe], it appears that today European capitals are [politically] too distant from each other… And while they are debating about who is more European, non-Europeans are increasing in number day by day (*Vecherniy Bishkek* 2015b).

In the case of Kazakhstan, it is also often articulated that internal division may further cause a greater political crisis or even crush the EU: 'There are huge internal debates about migration issues, and this may lead to a reconsideration of what the European Union is' (KZ-10-S/E); or 'the problem of refugees has become so complicated that it may even break up the European Union' (*Egemen Qazaqstan* 2015f).

Secondly, the migration/refugee crisis is perceived as causing *security issues* for European countries and putting the lives of European citizens at risk. For example, it is common to establish a direct link between refugee flows and the threat of terrorism in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These narratives often suggest that 'Islamic terrorists have started penetrating EU member states under the guise of refugees from the Muslim countries' (*Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* 2015c); or 'we know that some ISIS supporters have crossed the European border together with refugees, and Europe has found itself unprepared' (KG-19-P). In this context, the November 2015 Paris attacks, or March 2016 Brussels attacks, are sometimes presented as examples of how the EU has become vulnerable to such threats due to refugees/migrants. Moreover, in the case of Kazakhstan one may also find narratives on how refugees/migrants are causing chaos and disorder in European societies. For instance, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* (2015a) reports of 'thefts, robberies, attacks on shops and

churches' as well as 'AIDS, tuberculosis, syphilis and other exotic diseases' linked to migrants and refugees. The conclusion in such similar cases is that the situation has 'spun out of the [EU's] control' and 'the old continent is becoming a huge bloody market' (*Egemen Qazaqstan* 2015e).

Thirdly, in the case of Kazakhstan the refugee/migration crisis is also recognized as having had *demographic consequences* for EU member states. The fact that the EU is open to more and more people of non-European origins is perceived as a change in its 'European appearance'. These narratives suggest that the native population in Europe is in constant decline, while the number of migrants is expanding. A Kazakh politician claimed that 'if we look at statistics, the indigenous population of Europe is not increasing despite general growth. This growth is provided by non-Europeans. When we go to France, we rarely meet French people, mostly migrants from North Africa' (KZ-4-P). The Kazakh media also regularly reports in a similar manner. For instance,

> The population in Europe is growing old. […] In less than 40 years more than a third of the EU's population will be older than 60, a quarter older than 65… If the average age in the world is 29, in Europe it is already 40. […] According to forecasts, if current birth rates remain stable, the population of the Old World will fall by 140 million by 2050, and will constitute only 600 million, if we exclude immigration processes from the calculation. Such a significant loss is comparable with the Black Death in the XIV century. […] One thing is clear: Europe has fallen into a civilizational deadlock. It is called *zugzwang* in the language of chess players, when any next step only worsens the current position (*Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* 2013a).

These kinds of widespread narratives in Kazakhstan construct the image of a literally dying Europe, which implies that, in the future, European countries will mostly be inhabited by people of non-European origin.

Finally, and closely related to the previous case, the refugee/migration issue is viewed in Kazakhstan to have impacted the *cultural aspect* of European life too. The growing number

of non-Europeans is not just an issue of demographics, but also the difficulties of their integration into local culture and traditions. 'We cannot clearly imagine how the sudden appearance of a community with an alien language, alien culture, and alien religion might impact on a European country', as writes *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* (2016b). The fact that migrants or refugees prefer living in their own communities without becoming a part of larger European society is frequently emphasized as a vital problem, since it threatens the most attractive aspect of Europe, its European-ness: history, culture, traditions, values etc. In other words, what is at risk is European identity. As put by a Kazakh politician, 'today Europe is heterogeneous. Because of their tolerance and democracy, the Europeans are not able to defend their identity. If you go to France or Germany, absolutely alien non-European traditions dominate their everyday life' (KZ-7-P).

What/who is to be blamed for the crisis? There is only one answer to this question in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: Europeans themselves. On the one hand, the refugee crisis is seen as a product of the EU's internal policy. The articulated argument is that the 'needless over-democratization of migration policy in the EU' makes the crisis possible in the first instance (KG-5-J). In this context, the notion of 'multiculturalism' constantly re-appears as a negative and unsuccessful policy implemented by Brussels: 'What I do not like in Europeans is their multiculturalism. It has failed to integrate different cultures' (KZ-2-S/E); or 'the former migration policy and multicultural model […] only facilitate the development of societal chaos' (*Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* 2015c). On the other hand, the crisis is recognized to be the outcome of the EU's external policy. The EU's involvement in the destabilization of Northern African and Middle Eastern countries is seen to be the trigger behind refugee flows to Europe. As put by another respondent,

> Only Europeans can be blamed for the problem with refugees that the EU is facing today. They bombed Saddam, they bombed Gaddafi, now they are bombing Assad. I am not saying they were good rulers; they were all rogue leaders. But at least they had control of the situation in their respective countries, and were able to keep the balance in highly complex societies (KZ-16-P).

From this angle, it is viewed that 'Europeans are eating the fruits of their human rights and democracy slogans' (KG-28-J). Interestingly, in this context the EU is immediately transformed from a 'victim' of the refugee/migration crisis, as the discussion above suggests, to a 'defendant', who is accused of not just causing the crisis, but also mistreating refugees/migrants seeking asylum in Europe. Barcevicius et al. (2015, 57) also stated that the 'media and elites [in third countries] use the refugee crisis as an example of the EU not living up to its own (human rights) standards and social values'. This pattern is particularly observable in the case of Kazakhstan. As narratives suggest, the refugee/migration crisis represented a test of European values. The EU, which used to always stand for human rights, equality and tolerance, is perceived as ignoring its own values with relation to refugees and migrants. In other words, its words do not match its deeds. 'Much-praised European *civilizovannost'* [civility] and tolerance' writes *Egemen Qazaqstan* (2015c)*,* 'is being tested by the refugee crisis. European arrogance, perpetually claiming that "they help the poor and needy" has been razed to the ground'. Moreover, the presence of aggressiveness and intolerance towards refugees and migrants is also a vital part of these narratives. The rise of right-wing movements, chauvinist slogans, attacks on refugee camps, and the negligent treatment of refugees are framed as the new reality of today's Europe, which simply implies, in the eyes of Kazakhstan, that the crisis has exposed the 'real face' of Europeans and their values (KZ-49-J). Obviously, such perceptions are likely to diminish the overall attractiveness of the EU considerably.

5.3.3 Summary

This section examined how the European economic and refugee/migration crises have impacted Kazakh and Kyrgyz perceptions of the EU's power/capability. It found that, although the EU is recognized to be a globally influential actor, as suggested in the previous sections, its power/capability is perceived to be in gradual and constant decline. This does not, however, imply that the Union is seen as a weak actor. The 'decaying' Europe narrative still accepts the EU as one of the leading actors in world politics, albeit uninfluential in Central Asia; but treats it as one that has already bypassed the peak of its

power. Illustrative here is the metaphor of 'old man/world/continent/Europe', which is repeatedly used to describe the EU/Europe in both countries. The 'decaying Europe' narrative is applicable to all three aspects of the EU's power/capability discussed in the previous section: the EU is declining economically; political heterogeneity is increasing; and it is losing attractiveness (soft power). What this generally implies is that such narratives additionally enhance the general ambiguity of perceptions of Brussels' power. It has become thus even more difficult to concisely summarize how powerful the EU is perceived to be in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

5.4 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter examined perceptions of the EU's power/capability in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In this context, the primary objective was not to reveal one 'yes' or 'no' answer to the question as to whether the EU is viewed as a powerful actor, but rather to provide detailed analysis of different aspects of Brussels' perceived capability. The main conceptual assumption was that power cannot be measured in overall terms. Instead, power is always both context- and issue-specific. Consequently, the chapter analyzed the EU's perceived power in two contexts – global and regional, and across three issue areas – economic, political, and soft power. Now this section brings all hitherto discussed aspects together to provide a brief summary of the general picture.

Overall, the findings suggest that the EU is already recognized as an international actor in its own right in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, it is also perceived to be more of a state-like actor than an international organization. This can clearly be observed from the inclination in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to compare the EU with other states like the US, Russia, and China. The point of debate is, therefore, not whether the EU is already an established actor or not, but how powerful an actor it is. The very fact that the Union is commonly juxtaposed with the most capable states in world politics seems to demonstrate that it is already perceived to be, or at least, expected to be, among them. It is in relation to them that the EU is perceived to be a 'giant', 'intermediate actor', or 'weak actor'. In this

sense, the EU's perceived power is always constructed in relation to that of the strongest states in world politics.

As a global actor, the EU's perceived power was found to be highly issue-specific in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. How powerful the Union is perceived to be is a matter of angle chosen to assess it. In both countries, the EU is easily recognized as an economic giant and highly attractive soft power, but intermediate actor in terms of its (geo)political capabilities. What these aspects suggest is that, in general, the Union is seen as a capable global actor. As for perceptions of the Union's power as a regional actor in Central Asia, the EU does not enjoy the same image of a capable player. That is to say there is a significant discrepancy between the global and regional dimensions of the EU's perceived capability. If perceptions of Brussels' regional influence can be summarized as that of a 'partly capable' actor in Kazakhstan, in Kyrgyzstan the image is that of an 'incapable' regional player. This difference between the two countries is mainly caused by the fact that Kazakhstan has closer ties with the Union, thus it is more active and more visible in Kazakhstan. In both countries, the relative weakness of the EU in the region is perceived to be caused by lack of a clear policy agenda; shortage of available resources; competition between member states; a poor communication policy; lack of interest in Central Asia; and Central Asia's difficult regional context. Finally, the Union is expected to overcome these limitations and narrow the discrepancy between its global and regional dimensions of its power, becoming a more active player in Central Asia.

The complexity of perceptions across contexts and issue areas makes it challenging to find one generalized picture of the EU's power/capability. The image always seems to alter depending on the particular context and issue area. Nevertheless, I want to follow Barry Buzan's and Ole Waever's definition here to argue that this complexity still allows to summarize that the EU is perceived as a *great power* in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In *Regions and Powers*, Buzan and Waever (2003) propose a three-level classification of international actors in terms of their overall capability: *superpowers*, who possess 'broad-spectrum capabilities exercised across the whole of the international system'; *great powers*, who 'need not necessarily have big capabilities in all sectors, and […] need not be actively

present in […] all areas of the international system'; and *regional powers*, whose 'capabilities loom large in their regions, but do not register much in a broad-spectrum way at the global level' (Buzan and Waever 2003, 34-37). In this classification, the EU seems to belong neither in a superpower category (it is still too underdeveloped to be equal to the US), nor a regional power category (it is already too powerful). Rather, as discussions above suggest, the EU seems to fall into the category of *great powers* with unbalanced capabilities across issue areas: an economic giant, a leading soft power, but a (geo)politically intermediate actor; and not actively present in all regions, i.e. in Central Asia. Buzan (2004, 58-59) further writes that 'even though the power of states cannot be reliably measured, at any given time there is a practical consensus about who the great powers are'. Building on this point, it can be suggested that there seems to exist a 'practical consensus' in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that the EU belongs to the category of great powers. Its general image is that of a global great power, whose influence, however, does not extend to Central Asia.

At the same time, the last section of the chapter argued that the EU is perceived not simply as a great power, but a great power *in decline*. The latest internal issues within the EU, such as its economic troubles or the migration/refugee crisis, have significantly altered the way its overall capability is assessed. As a result, the Union is seen as declining economically, politically, demographically, culturally, and morally, implying that its golden age of prosperity may have already passed. This aspect is particularly evident in Kazakhstan, where the EU as such is more visible, meaning that any EU-related issues are likely to be more visible also.

Finally, I would like to note that what was found in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in terms of perceptions of the EU's power seems to be hardly different from findings in other parts of the world. Chapter II surveyed the literature on this account, and what was discovered in this chapter very much speaks to the existing literature. The next chapter goes on to examine perceptions of the EU as a *threat* and/or an *opportunity*, another central component of images in International Relations.

Chapter VI: Perceptions of the EU as an Opportunity and/or a Threat in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Chapter III theorized that an international image is a complex concept consisting of various internal components. Therefore, any analysis of image needs to begin with identification of what internal components are to be focused on. Many scholars of Images Studies agree that perceptions of one's *power* and perceptions of *threat/opportunity* from that actor are core elements of international images (see **Table 3-1** on page 41). It was argued that what is important for international images is not only perceptions of *how powerful* one actor is, but also perceptions of *for what purposes* one intends to use that power, i.e. whether it represents a threat or an opportunity. As Herrmann (2013, 340) put it, 'concentrating on these two dimensions […] is a parsimonious way of describing the perceptions of others'. This thesis also focuses on these two aspects while examining images of the European Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Accordingly, if Chapter V examined perceptions of the EU's power/capability, this chapter analyzes whether intermediate level actors in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan view the EU and cooperation with it as representing an opportunity or posing a threat for their own country.

Chapter III further conceptualized that perceptions of threat and opportunity occur, *inter alia*, as a result of goal compatibility assessment. If a perceived actor's intentions are recognized to be compatible with one's own intentions, the cooperation with that actor will be viewed as offering an opportunity from which to benefit. By contrast, if the other's intentions are seen as being incompatible, that actor will be seen as a threat to be avoided. Despite being commonly used in academia, the notions of 'threat' and 'opportunity' are not specifically defined. Even those scholars, such as Walt (1985, 1987), who worked extensively on 'perceptions of threat' do not provide any specific definition of the concept, but rather use it broadly to denote a potential harm and danger that one actor may anticipate from others (for general discussion see Baldwin 1971, Cohen 1978, Stein 2013). Therefore, this chapter also uses them in broader meanings: a 'threat' should be understood as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan's perceptions of the EU as a harmful and disadvantageous

international actor for them; whereas an 'opportunity' needs to be interpreted as perceptions of the EU and relationships with it to be beneficial and advantageous for these countries. Although both 'threat' and 'opportunity' categories are deductively pre-identified from Image Studies, the content and internal elements of these categories will be inductively inferred from the collected data through coding. This approach is argued to be especially valuable when a study deals with *perceptions of others*. An inductive approach allows an understanding of what *others* identify as a threat or an opportunity, instead of imposing upon them pre-identified definitions and elements of threat/opportunity. At the same time, only the most visible aspects of opportunity and threat will be discussed in the following sections, which will be decided based on a number of codes and references found in the data in relation to the threat and opportunity aspects of the EU (see Chapter III for Methodology).

The chapter proceeds in three main sections. The first section discusses the opportunity aspects of perceptions of the Union. It will argue that in both countries the EU is predominantly viewed as the most benign international actor; consequently, an opportunity to benefit from. At the same time, the content of opportunity visibly varies in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The second section, conversely, will focus on perceptions of threat from the EU. The section will claim that when it comes to the EU's normative agenda, the image may shift from that of an opportunity to a threat. It will demonstrate that in both countries Brussels is sometimes viewed as a threat to political stability and a threat to local traditional values. The overall findings of the chapter will be summarized in the last section.

6.1 The European Union as an Opportunity

It is nothing new that the EU positions itself as an actor with exceptionally benign intentions while acting internationally. For example, Jorgensen and Laatikainen (2004, 15) suggest that 'the Union tends to present itself as a force of goodness in international society'. Similarly, Kratochvil (2009) demonstrates that in the context of neighborhood

policy, 'the European Union is eager to present its power influence […] as benign', whereas Sheahan et al. (2010) conclude that the main projected self-image of the EU in the Pacific region is that of a benign partner. Chapter IV also showed that projected benevolence is one of the central components of the Union's self-image in Central Asia too. What this benign self-representation implies is that everything the EU offers is meant to be an opportunity from which a perceiving side can benefit. At the same time, a positive self-image seems to be natural for any actor irrespective of what they do. As argued by Scheipers and Sicurelli (2007, 438), 'self-representations necessarily contain a good deal of utopia – otherwise they are not attractive to others'. Zielonka (2011, 284) further demonstrates that not only the EU, but also other actors such as the US, Russia, and China 'see themselves as agents of peace and development, not only in their respective peripheries but also in the world. In this sense, the EU is certainly not unique'. Yet, the EU continues to represent itself as a unique international power. In this context, what is important is not the very fact that the EU positions itself as a 'force for good', but the issue of whether the projected benevolence is recognized and shared by outsiders.

The findings of this chapter demonstrate that in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan the EU's dominant perception is that of a benign actor. This can be contrasted to the way other external powers like the US, China, or even Russia are viewed in the region. One could speculate that the 'big three' countries provoke more ambiguous and polarized perceptions in terms of the threat and/or opportunity they represent. For example, a number of studies reported that China is greatly mythologized and stereotyped in Central Asian countries. Consequently, a great degree of Sinophobia still dominates the perceptions (Burkhanov and Chen 2016, Peyrouse 2016, Syroezhkin 2014). Similarly, several scholars observed that anti-Americanism in Central Asia has been steadily increasing since the 2000s, largely because of American military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the perceived involvement of the US in various 'color revolutions' in the Post-Soviet countries (Schatz 2008, Schatz and Levine 2010, Parakilas 2016). Even in the case of Russia, it can be argued that despite being recognized as the main partner, Russia is still viewed through the prism

of fear and phobia in Central Asian states, which has increased since the Ukrainian crisis (CAISS 2017, 24).

In this context, the findings of this study suggest that the EU is predominantly viewed as the most benevolent external actor in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.[67] The collected data show two closely interrelated attributes why the Union is referred to as a benevolent player unlike the other countries. Firstly, the Union is seen to remain distant from participating in competition for influence in the region. It is recognized as a neutral actor, which does not seek any domination over Central Asians. As a result, there is no perceived physical threat that the EU would take over political and economic processes and make the region dependent on it. As put by some respondents: 'there are only positive attitudes towards the European Union. Why? Because they do not have any geopolitical pretentions here. […] There is no single European country that is cited against Kazakhstan, in contrast to our Northern or Eastern neighbors' (KZ-28-CS); or 'in contrast to Russia and China, the EU does not have geopolitical ambitions in Central Asia. […] The EU is the one who genuinely wants to assist us in modernizing our state' (KG-1-P). Secondly, Brussels is perceived as a player with whom it is relatively easier to build a trusted relationship, because its foreign policy approach is seen to be softer than that of other powerful actors, and the EU is viewed as considering and respecting the interests of both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.[68] As is

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[67] What needs to be re-emphasized here is that the findings of this study cannot be necessarily generalized to public perceptions, as this study specifically deals with the 'intermediate level' actors as explained in Chapter III. Nevertheless, even various public opinion polls also suggest that the perceptions of threat from the EU remain significantly low in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. For example, Chernyh (2010) presented that only 0.4% of respondents had identified the EU as a threat to Kazakhstan in 2010, whereas Russia received 2.3%, the US-22,4%, and China-38.3%. Similarly, IRI polls in Kyrgyzstan also traced a low level of perceived threat from the EU. In 2017, only 13% of respondents viewed the EU as a threat. By contrast, the US got 45%, China-37%, and Russia-6% (IRI 2017). Moreover, the Eurasian Development Bank's (EDB) Integration Barometer surveys carried out every year since 2012 have been providing similar results too. The latest issue, for example, showed that separate EU member states (Great Britain, Germany, France) were categorized as 'unfriendly' by less than 3% of respondents in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In both countries, the perceived 'unfriendliness' of China (15% and 11%, respectively) and the US (17% and 22%, respectively) were visibly higher, whereas only Russia (2% and 0%, respectively) performed better than EU member states (EDB 2017). Finally, a survey among the Central Asian youth conducted by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (FES) further demonstrated that the younger population in both countries preferred closer ties with the EU, which came after Russia (FES 2016a, 2016b).

[68] However, this perception of softness and respect for Central Asians' interests may negatively change when it comes to the EU's normative agenda. As will be discussed in later sections, the EU is often perceived as the one who unilaterally imposes its values upon others.

often articulated: 'the EU prefers delicate methods; it does not dictate and impose, rather offers' (KZ-23-P); or 'it [the EU] is restrained, it is tactful, and its policy is not obsessive' (KG-14-CS); or 'it is more comfortable to cooperate with the EU, whereas cooperation with other actors comes with heavy political ballast' (KG-3-S/E). Again, from these aspects the EU is constantly compared to Russia, China, or the US, who are believed to be more assertive, and even aggressive actors.

As a result, the EU provokes a considerably low level of suspicion in comparison to the 'big three' countries. Its policy activities are predominantly trusted and supported. Even the EU's grants allocated to civil society seems to trigger relatively less suspicion than those of other actors (see Footnote 68): 'some people question the real intentions behind European projects. But I do not think they are like the Soros. I trust and respect them' (KZ-13-J). Another respondent went even further to state that

> our [Kazakh] secret services give the 'green light' to our cooperation with European foundations and projects. They specifically warn us to be careful with the Chinese, Americans, Russians. But they look at the Europeans without suspicion. They approve when we cooperate with the Ebert Stiftung or other organizations from European countries (KZ-11-S/E).

In this context, what the EU pursues in Central Asia is greatly viewed as advantageous for Central Asians too. The majority of interviewed elites believe that what Brussels promotes in the region is stability and prosperity (e.g. KZ-13-J; KZ-19-S/E; KZ-35-S/E; KG-6-P; KG-14-CS; KG-19-P). Therefore, cooperation with the Union is viewed to be favorable to the political, economic, social development of these countries. Similarly, available media samples reporting on EU's policies in the region are predominantly positive both in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan too. They predominantly report on 'generous and supportive Europe', 'mutually beneficial relations', 'effective European projects', 'important grants' etc. that contribute to the image of the EU as a 'force for good'.[69] In other words, the

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[69] These and other similar descriptions are regularly used in relation to the EU in both Kazakh and Kyrgyz media.

cooperation with the EU is predominantly recognized as an *opportunity* from which they can benefit.

At the same time, there is a visible difference between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in terms of what kind of opportunity the EU precisely represents for each of them. In other words, although the general perception of opportunity is identical, the content of opportunity is partly different in the two countries. In total, the collected data illustrates three issue-areas where the Union is recognized to represent a value for both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan: democratic values, European standards, and the EU's integration experience. Additionally, in Kazakhstan, Brussels is also viewed as representing an opportunity in terms of trade/investment and technology/innovation, whereas in the case of Kyrgyzstan the perception is that the EU does not represent any economic opportunity for the country. Instead, Kyrgyzstan sees the EU as an opportunity in terms of the latter's development assistance to the country. All these aspects are summarized in **Table 6-1**.

Table 6-1: Perceptions of the EU as an Opportunity in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Kazakhstan	Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan	Kyrgyzstan
Trade and Investment		
Technology and Innovation		
		Lack of Economic Opportunity
		Development Assistance
	Democratic Values	
	European Standards	
	Integration Experience	

As will be broadly discussed in Chapter VII, the differences between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in **Table 6-1** mainly occur due to the structure of these countries' bilateral relations with the Union. As the EU is Kazakhstan's biggest economic partner, for

Kazakhstan it represents an economic opportunity first of all. By contrast, in the context of underdeveloped bilateral relations, what becomes visible in Kyrgyzstan is the Union's development assistance. Consequently, it is perceived as a donor in Kyrgyzstan.

The following sub-sections intend to analyze these specifics of the opportunity aspect of the EU's image. I will start from opportunity perceptions intrinsic only to Kazakhstan, then will move on to discuss the case of Kyrgyzstan. The third sub-section will consider opportunity perceptions shared in both countries. The final sub-section will propose a brief summary of the overall image.

