INTEGRATION PROCESSES

ИНТЕГРАЦИОННЫЕ ПРОЦЕССЫ

Geopolitics of Connectivity: The EU in Central Asia

Sergey V. Mazanik [ID] ✉, **Tatiana A. Romanova** [ID]

Saint Petersburg State University, Saint Petersburg, Russian Federation

✉sergeymazanik97@gmail.com

Abstract. The articulation of the concepts of strategic sovereignty and strategic autonomy in the official discourse of the European Union (EU) is indicative of its geopolitical turn. In this context, the purpose of this article is to clarify how the EU politically redefines the Central Asian space as part of its connectivity strategy (EU Strategy for Connecting Europe and Asia). The theoretical framework of the study is based on critical geopolitics, which, through a discourse analysis approach, makes it possible to identify the changes that EU representatives make in the spatial representation of Central Asia and the dynamics of the significance of this region in the EU's connectivity strategy. First, critical geopolitics will be operationalized with an emphasis on analytical categories such as discourse, hegemony, identity and ontological security. Thereafter, drawing upon the long-standing academic tradition of considering the EU as a geopolitical actor, the paper clarifies how, under the sway of the ongoing debate on strategic sovereignty (autonomy), the EU deploys the logic of inclusion and exclusion in its relations with third countries. Subsequently, the European connectivity concept will be outlined and the transformation of Central Asia's role within the framework of the EU's connectivity strategy will be revealed. The study found that, in the EU's official discourse, connectivity, which is characterized by both normativity and securitization, is a tool for achieving resilience for the EU and its partners in Central Asia, a means of protecting them from third countries' attempts to politically and economically weaponize interdependence, a way of preserving the so-called rules-based order as a resource of the EU's global normative influence, and a way of achieving strategic autonomy that the EU is willing to export as a model. The inclusion of Central Asia in the concept of EU connectivity and the exclusion of other actors promoting their own models of governance and connectivity in this region can turn Central Asia into one of the most important areas of normative confrontation between the EU and the proponents of an alternative world order.

Key words: geopolitical turn, critical geopolitics, resilience, strategic sovereignty, strategic autonomy, rules-based order

Геополитика коннективности: ЕС в Центральной Азии

С.В. Мазаник [ID] ✉, Т.А. Романова [ID]

Санкт-Петербургский государственный университет, Санкт-Петербург, Российская Федерация

✉sergeymazanik97@gmail.com

Аннотация. Артикуляция концепций стратегического суверенитета и стратегической автономии в официальном дискурсе Европейского союза (ЕС) свидетельствует о его геополитическом повороте. В этом контексте цель исследования — прояснить, как ЕС политически переопределяет пространство Центральной Азии в рамках стратегии по связыванию Европы и Азии, или стратегии коннективности (connectivity). Теоретическую основу исследования составляет критическая геополитика, позволяющая с опорой на дискурс-анализ как метод выявить изменения, происходящие в пространственной репрезентации Центральной Азии в дискурсе ЕС, а также динамику значения данного региона в стратегии коннективности. Вначале критическая геополитика будет операционализирована с акцентом на такие аналитические категории, как дискурс, гегемония, идентичность и онтологическая безопасность. Затем, опираясь на давно существующие в академической литературе о европейской интеграции представления о ЕС как о геополитическом акторе, выявляется, как под воздействием современной дискуссии о стратегическом суверенитете (автономии) ЕС использует логику включения и исключения в отношениях с третьими странами. Далее будет изложено содержание европейской концепции коннективности и охарактеризована трансформация роли Центральной Азии в стратегии коннективности ЕС. Установлено, что в официальном дискурсе ЕС коннективность, для которой характерны нормативность и уклон в секьюритизацию, является инструментом достижения стрессоустойчивости Евросоюза и его партнеров в Центральной Азии, средством их защиты от попыток третьих стран использовать взаимозависимость как политическое и экономическое оружие, способом сохранения так называемого «порядка, основанного на правилах», — ресурса нормативного влияния ЕС в мире, и достижения стратегической автономии, модель которой ЕС готов экспортировать. Включение Центральной Азии в концепцию коннективности ЕС и исключение из нее иных акторов, продвигающих в данном регионе собственные модели управления и коннективности, может превратить Центральную Азию в одно из наиболее важных пространств нормативного противостояния ЕС и сторонников альтернативного миропорядка.

Ключевые слова: геополитический поворот, критическая геополитика, стрессоустойчивость, стратегический суверенитет, стратегическая автономия, порядок, основанный на правилах

Introduction

In recent years, European Union (EU) officials have identified several foreign policy factors as threats to the European integration project. These include political instability in the regions neighbouring the EU, the ensuing migration crisis, disruption of critical supply chains, and weaponized interdependence as threats to the European integration. To respond to these threats, the EU leaders have put forth the proposal of transforming the EU into a full-fledged geopolitical actor.[1] In the EU's official

---

[1] Speech by President-elect von der Leyen in the European Parliament Plenary on the Occasion of the

discourse, this determination has led to the so-called geopolitical turn, in particular the emergence of the concepts of strategic sovereignty and strategic autonomy. Strategic sovereignty/autonomy is supposed to enable the EU to preserve its leading position in a rapidly changing world. Scholars have long considered the EU to be a geopolitical actor, that is, an agent engaged in the spatial shaping of the international politics, for, while expanding and establishing the system of external governance, the EU has also been reconceptualising the geographical space around itself through forming a hierarchy of neighbouring countries based on their compliance with EU norms and principles, which are also known as the *acquis communautaire* (Lavenex & Schimmelfennig, 2009).

