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Learning in, about and from the field? Symbolic functions of EU knowledge production on Central Asia

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ABSTRACT

Examining the European Union's (EU) engagement with Central Asia since the early 1990s, we see an increased commitment to context sensitivity. Arguably, in order to design 'better' interventions, the EU needs to know more about this region. This article explores three means of EU learning: *in* the field – through EU officials' first-hand experience of working at EU Delegations in Central Asia; *about* the field – through programmed channels of external expert knowledge, and in particular think tanks; and *from* the field – during institutionalized consultations with multiple local actors, such as academics, journalists and non-governmental organizations. It is argued that despite this complex learning infrastructure, EU knowledge production on Central Asia has a predominantly performative character. Rather than leading to changes in its relations with Central Asia, new knowledge produced by the EU aims at legitimizing this organization's pre-existing frameworks of engagement and practices of interactions with the region, and substantiating existing policy priorities.

KEYWORDS

European Union; knowledge production; learning; legitimation; local turn; practice turn

Introduction

In recent years, the European Union (EU) has stressed the importance of context specificity and local ownership of its external action and interventions around the world (Koros-televa 2020). This marks a shift from the previous approach in which the EU positioned itself as a teacher or mentor, while viewing the assisted countries as students who should acquire certain behaviours or values (Lavenex 2004; Keukeleire and MacNaughtan 2008). This EU-centric socializing character of EU interactions with neighbouring regions, particularly through democracy promotion, has been widely explored regarding the Southern Mediterranean and Africa (Dimier 2014; Del Sarto 2016), as well as the post-Soviet space (Delcour 2011; Axyonova 2016), including Central Asia (Axyonova 2014; Voloshin 2014; Sharshenova 2018).

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However, to design more context-specific interventions, the EU needs more knowledge about the field, which in accordance with an international relations (IR) convention denotes particular terrains of its interventions. Examining different stages of the EU's engagement with Central Asia, as one of such fields, we can see that the EU has devoted more effort to exploring this part of the world. This is manifested through a slow but steady incorporation of country-specific programmes and mechanisms into the EU approach towards this region between the early 1990s and now. Moreover, the EU has created and over time modified different learning schemes to produce more in-depth and diverse knowledge about the region. Knowledge production is an umbrella term that refers to processes of collecting, packaging together and interpreting data for various purposes. The EU's intensified knowledge production ostensibly serves instrumental purposes, mainly to improve its interventions in Central Asia. This article explores how, what and for which political uses (Boswell 2009) the EU has been learning about Central Asia – both in terms of gathering information (by collecting data) and constructing knowledge (by interpreting these data) (Bicchi 2014, 242).

Much of IR research on knowledge in international organizations (IOs) has long focused on the above-mentioned instrumental function of knowledge production, implying that IOs produce knowledge to comprehend the world around them, inform the public and propose evidence-based policy solutions for existing problems (for an excellent overview of the relevant literature and its critique, see Hülse 2007). Rare contributions have emphasized alternative functions of knowledge at IOs, including at the EU, pointing to politicization of knowledge and its often-symbolic use (e.g., Radaelli 1999; Best 2007) creating or sustaining IOs' authority (Broome and Seabrooke 2012). Following this path and building on advances in organizational studies, Boswell (2009) has identified two important but previously undertheorized symbolic functions of expert knowledge: legitimizing and substantiating. Boswell argues that political actors may produce knowledge to legitimize themselves in the eyes of various external, potentially critical audiences by playing a seemingly technocratic card or substantiate their policy preferences in competing environments. These and related arguments have been further explored and illustrated in several publications with insightful case studies focusing on production and use of knowledge by IOs (Autesserre 2014; Pécoud 2015; Sending 2015; Littoz-Monnet 2017). Looking at EU–Central Asia interactions, in this article we show that the process of learning and its outputs, that is, knowledge which is ostensibly produced for instrumental use and presented as necessary to improve EU interventions in the field, is not an exception from this trend: it also fulfils symbolic functions.

We identify three modes of learning that the EU has used regarding Central Asia. The first mode concerns what Neumann (2012, 7) describes as knowledge production by nomadic field diplomats. This learning takes place *in* the field but resulting knowledge is often highly specific and distorted, since '[i]t derives from day-to-day personal dealings with the leading political strata in the country to which a diplomat is accredited, sometimes to the detriment of his understanding of society at large in that country' (Bull 1977, 181; cited in Neumann 2012, 7). For the EU, such learning occurs through the first-hand experience of EU officials based in EU Delegations across Central Asia, which function as EU embassies in the respective countries. The EU has been relying on this mode of learning since 1994, when the first Delegation of the European Commission with regional mandate was opened in Kazakhstan. The second mode refers to fully mediated learning

about the field, by reaching out to external expert knowledge providers. In this regard, the EU started engaging with (and often financing) EU-based think tanks specializing in the post-Soviet space around the time the first 2007 ‘EU–Central Asia Strategy, entitled European Union Central Asia Strategy for a New Partnership,’ was adopted. The third mode concerns learning *from* the field, which takes place during the EU’s interactions with multiple local actors, and especially expert communities and non-governmental organizations (NGOs). The EU began to publicly prioritize this type of learning in 2017, during the preparations for the second 2019 ‘EU–Central Asia Strategy, entitled The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership.’ These three modes of learning co-occur, but the importance that the EU attributes to each of them changes over time – with more space gradually given to learning *from* the field.

The article argues that there are changes in the means of knowledge production over time, that is, in the modes of learning described above, but not necessarily in the functions of the knowledge that is produced through diversification of the learning process, that is, regarding the definition of problems and priorities that the EU sets for Central Asia. Despite its complex learning infrastructure, EU learning about Central Asia remains largely performative, with knowledge mostly serving symbolic functions. In the context of the local turn in international development, the EU needs to show readiness to learn in order to legitimize its interventions in Central Asia. The EU has learnt to highlight its attention to, and reliance on, local actors, their understandings, and the way they formulate local needs. However, this knowledge hardly changes what the EU is ready to offer. Instead, it legitimizes pre-existing frameworks of the EU’s engagement and practices of interactions with the region, while substantiating EU policy choices that often prove to be old wine in new wineskins (Dzhuraev 2022, in this issue).