6.1.1 Kazakhstan

As noted above, the findings of this study show that the idea of the EU as a benign actor is widely shared in Kazakhstan. Despite Kazakhstan's self-perception as a strategically important destination for the EU's energy interests, interviewed elites acknowledge that it is Kazakhstan who needs the EU more, and not *vice versa* (e.g. KZ-10-S/E; KZ-36-S/E; KZ-37-P; KZ-45-P). 'Europe demonstrates the example of success. The very fact of its presence here [in Kazakhstan] brings a flow of fresh thoughts to our stagnant pond, if not slough', in the words of an interviewed journalist (KZ-8-J). The EU is predominantly admired, welcomed, and modeled. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* (2012a) goes further,

> [t]he notion of '*evropeiskiy*' [European] in our minds is associated with the categories of high standards and values in political, cultural, educational spheres. Kazakhstan gives priority to cooperation with the EU in order to approach it, to introduce its advanced experience, technology, quality, and the highest level of management for the development of the republic.

These quotes are representative of how the EU, or Europe in general[70], is positively perceived in Kazakhstan.

As a result of this general positivity, an aspiration in Kazakhstan to become (and be accepted as) a part of wider Europe can be noticed. In this regard, it is interesting to observe how the reference to Kazakhstan's Eurasian identity constantly re-appears in data samples to confirm its closeness to Europe. Overall, the Eurasian identity denotes the idea of Kazakhstan's uniqueness, 'straddling East and West' (Cummings 2003, 140). Kazakhstan constantly refers to itself as to an exclusive geopolitical and cultural space – a 'bridge' – influenced by and connecting both Europe and Asia (Spehr and Kassenova 2012, 137). Anceschi (2014a, 745; emphasis in original) summarizes that this 'narrative of the *most* (bridge) […] is perhaps the most recognizable element of the entire rhetorical infrastructure supporting Kazakhstan's foreign policy'. As the findings of this study suggest, although the very idea of being Eurasian implies harmoniously combining both Asian and European heritage, these two constituencies are not recognized to be equally influential upon Kazakhstan. The European aspect of its identity is given priority over its Asian constituent when it comes to the question of where the country belongs. In other words, by presenting the country as Eurasian, Kazakhstan emphasizes its closeness or even belonginess to Europe in a broader sense. This idea has also been discussed by several other scholars. For example, Kassenova (2008, 133) mentioned that from time to time the official discourse articulates that Kazakhs belong in Europe. Furthermore, she continued that while formulating its policy towards Kazakhstan, the EU should take into account the country's self-reference as European, and asked if 'Kazakhstan [is] really that different and less European than Azerbaijan' (Kassenova 2015b, 2). Similarly, Cornell and Engvall (2017, 6) argue that 'Kazakhstan is a European country, but European states and institutions have so far failed to treat it as such'.

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[70] As Chapter VII will discuss, the notions of 'Europe' and 'European Union' are often used interchangeably in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, it is sometimes challenging to separate perceptions of one from another.

At the state level, Kazakhstan's constant inclination to stress its belonginess to Europe can be observed in both its practice and rhetoric. For instance, Kazakhstan was the only country to be perturbed when the US State Department went through internal reorganization, during which Central Asian countries were moved from the Eurasian Bureau to the South and Central Asia Bureau (Kassenova 2008, 134). Moreover, the emphasis on Kazakhstan's Europeanness reached its peak under the aegis of its OSCE chairmanship in 2010. As Fawn (2013, 207) observed, the chairmanship was meant, among others, 'to assert its [Kazakhstan's] part-European identity'. In this context, the Kazakh officials used to repeatedly articulate that Kazakhstan would belong in Europe and comply with its values: 'Kazakhstan's bid to chair the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe was reasoned exactly by [its] choice in favor of further European integration' (Nazarbayev 2009). Similarly, Kazakhstan was the only Central Asian country to declare a state program for enhanced cooperation with Europe – 'The Path to Europe' – which was introduced in 2009. In this regard, Kazakhstan's state secretary stated that

> today's Kazakhstan, which combines the characteristics of the two civilizations […], can provisionally be called Europe in Asia and Asia in Europe. [Nevertheless] the integration into Europe is both the deliberate choice of the first President of the country, and the imperative of the development of independent Kazakhstan (Saudabayev 2009).

Some interviewed respondents further continued: 'as you can see, we did not call it the "path to Europe through Russia" or "path to China". It is the "path to Europe", which means we will always be trying to integrate into Europe' (KZ-17-S/E); or 'Kazakhstan is a Eurasian country. We are different from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan or Tajikistan. We are closer to Europe and aspire to Europe. We would like to cooperate beyond? the EU-CA format, because this format is too narrow for Kazakhstan's potential' (KZ-25-P). Again, what these cases arguably demonstrate is that despite the fact that the Eurasianism is designed to combine both Asian and European characteristics, it is exclusively Europe that is perceived as the destination for Kazakhstan's future.

From this perspective, the EU or Europe is recognized to represent predominantly an *opportunity* that the country can take advantage from. **Table 6-1** above identified five issue-areas, where the EU is viewed to be beneficial for Kazakhstan (see на стр. 150). This section will further discuss only two of them, which are intrinsic only to Kazakhstan: opportunity in terms of trade/investment and technology/innovation. The other three aspects are shared by both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, thus they are examined in Section 6.1.3, whereas Section 6.1.2 will elaborate on elements that refer only to Kyrgyzstan.

Trade and Investment

As noted in Chapter V, the EU's perceived power is mostly assessed through the lens of its economic capability. Successful economic integration, massive GDP, investment capacity, high living conditions, the Euro – all frequently appear as the immediate association with the notion of the European Union. Moreover, the EU-Kazakhstani bilateral relationship is heavily economic in its structure, where the EU represents the biggest trading and investment partner for Kazakhstan.[71] Therefore, it is not a surprise that the answer to the question of what kind of opportunity the Union represents for Kazakhstan is obvious and straightforward. First and foremost, the EU is perceived as offering an *economic opportunity* for the country (by contrast, the next section will discuss the opposite picture in Kyrgyzstan, where there is a perceived lack of economic opportunity from the EU).

The discourse on the EU-Kazakhstani relationship is heavily dominated by the narrative that the EU is the country's main trade and investment partner. This narrative is constantly reproduced at all levels of society in Kazakhstan. For example, a quick survey of top Kazakh officials' open statements and speeches easily reveal the exact template that continuously re-appears. For instance, President Nazarbayev repeatedly states that

> [d]uring recent years, the EU has been the main foreign trade and political partner
> of our country. It is worth noting that the foreign investments of EU countries in

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[71] The EU is Kazakhstan's (1) biggest trading partner with $22 billion trade turnover in 2016 (39.9% of Kazakhstan's total trade); and (2) biggest investor with $48.8 billion FDI stocks in 2015 (European Commission 2017 a, b, c, d).

Kazakhstan reach US$80 billion. Bilateral trade turnover has reached $53 billion (The Astana Times 2013);

or as a senior Kazakh diplomat claims:

> beyond doubt, economic cooperation underpins the strategic nature of Kazakhstan-EU partnership. The European Union has firmly occupied the position of Kazakhstan's leading trade and investment partner, surpassing Russia and China. Last year, bilateral trade turnover amounted to $54 billion. The EU accounts for 49 per cent of our total trade and 45 percent of accumulated FDI in our economy (Akhinzhanov 2013).

Similarly, these narratives are replicated by numerous media outlets. Just as a comparison to the previous quotes, for example, *Express-K* (2011b) writes that 'the European Union has firmly occupied the position of the leading trade and investment partner of our country. The EU accounts for 47% of Kazakhstan's total trade turnover and one third of attracted investment'; *Egemen Qazaqstan* (2015a) reports that 'the EU is the biggest trade and investment partner of our country. Trade turnover constituted $53 billion last year. The amount of investment from European countries to Kazakhstan's economy is more than $102 billion'; or we read in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* (2015d) that 'the trade turnover between Kazakhstan and the European Union has increased 13 times, and the volume of European investments to Kazakhstan's economy – 10 times. Half of trade turnover and more than half of attracted investment are from European countries'. As can be noticed, all quotes provided contain the same narrative pattern, which characterizes the EU as the 'main', 'leading', 'biggest', 'strategic' source of economic benefit for Kazakhstan. Furthermore, representatives of intermediate elites interviewed for this research were also quick to acknowledge that economic cooperation is a top priority where the country can benefit from the EU: 'we depend on the EU, because it is our biggest economic partner. We greatly benefit from it, rather than it benefits from us' (KZ-3-S/E), or 'we should establish even closer relations with the EU, because it can contribute to our [economic] development given its enormous economic potential' (KZ-39-J).

At the same time, there seems to be no concern related to unilateral domination of the Union over Kazakhstan's economic sphere. There is no perceived threat that as a result of unbalanced economic relations Kazakhstan may become economically dependent on the European Union. This sharply differs from the reactions to the growth of, for example, China's economic activities in the country. As one of the respondents claimed, 'receiving investment from China is different from receiving it from the EU: the Chinese may have hidden intentions, they make different economic and ecological terms, while with the Europeans we are free from any fear' (KZ-2-S/E). In this context, how a broader population negatively reacted to the Kazakh government's initiatives to transfer 51 industrial factories from China to Kazakhstan, or to allow the lease of agricultural land to entities with foreign (read Chinese) ownership are telling examples of attitudes towards China's increasing economic presence (see Burkhanov 2018). By contrast, there is only a positive perception of increased, and at the same time, more diversified economic cooperation with the EU. Close economic ties with the EU are viewed as a necessary condition for the country's development: 'we can't [economically] develop without the EU. This is for sure. Kazakhstan is interested in deeper economic ties with the EU' (KZ-38-CS).

Technology and Innovation

Another visible aspect of the EU's image as an opportunity, inferred from the collected data, is the perception of the Union as being a potential source of *technology and innovation* for Kazakhstan. The narratives such as 'economic modernization', 'technological advancement', or 'industrial-innovational development' are highly visible in Kazakhstan's internal discourse, since the government continuously reproduces them through the initiation of various state programs.[72] In this context, it is acknowledged that Kazakhstan is a technologically underdeveloped country. Therefore, to satisfy and qualitatively advance its technological development, Kazakhstan is said to look at European countries: 'Kazakhstan does not even produce a needle. […] We should learn their [the

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[72] For example, '30 corporate leaders of Kazakhstan'; 'State program of forced industrial and innovative development of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2010-2014; or 'State program for innovative and industrial development of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2015 – 2019'.

EU's] technology' (KZ-38-CS); or 'in 22 years we have found ourselves exporting nothing but raw oil. We don't even have technology to process it. [Thus] we urgently need technology from the EU' (KZ-37-P). It is often articulated that the most advanced technology is owned by European/Western countries. The EU is frequently referred as a 'technological leader [of the world] since the XIX century' (KZ-27-P), 'technological giant' (KZ-27-P), or 'powerful accumulator of innovation in the world' (KZ-8-J). As a result, the Union is recognized as a potential priority for Kazakhstan in terms of technology and innovation import: 'we need technology only from Europe, not cheap ones from China', in the words of one respondent (KZ-49-J).

At the same time, there is a clear understanding that transferring innovation from Europe is not an easy task. The perception is that the EU does not intend to share its technology with Kazakhstan, instead it further wants to exploit Kazakhstan for raw materials only: 'of course, the EU will never share with us its secrets in innovation' (KZ-13-J). In this context, Brussels is sometimes referred as a 'self-interested, egoistic, unreliable' actor (KZ-44-CS). At the same time, there is a perception that the EU, to a certain extent, depends on Kazakhstan's energy resources, therefore, it is commonly suggested to use Kazakhstan's natural resources as a mean of bargaining to get access to Europe's innovations. In other words, Kazakhstan should exchange its resources for technology instead of unilaterally exporting raw materials to the European market. As President Nazarbayev once stated 'Europe cannot survive without Asia. Europe needs […] Kazakhstan, our resources. We need their science, their technology' (*Tengrinews* 2015). This exchange is viewed as both fair and mutually beneficial.

As before, the perception of the EU as an opportunity in terms of technology and innovation is barely visible in Kyrgyzstan. Both Kyrgyz respondents and media hardly mention the importance of EU's technology and innovation for the country. However, the absence of such narratives should not necessarily be explained by the unattractiveness of EU's technology/innovation to Kyrgyzstan. Instead, it might be caused by general skepticism in Kyrgyzstan that the country cannot benefit from the EU in any noticeable way given the low level of bilateral relations. The section below will turn to the case of

Kyrgyzstan and discuss this and other aspects of perceptions of the EU as an opportunity to benefit from.

6.1.2 Kyrgyzstan

The dominant perception of the EU in Kyrgyz society is also that of a benign actor, who predominantly represents an opportunity for the development of the country. Brussels is immediately associated with prosperity; its achievements are admired; its experience is desired: 'we could get everything from the EU. […] Kyrgyzstan or any other backward country cannot develop without the EU' (KG-6-P); or 'European heritage is the most unique legacy on the earth. We could adopt everything from them' (KG-33-CS), as articulated by several respondents (also e.g. KG-4-P; KG-7-P; KG-11-J; KG-14-CS). In this sense, perceptions in Kyrgyzstan are no different from Kazakhstan.

Like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan is also inclined to emphasize its closeness to a wider Europe. For example, President Atambayev once stated that 'Europe should be [from Lisbon] to Bishkek, of course. It is because Kyrgyz people are absolutely Europeans in spirit' (*Interfax* 2015). What does make Kyrgyzstan closer to Europe? The previous section found that it is the Eurasian identity, which is articulated to prove Kazakhstan's closeness to wider Europe. In the case of Kyrgyzstan, it is the country's self-image as an 'island of democracy' that serves the same purpose. Overall, this idea of 'island of democracy' is well-known in the academic literature. Kyrgyzstan started being referred to as the most democratically advanced country in Central Asia in the early 1990s (Anderson 1999, Beshimov 2008, Juraev 2008). At the same time, it is not just an external reference to Kyrgyzstan, as the country also internally positions itself as an 'oasis of democracy' (Omelicheva 2015, 80).[73] In the absence of rich natural resources, unlike in some of its neighboring countries, it is through emphasis on its democratic nature that Kyrgyzstan has sought to attract foreign attention and aid (Cummings 2012, 130). In this respect, the way President Atambayev

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[73] Another illustration is the country's self-reference as 'the Switzerland' of Central Asia, which is also a European country. Arguably, this may also indicate that Kyrgyzstan associates itself with Europe.

once complained about the lack of support from European countries seems to be a telling illustration:

> [w]hen trillions of dollars are being spent on wars in Afghanistan or Iraq or Libya or elsewhere… It [war] can't be stopped with force. They can only be stopped by showing an example, at least of one country – democratic, secular Muslim country. I'm tired of pointing out that it would be much cheaper just to help Kyrgyzstan build a secular *democratic* state in our Muslim country. But you know, we are left with no real support from democratic countries' (*Euronews* 2015).

Similarly, interviews conducted for this research further demonstrated that it is commonly acknowledged that Kyrgyzstan is visible in Brussels' agenda only thanks to its relative democracy. In the words of some respondents, 'democracy is Kyrgyzstan's only *fishka* [shtick]. Only because of this the EU is present here' (KG-1-P); or 'Europe could ask "why we need this distant Kyrgyzstan". They need us because they sow democratic fruits here in the island of democracy with the hope that the island will become a continent' (KG-21-CS).

The collected data show that narratives on Kyrgyzstan's nature as a democratic state are constantly re-produced in the country. It is not infrequent to hear from Kyrgyz elites of all levels that Kyrgyzstan represents the most, even the only, democratic country in the region. The self-image of 'democratic Kyrgyzstan' is successfully presented as a distinguishing feature of the country from other Central Asians: 'only we make real steps towards democracy. Can you name any other [democratic] Central Asian country? I assume, you cannot' (KG-18-P). At the same time, this self-perceived regional superiority in terms of democracy level is designed to support Kyrgyzstan's closeness to Europe rather than its other counterparts. In other words, it is the democratic nature of Kyrgyzstan that makes it unique compared with other Central Asians, and it is in terms of democracy that Kyrgyzstan is closer to a wider Europe than the others. As further claimed by one of the interviewed elites, 'we wholly share main [European] values. We are not pure Asians, […] we are more like Europeans' (KG-35-P).

Similar to Kazakhstan, this positive aspiration to be (viewed as) a part of a wider Europe further implies that (almost) everything coming from the EU is recognized to be beneficial for Kyrgyzstan. At the same time, the degree and content of perceived opportunity is slightly different from Kazakhstan. Unlike in Kazakhstan, the EU is perceived as (1) not representing an opportunity in terms of economic relations. Instead, the Union is viewed as directly contributing to Kyrgyzstan only through its (2) development assistance. These two aspects are discussed in the following sub-sections. Besides, Kyrgyzstan also views the Union as an opportunity in terms of democratic values, European standards, and integration experience, all of which are discussed in Section 6.1.3 together with Kazakhstan as these aspects overlap in the two countries.

Lack of Economic Opportunity

In the case of Kazakhstan, as previously discussed, an economic benefit is the most salient aspect of the perception of the Union as an opportunity. The EU is listed as Kazakhstan's top trade and investment partner. What we can observe in Kyrgyzstan is the opposite picture. Despite being perceived as a generally positive and benign actor, the EU is not viewed as an important external partner for Kyrgyzstan in terms of representing significant benefits. The reason behind this, as will be broadly discussed in Chapter VII, is the underdeveloped level of bilateral cooperation. There is clear recognition that the current state of EU-Kyrgyzstan relations does not have much to offer the country. Consequently, the EU's overall importance for Kyrgyzstan is marginalized, and it is predominantly perceived as providing *limited economic benefits*: 'we do not have close economic ties with the EU. We barely import [from the EU], and do not export at all' (KG-5-J).

The collected data allow two perceived reasons of low economic relations to be inferred. On the one hand, the EU itself is viewed as not interested in Kyrgyzstan (except in democracy, as mentioned выше). Rather, the Union's interests in Central Asia are seen to be primarily focused on the energy resources of Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. In this context, it is widely acknowledged that Kyrgyzstan is of marginal importance for the EU: 'Kyrgyzstan comes as a mere secondary element of what the EU wants in Central Asia'

(KG-8-S/E). Even the GSP+ status, granted to Kyrgyzstan in 2016, is doubted to be able to make notable changes in the level of bilateral economic relations.[74] The GSP+ is mostly referred to as a mere symbolic gesture from Brussels, rather than a desire to really improve economic relations: 'it was just a political decision to grant the GSP+ to us' stated a Kyrgyz politician (KG-22-P), while another respondent claimed that 'the EU was sure that nothing would change in the European market if they give us the GSP+ status. It was a symbolic gesture' (KG-32-S/E).

On the other hand, the lack of interest from the EU is viewed to be further complicated by the current state of Kyrgyzstan's own political and economic conditions: political instability, corruption, or non-competitiveness of the Kyrgyz economy. One of the respondents figuratively put it that:

> unfortunately, economic relations with the European Union are not developed as highly as we would wish. No serious European companies operate in Kyrgyzstan; no European countries invest serious money in our economy. In practice, we do not have any joint ventures with them. Everything is hindered by 'Mister 10%'[75] (KG-2-P).

Commenting on the prospects of the GSP+ status, several other interviewees further continued that 'Kyrgyzstan cannot even compete with other members of the EAEU let alone the EU' (KG-28-J), or 'what are you expecting from Kyrgyzstan to export to the European market? It can hardly export to the Russian [market]' (KG-23-S/E), or 'it would already be a success if Kyrgyzstan exported three jars of honey to the European market' (KG-5-J). In this context, the lack of economic opportunity from the EU is viewed as a long-term reality for Kyrgyzstan.

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[74] The 'GSP+' (Generalized Scheme of Preferences +) status was granted to Kyrgyzstan in February 2016. It is designed to completely remove tariffs from more than 6000 product categories exported from Kyrgyzstan to the market of EU member states.

[75] The interviewee referred to the practice of a 10% kickback from any signed contract.

Development Assistance

In the absence of close economic relations with the EU and perceptions that the Union does not represent noticeable opportunity for Kyrgyzstan in terms of economic benefits, what becomes visible in Kyrgyzstan is the EU's *development assistance* practices. In the case of Kazakhstan, development assistance from the EU is very much shadowed by dense relations in other spheres, such as trade and investment, technology exchange, or energy cooperation. Moreover, the EU itself had been gradually decreasing its assistance to Kazakhstan at the bilateral level until it stopped in 2014. Therefore, the overall visibility of Brussels' development assistance in Kazakhstan is significantly lower than in Kyrgyzstan. Even when it is visible to an extent, the majority of interviewed elites did not perceive it as making a significant difference in the country (e.g. KZ-17-S/E; KZ-29-P; KZ-31-S/E; KZ-38-CS; KZ-46-S/E). Some respondents went as far as to claim that 'Kazakhstan is able to cover its own expenses and does not need any European tips' (KZ-16-P).

This sharply diverges from what one finds in Kyrgyzstan, where Brussels' donor activities are highly visible. Even the official discourse in Kyrgyzstan constantly affirms that what the EU is doing in terms of development assistance is very important for the country. Various Kyrgyz officials regularly express appreciation and gratitude for the EU's support: 'the last 20 years have been challenging for our country, and all these years you [the EU] have been with us. […] We, the Kyrgyz people, are grateful to the European Union for the provided assistance' stated Roza Otunbayeva, the president of the interim period after the 2010 revolution (*Knews* 2015). Moreover, the issue of financial assistance, grants, and loans are always on the agenda of bilateral official visits and meetings. As noted выше, the official discourse in Kyrgyzstan appeals to the country's democracy to attract more attention and financial support from the EU. Commenting on Atambayev's visit to Brussels in 2015, for example, *Vecherniy Bishkek* (2015c) wrote that

> the formula of 'island of democracy' […] was the main 'investment idea' [of Atambayev's official visit to the EU]: Europe provides financial assistance to Kyrgyzstan, and the state undertakes to fight corruption including Atambayev's

relatives, and build *democracy* in the heart of Central Asia – in opposition to Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan and others.

In this regard, the way President Atambayev reproached the Union for a 'selective approach' in supporting democratic values is another illustrative example. During his visit to the EU in 2015, President Atambayev complained that the EU had refused to support Kyrgyzstan with €15 million. Whereas, as he stated, the Union had been spending 'billions' in support of democracy in Ukraine (*Azattyq* 2015). What is even more telling is that this statement was made during the photo exhibition called 'Kyrgyzstan – a chance for young democracy'. Moreover, during the same visit he directly replied to those who domestically criticized the government for receiving endless loans and grants from external donors and making it the main purpose of the country's foreign policy. President Atambayev stated:

> if the assistance is provided, it should be taken. What is shameful here? Moreover, I was told that such help [from the European Union] would be increasing. What is wrong with that, if Atambayev is able to somehow arrange and we can receive assistance, [and] our debts are written off? God willing, we will start working and earning money ourselves (*Slovo Kyrgyzstana* 2013).

What is evident from these kinds of narratives in Kyrgyzstan's official rhetoric is that the issue of development assistance is important and occupies a central position in the Kyrgyz–European bilateral relationship.

Similarly, the image of the EU as an important donor is also highly visible in media samples and interview answers collected for this research. Although the Union generally is barely visible in Kyrgyzstan's printed media (in contrast to Kazakhstan), the collected number of samples predominantly focus exactly on EU's development projects and programs in the country. The media articles usually have titles similar to 'The European Union declares its support' (*Slovo Kyrgyzstana* 2012b); 'The European Union will help us' (*Vecherniy Bishkek* 2013); '[The EU] will declare a new program of support' (*Erkin Too* 2012a); or 'The European Union will support the country's budget' (*Slovo Kyrgyzstana* 2016). The content of these articles is highly positive. As a rule, the EU is framed as an

actor lending a helping hand for the benefit of Kyrgyzstan in hard times. The EU-funded projects are referred to as supporting the spheres, where the Kyrgyz government is unable to allocate its own resources. This positivity in the media is further shared by interviewed elites too: 'the EU helps Kyrgyzstan in a lot in different spheres. […] We are grateful' (KG-26-J); or 'how many good projects they have implemented!? We can only thank them' (KG-28-J).

