JCMS JOURNAL OF COMMON MARKET STUDIES UACES

JCMS 2025 pp. 1–23 DOI: 10.1111/jcms.70037

Geopolitics on a Shoestring? Unpacking the EU'S Geopolitical External Assistance to Central Asia

BALÁZS SZENT-IVÁNYI[1,2] and DÓRA PIROSKA[3]
[1]Aston University, Birmingham [2]Corvinus University of Budapest, Budapest [3]Central European University, Vienna

ABSTRACT

The paper examines how the European Union's (EU) increasingly emphasised geopolitical ambitions are reflected in the practice of its external assistance policy. An analysis of EU documents around various policy initiatives and funding instruments reveals that in the Commission's understanding, geopolitical external assistance increases EU market power, is well resourced financially, focuses on strategic sectors that create long-term dependencies and downplays normative considerations. We examine how these characteristics actually play out in the EU's post-2021 external funding for Central Asia. There is indeed an emphasis on market power, and a shift in sectors is also evident, away from those associated with poverty reduction towards ones like green and digital technologies. Normative issues are relatively absent. However, a stark reduction in resources glaringly contradicts a more geopolitical approach. The EU argues that this shortfall will be more than compensated by private sector investments, funded by national and multilateral development banks. Yet this is by no means guaranteed, and involving actors like the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development in leveraging private investments creates additional dilemmas. The findings highlight the challenges that the EU faces in becoming a more geopolitical actor in the context of scarce financial resources and competing priorities.

Keywords: Central Asia; development assistance; EU; geopolitics

Introduction

Since the 2008 Global Financial Crisis, the European Commission's political discourse has increasingly shifted to reflect geopolitical ambitions. In 2019, Commission President Ursula von der Leyen (2019) explicitly declared that she will lead a geopolitical Commission, and this shift is now evident in several policy areas. For example, the EU's external investment and trade policies have become 'geopoliticised' (Meunier and Nicolaidis, 2019) and now aim to insulate and increase the resilience of the European Union's (EU) supply chains (Schmitz and Seidl, 2023). Geopolitical ambitions rather than 'pure' neoliberal precepts are increasingly present in the EU's industrial policy as well (Di Carlo and Schmitz, 2023; McNamara, 2023). In digital policy, the Commission's discourse has turned away from the language of market efficiency towards strategic autonomy and sovereignty (Schmitz and Seidl, 2022).

This geopoliticisation has had a substantial impact on the EU's rhetoric in its external assistance policy as well. Traditionally, this rhetoric projected strong normative power (European Commission, 2006; Manners, 2002), portraying the EU as a 'force for good' (Bountagkidis et al., 2015). Whilst this normative position was never devoid of strategic interests (Diez, 2004), there is now a growing consensus that the narratives around EU external assistance have shifted further away from 'the promotion of sustainable peace, freedom, democracy, human rights, rule of law, equality, social solidarity, sustainable development and good governance' to countering geopolitical threats like energy dependency, migration and the EU's geoeconomic rivals (Hadfield and Lightfoot, 2021).

The aim of this paper is to analyse how this geopolitical shift in rhetoric has actually influenced the EU's external assistance practice with its partner countries. We analyse this new rhetoric, focusing on the Global Gateway, Team Europe and other recent policy initiatives and funding instruments, to understand what priorities constitute the Commission's geopolitical ambitions. We then examine the Commission's external assistance practice in Central Asia. Whilst the region is not the most significant recipient of EU external assistance, it is nonetheless a 'most likely' region for geopoliticised development cooperation: geopolitical tensions between the EU, Russia and China are highly pronounced in Central Asia. To identify shifts in practice, we examine how the priorities in the EU's aid programming documents for the five Central Asian post-Soviet countries shifted between the previous and the current budgetary cycles, as well as how the portfolio of actually funded projects changed. This exercise reveals a number of recent shifts in the EU's funding relations with Central Asia. Many of these are consistent with a more geopolitical external assistance policy, whilst others contradict it or raise questions of their own. The EU now places a much stronger emphasis on ensuring its own market power but has significantly decreased aid earmarked for Central Asia. There are strategic hopes that this decline in aid will be more than offset through greater private investments into 'bankable' projects, but expectations around this are not unproblematic, partly because of the tighter cooperation foreseen with the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). The EBRD is the most active development bank in Central Asia, but it is not an EU institution and features many non-EU member shareholders. Its neoliberal market building and democracy promotion mandates complicate its ability to support the EU's geopolitical ambitions (Piroska and Schlett, 2024). There has also been a shift in sectors away from human development towards green and digital technologies, undermining the EU's commitment to poverty reduction, whilst normative considerations seem to remain rather marginal in the region.

These findings highlight the challenges that the EU faces in becoming a coherent geopolitical actor. Importantly, geopolitical influence requires money. Total financial resources for external assistance in the EU budget have increased by 12% in the 2021–2027 budgetary cycle compared to the previous one but compete for even more priorities (European Commission, 2021i). Promises of more private investment through guarantees and other instruments may, in theory, raise additional resources, but these are more difficult to control and monitor than development aid. Whether the interests of the actors who fund these investments, like the EBRD, actually align with the EU's goals is questionable, and member state development banks may pursue other agendas as well.

This paper is structured as follows. The following section problematises geopolitics and the EU's geopolitical turn, whilst the subsequent one lays out how the EU understands geopolitical external assistance policy. This is followed by a discussion of the EU's external assistance practice in Central Asia, whilst the final section concludes.

I. The EU'S Geopolitical Turn

In its basic understanding, geopolitics refers to a set of perspectives on political influence over foreign territories. In geopolitics, geography operates 'as a source of politics when geographical location, territory and resources, including "human resources", feed into the assessment of actors' power, which in turn defines their intentions and "national interest" and thus their behaviour' (Guzzini, 2020, p. 6). Geopolitics, therefore, has roots in the realist understanding of international relations and is linked to conflictual, zero-sum power competition. According to Guzzini (2017), geopolitical theory assumes an interconnected and finite world characterised by Malthusian 'demographic pressures', leading to distributional conflicts over resources, where only the 'fittest' survive. As almost everything can be connected to geographical factors, the geopolitical mindset becomes the default position of policy-makers (Guzzini, 2017).

The term therefore implies great power securitisation, militarisation and inevitable conflict between nations. Beyond military power, economic dominance and asymmetric interdependencies may also constitute the basis of geopolitical influence. Often termed geoeconomics, its constituent policies encompass a vast array of approaches, influenced by both neoliberalism and economic nationalism (Vihma, 2017). Geopolitics is therefore a veil that hides a variety of mechanisms, making it a sufficiently broad and 'essentially contested concept' that can be moulded and mobilised by political actors for their purposes (Collier et al., 2006).

This conceptual ambiguity is not reflected well in the literature scrutinising the EU's geopolitical turn. Both EU policy-makers and analysts refer to geopolitics as a more-or-less consensual reference frame and tend to ignore that it is in fact a highly malleable concept. Many contributions to the literature take the EU's geopolitical discourse at face value and miss the opportunity to critically unpack how the EU actually understands the concept (a notable exception is Nitoiu and Sus, 2019). Few papers provide definitions of geopolitics or, at best, offer short, tautological ones like Meunier and Mickus (2020, p. 1081), who define policy geopoliticisation as the 'reframing of a policy issue as a geopolitical problem'. This lack of a clear definition means that the literature, just like the EU, assumes different and often contradictory policies under the signifier of geopolitics.