Theoretically, we draw on literature on international practices (Bicchi 2011; Bueger 2014; Adler-Nissen 2016) and sociology of IOs, including organizational learning in international contexts (Haas 1990; Boswell 2009; Broome and Seabrooke 2012; Autesserre 2014; Bicchi 2014; Kuus 2014), and extend these insights to the analysis of EU–Central Asia interactions. Our primary focus is neither on EU policymaking towards Central Asia, nor on the substance of the EU’s relations with this region and content-specific changes in programmatic priorities in the two 2007 and 2009 EU strategies towards Central Asia, as this has been analysed in other contributions to this special issue (see the Introduction) (Dzhuraev 2022). Instead, we investigate the *modus operandi* of these relations from the EU’s perspective by exploring different formats and patterns of EU learning and functions of its knowledge production. The article draws attention to EU norms (its liberal identity) and organizational features (bureaucratization, compartmentalization of labour and a top-down approach), which are crucial to understand both the potential and constraints of this organization’s learning efforts. It also seeks to explicate the role of various participants of EU knowledge production, including the way these actors understand their involvement in EU learning.

Local turn and the imperative to learn

IOs increasingly declare their willingness to learn about countries where they operate. This needs to be seen in the context of the local turn in peacebuilding and development interventions, which started in the mid-2000s as a reaction to failures of international involvement

locally (Autesserre 2014). A growing criticism of both the inefficiency and inadequacy of imposing external solutions in assisted countries, and related questioning about the interveners' legitimacy (Best 2007; Zaum 2013) resulted in reconceptualizing the role of localism.

The EU is part of this trend (Korosteleva 2020). On many occasions, this IO has declared its readiness to learn about countries with which it engages by grasping alternative world-views and even integrating some local understanding of problems and solutions into its own interventions (see Bossuyt and Davletova 2022, in this issue, for a discussion on the EU approach to *mahalla* in Uzbekistan). On the one hand, the local turn at the EU level is part of a larger trend in the universe of international development aid. On the other hand, it can also be interpreted as an indication of transformation coming from the field – from the EU's experiences of engagement around the world and a realization that solutions modelled upon the EU's experience are not necessarily applicable elsewhere.

When describing how the 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy differed from the previous 2007 one, the then EU Special Representative (EUSR) for Central Asia, Peter Burian, recognized the patronizing attitude that characterized previous EU engagement with Central Asia, and its shortcomings:

We realised that the strategy of 2007 was too large, too ambitious, and in some areas, we were not able to fully implement what we actually wanted to. This was due to a limited understanding of specific needs, priorities, and ambitions of our partner countries. (cited in Heinecke 2019, 5)

In the same interview, Burian announced a change of approach and mentioned an EU commitment to learn *about* and *from* Central Asia: 'I believe we are moving with our partnership to a qualitatively new level where we benefit from each other's knowledge, experience, and contribution [...]' (cited in Heinecke 2019, 5). This demonstrates that, at least discursively, the EU acknowledges that having more knowledge about the region and understanding the motivations of local actors are preconditions for more effective interventions.

Declaring a willingness to learn is also a form of public relations and a way to differentiate itself from other actors (Boswell 2009) present in the region by portraying itself as a partner who listens to Central Asians and learns from them. This willingness is one of the few leverage points that the EU has in Central Asia, given that it does not have the money and resources of other actors, such as Russia (Fawn 2021, in this issue) and China (Krivokhizh and Soboleva 2022, in this issue). Particularly since the launch of the consultation process in 2017, EU officials have often stressed that the EU is responsive to local needs and priorities. However, as Arynov (2021, in this issue) shows, this does not always resonate with how this organization is perceived in the region (see also Kluczevska and Dzhuraev 2020).

Central questions remain as to how the EU learns, what it learns and with what effects. To explore the EU's learning modes we need to try 'seeing like [this] IO' (Broome and Seabrooke 2012), namely from the inside out, in other words, by investigating practices of the EU's interactions in the field through its organizational logic.

Methodology: learning how the EU learns about Central Asia

This paper is inspired by the practice turn in IR (Friedrichs and Kratochwil 2009; Adler and Pouliot 2011; Bicchì 2011, 2014; Bueger 2014; Bueger and Gadinger 2018) with its diverse

origins in the works of Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, Michel Callon, Bruno Latour, Karin Knorr Cetina and other social theorists. Instead of a single paradigm, several approaches locate the concept of practices at the core of IR (Adler and Pouliot 2011). This article borrows from three of them.

- First, practices are a basic category of our analysis of EU–Central Asia interactions. The article shares ‘a commitment to the analytical priority of processes, relations, and practices’ (Nexon and Pouliot 2013, 342). Looking at micro-level practices of EU learning in, about and from Central Asia allows us to explain the modes, characteristics and functions of EU knowledge production. Focusing on practices involves a significant historical dimension since ‘one has to look back to the generative relationships that made them [international practices] possible, as well as the socio-political processes that allowed their diffusion’ (Adler and Pouliot 2011, 29).
- Second, we adopt praxiography as a research strategy. In this regard, Bueger (2014, 4) suggests studying practices in the international realm through a combination of three strategies: investigating sites, studying controversy and following concepts. Thus, while exploring EU learning practices, we analyse different understandings and applications of framing concepts, such as learning, expert knowledge in various sites: EU Delegations in Central Asia and offices of EU institutions in Brussels, think tanks and conference venues. We also examine controversies around knowledge production, which are visible, for example, at various levels of EU bureaucracy manifesting different approaches to Central Asia, or in a consultation process which, from the EU’s point of view, was centred on local experts, but from these experts’ point of view was EU centric.
- Third, given that ‘the study of practices has much in common with ethnography’ (Bueger and Gadinger 2018, 132), practices became our main methodological tool. Applying praxiography to our fieldwork-based research, we relied on a combination of three core methods: ethnographic and expert interviews, (participant) observation, and documentary analysis. Thus, this article draws on our interviews with officials from the European Commission and the European External Action Service (EEAS) in Brussels, employees of the EU Delegations in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan,¹ Central Asian experts who were involved in the 2017–19 consultation process prior to the adoption of the 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy, and leaders of NGOs which obtain funding from the EU. Like other contributors to this special issue (Arynov 2021), we encountered significant difficulties when trying to reach EU officials, in both Brussels and Central Asia. In both cases, most meeting requests and emails remained unanswered. Yet, our impression is, that in comparison with EU officials in country Delegations, Brussels-based officials tend to discuss the EU activities in Central Asia more comfortably and more critically. Sites matter: the latter are physically located in Brussels, which is their own field, where they face fewer risks of miscommunication. In Central Asia, on the contrary, the EU Delegations not only look like a modern fortress (with high fences with barbed wire, two military–security posts on both sides of fences, several posts with metal gates on the path leading to the buildings, cameras and metal detectors, as well as bars on the windows of the buildings), but they also position themselves like a fortress. EU field diplomats distance themselves not only from government officials and allegedly government-supported civil society groups, who periodically