At the same time, this is not to say that the EU's development assistance in Kyrgyzstan is free from any criticism. Kyrgyz intermediate elites, while generally appreciating the assistance provided by the EU, still express skepticism in terms of whether it is making a visible contribution in the country. Both the scale and quality of EU-funded projects are often described as insufficient. On the one hand, the EU's financial allocations are viewed as too inadequate to bring structural changes to Kyrgyz society. Projects are viewed as being too small and too specific to make transformative improvements at the state-level. In the words of one respondent, 'all these projects, probably look like "dusting" in a house. Dusting cannot change the location of walls and cardinally renovate the house. But, if you do not dust, the things may get even worse. The EU at least has a try' (KG-10-J). On the other hand, the low efficiency of existing projects is also criticized. As many interviewed elites agreed, a large share of allocated financial resources return to the EU in the form of salaries of European experts and consultants. Moreover, the competence of experts involved and their knowledge of the context is further questioned. As a result, Kyrgyz elites largely agreed that the quality of EU-sponsored projects does not always match the declared intentions: 'the bulk [of assistance] goes to the consultation of western experts. They make beautiful reports,] and returns to Europe. They leave behind only reports, which are gathering dust on shelves' (KG-4-P; also KG-1-P; KG-5-J; KG-8-S/E; KG-23-S/E among others). In this context, the EU is expected to improve both the scale and quality of its development assistance. Again, what this illustrates is that, despite generally being appreciated, the EU's donor activities in the country hardly elevate the Union to the rank of important external actors.

6.1.3 Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

If the preceding two sections have respectively discussed perceptions of opportunity intrinsic to either Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan, the current section moves on to consider those aspects that are equally shared in both countries. First, it starts from the perception of the EU as an opportunity in terms of its democratic values; second, it elaborates on European standards, which are seen as an opportunity to learn from; third, it concludes with the perception of the EU's integration experience as an opportunity to apply to the case of the EAEU.

Democratic Values

As mentioned in Chapter IV, a normative agenda has always been, at least rhetorically, at the centre of the EU policy towards Central Asia. It also has also attracted extensive scholarly attention. However, the literature on this account has largely been EU-centric, mostly exploring what the EU promotes in Central Asia, how the Union promotes it, and with what effect (e.g. Axyonova 2014, Hoffmann 2010, Warkotsch 2006, 2011c). In this context, the Central Asian perspective on the EU's normative agenda has been relatively neglected (for exception see Omelicheva 2015). The data collected for this research allow this gap to be partly filled.

While discussing whether the EU represents an opportunity or threat, references to 'European values' continuously appear in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. What is even more interesting is that the 'values' promoted by the EU are referred to as both opportunity and threat, depending on particular interpretations of this notion. In this regard, two different interpretations of European 'values' can be identified in both countries: the EU's *political* values and *cultural* values. They are illustrated in **Figure 6-1** below.

'European Values'

Political values: Democracy, Human Rights, Rule of Law etc.

Cultural Values: LGBT, Decline of Family Relations etc.

Opportunity universal, must be *adopted*

Threat not universal, must be *adapted*

Threat immoral, must be fully *avoided*
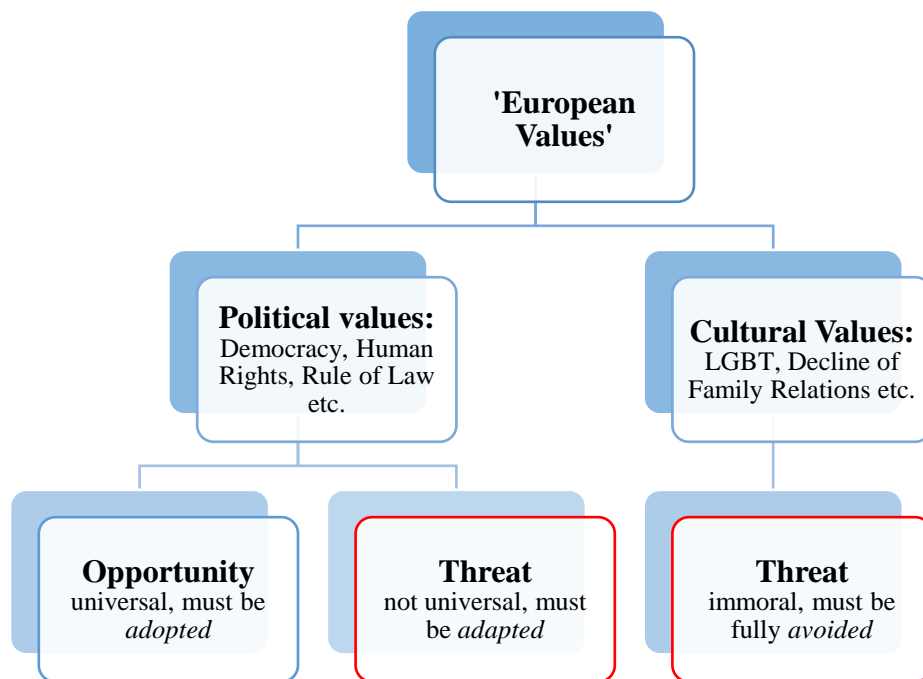
Figure 6-1: Perceptions of 'European Values' in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Firstly, 'European values' are associated with *political values* such as democracy, human rights, rule of law, good governance etc. When the EU is seen as promoting its political values, general attitudes towards the EU appeared to be divided and polarized in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. If some view promoted political values positively and accept them as universal ('opportunity'), others remain skeptical and argue that what the EU promotes is not necessarily universal values, and, therefore, does not necessarily suit Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan ('threat'). The former argues for the full *adoption* of these values, whereas the latter claims that they need to be *adapted* to the context of receiving countries, rather than uncompromisingly adopted. Otherwise, unilateral imposition of the 'European model' of democracy is said to represent a threat to political stability of these countries (this perception of 'threat' will be discussed in Section 6.2 below). As will be elaborated in Chapter VII, which interpretation an elite member supports seems to partly depend on the interviewed individual's professional position. State-affiliated elites tended to be more skeptical towards the promotion of democracy principles by the Union, whereas oppositional politicians and representatives of civil society normally expressed exclusively positive attitudes towards Brussels' support of democracy.

Secondly, the notion of 'European values' can be interpreted from the *cultural* aspect as well. 'European values' have come to be associated not only with democracy and human rights, but also with 'untraditional' values such as the breakdown of family/relative bonds, same-sex marriages, or LGBT rights, which are uncompromisingly condemned in both Kazakh and Kyrgyz societies. When understood from this aspect, 'values' promoted by the EU are perceived to represent a threat to local 'traditional' values, thus it is said they should be completely *avoided*.

The focus of this section is on positive 'opportunity' perceptions only. Therefore, the discussion below continues with the perception of the Union as an opportunity in terms of democratic values, whereas other two perceptions of 'threat', illustrated in **Figure 6-1** above, will be elaborated in Section 6.2 below.

Overall, one interpretation of *democratic values*[76] promoted by the EU is that they represent an opportunity to learn from. This aspect of the EU's image is especially salient in the case of Kyrgyzstan. One reason for this is that Kyrgyzstan, as already noted, mostly represents itself as an 'island of democracy' in Central Asia and uses this self-image to attract the attention of external actors, and, above all, of the EU. The official discourse in Kyrgyzstan constantly affirms that the country's principal aim is further democratic transformation. As a result, the political context in the country creates a more favorable context to the spread of narratives on democratization. This visibly contradicts what can be observed in Kazakhstan. As will be discussed in Section 6.2, the official rhetoric in Kazakhstan is more restrictive of democracy narratives, and is even more so when it comes to external promotion of democratic values in Kazakhstan. Another reason might be, again, the low level of the EU-Kyrgyzstan relationship in other spheres such as economic cooperation. In the absence of close economic ties, what becomes visible in Kyrgyzstan are the EU's democracy promotion efforts (along with development assistance, discussed above). The Kyrgyz political leadership, intermediate elites, and media are all keen to highlight that the

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[76] In this context, 'democracy' should be understood as an all-encompassing umbrella notion that includes human rights, rule of law, equality, justice, freedom of election, freedom of speech, good governance etc.

European model of democracy is the sphere where the country can benefit the most from the European Union. In contrast, in Kazakhstan, the EU's democracy values are viewed to be secondary to the economic benefits that the country receives from cooperation with Brussels.

Despite the difference in overall salience, the content of narratives on the EU as a democracy model seems to be identical in both countries. Democracy is associated with 'effective functioning of political institutions at all levels, […] the importance of human life, the primacy of individual rights over society, regime, and state' (KZ-17-S/E); with 'freedom of action, rule of law, dialogue, social justice' (KZ-21-P); with 'transparency, accountability, and public participation' (KG-27-CS); and with 'tolerance, humanism' (KG-9-S/E). When perceived from this aspect, an admiration towards Europe's democratic values in both countries can be observed: 'you just look at the European Union and dream about having here [in Kazakhstan] the same level of democracy' (KZ-13-J), or 'Every day I dream about the day, when a human being will be treated in our country as in European countries' (KG-20-P). From this angle, Europe's democratic values are recognized to be universal, thus, suitable for any context regardless of their historical, cultural, and traditional differences. One of the respondents, for example, asserted that 'there is only one democracy. Each country cannot make its own model, because a country is either democratic or not, the same as a woman is either pregnant or not' (KZ-2-S/E). Another interviewee in Kyrgyzstan also claimed that:

> Chernomyrdin[77] once said: 'whatever party we try to create, it always ends up looking like the Communist Party'. This also relates to democracy. If we try to create our own model of democracy, justifying that with the need for stability and order, we will always end up with 'the Communist Party' Democracy, human rights, rule of law – they are universal for everyone regardless of their background (KG-2-P).

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[77] Viktor Chernomyrdin was one of the key Russian politicians in the 1990s.

In this context, arguments such as every state should develop its own 'adapted' or 'manageable' model of democracy (discussed in Section 6.2.1) are interpreted as 'craftiness of politicians manipulating the public' (KZ-35-S/E); or 'nothing more than big dirty politics' (KG-16-CS); or 'an attempt of authoritarian leaders to preserve their rule' (KG-6-P). Moreover, interviewed elites in both countries tended to often acknowledge the increased tendency in this direction. They observed that in their respective countries the meaning of 'democracy' had suffered lately from intentional distortion. 'Democracy has almost become an abusive word in our society', complained a Kazakh respondent (KZ-30-S/A). This tendency is perceived to be visibly intensified by the Russian media, which is seen to have increased its propaganda on this matter in the course of recent years (e.g. KZ-13-J; KZ-15-CS; KZ-34-S/E; KZ-46-S/E; KG-1-P; KG-3-S/E; KG-8-S/E; KG-17-P; see also Chapter VII for more discussion on 'the factor of Russia').

As a result of these positive perceptions, cooperation with the EU on this aspect is seen as an opportunity for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to advance their own level of political development. The EU is viewed as the only option in terms of cooperation in a democracy promotion sphere given the perceived benevolence of Brussels' intentions compared, for example, to the US.

> One point is worth mentioning. Democracy, transparency, human rights – they are better developed in Europe than in Russia or China. Therefore, the only possible directions for us should be Europe: we should learn from Europe; we should assimilate European experience; we should be like Europe (KZ-13-J),

Another Kyrgyz interviewee also stated that 'in terms of promoting [democratic] values and principles, Russia and China are not, obviously, alternatives to the EU. Moreover, the EU is more experienced and trusted than the US. It is better to learn from Europe' (KG-32-S/E).

European Standards

The notion of the so-called '*European standards*' is another highly visible element of the EU's image as an opportunity shared in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. As some

respondents during interviews immediately stated: 'for me the EU is automatically high standards' (KZ-2-S/E), or 'the EU is the *etalon* of standards for everyone' (KG-18-P). However, in contrast to other attributes of the EU's image, the notion of 'European standards' is extremely vague. It does not have a clear fixed meaning, rather it can be filled with different understandings and be variously interpreted. 'European standards' may refer to anything that is positively associated with the EU. In some cases, 'standards' are used to refer to an overall model of economic, political, and social development of European countries. In this sense, a European standard of economic development, or of democracy, or of social welfare is viewed as the most admirable and desired model. In other cases, the notion of 'standard' may have more specific reference to technical characteristics of European goods and services. In this sense, 'European standard' is used as a synonym of high quality.

Whatever meaning it has, the notion of 'European standard' is widely used in both Kazakh and Kyrgyz societies. Firstly, it is present in the official discourses of both countries, when state officials frequently speak of the necessity of introducing European standards to different sectors of these countries' economic and political life. In the case of Kazakhstan, for example, this can be observed from the country's long-lasting endeavor to adopt 'Euro-3', then 'Euro-4', and now 'Euro-5' petroleum standards. As for Kyrgyzstan, after receiving the GSP+ status from the EU in 2016, state officials from different levels as well as business communities began discussing the issue of bringing Kyrgyz goods in line with European standards in order to export them to the European market.

Secondly, European standards are equally reflected in the media too. The media in Kazakhstan especially, frequently writes about how the country intends to adopt 'European standards': 'On the way to European standards' (*Express-K* 2011a), 'To meet the European criteria' (*Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* 2013c), or 'According to European standards' (*Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* 2016a), just to mention a few article headings from collected samples. Similarly, the Kyrgyz media from time to time, though less frequently than in Kazakhstan, makes specific references to 'European standards'. For example, we read in *Vecherniy Bishkek* (2012) that for Kyrgyzstan the EU 'is not only investment, but also […]

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high European standards that exist for us […] to create production, [and] goods for export to other countries'; or *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* (2012a) proudly writes that Kyrgyzstan 'will build administrative and residential buildings [applying] European standards. The quality of work will be guaranteed by Eurocodes, the documents agreed at the level of the European Union'.

Figure 6-2: The Prefix 'Euro-' in the streets of Astana (left), Almaty (middle), and Bishkek (right)[78] (author's photographs)

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[78] Astana: upper left - 'Visas, tourism, education abroad' – a tourist company; lower left: 'Euro-cleaning: a network of dry-cleaners and laundries of European level' – a laundry company.
Almaty: upper middle - 'Euro-pharmacy' – a pharmacy; lower middle - 'Euro-pharma' – a pharmacy.

Thirdly, even in everyday life one may frequently hear a reference to Euro-standards. As one of the respondents said,

> in our ordinary life we like to refer to European standards very much – something meets European standards, done according to European style, *Euro-remont* [Euro-renovation] and so on. It [European standard] remains one of the most attractive sides of Europe for us (KZ-10-S/E).

The proof of this can easily be found in the streets of both Kazakh and Kyrgyz cities. The names of many business stores contain the prefix 'Euro-', or they refer to European quality in their advertisement leaflets (see **Figure 6-2** above).

Given this high appreciation of European standards, it is no surprise that cooperation with the EU is unanimously perceived as an opportunity for these countries to upgrade themselves to the European level of quality. As viewed, there is no alternative to European standards:

> we should move towards European standards. We do not need Russian, Chinese or Japanese standards. We need European standards of life, fighting corruption, civil society standards, standards of freedom of speech. Of course, Europe also has its own shortcomings. However, they are ahead of humankind in terms of development. They are the leading civilization: not us, not China, not Russia, not Asia with Africa, but Europe (KZ-37-P; also KZ-18-P; KZ-23-P; KZ-30-S/E; KZ-34-S/E).

Another respondent in Kyrgyzstan further continued that

> Kyrgyzstan joined the Eurasian Economic Union. But if we could, we would join the European Union. Why? Because internal [political] standards in the EAEU are much lower than in the EU. Therefore, joining the EAEU was a step back for us, whereas [joining] the EU would be ten steps forward (KG-12-S/E; also KG-9-S/E; KG-18-P; KG-24-CS; KG-33-CS).

Bishkek: upper right – 'Euro-Fashion' – a clothing store; lower right – 'Euro Gurmaniya' – a food store.

Integration Experience

Finally, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan both recognize the EU as an opportunity to learn from its rich and successful *integration experience*. Given the fact that both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan themselves are in the process of institution-building within the framework of the EAEU, it was not rare to find comparative references to the European experience in Kazakh and Kyrgyz societies. The EU is frequently described as an 'example', 'successful', 'unique', and 'breakthrough' integration.[79] Kazakh and Kyrgyz elites often highlight the point that the EU, first of all, is 'a union of former archenemies' (KG-20-P), therefore the very fact that Europe has been able to overcome those complex historical processes in order to transform from the battlefield to the most prosperous part of the world is viewed as an achievement in its own right: 'the EU has experienced various difficulties during its formation and has successfully got over them, as a result, today it represents the most mature integration ever' (KZ-37-P); or

> the EU has done a great job to bring together not merely 28 states, but 28 states with different history, political structures, and economic development. Today we are in our own process of creating an economic organization [the EAEU], and we clearly understand how difficult it is (KG-19-P).

The European institution-building model is generally used as a reference point when Eurasian integration is discussed. The EU is perceived as a template or prototype to draw positive lessons from as well as to avoid its negative experiences. For example, we read in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* (2014a) that 'it is critically important for Kazakhstan, which represents one of the main authors and ideological inspirers of the Eurasian integration, to learn from the European experience so as to be able to avoid the pitfalls of the future Eurasian Economic Union'.

But more commonly, a reference to the European model is used to emphasize the existing shortcomings of the EAEU in contrast to the former. The point that the EAEU does not

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[79] These adjectives repeatedly appear in collected data samples.

quite follow the 'tested' and 'proven' European path is frequently highlighted by the majority of interviewed elites in both countries. That is to say that the EAEU is expected 'to directly follow the already identified path to success' (KG-33-CS), instead of 'reinventing the wheel again' (KZ-1-S/E). In this regard, two aspects of the EAEU were found to be criticized the most. First, the interviewed elites in both countries are daunted by the speed of the Eurasian integration. As viewed, the EAEU is trying to encompass too much in a very short period of time. As a result, 'speed works at the expense of quality' (KZ-28-CS). Therefore, the EAEU is expected to take its time in building a strong foundation first, only then expanding the boundaries of integration. For example, criticizing the rushing dynamics of the Eurasian integration, a Kazakh interviewee claimed that

> Europe has come a long way to create this kind of successful integration. But they calculated every decision they made, every step they took. It has taken longer, but it has been a deliberated path. Look at the Eurasian Economic Union. It does not work at all, because we are rushing the logical development that any integration needs (KZ-48-J).

Similarly, a Kyrgyz politician stated that

> this [the European] integration is a model for us – of how a union should be built. […] It clearly demonstrates that integration should start small in order to succeed. Unfortunately, it has not been taken into consideration by many other integrations, including the EAEU. We [the EAEU] always have general and grandiose ambitions, though the path to success always starts from concrete and small aims, as it was coal and steel in case of the EU (KG-7-P).

Second, Kazakh and Kyrgyz elites tend to contrast the EAEU to its European prototype in terms of the equality of all member states in the decision-making process. The European Union is perceived as a union where 'fairness and the principle of non-discrimination' dominates (KZ-23-P), and where all member states' interests are respected. 'Even giant countries like Germany, France, the UK or Italy can neither economically nor politically infringe interests of Luxemburg or Denmark', as claimed one interviewee (KZ-3-S/E). This

is viewed as a true expression of democracy, when, for example, 'Malta can block the German position if that contradicts its interests' (KZ-29-P). In a similar manner, *Vecherniy Bishkek* (2011b) of Kyrgyzstan writes that

> [t]he structure of this organization [the EAEU], following the example of the European Union, should not stipulate from the very beginning any individual country to become a leader, which leads others and claims hegemony. For instance, huge Germany and small Luxemburg have equal rights.

As a result, the EU is seen as a fear-free organization, whose members are never in a position of being forced and pressured, regardless of their economic and political capacity.[80] This is perceived as a sharp distinction from the Eurasian Economic Union, where the Russian political and economic pressure on other members is viewed as quite obvious.

This perception of the EU, however, slightly diverges from how the Union actually functions. The decision-making within the European Union does not always require a unanimous vote, when even a small country can block an initiative if it contradicts its interests. This applies only to issues of highest importance such as foreign policy or taxation. In fact, most decisions require a qualified majority, which in practice means 55% of member-states with 65% of the total EU population. In this system of voting, one can hardly speak about Luxemburg blocking Germany. This illustrates that the model of European integration is very often idealized. Although the recent negative developments within the EU seem to have undermined this (see Chapter V for this), the Union is still recognized as the only example of successful integration. As one of the respondents figuratively put it, 'the European Union is a half full glass, rather than half empty' (KG-19-P). In this regard, the EAEU is expected to fully follow the main principles of European integration in order to get rid of its existing shortcomings. At the same time, there is naked skepticism that it ever will.

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[80] Yet, Chapter V mentioned that in the particular context of the economic crisis in Greece, the EU is sometimes is seen as an organization ruled by economically stronger countries like Germany (see Section 5.3.1).

6.1.4 Summarizing the 'Opportunity'

This section discussed perceptions of the EU as an opportunity in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In general, it was argued that in both countries the Union is recognized as the most benevolent external actor. However, the EU's benign image is a relative category, as it is normally constructed against the US, China, or even Russia. In other words, it is in relation to these actors that the EU is seen as having benevolent intentions in Central Asia. This further leads to the recognition that cooperation with the EU predominantly represents an opportunity which these countries can benefit from, i.e. the EU is a 'force for good'. At the same time, the exact content of opportunity partly varies in the two countries. While in Kazakhstan the EU is immediately seen as an opportunity in terms of economic benefits, Kyrgyzstan laments the lack of economic opportunities from the EU, and mostly views it only as a donor. Additionally, in both countries the EU is perceived as representing an opportunity in terms of adopting its democratic values and standards, as well as learning from its integration experience.

6.2 The European Union as a Threat

This section, conversely, will demonstrate that the EU's perceived intentions are not absolutely free from any skeptical views. As argued earlier, the Union is largely recognized as the most benign external actor in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. However, one issue area appears to be controversial. That is the EU's normative agenda in Central Asia. When it comes to the promotion of 'European values', the EU is not always recognized as a benign and pacific actor, rather perceptions of the Union may shift from positive to negative. In this context, the EU is often viewed as a 'mentor' with hidden intentions, trying to impose its will on others. This causes suspicion towards the EU's activities: 'the European Union aims to promote its values by saying that they want to help us. But free cheese is only in a mousetrap. The EU pretends to help us, but in reality, they pursue their own secret interests' (KG-25-J), or 'sometimes they [Europeans] present their hidden

intentions wrapping them into a beautiful wrapper' (KZ-12-P). As a result, the EU's behavior in this issue-area may be interpreted as a threat to their own country.

As the collected data demonstrate, the EU's perceived imposition of its values is seen to represent a threat in two ways. They result from different interpretations of 'European values', shown in **Figure 6-1** выше (see on page 166): (1) political values of democracy and (2) cultural values such as the breakdown of family values, LGBT issues etc. As argued выше, when understood from the first angle, perceptions in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan become divided and polarized, though the degree of polarization seems to be different in the two countries. On the one hand, values of democracy promoted by the EU are recognized as being universal, thus suitable and beneficial for Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan (Section 6.1.3 above). On the other hand, an alternative interpretation is that democratic values are not necessarily universal, rather each country needs to develop its own model of democracy. From this aspect, the EU's assertive promotion of democracy is seen as an imposition of its own model, thus a *threat to political stability* of these states. These different interpretations, as will be elaborated in Chapter VII, were found to be partly shaped by the interviewed elite's professional position: if oppositional politicians and civil society representatives tended to view the EU's promotion of democracy as an opportunity, those who viewed it as a threat normally belonged to state-affiliates.

