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**Perceptions of the EU in Central Asia:
A Comparative Study of Media Discourse
in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan**

1. Introduction: EU-Central Asia relations

The European Union has increasingly become a significant player in international affairs, extending its influence beyond its member states to regions across the globe. Central Asia, with its strategic location and abundant resources, has garnered attention from various external actors seeking to enhance their engagement in the region.¹ Comprising Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, Central Asia has historically served as a vital crossroads connecting Europe and Asia in terms of energy, trade, and infrastructure. However, in the immediate aftermath of the Soviet Union's collapse, which granted independence to the states, both regional and external powers paid little attention to the region. Nonetheless, over the past two decades, Central Asia has gradually emerged as a prominent player in Eurasian geopolitics. Russia, the United States, China, the European Union, and other regional powers are all striving to maintain and strengthen their positions in the region, albeit from different starting points. Even after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Central Asian states remained politically and economically tied to Russia. This is due to the prevalence of the Russian language, media, and the significant movement of goods and people between Russia and Central Asia, which positions Moscow as the key external actor in the region.² China's influence, on the other hand, stems primarily from its aid, trade, and development programs with Central Asian countries.³ Meanwhile, the EU's normative power in the region is less

¹ COOLEY, Alexander: *Great games, local rules. The new great power contest in Central Asia*. Oxford University Press, New York, 2012. 5.

² JURAEV, Shairbek: Comparing the EU and Russia engagements in Central Asia. *L'Europe en Formation* 4 (2014) 78.

³ BOSSUYT, Fabienne: The EU's and China's development assistance towards Central Asia: low versus contested impact. *Eurasian Geography and Economics* (2019) 11.

visible. Central Asian states, in their pursuit of foreign policy equilibrium and the development of “multi-vector” strategies, have attempted to balance their options after gaining independence.

This year is the 30th anniversary of diplomatic relations between the EU and Central Asian countries. The EU first established diplomatic contacts with Central Asian countries in early 1993, and its initial regional delegation was opened in Almaty, Kazakhstan. The EU’s expansion towards the East in 2004, strategic location, the 9/11 terrorist attacks, and the “war on terror” in Afghanistan, coupled with its growing energy interests in the region, further elevated the importance of Central Asia in Brussels’ perspective. Consequently, in 2007, the EU launched its Strategy for a New Partnership with Central Asia, aiming to usher in a new era of EU engagement with the region. This strategy, known as the 2007 EU-Central Asia Strategy, was adopted during Germany’s EU presidency and was primarily associated with the interests of that country in the region.⁴ However, this document faced substantial criticism for treating Central Asia as a homogeneous entity and disregarding the specific characteristics of individual countries, rendering it abstract and ineffective. Consequently, in June 2017, the EU Council initiated preparations for a new strategy which adopted in 2019, taking a different approach by actively involving Central Asian partners in the process.⁵ In the words of Peter Burian, the former EU Special Representative for Central Asia, the EU aimed to understand the partners’ own priorities, needs, challenges, and their perception of the EU’s role in addressing regional issues.⁶

Research on the external perception of the EU contributes to understanding whether the EU’s partners share its vision of global challenges and solutions. Examining external images of the Union helps gauge the degree of acceptance of the EU’s self-representation as “a global player... ready to share in the responsibility for global security and in building a better world”.⁷ Furthermore, a positive assessment of the EU as an international player enhances its legitimacy in world politics and increases the effectiveness of its policies and actions. Lucarelli and Fioramonti emphasize that how the EU is perceived by other countries directly impacts its success as a player on the international stage, implying a correlation between the EU’s image and the acceptance of its policies.⁸ Recently, Larsen highlighted another crucial dimension of research on the EU’s perception in the world, suggesting that such studies provide insights into whether the EU can be considered

⁴ VOLOSHIN, Georgiy: *The European Union’s normative power in Central Asia. Promoting values and defending interests*. Palgrave Macmillan, Houndmills, 2014. 49.

⁵ General Secretariat of the Council: *Council Conclusions on the EU Strategy for Central Asia*. 2017. 6. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/23991/st10387en17-conclusions-on-the-eu-strategyfor-central-asia.pdf> (2023.05.10.)

⁶ HEINECKE, Susann: EU – Central Asia Relations. New Opportunities for A Stronger Partnership? Interview with Peter Burian. *EUCACIS in Brief*9 (2019) 7.

⁷ Council of the European Union: *A secure Europe in a better world. European security strategy*. Brussels, 2009. 28. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/30823/qc7809568enc.pdf> (2023.05.15.)