Likewise, the combination of normativity and geopolitics characterises the EU's policy towards the five Central Asian states: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan (Fawn, 2022). After many years of marginality for Brussels (Hoffmann, 2010; Dzhuraev, 2022), Central Asia has recently become a key space for implementing the EU's strategy of connecting Europe with Asia.[2] The connectivity strategy is already well-studied,[3] however, the existing literature pays little attention to the normativity of connectivity (Karjalainen, 2023), yet the latter is defined in

Presentation of Her College of Commissioners and Their Programme // European Commission. November 27, 2019. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/SPEECH_19_6408 (accessed: 02.05.2023).

[2] Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank "Connecting Europe and Asia — Building Blocks for an EU Strategy" // European Commission. September 19, 2018. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_connecting_europe_and_asia_-_building_blocks_for_an_eu_strategy_2018-09-19.pdf (accessed: 01.04.2023).

[3] Novotná T. The European Union and Korea Between the US and China: Geopolitical Aspects of Connectivity from the Soft to Hard Power Approaches // Ordnungspolitische Diskurse. 2021. No. 11. URL: https://www.econstor.eu/bitstream/10419/235510/1/1761310089.pdf (accessed: 15.05.2023). See also: (Gaens, Sinkkonen & Vogt, 2023).

the EU's official discourse through such neoliberal categories as *sustainable development* and *rules-based order*. Furthermore, the potential impact of connectivity on the interrelation between the EU and Central Asia, as well as the correlation between connectivity and the Brussels' current geopolitical rhetoric, remain unexplored.

Thus, the goal of this paper is to identify how Brussels implements its connectivity policy in Central Asia in the context of the EU's geopolitical turn. In other words, the research will seek to clarify how the EU politically redefines the Central Asian space under the sway of the strategic sovereignty and strategic autonomy concepts.

The theoretical framework of this paper is based on critical geopolitics, which is further substantiated by a discourse analysis of the EU official documents and speeches of the EU officials. This enables us to identify the meanings that the EU political elites accord to the connectivity concept, and to trace the transformation of both the role of Central Asia in the EU's external actions and of the EU itself as a geopolitical actor.

After outlining the key provisions of critical geopolitics and the characteristics of the EU from this perspective, the paper clarifies the genesis of the EU's connectivity concept and its relationship to the EU's geopolitical turn. Thereafter, the article examines the ways in which the EU discourse on connectivity and strategic sovereignty is transforming the role of Central Asia in the EU's current external action.

Key Provision of Critical Geopolitics

Based on constructivist assumptions about social reality, critical geopolitics is defined as "a discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft 'spatialize' international politics and represent it as a 'world' characterized by particular types of places, peoples and dramas" (Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 190). Hence, the task of critical geopolitics boils down to uncovering "the spatialization of international politics by core powers and hegemonic states" (Tuathail & Agnew, 1992, p. 192). Hegemony is

interpreted here as a special cultural and political complex of practices and representations (Agnew & Corbridge, 1995, p. 17) which form "subjective, ethnocentric, essentialist and implicitly authoritarian" geopolitical narratives (Olson & Sayer, 2009, p. 180). Both statesmen and intellectuals reflecting on geopolitics play the role of agents, whereupon practical and formal types of geopolitics are distinguished (Tuathail, 1999). This paper focuses on the EU's practical geopolitics.

The focus on the linguistic environment in which geopolitical narratives and concepts are formed implies the use of discourse analysis. However, critical geopolitics distinguishes between *spatial practices* and *representations of space*. The former refer to the "pre-discursive materiality," i.e. "the physical flows, interactions, and movements that occur in and across space," whereas the latter come down to "the concepts, naming practices, and geographical codes used to talk about and understand spatial practices" (Tuathail, 1998, p. 18). Therefore, discourse analysis allows us to take into account the dialectical relationship between a discourse and the spatial practices which are reconceptualised in it and change under its influence (Agnew & Corbridge, 1995, p. 46).

Articulating geographical assumptions allows the actor to "normalize" the space around it (Tuathail, 1996, p. 46), that is, to describe it in categories intelligible to the actor and its audience. For this reason, geopolitics is often characterised as a practice of producing borders dividing the geographical space according to the "we — they" dichotomy (Moisio, 2015). This process forms and sustains the actor's identity (Dalby & Tuathail, 1996, p. 452) as well as its ontological security (Whittaker, 2018): by regularly repeating geopolitical tropes on itself and others, the actor can represent the space as part of the common sense, which provides for the sense of stability and predictability (Dodds, 1993).

According to critical geopolitics, each spatial configuration should be considered as "a historically and geographically specific form of political organisation and political thought"

(Elden, 2010, p. 757). Consequently, discourse analysis takes into consideration the embeddedness of actors articulating certain geopolitical views into local, national, and transnational interpretive communities (Tuathail, 1996, pp. 60–61). Placing the actor's representations of space in the social and historical context reveals that these concepts are conditioned by the content of a broader discussion on the actor's modes of operation and ways of further development. Accordingly, this research elucidates how certain concepts (strategic sovereignty or autonomy, in our case) transform other geopolitical concepts (connectivity) which, in turn, constitute political discourses (Moisio, 2002, pp. 94–95).