criticize the EU's involvement in domestic matters, but also from their 'loyal' partners, such as local NGOs which receive EU funding. The same concerns researchers such as ourselves, who at the time of fieldwork worked in European universities and had track records of obtaining EU research grants and participating in EU-funded research projects.

In contrast to extensive interviews which both of us had previously conducted with representatives of multiple IOs in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan – including several United Nations (UN) agencies, often lasting several hours and taking place in an overall forthcoming and often informal atmosphere, most meetings with EU officials in these countries were rather tense and short, sometimes being allocated only 20 min. Interviews often had to be requested via email several weeks in advance and a positive reply would arrive only if 'brokers' (EU officials based in Brussels, high-level employees in other IOs operating in Central Asia or other personal connections) became involved and provided informal recommendations for EU Delegations staff to meet us. Despite that, several meetings were either postponed indefinitely (although never officially refused) or promised, but never occurred. While anecdotal, these personal encounters reflect how the EU positions itself in the wider community of organizations which also operate in the field and how it differs from them, as well as from those it interacts with (and with those it does not), and in which settings. Other researchers explain similar fieldwork difficulties through the diplomatic training of many EU officials and their ability to avoid controversies (Kuus 2014, 54). However, paradoxically, it is such avoidance of direct contact with scholars and the overall elusive character of EU communication with those who might be seen as potential sources of critique that emphasize controversies (Bueger 2014) inherent to the politics of EU engagement in and with the field.

The article also analyses insights from our observations, including participant observations, at various events organized by the EU in Central Asia, such as celebrations of the Europe Days in Tajikistan and conferences with the participation of EU officials, both in Brussels and in Central Asia in 2018 and 2019.² Participation in these events, as well as direct involvement in preparation of some of them, involved lengthy and regular interactions with both EU officials and Brussels-based think tanks and observations on how EU officials interact with representatives of other IOs, journalists, experts and scholars from across the EU and Central Asia.

Finally, in an attempt to 'read practices from texts' (Bueger and Gadinger 2018, 151), we also review publicly available agendas, lists of participants and report summaries of events organized as part of the consultation process prior to launching the 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy. This is complemented by an analysis of news, public statements and strategic documents concerning the 2019 Strategy.

The EU learning *in* Central Asia: EU diplomatic missions and officials in the field

The first mode of EU learning involves production of field-based knowledge through everyday micro-level practices, which is a common learning strategy of IOs. It takes place by setting up 'physical' infrastructure in the region, that is, by opening EU

Delegations and filling these Delegations with EU officials who observe dynamics on the ground and interact with local actors.

Compared with other IOs, the EU has been a latecomer in establishing field missions in Central Asia due to the almost non-existent external policy competences of EU organizational predecessors and the gradual acquisition of such competences by EU institutions at later stages. The EU had already begun to engage with newly independent Central Asian states in 1991, initially through the Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) programme (1991–2006) and starting from the mid-1990s through bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) (Paramonov, Stokov, and Abduganieva 2017, 5–6). The first Delegation of the European Commission with a regional mandate was opened in Kazakhstan in 1994. However, other permanent EU representations in the region appeared much later. The next EU Delegations were opened in Tajikistan only in 2003, in Kyrgyzstan in 2011, in Uzbekistan in 2011 and in Turkmenistan in 2019. The case of the Delegation in Ashgabat is telling regarding the different approaches characterizing various EU divisions: with the EEAS pragmatically advocating for more EU presence in the field on the grounds that ‘dialogue in the field gives new ideas’, against the European Parliament’s scepticism about deepening relations with Turkmenistan because of its poor human rights record.³ In terms of learning potential, however, maintaining physical presence in Central Asia offers an advantage for the EU and the organization seems to recognize this. Nevertheless, this potential is not used effectively.

First, EU officials working in Delegations abroad are not systematically engaged in strategic decision-making concerning EU–Central Asia relations. The EU Delegations around the world, including in Central Asia, function as diplomatic missions, that is, embassies, rather than typical field offices of IOs (Austermann 2015, 54). This results from the unique nature of the EU as a polity in international politics, which is not (just) an IO and not (yet) a state, but rather a system of multilevel governance (Bache 2012), which is seen by some as a supranational type of federation (Von Bogdandy 2012). Thus, the Delegations operate under the EEAS (a proto-foreign and defence ministry of the EU), which reports to the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (Blom and Vanhoonacker 2015, 207; Maurer and Morgenstern-Pomorski 2018, 306). This means that although Cooperation Sections of EU Delegations hold development aid mandates and report to the Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA),⁴ the Delegations primarily function to gather information (Maurer and Morgenstern-Pomorski 2018, 312) and represent the EU locally (Duke 2013, 125). The Delegations are thus bound by diplomatic rules and practices. The officials working in these Delegations operate as field diplomats and rarely engage in semi-informal interactions with local actors, which is rather typical for staff of other IOs.