⁸ LUCARELLI, Sonia – FIARAMONTI, Lorenzo: *External perceptions of the European Union as a global actor*. Routledge, London, 2010.

a normative power.⁹ In one of his last papers, Zhanibek Arynov argues that what “kind of actor the EU can be in the region and the kind of policies it can successfully implement depends not only on its abilities as international actor and resources at its disposal, but also on what kind of actor Central Asians perceive the Union to be.”¹⁰

In recent years, there has been increasing scholarly interest in the external perception of the EU. Researchers have delved into questions concerning how the EU’s partners evaluate its position and influence in global politics. Holland and Chaban conducted groundbreaking research on the image of the EU beyond Europe, with a particular emphasis on the Asia Pacific region.¹¹ While research on the EU’s image has predominantly focused on the Union’s public, mass media, and elite perceptions in partner countries, certain regions and states have remained neglected, and Central Asia is one such region. The limited research interest can be attributed to the relatively low economic profile of Central Asian countries as EU trading partners. However, the EU has consistently made efforts to become a more visible and significant actor in the region since 2001, alongside Russia, China, and the United States.¹² Given the EU’s commitment to engage with the region, investigating the perception of the EU in Central Asia contributes to expanding knowledge of the EU’s image in this often-overlooked region. It also provides an avenue for exploring the correlation between the EU’s image and the effectiveness of its policies.

Previous research on EU-Central Asia relations has primarily focused on topics such as the rivalry of great powers in Central Asia,¹³ the implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia,¹⁴ and the EU’s promotion of democracy, human rights, and the rule of law in

⁹ LARSEN, Henrik: The EU as a normative power and the research on external perceptions: The missing link. *JCMS: Journal of Common Market Studies* 52, no. 4. (2014) 897.

¹⁰ ARYNOV, Zhanibek: *Global Giant, Regional Dwarf? Perceptions of EU Actorness in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan*. In: Freire, Maria Raquel (ed.): *EU Global Actorness in a World of Contested Leadership. Policies, Instruments and Perceptions*. Springer, Cham, 2022. 186.

¹¹ CHABAN, Natalia – HOLLAND, Martin: *The European Union and the Asia-Pacific: media, public and elite perceptions of the EU*. Routledge, Abingdon, 2011.

¹² FRASER, Cameron: The Policies of the European Union and Russia Towards Central Asia. *ICBSS Xenophon Paper* 8 (2009) 1–89.; DE PEDRO, Nicolas: *The EU in Central Asia: Incentives and constraints for greater engagement*. In: De Pedro, N. – Esteban, M. (eds.): *Great powers and regional integration in Central Asia: A local perspective*. Exilibris Ediciones, Madrid, 2009. 113-135.

¹³ BOSSUYT, Fabienne – BOLGOVA, Irina: *Connecting Eurasia. is cooperation between Russia, China, and the EU in Central Asia possible?* In: Lagutina, M. L. (ed.): *Regional integration and future cooperation initiatives in the Eurasian Economic Union*. Knowledge, Hershey, 2020. 234-250.; SAMOKHVALOV, Vsevolod: Russia and its shared neighbourhoods: a comparative analysis of Russia-EU and Russia-China relations in the EU’s Eastern neighbourhood and Central Asia. *Contemporary Politics* vol. 24, no. 1. (2018) 30-45.

¹⁴ VASA László: The European Union Strategy on Central Asia. Out of game? *Romanian journal of European affairs* vol. 20, no. 2. (2022) 120-130.; ZHARMAKHANOVA, Zh – MARCOS, Antonio Alonso: New EU strategy for Central Asia: barriers for its successful implementation. *Вестник КазНУ. Серия международные отношения и международное право. Bulletin of KazNU. Series International Relations and International Law* vol. 98, no. 2. (2022) 70-77.

the region.¹⁵ However, there has been limited research on the EU's perception in Central Asia. Some studies have examined the EU's perception as a neutral and benevolent actor based on interviews with government officials from several Central Asian countries,¹⁶ while others have explored public opinion on foreign partners through surveys.¹⁷ Additionally, studies have explored the EU's perception among Central Asian elites.¹⁸

Understanding how the EU is perceived in Central Asia is crucial for comprehending the dynamics of its relations with the countries in this region. This article focuses specifically on Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, two key countries in Central Asia, and investigates the mass media's perceptions of the EU within these nations. Both nations have distinct historical, cultural, and geopolitical contexts that shape their interactions with the EU. Kazakhstan, as the largest economy in Central Asia, has witnessed substantial economic growth in recent years. The EU has been actively involved in the country's development, promoting economic cooperation, trade, and investment. Tajikistan, on the other hand, faces security concerns from Afghanistan as it shares a common border.

