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European Union and Central Asia – past directions and future perspectives

Ana-Maria ANGHELESCU*

Abstract

In 2007, the European Union launched a targeted Strategy for Central Asia, as a continuation of the efforts to improve the relations with the five post-soviet republics. The adoption in 2019 of a new EU Strategy for Central Asia offers the opportunity to include in the new strategic framework the lessons learned during the past decade of promoting the EU influence in the region, besides promoting measures to strengthen EU's global posture. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the capacity of the EU to mobilise resources for its foreign policy goals, specifically in relation with Central Asia. In examining this idea, I will use the framework offered by the neoclassical realist theory, mainly because in relation to some foreign policy objectives, the EU can be assimilated to a state.

Keywords: Strategy of the European Union for Central Asia, neoclassical realism, foreign policy implementation, resource extractive state

Introduction

In the last years, the European Union (EU) faced considerable challenges, both internally and externally, all of which required common efforts to be tackled. A result of such endeavours was the adoption of a new strategy for the EU foreign and security policy, *Shared vision, common action: A stronger Europe* (2016). In her Foreword, the High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, stressed the changing nature of the international system in which the EU has to act, pointing to the capacity it possesses as a united actor, with a global perspective (Foreword, 2016, p. 4). The idea of accomplishing its global aim was put forward also in the European Security Strategy from 2003, which pointed that „An active and capable EU would make an impact on a global scale” (European Security Strategy, 2003, p. 15).

One of the main challenges remained the power struggle with the Russian Federation in the common neighbourhood, beyond the Eastern Partnership countries and reaching also the five Central Asian republics: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. In 2007, the EU launched a Strategy for a new Partnership with Central Asia, an initiative aimed at redefining the

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relations with the five post-soviet republics, in the context of a renewed interest in the region's potential. The partnership envisioned cooperation in various sectors, ranging from policy and rule of law to human rights, education, economy and energy.

More than a decade later, the distribution of power in the international system has shifted, Central Asia being a region where major actors are interested to play. We are currently witnessing the growing Chinese influence and the Russian quest for maintaining its privileged role in the region, together with the security presence of the United States (Cooley, 2012, p. 4).

In this context, Brussels is drafting a new Strategy for Central Asia, which will be presented in 2019. The negotiation of a new Multiannual Financial Framework, with the objective of implementing projects in a flexible manner and more result-oriented, as well as the whole wave of reform in the EU are creating the premises for a more nuanced presence of the EU as a coherent actor in Central Asia.

The aim of this research paper is to evaluate the EU's capacity to mobilise resources for its foreign policy goals, specifically in relation with Central Asia. In examining this idea, I will use the framework offered by the neoclassical realist theory, mainly because the international system is dominated by anarchy, which triggers a perpetual balance of power. Furthermore, I consider that in some respects, in particular the relations with Central Asia, the EU acts in a similar manner to a state, by adopting a common framework of action, within which bilateral cooperation is also possible, especially because the region is not situated in the immediate proximity of the EU and can determine the global impact of Brussels. Considering the fact that in the region there are already some of the great powers at play, we can assume that the EU member states cannot rationally compete with them at national level.

The neoclassical realist theory provides a complementary perspective to the EU foreign policy, dominated by constructivist approaches and neglecting the realist perspective. The paper discusses the neoclassical realist theory, attempting at applying this framework to the EU. The international power dynamics is reflected in the current state of the Central Asia and the post-independence trajectory of the five republics, coupled with the relations with the great powers interested in the region. In the next sections, I will compile the results of various European and independent reports regarding the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia in a SWOT analysis, the opportunities section being the main recommendation for the future strategic planning.

1. A neoclassical realist approach to European Union's foreign policy

When thinking about the EU, the analysts adopt mainly a constructivist or a liberal approach. Insufficient attention has been given to the power dynamic in the international system, which draws

partner states to respond to the EU's initiatives. By choosing the neoclassical realist approach to explain the EU, I aim at broadening the view of the Europeanisation in neighbouring countries, expanding the constructivist view with a more structuralist image of the international system. Europeanisation explained through the new institutionalism focuses mainly on institutions, formal and informal, in creating a means for the reform implementation. The common framework employs a bottom-up perspective, while the neoclassical realist approach aims at combining the national and international levels of analysis. Therefore, the use of a realist framework, even neoclassical, can represent both an interesting endeavour and a challenging one.

