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EU–Central Asian interactions: perceptions, interests and practices

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ABSTRACT

By shifting the study of European Union (EU)–Central Asian relations from its fixed category of black-boxing both the EU and Central Asia, this article advances the case for the approach of examining multi-level and multi-actor interactions that identify the dynamic processes of reciprocal action and meaning-making that characterize the mutual cooperation. It distinguishes perceptions, interests and practices, pointing to the rationales and modes of behaviour of multiple EU and Central Asian actors. The article also advances five reasons why EU studies should take more interest in Central Asia, given that the EU’s larger external relations and security agenda extends to this region. Similarly, it shows that Central Asian studies can benefit from the analysis of the region’s interactions with external actors, including the EU, given that external actors contribute to reshaping national policy agendas and influence everyday life.

KEYWORDS

Central Asia; Central Asian studies; European Union external action; European Union studies; international organizations

Introduction

Though not each other’s most fundamental partners, the European Union (EU) and Central Asia consider each other to be increasingly important. This study identifies the interactions between the EU and Central Asian countries – Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan – analysing perceptions, interests and practices which characterize their collaboration. It investigates why and how they have transformed their interactions since the former Soviet Central Asian republics gained independence in 1991 and initiated foreign policies, and when the EU, increasingly vested with external policy competences, first paid attention to this region. Analysing the antecedents of contemporary interactions from the early 1990s, rather than focusing solely on current events, allows for an examination of a temporal, spatial and thematic evolution in EU–Central Asia interactions over time.

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Below we make cases for EU-focused research to study Central Asia. First, a very few examples from the EU and its officials confirm that the EU considers Central Asia important to it, and vice versa. That is, even if and as both face alternatives and competitors, including but not only Russia and China bilaterally as well as their own regional formations, the United States which on many matters coincides with the EU, and India, Iran, South Korea and Japan. In launching in 2019 its second strategy for Central Asia, titled 'The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership', the European Commission declared that the EU and the Central Asian states 'have a longstanding relationship based upon strong mutual interests' (Joint Communication 2019).¹ The EU has a Special Representative for Central Asia, one of only nine of these diplomatically infrequent, even pioneering positions, which allows interactions within EU institutions and states, and then with external interlocutors (Grevi 2007; Tolksdorf 2013). The incumbent during the launch of the second Strategy, Peter Burian, explained that 'Central Asia has always been important for Europe' (Burian 2019). These official views grow from the EU's own geographical expansion and reconfiguration of its neighbourhood. The EU noted that its 2004 and 2007 enlargements brought it to the shores of the Black Sea, and thereby also 'closer to Central Asia, geographically, politically, economically'. Consequently, it intended to 'strengthen and deepen' those relations (European Council 2007).

At the time of the EU's first Central Asia Strategy titled 'European Union Central Asian Strategy for a New Partnership', in 2007, Brussels acknowledged the region's security value to it, if belatedly, with its new-found global security importance towards Afghanistan after the 9/11 terror attacks. Three Central Asian states border Afghanistan and all five either consented to transit and refuelling arrangements or host military bases for individual Western countries, including France and Germany, and for collective NATO operations. While international involvement in Afghanistan decreased over a decade before the sudden US withdrawal in 2021, the EU nevertheless included and continues to include a series of soft security measures in its interactions with Central Asia. In its efforts to enhance Central Asia border management, the EU deems Central Asia to be 'one of the most strategically important regions', and tackles challenges to its interests that include 'human trafficking, trafficking of drugs, organised crime and terrorism' (Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA), *n.d.*, archived referring to 2015–20).

So important for the EU has been Central Asia's hydrocarbons and mineral wealth that the European Parliament passed a resolution on the first Strategy extolling that 'the EU must speak with one voice on energy policy, in view of the presence in the region of projects of major interest to Europe in terms of energy supply'. It also called for vigilance against competition (European Parliament 2007). Subsequent EU documentation and studies continue, despite lost opportunities, to frame Central Asia as 'an energy-rich region with strong potential for the EU' (Russell 2020, 19). Newer research on EU behaviour in this region points to its awareness and anticipation of what can and should be called geopolitical behaviour.

Central Asian leaders, for their part, have increasingly stressed the importance of collaborating with the EU, even if no separate strategies of cooperation have resulted, either regionally or bilaterally. For example, Tajikistan's President Emomali Rahmon has repeatedly stated that 'strengthening relations with the EU is considered a priority' of this country's foreign policy (Asia Plus 2015). Such declarations, however, are usually accompanied

by the leaders' clarifications that issues related to the development of economic cooperation should be foremost, and without expressly saying so, that the EU's emphasis on human rights and democratization be minimized. Thus, in the region's two more aid-dependent countries, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, local commentators report on events related to political developments, such as the 2019 EU–Central Asia strategy, predominantly in terms of the amount of development aid allocated (Asia Plus 2019). In turn, in more economically endowed countries, in particular Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the attention is mainly paid to economic agreements and trade deals concluded with the EU (Akorda 2021; Saidov 2022).

As even this brief overview demonstrates, common ground exists in EU–Central Asian interactions, namely a recognition of mutual importance and the benefits that cooperation generates. However, multiple perceptions and divergent expectations exist concerning the aims of this cooperation. We also observe a myriad of mutual interests, and various overlapping practices of equalized cooperation and hierarchical development assistance, that complicate the nature of these interactions. These are precisely the aspects that this special issue explores.