The media plays a critical role in shaping public opinion and influencing narratives. Examining media discourse provides valuable insights into the perceptions and attitudes of societies towards external actors. The paper's main objective is to identify and compare the dominant narratives surrounding the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. While both countries share some common perceptions of the EU, there are notable differences in the way the EU is portrayed in the media, reflecting their distinct contexts and priorities. For example, in Kazakhstan, the EU is often associated with economic cooperation and modernization, while in Tajikistan, it is seen more in the context of security and stability. The research was guided by the following research questions: How is the EU portrayed in the media discourse of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan? What are the dominant themes and narratives surrounding the EU's role in Central Asia? How do the media perceptions of the EU differ between Kazakhstan and Tajikistan? The selected time frame for the analysis encompassed news articles from June 2019 to May 2023. This time frame was chosen to capture a significant period during which the EU updated its strategy towards Central Asia and entered a new phase of relationship with the region. The year 2019 marked the launch of the new EU Strategy on Central Asia, emphasizing enhanced engagement and cooperation, and May 2023, simply the time which data collection started for this research paper.

¹⁵ CRAWFORD, Gordon: EU human rights and democracy promotion in Central Asia: From Lofty principles to Lowly self-interests. *Perspectives on European Politics and Society* vol. 9, no. 2. (2008) 172-191.; HOFFMANN, Katharina: The EU in Central Asia: successful good governance promotion? *Third World Quarterly* vol. 31, no. 1. (2010) 87-103.

¹⁶ BOSSUYT, Fabienne: *The EU's Transnational Power Over Central Asia. Developing and Applying a Structurally Integrative Framework to the Study of the EU's Power Over Central Asia*. PhD dissertation, Aston University, Birmingham, 2010.

¹⁷ CHERNYKH, Irina: *Foreign policy preferences of Kazakhstan citizens* (based on social survey in 2010). In: Sultanov, B. (ed.): *Economic and political cooperation of Kazakhstan and Russia (1991–2011). State and perspectives*. KISI, Almaty, 2011. 122-130.

¹⁸ PEYROUSE, Sebastien: How does Central Asia view the EU. *EUCAM Working Paper* 18 (2014) 1–12.

In the following sections, this paper will present the methodology employed for the analysis, discuss the main findings, and offer a comprehensive analysis of the media's perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The paper aims to contribute to a nuanced understanding of the perceptions and narratives surrounding the EU in Central Asia and facilitate informed discussions on the future of EU-Central Asia relations.

2. Methodology of Research

This research employed a qualitative and quantitative content analysis to investigate the perceptions of the EU in Central Asia, specifically focusing on Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. Content analysis was chosen as a systematic and objective approach to analyze textual data, making it well-suited for examining media discourse. The qualitative research methodology utilized a combination of keyword search and discourse analysis to provide a comprehensive analysis of media perceptions surrounding the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

The first step of the methodology involved selecting major newspapers in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan to ensure a diverse representation of media outlets in terms of political orientation, language, and periodicity. Four newspapers were chosen for analysis: *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and *Vremya* in Kazakhstan, and *Jumhuriyat* and *AsiaPlus* in Tajikistan. The selection criteria included political orientations, languages in which they were published, and daily periodicity. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, known for its pro-governmental stance, was chosen to provide insights into the prevailing political orientation in Kazakhstan. *Vremya*, a neutral newspaper, was included to provide a broader perspective on the EU's perception in the country. In Tajikistan, *Jumhuriyat*, a pro-governmental newspaper, was selected to capture the dominant political narrative regarding the EU, while *AsiaPlus*, known for its neutral reporting, was included to offer a balanced view. (Table 1) By collecting data from newspapers representing different political orientations and languages in both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, this study ensures a comprehensive analysis of media discourse on the EU in Central Asia.

Table 1: Selected newspapers from Kazakhstan and Tajikistan

	Newspapers	Political Orientation	Language	Periodicity
Kazakhstan	Kazakhstanskaya Pravda	Pro -Governmental	Russian	Daily
	Vremya	Neutral	Russian	Daily
Tajikistan	Jumhuriyat	Pro-Governmental	Tajik	Daily
	AsiaPlus	Neutral	Russian/Tajik	Daily

Source: Table created by author.

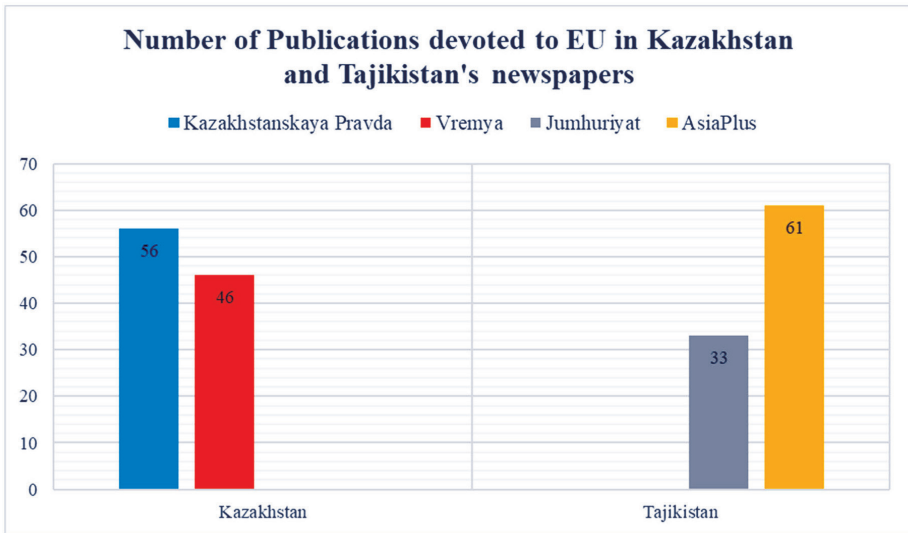
The content analysis focused on key indicators of perception, including the language used to describe the EU, the context in which the EU was mentioned, and the overall sentiment expressed towards the EU. These indicators facilitated the categorization of the articles, enabling a systematic and objective analysis of media perceptions. The data obtained through the keyword search and content analysis were interpreted to answer the research questions and provide insights into media perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