The neoclassical realist perspective of the EU foreign policy in Central Asia highlights the need of creating a common European foreign policy, which resembles that of a state, as well as maintaining the significance of the a multiple layered voice. The constructivists highlight the idea that the EU is a normative power, aiming at creating a value-based foreign policy with neighbouring countries, while providing the set-up for a more coherent approach in the region (Maurer and Simao, 2013, p. 94). Analysing the EU only as a value-based actor, which aims at promoting stability in the system (Maurer and Simao, 2013, p. 95) does not account for the international system's structure which impacts the EU foreign policy choices.

The theoretical perspective of the present paper stresses the importance of the power dynamics in the international system, without neglecting the relevance of the internal leaders in forging certain policy decisions. Even at the EU level we can discuss of a cohesive approach to certain foreign policy goals, which can enable the use of a neoclassical realist approach in the study of its behaviour.

1.1. The neoclassical realist theory: from system through units to foreign policy

The neoclassical realism is a relatively recent research agenda, Gideon Rose coining the term in a review article in 1998. Rose claimed that, in an attempt to shed light on the foreign policy of states, the neoclassical realists argue that the material capability as well as the system's structure influence the behaviour of the states through the national leaders' perceptions and decisions (Rose, 1998, pp. 146-147). In an attempt to structure the research agenda of neoclassical realism, two volumes, from 2009 and 2016, brought together the main contributions to this theory, by highlighting the primacy of international system, without neglecting the domestic political arrangements and the national leaders' perceptions in choosing some foreign policy directions (Ripsman *et al.*, 2009, p. 280). In 2016, the authors refined the methodology and proposed a third generation theory aimed at explaining the international politics, instead of narrow foreign policies. Furthermore, the researchers

contributed to better defining the four categories of intervening variables at the national level (Ripsman *et al.*, 2016, pp. 8-9).

In the neoclassical realist view, the international system preserves the three fundamental characteristics identified by Kenneth Waltz in neorealism: the ordering principle, the degree of differentiation and the distribution of capabilities among the units (Ripsman *et al.*, 2016, p. 36). Therefore, the state's external behaviour is shaped the following systemic variables: relative distribution of power and its dynamics, various structural modifiers, clarity of the threats and the nature of a state's strategic environment, according to the imminence and magnitude of the threats and opportunities that states face (Ripsman *et al.*, 2016, pp. 40-56).

At the unit's level, the neoclassical realism defines the Foreign Policy Executive (FPE) as the main individuals with the capacity to influence the foreign and military conduct, having a monopoly over intelligence in the field (Ripsman *et al.*, 2016, p. 61). The lenses between the systemic stimuli and the state's behaviour are leaders' images, strategic culture, the nature of state-society relations and domestic institutions (Ripsman *et al.*, 2016, pp. 60-79).

Complementing the general neoclassical realist approach, the model of resource extractive state proposed by Jeffrey W. Taliaferro offers a more clear view of the internal dynamic. The leaders' perceptions of the relative power and intentions of other states are instrumental in choosing certain types of foreign policy strategies. The national elites decide in matters of foreign policy according to their capacity to mobilise resources for answering the challenges of international system, dependent on institutional strength of the state, as well as leaders' ability to raise and maintain support for national security strategies (Taliaferro, 2006, pp. 486-489). Additionally, state-sponsored nationalism and ideology can increase the societal cohesion and further contribute to the ability of the leaders to mobilise resources (Taliaferro, 2006, p. 491).

Broader than liberalism and constructivism, neoclassical realism remains primarily a state centric theory, the differences between units' internal policymaking and their understanding of systemic stimuli being reflected in the foreign policy behaviour (Rose, 1998, p. 154; Ripsman *et al.*, 2016, p. 35).

1.2. European Union as a neoclassical realist subject

The EU is a complex actor, with a clear influence in the power dynamics at the international level, albeit its relative impact compared to other established actors is somewhat contested. Considered by some researchers as a *sui generis* actor (Ozoguz-Bolgi, 2013, p. 3), the EU aspires to have a global influence, which necessitates a greater foreign policy coordination (Duke and Vanhoonacker, 2017, p. 25).

The state-centric approach of realism does not seem suitable for the EU, a preponderantly intergovernmental organisation in terms of foreign policy, than a supranational one with a tendency towards federalisation. Nonetheless, the attempt to theorise the EU as a subject of a realist analysis is not new: André Barrinha (2016) analyses the process of the foreign policy strategy elaboration through a progressive realist approach, while Nicholas Ross Smith (2016) discusses the economic relations of EU with Ukraine from the perspective in neoclassical realism. In addition, Stefano Costelli (2009) applies the neoclassical realist approach in an analysis about the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership.