EU as a Geopolitical Actor

Hegemony, identity and ontological security as key analytical categories of critical geopolitics have long been debated in the academic discussion on the correlation between the normative and the material in the EU's politics. Since the EU's 2004 eastward enlargement and the emergence of new representations of space (e.g. ring of friends, neighbours of our neighbours), scholars have treated the EU as a system of concentric circles of external governance dispersed from Brussels (Smith, 2005). This system relied on the regional normative hegemony of the EU, which was able to structure the space based on the degree of its normative influence on partners (Haukkala, 2008). Having acknowledged the EU as a geopolitical actor, scholars ascribed it a neoliberal geopolitical thinking, as the EU sought to transform the European continent into a unified political space for the sake of establishing peace and security (Grygiel, 2015).

Following the 2016 EU's Global Strategy (EUGS),[4] which proclaimed resilience as the

---

[4] Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy // European External Action Service. June 2016. P. 13. URL: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf (accessed: 28.03.2023).

foundation of the EU's external action, researchers suggested that Brussels' ambitions to normatively influence third countries were diminishing (Tocci, 2020). Nevertheless, Brussels ascribed resilience (essential for security) to liberal democracies only. This concept established an insurmountable distance between the EU, which constituted the normative centre, and recipients of norms; it also enabled Brussels to rank third countries according to their degree of Europeanness and resilience. Thus, a system of unequal relations was reproduced (Romanova, 2019, pp. 66–79).

Likewise, the debate on the EU's strategic sovereignty (strategic autonomy) exposed the logic of inclusion and exclusion. The origins and genealogy of the two synonymous concepts in Brussels' official discourse have already been examined (Romanova & Mazanik, 2022). For the purposes of this article, we will highlight two features.

First, the debate about strategic sovereignty gained momentum amid the 2020–2021 coronavirus pandemic and the subsequent disruption of global supply chains. Hence, the focus was primarily on trade and industrial policy. On the one hand, the EU has sought to minimize its dependence on supplies from the countries that were "unreliable"[5] and aspiring "the systemic change of the international order"[6] (e.g. China). The EU itself has been interested in preserving the rules-based order viewed as a resource and one of the "vital interests underpinning… [the EU's] external action."[7] Therefore, in the context of strategic autonomy (sovereignty), the EU focuses not only on its own production capacity, but also on stigmatizing opponents of the liberal world order. On the other hand, strategic autonomy presupposes openness to the world, thus the EU's ability to "forge global high-quality standards which bear the hallmark of Europe's values and principles" plays a key role.[8]

Second, whereas resilience is believed to be inherent both to the EU and potentially to other countries for which the EU remains a normative leader, strategic sovereignty (autonomy) is an exceptional peculiarity of the EU, according to its discourse (Romanova & Kotsur, 2022). The conditionally realistic content of the EU geopolitical discourse calls on the EU to adopt a more assertive stance so as not to hide away from "the jungles" of "the rest of the world" behind the walls of "the European garden."[9]

This discourse, therefore, reinforces the hierarchy in the geopolitical imagination of European elites. As previously observed, "Speech geopolitics of 'securitisation' go hand in hand with speech geopolitics of cooperation" (Boedeltje & van Houtum, 2011, p. 143). Thus, the articulation of geopolitics enables the EU to adapt to new shocks and thereby find a new equilibrium of ontological security (Browning, 2018). This inevitably leaves an imprint on the connectivity strategy.

---

[5] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions "A Secure and Sustainable Supply of Critical Raw Materials in Support of the Twin Transition" // EUR-Lex. March 16, 2023. URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=CELEX:52023DC0165 (accessed: 15.05.2023).

[6] Speech by President von der Leyen on EU — China Relations to the Mercator Institute for China Studies and the European Policy Centre // European Commission. March 30, 2023. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/speech_23_2063 (accessed: 15.04.2023).

[7] Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy // European External Action Service. June 2016. P. 13. URL: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf (accessed: 28.03.2023).

[8] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the European Council, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions "A New Industrial Strategy for Europe" // EUR-Lex. March 10, 2020. URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1593086905382&uri=CELEX%3A52020DC0102 (accessed: 15.04.2023).

[9] European Diplomatic Academy: Opening Remarks by High Representative Josep Borrell at the Inauguration of the Pilot Programme // European External Action Service. October 13, 2022. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/european-diplomatic-academy-opening-remarks-high-representative-josep-borrell-inauguration_en (accessed: 01.05.2023).

Connectivity:
The Evolution of the Concept
in the Official EU Discourse

As set forth in the Declaration of Ministers for Foreign Affairs made at the Asia — Europe Meeting, connectivity encompasses "the hard and soft aspects, including the physical and institutional social-cultural linkages" and contributes "to the narrowing of the varying levels of development and capacities."[10] However, in different political discourses, connectivity is conceptualised and instrumentalized in different ways. In the 2018 Connectivity Strategy, the EU set forth a contrasting vision of connectivity in comparison to the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, since China, a systemic rival promoting alternative models of governance,[11] uses the latter to impose a Sino-centric metageography on the world and to limit the territorial scope of the rules-based order (Godehardt & Kohlenberg, 2020). Brussels is seeking to protect the key resource of its global influence, namely the rules-based order, from "others" who "are also setting out their own [connectivity] strategies at this time."[12] Consequently, "a sustainable, comprehensive and international rules-based connectivity"[13] is being securitized.