In what follows, this article identifies dominant strands in the literature on the engagement between the EU and Central Asia; argues for the usefulness of the concept of interactions to analyse this engagement and explains how perceptions, interests and practices, which constitute these interactions, are interrelated; advances arguments why EU studies and Central Asian studies can benefit from each other; and presents findings from articles that form this issue.

From relations to interactions

Collaboration between the EU and Central Asia, either studied as the inter-regional or of the EU with single countries, is not entirely new in academic literature. Nevertheless, such research has largely been conducted in separate fashions with separate foci. Scholars investigating the overarching frameworks, institutional set-up and conduct of EU external policy, and characteristics of EU power and its global actorness give little attention to the region, while some researchers interested both in the EU and the post-Soviet space have approached Central Asia as a case study of EU external action (e.g., Hoffmann 2010; Bossuyt and Kubicek 2011; Sharshenova and Crawford 2017; Spaiser 2018; Arynov 2018). At the same time, the topic has been investigated by researchers focusing primarily on Central Asian politics and international relations, mainly (but not exclusively) of Central Asian origin, who came to look at the EU as a case study of Central Asia's international engagement and even cooperation (e.g., Kassenova 2007; Anceschi 2014; Juraev 2014; Kembayev 2016).

Some existing literature provides an overview of overarching frameworks of the EU's relations with Central Asia, in particular zooming in at development aid and EU norm promotion within the democratization paradigm (Kassenova 2007; Crawford 2008; Warkotsch 2009; 2011; Kavalski 2010; Gavrilis 2011; Emerson et al. 2010; Axyonova 2014; Voloshin 2014; Sharshenova 2018). Another body of research investigates power relations between the EU and Central Asian actors (Kluczevska and Juraev 2020) and places the EU in a wider geopolitical context, assessing how this organization positions itself towards other international players, particularly China and Russia (Sharshenova and

Crawford 2017; Spaiser 2018; Bossuyt 2019; Bossuyt and Dessein 2021; Leskina and Sabzalieva 2021), and how it builds relations with them.

This special issue builds on these bases, while also offering a different approach. Instead of trying to devise a new, fixed categorization of EU–Central Asia relations, we shift the focus towards interactions. We are interested in changing the conceptual lens from a rather mainstream International Relations (IR) concept of ‘relations’ to the more socio-anthropologically loaded concept of ‘interactions’ that has already gained its place in critical IR and critical development scholarship. This speaks to other ‘region-to-region’ and related IR literature (Bicchi and Bremberg 2016; Del Sarto 2021; Russo 2018), pointing to dynamic processes of meaning-making, communication, reciprocal action and involvement, which occur largely through everyday exchanges. Interactions are always in the making, characterized by frequent ups, downs and U-turns. By doing that, we distinguish interactions occurring on various levels. On a macro-level, we contextualize EU–Central Asia interactions not only between themselves but also by identifying the two sides’ engagement with other international players and also transnational companies and some member state governments whose interests do not always overlap with official EU positions. On a meso-level, we aim to avoid black-boxing either the EU or Central Asian states, and instead ‘unpack’ these actors. This focuses on interactions arising between various EU institutions, both ones based in Brussels and in Central Asia, and multiple Central Asian actors, including governmental bodies, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), local expert communities. On a micro-level of EU–Central Asia interactions, we explore (mutual) perceptions and everyday practices of cooperation, negotiations and contestations occurring on the ground.

Through such focus on interactions we build on literature on international organizations (IOs) that conceive of them as actors in their own right (Barnett and Finnemore 2004), analysing their interactions in the field (Acharya 2004; Autesserre 2014). We also engage with scholarship that distinguishes interactions as an important methodological category (Avant, Finnemore, and Sell 2010; Adler and Pouliot 2011), including in EU studies (Taylor, Geddes, and Lees 2012; Adler-Nissen 2016; Del Sarto 2021).

Central Asian states’ interactions with other IOs, such as the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE) where they enjoy membership status (or, in the OSCE’s non-legal language, are participating States) have been characterized by ‘internal conditionality’ (Fawn 2013). Their interactions with the EU have also been analysed through the lens of conditionality – echoing the literature on EU policies towards its ‘neighbours’ (Kelley 2006; Schimmelfennig and Scholtz 2008; Ademmer and Börzel 2013). The degree, coherence and effectiveness of this ‘positive conditionality’ towards Central Asia have been problematized (Warkotsch 2011; Stoddard 2015; Voloshin 2014; Spaiser 2018). The specific type of policy conditionality (Trauner 2009) that the EU uses in Central Asia is softer, in that it is related to aid allocation rather than pre-accession negotiations. Regardless of value added of conditionality arguments as applied to Central Asia, such discussions make one of many claims for greater EU attention to the region and bring studies of EU–Central Asia interactions in conversation with EU external governance literature. The focus of such EU-centred studies preoccupied with exploring ‘Europeanization’ (Graziano and Vink 2006), has been on macro-level factors, and on the tools that help the EU to influence its counterparts. This largely disregarded agency of the latter or, at most, analysed them as rather passive recipients of EU policies and

unwritten rules, either for domestic or foreign policy reasons, and then more on a bilateral than inter-regional basis (Trauner 2009; Delcour 2011; Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011).

This view, however, has been significantly challenged in analyses that emphasize contestations of and resistance to EU attempts at socializing its partners, in particular, some countries of the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP), into the EU mode of action (Börzel and Risse 2012; El Qadim 2014). Focus on interactions that involve mutual (re)negotiation of rules and (re)adaptation of practices (Del Sarto 2021) seems to be a better fit for studies that aim to evaluate EU policies towards not only those whom the EU sees as 'neighbours' but also towards 'neighbours of the neighbours', such as countries of Central Asia.