Despite its lack of a state-like structure, the EU seems to follow a coherent normative approach in all its partnership, thus proving difficult to employ a predominantly power-oriented approach such as realism. N. R. Smith argues, however, that the neighbourhood represents a place the EU follows geopolitical interests of stability, rather than exclusively normative ones (Smith, 2016, p. 31). Even the constructivists consider that the value-based approach of the EU is oriented towards the promotion of structural stability (Maurer and Simao, 2013, p. 95). The aim to establish itself as a reliable actor in the international system, forces the EU to focus on value-based policies can generate structural gains, such as economic resources or prestige.

Therefore, I consider that the geopolitical interests of the EU extend also to Central Asia, even if this region is not an immediate neighbour. However, given the power interplay in the region and its energy resources much needed by the EU and its member states, Central Asia is a needed asset for increasing the authority of the EU at the international level, while maintaining the interest of the member states. The promotion of a specific strategy for Central Asia, aiming at implementing various normative goals, aims at maintaining a security stable region, which otherwise would spill-over in the immediate neighbourhood the EU, while also working towards ensuring energy security (Pop, 2017, p. 114).

The adoption of Lisbon Treaty aims at creating a more democratic and coherent approach to the foreign policy, while ensuring a continuation of the value-based initiatives (Maurer and Simao, 2013, p. 96). The EU reform coupled with the present changing nature of diplomacy mean a broader scope of the European diplomacy as well as the engagement of traditional and non-traditional actors in one's actor foreign policy definition (Smith, 2015, p. 13).

The Lisbon Treaty provides for a certain amount of consolidation in the foreign policy of the EU, while maintaining the intergovernmental decision-making. Nevertheless, this resulted in a more structured institutional form, with a High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy bridging together the European Commission and the Council of the EU (Maurer and Simao, 2013, pp. 100-101).

The maintenance of the different levels of the EU foreign policy seem to diffuse the unity of the European goals, but there are examples when the various levels of decision-making were forged into a single message (Smith, 2015, p. 20). However, from a neoclassical realist perspective, the

process of consultation, information-sharing and debating represent the way through which the elites are making sense of the power dynamics in the international system. Even if the different actors involved have various opinions, for the EU the action taken is unitary and broad enough to correspond also to national interests (Smith, 2015, p. 21).

Considering the fact that the foreign policy is ultimately a national competence, the coordination of the European external presence depends mainly on the nature of state-society relations, as described by the neoclassical realist theory. The institutional framework of the EU allows for consultation between stakeholders, which broaden the views regarding the strategic environment and the necessary steps.

Having in mind the stringent migration crisis manifested on the Southern frontier, we can assume that the main promoter of stronger relations with Central Asia will be the European Commission, through the High Representative, probably supported by the Eastern countries, which retain bilateral interests and presence in the post-Soviet space. The Foreign Policy Executive will be mainly a bureaucratic one, evaluating the success of the previous framework of cooperation and, in the context of a rising China, will propose measures for deepening the EU cooperation with the region.

The relationships of the member states with Central Asian states have been relatively limited, with the notable exception of Germany that has an extensive cooperation, resulting from the presence of German diaspora. The member states' interest revolve mainly around security cooperation, determined by the military operations in the neighbouring Afghanistan. Nevertheless, the relatively weak participation of the member states in the region gives way for a single voice of the EU, as a unitary and more powerful actor to be present in the region, possibly raising to the standard imposed by the current power play in Central Asia.

Therefore, the question raised by the present paper points towards how much institutional and political capacity has the EU to mobilise resources for a common goal in Central Asia, given that the relatively weak involvement of the member states leaves space for manoeuvre. Without competing interests at internal level, the EU has the potential to act as a state in search of domestic support for strategic foreign policy goals, in a region where great powers have already a place of their own.

2. Central Asia – unity in diversity?

As a post-soviet region, Central Asia struggled with the globalised view of state-society relations, aiming at first to implement democracy and market economies (Emerson and Boonstra, 2010, p. 11). However, the main trigger of Soviet disintegration was nationalism and not democracy, as the minorities across the Soviet Union took advantage of the instruments offered by the

Gorbachev's reforms (Bingol, 2004, p. 44). The Soviet nationalities policy aimed at creating the *homo sovieticus*, but also at strengthening the national minorities as a tool for increasing their availability to communist influence (Buzan and Waever, 2003, p. 402; Cooley, 2012, p. 18).

