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Admiration despite Invisibility? How Kazakh Youth Perceive the European Union¹

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About the author



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Summary

Youth has always been one of the central target audiences of the EU's policies towards Central Asia, which was once again emphasized in the recent EU Strategy for the region. This paper scrutinizes how youth representatives in Kazakhstan, Brussels' closest partner in the region, perceive the EU and its policies. Analyzing qualitative data obtained through focus group discussions with students of leading Kazakhstani universities, the paper argues that the issue Brussels faces among youth is not an image problem, rather it is a visibility issue. Although Kazakhstani youth are aware of the EU's main 'attributes' at the basic level, they have little knowledge that goes beyond stereotypical, yet positive, images of it. This stereotyped admiration towards the EU, however, is not necessarily an outcome of Brussels' successful policies, rather it is partly inherited from the historically idealized image of Europe. The paper suggests that increasing its visibility and better communicating its policies and messages need to be a priority for the EU in Central Asia.

Introduction

Engagement with youth has long been one of the central pillars of the EU's policy towards Central Asia. Such attention to youth is not surprising though as over half of the approximately 70 million people in the region are under 30. To better address the needs of this major segment of the population, Brussels has been assisting regional governments in reforming their education sectors (e.g. TEMPUS, CAEP, Erasmus+); creating various academic exchange and mobility opportunities for Central Asian youth (e.g. Erasmus Mundus, Erasmus+); and developing European Studies at local universities (e.g. EU information centers, Jean Monnet modules, and Jean Monnet chairs). Equally important is to emphasize the role of European diplomats on the ground, who regularly visit local universities and schools, as well as of European national cultural centres such as the Goethe Institute and the Alliance Française, which also contribute to the common purpose of bringing Central Asian youth closer to Europe: to its culture, history, and values. After almost thirty years of such active engagement, some logical questions arise: how familiar are Central Asian youth with the EU? What do they think about Brussels' role and policies in the region? Do they recognise it as an important partner? Have Central Asian youth become more pro-European in their external orientations? This paper addresses these questions based on the qualitative data obtained through focus group discussions with students of Political Science, International Relations, and Area Studies in leading universities in Kazakhstan.

Predictable Stereotypes

Kazakh youth have highly complex and multidimensional image of the EU with both positive and negative elements, yet positive elements visibly dominating in many aspects. Generally speaking, the inferred perceptions of the EU do not come as a big surprise. Symbols such as the European flag, Euro, and the Schengen visa appeared among the most common spontaneous images of the EU in the eyes of focus group participants. Likewise, Kazakh youth commonly associate the EU with economic power. A strong currency, common market, free trade, export/import volume, investment capacity, and technology and innovation are visible associations with Brussels' economic capability. Consequently, the EU, first of all, is recognized as a key economic partner, a source of technological advancement, and a model of integration for Kazakhstan. Another highly valued dimension of the EU's positive image is a perceived high quality of life in European societies. 'Good life' in EU states is associated with quality social protection, education and

healthcare systems, as well as values of democracy, human rights, freedom, and equality.

Again, all these basic perceptions articulated by focus group participants are neither exclusive nor unexpected as they are largely in line with what has already been reported from different corners of the world. This suggests that how Kazakh youth generally perceives the EU is hardly different from dominant stereotypical images of the EU spread across the globe. Moreover, it can even be argued that these stereotypical, yet predominantly positive, images of the EU are not always an outcome of Brussels' activities, but rather are partly derived from the historically idealised image of Europe in the former Soviet countries. The image of Europe as the most prosperous region with social welfare, rich culture and history, and advanced research and innovation has historical roots in this region. What we observe from focus group discussions is that some participants struggle to clearly demarcate the boundary between Europe and the EU. Very often these two notions are used interchangeably. Therefore, it can be claimed that some elements of stereotypical perceptions of the EU discussed above are partly inherited from this historically idealised image of Europe, rather than being informed by participants' thorough knowledge of the EU and its policies.

Beyond Stereotypes: Lack of Awareness

Beyond these 'standard' set of stereotypical views, focus group participants, on average, were found incapable of demonstrating in-depth awareness of the EU and its policies, despite the assumption that the sample chosen for this study was more likely to be informed about the EU given their educational focus on Political Science and International Relations.

The lack of knowledge among participants was especially visible regarding EU-Kazakhstan/Central Asia relations. When asked about the current state of EU-Kazakhstan relations, rarely did focus group participants go beyond general assumptions that the sides cooperate in trade, the EU invests in oil, or it promotes values. These general articulations seem to emanate from students' general associations with the EU discussed above. Moreover, participants often directly admitted that following EU-Kazakhstan relations is of little interest to them. A striking example is participants' scant level of awareness about the EU's 2019 Central Asia Strategy. The adoption of the Strategy has been the biggest event in EU-Central Asia relations in recent times. When asked whether they had heard of

it, only a very few participants confirmed they had, but struggled to give details. Even when some participants illustrated more awareness of, and interest in, EU affairs, it seemed to be mainly conditioned by their personal experience, such as participation in an academic exchange program, a visit to an EU member-state, or a meeting with EU ambassadors.

