

Partnership and Cooperation Agreements and the European Union's energy security in the context of Central Asia

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Abstract

This article presents a qualitative research with the aim of analysing and prognosing the future of relations between the European Union and hydrocarbon exporting countries in Central Asia, based on bilateral Partnership and Cooperation Agreements. The results of analysis, set within the broader geopolitical competition for influence in the region, distinguishes Turkmenistan's significant role as both potentially important state for the future of the EU's energy security, as well as the greatest challenge in building relations with the states of the region in a framework that requires a common axiological foundation.

Keywords: Central Asia, European Union, energy security, Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), geopolitics, Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan

Umowy o Partnerstwie i Współpracy a bezpieczeństwo energetyczne Unii Europejskiej w kontekście Azji Środkowej

Streszczenie

Artykuł przedstawia wyniki badania jakościowego mającego na celu analizę i prognozowanie przyszłości relacji Unii Europejskiej z państwami-eksporterami węgłowodorów w Azji Środkowej, opartych o porozumienia bilateralne – Umowy o Partnerstwie i Współpracy. Wyniki analizy rywalizacji geopolitycznej o wpływy w regionie wskazują na rolę Turkmenistanu jako państwa będącego potencjalnie istotnym dla przyszłości bezpieczeństwa energetycznego UE, a także na największe wyzwania w budowaniu relacji z państwami regionu w formule zakładającej wymóg wspólnego fundamentu aksjologicznego.

Słowa kluczowe: Azja Środkowa, Unia Europejska, bezpieczeństwo energetyczne, Umowa o Partnerstwie i Współpracy, geopolityka, Turkmenistan, Kazachstan, Kirgistan, Uzbekistan, Tadżykistan

The shape of the modern world is largely based on the energy released from hydrocarbons. Free access to them, whether through domestic resources or international trade, makes it possible to maintain the economic structure of states. Countries which do not have a surplus of these raw materials are forced to meet their needs with imports, ideally from the most stable and cheapest possible source. The European Union (EU), being an entity comprised of countries with non-uniformed energy sectors, is based on varied potential of internal deposits of energy resources and developed external sources of obtaining them that secure a possible deficit. As a whole, the EU is dependent on the continuous diversification of sources of hydrocarbons to ensure regional flexibility of energy policies, thus increase the competition among the exporting countries, resulting in lower prices. These actions help to reduce the operating costs of the Member States' economies and increase their ability to adapt to potential changes in the international system. An important factor conditioning the role played by the EU in ensuring energy security of Member States is the possibility of a more effective development of supra-regional trade agreements, which are to facilitate the flow of resources, thereby increasing the number of economically justified directions of trade exchange. In this context, economies of scale are also important, as they enable more effective negotiations with potential trading partners, facilitating the joint development of arrangements that are also beneficial for individual Member States.

The issue that will be addressed in this article is the EU's potential for political expansion, and ultimately increased trade cooperation, in a region that is rich in energy resources, but still underdeveloped in terms of bilateral relations – Central Asia. By analysing the countries of the region that are most attractive to the EU in terms of hydrocarbon trade and that offer the prospect of significant cooperation on hydrocarbon imports, it will be possible to identify both opportunities and threats for closer cooperation between them and the EU. Next will be conducted an analysis of the form of cooperation of the EU's agreements with countries of the region, expressed in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), and in the case of Kazakhstan – the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA). It will allow to find an answer to the research problem – whether agreements in the form of PCA/EPCA are the universal tool for building long-term relations between the EU and the countries of Central Asia with significant hydrocarbon export potential.

The hypothesis of this research is that despite the local differences in the political systems, economies, as well as the history of bilateral relations with the EU, the PCA/EPCA is a universal form of building long-term cooperation due to: 1) from the perspective of the EU, the possibility to effectively build its soft power in the hydrocarbon exporting countries of the region; 2) from the perspective of the regional partner countries, being the only institutionalised form of cooperation that allows building stable trade relations with the EU market in a long term.

A comparative method and secondary analysis of quantitative and qualitative existing data will be used to analyse the countries of the region in terms of their importance for the EU's energy security. Then the extent of the relationship between cooperation in the

framework of the PCA and the EPCA and the potential for building stable relations with the previously analysed Central Asian countries will be examined.