The boundaries of Central Asia are as contested as its unity. From the point of view of the theory of regional complex of security, Central Asia is a part of the post-Soviet complex, dominated by Russia, but, as we shall analyse below, there are other great powers active in the region (Buzan and Waever, 2003, p. 397). Another perspective is that exactly the involvement of the external actors in the region defines Central Asia as a unitary region (Kavalski, 2010a, pp. 5-6). From the latter point of view, nowadays Central Asia is very different from the historical Central Asia, as there are now independent states whose sovereignty came from the dissolution of Soviet Union (Kavalski, 2010a, p. 6). Consequently, their post-1991 evolution was not based on a statehood conscience and was driven by the same elites as before (Cooley, 2012, p. 18). Moreover, the Central Asian states are exercising their abilities in a very utilitarian manner, in order to gain the most of every interaction by playing the card of regional identity (Laruelle, Factoring the foreign policy goals of the Central Asian states, 2015, p. 75).

Central Asia is a region mainly recognized for its rich energy resources, but the internal political landscape determined a different path for each country. The Tadjik civil war (1992-1997) served as a counterexample for the Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan and determined the rulers to strengthen their power grip (Emerson and Boonstra, 2010, p. 11). Regime survival became the main goal of the Central Asian ruling elites, with different grades of authoritarianism during the 1990s, ranging from a softer version in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to the hard one present in the closed regimes of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Bingol, 2004, p. 54; Emerson and Boonstra, 2010, p. 12; Cooley, 2012, p. 21).

The 2000s marked a political hardening, as the war on terrorism placed the Central Asian states at the centre of international interest, due to their closeness to Afghanistan. Additionally, the so-called coloured revolutions of the post-soviet states began to influence the local polities of Central Asia, contributing to the increased illiberalism of the heads of state (Emerson and Boonstra, 2010, p. 12; Buzan and Waever, 2003, p. 403).

Popular protests led to the dismissal of two presidents in 2005 and 2010, but it did not determine a consistent path to democratisation in Kyrgyzstan, while in Tadjikistan, the end of civil war brought about stability and democratic consensus. Turkmenistan experienced a power change in 2007, only after the death of the long-time ruler Saparmurat Niyazov in 2006, and Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov became a relatively more open president. Similarly, Uzbekistan experienced power change only after president Islam Karimov's death, when a more liberal Shavkat Mirziyoyev became president in 2016.

Kazakh president Nursultan Nazarbayev seems to enjoy the support of population, because of the economic success of the country.

The five Central Asian states face common challenges such as endemic corruption, socio-economic disparities, human rights violations, water issues, as well as the management of energy resources¹. Emilian Kavalski (2010a, p. 7) considers that Central Asia cannot be accounted for as a classical region with a shared identity and common values, but more as a region of common challenges without a shared identity, not even at national level in the Westphalian sense. Marlene Laruelle (2015, p. 77) notes that Central Asian states do not seek regionalism, but visibility at international level, by participating in various regional initiatives, without committing to their objectives.

A characteristic of the five Central Asian states is the multi-vectoral foreign policy, meaning they are building multiple bilateral relations, and their partners acknowledge this. However, only Kazakhstan seems to have built a positive multi-vectoral policy, playing in such a way so as not to antagonise the external partners. Turkmenistan, on the other side, declared itself neuter, isolating itself, while Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan gain significant advantages, both in security and economy, through the opposition of the great powers, only proving their internal instability (Laruelle, *Factoring the foreign policy goals of the Central Asian states*, 2015, p. 82).

The tensions between the political leaders have constantly hindered the possibilities of regional cooperation (Laruelle, *Factoring the foreign policy goals of the Central Asian states*, 2015, p. 82), but this seems to be changing recently, especially following the power change in Uzbekistan. Mirziyoyev follows the same strategies as his predecessor, but he is more concerned about the tactics, being more open to regional cooperation in identifying solutions for common problems (Weitz, 2018, p. 51).

As part of their quest to be recognized as autonomous actors, the Central Asian leaders – with the exception of Berdimuhamedov, represented by the Speaker of the Turkmen Parliament – gathered in Astana, at the invitation of Nazarbayev, on 15th March 2018. The meeting was deemed informal and received little publicity, but resulted in a Declaration, which highlighted the regional solidarity and broad engagement to cooperate on various topics of common interest. The summit highlights the commitment of the leaders, as the Central Asian internal policies are still driven by personal views, marking a concrete step towards regionalisation, as I discussed elsewhere (Anghelescu, 2018). However, the little awareness surrounding the discussions suggest that the protagonists are not yet

¹ For a more comprehensive discussion on the internal policy problems common across the Central Asia region, see Emerson and Boonstra, 2010, pp. 11-36.

fully prepared to challenge the involvement of the great actors in their regional issues (Anghelescu, 2018; Ng, 2018).