A significant literature has emerged to scrutinise the EU's geopolitical turn, amongst political economists and EU external relations scholars. For political economists, the Commission's embrace of geopolitics and geoeconomics represents a turn away from earlier neoliberal market precepts towards more assertive European interest-driven politics. This includes greater concerns around foreign investments and investment screening (Bauerle Danzman and Meunier, 2023; Otero-Iglesias and Weissenegger, 2020), increasingly developmental/dirigiste industrial policy, including the European Green Deal (Di Carlo and Schmitz, 2023; Leonard et al., 2021; McNamara, 2023; Schmitz and Seidl, 2023), more permissive state aid regimes (Meunier and Mickus, 2020) and 'trade alliances that discriminate against non-members' (Meunier and Nicolaidis, 2019, p. 108). Many of these contributions analyse the drivers behind the geopolitical turn, identifying both external and internal factors. Amongst the external factors, the global financial crisis takes a prominent place, followed by the 2015 refugee crisis, the changing security landscape with China's rise and activist US industrial policy, the shocks of the COVID-19 pandemic and Russia's invasion of Ukraine (Bauerle Danzman and

Meunier, 2023; McNamara, 2023; Meunier and Nicolaidis, 2019). As for the internal drivers, scholars point to inter-institutional rivalry within the EU (Haroche, 2023) and new actors who benefit from the enlarged policy space. McNamara (2023) draws attention to a new political alliance between the progressive left concerned with climate change and conservatives who seek to reduce dependence on China and protect EU strategic autonomy. Schmitz and Seidl (2023, p. 835) also argue that the rise to prominence of geopolitics 'provided an opening for neo-mercantilist and socially oriented actors to challenge the dominant neoliberal logic'.

Political economy contributions also discuss the key features of the EU's geopolitical turn. Most importantly, security concerns seem to dominate over economic ones (Bauerle Danzman and Meunier, 2023). By pushing strategic autonomy and using state intervention to reshape supply chains, the EU aims to insulate itself from global economic vulnerabilities (McNamara, 2023). Importantly, the EU no longer aims to change countries internally along normative dimensions using its trade, aid and diplomatic power but is instead seeking to alter the global balance of power (Meunier and Nicolaidis, 2019).

EU external relations scholars have pointed out the contradictions between the EU's image as a normative actor and its behaviour. In its external assistance, understood here as encompassing all EU funding channelled to third countries, the EU has long sought to create an image of itself as being driven by normative considerations. As stated in the 2005 European Consensus on Development, a joint statement by the three major EU institutions, 'the primary and overarching objective of EU development cooperation is the eradication of poverty in the context of sustainable development [...] and that sustainable development includes good governance, human rights and political, economic, social and environmental aspects' (European Commission, 2006, p. 12). However, in practice, political, security and economic interests were always present, 'informing' normative values (Youngs, 2004), creating 'dual' strategies (Pace, 2007) or 'hybrid geopolitics' (Nitoiu and Sus, 2019; Pänke, 2019). Other scholars argued that geopolitics has become increasingly influential in EU external policies over time. According to Hadfield and Lightfoot (2021, p. 487), since the early 2000s, the EU reframed external assistance several times, grafting it onto 'other goals via a series of "nexuses", including security-development, migration-development and climate-development'. The use of external assistance has been gradually becoming more instrumental, serving European economic and security interests (Furness et al., 2020) and potentially lowering the EU's normative and transformative ambitions (Crombois, 2019; Winn and Gänzle, 2023). Indeed, the EU Global Strategy, adopted in 2016, called on EU external assistance policy 'to become more flexible and aligned with [EU] strategic priorities' (Hackenesch et al., 2021, p. 4). This coincided with the increasing domestic politicisation of EU external assistance policy. The policy had long been portrayed as a relatively technocratic policy area, but following the mid-2010s, political conflict around it has been on the rise in Europe, especially regarding its ability to manage migration (Hackenesch et al., 2021, p. 4).

The shift away from external assistance policy's 'traditional' focus around poverty reduction and normative values was explicitly labelled as geopolitical by Beringer et al. (2019). The drivers of this shift have been similar to those of the EU's broader geopolitical shift discussed above. However, external assistance has also been seen as a tool that can 'fix almost any problem' (Furness et al., 2020), including irregular migration (Lauwers et al., 2021), climate change and the promotion of European exports and investments. Policy-makers have treated it as a 'Swiss army knife' to simultaneously promote often conflicting objectives (Van der Veen, 2011). Nonetheless, scholars have emphasised several nuances. The promotion of human rights has remained relatively high on the agenda of EU external assistance policy (Saltnes and Thiel, 2021, p. 108). Funding for Sub-Saharan Africa has been strongly focused on poverty reduction (Gavas, 2013), with EU assistance being allocated on a 'needs and performance basis' (DFID, 2013, p. 127). Beringer et al. (2019) have identified differences in EU policy goals depending on policy areas: normative power guides the EU when policies are about biodiversity conversation, democratisation and LGBTI rights; however, geopolitics dominates in political and economic questions. It is therefore safe to argue that even if the EU's external assistance policy was never fully driven by normative concerns, these were definitely present to various degrees, at least up until the late 2010s.

There are a number of fallacies inherent in both the political economy and the EU external assistance literatures, which highlight how controversial the references to geopolitics are. First, contrasting geopolitics to interdependence implies that purposefully creating and maintaining asymmetric interdependencies cannot be driven by geopolitical motivations. However, such interdependencies can actually be tools for territorial influence, and trade interdependence can be weaponised (Farrell and Newman, 2016). Second, there seems to be an assumption in at least some of the political economy contributions that economic logic has, until now, been devoid of security logic and that security logic is independent from economics. The EU's economic and security interests have long been intertwined (Dandashly and Noutcheva, 2020). Finally, the old fallacy of mistaking Normative Power Europe to be void of power politics also resurfaces in some contributions. The literature has repeatedly shown how spreading normative values furthers EU strategic interests (Youngs, 2004), blurring the distinction between purely normative and geopolitical goals.

II. Identifying Geopoliticised External Assistance in EU Rhetoric

The ambiguous nature of geopolitics as a concept, reflected in the literature on the EU's geopolitical turn reviewed above, means that we cannot take it at face value. In order to examine what the turn means for the practice of EU external assistance, we must first understand how the EU conceptualises geopolitics in its rhetoric linked to the policy area. This section therefore aims to establish how external assistance is conceptualised in the EU's geopolitical rhetoric.

The European Commission has published a number of documents and communications since 2021 that outline its geopolitical agenda in external assistance, around four key initiatives and financial instruments: the Global Europe budgetary instrument, the European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+), the Global Gateway Investment Plan and the Team Europe approach. The documents, press releases and online communications associated with these initiatives provide an excellent source of data to identify how the EU translates the geopolitical approach to external assistance policy. To systematically identify these documents, we used the EU's websites devoted to these initiatives as starting points and followed the links from each to collect the key documents. The documents were analysed using a thematic approach, focusing on identifying references to how exactly the EU aims to use external assistance to promote geopolitical objectives.

These references were then grouped into four themes: market power and donor influence, increased resources, strategic sector targets, and normative objectives. We have complemented this analysis with insights from the small academic literature analysing the four initiatives/financial instruments. This section first presents these four policy initiatives and instruments and then discusses the four themes that characterise the EU's understanding of geopolitical external assistance.

Global Europe (officially the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument – Global Europe) is the main financial instrument in the EU budget to fund external assistance in the 2021–2027 budgetary cycle, worth approximately €80 billion. Global Europe is the EU's main tool 'to implement its priorities globally, to rise to the challenges and opportunities and to promote its interests in the world, [including] […] eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable development, prosperity, peace and stability' (European Commission, 2021j). According to the European External Action Service (EEAS, 2022), it is 'an instrument ready to tackle current geopolitical challenges'. It 'is driven by a "policy first" and "value-driven" approach that will enable the EU to take a stronger geopolitical approach to its external action', including tackling the global consequences of Russia's invasion of Ukraine.

Prior to 2021, EU external assistance was funded from two main sources, the extrabudgetary European Development Fund (EDF) and the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI). The EDF had its own governance mechanisms and focused on funding cooperation with the African, Caribbean and Pacific (ACP) countries. Its overarching objective was 'the eradication of poverty consistent with sustainable development and the gradual integration of ACP countries into the world economy' (Gavas, 2013). The DCI, part of the EU budget, focused mainly on Asia and Latin America. Its primary objectives were similar to the EDF, but also broader: the alleviation of poverty; sustainable economic, social and environmental development; and the promotion of democracy, rule of law, good governance and respect for human rights (Parry and Segantini, 2017). The management and programming of the EDF and the DCI were separated, with the Commission's Directorate-General (DG) for Development and Cooperation managing the former and the EEAS the latter.