The reputational and political risks that are involved make EU officials in the field difficult interlocutors and explain the high levels of inaccessibility and even secrecy, which can be experienced by researchers such as ourselves who explore how the EU works in the field. Bicchi’s (2014, 242) distinction between *information* and *knowledge*, although disputable on both methodological and theoretical grounds (Boswell 2009; Broome and Seabrooke 2012), helps to understand that EU officials at the delegations are rather expected to *gather information* about developments on the ground and share it with Brussels, for example, through regular Head of Mission reports, than to

analyse and connect it to *create knowledge* about the field. In other words, the distribution of roles in the EU knowledge production chains is such that field diplomats provide input data which, ultimately, are interpreted by their colleagues at EEAS, DG INTPA or other parts of the EU bureaucratic machinery in Brussels (Austermann 2015, 53; Blom and Vanhoonacker 2015, 217–218). In the same vein, while EU officials in Delegations participate in the development of the multi-annual indicative programmes (MIP), that is, country-specific programming which needs to reflect priorities enlisted in EU–Central Asia Strategies, they do not take part in drafting vital documents that produce overarching narratives, such as the Strategy itself. The 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy, for example, was drafted by EEAS officials based in Brussels, and the key individuals involved in this process did not have prior working experience in Central Asia on the ground.⁵ Thus, in one of our interviews a month before the new EU–Central Asia Strategy was officially launched in May 2019, a high-level official at the EU Delegation in Tajikistan admitted not having seen any draft of this document. As this interviewee explained: ‘This process [drafting] is taking place much above us [in Brussels], we are [at the delegation in Dushanbe] just a by-product.’⁶ This demonstrates that the experience and insights of EU officials based in the field are not used systematically by the headquarters for strategic decision-making because of a rigid compartmentalization of labour and a top-down structure.

The second feature of learning in the field concerns the use of field knowledge upon EU officials’ return from the Delegations to Brussels. In theory, moving staff between the headquarters and field locations not only facilitates development of field-based expertise, but also creates conditions for circulation of this knowledge between different levels of a given organization. The EU staff, who are nationals of EU member states, can be sent to work at Delegations abroad for three years and in some cases for longer, if they are willing to remain in the field or there is no one to replace them. After that, they return to Brussels for at least three years. Through such a rotation mechanism, these employees’ personal insights from working in Central Asia could be used in Brussels to feed strategic planning towards the region. In practice, however, during rotations there are frequent problems with regard to lack of continuity, information flows and communication (Austermann 2015, 56). Only in very rare cases did people who had previously worked at EU Delegations in Central Asia later join the central, Brussels-based Division for Central Asia at EEAS or the Unit for Middle East, Central Asia and South Asia⁷ at DG DEVCO/INTPA. More often, such employees were assigned to new units, responsible for EU work in completely different regions or other thematic areas. This is a common practice for national ministries of foreign affairs (which the EEAS attempts to emulate) but seems to be unusual for national development agencies or IOs that tend to booster country or area expertise. Field insights become lost because working in EU Delegations is often seen as a necessary stepping-stone for more junior officials to secure and advance a career in Brussels. Since few high-level positions are available for EU employees returning from Central Asia and with expertise on this specific region, these civil servants are often upgraded to work in whichever units currently have available positions.⁸ In this way, however, the potential for learning from EU officials’ field experience is missed because of the EU’s organizational and staffing practices.

The third nuance of field-based learning concerns the division of tasks and distribution of power between EU officials – nationals of EU member states working at the

Delegations, and local staff – who are citizens of countries where the Delegations are based, in this case of Central Asian countries. While employing both international and local staff in field offices is a common feature of IOs, local staff can gradually use more of their knowledge and skills and rise higher in the ranks. Local staff are usually highly qualified individuals, familiar with the local context, fluent in several languages and often hold several university degrees from both their home country and abroad. However, local staff at EU Delegations cannot occupy diplomatic or otherwise politically loaded positions because of their different citizenship, and for the same reason they cannot be involved in decision-making. Consequently, they work in operation or communication sections and perform only administrative and technical tasks (Duke 2013, 125). In everyday practices at EU Delegations local employees can still express their opinions and in this way inform and indirectly influence EU officials, but there are no formal mechanisms for them to shape EU activities in their countries.

Overall, the potential for learning about the field directly from the EU's presence in the field has clearly been missed. Insights collected on the ground need to be filtered and mediated in order to be taken into account in Brussels and influence policymaking towards Central Asia. A top-down approach and a rigid bureaucratic apparatus clearly hinder making use of field-based knowledge – something that frequently causes dissatisfaction among EU staff working in the Delegations.

The EU learning *about* Central Asia: Europe-based programmed channels of external expertise

The second mode of the EU learning concerns this organization's engagement with external epistemic communities. Such learning occurs through knowledge-brokers: advocacy, academic and dialogue-oriented think tanks, as well as new types of hybrid initiatives. It takes many forms, starting from the EU engaging with knowledge made available by existent expert networks, through delegating knowledge production to them, to setting up new expert communities for specified advice. As Ullrich (2004, 67) explains, such platforms allow for 'sharing of ideas, broadening of perspective and exchange of information.'

The trend of the EU reaching out to external programmed channels of expertise is not new and not limited to Central Asia. It has its origins in the 1970s and is related to the process of geographical and operational expansion of the EU over time (Ullrich 2004; Kelstrup 2016). Being a bureaucratized organization itself, the EU started to engage with outside sources of expertise, which were also structured and largely formalized (Perez 2014, 324). Moreover, as a highly elitist and liberal entity, the EU has a long tradition of engaging with organizations which share its institutional culture, values and goals – features which provide them with institutional credibility vis-à-vis the EU (Boucher and Hobbs 2004, 85). While initially such 'customised knowledge production' (Perez 2014, 325) concerned internal matters of the EU, over time it became a tool of gathering additional knowledge on regions into which the EU expands and with which it engages.