Let us take a closer look at the normative component of connectivity. In order to achieve strategic autonomy, Brussels commits itself to "invest in regional orders and in cooperation among and within regions."[14] In this context, the EU positions itself as a "connectivity super power, both at home and abroad,"[15] i.e. as a normative leader determined not only to develop energy, transport, digital infrastructure and people-to-people contacts, but also to extend its expertise in regional connectivity and cooperation to Asian countries.[16] This approach is also reflected in the EU's strategy towards China.[17] The normative line is reinforced in the EU's Global Gateway strategy as "a template for how Europe can build more resilient connections with the world."[18] In accordance with this strategy, all connectivity projects to be funded by the EU have to comply with its democratic values and good governance

---

[10] Annex I. ASEM Connectivity // ASEAN. URL: https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/11/Annex-I.pdf (accessed: 02.05.2023).

[11] Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council "EU — China — A Strategic Outlook" // March 12, 2019. P. 1. URL: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2019-03/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf (accessed: 01.04.2023).

[12] Explaining the European Union's Approach to Connecting Europe and Asia // European Commission. September 19, 2018. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/MEMO_18_5804 (accessed: 30.04.2023).

[13] Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank "Connecting Europe and Asia — Building Blocks for an EU Strategy" // European Commission. September 19, 2018. P. 13. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_commu

nication_-_connecting_europe_and_asia_-_building_blocks_for_an_eu_strategy_2018-09-19.pdf (accessed: 01.04.2023).

[14] Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy // European External Action Service. June 2016. P. 4. URL: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf (accessed: 28.03.2023).

[15] Borrell J. The EU Needs a Strategic Approach for the Indo-Pacific // European External Action Service. March 12, 2021. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-needs-strategic-approach-indo-pacific_en (accessed: 20.04.2023).

[16] Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee, the Committee of the Regions and the European Investment Bank "Connecting Europe and Asia — Building Blocks for an EU Strategy" // European Commission. September 19, 2018. P. 6, 8. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_connecting_europe_and_asia_-_building_blocks_for_an_eu_strategy_2018-09-19.pdf (accessed: 01.04.2023).

[17] Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council "EU — China — A Strategic Outlook" // March 12, 2019. P. 1. URL: https://commission.europa.eu/system/files/2019-03/communication-eu-china-a-strategic-outlook.pdf (accessed: 01.04.2023).

[18] Global Gateway: Up to €300 Billion for the European Union's Strategy to Boost Sustainable Links Around the World // European Commission. December 1, 2021. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_6433 (accessed: 24.04.2023).

standards.[19] Recognizing the futility of trying to isolate itself from an increasingly connected world, the EU intends to manage interdependence "to promote the security and prosperity of [its] citizens and to safeguard [its] democracies."[20] Correspondingly, the normative expansion and the involvement of as many countries as possible in projects based on the principles of connectivity formulated by Brussels are key to the EU's security.

The emphasis on the security of the EU and on safeguarding the liberal world order naturally results in the securitization of the connectivity concept. This is evidenced by theses on the complementary nature of security and connectivity[21]: "Sustainable, comprehensive and rules-based connectivity will contribute to the enhanced prosperity, security and resilience of people and societies in Europe and Asia."[22] The same refers to the Indo-Pacific strategy, in which Brussels undertakes to "foster a rules-based international order" which will help the EU "enhance its strategic autonomy and ability to cooperate with partners in order to safeguard its values and interest," as well as "contribute to the resilience of the European economy … and to the reduction of strategic dependencies on critical raw materials."[23]

Furthermore, to protect "the European sovereignty" and to "make Europe's economic base more resilient, competitive and fit for the green and digital transitions," the EU member states have pledged to "promote [the EU's] standards, market access, sustainable value chains and connectivity."[24] Consequently, security becomes one of the criteria for the "trusted connectivity."[25]

From the Brussels' perspective, the risks of economic coercion and the weaponization of interdependence by third countries represents a significant challenge to the established rules-based order. For this reason, in the context of the rhetoric about protecting this order, Brussels supplements the concept of connectivity with the category of "like-minded partners" (LMPs). These are expected, on the one hand, to share the EU's democratic values[26] and "to defend universal principles and rules"[27] — that is, the rules-based order — faced with "the growing assertiveness of authoritarian and totalitarian regimes,"[28] and, on the other hand, to ensure

---

[19] 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" // European Commission. December 1, 2021. URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021JC0030 (accessed: 24.04.2023).

[20] Shared Vision, Common Action: A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy // European External Action Service. June 2016. P. 8. URL: https://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/top_stories/pdf/eugs_review_web.pdf (accessed: 28.03.2023).

[21] Enhanced EU Security Cooperation in and with Asia — Council Conclusions // Council of the European Union. May 28, 2018. URL: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/35456/st09265-re01-en18.pdf (accessed: 15.05.2023).

[22] Factsheet on the EU Strategy on Connecting Europe and Asia // European External Action Service. September 2019. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu-asian_connectivity_factsheet_september_2019.pdf_final.pdf (accessed: 18.04.2023).

[23] EU Strategy for Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific — Council Conclusions // Council of the European Union.

April 16, 2021. P. 2–3. URL: https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-7914-2021-INIT/en/pdf (accessed: 20.04.2023).

[24] Informal Meeting of the Heads of State or Government. Versailles Declaration // European Council. March 11, 2022. URL: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/54773/20220311-versailles-declaration-en.pdf (accessed: 02.05.2023).