The many challenges faced by the Central Asian states stem from their regional positioning, at the crossroads of the influence of great actors, as well as from their common political path in the context of globalisation. However, due to a complex of changes both at internal level, as well as in the dynamics at the international level, the region seems to raise above its limit as a playground of the great powers and tries to construct a common political identity of goals and deeds.

3. Power play in Central Asia – the great actors in the region

Following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, Central Asia became interesting again for the great powers and came under global scrutiny. All this renewed interest in the dynamics of the five post-soviet republics – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan – recalled the "Great Game" of the 19th century – a power play between the British and Tsarist Empires which was branded as such by Rudyard Kipling. However, as many researchers highlight, the present dynamics of the region are not a replay of the 19th century power struggle, because, while the great actors are still actively involved in the region, the Central Asian ruling elites are trying to impose their own local rule (Romanowski, 2016, p. 5; Cooley, 2012, pp. 4-5; Kavalski, 2010a, p. 9).

Even if nowadays the Central Asian republics are autonomous states, the great powers are still aiming at influencing the regional dynamic in a concurrent manner, which reinforces their multi-vectoral foreign policy, especially the negative side of it. The process known as *hegemonic fragmentation* (Kavalski, 2010a, p. 19) allows the five states to have a reasonably equal regional stance, preserving the stability through a stable balance of power.

The main reason determining the active involvement of the foreign actors in Central Asia is the security issue. As neighbours to Afghanistan and some of them being themselves relatively weak states, the United States, Russia, China and India are more or less preoccupied with the security of the region.

The United States entered Central Asia landscape mainly after 9/11 as part of the war on terrorism, when Washington established a security cooperation especially on a bilateral basis with each of the five republics. However, the success of the American measures is debatable, as the local leaders used the opposition with Russia and China to increase their benefits, while lowering the US demands (Cooley, 2012, p. 49). The precedence given to the US security interests in this bilateral relation, as well as the relatively low attention granted to local needs decreased the chances of

successful cooperation for other institutional actors associated with the United States, such as World Trade Organisation or NATO (Fumagali, 2010, p. 188).

Russian presence in Central Asia was taken for granted during the 90s, when Kremlin did not propose a concrete policy and even tried to separate itself from the region that reminded of the Soviet past (Laruelle, 2010, p. 155). The domestic changes in Russia at the turn of the century determined a renewed interest for the region, as a quest for re-establishing the great power status of Russia under Vladimir Putin's rule. The main interests in the region revolve around energy resources, which Russian companies seek to fully control, and the regional security, expressed through the creation of institutional frameworks resembling the Western ones (Laruelle, 2010, pp. 162-167). In addition to hard power measures, Russia also plays the card of soft power through economic ties and cultural cooperation, but it is argued that everything was just a reaction to the rise of other actors (Cooley, 2012, p. 72).

China's engagement with Central Asia represents just a short glimpse into the greater Chinese strategy of *peaceful rise*, which promoted regional cooperation and the avoidance of conflict with other great powers (Clarke, 2010, p. 120). By convincing the partners of the mutual beneficial relations, China sought to establish itself as an alternative to Russia and the United States, first by creating a strong and active institutional framework of cooperation – Shanghai Cooperation Organization (Clarke, 2010, p. 133; Cooley, 2012, p. 75). In 2013, the Chinese President launched the *One Belt, One Road* initiative, later rebranded as *Belt and Road Initiative* (BRI), a foreign policy concept aiming at restoring a new Silk Road through various fields of cooperation: political, economic, financial and infrastructural, as well as through people-to-people contacts. China aims at convincing its partners to support Beijing's initiatives in the international arena, as well as creating an awareness of the Chinese soft power across the region (Laruelle, 2018, p. xi).

Turkey is also seeking to have a place in the Central Asian affairs, by playing the cards of a common pan-Turkic identity with little success (Sasley, 2010, p. 209). Iran is interested in economic and political cooperation, without aiming at becoming a hegemonic partner, but a regional actor not limited by the Western pressures (Pahlavi and Hojati, 2010, p. 225). India designed a *Look North* policy, proving a strategic will limited by little influence due to the domestic limitation (Kavalski, 2010b, p. 257), but recently emerging as a partner for China in the region.