The first think tank⁹ which was engaged in providing the EU with knowledge on Central Asia was the Brussels-based Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS), generally seen as the core think tank, simultaneously researching and advising the EU (Boucher and Hobbs 2004, 11). Founded in 1983, CEPS positions itself as 'a leading think tank and forum

for debate on EU affairs¹⁰ and for a few decades already it has served either as a birth-place or cradle for many scholars, analysts and think tanks focusing on this IO. CEPS has been performing policy-oriented research on a broad range of IR topics, including the EU neighbourhood, and foreign and security policy – which were the entry points for a thematic inclusion of Central Asia. Around the time when the first 2007 EU–Central Asia Strategy was adopted, and before the EU established its Delegations in all Central Asian countries, CEPS became the EU’s first main external source of information on this region. Central Asia was initially covered by Neil J. Melvin, a former OSCE official and academic, and Michael Emerson, former EU high-ranking official, diplomat and reputable expert – the first EU Ambassador to the USSR and later to Russia, who then joined CEPS and produced numerous briefs on the post-Soviet space (e.g., Emerson 2009). CEPS also contributed to preparing the 2007 EU–Central Asia Strategy. To this end, and also to promote the Strategy, CEPS organized a number of events focusing on Central Asia between 2006 and 2007.¹¹ Until the early 2010s, CEPS used to release short briefs on the region for EU officials and provide reports for the relevant committees of the European Parliament. The title of the first CEPS publication on the region, *The European Union’s Strategic Role in Central Asia* (Melvin 2007), is telling regarding the orientation of such knowledge production. From the very beginning, informative publications of CEPS were policy-oriented and aimed at identifying opportunities for EU engagement in Central Asia.

The second external learning channel, originating from CEPS, is the EU–Central Asia Monitoring (EUCAM): a 2008 initiative of CEPS and a Madrid-based think tank *Fundación para las Relaciones Internacionales y el Diálogo Exterior* (FRIDE), co-funded by the EU, some Member States and other donors. In the editorial of the first EUCAM brief, Melvin wrote that this initiative aimed to ‘scrutinise the EU Strategy for Central Asia and its implementation and through such scrutiny help ensure that the emerging relationship is forged in accord with the Union’s fundamental and strategic interests’ (EUCAM 2008, 1). While EUCAM was initially founded as an 18-month project, it managed to secure subsequent funding from the Open Society Foundations (OSI), the European Parliament and several Member States and has continued as the EU’s important source of expert knowledge for presumably evidence-based policies on Central Asia. From the start, EUCAM was led by Jos Boonstra, who initially worked for FRIDE. When in 2016 Boonstra moved to the Groningen-based Centre for European Security Studies (CESS), so did EUCAM. While CEPS used to provide the EU with more general information on Central Asia, EUCAM has been producing specialized knowledge on a variety of political, social and economic issues – while simultaneously identifying entry points for the EU to engage with the region. These publications, often written by established academics from EU Member States and Central Asia (EUCAM 2008, 9), have taken the form of short commentaries, policy briefs and reports which are accessible to EU officials. Moreover, while CEPS publications about Central Asia were exclusively prepared by European experts, EUCAM started to actively build networks with established professionals from Central Asia. Such an attempt to include local knowledge into Western-based knowledge production is a manifestation of the local turn, even if the selected Central Asian experts were Western-educated and English speakers.

The third, more recent learning channel is the European Neighbourhood Council (ENC).¹² Founded in 2016, this small think tank is led by young professionals. As the

name suggests, the ENC's regional coverage includes North Africa, Middle East, Eastern Europe and, as a region neighbouring EU neighbourhoods, Central Asia as well. In a relatively short period of time since its foundation, the ENC has managed to develop a big and diverse network of donors and partners, including EU institutions, other IOs, international non-governmental organizations (INGOs) and academic institutions.¹³ The ENC took a bet on young, emerging Central Asian experts, albeit only those with fluent English and a Western education, whom it has regularly involved in its research and outreach activities. Thus, the ENC is not only a knowledge broker but also a multi-service partner of the EU: it combines and often merges research, outreach and project implementation. This shows that the EU tasks knowledge brokers not only with the provision of expertise but also with the implementation of EU external action.

The fourth, most recent external channel of EU learning concerns large hybrid research and policy-oriented projects, which are funded by the EU, for example, through the Horizon 2020 Research and Innovation Programme. Such initiatives are of a temporary character and do not involve setting up new organizations, but rather unite existing research and policy advice entities, importantly also co-opting universities. A case in point is the 2018–19 project entitled 'Strengthening and Energizing EU–Central Asia Relations' (SEnECA), which was led by the University of Duisburg-Essen in Germany and involved 12 institutions with at least some degree of expertise on Central Asia, including four universities and research institutions from Central Asia. Apart from establishing an 'interdisciplinary network of researchers working on Central Asia in Europe and European integration in Central Asia', SEnECA specifically aimed to 'give recommendations on the revision of the EU–Central Asia Strategy'.¹⁴ Like in the case of the three aforementioned think tanks, knowledge produced through projects such as SEnECA is meant to make Central Asia more comprehensible to the EU and feed into EU strategies by offering concrete policy initiatives. Yet, what differentiates such new learning infrastructure from its predecessors is that it also aims to make the EU more visible to Central Asia. This happens through a strong public relations component, as well as engagement of Central Asian opinion leaders and gatekeepers to local academic and intellectual circles in the project.

Undoubtedly, there are differences between these four external learning channels. Each of them occupies a different niche (with CEPS and EUCAM being more research oriented, and ENC and SEnECA policy oriented) and provides a different type of expertise (with CEPS experts being former diplomats or civil servants and having a background in Soviet studies; EUCAM involving established foreign and local academics, ENC relying on emerging local researchers and activists, and SEnECA bringing together European and Central Asian universities, research institutions and think tanks). Despite these differences, the four learning channels share some common features, which reveal the bounded nature of EU learning through outside knowledge providers. To start with, they offer policy-oriented knowledge, rely on EU funding, use EU vocabulary and involve pro-EU and liberally oriented experts. These features are interrelated and mutually reinforcing. Moreover, they are either based in Brussels or nearby (Groningen, Berlin, Duisburg). Having a physical presence in relative proximity to Brussels allows these organizations to effectively network with EU officials, which contributes to their credibility and raises their chances to secure EU funding (Bajenova 2019, 69–70). Furthermore, such organizations form part of closed knowledge networks and function as epistemic communities

or, indeed, communities of practice (Bicchi 2011), in that they employ or engage with professionals with strong analytical skills and academic credentials. Nevertheless, due to the nature of these institutions their expertise is also shaped not only by knowledge and academic criteria, but also by factors such as short funding circles, fundraising priorities and managerialism (Bajenova 2019, 63).