As far as the cultural aspect of 'European values' is concerned, perceptions appear to be predominantly unanimous with no alternative interpretations. In both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, issues like same-sex marriage, LGBT rights, a shift from the 'traditional' family institution, and breakdown of close family bonds are uncompromisingly condemned. The EU's support and promotion of these values is perceived to pose a *threat to local 'traditional' values* (**Figure 6-1** on page 166). The following two sub-sections accordingly discuss these two elements of the EU's image as a threat.

6.2.1 Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Threat to Political Stability

An alternative interpretation of the EU's promotion of democracy suggests that there is no universal model of democracy. Instead, each country may develop its own version depending on internal characteristics. From this angle, what the Union promotes is said not to be fully applicable to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, therefore it needs to be *adapted* to the local realities. Otherwise, the 'European model' may represent a *threat to political stability* in these countries. This line of argumentation, extensively found in conducted interviews as well as media samples, greatly coincides with how the official discourse(s) has long been framing the concept of democracy, especially in Kazakhstan. In general, 'democracy' as such has never been questioned even in the official discourses of Central Asian countries. There is no rhetorical denial in either Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan that these countries' ultimate goal is to build a 'democratic' state.[81] What is questioned, however, is the promotion or even imposition of democracy by external actors, including the EU.

Omelicheva (2015) observes that despite rhetorically complying with 'democracy', the very meaning of this notion is understood and articulated differently in Central Asian countries. The leaders' construction of 'democracy' is designed to undermine the western understanding and reject its presumed universality. Especially, this seems to be more evident in the case of Kazakhstan. The Kazakh leadership has long asserted that the western model of democracy is not necessarily applicable to the country. Therefore, on its way to democracy, the country is said to follow its own 'Kazakhstani path' (Omelicheva 2015, 75-80). President Nazarbayev repeatedly articulates that

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[81] It can be argued that in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the discourse of democracy has always been the focus of local authorities. As noted in Section 6.1.2, 'democracy' has been Kyrgyzstan's main currency to attract the attention and aid of external players (Cummings 2012, 130). In the case of Kazakhstan, Schatz and Maltseva (2012) argue that the country's leadership has used democracy frames to 'persuade' internal society as well as external actors to increase the legitimacy of the regime.

by expressing respect to democracy that exists in the world and moving toward it, at the same time, we do not want to lose our own identity. We have different thoughts. We, it can even be said, see different dreams than Europeans (*Tengrinews* 2014),

or

for many years, the world has been trying to make us believe that there is supposedly only one successful model of democratic structure. But it is not true. Democracy is a universal value. [Only] one model of democracy emerged in the genes of European people and traveled to North America with immigrants. […] However, there are many other alternatives. […] In fact, each country may have its own unique political system (Akorda 2015).

Even in Kyrgyzstan, which was often referred to as an 'island of democracy' in the early stages of its independence, the leadership under Akayev, and later under Bakiev, tried to adapt the notion of democracy for their own political purposes, parallelly criticizing and rejecting the liberal democracy of the western model (Omelicheva 2015, 75-86). But this seems to have decreased during the Atambayev's presidency, who arguably did not alienate much of the 'European' model of democracy and created a relatively enabling political context for democracy narratives. For example, during his visit to the EU in 2015, President Atambayev stated that 'we [Kyrgyz people] are following *your* [European] path − the path to democracy', further claiming that the Kyrgyz people are close to European democracy principles (President.kg 2015). As a result, the extent of rhetorical opposition to external promotion of democracy is relatively lower in the Kyrgyz official discourse. The projection of these official narratives was found in the data, collected for this research (elite interviews and media samples). The findings indicate that the non-universality of 'European/Western' model of democracy is *partly* shared at the intermediate level too.[82] However, as in the case of official discourses, it is more visible and explicit in the case of Kazakhstan.

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[82] The reason for saying 'partly' is that, as discussed earlier, one line of interpretation still recognizes that democracy is universal. From their perspective, the narrative articulated by the official discourse is nothing more than a political manipulation (see Section 6.1.3 above).

What are the perceived reasons of non-universality of the European/Western model? In both countries, it can be summarized as European/Western individualism *versus* Central Asian collectivism. As it is viewed, the European/Western model of democracy gives too much priority to individual rights. As a result, it becomes associated with an overly permissive society, one where individuals have the right to 'behave in any way they want, because they are protected by the umbrella of human rights' (KZ-5-P). From this angle, the society or state is secondary to individuals. This is perceived as contradicting the realities of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where collective interests are traditionally given priority over individual rights. As articulated by several respondents: 'the factors such as community spirit and collectivism should be taken into account in countries like Kazakhstan. I believe that individuals should acknowledge the boundaries of their freedom. Freedom is not limitless' (KZ-20-P); 'democracy does not imply all-permissiveness. Rather, it must have its own principles and order. Democracy does not give a right to do everything one wants' (KZ-4-P); or 'the basic human rights must be ensured by a state, but it does not mean that people can turn away from societal norms. They should be accountable to society' (KG-28-J). In other words, in the Central Asian understanding of democracy, a state is viewed as the main institution that should, on the one hand, ensure democracy, while on the other, regulate and control it to a certain extent so as to provide societal stability. Preserving stability and order is seen to be the main objective of any society. Therefore, the European/Western model of 'individualistic' and 'all-permissive' democracy is said to be *adapted* to the realities of these countries, rather than blindly *adopted*.

In this context, the EU's insistence on the universality of democracy and its active promotion is viewed as a possible threat to the political stability of these countries. The Union is seen to be behaving as a superior power, 'which teaches others, criticizes them, and tries to impose its will on others' without any consent from them, and ignores their contextual distinctions from Europe (KG-22-P). As asserted by another interviewee in Kazakhstan,

> … traditional European overconfidence. They have this trait, unfortunately. Probably it is based on self-reliance that they are developed and highly cultured, while others are 'slightly barbarous'. All their failures here [in Central Asia] are caused by their overconfidence that they know better than us what we need and how we should live here (KZ-8-J).

From this angle, various international and local NGOs cooperating with the EU on politically sensitive issues provoke suspicion and perception of threat. They are labelled as 'destructive' organizations, which implement 'subversive activities' (KG-28-J). As a Kazakh politician claimed:

> we may have different attitudes towards President Putin, but he provided the most accurate characteristics of them [NGOs] – 'the agents of Western influence'. We must never forget the old saying that whoever pays the piper calls the tune. We must stop the activities of such NGOs. Again, we would never be allowed to sponsor NGOs in London or Berlin (KZ-16-P).

Brussels' attempt to bypass the official state and cooperate with 'destructive' NGOs, non-structural opposition, or just 'criminals sentenced by Kazakh government' (KZ-24-P) is perceived to be interference into domestic affairs, masked by the rhetoric of democracy and human rights. Therefore, it is expected that the EU should cooperate first with the official government on the issues of democracy promotion and support to NGOs: 'a top-down approach is needed [in democracy promotion], rather than support to separate murky NGOs' (KZ-13-J); or 'if the EU has nothing to hide [from the state], it should work together with our competent authorities, instead of saying "we will give this amount of money to these NGOs for democratization, but you should not interfere"' (KG-34-P).

In the case of Kazakhstan, suspicion towards the EU (or the West in general) is further reinforced by the discourse of instability and chaos in other countries and regions. In the official discourse of Kazakhstan, the Arab Spring and the series of color revolutions in the post-Soviet space are associated with the external 'promotion of democracy'. These are used to demonstrate that the unilateral external imposition of democracy leads only to

instability and chaos. Especially, the examples of Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine were found to be highly visible in the collected data samples, possibly due to their proximity to Kazakhstan. Blank (2012, 154) argued that Kyrgyzstan represents 'a cautionary example to all of its neighbors who believe that it exemplifies all the dangers and none of the benefits of democracy'. Similarly, the collected data show that both Kyrgyzstan and Ukraine are perceived as victims of an uncontrolled promotion of democratic values, which pushed back their political, economic, and social development. They are viewed as examples which must be avoided, rather than followed. Instead, it is Singapore, which is frequently referred to as a role model for Kazakhstan more than any other European/Western country, Ukraine or Kyrgyzstan:

> Once we hosted a delegation of the EU. European MPs and politicians were speaking here at the parliament. In their speeches, they were always repeating - 'learn from Kyrgyzstan!'. With raised fingers they did not tire of repeating – 'learn from Kyrgyzstan!'. But we do not want to learn from Kyrgyzstan. We do not want that kind of democracy. If Europeans wish so, they themselves can learn from Kyrgyzstan. Even Lee Kwan Yew was surprised that all Western countries used to criticize him while praising Kyrgyzstan. Where is Singapore and where is Kyrgyzstan?! We do not want Kyrgyzstan here, we want Singapore in Kazakhstan (KZ-16-P).

Threat to Traditional Values

Another aspect of the Union's image as a threat to both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is the perception that the EU represents a *threat to local traditional values*. This perception appears when the EU and the promotion of 'European values' is interpreted in terms of 'untraditional' cultural values, and more specifically, (1) the rights of LGBT communities and (2) the decline of family bonds (see **Figure 6-1** above). This has already become a visible and inseparable attribute of the EU's overall image. From this angle, European societies are viewed as experiencing a deep crisis of morality and human values. 'Alien' to humankind, moral norms are seen taking over everyday life in European/Western countries.

Unlike 'democratic values' (which cause divided and polarized perceptions), both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan *unanimously* view 'untraditional cultural values' as a threat that must be totally *avoided* and *countered*.[83]

Firstly, the EU and 'European values' are highly associated with the rights of sexual minorities and same-sex marriages, which cause exclusively negative attitudes in both countries. In this regard, there is even a special notion used in reference to Europe – *Gayropa* – which results from the combination of words 'gay' and 'Europe' in Russian. Arguably, it is not an image which has deep historical roots, rather a new trend of recent years mostly provoked and brought about by Russian propaganda, which undoubtedly has influence in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. In relation to Russia, Foxall (2017, 3; emphasis in original) generally summarizes that the 'evolution of EU–Russia relations […can be] captured [by] the phrase "from *Evropa* to *Gayropa*"'. The notion of *Gayropa* started being articulated in Russia in the early 2010s, and 'has become a means to define Russia's place in the modern world and plays an important role in geopolitical discourse and to legitimize the powers that be' (Riabov and Riabova 2014). This narrative has led Russia to perceive the EU as a threat to its 'spiritual bonds' (Gaufman 2017, 125-144). Similarly, Shahnazarian (2017) also observe the discourse of *Gayropa* to be present in Armenia, and also views it as a consequence of the Russian propaganda in the country.

In this context, it is not a surprise that the same narrative is also present in Central Asian countries. Arguably, the LGBT issue is the most visible negative association with the EU in both countries. Even European diplomats on the ground, interviewed for this research, commonly acknowledged that *Gayropa* had become an extremally powerful narrative that significantly damaged the EU's image and caused extra obstacles for it. As one diplomat claimed: 'for many people [in Kazakhstan] now we are just *Gayropa*. And we do not even know how to counter this powerful narrative' (EU-3-European diplomat). At the core of this narrative is the idea that Europe is increasingly moving towards 'unnatural' same-sex

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[83] However, it should also be noted that a few interviewed elites in both countries expressed neutral or relatively positive attitudes towards 'untraditional' values. However, this seems to mostly belong to idiosyncrasies of those elites.

relations. This is seen as destroying the very institution and meaning of 'family'. The passage from *Slovo Kyrgyzstana* (2015) below transmits all fears related to this, thus it is worth quoting it in length:

> the eternal bonds of marriage and family relations (monogamy, strong family ties, parenthood) are anathematized and ridiculed. One must finally lose mind and fall into unconsciousness to replace the sacred from indescribable times words of 'mother' and 'father' with indifferent and idiotic 'parent #1' and 'parent #2. […] Interesting: do the Europeans understand where are they going? Do not they have a sense of tragedy, the decline of European civilization? [...] In brief, the mentioned European eccentricities are realized under the flag of human rights and freedom. Europeans and Americans understand this problem in a very abstract one-sided way, [which is] beyond ethical and moral considerations

From the passage, we can also notice that the notion of same-sex relations is discursively linked to the notion of human rights. As a result, the latter has come to be (negatively) associated with the rights of LGBT communities. Moreover, the rights of LGBT communities are viewed as more persistently defended than the rights of others; 'Today homosexuals are more privileged than heterosexuals' claimed a respondent (KZ-8-J). In this context, even those interviewed elites who had generally positive attitudes towards *political* values of democracy and human rights, tended to reject that human rights should necessarily include the rights of sexual minorities: 'some of [European] values are clear and close to us. If rule of law, we definitely should aspire to it. But what does the concept of law include? Law for whom? If for gays, we can't accept that' (KZ-12-P); or '"European values" are, first of all, democracy, justice, tolerance. Look, a Pakistani became the mayor of London. I can't even imagine, for example, how a Kazakh could be elected for a similar position in Kyrgyzstan. […] But tolerance should not lead to the issue of gays, to same-sex marriages' (KG-26-J).

Secondly, the perceived value crisis in Europe is also associated with the decline of family bonds in Europe. As it is perceived, European societies are becoming highly individualized, when people only care about themselves, their self-interest, and their self-comfort. As a

result, the relationship between family members is seen to be weakened or even abandoned, and a sense of affinity between relatives is lost. An illustrative narrative of this kind can be found, for example, in *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* (2015b):

> Citizens of European countries are increasingly refusing to display simple human feelings, replacing them with considerations of practicality… It should be noted that 90% of the dead are cremated in the Swedish capital, 45% of the urns are not taken away by their relatives. The vast majority of funerals [are organized] 'without any ceremony'. Employees of the crematoriums do not know whose remains are burned, because there is only an identification number on the urns. For economic reasons, the energy received from the burnt urns is optionally included in the heating of their own houses or in the heating system of the city. The absence of funeral ceremonies is only one part of general tendency to break sensual and emotional bonds in many Swedish families. [We] wish only in Swedish?!

Moreover, the decline of family bonds is more specifically demonstrated with the example of parent-child relationships. There is a widely-spread perception in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that the number of lone parents, abandoned by their own children and left in residential houses, is increasing across European countries. In turn, parents are viewed as preferring fewer children, as well as being neglectful of their children and not showing enough parental warmth to them. For example, we read in *Egemen Qazaqstan* (2015b) that 'in Western [read European] countries [individual] egoism is in the first place, and has become a normal principle. This leads to tragic consequences: the number of lonely elderly people in these countries is increasing […]; in practice, the birth rate is decreasing year by year'. As similarly stated by one of the respondents: 'I am worried that people in Europe and America are losing family ties. Children have to leave their parents' home when they are very young, thus parents later find themselves in nursing houses' (KG-22-P).

Again, all these 'untraditional' values are viewed as something unnatural and alien for the traditional and cultural foundations of Kazakh and Kyrgyz societies, where same-sex relations are said to be morally unjustifiable, and where close family and relative ties and mutual respect between older and younger generations are said to be a vital aspect of their

everyday life. In this context, any attempt by the EU to promote its 'untraditional' and 'immoral' values is perceived to represent a threat to local traditions. From this angle, the EU is repeatedly accused of imposing its alien vision to culturally different Central Asian countries. One Kazakh politician shared his experience in this regard:

> once we [Kazakh MPs] went to St. Petersburg in the framework of PACE[84]. Around 200 MPs gathered from CIS countries and from the EU. During the event, European deputies had been reproaching us for two days. Two days, around 200 participants! Why? Because we do not allow unisex marriage in our countries. Is that normal to assemble 200 people and teach others how to live?! It is ridiculous. They must stop doing that (KZ-18-P).

At the same time, there is a clear understanding that the mentioned 'untraditional' and 'immoral' values have already become an inseparable part of European way of life, its values, and its democracy. Consequently, cooperation with the EU is viewed as unavoidably leading to the leak of 'undesired' elements into receiving societies. Therefore, in order to resist them and to protect the traditional basis of local societies, everything coming from Europe is said to be carefully filtered. As one of the interviewed elites figuratively put it,

> learning from Europe does not imply that we must directly copy everything. […] Mukhtar Shakhanov[85] once stated that 'we wanted to connect to the *vodoprovod* [water supply system] of civilization, but not be connected to the *kanalizaciya* [sewer]'. Therefore, we a need a filter (KG-25-J).

In other words, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are said to need selectivity when it comes to the issue of value promotion in their relations with the European Union.

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[84]PACE - Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe.

[85] Mukhtar Shakhanov is a famous Kazakh poet. He is also popular in Kyrgyzstan because of his friendship with Chingiz Aitmatov, a famous Kyrgyz writer. Shakhanov also served as Kazakh ambassador to Kyrgyzstan in 1993-2003.

6.2.2 Summarizing the 'Threat'

The section analyzed whether the EU is perceived as representing a threat in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The discussion demonstrated that despite generally being recognized as a benign actor, who represents an opportunity to benefit from, the EU can simultaneously be seen as a threat in both countries. Specifically, when it comes to the promotion of 'European values', the Union's image may shift from that of an opportunity to a threat. First, in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the EU can be perceived as a threat to the political stability of these countries, when promoting 'European democracy' is interpreted in terms of individualistic all-permissiveness and societal disorder. This aspect was found to be relatively more salient and explicit in the case of Kazakhstan, as the political leadership in the country has been more insistent on articulating the narrative in denial of the universality of the 'European' model of democracy and its suitability to Kazakhstan. Second, in both countries the EU is also perceived to represent a threat to local traditional values, because promoted 'European values' are associated with the rise of same-sex relations and the breakdown of family/relative bonds. From these two aspects, what the EU proposes is perceived to be either partly adapted (democracy values) or fully avoided ('untraditional' values).

6.3 Summary and Conclusion

This chapter analyzed whether the European Union is viewed as an opportunity or a threat, which, according to Image Study scholars, is one of the central dimensions of perceived images in International Relations. Now this section intends to provide a summary and some concluding points related to what has been discussed in previous sections. First, perceptions of threat and/or opportunity were found to be issue-specific. In the case of the EU, it is a challenging and problematic task to generalize the question of whether the Union is viewed as a threat or an opportunity. Such a generalization inevitably over-simplifies the whole picture. Instead, it needs to be acknowledged that perceptions of threat/opportunity are

more nuanced and complex. Depending on a specific issue area, the EU's image may change from that of an opportunity to a threat, and *vice versa*. What this implies is that the EU is perceived to be simultaneously both an opportunity and a threat, and which aspect becomes more salient depends on a particular angle.

Second, when 'opportunity' and 'threat' aspects are directly compared, it can be concluded that the former outweighs the latter in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Such a conclusion can be made through comparison of numbers of issue-areas, from which the EU is perceived as an opportunity and a threat. Only one issue-area leads to perceptions of threat, and that is value promotion; whereas from many other aspects, the EU is viewed positively. The EU is generally recognized as the most benign international actor. At the same time, it needs to be noted that the perceived benevolence is a relative category in a sense that it is relative to other actors such as the US, China, and Russia that the EU provokes less suspicion and is more trusted. Furthermore, both countries were found to demonstrate an aspiration to be (viewed as) a part of, if not the EU as an institution, then wider Europe, emphasizing their closeness or even belonginess to a wider Europe. Kazakhstan appeals to its Eurasian identity to relate itself to Europe; whereas Kyrgyzstan treats its level of democracy as a factor that makes the country unique and closer to Europe in contrast to other regional counterparts. Europe serves as a point of reference that both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan frequently refer to.

Third, in the context of the Union's perceived benignity and positivity, what it offers to Central Asian countries is predominantly perceived to represent an opportunity for them to benefit from. Although the general perception of opportunity is identical in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the particular content of opportunity partly differs in the two countries. This difference seems to be predominantly caused by the depth and structure of these countries' relations with the Union, as will be discussed in the next chapter. As the EU is Kazakhstan's biggest economic partner, Kazakhstan views Brussels, first of all, as an economic opportunity in terms of trade and investment, and technology and innovation. By contrast, Kyrgyzstan does not enjoy the same level of deep relations with Brussels. Consequently, what is perceived in the country is the lack of economic benefits from the

EU. Instead, the Union's development assistance becomes the most visible aspect of its activities in the country, which implies that the EU is perceived as a donor in Kyrgyzstan. Additionally, what both countries equally share is the EU's perception as an opportunity in terms of (*partly*) adopting from its democracy values, high standards, as well as learning from its integration experience.

Finally, despite being recognized as a (relatively) benign actor, the EU's normative agenda was found to be the only issue-area that provokes perceptions of threat from the EU. On the one hand, the perception of threat to political stability occurs when the Union is viewed as imposing its own model of democracy, opting for individualistic all-permissiveness at the expense of societal stability and order. Although it is present in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, it is in the former case that the narrative is articulated more visibly and explicitly. The reason, arguably, is in the difference of domestic political systems in the two countries, with Kazakhstan being more restrictive to the idea of external democracy promotion, and with Kyrgyzstan being more permissive and open to narratives of democracy (more in Chapter VII). On the other hand, there is also the perception of threat to local traditional values equally shared in both countries. This threatening image of the EU appears when 'European values' are interpreted in terms of the rise of same-sex relations and decline of family bonds in European societies. Despite becoming prevalent quite recently, this aspect has already become the most negative element of the Union's perceptions and an integral attribute of its general image. Having examined both power/capability and threat/opportunity aspects of the EU's image respectively in Chapters V and VI, now Chapter VII turns to scrutinize the factors that shape the way the EU is perceived.

Chapter VII: Factors Influencing Perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Chapters V and VI respectively examined perceptions of the EU's power/capability and threat/opportunity. The main focus of those chapters was to reveal *how* the EU is viewed from these aspects in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. By contrast, this chapter seeks to shift the focus from *how the EU is perceived* to *why it is perceived so* question. In other words, Chapter VII intends to understand the nature of perceptions of the EU discussed in previous chapters and examine what kind of factors shape them. The analysis of image sources has not been as central in the existing literature as the inquiry of images *per se*. The authors have mainly been interested in *how* an object is viewed, while only a few have further attempted to understand *why* an object is viewed in a particular way (e.g. Tsuruoka 2008, Chaban and Magdalina 2014, Keuleers 2015). In this regard, one of the aims of this study, as identified in the Introduction, is to bridge this gap and offer some empirical insights into how the EU's images and perceptions are shaped.

In the absence of comprehensive analytical frameworks, Chapter III proposed to apply a *multilevel analysis framework* for the study of image sources suggested by some authors (Keuleers 2015, Barcevicius et al. 2015). Such a framework scrutinizes them by dividing them into *global*, *country*, and *individual* level factors. This tripartite focus, as argued, provides a more holistic and detailed picture of image sources by ensuring that all levels influencing perceptions are taken into consideration (see Section 3.5).

Following this framework, overall, eight factors that shape the way the EU is perceived in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are discussed in following sections. They are listed in **Table 7-1** below. These factors are developed as a result of my interpretations of the collected data. Some of the identified factors repeatedly appear in the data and are referred to by interviewees, both by EU officials and/or Kazakh/Kyrgyz elites (e.g. the factor of Russia). Others are not openly visible in the data, but still their influence can be observed while analysing it (e.g. individual level factors).