Central Asia has become a region where international actors are interested to have a say, because of security reasons, or because of the resources the landlocked region brings. By becoming a “window into the multipolar world” (Cooley, 2012, p. 11), Central Asia cannot be the subject of the traditional approaches of the great powers, as the regional needs and domestic views have to be taken into account. From a neoclassical realist perspective, the international subsystem of Central Asia is

relatively clear, the nature of threats to the EU presence in the region being preponderantly economic raised from the increasing presence of China. Consequently, the EU has to adapt its policy in order to respond better to its internal need for greater global actorness, while balancing the Chinese rise.

4. European Union – a strategy for a new partner for Central Asia in the 21st century

In 2007, following a scattered bilateral cooperation, the EU, at the initiative of Germany, adopted a Strategy for cooperation with the Central Asian countries. During the 90s, the EU supported the development of commerce and investments in this region, providing assistance in the transition from centralised to market economy, through the creation of small and medium enterprises. Additionally, in terms of infrastructure and transports, the EU invested in the Transport Corridor Europe Caucasus Asia (TRACECA), with the aim of developing the regional connectivity and reducing the poverty (Mori, 2016, p. 11).

The reasoning behind the adoption of the 2007 Strategy was based first and foremost on the regional security problems, in view of the Afghanistan war, complemented with the EU's interest for the diversification of its energy sources, following the Russo-Ukrainian tensions of 2006 (Council of the European Union, 2009, p. 10; Emerson and Boonstra, 2010, p. 9). The Strategy focuses on seven priority areas for a comprehensive partnership: democratisation, human rights and rule of law; youth and education; economic development, commerce and investments; energy and transport; environmental and water sustainability; common threats, as well as intercultural dialogue (Council of the European Union, 2007, p. 2).

The financial assistance offered through the Strategy for 2007-2013 was pledged to a double amount compared to the previous period of cooperation (Council of the European Union, 2007, p. 3), reaching 750 million euro for three main objectives: stability/security, poverty reduction, and regional cooperation (Peyrouse, 2017, p. 2017). For the 2014-2020 period, the funding allocated by the EU for bilateral and regional cooperation was increased by 56%, raising to over 1 billion euro (Council of the European Union, 2015, p. 4). The money were allocated according to country priorities, with the notable exception of Kazakhstan, which cannot receive funding because of its economic development. The areas of investment were defined as follows: Kyrgyzstan – rule of law, education and rural development; Tajikistan – education, health and rural development; Uzbekistan – rural development and Turkmenistan – education (Directorate General for External Policies, Policy Department, 2016, p. 9).

The cooperation with international financial institutions was highlighted as a priority in the Strategy, as the World Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development and European Investment Bank could support the EU initiatives in the region (Council of the European Union, 2007, p. 6).

Institutionally, the Strategy aims at direct cooperation with other international organisations, to be read *western organisations*, such as UN, OSCE, NATO or Council of Europe (Council of the European Union, 2007, p. 5). However, the EU could not ignore the power interplay in Central Asia, acknowledging the regional cooperation initiatives sponsored by Russia (Collective Security Treaty Organisation and Eurasian Economic Community) or China (Shanghai Cooperation Organisation and Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation - CAREC) (Council of the European Union, 2007, p. 6). Additionally, the EU named a special representative for Central Asia, a fact that encouraged the development of periodic bilateral dialogues in various domains, as well as the cooperation with relevant institutions of member states (Council of the European Union, 2007, pp. 5-6). Specifically, the EU established a series of objectives of regional cooperation with the aim of increasing the socialisation and norm transfer. It promoted activities such as regular political dialogue, creation of a European Education Initiative, an EU Rule of Law Initiative and the development of an *e-silk-highway*, as well as a Human Rights Dialogue and energy dialogue on a bilateral basis (Council of the European Union, 2007, p. 3).

Researchers consider the 2007 Strategy an expression of a political vision comprising some broad aims, in need of a rigorous plan of actions to attract the participation of member states that do not consider Central Asia as a political priority (Boonstra, 2015, p. 1). However, from a neoclassical realist perspective, the absence of many actors interested in Central Asia at the level of EU allows Brussels to construct a unitary vision and implement it in a multilateral approach. On the other hand, the lack of interest among the member states for Central Asia may translate in a lack of support for the EU Strategy, as they are not ready to mobilise resources for a remote region while confronting more stringent needs at home or in the near abroad. Overall, everything depends of how the EU manages to mobilise the support of the member states in its relations with a region with high potential.

5. Lessons for the future of EU-Central Asia cooperation

In 2019, the EU will launch a new Strategy for Central Asia, which has to take into account the increasing struggle present in Central Asia, as already discussed, along with the internal challenges faced by the EU itself. The reforms envisaged by different leaders of the EU point to the need for increased coordination among the member states and the necessity to the raise to the standard of a global power constantly predicated in the international arena.