Strategic potential of the region

Central Asia is a region that for centuries has been a key area for trade flow, such as the historic Silk Road, connecting Europe and the Middle East with China. It was also a field of competition between empires when the Great Game¹ was played over the region, between the British Empire and the Russian Empire, eventually incorporating it into the Russian sphere of influence and formally holding it until the fall of the Soviet Union. Today, despite the independence of the countries in the region, it is still an area where Russia has significant influence, e.g., through historical infrastructural conditions (i.e., the direction of the flow of energy resources), or the presence of a large Russian minority, which influences the functioning of the local political systems. All republics of Central Asia² (European Commission WW/W), except for Turkmenistan, are members of the Russian-dominated Commonwealth of Independent States, thus increasing Russia's political influence and, through economic ties, maintaining its current position in the region. A similar example is the Eurasian Economic Union, which includes Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

However, the complexity of the network of influences in Central Asia, after the independence of the countries in the region, goes beyond the historically determined ties with the Russian state. This region, because of its geopolitical position constituting the southern edge of the area falling within the concept of *Heartland* (Mackinder 1904: p. 312; 1919: p. 93), is also one of the places where civilisations meet (Huntington 1993: p. 33), creating in this area historical conditions of transitional external influences. This is a region where, in addition to the traditional dominance of Russia, another superpower with significant ambitions to secure strategic inland-directed interests – China – is now playing an increasingly important role. China's focus on expanding its influence in the Central Asian states is conditioned by their geographic location, crucial for transcontinental trade plans, and potential access to a strategic reservoir of hydrocarbons, so necessary for its growing economy as one of the world's major hydrocarbon importers. The proximity of China's borders has allowed many countries in the region to increase their inflow of external capital, thus weakening their economic dependence on Russia and creating an environment of rivalry between the two countries. China's position as the world's second largest economy and its experience in foreign infrastructure investment makes it an important counterweight to Russia, despite its historical roots in the region.

Nevertheless, the region is not a monolith. It is characterised by significant differences, both in the raw material potential and in states' internal and foreign policies. This fact

¹ The 19th century geopolitical rivalry for dominance over the area of Central Asia, Persia, Afghanistan and modern day Pakistan, between British and Russian empires.

² Limiting the area of Central Asia to the post-Soviet area, which includes five republics - Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

makes it necessary to analyse its individual countries in order to identify all political opportunities and threats for possible closer cooperation. The states of the region that play a potentially significant role in ensuring the EU's energy security are those with a positive balance of trade in energy resources. It is also important to determine the countries with the infrastructure capacity for hydrocarbon extraction and its transmission to European customers to systematise the criteria for selecting partners for trade cooperation.

Three countries in the region fulfil the conditions to be indicated as the countries with significant import opportunities for the EU – Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Each of them differs significantly in terms of political potential for cooperation, geopolitical dependencies and the predominance of a particular type of exported energy resource. To discern the opportunities and threats for potential cooperation between the EU and a given country, it is necessary to analyse international position, political system and energy sector. This analysis will allow to determine, in the case of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, the basis on which cooperation on the PCA and the EPCA has been built, and in the case of Turkmenistan, what differentiates it from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, as well as to determine what factors potentially limit its closer cooperation with the EU.

Kazakhstan

As the geographically largest country in Central Asia, Kazakhstan has both the ability to extract energy resources in quantities far exceeding domestic consumption and the capacity for their efficient transmission. The territory of Kazakhstan, historically, economically and demographically linked to the Russian state, after gaining independence in 1991, is still to a significant extent under the political influence of Moscow. Currently, a strong connection of political and economic interests of Kazakhstan and Russia is determined by following factors: (1) Russia's position as the most important trading partner, and (2) a considerable number of ethnic Russians living in the territory of Kazakhstan, who constitute about 20% of all its citizens. Kazakhstan, as a republic which was formerly a part of the USSR, has a hydrocarbon transmission infrastructure inherited from pre-independence times, concentrated in the northern direction, being a part of Russia's transmission system (Kochanek 2017: p. 102).

Kazakhstan's resource potential makes it one of the major hydrocarbon exporters in the region. With the largest oil reserves in Central Asia (estimated at 30 billion barrels) and significant natural gas deposits (estimated at 2.407 trillion m³), it is an important element in potentially increasing the region's trade links with the EU (Central Intelligence Agency 2021a). Kazakhstan's traditional export destinations to date have been the EU, Russia and China, but Kazakhstan has the potential to increase the volume of its raw material exports, due to the country's steadily growing production capacity. Kazakhstan is also a country where 12% of the world's uranium deposits are located. This fact adds to the importance of economic relations with this country, given that 26% of energy produced in the EU is nuclear, as well as the strategic importance of Kazakhstan being one of the few uranium exporting countries in the world (World Nuclear Association 2021a; 2021b).