Global Europe merged these two (and other) funding instruments, representing 'the most radical changes in decades' in EU external assistance, and also consolidated their programming in the new DG International Partnerships (INTPA). Whilst eradicating poverty remained the key priority of Global Europe, the appearance of rhetoric around promoting 'the Union's values and interests worldwide in order to pursue the objectives and principles of the Union's external action' (Burni et al., 2021, p. 475) is highly notable. Global Europe has created the conditions for a more unified, coherent and visible EU action (Burni et al., 2021, p. 475).

Global Gateway, the EU's global investment scheme (or 'value-based connectivity approach', EEAS, 2022), presented in December 2021 and building on previous EU external investment initiatives (Keijzer, 2024), further defines the EU's geopolitical ambitions for external assistance policy. Worth €300 billion, it aims at promoting EU interests through a combination of external assistance, loan guarantees and public and private investment raised by European development banks. These latter actors play a key role in mobilising private finance through blended financial instruments. 'Global Gateway projects will invest in infrastructure to plug vulnerabilities, provide trusted connectivity, and build capacity in the face of natural or man-made challenges, physical, cyber or hybrid threats, and economic coercion for geopolitical aims' (EU, 2021, p. 3). The Global Gateway will create a 'new paradigm for EU development policy, defined by strategic interests' (Furness and Keijzer, 2022).

A key financing instrument for leveraging private sector funding for the Global Gateway is the EFSD+. This instrument, which expands the previously existing EFSD and is now integrated into Global Europe, provides guarantees and blending facilities for private investors through national development banks (NDBs), the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the EBRD, by allowing them to fund projects that may have otherwise been too risky, thus increasing overall resources.

The Commission's geopolitical ambitions are also visible in the Team Europe approach. Team Europe is a coordinating mechanism for European external assistance, covering the Commission, member states, their NDBs and implementing agencies, as well as the EIB and the EBRD. Launched in 2020 to better co-ordinate the European assistance in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Team Europe now covers all EU external assistance (Burni et al., 2022). 'In a changing *geopolitical context*, Team Europe is about establishing a leading role on the global stage, protecting our interests and promoting our values' (European Commission, 2023b). Whilst Team Europe does not fundamentally change the architecture of EU external assistance, it has provided a new coordination platform (Hodson and Howarth, 2023) and a powerful brand.

Documents related to these initiatives reveal four core themes of the Commission's geopolitical ambitions. First, for the Commission, assistance driven by geopolitical motivations primarily aims to increase the *market power and influence of the donor* in the recipient country. In the documents, market power is understood along the lines identified by Damro's (2012) market power Europe argument; that is, the EU exercises power to externalise internal policies with an aim of creating market opportunities for European businesses. The Global Gateway outlines a neoliberal framework that takes advantage of both the direct power of private investors and the international legal order of foreign direct investment and trade. External assistance thus serves to increase investment and trade (Furness and Keijzer, 2022). The Global Gateway allows the 'EU's partners to develop their societies and economies, but also create[s] opportunities for the EU Member States' private sector to invest and remain competitive' (European Commission, 2023a). The EU institutions ensure that 'infrastructure projects will be based [amongst others] on the EU's own strategic interests' (EU, 2021, p. 3). According to von der Leyen, 'the Global Gateway strategy is a template for how Europe can build more resilient connections with the world' (European Commission, 2023a).

These resilient connections in the Commission's understanding are market connections and are either built through the promotion of market-friendly reforms for European private investors or through the EIB and the EBRD, working with NDBs, in the framework of Team Europe. Team Europe relies on a variety of investment methods, including joint initiatives, which 'bring together the best possible mix of tools, modalities and partners (e.g., civil society organisations and the private sector) to deliver the intended impact' (European Commission, 2023b). As investments under Team Europe should make sense financially for private investors, 'infrastructure plans and […] credible pipelines of projects' need to be prepared, which 'ensure value for money' (EU, 2021, p. 11).

Second, in the Commission's understanding, *larger amounts of resources lead to greater power for the donor*. This implies significant amounts of external assistance, but the Commission also invites private financial investors not only to increase the EU's market power but also to increase resources overall. This is especially apparent when it comes to climate finance, where the European Commission (2023c) declares that 'investing in both mitigation and climate resilience, as well as in clean energy, is a necessity but also a major economic opportunity'. Along these lines, in order 'to meet the scale of investment needed, Global Gateway will mobilise more and better investments in international infrastructure' (EU, 2021, p. 8). Global Gateway 'will also use innovative financial instruments to crowd-in private capital' (EU, 2021, p. 9). 'The EFSD+ guarantees […] allow private investors to finance projects in more challenging markets, by assuming the risks of more unstable environments whilst avoiding market distortions' (European Commission, 2023d). The European Commission (2023d) supports requests for EFSD+ funds, which 'offer the best development impact and contribute most to the EU policy objectives'. Moreover, the European Commission (2021h) is also willing to diversify the kinds of finance targeting partner countries, exploring 'the possibility of establishing a European Export Credit Facility to […] help ensure a greater level playing field for EU businesses in third country markets, where they increasingly have to compete with foreign competitors that receive large support from their governments, and thus facilitate their participation in infrastructure projects'.

Third, the Commission's geopoliticised external assistance *targets sectors that maximise donor influence*. The Global Gateway communication asserts that 'Europe's world-leading industry, private sector knowledge and investment capacity gives us a unique competitive advantage around the world and Global Gateway must make full use of it' (EU, 2021, p. 3). The sectors where the EU is best placed to create dependencies are linked to those where it is already a strong global innovation hub. In particular, green technology related to the energy sector is regarded as a means through which to establish technology dependence. Promoting green technology and energy security is an explicit goal of the Global Gateway. A second potential area is digital technologies, where future demand is again ensured. In addition, transportation is singled out, where sectoral dependence may serve European interest, as the Global Gateway will 'support networks providing connectivity with the Trans European Transport Network' (European Commission, 2023e). Through development assistance, the EU can ensure that its partners adapt European standards in these areas, making them dependent on European technology in the long term. Focus on these sectors implies that the EU's commitment to poverty reduction, its core stated development policy aim, will weaken (Furness and Keijzer, 2022).

Finally, pursuing geopolitical objectives may also mean a *decreasing emphasis on normative objectives* linked to development funding around human rights and rule of law. These are seen to hinder the achievement of geopolitical objectives, especially in contexts where there is little local resonance with them. As discussed, normative objectives have been a central tenet of the EU's identity as a donor (Saltnes and Thiel, 2021). Instead of visibly abandoning normative conditionality altogether, references to it are downplayed. The European Commission (2023d) still relies on normative language in some cases, for example, the 'EFSD+ is foreseen […] to contribute to eradicating poverty and promoting sustainable development, prosperity, peace and stability', but there are significantly fewer references to human rights. Under Global Gateway investments in authoritarian states, ensuring that capital is not lost may override concerns around human rights (Furness and Keijzer, 2022). There may however be cases when an emphasis on normative ideals might actually support the EU's geopolitical ambitions, especially in partner countries where domestic, pro-EU coalitions may be empowered by this.

In the following section, we match these four core features of geopolitised external assistance (market power, increased resources, sectors that maximise influence and the decreasing emphasis on normative objectives) to the Commission's practice of defining spending targets in Central Asia.

III. The EU'S Geopolitical Shift in Central Asia

Case Selection and Data

The five Central Asian former Soviet states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan) form an appropriate case study, as they matter increasingly for the EU's geopolitical objectives (Khan and Mihr, 2023). The EU's presence in the region, through external assistance, private investments or indirectly through the activities of the EBRD and NDBs, dates back to the end of the Soviet Union (Johnson, 2016). In the 1990s, EU interest in the region manifested in the promotion of human rights and democracy. Guaranteeing the rule of law and transparency of public institutions was linked to increasing capacity to attract foreign direct investment. The implementation of these principles, however, has always been characterised by a lack of effort (Piroska and Schlett, 2024). Over time, the discourse legitimising EU presence has increasingly taken a geopolitical turn. The EU launched a new Central Asia strategy in 2019 entitled 'The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership' (Fawn, 2022), followed by the first high-level EU–Central Asia Economic Forum and a Ministerial Meeting in November 2021. At the latter, Josep Borrell, the EU's foreign policy representative, stated that '[t]he EU has high stakes in seeing Central Asia develop as a more resilient, prosperous and more closely interconnected economic and political *space*' (cited in Kuszewska-Bohnert, 2023; emphasis added).