As a result, these learning channels are reactive to EU policy needs, in that their research often responds to demands pre-formulated by the EU, for example, through research and project grants. The EU thus sets specific frameworks to produce new knowledge by providing its own research questions and determining the scope of research. Because of a necessity to maintain close ties with the EU, both as a donor and target audience, these organizations need to maintain trust with the EU and create congruence in thinking. This filters information and narrows the scope of potential criticism of EU frameworks of engagement with Central Asia. It is impossible to assess whether, or to what extent, knowledge produced by these institutions and projects feeds back into the EU institutions and influences the cognitive frames of EU officials. This is because they do not provide *new* knowledge, but largely reiterate and 'validate' the challenges and priorities already identified by the EU. As in the case of other EU-related think tanks, 'you know what they'll say even before you read it' (Boucher and Hobbs 2004, 87). From the EU side, engaging with such organizations denotes a safe, controlled learning process, in which their knowledge adds up incrementally, fits pre-existing frames and does not challenge the EU. Relationships between the EU and these actors are co-constitutive: it is not only think tanks and other specialized initiatives that shape the EU's awareness of Central Asia, but the EU that shapes these organizations (Kelstrup 2016, 4).

Ultimately, what the EU learns through such programmed channels of expertise is largely that the region is sliding towards autocracy and there is a demand on the ground for EU interventions enhancing democracy, human rights and rule of law. Such a mediated learning process becomes a way to find and co-opt new experts, both from EU Member States and Central Asia, to increase the legitimacy of EU actions in the region.

The EU learning *from* Central Asia: consultations with local experts for the 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy

The third mode of EU learning about Central Asia refers to a more recent type of epistemic practice in which EU officials officially reach out to local experts. Here, we analyse several events organized between 2017 and 2019 under the auspices of the EUSR for Central Asia, Peter Burian. They took place in Central Asian and European cities, involved consultations with local non-governmental actors – NGO leaders, academics and small entrepreneurs (Burian 2019), and aimed at providing input for the 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy (European Parliament 2019, 11).

While consultations are not an entirely new format in the EU's engagement with Central Asia, previously they had involved representatives of embassies of EU Member States present in Central Asia and other IOs, such as the World Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), as well as development agencies from several EU Member States, for example the German Corporation for International Cooperation (GIZ) and UK Department for International Development (DFID). Local

partners were not consulted, and this has been a criticism in recent years. Thus, the 2007 EU–Central Asia Strategy was adopted under the German presidency of the EU and was widely acknowledged as Germany’s doing, and as indicative of this specific country’s interests in the region (Voloshin 2014, 43). This document was also widely criticized for approaching Central Asia as a homogenous region and ignoring particularities of single countries, which made it abstract and ineffective. As a result, the June 2017 communication from the Council of the EU, which officially launched preparations for a new 2019 Strategy, took a different approach. It announced that this time ‘the EU intend [ed] to involve the Central Asian partners in the preparation of the new strategy’ (General Secretariat of the Council 2017, 6). In one of his interviews, Burian argued that through the consultations the EU ‘wanted to hear from our partners how they see their own priorities, needs and challenges, and how they see the role of the European Union in helping them addressing those challenges [...]’ (cited in Heinecke 2019, 5). However, despite this innovative format and a narrative of openness, in practice the consultation process had a largely legitimizing function.

To start with, a careful selection of Central Asian participants¹⁵ is revealing of whom the EU considers as ‘stakeholders’ and from whom it is willing to learn, and also who is excluded from this process. At the request of Burian, some potential invitees were identified by EU Delegations in Central Asian countries, while others belonged to Burian’s own network.¹⁶ When asked about the selection criteria for participants, an interviewed EU official from the Delegation in Tajikistan explained, referring to Tajik invitees:

The problem is that in Tajikistan there are very few real political scientists who could do an independent analysis. There are no independent think tanks, no independent university. There are no independent people outside NGOs, so we had to invite mainly NGO people. But the majority of them are in fact scholars: they have solid education and experience. They are both experts and activists.¹⁷

Striking in this explanation is the repeated emphasis on ‘real’ and ‘independent’ input that the invitees were supposed to provide. The EU official repeatedly used ‘independent’ as a synonym of views that are both ‘liberal’ (e.g., committed to secularism and gender equality) and ‘pro-Western’ (as opposed to views which are pro-governmental, pro-Russian, pro-Chinese or simply apolitical). Because EU officials believed that not many local academics, analysts and civic activists could fulfil such criteria of ‘independence’, the Delegation eventually selected a small number of individuals who worked at Western-funded development organizations in Tajikistan, and most often at organizations receiving funding directly from the EU. A similar selection took place in other Central Asian countries. While the invited experts represented many sectors (e.g., academia, media and small business), our mapping of participants¹⁸ at various meetings from the two-year consultation process reveals that they shared the same specific features. Nearly all local experts were fluent English speakers, had received a Western education and had previously participated in EU-funded development and research projects. This suggests that the EU was not open to diverse local views on the stake of EU–Central Asian relations and not willing to learn about heterogenous approaches to development and prosperity. Rather, it tried to confirm its own assumptions and priorities, as, arguably, the carefully selected invitees already shared EU values. Such filtration of local experts, following very similar criteria, is not unusual for other IOs working in Central Asia, when they

attempt to control who is given the right to speak for others to legitimate their actions in the field (Korneev 2018).