[25] 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" // European Commission. December 1, 2021. P. 1–4. URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021JC0030 (accessed: 24.04.2023).

[26] European Parliament Resolution of 25 November 2020 on the Foreign Policy Consequences of the COVID-19 Outbreak (2020/2111(INI)) // EUR-Lex. November 25, 2020. URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52020IP0322 (accessed: 25.04.2023).

[27] Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council on Strengthening the EU's Contribution to Rules-Based Multilateralism // European Commission. February 17, 2021. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/en_strategy_on_strengthening_the_eus_contribution_to_rules-based_multilateralism.pdf (accessed: 15.05.2023).

[28] European Parliament Resolution of 6 July 2022 on the EU and the Defence of Multilateralism

durable supplies of critical raw materials and goods to the EU, which will "help fulfil its geopolitical ambitions globally."[29]

The combination of normativity and securitization provides Brussels' with flexibility in identifying LMPs: the EU has concluded connectivity agreements not only with democratic Japan and India, but also with the Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN), an international organization that does not include liberal democracies.[30] In the same way, the EU has established strategic partnerships with Canada, Ukraine, Namibia and Kazakhstan in the field of critical raw materials, despite the fact that these countries exhibit a diverse range of political regimes.

Ultimately, Brussels has begun to consider the normatively loaded connectivity as:

1) a tool for ensuring its own resilience, strategic sovereignty and strategic autonomy;

2) a condition for the EU's security from a wide range of threats, in particular from the interdependence weaponized by third countries;

3) a way to preserve the international rules-based order.

Herein lies the ambivalence of the EU's connectivity concept. On the one hand, Brussels is removing obstacles to political and economic interaction between the EU and LMPs, and is seeking to create a unified, interconnected global normative space. On the other hand, Brussels constructs borders and denies the right to connect

with the EU to those countries that are unwilling to accept European standards, and that undermine the rules-based order. Let us examine the impact of these tendencies on the EU's policy towards Central Asia.

The EU Connectivity Policy in Central Asia

Against the backdrop of unsuccessful attempts to socialize the Central Asian states into liberal democratic norms, the EU gradually began to operate on a more neutral basis. Ensuring security and good governance legitimized Brussels' cooperation with illiberal regimes (Makarychev, 2020). This approach was retained in the 2019 Central Asia strategy and complemented by the task of ensuring the prosperity of the region, which came down to fostering connectivity both within Central Asia (i.e. to supporting intraregional integration processes) and between Central Asia and the EU.[31] Still, the reduced significance of the value component does not mean abandoning normativity *per se*.

First, connectivity remains a normatively loaded concept in the EU's official discourse. For instance, the activity of relations with the EU is determined by "the readiness of individual Central Asian countries to undertake reforms and strengthen democracy, human rights, the rule of law and the independence of the judiciary," as well as to develop a free market economy.[32]

Second, with regard to the Central Asian region, Brussels repeats the thesis of "sustainable, open, inclusive and rules-based" connectivity and undertakes to support only

(2020/2114(INI)) // EUR-Lex. July 6, 2022. URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52022IP0286 (accessed: 24.04.2023).

[29] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament, the Council, the European Economic and Social Committee and the Committee of the Regions "Trade Policy Review — An Open, Sustainable and Assertive Trade Policy" // EUR-Lex. February 18, 2021. URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/ALL/?uri=COM:2021:66:FIN (accessed: 02.05.2023).

[30] Rieck C. Strange New Worlds: The European Union's Search for Like-Minded Partners in the Indo-Pacific // Panorama: Insights into Asian and European Affairs. 2022. No. 1. P. 39–53. URL: https://www.kas.de/documents/288143/16920728/Panorama+European+Strategic+Approaches+to+the+Indo-Pacific.pdf/e7b7d256-61ec-d864-191a-7cd63342cee4?version=1.0&t=1645002783217 (accessed: 02.05.2023).

[31] Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership" // European Commission. May 15, 2019. P. 1–2. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf (accessed: 15.05.2023).

[32] Council Conclusions on the New Strategy on Central Asia // Council of the European Union. June 17, 2019. P. 2. URL: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39778/st10221-en19.pdf (accessed 29.04.2023).

those projects that correspond to these criteria.[33] The EU has set forth the same normative requirements for adjacent strategic corridors and their eventual connection to its own transport networks,[34] and includes the norm of connectivity in the texts of draft cooperation agreements with CA states.[35]

However, the focus on threats is easily combined with the established EU approach of promoting politically more neutral issues of stability and security in Central Asia. Hence, the development of connectivity, which involves expanding regional cooperation and supporting the stability of Central Asian states, is identified as a condition for the EU's security;[36] "stronger connectivity between Central Asia, Afghanistan and South Asia"[37] is seen as the key for the safety of these countries.

The link between connectivity and security can also be traced in the 2019 EU's Strategy for Central Asia, which implies the development of connectivity in areas as such transport, energy, digital technologies and people-to-people contacts, while at the same time describing for each of these areas the threats that Brussels hopes to minimise by fostering connectivity.[38] As long as the EU's connectivity strategy is Brussels' response to Chinese connectivity initiatives, it is not surprising that Brussels considers China's infrastructure projects in Central Asia as opaque and a potential threat to the region's stability.[39] Nevertheless, the EU remains declaratively willing to cooperate with extra-regional partners, since it positions Central Asia as "a region of rules-based cooperation and connectivity rather than of competition and rivalry."[40]

In the context of the geopolitical turn, the securitization of connectivity is becoming increasingly evident. Brussels recognizes "connectivity in the Indo-Pacific and stability in Central Asia" as its "geopolitical priorities"[41]

---

[33] Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership" // European Commission. May 15, 2019. P. 11. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf (accessed: 15.05.2023).