Russia, China and Turkey are all acting highly assertively in the region (Winn and Gänzle, 2023). China has invested extensively in infrastructure and productive capacities (Bossuyt, 2018), and its Belt and Road Initiative has shown the region's potential in enhancing China's connectivity towards Europe (Bossuyt and Bolgova, 2020). The region is, however, geographically 'close' to the EU, and Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are important energy exporters. Russia's invasion of Ukraine heightened the importance of the region: ensuring sanction compliance and diminishing sanction avoidance by Russia in the region became key EU interests, thus forcing the countries to seek more balanced international relations and weakening Russian influence (Brzozowski, 2022). This inspired the first high-level meetings between the European Council's president and Central Asian heads of state in 2022 and the first EU–Central Asia Summit, scheduled for April 2025. Central Asia entered the EU spotlight as a potential alternative supplier of oil and gas instead of Russia and also as an alternative transport route for European businesses. The EU, therefore, faces strong incentives to implement geopolitical external assistance to counter Russian and Chinese influence in the region. However, Central Asian actors remain cautious about the renewed EU interest in their region (Drost et al., 2025). Whilst Europe is an attractive partner as it can provide economic diversification and certain technologies, Central Asian interests lie in water management and agriculture as well as education.

The five countries are economically diverse, including natural-resource-dependent upper-middle-income countries and lower income countries (Table 1). Nonetheless, the EU clearly tends to group them together, and since this paper aims to understand EU policy change, the way the EU sees regions is a natural way to structure our investigation. The differences between the five countries bring variation into our case study and allow checking the degree to which the EU takes these into account.

To examine the EU's geopolitical approach, we rely on the analysis of the EU's aid programming documents. Specifically, we compare the EU's spending priorities for the five countries in its Multiannual Indicative Programmes (MIPs) for the 2014–2020 and the 2021–2027 budgetary cycles. Looking at the shift in spending priorities allows us to assess whether there has actually been a shift towards more geopoliticised external assistance. The MIPs are formulated through a complex process led by the EU's delegation to the partner country, based on guidelines set by the Commission. It involves extensive dialogue with the partner country's government, local stakeholders and EU member states (Tannous, 2013). The MIPs are meant to align with the partner country's national development strategy, and their main purpose is to identify how the EU can contribute to the goals in these. They 'condense a wide range of information about core development challenges' (Lundsgaarde, 2023, p. 12) in the country and formulate objectives and planned activities based on these for EU assistance. The MIPs identify a relatively small number of sectors that the EU will fund during the given budget cycle, provide indicative funding amounts for these and set indicators to measure success. The MIPs do not identify specific projects: these are derived at later stages through multiannual or annual action plans, along with actual financial commitments.

The MIPs matter, as they provide a glimpse into the EU's strategic *intentions* and the kinds of actions that it is likely to fund based on these (Lundsgaarde, 2023, p. 24). Whilst these intentions may not be realised and contexts giving birth to them may change, they provide key insights into the EU's strategic thinking. The relevance of the EU's MIPs with various partner countries is shown by the fact that they have frequently been analysed in the literature to understand the EU's motivations in external assistance policy (Konopelko, 2018; Lundsgaarde, 2023; Sergejeff et al., 2023).

Table 1: Diversity and Commonalities Amongst the Five Central Asian Countries.

	GDP/capita (2022, current USD)	*Exports to the EU (2022, million EUR)*	*Assistance from the EU institutions (annual average between 2019 and 2021, million USD)*
Kazakhstan	11,243	29,826	1.8
Kyrgyzstan	1606	147	65.8
Tajikistan	1054	145	55.3
Turkmenistan	7297[a]	398	3.6
Uzbekistan	2255	845	49.1

[a]Data for 2020.Source: World Bank (2023), European Commission (2023f) and OECD (2023).

The MIPS for the five countries were accessed on DG INTPA's website and the websites of the EU delegations in their capitals. For the 2021–2027 cycle, each of the five countries had their own MIP. However, for the previous cycle, there was no MIP for Kazakhstan, and the MIP for Turkmenistan covered only the period between 2014 and 2017, due to their higher incomes. There was also a Central Asian regional MIP in the 2014–2020 cycle, which covered projects with a cross-border nature, but not for the 2021–2027 period. The MIPs are generally dense texts but follow similar structures. The Commission identifies three to four priority areas for funding per country and sets indicative resource allocations for these. We aimed to extract these priority areas and resources, as well as the narratives used to justify their selection. The priority areas are introduced in Section 1.2. ('Choice of sectors') in the 2014–2020 MIPS and in Section 2 ('EU support per priority area and proposals of Team Europe initiatives') for 2021–2027, together with detailed narratives justifying their selection. The priority areas are clearly stated in all cases. We then analysed the narratives provided for each sector using a thematic approach, identifying themes that can be associated with either of the four core features of geopoliticised aid presented in the previous section (market power, increased resources, sectors which maximise influence and the decreasing emphasis on normative objectives). The indicative financial allocations associated with each priority area are listed in the 'Financial Overview' section of each MIP.

To complement the MIPs, we also analysed the (multi)annual action plans, which break the MIPs down into specific projects, using a similar thematic approach. At the time of writing, these were available for Kazakhstan (2022–2023), Kyrgyzstan (2021, 2022) and Tajikistan (2021, 2022). Furthermore, we compiled project-level data on actual EU spending in the five countries between 2014 and 2020, based on the International Aid Transparency Initiative (IATI, 2023; Table A1 in the Appendix). This was used to determine whether the EU stuck to its plans in the 2014–2020 MIPs and thus whether the more recent set of MIPs represents any change in direction.

Market Power and Influence

The main priority areas in the two sets of MIPs are summarised in Table 2. The 2014–2020 MIPs framed business and investment climate reforms as tools that support domestic companies, especially micro, small and medium enterprises (MSMEs), which then create employment, reducing poverty. Foreign investments were not emphasised. The 2021–2027 MIPs represent a clear change of direction, although this is more pronounced for some countries than others.

The EU is most explicit about its goal to increase market power for Kazakhstan, with which it has an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement since 2020. The MIP on Kazakhstan states that the primary reason why the country is 'of interest to the EU [is] to develop the market for European products and services' (European Commission, 2021a, p. 3). Reforms creating a more business- and investment-friendly legal environment are meant to 'ease access to finance and markets for the local and European private sector' (European Commission, 2021a, p. 4). The MIPs are less explicit for the other four countries, but the shift is visible in each case. For Tajikistan, the MIP calls for a 'deep transformation of its economic system, opening it up to the private and foreign investment' (European Commission, 2021d, p. 9). A Sustainable Energy Support

Table 2: Priority Areas and Earmarked Official Development Assistance (ODA) and EFSD+ Amounts for Central Asia in the EU's 2014–2020 and 2021–2027 MIPs (Million Euros).

	2014–2020		*2021–2027*		
Country	*Priority areas*	*ODA*	*Priority areas*	*ODA*	*EFSD+*
Kazakhstan	No MIP		1. Green investment	16	Y
			2. EPCA implementation, governance and market access		
Kyrgyzstan	1. Rule of law	37.7	1. Governance and digital transformation	7	TBC
	2. Education	71.7	2. Human development	35	TBC
	3. Rural development and poverty reduction	71.7	3. Green and climate-resilient economy	18	TBC
	4. Support measures	2.7	4. Civil society and cooperation facility	2	TBC
Tajikistan	1. Health	62.2	1. Inclusive green and digital economy	27	5
	2. Education	75	2. Human development	22.8	Y
	3. Rural development	110.0	3. Natural resource management, efficiency and resilience	39.1	40
	4. Support measures	3.8	4. Civil society and cooperation facility	1.8	N
Uzbekistan	1. Rural development	165.5	1. Democratic governance and digital transformation	13	N
	2. Support measures	2.5	2. Inclusive, digital and green growth	30.4	Y
			3. Development of a smart and eco-friendly agri-food sector	27	Y
			4. Civil society and cooperation facility	5.6	N
Turkmenistan	1. Human capital development	36.2	1. Green aspects of the economy	18	N
	2. Support measures	0.8	2. Improving the business climate		
Regional Central Asia	1. Sustainable regional development	170	No regional MIP		
	2. Regional security	37.5			
	3. Multi-country technical assistance	35			
	4. Support measures	2.5			
Total		**884.8**		**262.7**	

Source: Authors, based on the European Commission (2014a, 2014b, 2014c, 2014d, 2014e, 2021a, 2021b, 2021c, 2021d, 2021e).