The second feature of this EU learning mode concerns its largely performative character. The participants we interviewed recall that several events took place in expensive and luxurious venues, such as high-star hotels, and were held in an elevated, rather than a working, atmosphere. Besides the invited Central Asian experts, other participants included high-level EU officials, representatives of EU Member States and institutions that often collaborate with the EU, such as the aforementioned EUCAM project or academics from EU-based universities. Nonetheless, this epistemic practice turned rather controversial, given that the space for a meaningful exchange between EU officials and Central Asian experts was missing. As one of the participants commented on the events where s/he participated, EU officials manifested a 'duty approach' (*dizhurny podhod*), in that 'they showed up at the beginning, then at lunch time and at the end of the event, each time saying a few words and quickly leaving.'¹⁹ Moreover, while the consultations aimed to provide a space for voices of Central Asian experts to be heard, this was not always the case. For example, some events included a few keynote speeches delivered by European experts, while the invited experts from Central Asia were merely sitting in the audience. One of the local experts commented on such a consultative event in which s/he participated:

Participants wasted their time, and the EU wasted its money. We [local experts] were not even allowed to talk. The organizers seated the best experts from the region amongst the public, without even giving them space at the round table. How arrogant is that? The EU wanted to show that they met the civil society, private sector, economists, and that we are all on the same page. But we all know that the Strategy is not being written in such meetings.²⁰

Our interviewees described the consultations as a 'big party' (*tusovka*), 'tourist trips' (*turisticheskie tusovki*) and 'box-ticking events.' They shared the impression that although these events were presented as helping the EU understand local perspectives, they were rather intended to stimulate an interest in the EU on the ground and increase the organization's visibility among local intelligentsia before launching the 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy. Local actors, however, were not deprived of agency. While realizing the nuances of the consultation process, many local professionals still agreed to attend the consultations because regular invitations to such events allow them to maintain the status of internationally recognized experts, access to EU officials and potential channels of influence.

The third trait of the consultation process refers to the modality of discussions. The topics featured very broad social, political and economic issues – all at once. During consultative events, as our interviewees pointed out, there were no specific questions which would allow the discussions to be streamlined towards reaching a consensus about the pressing needs of Central Asia that the EU could address. At subsequent meetings, the same topics were discussed repeatedly. As one participant commented: 'It is not clear what is the point of organizing such similar events multiple times. There were no specific goals. Speakers would say whatever they wanted, there was little in common.'²¹ Had the EU been interested in reaching some conclusions, it could have organized thematic working groups with selected experts participating in each session and specific tasks identified for each meeting. In practice, however, there was no continuity

because local experts were invited for one or two meetings only. Moreover, as an interviewee recalls, EU officials ‘nodded a lot and spoke very little at those events, and especially the ones from [EU] Delegations. [It felt] as if they did not want their opinions to be known, they just listened and took notes.’²² This again shows that the consultations were not designed to foster actual exchange between local experts and the EU delegates: the latter seemed to avoid engaging in potentially problematic but also potentially enriching discussions. Their learning from the field was mostly observational, akin to diplomatic knowledge production in the field.

Even with notes taken at each event, given the modality of these consultations it would be difficult to aggregate multiple opinions that were expressed by Central Asian experts, let alone provide a coherent summary. When asked how the EU consolidated such heterogeneous, often conflicting input from local actors, and how exactly they influenced the 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy, an EU official working in Tajikistan responded, evasively but tellingly, that ‘the colleagues in Brussels tried to avoid chaos.’²³ While the consultation process might seem chaotic, it is informative about the aims of the EU learning from Central Asia. The symbolic – legitimizing and substantiating – functions of knowledge production (Boswell 2009) have clearly prevailed, leaving limited space for its instrumental use, i.e., for evidence-based policymaking towards the region. One participant succinctly observed:

Whatever the new Strategy would be about, the EU can find a confirmation for each sentence. They can say: this was mentioned during consultations. Because so much was said at these events and there was no methodology of how input [from local experts] was taken on board, it is easy for the EU to selectively indicate that they included this and that person’s suggestions.²⁴

Indeed, the consultation process was actively used by EU officials to enhance the EU legitimacy and appropriateness of the 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy. For example, in his 2019 op-ed for the *Astana Times*, the EUSR Burian (2019) wrote about the consultations: ‘*An explicit demand for a “more ambitious” presence and engagement of the EU made the preparation of a new Strategy for Central Asia particularly timely*’ (emphasis added).

In a similar line, at the 2019 EU–Central Asia Forum the then High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Federica Mogherini, stated:

As we were drafting our Strategy, we engaged with many of you in this room. We wanted to hear your expectations and aspirations for our partnership and for your future. I am very much encouraged because [...] *your [Central Asians] recommendations are very much in line with the content of our [EU’s] discussions.* (High Representative 2019b, emphasis added)

This shows that the most recent mode of EU learning from the field, through formalized consultations with local actors, aimed to create a perception of local ownership of the 2019 Strategy by ‘proving’ that there was a demand for more involvement of the EU on the ground and that, unlike governments in the region, people in Central Asia shared EU values and interests.

Discussion and conclusion

Thanks to its extensive and diverse learning infrastructure and practices of learning in, about and from the field, the EU has been making progress in learning about Central

Asia. However, it does not seem to be willing to use the resulting knowledge instrumentally – to attune its policies, making them more tailor-made, accounting for agendas proposed locally. Instead, the EU has prioritized important symbolic functions of this multi-source knowledge, which is manifested in practices of its interaction with Central Asian actors.

Despite previous criticism, the 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy did not significantly differ from the 2007 one. The EU did not adopt a more country-specific approach. It not only continued with its practice of *seeing* and framing the five Central Asian countries as a fairly homogenous region but also tried to artificially reshape this region by linking it with Afghanistan (Fawn 2021; Hanova 2022). Moreover, the new Strategy regrouped the previous priorities of the EU in the region (democracy, human rights and security) into three new clusters: ‘partnering for resilience’, ‘partnering for prosperity’ and ‘working better together’ (High Representative 2019a). The similarity of the two strategies was discussed by both scholars and analysts (see also Dzhuraev 2022). For example, Putz (2019) pointed to ‘broad generalities, which serve as a glaring reminder that policies on paper can be far removed from the immediate realities in the region.’ The EU continues to steer the dialogue and focus the attention of its Central Asian interlocutors on what is relevant for the EU in the first place.

The limited effects of EU learning are not surprising because, as this article has shown, informing action is not the primary function of learning (Boswell 2009). The EU engages in extensive learning mainly to legitimize (Zaum 2013) its interventions in the region. Thanks to its extensive learning process focusing on studying local needs, the EU can boldly state that it is sensitive to the principles of the local turn. This allows the EU to claim that it does not engage in any geopolitical games (Fawn 2021) and does not impose its norms on Central Asia, because an expectation for more EU interventions comes from the ground.