Drawing on these considerations, we suggest focusing on the interactions between the EU and Central Asia, while exploring in what ways, in terms of processes and outcomes, these interactions impact on both EU and Central Asian actors. Several papers in this special issue identify the transformations occurring on both sides throughout the long-term engagement and as a result of specific encounters. They also ask what exactly is being transformed and how such transformations influence priorities and practices of mutual engagement. Such an angle requires us to recognize multiple levels of EU–Central Asia interactions, and, importantly, pay attention to dynamics occurring on the ground.

Perceptions

The first component of interactions that this special issue identifies concerns plans for and perceptions that EU and Central Asian actors hold of one another. This refers to intersubjective processes of making sense of each other's actorness, positioning oneself towards the others' interests, as well as interpreting and foreseeing their actions. Identifying and understanding perceptions have been increasingly recognized as fundamental to the study of international interactions (Herrmann 2013; Lucarelli 2014). Central Asia offers multiple perspectives, in that arguably the regional leaderships and societies can and do engage on bases that the EU would recognize. The Soviet system created foundations that make this region not in need of basic socio-economic development, as is the starting point for much EU aid and assistance elsewhere globally (Sievers 2003). Nevertheless, and despite the optimism of the early 1990s and the EU's first engagements with this region, from the EU perspective Central Asia remains a bastion of autocratic leadership and where successive elections have been often described as unfree and unfair, or where the polity is fundamentally breeches international commitments, that international election observation is refused outright (Fawn *forthcoming*). The quality, variety and indeed challenges of EU–Central Asia interactions hold considerable potential for informing on the function of each party.

Looking at the EU side of these interactions, we explore how this complex organization has perceived Central Asia in various periods. In this respect, contributions to this special issue highlight a diversity of lenses through which the EU has been approaching the region since the early 1990s. These included seeing Central Asia as an exotic, unknown and by that potentially dangerous 'neighbour of a neighbour' – following the Soviet Union's collapse in 1991; then an unstable, perilous region in the light of potential and actual intra- and inter-state conflicts accompanying post-Soviet nation- and state-building processes (Jackson 2005; Heathershaw and Megoran 2011); an indispensable but

imperfect ally in the context the global war on terrorism and the US-led military intervention in Afghanistan, starting from 2001 (Cooley 2012; Hanova 2022, in this issue); and, more recently, a fertile terrain for Islamist radicalization in the context of the expansion of the Islamic State of the Iraq and the Levant (ISIS) in the mid-2010s (Pierobon 2022, in this issue).

The EU also tends to view Central Asia through its own prism, and increasingly antagonistic relations with Russia, well before the watershed of February 2022, and implicit mistrust of China (Krivokhizh and Soboleva 2022, in this issue). The EU approaches the region as a space of competition for minds and hearts, as well as for markets and energy resources (if also often unsuccessfully). Clearly, many of these images have little to do with developments in Central Asia per se but rather reflect the EU's threat perceptions with regard to other, more global trends and events which the EU perceives as endangering its domestic and foreign policy interests.

Our focus on perceptions also allows differentiation among the multiplicity of views that various EU actors hold of Central Asia. The EU itself is of course multi-centred. While the European Parliament tends to maintain an ideological, proactive stance in promoting human rights, the European Commission, similarly to some major member states, acts more pragmatically (Dzhuraev 2022, in this issue). This diversity of approaches within the EU and continuous internal negotiations have practical implications for EU–Central Asia interactions. For example, despite the fact that more cooperation with hydrocarbon-wealthy Turkmenistan would be economically beneficial to the EU, due to openly declared human rights concerns, the EU established its delegation in this country only in 2019 – 15 years after the delegation in Kazakhstan was established (and it continued to speak of building infrastructure to bring Turkmen gas to European markets, while China built a pipeline and transformed Turkmenistan into its single largest source of energy). The lack of a unified stance on the nature and degree of engagement by the EU, however, signals to Central Asian political elites that internal differences, and even contradictions, within the EU can be exploited to their benefit (Dzhuraev 2022).

Beside exploring the EU's multiple perceptions developed about Central Asia over time, we also analyse how the EU believes that it is perceived locally. Here, it is worth indicating the EU's fundamental misperception of itself in Central Asia, largely reflecting its Eurocentric attitude. This is visible, for example, in higher education, where China and Russia annually allocate thousands of scholarships for Central Asian students – versus the relatively few offered by the EU, even as the EU pronounces itself a leader in this field (Fawn 2022, in this issue). The EU's misperception of itself also largely results from operational features, such as its highly bureaucratic and top-down structure. This is reflected, for instance, in how the EU produces knowledge about Central Asia (Korneev and Kluczevska 2022, in this issue). One component of such misperceptions is the EU's conviction that many actors in Central Asia want more EU engagement, including liberal interventions in domestic, governance-related matters, as well as support in EU-modelled region-building (Hanova 2022), which mirrors EU fixation on good governance and region-building elsewhere (Bicchi 2006; Del Sarto 2021). Such perception is also reinforced by EU-funded civil society organizations which, being simultaneously EU beneficiaries and information-suppliers, often adopt the EU's vocabulary to maintain the flow of foreign aid (Pierobon 2022).