Situative Suspicion

The EU positions itself as a 'force for good', which pursues not just self-interest, but rather helps other actors and positively shapes the whole international environment. Overall, focus group participants appear to share this point on the comparatively benign nature of the EU in Kazakhstan. From this aspect, the EU is sharply distinguished from China and Russia, which are viewed as being more dominating or even threatening neighbours. At the same time, this does not imply that Brussels is perceived as a purely altruistic actor. In that sense, trust of the EU is not absolute, but relative: it is in relation to other countries that Brussels is recognized as a more trustworthy actor. In fact, the majority of participants agreed that while interacting with Kazakhstan, the EU, first of all, pursues its own interests. Commonly, this relates to Brussels' perceived geopolitical and hydrocarbon interests in Kazakhstan, i.e. having a foothold next to Russia and China and exploiting Kazakhstan's oil reserves for its economic benefits.

Furthermore, certain aspects of the EU's policies may cause suspicion. First, there is a fear of losing national identity and culture because of emulating the European lifestyle. Some participants agreed that Kazakhstani and European culture have certain differences. An often repeated example is a respectful relationship between older and younger generations in Kazakhstan, which is perceived as lacking in European societies. In this context, admiration towards Europe should not lead to the abandonment of local culture, values, and traditions, as often articulated. Such a concern was especially salient among Kazakh-speaking participants. Another ambiguous issue is the rights of sexual minorities, which is perceived to be championed in EU countries. Focus group participants were found to have a polarised opinion on this issue. One group has neutral-positive attitudes and believes that the rights of sexual minorities are an indivisible part of human rights. Another group, however, perceives the promotion of these rights as culturally unsuitable for Kazakhstan. This arguably was the most negative aspect associated with the EU among focus group participants. Finally, some representatives of Kazakhstani youth tend to believe that the education and academic mobility programmes offered by the EU have negative side effects, too. This relates to the perceived brain drain from Kazakhstan to European countries. There is a

perception that the population in Europe is inevitably aging, therefore, the EU tries to attract skillful and well-educated young people from other countries. This is recognized as a challenge for Kazakhstan. In the context of this suspicion, it is articulated that Kazakhstan should be careful and act decisively to secure its own interests and foresee the negative consequences while interacting with Brussels.

Restrained Pro-Europeanness

In terms of foreign policy, Kazakhstani youth were reported to significantly favour close ties with Russia but, compared to the older generation, this pro-Russianness is less expressed among the youth. What the collected data indicate is the restrained pro-Europeanness among Kazakh youth. On the one hand, the EU, with some caveats, enjoys a predominantly positive image, as discussed above. The European model of development, including its social-economic conditions and political values, makes it a desired external actor that Kazakhstan could build closer ties with. On the other hand, a great majority of participants questioned to what extent a deeper partnership with Brussels is feasible in practice. Two concerns were commonly expressed by students.

The first relates to the possible deterioration of Kazakhstan's relations with Russia (and China) as a result of the shift towards the EU. Participants were in agreement that closer cooperation with Brussels should not be built at the expense of friendly relations with Kazakhstan's neighbours. Even those who demonstrated negative attitudes towards Russia's dominance in the region agreed that Kazakhstan cannot prioritise the EU over its immediate and more powerful neighbours. In this context, Kazakh youth appear to support the multi-vector foreign policy implemented by the government.

The second concern refers to the broader issue of Brussels' geopolitical capability. The EU, despite its perceived economic might, is not seen as a strong geopolitical actor, which can provide an equal alternative to other powerful actors. Brussels is often described as lacking internal unity and interest to play an active role in the region. Such scepticism is further fuelled by the perception that Brussels has been suffering from critical political and economic issues internally: consequences of the refugee crisis of 2015, Brexit, and COVID-19, more recently. Consequently, the doubt is whether the EU can and want to facilitate closer ties with Kazakhstan.

Again, these two issues do not imply that closer partnership with the EU is not supported by Kazakh youth, but rather the scepticism refers to whether Kazakhstan will be 'allowed' by its powerful neighbours to drift towards the EU, and

whether the EU itself has the capability to satisfy Kazakhstan's request of closer ties.

Conclusion

The discussed findings, first of all, imply that the problem the EU faces among Kazakhstani youth is not that of an image issue, but rather it is a visibility problem, despite the youth having always been one of the main target audiences of EU policies. In general terms, Kazakh youth appears to understand *what the EU is*: the 'standard' set of its attributes such as a successful integration, developed economy, progressive values, Euro, the Schengen visa, and *etc.*, were easily recalled by participants of this study. Yet, rarely did focus group participants demonstrate a thorough awareness of *what the EU does* in particular and *what impact it makes* in the country. In other words, their knowledge of the EU and its policies hardly go beyond widespread stereotypical views. What particularly important is that the low visibility is observed among young people, who are supposedly better informed about the EU than their average fellow citizens given their specific educational background. If even this group demonstrates scarce awareness of the EU and its policies, this can arguably be treated as one of the indicators of the insufficient reach of EU-led initiatives in the region. In this regard, the paper argues that the predominantly positive image that the EU enjoys may not necessarily be an outcome of Brussels' successful policy implementation in the country, but could partly result from the historically idealised image of *Europe*. In the long run, this positive image may vanish under the pressure of the increasingly negative information flow concerning the EU's future. Therefore, boosting its visibility, effectively communicating the impact of its policies, and better articulating its main messages need to be the top priorities for Brussels to preserve the positive image that the EU currently enjoys. The new EU Strategy for Central Asia clearly acknowledges this issue, but a more active approach is needed in this direction, including a better use of social media platforms and other new communication technologies.