[34] 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" // European Commission. December 1, 2021. P. 6. URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021JC0030 (accessed: 24.04.2023).

[35] Annex to the Proposal for a Council Decision on the Conclusion, on Behalf of the European Union, of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement Between the European Union, of the One Part, and the Kyrgyz Republic, of the Other Part // European Commission. June 13, 2022. URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:80e18e18-eaf7-11ec-a534-01aa75ed71a1.0022.02/DOC_2&format=PDF (accessed: 15.05.2023).

[36] Report from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council "2021 Annual Report on the Implementation of the European Union's External Action Instruments in 2020" // European Commission. December 16, 2021. P. 34–35. URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/resource.html?uri=cellar:09b53227-5e5a-11ec-9c6c-01aa75ed71a1.0001.02/DOC_1&format=PDF (accessed: 15.05.2023).

[37] Council Conclusions on the New Strategy on Central Asia // Council of the European Union. June 17, 2019.

P. 3. URL: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/39778/st10221-en19.pdf (accessed 29.04.2023).

[38] Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership" // European Commission. May 15, 2019. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf (accessed: 15.05.2023).

[39] European Parliament Resolution of 21 January 2021 on Connectivity and EU — Asia Relations (2020/2115(INI)) // EUR-Lex. January 21, 2021. URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021IP0016 (accessed: 15.05.2023).

[40] Joint Communication to the European Parliament and the Council "The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership" // European Commission. May 15, 2019. P. 2. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/joint_communication_-_the_eu_and_central_asia_-_new_opportunities_for_a_stronger_partnership.pdf (accessed: 15.05.2023).

[41] Communication from the Commission to the European Parliament and the Council "2021 Strategic Foresight Report: The EU's Capacity and Freedom to Act" // European Commission. September 8, 2021. P. 18.

and argues that in "the current geopolitical context ... connectivity has become an area of strategic importance."[42] To this end, the EU has entered a strategic partnership with Kazakhstan, a significant supplier of hydrocarbons and other natural resources,[43] which makes Kazakhstan the only LMP for the EU in Central Asia.

In addition, the launch of two initiatives, namely Sustainable Energy Connectivity and Digital Connectivity in Central Asia, is justified by the desire of the EU and the Central Asian states to confront "intense geopolitical competition, new security threats, and challenges to the rules-based international order."[44] Therefore, recognizing that "Central Asia and Europe are ... becoming more and more connected,"[45] the High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, J. Borrell, has emphasised that both the EU and Central Asia face similar challenges and threats with regards to the multilateral order.[46] As

a recipe for countering the aforementioned dangers, it is proposed to "cooperate more and better," as well as to "defend the international rule of law, because this is the guarantee of our [the EU's and Central Asia's] common security."[47]

Curiously, experts in Central Asia also discuss the convergence of perspectives on security and threats between the EU and Central Asian states. In this way, the opacity of the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative, according to N. Kassenova, "seems to create some mental and psychological connectivity between the EU and Central Asia even before the physical infrastructure is properly in place."[48] Yet while the EU pursues its connectivity policy in order to expand the camp of adherents to the rules-based order and thereby to increase its own influence in the world, the Central Asian states see the EU's connectivity mostly as an opportunity to combat excessive economic and political dependence on China,[49] as well as to adopt globally recognized EU trade, investment, technological and

URL: https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/PDF/?uri=CELEX:52021DC0750 (accessed: 15.05.2023).

[42] EU — Kazakhstan Cooperation Council // Council of the European Union. June 20, 2022. URL: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-ministerial-meetings/2022/06/20/ (accessed: 02.05.2023).

[43] Memorandum of Understanding Between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the European Union on a Strategic Partnership on the Sustainable Raw Materials, Batteries and Renewable Hydrogen Value Chains // European Commission. November 7, 2022. URL: https://single-market-economy.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-11/EU-KAZ-MoU-signed_en.pdf (accessed: 15.05.2023).

[44] Global Gateway: Team Europe Launches Two Initiatives in Central Asia on Energy and on Digital Connectivity // European Parliament. February 18, 2022. URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/plmrep/COMMITTEES/DEVE/DV/2022/11-30/TeamEuropeinitiativesinCentralAsiaonenergyandondigitalconnectivityEN.pdf (accessed: 15.05.2023).

[45] Remarks by President Charles Michel After His Meeting with President of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev in Astana // European Council. October 27, 2022. URL: https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2022/10/27/remarks-by-president-charles-michel-after-his-meeting-with-president-of-kazakhstan-kassym-jomart-tokayev-in-astana/ (accessed: 29.04.2023).

[46] EU — Central Asia Ministerial: Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the Joint Press Conference with Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan

Vladimir Norov // European External Action Service. November 17, 2022. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-central-asia-ministerial-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-joint_en (accessed: 04.05.2023).

[47] Opening Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EU — Central Asia Connectivity Conference: Global Gateway // European External Action Service. November 18, 2022. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/opening-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-eu-central-asia-connectivity_en (accessed: 02.05.2023).