As for the other side of these interactions, Central Asian perceptions of the EU have received some recent attention, especially by scholars coming from the region (e.g., Juraev 2014; Arynov 2022a, in this issue; 2022b). Building upon these contributions and broadening the discussion, this special issue responds to Keukeleire's (2014) invitation to emphasize an 'outside-in-perspective' on EU external policy and surveys how the EU has been viewed by different Central Asian actors, including government bodies, civil society, local expert communities and beneficiaries of EU-funded development projects. One insight from contributions that deal with these aspects concerns a common perception of the EU as a generally benevolent external actor, constituting no serious threat in the near or long-term (Arynov 2022a) – unlike China with its financial 'strings attached' investments or Russia with its geopolitical motivations (Fawn 2022; Krivokhizh and Soboleva 2022). The EU is also widely perceived as a development donor, even a generous one, and this EU role is preferred locally, rather than as a geopolitical actor (and despite its outright contestations that it is not a geopolitical actor in Central Asia; Fawn 2022). As a donor, however, the EU is criticized for imposing its own visions and priorities that do not always reflect local needs, and also for a lack of openness in dialogue beyond the declaratory (Korneev and Kluczevska 2022; Pierobon 2022).

Another aspect is that regional perceptions of the EU are topic specific. There is a simultaneous appreciation of 'European standards', for example, of infrastructure, and a scepticism towards the rights of sexual minorities in several EU countries – resulting in the ironic label 'Gayropa' (Foxall 2017), which contributes to the EU's perception as a 'power in decay' (Arynov 2022a). Such a 'pick and choose' attitude is not unique for Central Asia, having also been observed in other global areas of EU activity (e.g., Zhang 2020; Serban and Harutyunyan 2021). This reconfirms the importance of Central Asia for EU studies. EU–Central Asian interactions reflect bigger trends in how the EU engages with various regions and how these regions perceive the EU, but also add new, unique insights to understanding these trends.

Interests

Interests constitute the second component of this special issue's analysis of EU–Central Asian interactions. EU interests have been analysed in literature that focused on EU development cooperation and related EU values (Voloshin 2014), as well as resulting governance initiatives in specific fields (Gavrilis 2011; Korneev 2013; Korneev and Leonov 2016; Bossuyt 2019; Kluczevska and Juraev 2020). EU interests have also gained attention of scholars who analysed EU democracy promotion in Central Asia, identifying factors that lead to its success or failure (Hoffmann 2010; Anceschi 2014; Axyonova 2014; Sharshenova 2018) as well as geopolitical constellations impacting on the EU's regional actions (Spaiser 2018). One conclusion from this literature is of a distinction, if not a contradiction, between EU interests, on the one hand, and norms and values, on the other. More specifically, EU interests in Central Asia, particularly those concerning natural resources and regional security and stability, appear to conflict with EU values of human rights, the rule of law and equality.

This special issue builds upon these bases, and offers new insights. The first contribution is a more nuanced view of what constitutes interests, as interrelated with perceptions and practices. Interests do not exist in a vacuum, but are influenced by perceptions

and in turn shape perceptions. Similarly, interests interact with practices, which are typically unreflexive, but might be impacted by declared and undeclared interests. Broadening the understanding of interests transcends the rationalist–constructivist divide which juxtaposes interests and norms. Comparing how the 2007 and 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategies were designed informs of how perceptions, interests and practices are co-constitutive.

The 2007 Strategy indicated three EU priorities for Central Asia: democracy, human rights and security. The Strategy's approach reflected the EU perception of Central Asia at that time as a homogenous region. Indeed, the document was widely criticized for being too generic (Emerson et al. 2010; Boonstra 2011; Warkotsch 2011) and failing to account for significant differences among the political and economic situations of Central Asia's five countries. This outcome becomes understandable when we consider practices of knowledge production and lobbying that lay behind the Strategy. Before 2007, the EU still lacked extensive learning infrastructure about the region (Korneev and Kluczewska 2022). Moreover, the document was adopted under Germany's EU presidency and largely reflected this country's interests in Central Asia (Voloshin 2014, 43). This explains the Strategy's attempt to marry democracy and security – in the post-9/11 context and in light of Germany's involvement in neighbouring Afghanistan, where it was the second biggest troop-provider after the United States.

A different configuration of perceptions, interests and practices emerges from the 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy. This Strategy listed new EU priorities in the region, namely 'partnering for resilience', 'partnering for prosperity', as well as 'working better together' (High Representative 2019). As with the previous Strategy, commentators deemed it too general, and consequently unable to induce changes in the region. Such formulation of EU priorities, however, is an outcome of the most recent EU tendency to see Central Asia as a place of competition between the EU, Russia and China, whereby the EU attempts to differentiate itself from the other two by being responsive to Central Asian needs, rather than imposing its own rules (Fawn 2022; Krivokhizh and Soboleva 2022). The formulation of priorities that stresses dialogue and EU responsiveness to local needs also results from new practices of EU knowledge production about Central Asia, which is more polycentric and inclusive, and also aims to co-opt local actors (Korneev and Kluczewska 2022). Thus, while the two strategies are similar, their construction differed significantly, which is also evident from the overarching narratives of the 2019 Strategy emphasizing (equal) partnership as an interest in itself.

The second finding of this special issue regarding interests concerns the need to unpack the EU and differentiate between multiple EU and EU-related actors. Energy security is particularly demonstrative. Energy interests have driven the EU's initial engagement with resource-rich Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Throughout the 1990s and early 2000s, the EU, and mostly the European Commission, attempted to secure access to oil, gas and fossil fuels. Over time, however, the Commission increased attention to the development of renewable alternatives. Meanwhile, oil transnational corporations and specific EU member states which partially own them (notably France, Italy, the Netherlands and previously also the UK) jeopardized the EU's own engagement in the energy field in Central Asia (Moisé and Sorbello 2022, in this issue). This shows that even if multiple EU actors are interested in specific fields of cooperation with Central Asia, their

interests can significantly differ, often to the point of becoming competitive and even conflictual.