Five more specific findings arise from this analysis. First, over time there has been a transformation in practices of EU learning about Central Asia. The first learning mode, through physical presence and routinized diplomatic practice in Central Asia, dates back to the mid-1990s when the EU opened its first regional Delegation in Kazakhstan. The second mode, through engagement with outside knowledge providers, started in the mid-2000s, around the time when the first, 2007 EU–Central Asia Strategy was adopted. The third learning mode, through formal consultations with local experts, was launched before the adoption of the second, 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy. Currently, the EU learns about Central Asia in a polycentric way, by producing knowledge internally (through diplomatic practice in the field), externally (through engagement with EU-based think tanks and Central Asian experts), and in a hybrid way (through EU launching and funding of projects such as EUCAM and SEnECA).

Second, this transformation and diversification of learning infrastructure over time is the main product of EU learning. In the 1990s and early 2010s, the EU learned that it needed basic, factual knowledge about the Central Asian countries which became independent after the Soviet collapse. As its learning infrastructure about Central Asia was gradually expanding, the EU learned that it needed to legitimize its presence and substantiate actions in the region among various audiences: EU Member States, Central Asian governments, as well as European and local experts. This is why, over time, EU learning became a complex process aiming at simultaneously deepening knowledge to inform policymaking, justifying EU interventions in the region, giving visibility to EU presence and co-opting local elites.

Third, EU learning did not produce much change in the content of EU–Central Asia interactions, but it reshaped their form – their specific practices. Over time, the EU has increasingly attempted to move from a ‘lecture’ to a ‘dialogue’ (seminar) style, and structure these interactions as more participatory and more equal. Comparing the 2007 and 2019 Strategies, Dzshuraev and Muratalieva (2020, 3) argued that ‘the most notable differences seem to be in the way the two texts are articulated, balanced and toned.’ By renouncing its geopolitical and paternalistic tone, the EU creates an impression that it listens to local actors and responds to local needs, thereby mainstreaming the local turn in its policies towards Central Asia – something that became the new global standard of international interventions, and that allows the EU to differentiate itself from other important actors present in Central Asia.

Fourth, the main lens through which both EU officials and EU Member States look at the region remains geopolitical, and this determines the limits of EU learning from the start. One EU official we interviewed was explicit about this approach: ‘Central Asia is exotic and oriental. But practically speaking, exports from this region to the EU are very small. So the EU does not have any interests here apart from geopolitical ones. Security is our aim number one aim.’²⁵ Another interviewed official further elaborated on this dominant lens:

Afghanistan is not becoming a safer place, it can negatively influence Central Asia. So we need to help secure borders [between Afghanistan and Central Asian countries] and build resilience here – because we wish for best outcomes for ourselves [the EU]. This is why, first of all, the [EU–Central Asia] Strategy needs to reflect interests of EU member states. They need to be on board because the EU has no military and for defence it relies on armies of member states.²⁶

This suggests that no matter if and what the EU learns about the region, a realist approach (Hyde-Price 2006; Sharshenova 2018) and a geopolitical, security angle prevail in its interactions with Central Asia.

Fifth, finally, the EU appears uninterested in learning about Central Asia to change itself, that is to rethink its overarching geopolitical approach and specific interventions in the field. Instead, it wants to learn more about Central Asia to find a better approach to win over local actors in this region, and it does so by creating an impression of congruence of interests. This resembles a teacher (the EU) learning more about its students (Central Asian countries) to socialize them more effectively by putting less pressure and instead giving them time and creating incentives for them to behave ‘properly’. In such a learning process, the one who is supposed to learn more about the field insists on conveying its own ideas to the field, without questioning them critically.

Notes

1. We recognize the limitations stemming from the fact that our fieldwork in Central Asia took place in only two countries.
2. These included two particular cases of intensive participant observation of the EU’s interactions with academics, journalists, other IOs, etc.: a multi-format event, which was part of our university-based research project and organized in partnership with a Brussels-based think tank after the launch of the 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy; and a 2019 Brussels-based event (‘recommendation workshop’) organized as part of another, explicitly policy-oriented and EU-funded, research project led by a consortium of academic and non-academic organizations.
3. Interview 8: EU official in Brussels, 9 July 2019.

4. Until 2021, it was called the Directorate-General for Cooperation and Development (DEVCO). The discursive move from ‘development’ to ‘partnerships’ reflects the local turn.
5. Correspondence with a European Commission official, July 2019.
6. Interview 6: official in the EU Delegation in Tajikistan, 19 April 2019.
7. It has recently ‘lost’ South Asia to another unit.
8. Interview 7: EU official in Brussels, 8 July 2019.
9. The selected think tanks and projects are the most visible EU knowledge providers about Central Asia and depend on EU funding. Other relevant think tanks include Chatham House, which has been influential in generating knowledge about Eurasia, but does not receive EU funding.
10. CEPS, *Who We Are*; <https://www.ceps.eu/about-ceps/>.
11. One of the authors attended several of these events.
12. Both authors have collaborated with this organization, and one is a member of its Academic Council.
13. ENC, *About ENC*; <http://www.encycouncil.org/about-enc/>.
14. TEPSA, *SEnECA – Strengthening and Energizing EU–Central Asia Relations*; <http://www.tepsa.eu/projects/seneca/>.
15. Given a relatively small circle of experts who participated in these events, we refrain from indicating their names, nationality or organizations.
16. Interview 8.
17. Interview 4: official in the EU Delegation in Tajikistan, 11 April 2019.
18. Based on available agendas and conference reports, interviews and informal conversations with some participants.
19. Interview 1: participant of the EU consultation process, 18 March 2019.
20. Interview 3: participant of the EU consultation process, 28 March 2019.
21. Interview 2: participant of the EU consultation process, 19 March 2019.
22. Interview 2.
23. Interview 4.
24. Interview 2.
25. Interview 6.
26. Interview 5: official in the EU Delegation in Tajikistan, 11 April 2019.

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