Programme envisaged for the country (European Commission, 2021g, p. 4) aims to create 'the conditions for investments in [energy efficiency and renewable energy] to be funded through the EFSD+ regional envelope'. Furthermore, the 'creation of a transparent and fair electricity market [...] will be attractive for the deployment of renewable energy projects through private sector participation'. In the case of Uzbekistan, the expanded partnership with European development banks 'will be focused on improving the investment and business environment' (European Commission, 2021c, p. 11), as well as on providing 'significant financial backing for banks' to ease access to credit (European Commission, 2021c, p. 14). There is less emphasis on business-friendly reforms in the cases of Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan; the MIP for the latter implies that it needs to increase transparency and enhance fair competition before it can become a viable investment location.

There was markedly lower emphasis on the need for the EU to gain markets in the 2014–2020 MIPs. Any mentions of developing businesses and the business climate focused mainly on MSMEs in rural areas, with clear links to poverty reduction. None of the actual projects funded under these MIPs focused on developing the business climate (see Table A1).

The focus on European private investments entails a greater role for development banks, who would provide financing for these with support from the EFSD+. Whilst NDBs and the EIB also play a role, in Central Asia, it is the EBRD that is likely to take a central position, given its historically stronger activities in the region. To mark the region's importance for its operation, the EBRD organised its 2023 Annual Meeting in Samarkand, Uzbekistan. The EBRD, however, is not an EU institution and not even a (fully) European bank: its largest shareholder is the United States with 10% of the voting rights. Its 73 shareholders also include the EU's rivals in Central Asia such as Russia, China and India (Strand, 2003). Whilst the EBRD has aligned its lending objectives with the EU's Central Asia strategy, it needs to cater to the interests of its non-EU shareholders, which may undermine the EU's geopolitical goal of increasing its own market power.

Furthermore, using the EBRD to promote the EU's strategic interests may run counter to the EBRD's political mandate, namely, 'to operate only in countries committed to democratisation'. The EBRD has long struggled with fulfilling this mandate in Central Asia where countries are under various degrees of authoritarian rule (Kilpatrick, 2021). This struggle has weakened its legitimacy towards potential financial investors (Best, 2007), thus turning it into a weak carrier of EU interest. Finally, the EBRD is not a traditional development bank, but rather it operates as a merchant bank.[1] As per its mandate, it takes the interest of the investors and its main shareholders first, whilst giving very little voice in decision-making for representatives from the countries it operates in (Piroska and Schlett, 2024). Whilst this feature certainly aligns with the EU's geopolitical strategy of explicitly promoting EU market power, it further diminishes the EBRD's legitimacy in the region.

Resources

A comparison of the main priority areas and earmarked amounts in the two sets of MIPs shows a *dramatic decrease in assistance*, from €885 million in 2014–2020 to below €264 million in 2021–2027 (Table 2). The Commission's expectation is that the greater involvement of development banks, with their ability to leverage private sector funding, would increase overall resources to the region (European Commission, 2019, p. 8), more than making up for the shortfall in development assistance. The 2014–2020 MIPs did not include any details on private sector and blended finance, as the EFSD was programmed

[1]Article 1 of the Agreement Establishing the EBRD.

through parallel structures and funding was available only for Sub-Saharan Africa and the EU's neighbourhood (European Investment Bank, 2024). The new EFSD+ however is global in its scope, and its programming has been integrated with the Global Europe budgetary instrument; hence, the newer set of MIPs explicitly cover it. This implies the EU's desire to ensure greater coherence between external assistance and private finance, under a 'policy first' principle (EEAS, 2022).

Details in the 2021–2027 MIPs on EFSD+ funding vary.[2] Whilst all of them discuss whether they foresee EFSD+ funding in the specific priority sectors or not (Table 2), amounts are provided only for Tajikistan. But even there, it is unclear how much private investment these amounts can leverage. No EFSD+ support for investments is foreseen in Turkmenistan, and in Kyrgyzstan, these are conditional on the country's political situation.

The EU's understanding of geopolitics is focused on a material conception of power: the more resources are mobilised, the greater the expected impact of power over the territory. The EU's practice in Central Asia, with significantly diminished external assistance, however seems to contradict this. As with extending market power, the Commission's intention is again to rely on development banks to raise private financial investment. Beyond the issues with the EBRD discussed above, further factors complicate the ability of these banks to raise resources for projects in the region. Although banks receive guarantees and other support from the EFSD+, the interests of their financial portfolio or index investors do not necessarily align with those of the Commission. Financial logic-driven investment is short-termist by nature, which contradicts the long-term investment needs of the geopolitically strategic sectors identified by the Commission in Central Asia such as green energy. These require substantially longer time for impacts to emerge than what financial investors prefer. Building infrastructure like energy systems is a time-consuming and path-dependent process, constrained and enabled by existing infrastructure that is itself the result of past power struggles. Furthermore, financial investors, instead of decreasing risk and instability, are themselves a source of risk as EU-enabled legal exit options allow them to leave the region when risk–return ratios turn unfavourable (Gabor, 2021).

Sectors

There has also been *a significant shift in sectors prioritised* (Table 2). The 2014–2020 MIPs mainly focused on poverty reduction. This is especially evident in how assistance was allocated between sectors: around 63% of funding was earmarked for sectors where expenditure would benefit the poor more than in other sectors. These include health, education and rural development, aid to which the World Bank and the OECD define as 'pro-poor aid' (Bodenstein and Kemmerling, 2015, p. 360). As poor people are more likely to live in rural areas, make a living from agriculture and have lower levels of access to health and education services, funding to these sectors is likely to have a larger marginal impact on poverty reduction than in others. Poverty reduction was especially emphasised in the two poorest countries, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Other goals were present as well however, such as rule of law, security and border control, energy,

[2]Such inconsistency with the MIPs is typical for other regions as well, see Lundsgaarde (2023).

environment and water (the latter three under the Regional MIP's Sustainable Development pillar). The actual projects funded reflect these priorities closely (Table A1), with heavy emphasis on rural development, health and education. In Uzbekistan, for example, all projects under the 2014–2020 MIP focused on rural development, including livestock and horticulture development or better public service delivery in rural areas. The only visible deviation from the plans was a project on the 'Introduction of Sustainable Development Policies' in Turkmenistan.

The difference in the 2021–2027 MIPs is striking. Poverty reduction received few mentions, and the sectors associated with it have mostly disappeared, condensed under the title of human development. Funding for these made up only 22% of the (itself significant reduced) total funding amount. Instead of this, support for green tech investments and digital transformation figured very prominently in all five 2021–2027 MIPs (Table 2). Beyond the amounts earmarked for these, the MIPs mentioned significant further possible investments, such as in developing transport infrastructure, potentially funded by EIB and EBRD loans (European Commission, 2021a, p. 5). Furthermore, the fact that relatively developed Kazakhstan received its own MIP in 2021–2027, but not in 2014–2020, also highlights the increasing importance of considerations other than poverty reduction.