2.1. Data Collection

The data collection process involved gathering articles from selected major newspapers in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan that mentioned or discussed the EU. The initial stage of the methodology consisted of conducting a keyword search within these newspapers to identify articles relevant to the EU within a specified time frame. This ensured the inclusion of articles pertinent to further analysis. Key search terms for data collection of EU-related articles included “European Union,” “European Commission,” “European Parliament,” “European Court of Justice,” “European Central Bank,” “European Presidency,” “Council of the European Union,” “Eurozone,” and “Euro.” These terms and their variations and acronyms were utilized in Russian and Tajik languages.

The data collection process involved obtaining a substantial number of news reports and periodical articles from these newspapers. A total of 56 articles from *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and 46 articles from *Vremya* were collected for analysis in Kazakhstan. In Tajikistan, 33 articles from *Jumhuriyat* and 61 articles from *AsiaPlus* were collected for analysis. (Figure 1)

Figure 1: Number of publications devoted to EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan’s newspapers.



Source: collected by author from newspapers.

2.2. Data Analysis

The subsequent stage of the research involved a systematic analysis of the collected articles, focusing on key indicators of perception such as language usage, contextual references, and overall sentiment expressed towards the EU. By categorizing the articles based on these indicators, a comprehensive examination of media perceptions was facilitated. The following steps were taken during the data analysis process:

Categorization: The articles were carefully read and categorized based on the main themes and messages related to the EU. This process involved identifying key descriptors, perspectives, and any explicit or implicit evaluations of the EU's role in the region. The categorization aimed to capture both positive and negative perceptions, ensuring a comprehensive analysis.

Comparative Analysis: The data from each newspaper in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan were compared to identify similarities and differences in media perceptions. This comparison involved examining the frequency and distribution of key themes across the newspapers to identify patterns or divergences.

Identification of Dominant Narratives: Through the comparative analysis, the dominant narratives surrounding the EU in each country's media discourse were identified. This step involved recognizing overarching portrayals of the EU and any consistent themes or messages that emerged across the newspapers.

Interpretation and Findings: The findings from the data analysis were interpreted in light of the research objectives and existing literature on EU-Central Asia relations. These interpretations aimed to provide insights into the media's perception of the EU, including its portrayal as an economic powerhouse, security partner, and humanitarian aid supporter.

3. Analyzing EU perceptions in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan's mass media

This section presents the findings of the content analysis conducted on major newspapers in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, providing valuable insights into the media discourse on the EU in Central Asia. Through an analysis of the breakdown of publications by topics, the tone of coverage, and the emphasized areas of cooperation, a comprehensive understanding of the portrayed perceptions and priorities in the media is achieved. The data collected and analyzed in this part of the paper serve to enhance the understanding of the EU's image in Central Asia. The figures provided below offer visual representations of the percentage of cooperation in various areas, the tone of coverage, and the distribution of publications by topics. These figures aid in comparing different cases and facilitate a clearer comprehension of the media's portrayal of the EU in the region. It is important to note that some articles address multiple sectors simultaneously, such as those covering both security and economic news. Therefore, the percentages were calculated to reflect the combined coverage of multiple topics.