Table 7-1: Factors Shaping EU's Images in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

Global Level Factors	*(1) Direct Contact between Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan and the EU*
	(2) Internal Troubles of the EU
	(3) Factor of Russia
	(4) Notion of 'Europe'
Country Level Factors	*(5) Domestic Cultural Context*
	(6) Domestic Political Context
Individual Level Factors	*(7) Individual's Professional Position*
	(8) Individual's Awareness of the EU

At the same time, by offering these factors, I do not claim to establish a direct causal relationship between the identified factors and perceptions of the European Union. In general, any analysis of image sources is a methodologically challenging task, because images as well as their sources are highly complex phenomena. Given this difficulty, Scott (1965, 64) argued that findings of such an inquiry are always based on interpretation, thus, they are, to an extent, 'suggestive' as he rightly pointed out. Therefore, the eight factors I propose here need to be conceived only as suggestive too.

Finally, this chapter does not presume that these eight factors are an exhaustive list. I do not pretend to reveal all of the possible factors that may contribute to perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Rather, I acknowledge that some potential sources of images may have been overlooked. For example, one could argue that 'Age' and 'Contact with the EU' could also have been important factors influencing how an individual perceives the EU (e.g. Barcevicius et al. 2015). Unfortunately, the data collected for this research do not allow for the inclusion of these and other possible factors in the discussion.

Having acknowledged these points, the three sections below discuss the identified factors in detail. Section 7.1 begins with four factors at the global level, followed by country level

factors in Section 7.2. Section 7.3, in turn, elaborates on two factors at the individual level. Finally, the findings are summarized in Section 7.4.

7.1 Global Level Factors

While studying images in International Relations, as rightly noted by Alexander, Levin, and Henry (2005), scholars have mainly appealed to structural level factors as possible sources of images. Indeed, structural level factors greatly contribute to how actors in world politics view each other (see Chapter III). The role of structural or, as I refer to here, *global level*, factors in shaping perceptions of the EU in Central Asia is also undeniable. The 'global level' factors in this context should be conceived as any image source that originates outside the borders of countries subject to the study. Therefore, even if one may reasonably argue that, for example, 'Internal Troubles of the EU' in **Table 7-1** is not a global level factor, but a domestic issue of the EU, it still seems to belong exactly to the global level when viewed from the Central Asian perspective. This section further continues with four identified factors at the global level that shape the way the EU is perceived in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

7.1.1 Direct Contact between Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan and the EU

The existing literature univocally acknowledges that perceived images, in the first place, come into being as a result of *direct contact* between perceiving and perceived actors. This has been a central focus of many scholars who intended to understand how actors develop perceptions of each other. Conventional constructivism, for example, is fully built around the argument that international actors come to formulate conceptions of Self and Other exclusively through the process of social interaction. Wendt's example of *Alter* and *Ego* accurately captures this idea (Wendt 1992, 1999; see Chapter III). Similarly, in Image Studies, Kelman (1965, 23) stated that '[i]t is through interaction with others that an individual develops his attitudes [towards them]', whereas Scott (1965, 93) called it 'common sense' that actors develop their images of each other in the process of bilateral

cooperation. Moreover, Shambaugh (1991) empirically demonstrated that the bilateral American-Chinese relationship was one of the main determinants of how 'America watchers' in China viewed the US, whereas the authors of a more recent research came to the same conclusion about the role of direct interaction in shaping external perceptions of the European Union (Barcevicius et al. 2015).

The importance of direct contact is also undeniable in the context of this research. Indeed, it can be suggested that Kazakhstan's/Kyrgyzstan's direct interaction with the Union is one of the most significant factors shaping how the EU is perceived in these countries. The relevance of this factor can be observed at least in two respects: on the one hand, the *depth* of cooperation with the EU influences overall visibility of the Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; on the other hand, the *structure* of cooperation affects the issue area(s) with which the Union is mostly associated in these countries.

Firstly, the *depth of direct relationship* with the EU appears to contribute to the general visibility of the Union in one or other country. One could argue that the more intensive the bilateral cooperation is, the more visible the EU becomes. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have considerably different depths of relationship with Brussels, with Astana being the EU's closest partner (in the context of Central Asia) in terms of both political and economic cooperation, whereas the Brussels-Bishkek relationship remains comparatively underdeveloped. Consequently, it is unsurprising that the Union was found to be more visible in Kazakhstan than Kyrgyzstan.

This can be observed from the amount of collected data in two countries. For example, the Kazakh media reports on EU-related topics on a regular basis, not just focusing on bilateral cooperation, official visits, and meetings, but also on general European affairs unrelated to the EU-Kazakhstan relationship. As a result, a total of 682 media samples were gathered in Kazakhstan for the purpose of this research. In Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, EU-related topics were found not to be as visible as in the previous case. Rather, the Kyrgyz media is generally neglectful of European affairs with the exception of increased attention to the EU during official visits and meetings. Consequently, only 262 samples were collected from

the Kyrgyz media in the same period (Chapter III). Likewise, my fieldwork experience revealed that there is a relatively higher number of 'Europe watchers' in Kazakhstan. As mentioned in Chapter III, it was considerably easier to identify Kazakh intermediate level elites who were able to share their commentaries on European affairs, whereas the number of Kyrgyz intermediate elites able to professionally comment on EU-related issues seemed to be fewer. This led to an imbalance in a number of conducted interviews in two countries: 53 in Kazakhstan and 35 in Kyrgyzstan. In addition to that, conducted interviews gave a general impression that, on average, the level of Kazakh elites' awareness of the Union and its policy in Central Asia was higher than that of their Kyrgyz counterparts. Such an argument is made as a result of a comparison of how insightful and detailed the interviews in the two countries were.

The difference in overall visibility of the EU also has an impact on its images in the two countries. More visibility implies more information is available about the EU. Scott (1965, 78-80) argues that the structural complexity of images may differ one from another depending on a number of attributes of the image, that is the amount of information available about the perceived object. More information about the object leads to its 'richer' or more complex images in the eyes of others. Following this logic, it can be suggested that as a result of its greater visibility, images of the EU in Kazakhstan were found to be richer and more complex than in Kyrgyzstan. One illustrative example of this is the 'Decaying Europe' narrative (Chapter V). Chapter V showed that this narrative is not only more visible in Kazakhstan than in Kyrgyzstan, but also more complex, explicit, and detailed, because data samples in Kazakhstan contained significantly greater and diverse numbers of references to this negative narrative. What this arguably suggests is that more visibility does not necessarily imply more *positive* visibility, rather negative aspects of images may also become more salient as a result of greater visibility.

Secondly, it can also be observed that not only the depth, but also the *structure of direct contact* between Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan and the EU influences how the former perceive the latter. If the *depth* of cooperation mainly shapes the Union's overall visibility, the *structure* of cooperation particularly influences aspects with which the Union is most

associated in the two countries. As in the previous case, structures of EU-Kazakhstan and EU-Kyrgyzstan relations visibly differ. The content of the EU-Kazakhstan relationship is economy-oriented with a focus on bilateral trade and investment. The picture is different in Kyrgyzstan, where Brussels mostly acts as a donor and supporter of the country's democratic aspirations. This divergence shapes the specific angle from which the Union is predominantly perceived in the two countries. For instance, the data samples collected in Kazakhstan, both media samples and elite interviews, contain a great number of references to economic aspects of Brussels' policy. As shown in Chapter VI, the EU is predominantly portrayed as an actor representing, above all, an *economic* opportunity for Kazakhstan. By contrast, the narrative on economic aspects is hardly visible in data samples in Kyrgyzstan as the level of economic cooperation between the parties remains low. Instead, the EU is predominantly associated with *donorship* activities in Kyrgyzstan (this perceptual difference between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan was discussed at length in Chapter VI). This difference, once again, can be explained precisely with the structure and content of these countries' relations with the EU: i.e. the aspect the EU comes to be associated with partly depends on which issue-areas these countries cooperate on with the EU the most.

7.1.2 Indirect Contact with the EU: The EU's Recent Internal Troubles

Although the overall importance of direct contact in shaping images remains undeniable, Scott (1965, 95) argues that '[m]ore commonly, international images are developed in complete absence of [direct] contact with the object […] perhaps indirectly through acquaintances'. Arguably, this is even more evident in an information age with the rapid development of new information spreading and distribution technologies, as any major events happening in one part of the world immediately become known across the globe, thus immediately contributing to the external perceptions of that actor. Applied to the case of perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, this implies that not just direct social interaction exists as a source of information about the EU, but also Central Asians indirectly learn about Brussels from other sources that have no relation to EU-Kazakhstan or EU-Kyrgyzstan relations. One indirect source of this type was found to be the EU's

internal affairs, or more precisely, *recent internal troubles* that the EU has been suffering from.[86]

As theoretically argued in Chapter III, although images are stable concepts, they are not absolutely static. Especially, 'spectacular' events, as Deutsch and Merritt (1965) called them, are more likely to bring noticeable changes to existing images. In the case of the EU, Chapter V demonstrated that the recent internal troubles in the Union, namely the economic crisis in the Eurozone and the issue of refugees/migrants, acted as 'spectacular' events and negatively altered the way the Union is currently perceived in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It can even be argued that these issues have become the main agenda-setting topics that the EU is immediately associated with in these countries. For example, a great number of collected media samples covers these topics, more in Kazakhstan and to a lesser degree in Kyrgyzstan. As a rule, these samples are also lengthier in comparison to those, which cover, for instance, issues related to EU-Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan relations. Likewise, the majority of interviewed elites were also more prepared to discuss the EU's internal difficulties caused by economic troubles or refugee flows, rather than specifics of its policy in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. One could similarly argue that average citizens of these countries may also not be familiar with what kind of policy the European Union implements in Central Asia, but that they most probably have heard of the EU suffering from internal problems given the extensive media coverage.

In this context, it is obviously not surprising to suggest that *the EU's recent internal troubles* have become one of the main factors shaping how the Union is perceived in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. This factor particularly contributes to the shift of Brussels' images from positive to negative. Chapter V discussed the narrative of 'Decaying Europe', which was said to become an inseparable component of the EU's general image. It is this narrative, which is triggered by recent internal issues in the Union. Similar trends of image

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[86] In theory, not only the EU's internal affairs, but also external policies unrelated to Central Asia can be a source of its perceptions in the region. In a certain aspect, the data collected for this research allow us to see how Brussels' foreign policy elsewhere (for example, towards the Ukrainian-Russian conflict) influences the Union's perceptions in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. However, the amount of collected data, unfortunately, is insufficient to develop a separate comprehensive discussion on this.

alteration as a result of the economic crisis and the refugee crisis have been reported in relation to perceptions of the Union in other parts of the world too (e.g. Barcevicius et al. 2015, Chaban and Holland 2014, Shestopal et al. 2016). This fact even further strengthens the argument on how important the discussed factor is in shaping external perceptions of the European Union.

7.1.3 Indirect Contact with the EU: The Factor of Russia

As stated by Scott (1965, 95) earlier, actors may develop their images of others not only in the process of direct interaction, but also indirectly, such as, 'through acquaintances'. In the context of this research, the role of such an 'acquaintance' – Russia – in shaping perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is also evident. First of all, it needs to be acknowledged that in the light of the situation in Ukraine and the subsequent Russian-European/Western confrontation, the EU and the West in general have become one of the most visible objects in the Russian media. For example, a recent analysis of news content in Russia's three state-controlled broadcasting channels – Channel One, NTV, and Russia-1 – revealed that the selected news channels had been broadcasting an average of eighteen daily negative news pieces about Europe for the past three and half years.[87] The average ratio of negative to positive news was 85% negative against 15% positive (ECEAP and UKMC 2018). Similarly, the authors of another research on perceptions of the Union in Russia argued that 'the [Russian] political regime creates a powerful information monopoly through censorship. It influences *what* information [about the EU] people can access and *how* they perceive it' (Barcevicius et al. 2015, 54, emphasis in original). What these demonstrate is that the Russian media speaks about the EU, and it mostly speaks in negative terms. To counter Russia's anti-European/Western 'disinformation campaign', as it is officially referred to by the EU, the Council Conclusions from 2015 suggested preparing an action plan on strategic communication (European Council 2015). This later

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[87] The analysis was carried out by the Estonian Center of Eastern Partnership (ECEAP) and the Ukraine Crisis Media Center (UKMC), and considered broadcasts between July 1, 2014 and December 31, 2017 (3.5 years). However, the objects of analysis included not only 28 EU member-states, but also Montenegro, Norway, Serbia, Switzerland, and five members of Eastern Partnership – Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, and Moldova (but it excluded Ukraine).

led to the establishment of the *East StratCom Task Force*, which deals with tackling the Russian 'disinformation campaign' in Eastern Neighborhood countries (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Belarus, Georgia, Moldova, Ukraine). The very fact that the EU engages with Eastern Neighborhood countries in terms of countering Russian propaganda indicates the Union's recognition of the negative influence that the Russian media has in these countries.

Furthermore, it also needs to be acknowledged that the Russian media has a dominating impact over information spaces of not just the Eastern Neighborhood countries, but also of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. For instance, Gerber and Zavisca (2016, 94) stated that the '[c]onsumption of Russian television news is […] extremely widespread in Kyrgyzstan, where 75 percent of respondents watch Russia-sourced news shows daily or several times a week'. Although the authors did not provide data for Kazakhstan, one could still suggest that the picture in Astana is not notably different from Bishkek. In other words, Russia has a significant role in supplying Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan with information, including about the European Union. Therefore, it can be argued that the Russian media is also one of the factors shaping how the EU is viewed in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Russia's negative influence was repeatedly acknowledged by interviewed European officials in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan during my field research The diplomats on the ground repeatedly emphasized the negative role that the Russian media plays in portraying the European Union, and complained about the difficulty of countering its impact (EU-1-European diplomat; EU-2-European diplomat; EU-5-EU official; EU-21-European diplomat; EU-22-EU official). One of the European diplomats shared his experience at length:

> I see a kind of degradation of perception of the EU in Kyrgyzstan. But that is not linked to the policy and projects of the EU here, it is linked to the problem between Russia and Ukraine. Many people here watch Russian media. Russian TV develops an image of the EU as an aggressive organization towards Russia. They developed the idea that it [the EU] is dangerous for the stability of Kyrgyzstan [too]. They built a parallel between Maidan in Ukraine and what happened here in 2010.[88] I

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[88] In 2010, Kyrgyzstan also went through internal turmoil, when Bakiyev's regime was overthrown as a result of mass uprisings in April. This also led to an ethnic escalation between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in the south of the country in June 2010. The interviewed diplomat is referring to these events.

remember, once I saw in *Vechernyi Bishkek* the pictures taken in Maidan and here [in Kyrgyzstan] in 2010. It said, "look, it is the same. Western countries will try to do the same again tomorrow". But we have no interest at all to see these countries unstable.

Along with European diplomats, the factor of Russian media was also acknowledged by interviewed elites in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, especially by those who seemed to have more pro-European orientation (among others, KZ-30-S/E; KZ-34-S/E; KG-1-P; KG-17-P). For instance, a Kyrgyz interviewee argued that 'the perception of the EU largely depends on how the Russian federal channels represent it' (KG-8-S/E), whereas a Kazakh interviewee stated that 'Russia can easily negate with its information means all the positive work that the EU is doing in Central Asia' (KZ-22-CS).

Drawing from fieldwork materials, it can be suggested that the Russian media plays at least two functions when it comes to portraying the European Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Firstly, the Russian media has an *agenda-setting* role to play. The agenda-setting theory is formulated around the idea that the media 'may not be successful much of the time in telling people what to think, but it is stunningly successful in telling its readers what to think *about*' (Cohen quoted in McCombs and Shaw 1972, 177 ; emphasis in original). Mass-media can be 'persuasive in focusing public attention on specific events, issues, and persons, and in determining the importance people attach to public matters' (Shaw 1979, 96). Applied to our case, it means that the media in Russia selectively puts emphasis on certain issues related to the EU and makes them more visible in the public discourse. In practice, it pays particular attention to negative aspects of the Union, thus, it brings negative narratives about the EU to the foreground. As the joint study conducted by ECEAP and UKMC (2018) demonstrated, the topics related to economic and social troubles, the rise of internal political disagreements, illegal migrant/refugee flows, terrorism, or untraditional sexual relations dominated the Russian news channels in 2014-2017. Consequently, these themes also rose in visibility in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan and became the issues with which the EU was immediately associated.

Secondly, along with agenda-setting, the Russian media also plays the function of *framing*, which denotes the idea that 'how an issue is characterized in news reports can have an influence on how it is understood by audiences' (Scheufele and Tewksbury 2007, 9). In other words, Russia's role in shaping perceptions of the EU is not that of simply reporting on negative aspects of the Union making them more visible, but also of presenting an interpretation of what they mean for the EU, for Russia, and for the world in general. The ECEAP and UKMC (2018, 59) study argues that the '[d]istinct feature of Russian news is that a viewer virtually never gets a pure fact about an event, but always an interpretation, an already formed opinion'. For example, during the refugee crisis of 2015 it was not just the facts of the crisis that the media was reporting, it was also constructing and spreading the image of a helpless, chaotic, declining Europe. Similarly, while reporting on 'European values', the Russian media provides its own interpretation of the concept associated with 'wrong values' such as 'LGBT issues' or 'pedophilia' (ECEAP and UKMC 2018). Given the influence of the Russian media in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, it is possible to suggest that these negative frames also travel to these countries, shaping the way the Union is perceived.

At the same time, it should be noted that the Russian media, obviously, is not the only factor to be blamed for negative perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. One reason is that it is a challenging task, as Laruelle (2018) argues, to discern which content in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is produced by the Russian media, and which is produced by the local media in Russian. This makes the issue more nuanced. Secondly, as many other studies demonstrate, the rise of negative perceptions of the EU is a common global trend in many corners of the world, including distant regions where Russia has no informational influence (e.g. Barcevicius et al. 2015, Chaban and Holland 2014, Chaban, Kelly, and Holland 2015). Therefore, the overall impact of the Russian media should not be overestimated either.

7.1.4 Notion of 'Europe'

When perceptions of the EU are discussed, it is unavoidable to highlight the role that the notion of '*Europe*' plays in shaping the *European Union's* external images. Lucarelli (2013, 439) proposed that exploring the link between these two could be one of the possible prospects for further research, but she also warned that it might be a methodologically difficult task. Despite this difficulty, some empirical studies have suggested that the idea of 'Europe' is one of the important factors that influence the EU's external perceptions in many geographic destinations (e.g. Barcevicius et al. 2015).

The interview and media materials collected for this research also allow me to speak of the notion of 'Europe' as one of the important factors contributing to perceptions of the European Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Interviews with intermediate elites demonstrate that the majority of elites in both countries have a clear understanding of what the 'European Union' is. Nevertheless, they often use 'Europe' interchangeably with the 'European Union'. This interchangeability is even taken for granted. For example, it was not rare to hear interviewees stating that 'today the European Union is already a synonym for Europe' (KG-6-P). As put by another respondent in Kazakhstan,

> my first association [with the EU] is, of course, that of Europe. I am aware of what the European Union is; I know about its enlargement and about member states. But the EU traditionally is Europe for me, especially Western Europe (KZ-51-J).

Similarly, media samples in both countries regularly use these notions interchangeably too. The titles of many of the collected newspaper articles researched regularly use 'Europe' while reporting on the 'European Union'. For example: 'To *Europe* – with fingerprints' (*Express-K* 2013), 'Will *Europe* withstand the Greek debt?' (*Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* 2015f); '*Europe* will help us again' (*Vecherniy Bishkek* 2011a); 'We will trade with *Europe* at reduced tariffs' (*Slovo Kyrgyzstana* 2014), to mention just a few. Despite referring to 'Europe', the content of all these and many other articles is about the European Union. This interchangeability both among elites and in media samples implies that although the reference point of this thesis is the European Union, some components of its images,

discussed in previous chapters, should be read not merely as those of the EU as an institution, but also of 'Europe' in general. Very often it is analytically challenging to separate one from the other.

A recent comparative study carried out by Barcevicius et al. (2015, 58-60) concludes that in many parts of the world '*Europe*' is mostly associated with social welfare, culture, history, research, and innovation aspects of the joint image, whereas the *European Union* becomes visible as an economic and political actor in the context of high level visits, foreign interactions, and the latest internal issues in the Union. A similar observation can be made in regard to perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan too. As Chapters V and VI illustrated, despite increasing skepticism towards the EU and growing negative perceptions of it, the Union still enjoys admiration in many aspects. It is still referred to as the most prosperous part of the world; its history and culture are praised; and the Central Asian countries would like to adopt its technology, innovation, and standards. This general positivity, however, seems to derive not necessarily from the European Union's successful policy as an institution, but rather is largely evoked by the historically developed notion of 'Europe' in these countries.

The image of Europe as a prosperous region has historical roots in the majority of post-Soviet states. In these countries, Europe has traditionally had an idealized positive image. For example, few authors demonstrate in relation to Russia, that Europe has played the role of its admired Other for centuries, and Russia has long attempted to become a part of this 'Heaven' – that is Europe (Costa Buranelli 2014, Neumann 1996). Similarly, the authors of *Identities and Foreign Policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* demonstrate the importance of 'Europe' not only for Russia, but also for Ukraine and Belarus (White and Feklyunina 2014). Arguably, this partly relates to other countries in the post-Soviet space too, including Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as shown in Chapter VI. To a certain extent, as in Russia, Europe has traditionally been admired and been the standard for what 'developed' means in these countries. This admiration towards 'Europe', however, existed long before the notion of the 'European Union' started being commonly recognized in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Therefore, the way the *European Union* is positively perceived in Kazakhstan

and Kyrgyzstan is partly inherited from the idealized image of '*Europe*'. As one of the interviewees stated, 'we love them [the Europeans] not because of what the European Union does in Kazakhstan, but because we know that they are Europe' (KZ-28-CS).

7.2 Country Level Factors

Having examined image sources at the global level, now the chapter continues with country level factors that contribute to perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The country level sources of images should be conceived as those that exclusively originate within a country under study: Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in this case. The focus on country-specific factors speaks to the argument put by critical constructivists (e.g. Hopf 2000, 2002, Doty 2000, Zehfuss 2001, 2002). They criticize the conventional constructivism of Alexander Wendt that conceptions of Self and Other develop exclusively in the process of social interaction. Critical constructivists suggest that although actors learn about others through direct interaction, how the 'learning' proceeds largely depends on the domestic context of a perceiving actor. Domestic history, culture, and values, among other things, may have a crucial effect on how an actor conceptualizes Self and Other. Several studies on perceptions have also mentioned that domestic factors are important for how actors view others (e.g. Tsuruoka 2008, Barcevicius et al. 2015). The collected data allow a discussion of two country level factors in particular: how the (1) domestic *cultural* context and (2) domestic *political* context in the two countries shape the way the EU is perceived.

7.2.1 Domestic Cultural Context

The role of culture[89] as an important factor that shapes how actors perceive each other is well-documented in existing literature. For instance, several authors working on international images argued that while perceiving others, an actor makes a judgement about

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[89] The notion of 'culture' is used here in its general anthropological meaning, which understands it as the 'complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society' (Tylor 1871, 1).

cultural proximity with a perceived actor, and that judgement is one of the central components in the image structure along with judgement about one's *power* and *threat/opportunity* (e.g. Cottam 1977, Herrmann 1985; see Table 3-1 in Chapter III). Shambaugh (1991, 296) also empirically demonstrated that culture was among six main factors that shaped how Chinese elites viewed the United States. In relation to perceptions of the European Union, the factor of culture is typically mentioned in the context of the EU's normative agenda. The discussion develops around the question as to how local cultural context may influence the acceptance/rejection of norms promoted by the EU.[90] In this regard, Ian Manners (2002, 245; emphasis in original) argued that 'the *cultural filter* […] affects the impact of international norms and political learning in third states and organizations leading to learning, adaptation and rejection of norms'. In other words, domestic cultural context functions as a primary perceptual screen, which scans external norms and determines how they are perceived and evaluated. Similarly, while studying perceptions of the EU in the ten countries that the EU established a strategic relationship with, Barcevicius et al. (2015, 55) found that culture in those countries 'affect[s] not only how people conceptualise Europe but also if they assess it positively or negatively'.