The geopolitical position of Kazakhstan and its historically established ties with Russia make it difficult to diversify the directions of export of own energy resources. This is contributed to by the fact of Russia's dominating the infrastructure for the transmission of Kazakh natural gas in the European direction, requiring Kazakhstan to have Russia as intermediary in the sales process, and thus involving it partially in the Russian geostrategy. This fact makes cooperation between Kazakhstan and the EU technically difficult due to the requirement of taking into account Moscow's political interests, or the need for large investments to create new transmission lines. Due to its geopolitical and economic potential, Kazakhstan is an important element of the rivalry between Russia and the EU, which is looking for opportunities to broaden the directions of international cooperation. If the EU would like to have a chance to build better relations with the largest country in the strategically important region, it is required to create a successful framework for cooperation as an alternative to the traditional model of interdependence with Russia. However, the fact that Russia possesses a much smaller, non-structural, civilisational attraction potential provides the EU with an opportunity by giving it a field on which the EU can base the process of building political, and consequently economic, relations. What is also beneficial for the EU is the lack of confidence in Kazakhstan for Chinese investment and influence, which results from their attempts to aggressively enter the structure of Kazakhstan's economy (Kochanek 2017: p. 106). This reduces the competition for the EU for political influence in the country, while putting pressure on the Kazakh government to choose options. Although Kazakhstan still falls short of the European archetype of a democratic state under the rule of law (Freedom House 2021a; Transparency International 2020), it is a country with both the most transparent political system in the region and a large potential for further political reform.

Uzbekistan

With a population of over thirty-three million, making it the most populous country in the area, Uzbekistan is one of the main geopolitical entities in Central Asia. In addition to its population, its position in the region is also conditioned by its energy resources, with natural gas deposits being among the largest in the world. An important factor in the international economic system is also the fact that Uzbekistan's geographical position forces it to be a transit state that would cooperate with the neighbouring countries, which have a similar economic model built upon the hydrocarbon sector, when it comes to transporting their surplus energy resources to the main markets (Pirani 2019: p. 21–22).

Despite Uzbekistan's natural gas deposits of 1.841 trillion m³, a sizeable portion of them is used for domestic consumption, leaving only 18% (9.401 billion m³) of the extracted natural gas (52.1 billion m³) for export (see: Central Intelligence Agency 2021b). In terms of energy export architecture, Uzbekistan is an important country not only in terms of the upstream³ sector, but also in terms of the midstream⁴ sector, due to its dense natural gas

³ A term used to describe a stage in the oil and gas industry that involves exploration and production.

⁴ In the oil and gas industry, it defines activities that include the processing, storage and transportation of oil and gas.

transmission infrastructure, which is an element of natural gas transit from countries such as Turkmenistan to world markets. As a consequence of the above-mentioned factors, Uzbekistan, being both an exporting country and an important element in the natural gas transmission system, currently has a significant role in ensuring stable supplies of this commodity to countries such as Russia and China (see: Studium Europy Wschodniej UW 2020).

Uzbekistan's position as an exporter of energy resources, its economic potential and the fact that it borders all countries in the region, make it a site of a geopolitical rivalry between the powers building up their influence in Central Asia. It is necessary to gain dominant political influence in Uzbekistan in order to take control of one of the most important control points for the flow of energy resources. A significant example of this country's position is its role in China's *Belt and Road Initiative*, in which Uzbekistan would host the transport infrastructure between the EU and China. An increase in Chinese investment has also led to a sudden increase in investment by Russia, which is trying to regain the influence it lost in the country after 1991 (Kochanek 2017: p. 110). This may indicate that policymakers in Moscow assume that the struggle for influence in the individual states of the region is a zero-sum game, where pro-Chinese Uzbekistan would be politically and economically distant from Russia. This perspective could allow the EU to recognise the principles of this competition, its stakes, and ultimately the optimal direction of its external policy. Uzbekistan's position forces it to attempt to maintain a balance between the various international actors to retain flexibility in its internal and external policies. This translates into a situation where Uzbekistan, having an economic model based on the export of energy resources, is forced to seek stable markets for their sale, thus offering an opportunity to the EU as a partner in diversifying Uzbek exports.

Turkmenistan

One of the countries of the Central Asia, which is potentially becoming increasingly important in the policy of securing new directions for supplies of energy resources to the countries of the European Union, is Turkmenistan. This republic, located to the south of Uzbekistan and bordering the Caspian Sea, due to the deposits of energy raw materials found on its territory, is not only the object of political interest for traditional actors in the region, such as Russia and China, but also for the EU and such countries as India. Turkmenistan's natural gas reserves constitute a major part of its geopolitical importance and they are a key element in the policies that the country may pursue in the future in the context of the international legitimacy of the Turkmen government.