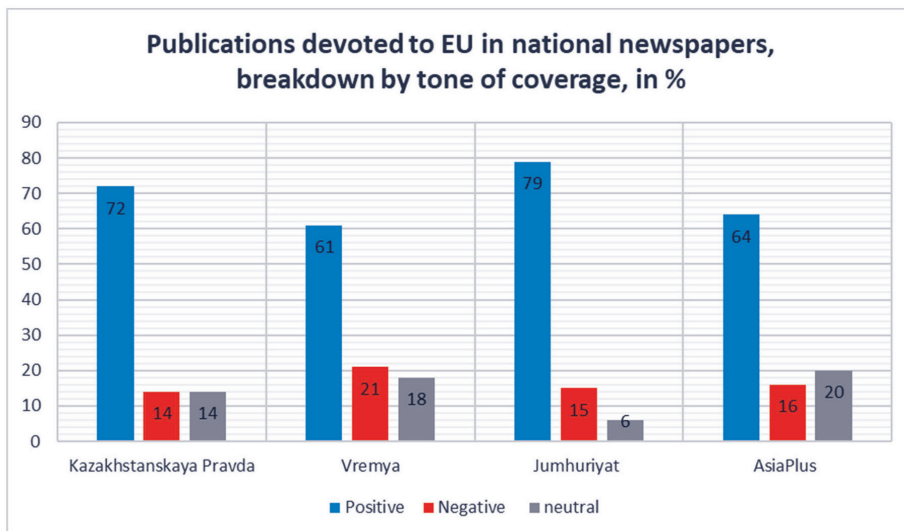
The first subpart focuses on the analysis of the tone of coverage. It provides insights into the overall sentiment expressed towards the EU in the media of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. This assessment offers valuable information about the general perception and portrayal of the EU, indicating whether the coverage tends to be positive, negative, or neutral. The breakdown of publications by topics reveals the specific areas of focus in the media's coverage of the EU, analyzed in both countries' media. This analysis highlights the level of attention given to bilateral relations between the EU and Kazakhstan/Tajikistan, demonstrating the significance placed on interactions and engagements between the EU and these Central Asian countries. Additionally, the coverage of EU-Central Asia relations indicates the recognition of the EU's broader role and involvement in the region. Moreover, considerable attention is devoted to EU-internal affairs, indicating an interest in the internal dynamics, policies, and developments within the EU. Furthermore, the media's coverage of the EU's external relations reflects an acknowledgment of the EU's engagements beyond its own borders. Additionally, the analysis explores the areas of cooperation emphasized in the media coverage, offering important insights into the priorities and narratives surrounding EU-Central Asia relations. By examining the specific sectors and initiatives highlighted in the media, a better understanding of the areas of mutual interest and collaboration between the EU and Central Asian countries is obtained.

The collected data were categorized into three distinct groups: negative, neutral, and positive, based on the tone of coverage exhibited in the publications. This categorization was determined by considering the nature of the message and its connotation. Publications that primarily emphasized the positive aspects of the EU, such as its interactions with Kazakhstan/Tajikistan, EU-Central Asia relations, domestic affairs, and engagements with other international actors, were classified under the positive category. Conversely, publications that tended to portray negative aspects of the EU's activities across various domains were grouped under the negative category. The neutral category encompassed publications that provided a balanced assessment of the EU's activities or covered both negative and positive aspects of the Union's affairs. The analysis of the tone of coverage in national newspapers indicates a generally positive portrayal of the EU, with varying levels of positivity across the publications. Overall, the media coverage in both countries tends to be positive, portraying the EU as an influential actor and partner. However, the neutral journals in both countries provide a more balanced representation of the EU, incorporating critical perspectives and diverse viewpoints. The breakdown of positive, negative, and neutral coverage is as follows:

- a) *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*: The majority of coverage on the EU in this newspaper was positive (72%), with a relatively low percentage of negative (14%) and neutral (14%) coverage.
- b) *Vremya*: The coverage in *Vremya* leaned more towards positive (61%) but also had a notable percentage of negative (21%) and neutral (18%) coverage.
- c) *Jumburiyat*: This newspaper displayed the highest level of positive coverage (79%), with a smaller proportion of negative (15%) and neutral (6%) coverage.

d) *AsiaPlus*: Positive coverage (64%) was also predominant in *AsiaPlus*, along with a moderate percentage of negative (16%) and neutral (20%) coverage. (Figure 2)

Figure 2: Publications devoted to EU in national newspapers, breakdown by tone of coverage, in %