The influence of cultural context in shaping perceptions of the Union can be observed in the cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan too. This is particularly evident when it comes to the interpretation of promoted 'European values'. Obviously, it is difficult to imagine that the cultural context in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is monolithic and that certain cultural norms are shared among all members of the society. Instead, I acknowledge that competing cultural norms may exist within these countries, therefore, members of the society may differ in their attitudes towards 'European values' depending on their own cultural values. This fact locates the factor of culture at the *individual level*, rather than the *country level* as I treat it in this chapter. Nevertheless, I also argue that a dominant cultural context, the norms of which are arguably accepted by the majority of society members, exists in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These norms are built on 'traditional values', and compliance

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[90] The fit of promoted norms into the local cultural (and other) context is one of the central issues generally in the literature on norm diffusion. For example, Checkel (1999) argues that for the successful diffusion of external norms there needs to be a 'cultural match' between external norms and internal norms.

with 'traditional values' is the dominant sentiment in both countries. This allows us to speak of the cultural context at the country level. This is also confirmed by the experience of EU officials working on norm promotion in the Central Asian countries. As one of them stated:

> The LGBTI issue is the clear example of *cultural* relativism argument that we often hear from our [Central Asian] counterparts. […] We are aware of the local *cultural values*, and it is certainly true that we need to be careful on how we present our arguments on this issue. […] We try to be realistic about *traditions* and *norms* in the country and public attitudes as well. We realize that governments have to look to the population, when the population has negative attitudes towards LGBTI rights (EU-18-EU official).

Another EU official continued that the rights of LGBTI communities are not on the Union's Central Asian agenda on a permanent basis, rather the EU tries not to touch on this issue without a serious concern about the discrimination of sexual minorities in these countries, because the EU understands that the local traditional and cultural values do not allow the issue to be openly spoken about (EU-11-EU official). What this demonstrates is that the European Union itself admits the existence of a specific *cultural context* at the country level in the Central Asian republics and takes it into account when designing its political behavior in the region.

The *cultural context* in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, as already noted, was found to impact the interpretation of 'European values' promoted by Brussels. The perceived distinction between *local* and *promoted* values leads to the rejection of the latter and contributes to negative perceptions of the EU as such. Chapter VI discussed the criticism of 'European values' from two aspects. Firstly, the 'European model' of democracy is sometimes associated with individual all-permissiveness and is perceived to overemphasize the rights of an individual. The 'European' individualism is viewed as contradicting the local context, where collective interests are said to always be primary to the wishes of individuals. In this example, we can clearly observe how *local* 'collectivism' clashes with *external* 'individualism'; as a result, the latter is alienated and interpreted negatively as a threat to

the local way of living. Secondly, Chapter VI also discussed the fact that 'European values' have come to be predominantly associated with untraditional sexual relations, the decline of traditional family values, and the degradation of kinship. Similar to the previous case, these are interpreted to be alien and immoral values, and commonly juxtaposed to local 'traditional' values, which are believed to remain within the boundaries of 'right values' and 'morality'. Again, we observe how the *local* clashes with the *external*, with the latter being downgraded. In other words, both cases illustrate how the local cultural context in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan functions as a filter, which processes and influences certain aspects of how the European Union is perceived in these countries.

7.2.2 Domestic Political Context

The domestic *political context* is another important factor that functions as a filter influencing how external actors and their policies are perceived. Barcevicius et al. (2015, 54) recently found that '[a] country's political system affects the way information [about external actors] is distributed'. They observed that in authoritarian countries like China, and to a lesser extent in Russia, the political regimes controlled the information space and regulated what kind of information about the European Union the people of these countries could access, thus influencing people's perception of the EU. The more authoritarian a country is, the more likely a political regime is to control information distribution, especially on politically sensitive topics such as democracy promotion. This point is particularly demonstrative in the cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These two states have certain differences in terms of political systems and regime types. Kyrgyzstan has traditionally been considered an 'island of democracy' in the whole region, whereas Kazakhstan is normally classified as a (semi-)authoritarian state. A quick survey of different world indexes easily confirms this difference. For instance, Freedom House's *Freedom in the World* index categorized Kazakhstan as a 'not free' state, while Kyrgyzstan was referred to a group of 'partly free' countries in 2018 (Freedom House 2018). Similarly, according to the *World Press Freedom Index*, Kyrgyzstan (ranked 89th out of 180) performed considerably better than Kazakhstan (ranked 157th out of 180) in terms of media

freedom (Reporters Without Borders 2017). Finally, the Polity IV Project classified Kyrgyzstan as a 'democracy' since the regime change in 2010, whereas Kazakhstan belonged to the group of countries with autocratic regimes (Polity IV Project 2014).

The difference in domestic political contexts has a certain impact on how the European Union is viewed in the two countries. This impact can be observed from perceptions of the democracy promotion aspect of Brussels' policy, which is a sensitive issue in authoritarian states. Various world indexes mentioned above demonstrate that Kyrgyzstan performs considerably better than Kazakhstan in terms of political openness of the regime. The domestic political context in Kyrgyzstan creates a relatively more enabling and adoptive environment for sensitive issues such as democracy promotion, including the EU's normative agenda in the country. As a result, generally the idea of democratization, as well as the EU's democracy promotion efforts, confront comparatively less discursive resistance in Kyrgyz society, including the official[91], media, and elite rhetoric (though some degree of resistance can still be observed, as discussed in Chapter VI). The data samples collected in Kyrgyzstan contain relatively fewer critical references to democracy, as well as to the EU's democracy promotion agenda, than those collected in Kazakhstan.

The picture is slightly different in Kazakhstan. As Kazakhstan is a politically more restrictive country, the state has a monopoly over political and media spheres. It tries to censor all politically sensitive issues and/or provide an official narrative to interpret them. As discussed in Chapter VI, the official discourse in Kazakhstan actively frames Brussels' democracy-related activities as an imposition of the European viewpoint. The 'European model' of democracy is regarded as unsuitable to the local context given the differences between European and Kazakhstani societies. Instead, the country, as officially articulated, is to follow its 'unique' model of democratic development. This official rhetoric, obviously, is echoed in the media discourse, as the media in Kazakhstan is largely controlled by the

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[91] The official rhetoric on this issue, however, notably changed during the last years of Atambayev's presidency. The president several times harshly criticised external promotion of democracy in Kyrgyzstan. But this criticism was particularly addressed to the US. Neither the EU, nor its member states, were directly mentioned or assumed in his critical speeches.

state. Similarly, my interview samples in Kazakhstan illustrated that Kazakh elites, especially state-affiliated ones, tended to support the official narrative and express more skeptical views on the democracy promotion policy of the Union compared to their Kyrgyz counterparts.

In sum, this suggests that the domestic political context may influence how much attention politically sensitive issues receive in the internal discourse of that country by creating an enabling/restrictive environment. Moreover, a political regime may also contribute to the interpretation of sensitive issues by articulating alternative narratives.

7.3 Individual Level Factors

After the discussion of *global* and *domestic* level factors shaping perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, this section continues with image sources at the *individual* level. Alexander, Levin, and Henry (2005) stated that Image theorists in International Relations have mainly focused on structural/global sources of perceptions. They continued that in order to get 'a more complete picture of the factors driving international images', the analyst should necessarily integrate the individual level analysis to the research framework (Alexander, Levin, and Henry 2005, 44, see also Keuleers 2015). Indeed, although global and country level factors create certain conditions for perceptions of external actors, very often individual level factors are likely to influence perceptions the most. The data collected for this study allow some discussion of individual level factors, as part of the data came from interviews with intermediate elites (Chapter III). Consequently, this section examines how certain factors, intrinsic to individuals, shape the way the EU is perceived. In this regard, two factors are discussed below: (1) the professional position of a perceiving individual and (2) an individual's awareness of the European Union.

7.3.1 Individual's Professional Position

In his study of how Chinese 'America watchers' viewed the US, David Shambaugh found that the primary factor shaping images of America was the professional role of perceiving Chinese elites. He argued that the

> [p]rofessional role means that people are conditioned by their organizational environments. Professional role conditions one's view of the world insofar as different occupations introduce different perceptual screening mechanisms related to one's role in society (Shambaugh 1991, 285).

The author further identified four professional role categories among his sample of Chinese elites: bureaucrats at the central government, research institute analysts, journalists, and university-based scholars. The overall argument was that depending on what group an individual belonged to, his/her perceptions of the US varied from members of other groups (Shambaugh 1991, 285-291).

A similar impact of *professional role* can also be observed in relation to perceptions of the EU among intermediate elites of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. As identified in Chapter III, intermediate elites in the context of this study consist of (1) politicians, (2) journalists, (3) civil society representatives, and (4) scholars/experts. The latter two role categories were found to be relatively unanimous in terms of their perceptions of the European Union (see below). However, the collected data from interviewed *politicians* and *journalists* allows me to make a distinction between state-affiliated politicians and journalists and oppositional politicians and journalists in terms of their perceptions of the Union.

A tendency can be observed in both countries that *state-affiliated* politicians and journalists express more skeptical views towards the EU. Most of all, this skepticism relates to Brussels' democracy promotion agenda. State-affiliated elites predominantly demonstrate distrust towards the EU's intentions and perceive its normative agenda as a threat to these countries' political stability. That is not, however, to say that all state-affiliates are equally distrustful of Brussels, but rather that the greatest extent of skepticism was found more

precisely within this category of intermediate elites than in others. It is difficult to identify the exact reason behind this. One the one hand, state-affiliated individuals may genuinely share the official narrative that the EU's pressure regarding democratization represents a threat to political stability; on the other hand, it can be resultant of self-censorship in order not to contradict the official narrative while acting as a state representative.

By contrast, Kassenova (2008, 133-134), for instance, argued that the political opposition in Kazakhstan has always been pro-European. The interview samples for this research further demonstrated this point. In both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, politicians and journalists sharing an *oppositional* background appeared to be more pro-European/Western in their political orientation. While criticising the existing regimes, they, first of all, refer to the EU and its member states as models of political, economic and social development that Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan should learn from. From their perspective, the state-articulated narrative that the European (political) model is unsuitable to local contexts is seen as an attempt by political regimes to preserve their own rule through the delegitimization of 'universal' values of democracy and human rights. As articulated, these values represent a threat not to countries, but to political regimes ruling these countries (more discussion was provided in Chapter VI).

The category of *civil society representatives*, by contrast, was found to be comparatively homogenous in terms of their attitudes towards the EU and its policy. As among oppositional elites, a positive pro-European/Western orientation also dominates among civil society representatives.[92] Given the specifics of their professional position, civil society representatives immediately view the EU from the perspective of Brussels' normative agenda and its support to local NGOs. While directly collaborating with the EU and working on EU-sponsored projects, civil society representatives largely value what the EU does for them in terms of financial and other support. They are predominantly receptive to what is proposed by the EU, including promoted values of democracy. Moreover, it is also

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[92] It needs to be remembered that the majority of interviewed civil society representatives in both countries are/were the receivers of the EU's funds for various projects. This might lead to some bias in their responses about the EU.

civil society representatives, who seem to be relatively open to the rights of sexual minorities, which are commonly condemned and rejected by respondents belonging to the other categories.

Finally, in the context of the relatively anti- and pro-European elite categories above, the interviewed *scholars/experts* tended to hold the most balanced perception of the European Union. Given the fact that scholars/experts were likely to be relatively better informed about the EU and know the details of Brussels' policy in Central Asia better than other categories, their images of the Union were generally more complex and consisted of different layers, both positive and negative. As a result, compared to the other categories, scholars/experts were less inclined to make categorical judgements about the European Union in either-or terms.

7.3.2 Individual's Awareness of the EU

Following the point in the previous paragraph, a separate argument can be made on how an individual's *degree of awareness* of the European Union may shape the way the EU is perceived. It is a commonly shared view in social-psychology that the volume of available information about an object is inversely proportionate to the level of stereotyping. The more an individual is aware of an object, the less stereotypical becomes his/her image of an object. This simultaneously makes the image complex and increases its overall accuracy. Furthermore, more information about an object is likely to lead to a more benign image. As summarized by Scott (1965, 84-85),

> benign images of the world and a desire for cooperative involvement in it will more frequently be found among the well-informed segments of the population than among the poorly informed [because] with a dimensionally complex structure it is more difficult to maintain dichotomous […] view of the world that regards the foreign as essentially different and dangerous.

While examining the sources of the EU's images, Barcevicius et al. (2015, 56) empirically confirmed that 'a significant correlation exists between positive attitudes towards the EU

and the degree to which a person is informed about the EU'. This finding remains valid in relation to the Union's images in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan too. In both countries, those who have deeper knowledge about the Union seemed to be less likely to categorize the EU into 'ally-enemy', 'threat-opportunity', 'successful-unsuccessful' dichotomies. Rather, they articulated more complex and multi-dimensional images that normally combined different aspects of the EU, both positive and negative. Moreover, as predicted by Scott above, precisely those who were more aware of the Union and its policies in Central Asia tended to hold a more benevolent image of the EU, expressing less criticism and distrust towards its policy initiatives. The fact that more information about the EU is likely to make its images more positive may also suggest certain policy implications for Brussels, which will be discussed in the following concluding chapter.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter has attempted to discern the nature of perceptions of the EU discussed in Chapters V and VI by identifying the factors that shape them. In doing so, however, it did not pretend to reveal every single factor that contributes to perceptions of the Union, because identifying all possible sources of images is an analytically challenging task. Moreover, the chapter did not claim to establish a direct causal relationship between identified factors and perceptions; rather, those factors were said to be a result of the interpretation I made on the basis of collected data, thus, the results are, to an extent, suggestive. As mentioned, the existing literature on image sources remains theoretically and methodologically underdeveloped. Therefore, more analysis is required to propose a solid analytical framework for such an inquiry.

In this chapter a total of eight factors divided into *global*, *country*, and *individual* levels have been discussed. A schematic demonstration of these factors is offered in the next chapter (**Figure 8-1**, p. 216), where they are presented in a conical-shape diagram.

As the discussion demonstrated, the majority of factors at the global and the country levels overlap in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, thus they create equal conditions for perceptions of the EU in two countries. For example, at the global level, *internal troubles of the EU*, *the factor of Russia*, and *the notion of 'Europe'* are identical in both countries, therefore they may explain similarities of perceptions in two cases.[93] The same relates to the factor of *cultural context* at the domestic level.

On the other hand, two factors were found to contribute most to the difference in perceptions between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. At the global level, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have differences in terms of their *direct relationship* with the Union. This leads to differences in perceptions of the EU in the two countries, because direct relationship was argued to be one of the main factors shaping perceptions. At the domestic level, the two republics also have differences in terms of their domestic *political context*, which also contributes to differing perceptions of Brussels, more precisely, of its democracy promotion aspect. On top of that, the chapter also argued that although global and country level factors create certain conditions for perceptions, they are likely to be further influenced by individual level factors too. In this regard, the chapter elaborated on how the *professional position* of intermediate elites and their *awareness of the EU* contributed to the way individuals viewed the European Union.

The fact that different factors at different levels influence perceptions of the EU implies that there is no straightforward picture of exactly how images of the Union are formed. Rather, it is a complex process, where different factors are responsible for different aspects of images. Therefore, it is quite challenging to make any judgement regarding the comparative weight and importance of each factor in relation to others. Which of them becomes more relevant depends on the particular aspect that the EU is viewed from.

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[93] Chapters V and VI demonstrated that perceptions of the European Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan greatly overlap. The difference exists only in respect to a few issues.

Chapter VIII. Conclusion

This thesis was undertaken to comparatively examine perceived images of the European Union in two countries of Central Asia – Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The focus on Central Asians' images of the EU was driven by the fact that the literature on EU-Central Asia relations has been predominantly Eurocentric and mostly neglected the role that Central Asians might play in this relationship. The main focus of scholars has been on how the EU defines its interests in the region, what it intends to achieve, how the Union's policies are practically implemented, what the effects of its activities are, and what the EU needs to undertake to improve the overall successfulness of its policy.

The question thus arose – what do Central Asians, the 'receivers' of Brussels' policy, think of the EU and its activities in the region? It is this perspective that the present thesis intends to contribute to. It has done so by addressing the central question as to *what are the dominant images of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan?* In addition, it also aimed to reveal perceptual *similarities and differences between the cases of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan*; to understand the nature of inferred images and perceptions, i.e. to answer *why the EU is viewed in a particular way*; and finally, to examine *the extent to which the EU's perceived images in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan correspond to its self-representations in the region*.

In addressing these questions, the thesis first drew from the constructivist approach to justify the importance of studying external images and perceptions. It was argued that identities and roles of an international actor are partly determined by the outsiders that it engages with. Identities and roles need to be *recognized* for an actor be able to 'activate' them while taking the perspective of others. This implies that the EU does not operate in a contextual vacuum while engaging with Central Asia; rather, its identities, roles, as well as the outcomes of its policies in the region are partly shaped and conditioned by how Central Asians interpret them. The Union needs to be accepted as a credible and legitimate actor. Therefore, what the EU can or cannot successfully implement in the region is not intrinsic to Brussels' side only, but depends on Central Asian countries, too. That is why it is equally

important to understand the way the 'receivers' – Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan – interpret the EU and its policy, i.e. to analyze images and perceptions of the Union in these countries.

Having justified why it is important to explore this external images and perceptions issue, the thesis went on to draw from Image Studies to conceptualize the notion of 'image'. It was argued that an image cannot be treated as a monolithic concept and examined in general terms. Instead, it is a highly complex phenomenon with a variety of internal components. Therefore, to meaningfully operationalize an image, one needs to establish which internal components are to be focused on. Following scholars of Image Studies, two dimensions were identified to constitute the core of international images: perceptions of one's *power/capability* and perceptions of *threat/opportunity* from that actor. The empirical chapters of the thesis developed around these two aspects of the EU's perceived-, as well as self- images.

The empirical findings of the thesis are illustrated in **Figure 8-1**. Overall, the figure encapsulates how the EU *self-represents* itself in the region (the top left section of the figure); how Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan *perceive* the EU (the bottom section); and what kind of *factors* shape those perceptions (the top right section). These findings and their implications are summarized below in detail. I start from the findings of the thesis related to perceived images of the EU, as this was the central focus of the study, and then move on to other aspects.

Figure 8-1: Self- and Perceived Images of the European Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

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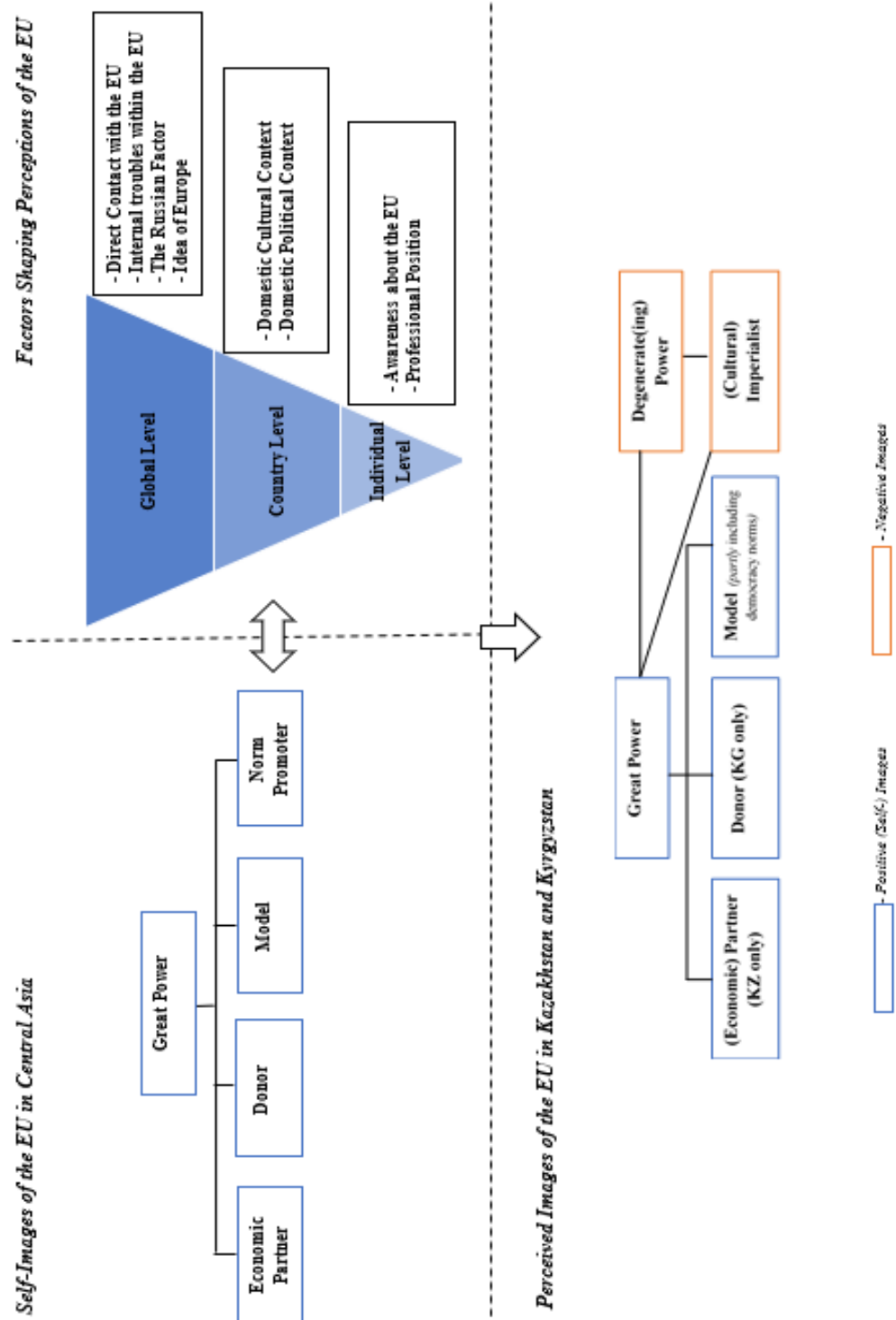
8.1 Decaying Beauty? Summarizing Perceived Images of the EU

Chapters V and VI examined perceptions of the EU's power/capability and perceptions of whether it represents an opportunity or a threat, respectively. Both chapters found that perceptions of the EU from these aspects are highly complex. Given this, I would like to summarize here several *ideal-type images* inferred from discussions in those chapters. Generally, the notion of the ideal-type image, commonly developed and used in Image Studies[94], is designed to propose a simplified picture of an object by combining different aspects of complex perceptions together. In this regard, what needs to be noted is that ideal-type images 'do not [necessarily] describe any particular person's worldview. Instead, they provide a set of referents against which to compare actual perceptions' (Herrmann 2013, 342). Therefore, the images of the EU proposed here should also be conceived as reference points only.

On the basis of Chapters V and VI it seems possible to infer six dominant images of the EU, as shown in **Figure 8-1** above. However, only four of them refer to both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan equally: that of a *Great Power*, *Model*, *Degenerate(ing) Power*, and *(Cultural) Imperialist*. The other two images refer either to Kazakhstan – *(Economic) Partner*, or to Kyrgyzstan – *Donor*. Some of the identified images, as discussed later, are mutually complementary (e.g. Partner/Donor and Model), while others are competing images (e.g. Model and (Cultural) Imperialist).