The third contribution to the study of interests in EU–Central Asia interactions is the focus on Central Asian perspectives, that is, what various regional actors expect from the EU. While the EU seeks to increase the region-ness of Central Asia (and connect it with Afghanistan), a coordinated regional approach of Central Asian countries towards the EU is lacking. Moreover, no country strategies exist that would outline how individual Central Asian countries see their relations with the EU. Even without ‘reverse’ strategies we see similar patterns in how various Central Asian actors position themselves vis-à-vis the EU. To start with, the priorities of Central Asian governments seem not to match those formulated by the EU for the region. For example, as part of the consultations accompanying preparations of the 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy, the EU asked Central Asian governments to provide written visions for how they would like their relationship to evolve. Only Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan responded. However, instead of drafting strategic visions they provided lists of projects that they wished the EU to finance in the next decade.² While anecdotal, this incident is illustrative of a broader trend. Governments in Central Asia are interested in engagement with the EU for aid and trade, when cooperation is economically and financially beneficial. They clearly also attempt to limit EU involvement in political systems and issues related to governance (Dzhuraev 2022).

The interests of other Central Asian actors in cooperating with the EU are equally complex, even if cursorily priorities seem to overlap. For example, both the EU and civil society organizations in Central Asia appear to be interested in supporting democratization from below. However, investigating actorhood of EU-funded NGOs reveals that they often feel being subordinated to the EU, and reduced to being implementors of EU templates, while their voice is disregarded. As a result, complex patterns of interactions emerge, in which NGOs simultaneously participate in EU-funded projects and lip-sync to EU interests, and contest and adapt EU norms and values in a subversive way in their everyday work with local communities (Pierobon 2022). The interactions between the two actors are additionally complicated by local organizations being financially dependent on the EU. Similar, ambiguous interactions emerge between the EU and Central Asian expert communities who are often consulted by the EU. Local experts frequently complain of exploitation by the EU. This is because the EU uses them to legitimize its preconceived ideas and cooperation agendas by saying that local experts agree with the EU’s vision for Central Asia. Despite that, they continue engaging with the EU because doing so consolidates their status as internationally recognized experts, and might result in future lucrative consultancy contracts (Korneev and Kluczewska 2022).

As it appears from this exploration, substantial and varied interests exist on both the EU and the Central Asian side. This is why it is striking, and ironic, that overall both the EU and Central Asia remain relatively peripheral to each other, even if the former has invested heavily in the 2019 Strategy for this region. For the EU, Central Asian ‘dangers’ are not immediate but, rather, imagined and still very distant, as can be seen from discourses on Islamist radicalization or from vague ideas on connectivity that seem to be more of a reaction to concrete Chinese steps in this area than anything specifically innovative on the EU side. Similarly, for Central Asian actors the EU is, in many ways, an attractive manifestation of the ‘good life’ (Arynov 2022a) if too elusive to materialize on the ground. Pragmatism often dictates to local actors the need to cooperate and meet

expectations of the EU, but many also survey alternatives offered by those who are geographically and culturally closer, such as China and Russia (Fawn 2022; Krivokhizh and Soboleva 2022).

This mutual peripherality (Dzhuraev 2022) perhaps explains Central Asia's absence from many scholarly publications on EU external policies. It is, simultaneously, an explanation for why in the new cycle of turbulence in Afghanistan and the Taliban's takeover in the summer of 2021, the EU has not been a primary reference point in the discussions occurring in Central Asia, despite EU attempts to remake the region by connecting Central Asia with Afghanistan – a vision actively promoted in the 2019 Strategy.

Practices

The third component of EU–Central Asian interactions identified in this collection concerns practices. The emphasis on practices is supported by the relatively recent practice turn in IR (Adler and Pouliot 2011; Bueger 2014; Bueger and Gadinger 2018) and, subsequently, in EU studies (Bicchi 2014; Adler-Nissen and Kropp 2015; Del Sarto 2021). Practices gained centrality in IR research that was, on the one hand, critical of an overemphasis on an often-artificial dichotomy between norms and interests, and, on the other, unsatisfied with discourse analysis, while abandoning the realm of action.

This special issue addresses how and why the practices of interactions between the EU and Central Asia have evolved since 1991, across countries and themes. Through such focus, this collection speaks to literature that explores the interlinked issues of the EU's expertise, learning and interactions (Bicchi and Carta 2012; Kuus 2013; Bicchi 2014; Adler-Nissen and Kropp 2015; Manners 2015), including during its enlargements (Copenhagen 2014; Hammerslev 2015) and activities in the Eastern Neighbourhood (Delcour 2011; 2017; De Bardeleben and Casier 2017; Korosteleva, Merheim-Eyre, and Van Gils 2018; Schumacher, Marchetti, and Demmelhuber 2018; Simão 2018) or in South-eastern Europe (Taylor, Geddes, and Lees 2012; Trauner 2009). Three particular types of practices form this collection's focus: practices of mutual learning; practices of macro-, meso- and micro-level cooperation between the EU and Central Asia; and, methodologically, practices of researching the EU.