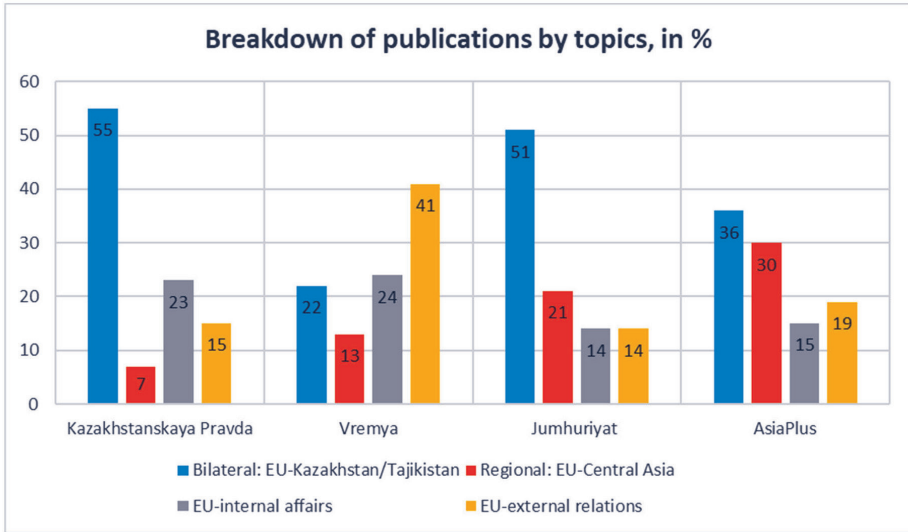


Source: collected by author

The collected data is categorized based on different topics of coverage. The first category is “Bilateral,” which includes all news articles focusing on bilateral relations. The second category is “Regional,” encompassing news articles mentioning EU-Central Asia relations. The third category is “EU Internal Affairs,” covering the internal affairs of the EU. Lastly, the fourth category is “EU External Relations,” which covers EU relations with regions or countries other than those in Central Asia. Figure 3 provides a breakdown of publications by topics based on the collected data. The percentages indicate the distribution of coverage across different categories for each newspaper. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* focused primarily on bilateral relations between the EU and Kazakhstan, with 55% of its coverage dedicated to this topic. It also showed a moderate interest in EU-internal affairs (23%) and addressed EU-external relations (15%) to some extent. However, the coverage of regional aspects received a relatively low emphasis at 7%. *Vremya*, on the other hand, allocated a significant portion of its coverage to EU-external relations (41%), indicating a notable interest in the EU’s relations with regions or countries outside of Central Asia. While bilateral relations with the EU-Kazakhstan accounted for 22% of its coverage, *Vremya* also dedicated substantial attention to EU-internal affairs (24%) and mentioned EU-Central Asia relations (13%) to a moderate extent. *Jumhuriyat* exhibited a strong focus on bilateral relations with the EU-Tajikistan, with 51% of its coverage dedicated to this topic. It also covered EU-Central Asia relations (21%) to a significant extent. However, the coverage of EU-internal affairs (14%) and EU-external

relations (14%) received relatively lower attention. *AsiaPlus* displayed balanced coverage across different topics. It addressed bilateral relations with the EU-Tajikistan (36%) and EU-Central Asia relations (30%) quite comprehensively. It also dedicated a reasonable portion of its coverage to EU-internal affairs (15%) and EU-external relations (19%).

Figure 3: Breakdown of publications by topics, in %



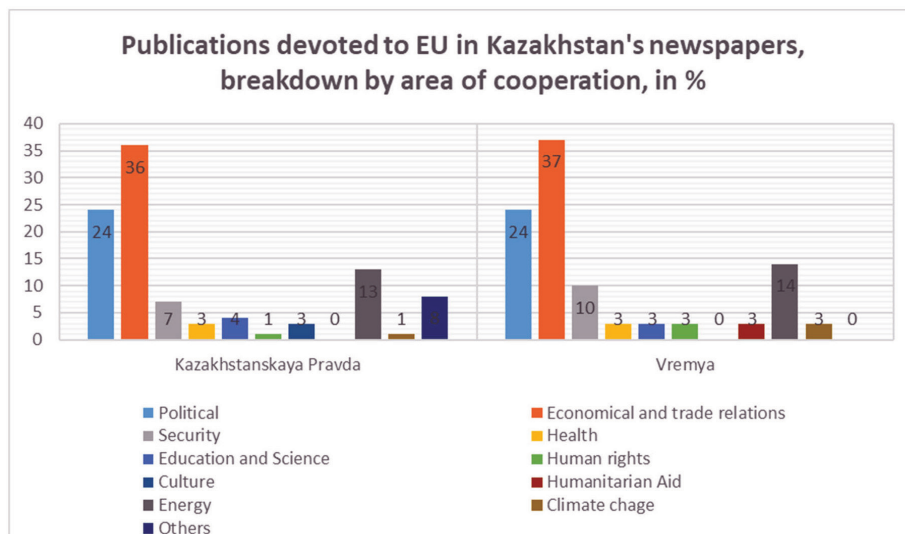
Source: collected by author.

The analysis delved into the specific areas of cooperation highlighted in the coverage of the EU in the newspapers of Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. In Kazakhstan’s newspapers, the breakdown of publications by areas of cooperation is as follows:

Political cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan received notable attention in both *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and *Vremya*, with similar percentages of coverage (24% in both newspapers). Economical and trade relations emerged as a significant focus in both newspapers, underscoring the importance of economic ties between the EU and Kazakhstan. *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* allocated 36% of its coverage to this area, while *Vremya* dedicated 37% to the subject. Security cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan was also addressed in both newspapers, with *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* devoting 7% of its coverage to this area and *Vremya* allocating 10%, highlighting its significance in the media discourse. Additionally, the newspapers explored various other areas of cooperation, including health, education and science, human rights, culture, humanitarian aid, energy, climate change, and more. However, the emphasis on these areas varied between the newspapers. This breakdown of publications sheds light on the specific areas of cooperation that received attention in the coverage of the EU by Kazakhstan’s newspapers. Overall, the analysis reveals a focus on political cooperation, highlights the significance of economic and trade relations, and indicates relatively limited attention

given to security cooperation in the coverage of the EU in Kazakhstan's newspapers. (Figure 4)