Generally, despite being perceived both positively and negatively, positive perceptions of the EU still prevail in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Such an argument can be made by comparing the number of issue-areas from which the EU is perceived positively and negatively. As illustrated in Chapters V and VI, in many aspects the EU enjoys favourable attitudes from both countries, whereas only a few areas provoke skepticism and suspicion towards the European Union. Moreover, the prevalence of positivity can also be observed

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[94] In Image Studies, several authors have extensively studied, for example, ideal-typical images of enemy, ally, imperialist, colony, barbarian, degenerate etc. (e.g. Herrmann and Fischerkeller 1995, Herrmann et al. 1997, Cottam 1986, Cottam 1977).

from the data coding, where generally positive references to the EU were found to be quantitatively greater in number than negative associations.

First of all, the EU has an image of *Great Power*, which works as a meta-image that other images are related to. The Great Power image captures perceptions of the EU as an already established and capable actor in its own right. As shown in Chapter V, the EU's power is constantly compared to other actors such as the US, China, or Russia, which indicates that the EU is viewed as belonging, or expected to belong, to the same category of powerful actors. But its perceived capability was found to vary across contexts and issue-areas. As a *global* actor the EU is recognized as an economic giant, influential soft power, but intermediate (geo)political actor. However, as a *regional* actor in Central Asia it is viewed as an actor with limited influence. Yet, the extent of how powerless the EU is varies slightly in the two countries (Chapter V). In other words, the Union is a Great Power, whose influence does not necessarily extend to Central Asia. As Buzan and Waever (2003, 34-37) proposed, great powers need not necessarily be equally influential in all issue-areas, as well as across all regions in the globe. Buzan (2004, 58-59) further stated that 'even though the power of states cannot be reliably measured, at any given time there is a practical consensus about who the great powers are'. The thesis found that a similar practical consensus exists in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan that today's EU belongs to the category of great powers.

Furthermore, as a Great Power the EU is recognized as a benevolent actor in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, one which poses no physical threat to their existence. From this aspect, as in the previous case, the EU is again commonly juxtaposed with the US, China, and Russia, whose intentions in the region provoke skeptical and suspicious perceptions among intermediate elites. By contrast, the Union is largely trusted, and cooperation with it is predominantly viewed as an opportunity to benefit from, but (partly) with the exception of Brussels' normative agenda (see ниже). Walt (1985, 1987) theorizes that the extent one actor is viewed as benevolent or malevolent depends not only on perceptions of that actor's offensive intentions, but also on perceptions of its proximity and power. The more powerful and proximate one is perceived to be, the more likely it is to

provoke suspicion and a sense of threat. As pointed out выше, in the particular Central Asian context, the Union is viewed as a distant and (partly) incapable regional actor (Chapter V). Following Walt's assumption, one could speculate here that the EU's perceived benevolence could be a result of its perceived regional weakness. This possible relationship was not specifically examined in this study; thus, further research is needed. But it seems likely that Brussels' weakness in Central Asia compared to other great powers simultaneously becomes its main strength in relation to them – a positive image of a trusted and benevolent actor.

As a benevolent Great Power, the EU further enjoys the image of *Model* in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. The Model image implies that the European Union (or Europe generally) is recognized as a guiding star for these countries '[s]imply by existing', as Manners (2008, 45) would put it. Chapter VI demonstrated that in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan there is an inclination towards becoming (and being recognized as) a part of wider Europe: Kazakhstan refers to its Eurasian identity, which is said to make the country part of a wider Europe; whereas Kyrgyzstan emphasizes its democracy, the factor considered to make the country closer to Europe. Europe is generally admired, praised, and idealized. Europe is frequently used as a reference point with which to compare these countries' own (political, economic, social) development. In this sense, European member states set the 'ideal' of how states and societies should function and develop. Chapter VI also found that the EU is more frequently referred to as a Model (*partly*) in terms of its democracy; 'standards', an inclusive notion which can denote everything positively associated with Europe; and integration experience in the context of the Eurasian Economic Union. Arguably, the Model image is the most positive aspect of the perceptions of the EU in both countries, which neither Russia nor China nor any other external actor seem able to compete with.

Besides, the Union is also recognized as an *(Economic) Partner*, which, however, refers only to the case of Kazakhstan (see **Figure 8-1** on page 216). In contrast to the Model image, whose existence does not necessarily require direct contact between perceiving and perceived actors, the Partner image comes into being only when the relationship with a perceived actor is deemed sufficiently developed to represent an important value for one's

own country (e.g. Zhang 2012, 239). In other words, the EU cannot have a Partner image simply by existing. Rather, this image requires a perceived high level of beneficial bilateral relations. In Kazakhstan, as Chapter VI discovered, the EU is accepted as one of the country's main external partners, which positively contributes to its development. It is especially visible in the context of economic cooperation with the Union. Brussels was found to be constantly referred to as Kazakhstan's biggest trading partner and investor, a narrative that repeatedly appears in official rhetoric, in media samples, as well as in elite interviews. The picture in Kyrgyzstan was different. Given the low level of bilateral relations, the Union is not viewed as an actor that plays a visible role in the country's life. Therefore, it is problematic to extend the (Economic) Partner image to Kyrgyzstan too.

Instead, the EU has a *Donor* image in the case of Kyrgyzstan. In the absence of close bilateral relations with the EU, Brussels' development assistance to Kyrgyzstan becomes (one of) the most visible aspects of its presence in the country. What the EU does in Kyrgyzstan is mostly associated with its donor activities. Yet, the Union's development assistance hardly seems to foster an image of the EU as an important actor for the country. Although the assistance is generally perceived positively and welcomed, its quantity and quality are often criticized and questioned with regard to its capability to bring a visible change to Kyrgyzstan. The Donor image cannot be extended to Kazakhstan, since the EU's development assistance was found to be barely visible in Kazakhstani society (Chapter VI).

What these positive images of the EU generally indicate is that *they are Brussels' comparative advantage in Central Asia in relation to other great powers*. The Union, for instance, can neither compete with the political influence that Russia has in the region, nor can it challenge China's increasing economic dominance. As Chapter IV demonstrated, the EU itself declares no intention to compete with them and become a dominating actor. Rather, it clearly recognizes its relative weakness and Central Asia's remoteness, and intentionally takes the role of a second-tier actor. Despite this, the EU still can be an influential actor, and its influence stems from its attractiveness and positive perceptions, rather than from material capabilities. The Union's positivity in the eyes of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is not an absolute category, but a relative one. It is in relation to others, to the

US, China, or even Russia, that Europe is admired, trusted, and idealized. Although the thesis did not directly deal with the perceptions of other actors, references to them continuously appeared in collected data samples when examining the way the EU is perceived. This implies that the Union's positivity in the eyes of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is constructed through differentiation from the mentioned players. This puts the EU in a better position compared to them. Therefore, what the Union could capitalize on in Central Asia is its soft power and relatively favorable perceptions.

However, there is also the other side of the coin. Although the European Union enjoys generally positive images, there are still certain aspects that lead to skeptical or even suspicious perceptions of the Union. Negative aspects of Brussels' perceptions discussed in Chapters V and VI can be summarized into two dominant images: *Degenerate(ing) Power* and *(Cultural) Imperialist* (see **Figure 8-1** on page 216).

The *Degenerate image*, in its ideal-typical form, implies that a perceived actor is viewed as being 'less strong than it might be, its available power instruments are discounted, […] decision making is confused and perhaps anarchic; country lacks focused leadership, organization, and discipline' (Herrmann and Fischerkeller 1995, 428). This description coincides with what was found in Chapter V. Despite being recognized as a Great Power, the EU is simultaneously seen as a *Degenerating* Great Power in terms of its capabilities. In both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, the Union is viewed as the one which is currently experiencing political, economic, social, demographic, cultural, and moral decline, mainly provoked by recent internal troubles. There is an increasing image of Europe as an 'old man' who has already passed the best years of his life, and is now slowly moving towards his end. As increasingly perceived by both countries, the economies of some European states are being ruined (e.g. Greece); social welfare of the people in Europe is diminishing; and political disagreements between EU member states are becoming heated. Moreover, due to the inflow of non-European refugees and migrants, the streets of European cities are perceived as becoming dominated by people, culture, traditions, and languages 'alien' to Europe. As a result, Europe's appearance is changing, and so is its everyday life, culture, traditions, values etc. In other words, the Europeanness is in decline (Chapter V). But even

more visibly, Europe is perceived as suffering from moral degradation. Associations with same-sex marriage, LBGT rights, and the breakdown of family values have already become the most negative aspects of the EU's general image in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Consequently, today's Europe is frequently referred to as '*Gayropa*', the narrative that EU officials and diplomats repeatedly complained to be very powerful and hard to resist to (Chapter VI).

On top of the Degenerate(ing) Power image, the European Union also has an image of *(Cultural) Imperialist*, which specifically refers to perceptions of its normative agenda in the region. The idea of 'cultural imperialism refers most broadly to the exercise of domination in cultural relationships in which the values, practices, and meanings of a powerful foreign culture are imposed upon one or more native cultures' (Tomlinson 2012). It was found that when it comes to the EU's promotion of its values, an important aspect in Brussels foreign policy agenda, the perception is that the EU unilaterally and insistently imposes its own values without consent from receivers. The imposed 'European' values are sometimes interpreted as 'alien' and 'destructive', not necessarily fitting local realities. Firstly, 'European values' were found to be associated with democratic values. As briefly pointed out выше, European democracy is *partly* recognized to be a model in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. However, there is also an alternative and competing perception that associates the European model of democracy with individualistic all-permissiveness and societal disorder, and thus unsuitable for Central Asia, where collective and societal interests are said to be of primary importance. From this aspect, the imposition of the 'European' model of democracy is believed to represent a threat to the societal stability of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Secondly, and even more negatively, 'European values' are associated with 'untraditional' values such as same-sex marriage and the decline of family bonds. They are univocally condemned and rejected. The EU's promotion of these values is viewed as a threat to morality and the traditional values of local cultures. Overall, by imposing 'European values', the EU is seen to act as an arrogant and imperialistic actor, who believes in its cultural superiority and treats others as inferior (Chapter VI).

In sum, I want to emphasize four general points from these findings. *Firstly*, what these findings are generally illustrative of is the fact that images of the European Union in both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are highly complex and issue-specific. They tend to vary depending on the specific issue-area that the Union is perceived from. As a result, it is challenging to bring to one denominator the way the EU is viewed, and the question of how the EU is perceived can hardly be answered in general terms. Rather, both the question and the answer need to be both more specific and nuanced. This seems to be the issue that many scholars working on international images are confronted with. For example, David Shambaugh, while working on perceptions of the US among China's 'America watchers', also discovered that perceptions were manifold and ambivalent. To reflect this complexity, Shambaugh (1991) titled his book as *Beautiful Imperialist*. Such a title was designed to capture exactly the complexity and paradox of perceptions of America in China. On the one hand, the US was viewed as a beautiful and admirable actor in terms of its economy and society; on the other hand, it was seen as an assertive and aggressive international player. A similar metaphor can be applied to the findings of this study, too. I would summarize images of the European Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan as that of a *Decaying Beauty*: one which is predominantly beautiful and admirable, but whose beauty is currently diminishing.

Secondly, not only images as such, but also factors shaping images, were found to be highly complex. Chapter VII identified and discussed in total eight sources of the Union's perceptions divided into three levels: *global level* factors: (1) Kazakhstan's and Kyrgyzstan's direct relationship with the EU, (2) the EU's internal troubles, (3) the factor of Russia, (4) the idea of 'Europe'; *country level* factors: (5) domestic political and (6) cultural context in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan; and *individual level* factors: (7) the professional position of perceiving individual, and (8) his/her general awareness of the EU (see **Figure 8-1** above). Such a complexity also makes it difficult to answer how exactly Brussels' images come into being. As in the previous case, there is no single answer to such a question, rather it needs to be nuanced as well. It is an interplay of various factors at various levels that influences various aspects of the EU's image.

Thirdly, as the study intended to *comparatively* examine images of the European Union in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, some summary of direct comparison needs to be made. As can be observed from **Figure 8-1** above, the perceived images of the EU are largely similar in both countries. In both countries the Union is recognized as an already established Great Power; in both countries the Union is perceived as the most benevolent international actor; and both countries share the image of the EU as that of a Model. Likewise, the *content* of negative images – Degenerate(ing) Power and (Cultural) Imperialist – also overlaps in two cases. Such an overlap of the Union's images in two countries can be explained by the commonality of factors shaping them. For example, 'the idea of Europe', 'the EU's internal troubles', 'the factor of Russia', or 'cultural context' from the previous paragraph are identical in both countries. Thus, they create equal conditions for the EU's perceptions in the two cases.

As for differences, the most visible difference is the existence/absence of the (Economic) Partner and Donor images in the two countries. As Chapter VII discussed in detail, this is mainly caused by the content of each country's bilateral relations with the EU. For example, Astana and Brussels have close economic ties, whereas the cooperation in the development assistance sphere remains secondary. Therefore, a high level of economic relations shadows the EU's activities in other sectors, thus the Union is recognized, above all, as an Economic Partner in Kazakhstan. The picture is the opposite in Kyrgyzstan. In the absence of a close (economic) relationship, Kyrgyzstan does not recognize the EU as an important Partner for the country, rather the EU's activities are predominantly assessed through the prism of its development assistance projects alone. Therefore, the Donor image prevails in Kyrgyzstan.

There is also at least one more important difference, which, however, is not visible in **Figure 8-1** (on page 216). That is the differing degrees of the EU's general visibility in the two countries. Chapter VII explained this by the depth of these countries' bilateral relations with the Union: the closer bilateral relations are, the more likely it is that visibility increases. The European Union was found to be more visible in Kazakhstan than Kyrgyzstan, since the depth of Kazakhstan's relations with Brussels is much greater than

that of Kyrgyzstan's. For example, the surveyed Kazakh media were found to regularly report on EU affairs, whereas in the Kyrgyz media the EU was not a visible topic. Similarly, from my fieldtrip experience, it was easier to find 'European watchers' to interview in Kazakhstan, whereas in Kyrgyzstan I faced an issue with identifying potential interviewees as well as getting their consent to interview, due to the low interest in EU matters. Interviewees in Kazakhstan also seemed, on average, to have more awareness of the Union than their Kyrgyz counterparts. All these factors led to an imbalance in the amount of collected data in the two cases, both in media and interview samples (Chapter III). As a result, some of the discussed images of the EU in Kazakhstan were discovered to be richer and more explicit than in Kyrgyzstan. This was particularly evident in the case of negative images of the EU, as more visibility does not necessarily imply more *positive* visibility. In other words, another noticeable difference between the two cases is that the negative images of Degenerate(ing) Power and (Cultural) Imperialist are more visible, detailed, and explicit in Kazakhstan than Kyrgyzstan.

Finally, I would like to outline how these findings in Central Asia fit in to the already existing literature on external images of the European Union elsewhere. As reviewed in Chapter II, Central Asia is one of the few regions overlooked by scholars working on external perceptions of the EU. As a rare exception, I would like to mention here Olga Spaiser's (2018) recent book, which contributes to this gap. Her findings, unsurprisingly, are also similar to those discussed in this study. She also touches upon the EU's images as a 'source of modernization', a 'limited political model', a 'patronizing actor', or a model of 'regionalism' (Spaiser 2018, 82-105). As can be noticed, what I summarized earlier in this thesis speaks to her findings, but also complements them with deeper insights.

Additionally, such findings in Central Asia can be contrasted to what has already been found in other parts of the world. The findings of this study suggest that it is difficult to claim that the way Central Asians view the Union significantly differs from how other regions and countries perceive it. For example, it has been extensively found that in many countries the EU's global actorness is predominantly associated with its economic capabilities, rather than its political ones. Likewise, admiration towards European culture,

history, values, and its integrational success have also been reported to exist in many geographical destinations. Moreover, the perception of the EU's decline caused by its internal troubles has similarly been recorded by several scholars (see Chapter II). In other words, what this study discovered greatly overlaps with what had already been found in many other regions and countries. In this sense, Central Asia is not a unique destination, where the EU enjoys special images and perceptions different from other geographic locations.

8.2 Comparing the EU's Self- and Perceived Images

One of the additional objectives of this study was to contrast the EU's *perceived images* in Central Asia with its own *self-representations*. The reason for doing so was the argument that images are relative categories, therefore they cannot be compared to outside reality. One can reflect on '(in)accurateness' of perceived images only when they are juxtaposed with other images, in this case, with the EU's own self-images. Moreover, as a central argument, the thesis argued that the EU and its policies need to be *recognized* by Central Asians, in order for Brussels to be able to successfully play the roles it intends to play and successfully implement its policies. So, the very idea of *recognition* also requires bringing together self- and perceived images.

What can be observed from **Figure 8-1** (p. 216) is that the EU's self- and perceived images in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan overlap in many respects. Firstly, both self- and perceived images are identical in terms of referring to the EU as to an already established Great Power, but a second-tier actor in Central Asia. Secondly, both self- and perceived images emphasize the EU's uniqueness from Russia and China in terms of the Union's benign intentions and of the respectful and soft approach that it applies. Finally, both self- and perceived images refer to the EU as to a Model, an Economic Partner in Kazakhstan, and a Donor in Kyrgyzstan. From all these aspects, it can be concluded, the EU is *recognized accurately* in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Employing Wendt's (2003, 511) point mentioned in Chapter III, it can be generally argued that the EU enjoys both *thin* and *thick*

recognition in these countries. Thin recognition, in Wendt's understanding, relates to recognition of the very agency of the EU as an already established subject of international relations – the Great Power as we observed in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Thick recognition, on the other hand, refers to the idea that the Union is not just one actor among many, but a unique one - a benign actor than others, as found in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Nevertheless, two of the identified perceived images, that of Degenerate and (Cultural) Imperialist, mismatch or even contradict the way the EU represents itself. Obviously, these kinds of negative images are not visible in Brussels' own self-representations, because self-representations always tend to be positive. Therefore, it is no surprise that the EU refers to itself and its intentions exclusively in positive terms (Chapter IV). Yet, we see that in some respects such positivity is not shared by perceivers, which may have practical implication for the EU's policies. This is especially illustrative in the case of the EU's normative agenda in Central Asia. As one aspect of Degenerating Power, the EU is viewed as suffering from moral degradation, whereas the (Cultural) Imperialist image implies the Union unilaterally imposes its 'unsuitable' values upon Central Asians. As a result, we see that the EU's promotion of its values represents the most contradictory aspect of its policy in the eyes of receivers.

The literature on EU-CA devoted much attention to Brussels' democracy promotion policies in Central Asia, and the EU received a lot of criticism in this respect for being unsuccessful. In this context, this mismatch between how the EU understands its normative agenda and how the Central Asians interpret it can be one of the explanations why the EU's promotion of democracy fell short of bringing visible change. Yet, this thesis did not address this question directly, so the practical implications of perceptions on the EU's policies is a matter of additional research.

8.3 Theoretical Implications

As discussed in Chapter II, the field of research on images and perceptions of the European Union has remained highly undertheorized so far, thus, one of the aims of this research has been to bridge this gap. As an exception, some authors applied political communication theories (Chaban, Schneider, and Malthus 2009), while others tried the role theory (Benes 2010, Bengtsson and Elgström 2012). Yet, the most common theoretical approach applied for such an inquiry has arguably been constructivism (e.g. Lucarelli and Fioramonti 2010a, b). However, as Mišík (2013) rightly claimed, such studies have hardly gone beyond general theoretical arguments, and fallen short to further theorize the very notions of 'image' and 'perception', using them rather vaguely. In this regard, it has been proposed to utulize the potential of Images Studies to theoretically unpack these concepts.

In building its theoretical framework, this study followed such a suggestion, and attempted to bring constructivism and Image Studies together. If the former has been used to justify why it is important to study images of the EU in Central Asia, the latter has provided with the conceptual apparatus of what the 'image' is and how to study it.

To begin with constructivism, the general argument has been articulated that the EU's image in the eyes of others is a constituent part of Brussels' international identity and roles, as well as effectiveness of its policy implementation. For the EU to be considered as an actor in its own right and to play certain roles in Central Asia, it needs to be *recognized* as a legitimate and credible actor by the countries of the region. Only in that case the Union will be able to successfully play desired roles and promote desired policies in its interactions with them. The application of constructivism in the thesis has been limited to this general argument, as it does not provide any further theoretical insights to unpack 'image' and 'perception'. Therefore, in purposefully using constructivism as a general umbrella framework only, the thesis hardly differs from other existing studies mentioned above.

However, unlike those studies, the thesis has tried to integrate Images Studies into this general constructivist argument to minimize the latter's theoretical broadness. What Images

Studies have provided us with is the conceptualization of 'image', which has opened a door for a more theoretically sophisticated analysis. As a result, a theoretical framework has been proposed that not only justifies why it is important to study images, but, more importantly, clearly defines and unpacks the notion of 'image'. In this regard, one point needs to be specifically emphasized, which arises from such synergy.

The empirical findings of this thesis demonstrate that the concepts of 'perception' or 'image' can hardly be used in general terms. This is especially important if one considers the fact that the majority of authors working on the European Union tended to neglect this and analyze its images in broader terms as if they were monolithic. Instead, borrowing from Image Studies, the thesis has demonstrated that images are always complex and issue-specific. More often than not, perceptions of the same object are likely to differ, sometimes dramatically, depending on a particular issue-area it is perceived from. As a result, paradoxically different images of the same object may sometimes coexist. One example of this is the coexistence of Model and Degenerate images of the EU in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. If the former relates to social-economic aspect of the Union, where the Union is portrayed as an actor to learn from, the latter – to the promotion of EU's 'untraditional' values among others, where the EU is said to be avoided. Similarly, the findings of the thesis demonstrated that Partner and Imperialist images of the EU also coexist in Kazakhstan. This brings to the point that the question of how an actor is perceived cannot be asked and answered in general terms. Instead, the common approach needs to be to look insight the notion of 'image' and identify what aspects of image one aims to focus on.

Besides, the empirical findings also speak to another theoretical argument, which states that despite being highly stable concepts, images are not static and may change over time under the influence of certain events. Such events may be intrinsic to a perceiving actor, as well as to a perceived actor. Sometimes, they may generally relate to events at the global level. This brings us to another theoretical point, which has been acknowledged by scholars, yet often neglected in empirical analyses – images and perceptions are not only issue-specific, but also time-specific.

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These theoretical arguments need to be better reflected in empirical studies. This implies that a common practice needs to be that any inquiry examining images and perceptions should be as specific and nuanced as possible. In other words, it is important to identify beforehand not only *who* perceives *whom*, but also *from which aspect*, and *when*. Only the consideration of all these angles is likely to provide as accurate findings as possible.

The same relates to the examination of factors influencing images. The sources of images are also highly complex and multifaceted. It is a challenging and sometimes speculative task to study image sources and understand how exactly they shape certain images. Nevertheless, scholars should still continue their attempts and find a more systematic approach for the study of image sources. As this study found, images are shaped by factors at the global, country, and individual levels. Therefore, the application of multilevel analysis as a general framework seems to provide a more holistic and comprehensive approach to the study of image sources.

Overall, despite a few developments in recent years, further improvement of theoretical foundations for the study of images and perceptions remains a priority task for academia.