As for learning, over three decades the EU has gradually developed a complex learning infrastructure about Central Asia, including through diplomatic practice in the region, engagement with outside knowledge providers, such as European think tanks, and consultations with local experts. While such polycentric learning aims to inform EU policy-making towards this region, ultimately it became a tool of co-opting local experts and a largely self-referential enterprise – in which the EU is told what it wants to hear (Korneev and Kluczevska 2022). The EU's learning experience in Central Asia has broader implications for how the EU interacts with other regions. Central Asia became a testing ground for some solutions that the EU then applied elsewhere. This concerns, for example, the formalized consultation process with local experts that was first launched in Central Asia in 2017, in preparation for the 2019 EU–Central Asia Strategy, and which the EU saw as successful and decided to replicate in the Eastern Partnership in 2019–20.³

If the EU acquires knowledge of Central Asia in an institutionalized and bureaucratized way, by contrast, learning about the EU in Central Asia is rather informal and results from everyday interactions. Many local actors are aware of the EU's perception of the region as

potentially instable and dangerous, and have adapted to mobilize it to their benefit, mostly by stimulating EU funding for development projects (Pierobon 2022). This shows that through regular interactions with the EU, local actors gradually grasp their counterpart's *modus operandi*. In particular, they master how to use EU expectations to their benefit by adjusting their discourses and practices to the EU's declared, normatively framed interests. They also realize how to navigate between multiple actors, with often contradictory perceptions and principles, that represent the EU in the region.

The second focus on practices refers to cooperation between the EU and Central Asia. At the macro-level, the EU competes in Central Asia for influence against other actors, and most notably Russia and China. On the one hand, the famous EU narrative – promoted by many politicians and scholars alike – about its soft power attractiveness (through, for instance, high standards of education and liberal values) is not without challengers in the region. Both Russia and China advance similar narratives, stressing that values which they protect (e.g., concerning stability and non-interference) are shared and opportunities that they offer are aspired to by many in Central Asia. Competition, thus, seems to span the value-framed terrain, just like the fields of security and economy. On the other hand, while the EU declares that it approaches Central Asia 'not for geopolitical interests and games', in practice its behaviour is largely geopolitical. The EU promotes Central Asian regionalism modelled upon the EU experience and includes Central Asian countries in its like-minded formations, such as the World Trade Organization (Fawn 2022). Having fewer resources, especially compared with China, the EU adopted a leadership strategy that differs from its competitors: it stresses its benevolent nature, openness for dialogue and cooperation without strings attached (Krivokhizh and Soboleva 2022). Central Asian governments, however, should not be viewed as passive actors in what is often seen, if mistakenly, as another variation of the 'Great Game'. Rather, regional governments have learned how to benefit from differences between their powerful partners and ensure that each partnership is non-exclusive. This simultaneously offers them access to multiple resources and ideas.

At the meso-level, EU interactions with national governments in Central Asia reveals some ambiguity. The EU positions itself both as a partner and a donor – two roles which imply different types of relations (Kluczevska and Juraev 2020). As a partner, the EU strives for balanced relations with its Central Asian counterparts, and it signals a willingness to treat them as equals. In this equalized type of relationship, interests and values of Central Asian governments are as valid as the EU's. However, by being a donor, the EU has an upper hand *vis-à-vis* its aid recipients. This implies an asymmetric relation, where Central Asian states find themselves subordinated. They are accountable to donors – whose interests and values matter more. Consequently, despite rhetoric of partnership, we witness a continuously Eurocentric actorness in the EU's interactions with Central Asia.

This directly translates into practices of cooperation at the micro-level, where the EU avoids engagement with local actors who do not share the EU's values. For example, while in recent years the EU actively promoted resilience, namely the internal ability of countries to bounce back against external shocks, it continues to do it by offering external, EU-modelled solutions to internal problems (Korosteleva 2020). The EU thus continues interacting with and funding Westernized NGOs, while bypassing important local actors, such as the *mahalla*. This neighbourhood unit is structured along age and gender hierarchies which contrasts with EU equality values. However, it *de facto* functions

as a resilience-builder on the ground – and thus constitutes a suitable partner for EU resilience-related efforts (Bossuyt and Davletova 2022, in this issue).

An important finding of this special issue is that while the EU might be reluctant to interact with local actors because of a normative mismatch, that is a problem not shared by Central Asian actors who interact with the EU. While being aware of normative differences, in everyday work they manage to reconcile creatively multiple rationales that are at stake. This is especially the case of EU-funded local NGOs which constantly co-create, contest and transform the norms that the EU promotes in the region, in order to reconcile often diverging perceptions and interests of the EU, national governments and local communities (Pierobon 2022).

The last, third aspect of practices is methodological and refers to fieldwork experiences of those researching the EU. Given that researching practices of EU–Central Asia interactions often requires multidimensional and multi-sited fieldwork, one of the major challenges for several contributors concerned gaining access to the field and in particular important stakeholders, such as EU officials. Realizing that such challenges are not uncommon of social researchers, the articles which look at the micro-level of EU–Central Asia interactions describe the process of conducting fieldwork, including issues such as negotiating access, researcher's positionality and dealing with unavailability of information, as well as making sense of often ambiguous data (Arynov 2022a; Pierobon 2022; Korneev and Kluczevska 2022). A resulting finding is that researchers' interactions with the EU are revealing about how the EU positions itself vis-à-vis social researchers. EU officials are undoubtedly more concerned with programme and project implementation than with building relations with many researchers who approach them. This is why they tend to be more forthcoming towards researchers whom they already know and trust, and who are either supportive of EU actions or constructively critical. In contrast, they are more sceptical towards researchers with whom they are unfamiliar and who are, consequently 'unpredictable' in their attitude towards the EU. This selective approach is not unique to the EU and constitutes a wider trend among IOs with reputational concerns. The difference is that EU officials working at delegations tend to be even more reserved than employees of other IOs, which results from their diplomatic training and the status of delegations, which resemble embassies rather than typical IO field offices (Korneev and Kluczevska 2022).