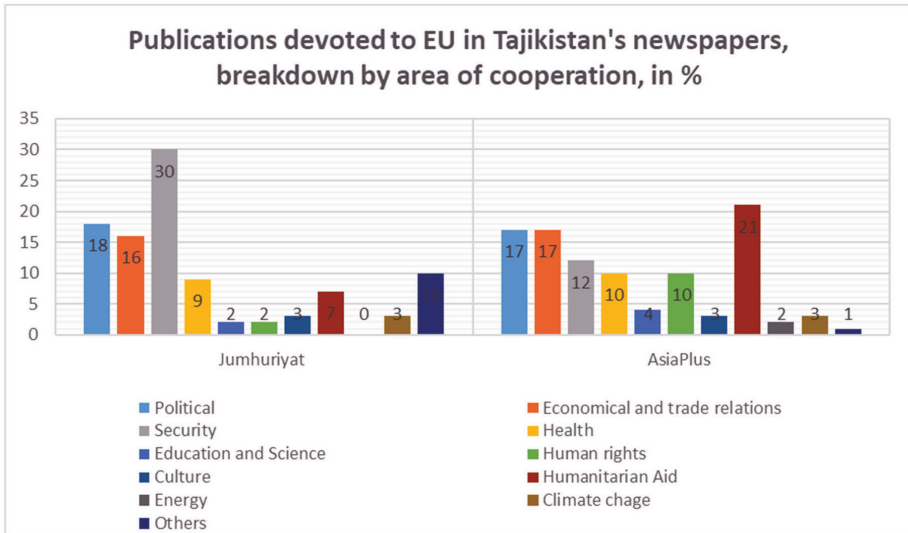
Figure 4: Publications devoted to EU in Kazakhstan's newspapers, breakdown by area of cooperation, in %



Source: collected by author.

In Tajikistan's case, political cooperation between the EU and Tajikistan received notable attention in *Jumburiyat* and *AsiaPlus* newspapers, although with slightly different percentages. *Jumburiyat* allocated 18% of its coverage to this topic, while *AsiaPlus* dedicated 17% to political cooperation. Similarly, both newspapers emphasized the significance of economic and trade relations between the EU and Tajikistan. *Jumburiyat* and *AsiaPlus* allocated coverage percentages of 16% and 17%, respectively, to this area. Security cooperation between the EU and Tajikistan was a significant focus in the newspapers. *Jumburiyat* allocated a substantial 30% of its coverage to security cooperation, while *AsiaPlus* dedicated 12% to this topic, highlighting its significance within the media discourse. Additionally, the newspapers explored various other areas of cooperation, such as health, education and science, human rights, culture, humanitarian aid, energy, climate change, and more. However, the distribution of coverage in these areas varied between *Jumburiyat* and *AsiaPlus*. (Figure 5) Overall, the analysis reveals a focus on political cooperation, highlights the slightly lower percentage of coverage regarding the significance of economic and trade relations compared to Kazakhstan, and indicates a substantial emphasis on security cooperation in the coverage of the EU in Tajikistan's newspapers.

Figure 5: Publications devoted to EU in Tajikistan’s newspapers, breakdown by area of cooperation, in %



Source: collected by author.

These findings suggest that the media discourse on the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan predominantly portrays the EU in a positive light. The newspapers highlight the importance of bilateral relations, regional dynamics, and various areas of cooperation.

By comparing a state-owned journal and a neutral journal in each country, as well as analyzing the media coverage in both countries, the following findings emerge:

- a) Comparison of state-owned journal and neutral journal in Kazakhstan

Kazakhstanskaya Pravda, a state-owned journal, demonstrates a distinct pattern in its coverage of the EU. The journal predominantly focuses on positive aspects of EU-Kazakhstan relations, dedicating 55% of its publications to bilateral relations between the two entities. This suggests a strong emphasis on highlighting the cooperative and mutually beneficial aspects of their relationship. The breakdown by areas of cooperation reveals a significant focus on economic and trade relations (36%), reflecting Kazakhstan’s interest in enhancing economic ties with the EU. Moreover, the journal’s positive tone of coverage (72%) reflects its alignment with the government’s perspective and its role in promoting a favorable image of the EU.