8.4 Research Limitations and Directions for Future Research

This study has certain limitations that can potentially be eliminated and complemented by further research. As conceptualized in Chapter III, this thesis specifically dealt with images of the EU held by *intermediate level actors* in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, represented by intermediate elites and the media. In fact, uniting various groups of middle-range elites and the media under the category of 'intermediate level actors' was an over-simplification, because these actors are by no means a homogeneous group. The way the media frames one actor can be totally different from how intermediate elites view it. Moreover, even 'intermediate elites' is not a unanimous and monolithic category. Therefore, one of the shortcomings of the thesis is that it neglects and omits, though acknowledges, possible differences within the 'intermediate level actors' in terms of their perceptions of the EU. This, however, was explained by the fact that the study's main focus was on *images* as

such, not on the actors holding them (see Chapter III). Another limitation of this study refers to the idea of *generalizability*, which is sometimes problematized, though not denied totally, in interpretive qualitative research (for general overview see Lewis and Ritchie 2003, Williams 2002, Smith 2018). In regard to this study, the findings cannot be generalized to other internal actors in society (for example, the general public) or to the whole country; rather, they refer only to examined intermediate level actors.

To eliminate these limitations and extend the scope of the study, further research could potentially be carried out in four directions. Firstly, the research can be expanded to examine images held by other actors in society. It has been common in the literature to study images held either by the general public or by high-ranking politicians/official discourse (see Chapter II). Do public perceptions of the EU differ from those of the intermediate level actors studied in this thesis? Answering this and other similar questions could provide deeper vertical insights into how one actor is perceived by another actor. Secondly, the research can also be expanded to include other countries in Central Asia. In this regard, it would be particularly interesting to see, for instance, whether perceptions of the Union in Kyrgyzstan differ from those of Tajikistan, as both have a similar structure and depth of relations with Brussels. Thirdly, as references to the US, China, and Russia repeatedly appeared in collected samples, it would be very important to carry out a comparative study of how all these actors are viewed by the same perceivers. In other words, a direct comparison of images of several external actors would provide additional meaning and value to the findings of this analysis. Finally, this study focused on perceptions of the EU's power/capability and threat/opportunity. Although Image Studies acknowledge them to be the central components of international images, these are not the only aspects. One direction of future research could be to incorporate other issue-areas and dimensions, and analyze how the EU is perceived from other aspects. In contrast to previous directions, this approach would focus not on *perceivers*, but on the *perceived*, and expand the concept of image or perception as such.

8.5 What could the EU do?[95]

The findings of this research might be of interest to the European Union. The EU is in the process of designing a new strategy for Central Asia, which is expected to be launched in the second half of 2019. It is naïve to expect that a new strategy will completely transform EU-CA relations and significantly increase Brussels' attention to the region. Yet, a new document needs to take into account the EU's shortcomings in the past, as well as build on its relative strengths. As noted earlier, the EU can hardly become the most powerful actor in the region in terms of material capabilities. Nevertheless, the Union can still be an influential actor given its positive perceptions. In fact, the thesis finds that a positive image is the EU's most obvious relative advantage in relation to the US, China, or even Russia. The EU could capitalize precisely on this aspect.

On the other hand, the findings also suggest that such a positivity is diminishing in the light of recent years. Therefore, this trend also needs to be considered in Brussels' new policy. The EU could take additional measures to confront the distortion of its positive image. As Chapter VII discussed, those intermediate elites who had deeper knowledge of the EU were more likely to possess a balanced and more positive image of the EU. Therefore, one possible option would be the improvement of its communication policy towards specific target groups and the development of new Central Asia-tailored tools to increase their awareness of the EU. Obviously, the issue of negative perceptions cannot be solved simply through better communication as this is not just a matter of misperception, but is also conditioned by 'objective' reasons, for example, by the real state of the (past) economic crisis, or the issue of refugees/migrants, or Brexit. Yet, what better communication could do is to decrease the level of stereotypical perception of the EU and events happening there by cutting off propaganda elements and increasing the visibility of alternative narratives about the EU.

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[95] This section is expected to appear in my article in *L'Europe en Formation* in September 2018. The main points in this section overlap with the points given in the article.

In the age of technology and internet, one option could be to develop internet-based information dissemination tools which would not ultimately demand any significant resources from the EU. Moreover, the Union and its delegations on the ground could make a better use of existing social media platforms. In terms of target groups, such initiatives should not and cannot aim to embrace the entire public; instead, they need be tailored to those who serve as information providers in society. However, the question as to whether the EU is interested in investing resources in such a shift of perceptions in Central Asia seems to remain an open one.

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Appendix I. Ethical Approval Letter

University of St Andrews

University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee
Sub-committee

10th June 2015
Zhanibek Arynov
School of International Relations

Ethics Reference No: *Please quote this ref on all correspondence*	IR11552
Project Title:	**The European Union and Central Asia: the paradox of (in)visibility**
Researchers Name(s):	Zhanibek Arynov
Supervisor(s):	**Professor Sally Cummings**

Thank you for submitting your application which was considered at the International Relations School Ethics Committee meeting on the 29th May 2015. The following documents were reviewed:

1. Ethical Application Form   3rd April 2015

The University Teaching and Research Ethics Committee (UTREC) approve this study from an ethical point of view. Please note that where approval is given by a School Ethics Committee that committee is part of UTREC and is delegated to act for UTREC.

Approval is given for three years. Projects, which have not commenced within two years of original approval, must be re-submitted to your School Ethics Committee.

You must inform your School Ethics Committee when the research has been completed. If you are unable to complete your research within the 3 three year validation period, you will be required to write to your School Ethics Committee and to UTREC (where approval was given by UTREC) to request an extension or you will need to re-apply.

Any serious adverse events or significant change which occurs in connection with this study and/or which may alter its ethical consideration must be reported immediately to the School Ethics Committee, and an Ethical Amendment Form submitted where appropriate.

Approval is given on the understanding that the 'Guidelines for Ethical Research Practice' https://www.st-andrews.ac.uk/utrec/guidelines/ are adhered to.

Yours sincerely

Dr Jeffrey Murer
Convenor of the School Ethics Committee

Cc: Professor Sally Cummings

Appendix II. Interviews with EU Officials and Officials of Embassies of EU Member States in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

A. List of Conducted Interviews

Place	Code	Interviewee	Organization	Date
KAZ - Astana	EU-1	European Diplomat	Embassy of France to Kazakhstan	17.09.2015
	EU-2	European Diplomat	Embassy of the Kingdom of the Netherlands to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan	17.09.2015
	EU-3	European Diplomat	Embassy of Italy to Kazakhstan	17.09.2015
	EU-4	European Diplomat (written answers)	Embassy of Belgium to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan	25.09.2015
	EU-5	EU Official	EU Delegation in Kazakhstan	9.10.2015
	EU-6	European Diplomat;	Embassy of Austria to Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, - Tajikistan and Turkmenistan	4.11.2015
BEL-Brussels	EU-7	EU Official	European Parliament	21.03.2016
	EU-8	EU Official	European Commission; DEVCO H2	21.03.2016
	EU-9	EU Official	European External Action Service	29.03.2016
	EU-10	EU Official	European External Action Service	29.03.2016
	EU-11	EU Official	European External Action Service	4.02.2016
	EU-12	EU Official	European Commission; DEVCO H2	5.04.2016
	EU-13	EU Official	European Commission; DEVCO H2	5.04.2016
	EU-14	EU Official	European External Action Service	5.04.2016
	EU-15	EU Official	European Parliament	6.04.2016
	EU-16	EU Official	European Parliament	6.04.2016
	EU-17	EU Official	European Commission; DEVCO B1	6.04.2016
	EU-18	EU Official	European External Action Service	7.04.2016
	EU-19	EU Official	European External Action	7.04.2016

			Service	
KYR-Bishkek	EU-20	European Diplomat	German Embassy to the Republic of Kyrgyzstan	17.05.2016
	EU-21	European Diplomat	French Embassy to the Republic of Kyrgyzstan	2.06.2016
	EU-22	EU Official	EU Delegation to the Kyrgyz Republic	22.06.2016

B. *Interview Questions*

1	How do you see the global roles of the European Union? What defines the EU as an actor on the world stage? Are there examples of where the EU has proven itself to be a global actor?
2	The EU is usually defined as an economic giant, but a political dwarf. Do you agree with such characteristics? How do you evaluate the EU's soft power? Is the EU a great power capable of competing with other global actors?
3	We often hear from EU representatives that Central Asia has a 'strategic' importance for the Union. If it is so, what makes the region 'strategic' for the Union? What does 'strategic' mean for the EU?
4	The EU is usually reported as being a weak actor in Central Asia with no clear-cut aims. To what extent do you agree with this criticism? Do you see the EU to be an active and powerful actor in Central Asia?
5	How do you see the main roles of the European Union in Central Asia? What kind of actor should it and could it be in Central Asia?
6	In which areas does the EU have a real influence and can make a change in Central Asia? What can the EU offer to Central Asia?
7	Is the EU succeeding in its policy in Central Asia? What are the main strength and weaknesses?
8	How would you describe the images that the EU wants to communicate to Central Asia? What are the main messages of the EU's communication towards the region?
9	Do you have any special communication or visibility plan/program/strategy for Central Asia?

Appendix III. Interviews with Intermediate Elites in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan

A. *List of Conducted Interviews*

Place	Code	Interviewee	Organization	Date
Kazakh Elites				
Astana	KZ-1	Scholar/Expert	Institute of World Economy and Politics (IWEP)	28.09.2015
	KZ-2	Scholar/Expert	Gumilev University; Department of Regional Studies	30.09.2015
	KZ-3	Scholar/Expert	Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies	1.10.2015
	KZ-4	Politician	Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan	1.10.2015
	KZ-5	Politician	Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan	1.10.2015
	KZ-6	Scholar/Expert	Gumilev University; Center for International and Regional Studies	6.10.2015
	KZ-7	Politician	Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan	6.10.2015
	KZ-8	Journalist	Newspaper 'Express-K'	7.10.2015
	KZ-9	Journalist;	Newspaper 'Egemen Kazakhstan'	9.10.2015
	KZ-10	Scholar/Expert	International Turkic Academy	10.10.2015
	KZ-11	Scholar/Expert	'Sinopsis' research center	10.10.2015
	KZ-12	Politician	Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan	12.10.2015
	KZ-13	Journalist; Political observer	Newspaper 'Egemen Kazakhstan'	13.10.2015
	KZ-14	Politician (written comments)	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan	13.10.2015
	KZ-15	Civil society	NGO 'Central Asian Office Penal Reform International'	15.10.2015
	KZ-16	Politician	Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan	15.10.2015
	KZ-17	Scholar/Expert	Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies	16.10.2015

	KZ-18	Politician	Former Member of the Parliament	17.10.2015
	KZ-19	Scholar/Expert	Institute of European Law and Human Rights	17.10.2015
	KZ-20	Politician	Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan	19.10.2015
	KZ-21	Politician	Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan	20.10.2015
	KZ-22	Civil society	Public Foundation for Parliamentary Development	20.10.2015
	KZ-23	Politician	Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan	21.10.2015
	KZ-24	Politician	Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan	22.10.2015
	KZ-25	Politician	Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan	23.10.2015
	KZ-26	Civil society	NGO 'Legal Media Center'	28.10.2015
	KZ-27	Politician	Former Minister of Foreign Affairs	30.10.2015
	KZ-28	Civil society	NGO 'Civil Alliance'	3.11.2015
	KZ-29	Politician	Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan; Former high-ranking diplomat	11.11.2015
Almaty	KZ-30	Scholar/Expert; Former diplomat	Independent researcher	16.11.2015
	KZ-31	Scholar/Expert	Centre of Actual Studies 'Alternativa'	16.11.2015
	KZ-32	Civil society	Public Foundation 'Charter on human Rights' (written comments)	17.11.2015
	KZ-33	Scholar/Expert	Institute of World Economic and Politics	17.11.2015
	KZ-34	Scholar/Expert	Institute of World Economic and Politics	17.11.2015
	KZ-35	Scholar/Expert	KIMEP University; Central Asian Studies Center;	17.11.2015
	KZ-36	Scholar/Expert	Kazakh – German University	17.11.2015
	KZ-37	Political figure	Opposition leader	17.11.2015
	KZ-38	Civil society	Civil activist	18.11.2015
	KZ-39	Journalist	Newspaper 'Tribuna'	18.11.2015
	KZ-40	Journalist	Newspaper 'Vremya'	19.11.2015
	KZ-41	Civil society	NGO 'International Legal Initiative'	19.11.2015

	KZ-42	Civil society	Eurasia Foundation of Central Asia in Kazakhstan	19.11.2015
	KZ-43	Civil society	NGO 'Legal Policy Research Center'	20.11.2015
	KZ-44	Civil society	NGO 'Echo'	20.11.2015
	KZ-45	Political Figure	-	20.11.2015
	KZ-46	Scholar/Expert	Central Asian Foundation for democratic development	23.11.2015
	KZ-47	Journalist	Journal 'Adam Bol'	23.11.2015
	KZ-48	Journalist	Newspaper 'Karavan'	24.11.2015
	KZ-49	Journalist	Newspaper 'Aikyn'	24.11.2015
	KZ-50	Politician	Nationalist	24.11.2015
	KZ-51	Independent journalist	-	24.11.2015
	KZ-52	Scholar/Expert	Al-Farabi University; Department of International Relations	25.11.2015
Brussels	KZ-53	Politician/ Diplomat	Mission of the Republic of Kazakhstan to the EU	5.04.2016
Kyrgyz Elites				
Bishkek	KG-1	Politician	Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic	11.05.2016
	KG-2	Politician	Former Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs	12.05.2016
	KG-3	Scholar/Expert	American University of Central Asia	12.05.2016
	KG-4	Politician	Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic	13.05.2016
	KG-5	Journalist	News agency 'Zanoza.kg'	13.05.2016
	KG-6	Politician	Opposition leader	14.05.2016
	KG-7	Politician - civil activist	Public Foundation 'Progress'	16.05.2016
	KG-8	Scholar/Expert	American University of Central Asia	16.05.2016
	KG-9	Scholar/Expert	Balasagyn Kyrgyz National University; Faculty of History and Area Studies	17.05.2016
	KG-10	Journalist	Radio Liberty, Bishkek Bureau	17.05.2016

	KG-11	Scholar/Expert	National Institute for Strategic Studies (NISS)	18.05.2016
	KG-12	Scholar/Expert	Kyrgyz-Russian Slavic University	18.05.2016
	KG-13	Scholar/Expert	Balasagyn Kyrgyz National University; Faculty of International Relations	20.05.2016
	KG-14	Civil Society	Coalition for Democracy and Civil Society	31.05.2016
	KG-15	Journalist	Newspaper 'Asia News'	2.06.016
	KG-16	Civil Society	NGO 'Bir Duino Kyrgyzstan'	2.06.2016
	KG-17	Politician	Opposition leader	4.06.2016
	KG-18	Politician	Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic	7.06.2016
	KG-19	Politician	Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic	7.06.2016
	KG-20	Politician – civil activist	-	7.06.2016
	KG-21	Civil society	Institute of public analysis	8.06.2016
	KG-22	Politician	Parliament of the Kyrgyz Republic	8.06.2016
	KG-23	Scholar/Expert	OSCE Academy	9.06.2016
	KG-24	Civil society	NGO 'Peremena'	15.06.2016
	KG-25	Journalist	Newspaper 'Kyrgyz Tuusu', political section	15.06.2016
	KG-26	Journalist	Newspaper 'Erkin Too', political section	15.06.2016
	KG-27	Civil society	NGO 'Center for the Protection of Children'	16.06.2016
	KG-28	Journalist	Newspaper 'Slovo Kyrgyzstana'	16.06.2016
	KG-29	Civil society	NGO 'Resource center for the elderly'	20.06.2016
	KG-30	Civil society	NGO 'Kylym shamy'	20.06.2016
	KG-31	Scholar/Expert	Independent expert	21.06.2016
	KG-32	Scholar/Expert	Independent researcher	25.06.2016
	KG-33	Civil society	Public Fund 'Legal Clinic 'Adilet''	27.06.2016
	KG-34	Politician	Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan;	27.06.2016
Brussels	KG-35	Politician/ Diplomat	Mission of the Kyrgyz Republic to the EU	2.04.2016

B. Interview Questions

1	What is the European Union for you? When you hear the word 'European Union', what are the most salient associations that come to your mind?
2	Do you see the EU as a single entity with common voice or as a discordant group of actors?
3	What can you say about the economic power, political power, and soft power of the EU? Do you see the EU as a great power capable of competing with other global actors? Why/why not?
4	Can the EU compete with other global actors in Central Asia? How do you assess its political, economic, and soft power influence in the region?
5	How would you evaluate the overall impact of the EU's policy in Central Asia? Is the EU implementing a coherent, clearly defined policy in Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia?
6	How do you see the main objectives that the EU tries to achieve in Kazakhstan/ Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia?
7	Do you consider the EU's objectives and policy in Central Asia to be different from those of other actors in the regions? Why/not?
8	What are the main strength and weaknesses of the EU's CA policy? What should the EU undertake in order to improve its policy and influence in the region?
9	What is the importance of the European Union for Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan and for Central Asia in general?
10	Can you identify the main directions of partnership, if any, where Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan could benefit from cooperation with the European Union?
11	Do you think the presence of the European Union in Central Asia necessarily has a positive impact on regional states?
12	Are there any issue-areas where the European Union's policy has a negative impact on Kazakhstan/Kyrgyzstan and Central Asia?

Appendix IV. List of Cited Media Samples

Egemen Qazaqstan. 2012. "Greek blackmail. War of nerves in the Eurozone (*Grek bopsasy. Euroaymaqta zhŭyke soghysy bolyp zhatyr*) ", 5 June 2012.

Egemen Qazaqstan. 2013. "Greece is fighting with difficulties (*Grekiya qiyndyqpen kŭres ŭstinde*)." 4 January 2013.

Egemen Qazaqstan. 2014. "Impetuous period of cooperation: Kazakhstan and the European Union relations will be upgraded (*Serpilisting serpindi kezengi: Qazaqstan men Europalyq Odaq arasyndaghy qatynastar zhanga denggeige kŏteriletin boldy*)." 10 October 2014.

Egemen Qazaqstan. 2015a. "Cooperation with the European Union has potential (*Europalyq odaqpen yqpaldastyqqa öris keng*)." 23 December 2015.

Egemen Qazaqstan. 2015b. "Let's not praise Western values too much (*Batystyq qundylyqtargha bas ura bermeyik*)." 1 April 2015.

Egemen Qazaqstan. 2015c. "Pitiful fates under the open sky (*Ashyq aspan astyndaghy ayanyshty taghdyrlar*)." 24 October 2015.

Egemen Qazaqstan. 2015d. "Prognosis of the future is deplorable (*Bolashaq bolzhamy bulyngghyr*)." 24 January 2015.

Egemen Qazaqstan. 2015e. "Refugees are taking over Europe (*Europany bosqyndar zhailap barady*)." 30 July 2015.

Egemen Qazaqstan. 2015f. "'Tragedy of the century': who is responsible for the refugee problem ? (*'Ghasyr qasireti': bosqyndar problemasyna kim kinăli*)." 4 September 2015.

Erkin Too. 2012a. "'[The EU] will declare a new program of support (*Koldoo körsötüünün zhangy programmasyn sunush kylady*)." 15 February 2013.

Erkin Too. 2012b. "Frozen Euro (*Ŭshŭgŏn evro*)." 2 March 2012.

Express-K. 2011a. "On the way to European standards (*Na puti k evropeiskim standartam*)." 21 July 2011.

Express-K. 2011b. "Window to Europe (*Okno v Evropu*)." 06 July 2011.

Express-K. 2013. "To Europe - with fingerprints (*V Evropu - so svoim otpechatkom*)." 5 March 2013.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2012a. "Europe gets closer (*Evropa stanovitsya blizhe*)." 27 October 2012.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2012b. "Ghost of cataclysm wanders through Europe (*Prizrak kataklizma brodit po Evrope*)." 23 February 2012.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2013a. "European *zugzwang* (Evropeiskiy tsugtsvang)." 20 July 2013.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2013b. "The head of state - a world-class politician (*Glava gosudarstva - politik mirovogo masshtaba*)." 6 July 2013.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2013c. "To meet European criteria (*Sootvetstvovat' evropeiskim kriteriyam*)." 13 April 2013.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2014a. "EAEU - EU: historical parallels (*EAES - ES: istoricheskie paralleli*)." 21 May 2014.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2014b. "'Intravital' monument of the Euro (*'Prizhiznennyy' pamyatnik evro*)." 25 June 2014.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2015a. "Crisis: eternal conflict of interests. The Brownian motion (*Krizis: izvechnyy konflikt interesov. Braunovskoe dvizhenie*)." 19 November 2015.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2015b. "Eurozone: the social face of the crisis (*Evropa: sotsial'noe litso krizisa*)." 15 January 2015.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2015c. "Latvia with Lithuania will become deserted (*Opusteyut Latvia s Litvoi*) ", 8 September 2015.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2015d. "The mission is succesfully completed (*Missiya zavershena uspeshno*)." 21 August 2015.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2015e. "Second category Europe (*Evropa vtorogo sorta*)." 17 April 2015.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2015f. "Will Europe withstand the Greek debt? (*Vyderzhit li Evropa grecheskiy dolg?*)." 24 January 2015.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2016a. "According to European standards (*Po evropeiskim standartam*)." 4 October 2016.

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda. 2016b. "Invite the Grinch, and he will steal Christmas (*Priglasite Grincha, i vy rastopchete Rozhdestvo*)." 7 January 2016.

Slovo Kyrgyzstana. 2012a. "At the level of world standards (*Na urovne mirovykh standartov*)." 9 October 2012.

Slovo Kyrgyzstana. 2012b. "The European Union declares its support (*Evrosoyuz zayavlyaet o podderzhke*)." 23 February 2012.

Slovo Kyrgyzstana. 2013. "Europe believed in Kyrgyzstan (*Evropa poverila v Kyrgyzstan*)." 20 September 2013.

Slovo Kyrgyzstana. 2014. "We will trade with Europe at reduced tariffs (*Stanem torgovat' s Evropoi po snizhennym tarifam*)." 5 October 2014.

Slovo Kyrgyzstana. 2015. "Hey, Europe, where is your conscience? (*Au, Evropa, gde tvoya sovest'?*)." 5 May 2015.

Slovo Kyrgyzstana. 2016. "The European Union will support the country's budget (*Evrosoyuz okazhet pomoshch byudzhetu strany*)." 5 April 2016.

Vecherniy Bishkek. 2011a. "Europe will help us again (*Evropa snova nam pomozhet*)." 28 November 2011.

Vecherniy Bishkek. 2011b. "From Eurasian Community - to Eurasian Union (*Ot Evraziyskogo soobshchestva - k Evraziyskomu soyuzu*)." 4 November 2011.

Vecherniy Bishkek. 2012. "Europe moves towards Asia (*Evropa dvizhetsia v Aziyu*)." 28 November 2012.

Vecherniy Bishkek. 2013. "The European Union will help us (*Evrosoyuz pomozhet nam*)." 20 September 2013.

Vecherniy Bishkek. 2014. "Boiling point (*Tochka kipeniya*)." 4 Macrh 2014.

Vecherniy Bishkek. 2015a. "Looking at the Greek light (*Zagliadyvayas' na grecheskiy ogonek*)." 14 July 2015.

Vecherniy Bishkek. 2015b. "Surge towards Europe (*Naplyv v Evropu*)." 4 September 2015.

Vecherniy Bishkek. 2015c. "Zhenishbek Nazaraliev: How Attambayev Passed the European Exam on the Crimea (Zhenishbek Nazaraliev: *Kak Atambayev sdal evropeyskiy ekzamen po Krymu*)." 7 April 2015. Accessed 22 June 2018. www.vb.kg/308948.