[48] Kassenova N. Central Asia and the EU Connectivity Strategy: Rising to the Good Governance Challenge // PONARS Eurasia Policy Memo. 2019. No. 617. URL: https://www.ponarseurasia.org/central-asia-and-the-eu-connectivity-strategy-rising-to-the-good-governance-challenge/ (accessed: 14.10.2023).

[49] See: Dzhuraev E., Muratalieva N. The EU Strategy on Central Asia // The Friedrich Ebert Foundation. March 2020. P. 6. URL: https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bischkek/16168.pdf (accessed 14.10.2023); Kassenova N. The EU Strategy for Central Asia: Imperatives and Opportunities for Change. A View from Kazakhstan // Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung. 2016. URL: https://www.academia.edu/15611528/The_EU_Strategy_for_Central_Asia_Imperatives_and_Opportunities_for_Change._A_View_from_Kazakhstan (accessed: 14.10.2023).

management standards for closer integration into the global economy and to enhance the well-being of their citizens.[50]

Nevertheless, the articulated similarity of the foreign policy goals of the EU and Central Asia illustrates that, in the context of the geopolitical turn, Brussels securitizes connectivity by transmitting outside its own security considerations. According to these, certain actors (in particular, China) are perceived to exploit interdependence as a means of challenging the established rules-based order. The unwillingness of these actors to recognize the EU's normative leadership in defining the parameters of connectivity automatically excludes them from EU-sponsored infrastructure projects. The implementation of such a connectivity policy, combining the inclusion of some actors and the exclusion of others, ensures the EU's strategic sovereignty (autonomy). However, the EU officials are starting to recognize the Central Asian countries' right to possess strategic autonomy[51] as a *modus operandi* for addressing contemporary challenges.[52]

Thus, while maintaining the normativity and securitization typical of the connectivity concept, the EU is allowing for the possibility of exporting its own model of strategic autonomy to the Central Asian countries. This suggests that, within the framework of the connectivity concept and the geopolitical turn, the EU continues to consider Central Asia as part of its own normative space.

---

[50] Komilov A. Digitalization: How the EU Can Transform Central Asia // The Diplomat. August 23, 2023. URL: https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/digitalization-how-the-eu-can-transform-central-asia/ (accessed: 10.10.2023).

[51] Matveeva A. A New Opening for EU — Central Asia Relations? // Carnegie Europe. April 13, 2023. URL: https://carnegieeurope.eu/2023/04/13/new-opening-for-eu-central-asia-relations-pub-89454 (accessed: 02.05.2023).

[52] Opening Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the EU — Central Asia Connectivity Conference: Global Gateway // European External Action Service. November 18, 2022. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/opening-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-eu-central-asia-connectivity_en (accessed: 02.05.2023).

Conclusion

As the analysis has demonstrated, in the context of the current geopolitical turn, Brussels continues to consider the space of the Central Asian states as part of the EU-centred system of normative hegemony. This system is supported by the articulation of the connectivity concept. Since its emergence in the EU's official discourse, this concept has been normative because Brussels defines the criteria of connectivity through neoliberal constructs such as "sustainability" and "rules-based order." However, a series of crisis events in recent years has forced the EU leadership to articulate a realistic geopolitical discourse, which implies that the EU has to defend European sovereignty and achieve its strategic autonomy. This discursive shift has transformed the EU's connectivity concept, which is now positioned as:

1) an instrument to fend off the third countries' attempts to use interdependence as a political and economic weapon;

2) a way to preserve the rules-based order and achieve strategic autonomy for the EU.

Contrasting the EU and supporters of its approach with "unreliable" countries seeking a systemic change in the international order further securitizes the connectivity concept. Despite its initial focus on inclusion and the blurring of borders, it actually delineates the boundaries of the supporters of the liberal rules-based world order and protects them from the violating countries.

The EU is seeking to attract Central Asian states to the camp of supporters of the 'right' European connectivity. This is not least because China, the EU's systemic rival, is implementing its own models of governance and connectivity in Central Asia. The dependence of Central Asian states on Beijing gives Brussels a reason to promote in this region its own model of achieving strategic autonomy and rebalancing dependence on third countries. Brussels' implementation of the connectivity policy, which reduces the space for compromise and reproduces clearer boundaries between

supporters of the rules-based order and its constructed opponents can turn Central Asia into one of the most important spaces of normative confrontation. The contours of this confrontation and the resulting opportunities/constraints for the Central Asian states, as well as the supposed changes in the EU's Central Asian policy in the context of intensifying normative competition in Central Asia, are the subject of further research.

References

Agnew, J., & Corbridge, S. (1995). *Mastering space: Hegemony, territory and international political economy*. London: Routledge.

Boedeltje, F., & van Houtum, H. (2011). Brussels is speaking: The adverse speech geo-politics of the European Union towards its neighbours. *Geopolitics*, 16(1), 130–145. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2010.493791

Browning, C. S. (2018). Geostrategies, geopolitics and ontological security in the Eastern neighbourhood: The European Union and the 'new Cold War'. *Political Geography*, 62, 106–115. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.polgeo.2017.10.009

Dalby, S., & Tuathail, G. O. (1996). The critical geopolitics constellation: Problematizing fusions of geographical knowledge and power. *Political Geography*, 15(6–7), 451–456. https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298(96)00026-1

Dodds, K. J. (1993). Geopolitics, experts and the making of foreign policy. *Area,* 25(1), 70–74.