Vremya, a neutral journal, provides a different perspective on the EU. While it also devotes a considerable portion of its coverage to bilateral relations (22%), it places a greater emphasis on regional dynamics (13%) and EU-external relations (41%). This indicates a broader focus on the EU’s engagement in Central Asia and beyond, potentially catering to a more diverse readership. The breakdown by areas of cooperation highlights a balanced coverage across multiple dimensions, including political, economic, security, and humanitarian aspects. The neutral

stance of *Vremya* is evident in its coverage, with a mix of positive (61%), negative (21%), and neutral (18%) tones, allowing for a more nuanced portrayal of the EU.

b) Comparison of state-owned journal and neutral journal in Tajikistan

Jumhuriyat, a state-owned journal in Tajikistan, displays a strong emphasis on bilateral relations between the EU and Tajikistan (51%). This underscores the importance placed on the cooperative aspects of their relationship. The breakdown by areas of cooperation reveals a particular focus on security cooperation (30%), reflecting Tajikistan's security concerns and the EU's role as a security partner. *Jumhuriyat* also maintains a predominantly positive tone of coverage (79%), aligning with the government's perspective and promoting a favorable perception of the EU. In contrast, *AsiaPlus*, a neutral journal in Tajikistan, offers a more balanced and diverse perspective on the EU. While it covers bilateral relations (36%), it also places significant emphasis on the regional dimension (30%) and EU-external relations (19%). The breakdown by areas of cooperation demonstrates a comprehensive approach, covering various aspects such as political, economic, security, humanitarian, and human rights. The tone of coverage reflects a more balanced stance, with a mix of positive (64%), negative (16%), and neutral (20%) tones. This suggests a more independent and objective representation of the EU, catering to a wider range of readership.

c) Comparison of Countries' Perceptions

The media coverage of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan reveals some similarities and differences in the overall perception of the EU in the two countries. The media coverage in Kazakhstan, represented by *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda* and *Vremya*, generally portrays the EU positively, focusing on its economic role, bilateral relations, and regional dynamics. The state-owned journal, *Kazakhstanskaya Pravda*, places more emphasis on economic cooperation, while the neutral journal, *Vremya*, provides a more diverse coverage across various topics. Similarly, the media coverage in Tajikistan, represented by *Jumhuriyat* and *AsiaPlus*, portrays the EU positively, highlighting its role in security and humanitarian aid. Both journals place importance on political and economic relations, with *Jumhuriyat* having a stronger emphasis on security cooperation. However, *AsiaPlus* covers a wider range of topics, including humanitarian supports and culture, reflecting a more diverse perspective.

These findings suggest that both state-owned and neutral journals in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan generally present a positive perception of the EU. The state-owned journals tend to align their coverage with the priorities and perspectives of the respective governments, emphasizing bilateral relations and specific areas of cooperation. The neutral journals, on the other hand, offer a more diverse range of coverage, addressing various aspects of EU-Central Asia relations. Overall, the media coverage in both countries reflects the importance placed on the EU as an economic, security, and humanitarian partner in the region.

4. Conclusion

In conclusion, this research aimed to explore the media perception of the European Union in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan by analyzing the content of major newspapers in both countries. The findings provide valuable insights into how the EU is portrayed in the media discourse, the dominant themes and narratives surrounding the EU's role in Central Asia, and the differences in media perceptions between Kazakhstan and Tajikistan.

The analysis of newspaper articles revealed that the media discourse in both Kazakhstan and Tajikistan generally portrays the EU in a positive light. The newspapers highlight the EU's significance and its role in the region, depicting it as an important actor in Central Asia. Kazakhstan's media focuses primarily on the EU as an economic powerhouse, emphasizing economic cooperation and trade relations. On the other hand, Tajikistan's media places greater emphasis on the EU as a security partner and humanitarian aid supporter, highlighting its contributions to addressing security challenges and providing assistance in humanitarian endeavors. The differences in media perceptions of the EU between Kazakhstan and Tajikistan can be attributed to the specific priorities and interests of each country, as well as the geopolitical context in which they operate. Kazakhstan, as a resource-rich country with a strong focus on economic development, emphasizes the economic dimension of EU relations. Tajikistan, with its security concerns from Afghanistan highlights the EU's role as a security partner and provider of humanitarian assistance.

However, it is important to acknowledge that the media representation is only one aspect of the complex relationship between the EU and Central Asian countries. Further research is needed to explore the broader public perceptions and attitudes towards the EU in these countries, as well as to examine the impact of media representations on policy-making processes and public opinion formation. It is worth noting that using a computer program language would facilitate a more efficient and productive content analysis of mass media. While the current analysis was conducted manually, the author believes that it did not affect the research results. In future steps, computer programming languages will be employed to select and analyze EU – Central Asia related articles, enhancing the research process.

In conclusion, this research provides valuable insights into the media perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan and Tajikistan. The positive portrayal of the EU in the media discourse and the dominant themes surrounding the EU's role in Central Asia reflect the recognition of the EU's importance and engagement in the region. Overall, understanding the perceptions of the EU in Central Asian countries is crucial for fostering stronger partnerships and cooperation between the EU and Central Asia. By acknowledging and addressing these perceptions, the EU can further enhance its engagement and effectiveness in the region, while Central Asian countries can leverage the opportunities presented by EU-Central Asia relations for their own development and prosperity.