Turkmenistan has the largest deposits of natural gas in the region, making it an important element in potentially enhancing the EU's energy security through diversification of hydrocarbon import sources. The estimated size of Turkmenistan's natural gas deposits is 7,504 trillion m³, which, combined with current production levels of 77.45 billion m³, means that basing EU imports on Turkmenistan could be part of a long-term supply diversification strategy (see: Central Intelligence Agency 2021c). Despite Turkmenistan's potential in this regard, however, there is the issue of the country's difficulties in both increasing

the amount of natural gas produced and exporting it. Through limited transmission infrastructure, Turkmenistan's export policy is perpetuated in traditional directions, such as the currently dominant ones of Russia, China, and Iran (see: U.S. Energy Information Administration 2016). More than half of Turkmenistan's natural gas production is being consumed by domestic needs, limiting its export capacity and making it dependent on the current investment processes in the extractive sector in order to modernise it, as well as to increase its production potential. In addition, there are plans to build a new gas pipeline – the Trans Caspian Gas Pipeline (TCP) – connecting Turkmenistan's upstream gas industry to potential customers in the western direction, especially the EU countries (see: European Commission 2021). This creates a situation, in which increased production generates new opportunities for states previously not cooperating with Turkmenistan in terms of natural gas imports, with the prospect of changing the EU's natural gas security architecture.

A distinctive feature of Turkmenistan is its political system, which has the most visible elements of an authoritarian system among the countries of the region (see: Freedom House 2021b). It is also characterised by the phenomenon of links between the operation of businesses and political sphere, with the result that external economic entities cooperating with Turkmen companies must operate in an area entirely licensed by the authorities. It is also exceedingly difficult for companies from outside Turkmenistan to enter the Turkmen market directly, including the energy or mining sectors, which means that the scale of influence that the EU may indirectly hold in the country is smaller than in Kazakhstan or Uzbekistan (Kochanek 2017: p. 113). Turkmenistan's political and economic system makes closer cooperation with the EU a challenge not only to the technical process of fine-tuning bilateral relations, but also to the discussion as to whether closer relations with authoritarian states are detrimental to the EU's image on the international arena. Due to the clear differences between the EU's outwardly proclaimed values and the economic imperative in building international relations, the EU may lose, in the eyes of external observers, the authenticity of its proclaimed system of values, which is the basis of its soft power and one of the elements of its strategy to build influence in the region. The geopolitical opportunity for the EU, in turn, lies in Turkmenistan's foreign policy stance aimed at contesting Russia's traditional role in the region, potentially forcing decision-makers in Ashgabat to seek alternative directions for international cooperation. In this case, the greatest obstacle to building the EU's influence in Turkmenistan is China, which does not impose conditions for cooperation other than pragmatic trade, allowing Turkmen decision-makers to maintain the domestic status quo at a low political cost.

The PCA/EPCA cooperation framework

The Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) and the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA), as its direct continuation, are tools in the development of the EU's cooperation with third countries, aiming to systematise the model of establishing relations, unifying the principles, criteria and direction in which this coop-

eration should proceed. They are instruments of European foreign policy, providing the legal basis for agreements and direct cooperation with the EU (Kalicka-Mikołajczyk 2013: p. 55–56). The aim of the PCA is to support economic development, stable democracy and civil society in partner countries, as well as to enable the introduction of European investments and entering trade relations with countries covered both by the European Neighbourhood Policy and countries outside it, such as Russia, the Middle East or Asian countries. By building both formal dependencies and commonalities in the very axiology of state functioning, these agreements may also indirectly serve the function of supporting the expansion of European political influence. As foreign policy's tools, PCAs and EPCAs can be used to increase the EU's influence on the individual states of the region, representing the EU's vital interest in certain areas of EU functioning, such as energy security of the Member States. The problematic aspect, however, is the translation of normative order into measurable reality, and thus also into objective distribution of power in geopolitics. However, political structures as complex as the EU require a development of a rigid framework of agreements, which are not susceptible to the dynamics of internal political changes, enabling long-term building of relations with third countries.