The framing around these areas in the MIPs emphasized how they will help boost MSMEs, promote employment, build back better after COVID-19 and increase climate resilience. It would not be realistic to expect the EU to talk openly about its interest in spreading EU technology and standards. There are however indications in the texts on how the region's green and digital transition would benefit the EU and how this transition should be on the EU's terms. The MIPs for Uzbekistan and Tajikistan emphasise that their transitions need to be 'aligned' with the implementation of the EU's Green Deal (European Commission, 2021c, p. 13; 2021d, p. 5; see also European Commission 2022b). Investments in Tajikistan will create 'export opportunities for EU Green Tech companies in a barely explored market where the EU is seen as a prestigious and strategical partner' (European Commission, 2021g, p. 4). For Uzbekistan, the EU's expertise in sustainable development within the Green Deal framework 'positions it as a preferred source of technical expertise' (European Commission, 2021c, p. 4). In Kyrgyzstan's digital transition, 'it has become even more relevant for the EU to project its best practices, experience, expertise as well as industrial and research excellence' (European Commission, 2021e, p. 5). The EU is also highlighted as the most relevant standard setter for Kazakhstan (European Commission, 2022a).

Similar considerations appear even in sectors more closely associated with poverty reduction: 'the EU's geopolitical engagement in Tajikistan has the objective of reducing dependency from Russia, which can be achieved through key initiatives in energy and water sector projects and human development, such as creating employment and preventing youth radicalisation' (European Commission, 2022d, p. 4; see also European Commission 2022c). The education sector reform programme in Kyrgyzstan also emphasises the aim of preventing radicalisation (European Commission, 2021f, p. 4).

This shift in sectors is certainly compatible with a more geopolitical approach, as it extends long-term EU influence through the creation of dependency on technology. The lack of focus on poverty reduction, however, creates problems. Whilst using external assistance instrumentally to achieve geopolitical goals can have beneficial impacts on the poor, the policy is not designed with their interests at heart and so inevitably falls short.

The persistence of poverty in some countries of the region actually even works against the EU's geopolitical objectives in the long term and can undermine any short-term gains, as poor societies remain hotbeds for instability and extremist ideologies.

Normative Objectives

Normative elements and specifically democracy and human rights were not strongly emphasised in either set of MIPs, with relatively few mentions for Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, other than generic phrases about their importance, without any attached funding.

The rule of law was a priority area between 2014 and 2020 only in the case of Kyrgyzstan, focusing on democratising the legislative process, improving access to justice, election reform and increasing respect for human rights. Consolidating Kyrgyz democracy was seen as a desirable goal by the EU. The actual projects reflected this and included a rule of law reform programme and support for electoral reform (Table A1). Promoting legal and judicial reform remained priorities for 2021–2027 as well, but they were bundled together with the digitalisation of governance, a more technical topic. Democracy as a whole received much lower emphasis, significantly decreasing the normative 'feel' of the MIP. The opposite process is true for Uzbekistan, where the 2021–2027 MIP feels more normative in content than its predecessor, which had few mentions of normative topics and no dedicated funding. Democratic governance was however added as a priority area for 2021–2027, to support 'Uzbekistan's transition to a pluralist democratic system based on the rule of law, universal values of human rights, including labour rights, a flourishing civil society and elimination of all forms of discrimination, especially gender' (European Commission, 2021c, p. 7).

The rule of law was a priority area between 2014 and 2020 only in the case of Kyrgyzstan, focusing on democratising the legislative process, improving access to justice, election reform and increasing respect for human rights. Consolidating Kyrgyz democracy was seen as a desirable goal by the EU. The actual projects reflected this, and included a rule of law reform programme and support for electoral reform (Table A1). Promoting legal and judicial reform remained priorities for 2021–2027 as well, but they were bundled together with the digitalisation of governance, a more technical topic. Democracy as a whole received much lower emphasis, significantly decreasing the normative 'feel' of the MIP. The opposite process is true for Uzbekistan, where the 2021–2027 MIP feels more normative in content than its predecessor, which had few mentions of normative topics and no dedicated funding. Democratic governance was however added as a priority area for 2021–2027, to support 'Uzbekistan's transition to a pluralist democratic system based on the rule of law, universal values of human rights, including labour rights, a flourishing civil society and elimination of all forms of discrimination, especially gender' (European Commission, 2021c, p. 7).

There is therefore no clear trend in the case of normative objectives; however, the changes can be consistent with a geopolitical approach: the EU promotes normative objectives in contexts where these are more likely to have an impact. More democratic and Western-leaning societies are clearly in line with the EU's geopolitical goal of increasing influence, but pushing normative objectives in countries where there is no local resonance with these decreases EU influence. Promoting democracy and human rights in heavily authoritarian regimes like Turkmenistan would bear little fruit. However, the EU has seen windows of opportunity after the 2010 Kyrgyz revolution and following the death of Uzbek President Islam Karimov in 2016 and the early reform efforts of his successor Shavkat Mirziyoyev (Salomov, 2019).

Conclusions

This paper aimed to examine what the EU's geopolitical shift means for its external assistance policy. Central Asia was used as a case study, as it can be seen as a most likely case for geopolitical development cooperation given the region's strategic importance for the EU and the influence of other powers. The paper derived a number of expected characteristics of how a 'geopoliticised' external assistance should look like, based on EU documents. These characteristics include focusing on market power, increasing resources, concentrating on sectors that maximise influence and playing down or at least being 'pragmatic' about normative issues. The EU's post-2021 intentions and practice in Central Asia live up to many of these expectations, although not without contradictions. Most importantly, there is a significant decrease in external assistance, with the expectation that private sector investments funded by development banks will compensate for the shortfall. We argue however that this is by no means guaranteed, and involving actors like the EBRD through the Team Europe approach brings additional challenges that may undermine the EU's geopolitical objectives. The EBRD is not fully a European organisation and needs to cater to the interests of its shareholders and financial investors. It may also be naïve to expect member state NDBs to fully align their lending activities in the region to EU-level objectives.

These issues aside, the EU's post-2021 engagement with Central Asia has clearly been designed with geopolitical considerations in mind, with a desire to create strategic coherence between the EU's external assistance and private finance instruments, as well as between different European actors. Although this happened in the context of scarce financial resources, it represents a new era for EU external assistance. The geopolitical shift, however, undermines poverty reduction, a key objective of external assistance. It is also questionable how established development effectiveness principles like partner country ownership and transparency can be implemented. Furthermore, research is required to examine just how much geopolitical thinking has permeated EU external assistance policies in regions other than Central Asia.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to Stefano Guzzini, Alexander Astrov, Daniel Mertens, Eric Brown, Ildar Damianov, Niels Keijzer and two anonymous reviewers for comments on previous versions of this paper. Any remaining errors are our own.

Data Availability Statement

The paper does not use new primary data. All secondary data analysed are cited in the text and available in the public domain.

Correspondence: Balázs Szent-Iványi, Reader in Politics and International Relations, Aston Centre for Europe, Aston University, Birmingham, UK; Department of World Economy, Corvinus University of Budapest, Hungary.
email: b.szent-ivanyi@aston.ac.uk

References

Bauerle Danzman, S. and Meunier, S. (2023) 'Naïve No More: Foreign Direct Investment Screening in the European Union'. *Global Policy*, Vol. 14, pp. 40–53.

Beringer, S.L., Maier, S. and Thiel, M. (eds) (2019) *EU Development Policies: Between Norms and Geopolitics* (Springer).

Best, J. (2007) 'Legitimacy Dilemmas: The IMF's Pursuit of Country Ownership'. *Third World Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 469–488.

Bodenstein, T. and Kemmerling, A. (2015) 'A Paradox of Redistribution in International Aid? The Determinants of Poverty-Oriented Development Assistance'. *World Development*, Vol. 76, pp. 359–369.

Bossuyt, F. (2018) 'The EU's and China's Development Assistance Towards Central Asia: Low Versus Contested Impact'. *Eurasian Geography and Economics*, Vol. 59, No. 5–6, pp. 606–631.

Bossuyt, F. and Bolgova, I. (2020) 'Connecting Eurasia: Is Cooperation Between Russia, China, and the EU in Central Asia Possible?' In Lagutina, M. (ed.) *Regional Integration and Future Cooperation Initiatives in the Eurasian Economic Union* (IGI Global), pp. 234–250.

Bountagkidis, G.K., Fragkos, K.C. and Frangos, C.C. (2015) 'EU Development Aid Towards Sub-Saharan Africa: Exploring the Normative Principle'. *Social Sciences*, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 85–116.