In order to do so, I will continue by reviewing the EU Strategy for Central Asia from 2007 through a SWOT analysis. The strengths and weaknesses of the Strategy are synthesized mainly from the conclusions of many progress reports elaborated both by the EU and by independent experts (Council of the European Union, 2008; Council of the European Union, 2010; Emerson and Boonstra, 2010; Council of the European Union, 2012; Pirro, 2013; Council of the European Union, 2015; Boonstra, 2015; Peyrouse, 2017). However, the threats and opportunities are discussed in the following section as lessons for the future planning of the Strategy, being elements that take into account the strategic environment of Central Asia as discussed in previous sections.

The EU identified in the first years of bilateral cooperation some priority areas, which are now further developed in the measures undertaken in the Strategy. The advantage provided by the span of initiatives is that the EU has created many channels through which to influence the strategic culture of the Central Asian leaders and experts in order to implement reforms. The successive reviews of the Strategy further strengthened the European vision for the region, by better operationalising the goals of cooperation and clarifying the specific actions to be taken.

However, the downfall of so many topics of cooperation results in difficulties in implementing result-oriented activities and the fulfilment of the proposed goals. This is especially true in the context of more sensitive areas of cooperation, such as rule of law and human rights, where the regional data show little improvement in the past years.

Moreover, the EU was keen to develop cooperation beyond the traditional areas of security and energy, where other main actors were present. To this end, the EU attempted at projecting its normative power in the region, through value-based initiatives (education, civil society and mass-media promotion) and civil operations (border management, drug trafficking). The main instruments used were the technical assistance projects, which provided training for local experts and access to the European *modus operandi* in the matter. The Central Asian countries were eager to develop cooperation especially in the fields of education and water management, as they considered the EU a standard and a model to follow.

Nonetheless, this development was coupled with little visibility for the EU in the region; therefore, the mainly political cooperation in these areas resulted in a lack of real impact in the society and on the states. One of the major weaknesses of the EU in the region remains the delocalisation of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia and the limited staffing of the EU Delegations that do not cover the entire region. Despite the search for a unitary voice of the EU in the region, the involvement of the Member States is crucial for the success of the Strategy, as they can provide technical assistance in the domains of national competence. Perceived as non-priority region, the cooperation with Central Asia lacks coordination between the member states national interests and

the European ones. Nonetheless, the last years saw an increase in the involvement of the national states in the implementation of European projects.

Another strength of the Strategy and of the EU as a unitary actor is the capacity to mobilise financial resources for the implementation of the activities. Throughout the past decade, the budget allocated specifically for Central Asia doubled and the amount allocated through other already established European programs (such as Erasmus, EIDHR etc.) significantly increased.

On the other hand, due to the limited presence of the EU on the field, the constant travelling of the experts and especially of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia from Brussels raises questions about the budgetary allocations. Other critics suggest that the money spent on the local projects are not transparently monitored, which, coupled with the lack of progress on democratisation, results in little impact on the civil society.

As noted above the main strengths of the Central Asian Strategy of the EU derive from its potential to impact different levels and domains, ambition met with increased financial resources. However, the challenges stem from the little capacity of the EU leaders to mobilise the political will of the member states to contribute the general vision with national projects.

The implementation of the 2007 Strategy for Central Asia showed the difficulty EU faces in maintaining its presence in the region, while also coordinating the activities of the member states. The EU is a less visible actor in the region and, despite the preponderant optimistic tone of the four Progress Reports (2008, 2010, 2012 and 2015), the concrete results are lacking, mainly because the objectives are too broad, while the means are too narrow (Peyrouse, 2017, p. 3).

One of the main threats that the EU has to face is a lack of concrete goals of cooperation and the long-term view for the initiatives launched, which translates in little progress and minimum visibility in the society. The significantly political dialogue has its merits in creating a regional community in Central Asia, but also lacks a more pragmatic side of cooperation through which to involve the whole region.

Bearing in mind that many actors are trying to be present in Central Asia, the EU is faced with the opportunity of working towards identifying niche domains, where it can truly contribute. The niche initiatives should be implemented in short periods, with specific objectives, easily traceable and monitored by independent bodies. Through the knowledge gained in the past decade of interaction, the EU can identify no more than 3 areas of regional cooperation to work on in the next 7 years Multiannual Financial Framework, in order to facilitate a loose integration of the five countries in fields of common interest. Given the previous success of the thematic cooperation, education, water management and border management can be considered.