Moreover, a significant difference exists between EU institutions based in Brussels and the EU delegations in Central Asia. While the former seem more open for interactions and willing to reflect critically on their activities, the latter distance themselves from social researchers. This is because Brussels is the EU's own ground, where EU officials are 'at home'. In Central Asia, by contrast, EU officials are much more careful because their actions and statements are constantly scrutinized and often criticized by representatives of Central Asian governments (publicly) and other actors, such as local organizations which the EU funds (albeit usually this criticism remains behind closed doors). These processes influence how EU officials interact with social researchers, and, ultimately, add to the perception of the EU as a fortress.

Why Central Asia matters for EU studies

Despite this richness of conceptual, empirical and methodological inputs that EU–Central Asia interactions offer, researchers of EU external action, as mentioned above, have largely

overlooked this region. Nevertheless, EU policy and scholarly interests regarding Central Asia can and should be significant, for at least five reasons. First is the actorness of the EU itself, represented in literature too expansive to relist here, and exemplified in practice by the EU's 2016 Global Strategy (particularly useful discussion is given in *Contemporary Security Policy* 2016).

Second, irrespective of anything intrinsic to Central Asia, Central Asia *is* part of larger EU foreign relations and security thinking. Although this special issue rightly contextualizes EU–Central Asia interactions, even suggesting relative, mutual marginality (Dzhuraev 2022), the EU has both increased the frequency and intensity of its declarations regarding Central Asia's importance to it. A separate comparative study might do well to establish the EU's own references to global regions.

Third, a core tenet of so much of EU studies concerns both how, as a given, the EU is the world archetype for region-making, and also how it should both export that experience, and itself be replicated, with or even without its guidance. Many EU studies compare a myriad of regional formations on the basis of EU familiarity and experience. That predominance has met with calls for regional studies that go 'beyond EU-centrism', rejecting the EU as the model for all to follow (e.g., Acharya 2016). Eurocentric assumptions are of course problematic, and without re-treading critiques here (for a well-documented critical appraisal of relevant scholarship, see Keuleers, Fonck, and Keukeleire 2016), the important fact *is* that the EU seeks to make a 'region' out of Central Asia, and also that post-Soviet regional formations seek recognition from their closest Western counterparts (Fawn 2022; see also Hanova 2022). Where other regionalism literature 'compartmentalizes' regional studies into a European core with other regions being sidelined (e.g., Fawcett and Gandois 2010), EU–Central Asia interactions give diversity to analytical possibilities for core themes in EU and regionalism studies.

Fourth, Central Asian states are also part of major integrative regional processes, if varying in intensities of ambition and success. These include the Eurasian Economic Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The first two expressly seek comparison with, and recognition by, the EU and NATO. However, leadership and engagement strategies of the EU and other actors present in the region, both IOs and states, significantly differ (Bossuyt 2019; Kobayashi 2019; Krivokhizh and Soboleva 2022). EU studies routinely ask, and encourage, EU comparability (e.g., Farrell 2007). That should not mean success (the EU's *sui generis* nature already presents a constraint) but also and especially the limitations (Fawn 2009). Yet, EU studies significantly neglect this dimension, and indeed generally EU–Central Asian relations. Where journals focused on Central Asia, Eurasia, and post-communist and post-Soviet studies give attention to the EU, EU and European integration journals overlook the region. The *Journal of European Integration*, for example, has not featured 'Central Asia' in an article title, and where Central Asia and EU democracy promotion was informatively offered as a case study, it served in a more generalized topic (Stoddard 2015).

The *Journal of Common Market Studies* (JCMS), even if it has come to give preponderant attention to the EU, studied geographically diverse forms of integration and indeed also backsliding and failure, such as, for example, in the Caribbean. Post-Soviet cases, despite plethora of case studies, feature but occasionally (e.g., Libman and Vinokurov 2011), even if years before the collapse of communism. The journal gave attention to Soviet dismay that 'European integration' seemingly only meant that which occurred in Western

Europe, but ignored the seeming integration efforts among European countries in the Soviet bloc (Shishkov 1979). Otherwise, however, past attention has been limited to occasional book reviews, even if such also raise an awareness of processes in Central Asia, or as a specific case study within EU–Central Asia relations (Martin-Mazé 2015). JCMS's 2018 editorial commendably acknowledged the desire to extend beyond what it called 'its traditional audience in Europe and North America', and to consider the emergence of other regions which were less represented in it (Haastrup et al. 2018). Central Asia has featured in journals focused on EU external relations, particularly *European Foreign Affairs Review*, and as a case study of their formulation.

Some of this reticence or neglect in works focused primarily on EU institutions may come from a priori conclusions – that regionalism, let alone EU-similar and/or EU-inspired regional order, does not exist in Central Asia. Hence, some EU-focused literature engaging with Central Asia has tended to conclude that those relations were predominantly or even 'solely' bilateral (Delcour 2011; for the latter, see Gstöhl 2015, 38). The EU, by contrast, devotes more funding to regional initiatives in Central Asia than it does to any single country, and its expressed aim as early as 2006 was to deploy new instruments for the same in such sectors as transportation, energy and the environment (Commission of the European Communities 2006). While an encourager of regionalism in its borderlands and funder of regional projects, the EU still often engages with individual countries even in the best-case scenarios for regionalism, as in South-eastern Europe (e.g., Smith 2005, 280). Far from obviating the study of EU intentions, such cases elucidate possibilities and limits.