Dzhuraev, S. (2022) The EU's Central Asia policy: No chance for change? *Central Asian Survey*, 41(4), 639–653. https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2022.2054951

Elden, S. (2010). Thinking territory historically. *Geopolitics*, 15(4), 757–761. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650041003717517

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,* 41(4), 675–698. https://doi.org/10.1080/02634937.2021.1951662

Gaens, B., Sinkkonen, V., & Vogt, H. (2023). Connectivity and order: An analytical framework. *East Asia*, 40, 209–228. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-023-09401-z

Godehardt, N., & Kohlenberg, P. J. (2020). China's global connectivity politics: A meta-geography in the making. In P. J. Kohlenberg & N. Godehardt (Eds.), *The multidimensionality of regions in world politics* (pp. 191–214). London: Routledge.

Grygiel, J. (2015). The geopolitics of Europe: Europe's illusions and delusions. *Orbis*, 59(4), 505–517. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.orbis.2015.08.002

Haukkala, H. (2008). The European Union as a regional normative hegemon: The case of European Neighbourhood Policy. *Europe — Asia Studies*, 60(9), 1601–1622. https://doi.org/10.1080/09668130802362342

Hoffmann, K. (2010). The EU in Central Asia: Successful good governance promotion? *Third World Quarterly*, 31(1), 87–103. https://doi.org/10.1080/01436590903557397

Karjalainen, T. (2023). European norms trap? EU connectivity policies and the case of the global gateway. *East Asia*, 40, 293–316. https://doi.org/10.1007/s12140-023-09403-x

Lavenex, S., & Schimmelfennig, F. (2009). EU rules beyond EU borders: Theorizing external governance in European politics. *Journal of European Public Policy*, 16(6), 791–812. https://doi.org/10.1080/13501760903087696

Makarychev, A. (2020). Illiberalism, post-liberalism, geopolitics: The EU in Central Asia. *Acta Via Serica*, 5(1), 1–22. https://doi.org/10.22679/avs.2020.5.1.001

Moisio, S. (2002). EU eligibility, Central Europe, and the invention of applicant state narrative. *Geopolitics*, 7(3), 89–116. https://doi.org/10.1080/714000971

Moisio, S. (2015). Geopolitics/critical geopolitics. In J. Agnew, V. Mamadouh, A. J. Secor & J. Sharp. (Eds.), *The Wiley Blackwell companion to political geography* (pp. 220–234). Chichister: John Wiley & Sons Ltd. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781118725771.ch17

Olson, E., & Sayer, A. (2009). Radical geography and its critical standpoints: Embracing the normative. *Antipode*, 41(1), 180–198. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1467-8330.2008.00661.x

Romanova, T. A. (Ed.). (2019). *The European Union's concept of resilience: articulation and its consequences for Russia*. Saint Petersburg: Izd-vo Sankt-Peterburgskogo un-ta publ. (In Russian). EDN: MSJNVT

Romanova, T. A., & Kotsur, G. V. (2022). From political liberalization to geopolitical turn (evolution of the EU's discourse, and the link between the normative and the material). *World Economy and International Relations*, 66(8), 25–33. (In Russian). https://doi.org/10.20542/0131-2227-2022-66-8-25-33; EDN: IJCKIP

Romanova, T. A., & Mazanik, S. V. (2022). Coordinative discourse of strategic sovereignty tilting the European Union's institutional balance. *MGIMO Review of International Relations*, 15(5), 79–112. (In Russian). https://doi.org/10.24833/2071-8160-2022-5-86-79-112; EDN: OOIZHD

Smith, K. E. (2005). The outsiders: the European neighbourhood policy. *International Affairs*, 81(4), 757–773. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1468-2346.2005.00483.x

Tocci, N. (2020). Resilience and the role of the European Union in the world. *Contemporary Security Policy*, 41(2), 176–194. https://doi.org/10.1080/13523260.2019.1640342

Tuathail, G. Ó. (1996). *Critical geopolitics: The politics of writing global space*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Tuathail, G. Ó. (1998). Postmodern geopolitics? The modern geopolitical imagination and beyond. In S. Dalby & G. Ó. Tuathail (Eds.), *Rethinking geopolitics* (pp. 16–38). London: Routledge.

Tuathail, G. Ó. (1999). Understanding critical geopolitics: Geopolitics and risk society. *Journal of Strategic Studies*, 22(2–3), 107–124. https://doi.org/10.1080/01402399908437756

Tuathail, G. Ó., & Agnew, J. (1992). Geopolitics and discourse: Practical geopolitical reasoning in American foreign policy. *Political Geography*, 11(2), 190–204. https://doi.org/10.1016/0962-6298(92)90048-X

Whittaker, N. (2018). Island race: Ontological security and critical geopolitics in British parliamentary discourse. *Geopolitics*, 23(4), 954–985. https://doi.org/10.1080/14650045.2017.1390743

About the authors:

Mazanik Sergey Vladimirovich — Postgraduate Student, Department of European Studies, School of International Relations, Saint Petersburg State University; eLibrary SPIN-code: 2097-5678; ORCID: 0000-0003-1150-0193; e-mail: sergeymazanik97@gmail.com

Romanova Tatiana Alekseevna — PhD (Political Science), Associate Professor, Department of European Studies, School of International Relations, Saint Petersburg State University; eLibrary SPIN-code: 8791-1970; ORCID: 0000-0002-5199-0003; e-mail: t.romanova@spbu.ru