The continual rise of China in the region is a major threat to the EU presence, especially in the context of the lack of visibility and understanding of the European instruments. Even if the EU is one of the biggest trade partners and donors in the region, there is a need for local activities aimed not only at promoting the opportunities of education in Europe (as previously done), but also of a constructive dialogue with the communities.

To this end, the EU has the opportunity to establish university branches in Central Asian cities, following the examples of Russia and the United States, promoting the European training programmes and the understanding of the EU functioning. Additionally, in the context of the Erasmus+ reform, the EU can design a section for scholarship funding in priority areas, where Central Asian citizens (students and experts) are allowed to participate. Considering the fact that EU is trying to change mentalities, education is the first domain of investment. Moreover, given the need for a better understanding and planning at the EU and member states level, the EU can support the creation of Central Asia Research Centres in European universities.

Ultimately, the EU is faced with a difficult choice of engaging the foreign great powers in its regional cooperation. In a recent interview, the President of the European Commission, Jean-Claude Juncker stated that the rhetoric of the Cold War is not productive and, while the EU faces challenges to its global standing, "There is no security agenda for Europe without Russia" (de la Baume, 2018). Moreover, the recent success of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative in Africa shows the need of engagement between West, in particular the EU, and China, especially due to the limited aid provided by the West and the numerous conditions attached to it (Morgan, 2018).

Conclusions

The power dynamics in a globalised world are changing the way relevant international actors develop and implement their strategies. However, these dynamics cannot be accounted for in the foreign policy acts without an understanding of the internal dynamics at the level of the international actors, with the EU being no exception to this.

The neoclassical realist analysis of the multipolar dynamic of power in Central Asia provides an insight in the challenges the EU has to face in order to (re-)establish itself as a global actor. The implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia shows, in a nutshell, the fact that the EU is a very ambitious actor, aiming at influencing mainly through normative instruments geopolitical regions. However, the EU goals remain vague and general, while the impact is limited, which further erodes the EU presence in the region.

Therefore, my analysis highlights the need of engagement between the EU and the other actors active in Central Asia, especially Russia and China, creating an integrating vision for the benefit of the region. Nonetheless, this idealistic perspective should not shadow the pragmatic approach to the EU external action, with a need for less areas of cooperation in the medium term.

The development of a unitary strategy, which aims at gathering the support of the member states, while also delivering an autonomous stance to the EU, remains an unfulfilled goal. The neoclassical realist approach proposed in this paper offers a view on the structural dynamic that influences the EU political agenda.

The consolidation of the foreign policy of the EU following the adoption of the Lisbon treaty increased the coherence and the legitimacy of the positions adopted by the EU on certain matters. However, the EU has struggles in establishing its authority in Central Asia through the promotion of collaboration, given the difficulties in achieving common positions among its own member states, aspect highlighted also in the neoclassical realist analysis of the EU.

Brussels pushed for the development of civil society and of consultation mechanisms in Central Asia, which shows a common ground achieved at the EU level, thus enabling a more coherent approach. However, the limited success of such measures in the region demonstrate that international dynamics of power are stronger than the need for legitimacy. The neoclassical realist theory highlights exactly this: the national decision-makers firstly take into account the structure of the system, which is then filtered through various national stakeholders, according to their level of influence.

The research underlined the fact that the EU should focus on a narrower agenda, the most effective policy being that of niche diplomacy. Given the American fatigue in the region, the EU has a clear path for a stronger educational presence, especially considering the de-russification policy adopted the five Central Asian states. Additionally, the structure of the international system demonstrate a predisposition for the movement of people, therefore the EU should proceed by enhancing the opportunities for the mobility of Central Asian, mainly a young population. Possible niches to be explored by the EU should not include only educational and research mobilities, but also touristic facilities for mobility, as well as civil society mobility. Without eliminating the political and security dialogue, the EU can achieve more authority among its member states by offering opportunities for developing bilateral relations in Central Asia, while increasing its autonomy in dealing with more resource consuming and rewarding policies.

The present paper aimed at offering a different perspective on the EU-Central Asia relation, by analysing the capacity of the EU to establish itself as a unitary actor. By using the neoclassical realist approach, my research took into account not only the internal processes leading to a common European stance, but also the structural causes determining the degree of success of certain policies.

Considering the elements proposed in the neoclassical realist theory, the EU is working towards becoming a more coherent actor in Central Asia, maintaining however, a low level of resource mobilisation, which determines limited responses from the five partner countries. All these elements indicate the difficulty of the EU to become the credible global actor it aims to be.

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