Brzozowski, A. (2022) Global Europe Brief: Will the EU Find New Horizons in Central Asia? Euractiv. https://www.euractiv.com/section/global-europe/news/global-europe-brief-will-the-eu-find-new-horizons-in-central-asia/

Burni, A., Erforth, B., Friesen, I., Hackenesch, C., Hoegl, M. and Keijzer, N. (2022) 'Who Called Team Europe? The European Union's Development Policy Response During the First Wave of COVID-19'. *European Journal of Development Research*, Vol. 34, No. 1, pp. 524–539.

Burni, A., Erforth, B. and Keijzer, N. (2021) 'Global Europe? The New EU External Action Instrument and the European Parliament'. *Global Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 471–485.

Collier, D., Hidalgo, F.D. and Maciuceanu, A.O. (2006) 'Essentially Contested Concepts: Debates and Applications'. *Journal of Political Ideologies*, Vol. 11, No. 3, pp. 211–246.

Crombois, J. (2019) 'The Eastern Partnership: Geopolitics and Policy Inertia'. *European View*, Vol. 18, No. 1, pp. 89–96.

Damro, C. (2012) 'Market Power Europe'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 19, No. 5, pp. 682–699.

Dandashly, A. and Noutcheva, G. (2020) 'Unintended Consequences of EU Democracy Support in the European Neighbourhood'. In Burlyuk, O. and Noutcheva, G. (eds) *Unintended Consequences of EU External Action* (Routledge), pp. 105–120.

DFID. (2013) Multilateral Aid Review Update 2013. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/multilateral-aid-review-update-2013

Di Carlo, D. and Schmitz, L. (2023) 'Europe First? The Rise of EU Industrial Policy Promoting and Protecting the Single Market'. *Journal of European Public Policy*, Vol. 30, No. 10, pp. 2063–2096.

Diez, T. (2004) 'Europe's Others and the Return of Geopolitics'. *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 17, No. 2, pp. 319–335.

Drost N. Cretti G. van Giersberge B. 2025 Central Asia Emerging From the Shadows European Union. Clingendael Report.
EEAS. (2022) The New 'NDICI - Global Europe' (2021–2027). https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/new-%E2%80%98ndici-global-europe%E2%80%99-2021-2027_en
European Commission (2006) *The European Consensus on Development* (Luxembourg: Office for Official Publications of the European Communities).
European Commission. (2014a) Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) 2014–2020 for Uzbekistan European Commission
European Commission. (2014b) Multiannual Indicative Programme Regional Central Asia 2014–2020 European Commission
European Commission. (2014c) Multi-Annual Indicative Programme (MIP) for the Kyrgyz Republic 2014–2020 European Commission
European Commission. (2014d) Tajikistan – Multi-Annual Indicative Programme 2014–2020. European Commission.
European Commission. (2014e) Multiannual Indicative Programme (MIP) for Turkmenistan for the Period 2014–2017. European Commission.
European Commission. (2019) *The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership* (JOIN(2019) 9 Final). European Commission.
European Commission. (2021a) Republic of Kazakhstan. Multi-Annual Indicative Programme 2021–2027. European Commission.
European Commission. (2021b) Turkmenistan. Multi-Annual Indicative Programme 2021–2027 European Commission
European Commission. (2021c) Republic of Uzbekistan. Multi-Annual Indicative Programme 2021–2027. European Commission.
European Commission. (2021d) Republic of Tajikistan. Multi-Annual Indicative Programme 2021–2027. European Commission.
European Commission. (2021e) Kyrgyz Republic. Multi-Annual Indicative Programme 2021–2027. European Commission.
European Commission. (2021f) Action Document for Education Sector Reform Performance Contract in the Kyrgyz Republic. European Commission.
European Commission. (2021g) Action Document for Sustainable Energy Support Programme in Tajikistan. European Commission.
European Commission (2021h) Global Gateway: Up to €300 Billion for the European Union's Strategy to Boost Sustainable Links Around the World. European Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_6433
European Commission. (2021i) Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – "Global Europe". https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-07/factsheet-global-europe-ndici-june-2021_en.pdf
European Commission. (2021j) Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI) – "Global Europe" Publications Office of the European Union
European Commission. (2022a) Action Document for EU–Kazakhstan Cooperation Facility 2022–2023. European Commission.
European Commission. (2022b) Action Document for Green Economy Programme in the Kyrgyz Republic. European Commission.
European Commission. (2022c) Action Document for Rural Drinking Water Supply and Sanitation Project in Tajikistan. European Commission.
European Commission. (2022d) Action Document for Technical/Vocational Education and Training (TVET) and Employment Sector Budget Support Programme in Tajikistan. European Commission.
European Commission. (2023a) Global Gateway. https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en. European Commission.

European Commission. (2023b) Team Europe Initiatives. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/team-europe-initiatives_en. European Commission.
European Commission. (2023c) Global Gateway – Climate and Energy. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/climate-and-energy_en. European Commission.
European Commission. (2023d) European Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (EFSD+). https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/funding-and-technical-assistance/funding-instruments/european-fund-sustainable-development-plus-efsd_en. European Commission.
European Commission. (2023e) Global Gateway – Transport. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/policies/global-gateway/transport_en. European Commission.
European Commission. (2023f) Statistical Data on the EU's Economic Relations With Its Main Trading Partners. https://policy.trade.ec.europa.eu/analysis-and-assessment/statistics_en. European Commission.
European Investment Bank. (2024) EFSD Guarantee. https://www.eib.org/en/products/mandates-partnerships/efsd/
European Union. (2021) Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank The Global Gateway. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2021-12/joint_communication_global_gateway.pdf European Commission
Farrell, H. and Newman, A. (2016) 'The New Interdependence Approach: Theoretical Development and Empirical Demonstration'. *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 23, No. 5, pp. 713–736.
Fawn, R. (2022) ''Not Here for Geopolitical Interests or Games': The EU's 2019 Strategy and the Regional and Inter-Regional Competition for Central Asia'. *Central Asian Survey*, Vol. 41, No. 4, pp. 675–698.
Furness, M., Ghica, L.A., Lightfoot, S. and Szent-Iványi, B. (2020) 'EU Development Policy: Evolving as an Instrument of Foreign Policy and as an Expression of Solidarity'. *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, Vol. 16, No. 2.
Furness, M. and Keijzer, N. (2022) Europe's Global Gateway: A New Geostrategic Framework for Development Policy? *DIE Briefing Paper* 1/2022.
Gabor, D. (2021) 'The Wall Street Consensus'. *Development and Change*, Vol. 52, No. 3, pp. 429–459.
Gavas, M. (2013) *Reviewing the Evidence: How Well Does the European Development Fund Perform?* (London: Overseas Development Institute).
Guzzini, S. (2017) 'Militarizing Politics, Essentializing Identities: Interpretivist Process Tracing and the Power of Geopolitics'. *Cooperation and Conflict*, Vol. 52, No. 3, pp. 423–445.
Guzzini, S. (2020) *From the Geography of Politics to the Politics of Geography* (DIIS Working Paper 2020:11). https://www.econstor.eu/handle/10419/238135
Hackenesch, C., Bergmann, J. and Orbie, J. (2021) 'Development Policy Under Fire? The Politicization of European External Relations'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 3, pp. 1–19.
Hadfield, A. and Lightfoot, S. (2021) 'Shifting Priorities of the EU as a Development Actor: Context and Consequences'. *Global Affairs*, Vol. 7, No. 4, pp. 487–504.
Haroche, P. (2023) 'A 'Geopolitical Commission': Supranationalism Meets Global Power Competition'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 4, pp. 970–987.
Hodson, D. and Howarth, D. (2023) 'From the Wieser Report to Team Europe: Explaining the 'Battle of the Banks' in Development Finance'. *Journal of European Public Policy*. Advance Online Publication. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2221301
IATI. (2023) D-portal.org. http://d-portal.org/ctrack.html#view=search
Johnson, J. (2016) *Priests of Prosperity: How Central Bankers Transformed the Postcommunist World* (Cornell University Press).