EU states of course also conduct bilateral relations, and irrespective of their EU membership, and particularist interests in Central Asia have generated state and indeed non-state interests (for companies and for energy interests, and their divergence from and disruptive effects on EU collective policy, see Moisé and Sorbello 2022). What remains important is the EU's self-declared intentions on both region-making and on inter-regional relations. Past studies locate the EU between its express imitators and rejectors (e.g., Farrell 2007, 1166); but the in-between case of Central Asia remains understudied.

The challenges from those intentions and on-ground practices are potentially very informative for both EU and Central Asia studies. Central Asia, on paper, lends itself to and calls for region-making, yet is 'anti-EU', not in policies against Brussels, but in defying the repeated and unceasing external expectations that Central Asia 'behave' like a region (for a summary example of such expectations, see Cooley 2012, 150). Demand continues for such literature, especially on how the EU constructs itself and adapted from interactions with others. These include, but without reference to Central Asia, the *Journal of European Integration's* special issue 'Making Europe: The Sociology of Knowledge Meets European Integration' (2015) and the 'Forum: The EU Global Strategy' in *Contemporary Security Policy* (2016).

A fifth dimension concerns how EU studies apply themselves, if somewhat selectively, to the specific question of how the EU is received and perceived. Central Asia is a significant audience for that. Through its strategies and its coordinating of regional summits – only the EU and the United States manage to convene together all and only Central Asian states – the EU does bring the countries together. The EU is concerned with self-promotion and reception, and through its official representations across Central Asia and its support to multiple societal actors and projects, it seeks to advance awareness of itself. Yet, those mismatches, and divergent perceptions of the reasons underlying the

EU's engagement in Central Asia continue to proliferate (recently, see Arynov 2022a, 2022b, 2022c). Understanding how the EU understands and learns about regions with which it engages is a fundamental need for both policy and scholarship, as it offers new insights about the EU itself (Korneev and Kluczevska 2022). Case studies inform how the EU seeks to fulfil a priority in its 2019 Strategy, that of supporting resilience in Central Asia. To that end, the special issue also moves to specific and local areas of engagement, particularly the *mahalla* in Uzbekistan. A stark yet substantively important conclusion is that the EU needs, in order to fulfil its own policy aspirations, to embrace a de-centred, post-neoliberal approach to the EU's own important policy of developing resilience (Bossuyt and Davletova 2022).

Conclusions

Ultimately, this collection should ideally inform scholars researching Central Asia and those primarily focused on the EU's external relations, and of its learning of and interactions with other parts of the world. Central Asia, as we intend this compendium to demonstrate, is of importance to the EU, and the EU's own language of, about and foremost to the Central Asian region has made that increasingly clear in preceding decades and is demonstrated in its strategies and the evolution between them. The Central Asian region provides a further testing ground for EU policies, and can and should be placed in wider, comparative studies of EU outreach and influence. Importantly also, and including particular contributions from this special issue, are the ways forward offered for the EU to continue to learn from and respond to its many interlocutors on ground.

While the case of Central Asia is informative and enriching for EU studies, exploring the EU–Central Asian interactions is also of importance for Central Asian studies. So far, this field afforded little attention to IOs' presence and activities in the region. Specialized research exists (Heathershaw 2009; Lewis 2012; Kluczevska 2017), however, it is often published in disciplinary and thematic academic journals (Korneev 2013; 2017; Isaacs 2018; Fawn and Lutterjohann 2019; Ismailbekova and Megoran 2020; Kluczevska 2021) rather than in major academic outlets that focus on the region. For example, a search for articles on IOs and their activities in Central Asia in two flagship journals, *Central Asian Survey* and *Europe–Asia Studies*, reveals paucity of attention in the last 10 years. A very important step in this regard was the special issue on the OSCE published in *Central Asian Survey* (2017). This special issue contributes to that body of literature by demonstrating why and how Central Asian studies can benefit from analysing the region's relations with external partners, such as the EU. Looking at how various actors in Central Asia interact with the EU allows us to learn more about this region itself – how local actors perceive themselves in relation to others (Arynov 2022a), and how external actors influence everyday life in the region by reshaping local institutions (Bossuyt and Davletova 2022), as well as domestic political (Pierobon 2022) and economic (Moisé and Sorbello 2022) agendas.

Finally, the focus on EU–Central Asia interactions also aligns our special issue with even broader literature on IOs, global governance and norm localization that goes beyond analysing IOs as diffusers of international norms, socializing countries described as 'developing' to the international order and standards of governance (Acharya 2004; Avant, Finnemore, and Sell 2010; Autesserre 2014). By that, we hope that this collection broadens

the readership of *Central Asian Survey* to scholars interested in the EU, IOs and international relations, and to invite further scholarly interactions.

Notes

1. Frequently referred to as the Strategy, the EU's 2019 policy for Central Asia has two parts. The first was presented in the name of the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, as a Communication to the European Parliament and the Council, and is entitled *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership*, dated 15 May 2019. Because the authorship of the document is given as the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, this will appear in references as 'High Representative (2019)'. In the text, however, and in keeping with common usage, the 17-page document is called the Strategy. The second part refers to the General Secretariat of the Council, which issued on 17 June 2019 its 'Council Conclusions on the New Strategy on Central Asia' where it states that those, together, 'provides the new policy framework for EU engagement with the countries of Central Asia' (General Secretariat of the Council 2019, 2, para. 2, and its contents are so referenced hereafter).
2. Interview with an EU official in Brussels, 9 July 2019.
3. Interview with an EU official in Brussels, 8 July 2019 (see also *EU Monitor*, 2021).

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