Keijzer, N. (2024) 'The Southernization of the EU's Development Policy? A Critical Review of the EU Global Gateway'. In Klingebiel, S., Kalinowski, T. and Keijzer, N. (eds) *Emerging Trends in International Development and Climate Policy* (Cham: Palgrave Macmillan).

Khan, K.H. and Mihr, A. (eds) (2023) *Europe-Central Asia Relations: New Connectivity Frameworks* (Springer).

Kilpatrick, A. (2021) *Transforming Markets* (CEU Press).

Konopelko, A. (2018) 'Eurasian Economic Union: A Challenge for EU Policy Towards Kazakhstan'. *Asia Europe Journal*, Vol. 16, pp. 1–17.

Kuszewska-Bohnert, A. (2023) 'The Policies of the European Union and Russia vis-à-vis Central Asia'. In Khan, K.H. and Mihr, A. (eds) *Europe-Central Asia Relations: New Connectivity Frameworks* (Springer), pp. 33–62.

Lauwers, N., Orbie, J. and Delputte, S. (2021) 'The Politicization of the Migration–Development Nexus: Parliamentary Discourse on the European Union Trust Fund on Migration'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 59, pp. 72–90.

Leonard, M., Pisani-Ferry, J., Shapiro, J., Tagliapietra, S. and Wolff, G.B. (2021) *The Geopolitics of the European Green Deal* (Bruegel Policy Contribution No. 04/2021).

Lundsgaarde, E. (2023) The Future of EU Blended Finance and Guarantees: An Assessment of Cooperation Strategies With Least Developed Countries in Africa. *IDOS Discussion Paper* 2/2023.

Manners, I. (2002) 'Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?' *JCMS Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 40, No. 2, pp. 235–258.

McNamara, K.R. (2023) 'Transforming Europe? The EU's Industrial Policy and Geopolitical Turn'. *Journal of European Public Policy*. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501763.2023.2230247

Meunier, S. and Mickus, J. (2020) 'Sizing Up the Competition: Explaining Reform of European Union Competition Policy in the Covid-19 Era'. *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 42, No. 8, pp. 1077–1094.

Meunier, S. and Nicolaidis, K. (2019) 'The Geopoliticization of European Trade and Investment Policy'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 57, No. S1, pp. 103–113.

Nitoiu, C. and Sus, M. (2019) 'Introduction: The Rise of Geopolitics in the EU's Approach in Its Eastern Neighbourhood'. *Geopolitics*, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 1–19.

OECD (2023) Aid (ODA) Disbursements to Countries and Regions. OECD. https://stats.oecd.org/Index.aspx?ThemeTreeId=3#

Otero-Iglesias, M. and Weissenegger, M. (2020) 'Motivations, Security Threats and Geopolitical Implications of Chinese Investment in the EU Energy Sector: The Case of CDP Reti'. *European Journal of International Relations*, Vol. 26, No. 2, pp. 594–620.

Pace, M. (2007) 'Norm Shifting From EMP to ENP: The EU as a Norm Entrepreneur in the South?' *Cambridge Review of International Affairs*, Vol. 20, No. 4, pp. 659–675.

Pänke, J. (2019) 'Liberal Empire, Geopolitics and EU Strategy: Norms and Interests in European Foreign Policy Making'. *Geopolitics*, Vol. 24, No. 1, pp. 100–123.

Parry, M. and Segantini, E. (2017) Briefing: How the EU Budget Is Spent. Development Cooperation Instrument. European Parliamentary Research Service.

Piroska, D. and Schlett, B. (2024) 'Mandate Management: A Field Theory Approach to the EBRD's Adaptive Practice in Egypt'. *Review of International Political Economy*, Vol. 31, No. 1, pp. 47–73.

Salomov, J. (2019) Mirziyoyevs Uzbekistan: Towards Openness and Real Democracy? *EUCACIS Online Paper* 6.

Saltnes, J.D. and Thiel, M. (2021) 'The Politicization of LGBTI Human Rights Norms in the EU-Uganda Development Partnership'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 59, No. 1, pp. 108–125.

Schmitz, L. and Seidl, T. (2022) Protecting, Transforming, and Projecting the Single Market. Open Strategic Autonomy and Digital Sovereignty in the EU's Trade and Digital Policies.
Schmitz, L. and Seidl, T. (2023) 'As Open as Possible, as Autonomous as Necessary: Understanding the Rise of Open Strategic Autonomy in EU Trade Policy'. *JCMS Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 3, pp. 834–852.
Sergejeff, K., Domingo, E. and Veron, P. (2023) The EU, Geopolitics and Human Development: Insights From Zambia, Kenya and Guinea. *ECDPM Discussion Paper* 340.
Strand, J. (2003) 'Power Relations in an Embedded Institution: The European Bank for Reconstruction and Development'. *Journal of European Integration*, Vol. 25, No. 2, pp. 115–129.
Tannous, I. (2013) 'The Programming of EU's External Assistance and Development Aid and the Fragile Balance of Power Between EEAS and DG DEVCO'. *European Foreign Affairs Review*, Vol. 18, No. 3, pp. 329–354.
Van der Veen, A.M. (2011) *Ideas, Interests and Foreign Aid* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press).
Vihma, A. (2017) 'Geoeconomics Defined and Redefined'. *Geopolitics*, Vol. 23, No. 1, pp. 47–49.
Von Der Leyen, U. (2019) Opening Remarks by President Von Der Leyen at the Read-Out of the First College Meeting of the Von Der Leyen Commission. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_19_6660
Winn, N. and Gänzle, S. (2023) 'Recalibrating EU Foreign Policy Vis-à-vis Central Asia: Towards Principled Pragmatism and Resilience'. *Geopolitics*, Vol. 28, No. 3, pp. 1342–1361.
World Bank. (2023) *World Development Indicators*. https://databank.worldbank.org/reports.aspx?source=2&series=NY.GDP.MKTP.CD&country
Youngs, R. (2004) 'Normative Dynamics and Strategic Interests in the EU's External Identity'. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies*, Vol. 42, No. 2, pp. 415–435.

A: Appendix

Table A1: EU-Funded Projects in Central Asia Under the 2014–2020 MIPs

	Commitment (USD)
Tajikistan	
Human Development Support Programme II	26,404,692
Sebzor hydropower plant construction project	21,987,446
Quality Education Support Programme I	15,629,552
Support to Health Care Reform in Tajikistan	5,109,448
Rural Development Programme I	38,478,032
Human Development Support Programme	23,407,470
Uzbekistan	
Agriculture Sector Budget Support and Complementary Assistance for Uzbekistan	43,974,892
Skills Development for Employability in Rural Areas of Uzbekistan	10,993,723
Livestock Sector Development Project	16,490,585
Improved Public Service Delivery and Enhanced Governance in Rural Uzbekistan	10,993,723
Ferghana Valley Water Resources Management Project	16,490,585
Management Training Programme (MTP) Capacity Building for SME Management in Uzbekistan	3,648,938
Horticulture Development Project	23,636,506
Sustainable Management of Water Resources in rural areas in Uzbekistan	20,831,040
Kyrgyzstan	
Sector Reform Contract-Social Protection Kyrgyzstan	32,860,620
Education Sector Reform Performance Contract	25,658,130
Education Sector Reform Performance Contract	12,108,235
The Rule of Law Programme in the Kyrgyz Republic second phase (ROLPRO 2)	14,016,997
Integrated Rural Development Program for the Kyrgyz Republic (IRD)	10,938,775
Education Sector Reform Contract	39,170,808
Strengthening Democracy through Electoral Reform Sector Reform Contract	12,668,482
Kazakhstan	
Supporting Kazakhstan's transition to a Green Economy Model	7,754,613
Support for Judicial Reform in Kazakhstan	11,268,441
Turkmenistan	
Support for Public Administration Capacity Building in Turkmenistan	4,325,669
Support for further sustainable Agriculture and Rural development in Turkmenistan Phase III	3,737,558
Support to the introduction of Sustainable Development policies Rationale use of natural resources in the energy–environment sectors in Turkmenistan	2,691,385

Source: IATI (2023).