Out of the analysed countries, with the potential to increase the EU's energy security, Kazakhstan (1994–2016) and Uzbekistan (since 1999) have experience of bilateral cooperation within the PCA. Both countries, meeting the requirements set by the EU⁵, such as adherence to the principles of democracy, free market and respect for human rights, found themselves in the structure of cooperation increasing the possibility of trade exchange with the EU. As part of the reduction of trade barriers between the countries concerned and the EU, the movement of energy resources has also been facilitated (see: Partnership and Cooperation Agreement 1999). The fact of abolishing trade restrictions in this area does not determine the increase in the amount of imported raw materials (non-tariff transmission costs), but it does increase the competitiveness of the European export direction, due to the political need to remove additional trade barriers. Cooperation within the PCA, apart from having a direct impact on the issues of export of energy resources to the EU, by imposing requirements on the partner countries aimed at their further approximation to the EU model of statehood, also influences the long-term processes of change within their political systems, with time increasing the stability of the EU influence in these countries.

An important form of cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan is also the EPCA, which has been in force since 2020. It is a direct development of the PCA, which is intended as a culmination of the work on systematising bilateral relations with the countries that have managed to fulfil the previous provisions of cooperation⁶. Being a continuation and a clarification of the detailed organisation of this relationship under the previous framework, the EPCA only develops its individual elements, this time focusing more strongly on the issues of economic development and building a free market.

⁵ At the time of the entry into force of both agreements, the signatory was not the European Union, but the European Communities.

⁶ These countries are Kazakhstan, analysed due to its export potential, and also Kyrgyzstan.

The issues of the agreement related to the energy sector have also been strengthened, further deepening the provisions concerning the facilitation of trade in energy resources, which were previously expressed in the PCA. The above-mentioned elements, formally resulting from a change in the form of bilateral cooperation between Kazakhstan (and potentially Uzbekistan in the future) and the EU, do not transform the principles of the previous PCA framework, and thus represent another stage in consequently building the EU position in the region (see: Council Decision (EU) 2016/123).

None the less, the case of Turkmenistan is different from the classical model of building relations between the EU and third countries. After 1991, Turkmenistan, being in a similar geopolitical position to other states in the region due to its geographic location, economic models and post-Soviet origins, became the example of authoritarian republic, even in the region experiencing problems with its transition to full democracy. However, the difficulty of building EU–Turkmenistan relations in a framework that requires a common axiological ground and rigidly defined framework of cooperation, such as the PCA, was not initially a matter of the complete impossibility of political rapprochement. This is evidenced by the talks conducted with Turkmenistan on developing cooperation with the EU within the PCA in the first years after the dissolution of the USSR. In 1998, these negotiations led to a declaration of Turkmenistan's desire to join this framework but were not ratified by the European Parliament due to human rights violations by the Turkmen authorities (Jarosiewicz, Lang 2015).

In the case of Turkmenistan, the main alternative⁷ of defining relations with the EU was the Generalised Scheme of Preferences (GSP), which addresses only the basic issues of cooperation. In the GSP, partner countries that have a low level of economic development, and which base their economy on the export of a single, dominant commodity, are not required to pay duties on their export to the EU (see: European Commission 2015). This type of cooperation allowed the Turkmen authorities to obtain economic benefits without incurring the political cost associated with the requirement of thorough reforms⁸. This agreement, which did not so strongly determine the direction of a given country's rapprochement to the statehood model promoted by the EU (as in the case of the PCA), and which in practice was limited mainly to economic issues, was thus not a key element in increasing the EU's soft power to the extent of bringing Turkmenistan closer to the West (Czermińska 2019: p. 75). Nevertheless, after Turkmenistan officially became an upper-middle income country in 2016 and ceased to meet the criteria of the GSP, this country faced the need to redefine how its relations with the EU were to be built. Turkmenistan returned to active talks on its accession to the PCA that will allow

⁷ Beside the Interim Agreement on Trade and Trade-Related Matters, in place since 2010, which also partially regulated trade relations between the EU and Turkmenistan.

⁸ Formally, cooperation under the GSP requires a partner country to sign a number of human rights conventions to be implemented. However, Turkmenistan, even though it is one of the bottom countries in the rankings of democratisation and respect for human rights, primarily had the opportunity to join the GSP framework and then was not removed from the cooperation on that basis, but only because it no longer fulfilled the condition of being one of the least developed countries. This fact may indicate the real position of the value system element in this form of cooperation.

a partial return to preferential trade terms between the two entities. The EU, through the European Parliament, reiterated in 2019 that any steps bringing Turkmenistan closer to the PCA cooperation are connected to the Turkmen authorities' respect for human rights, leaving the possibility of ratifying the agreement in limbo for the foreseeable future (Soutullo et al. 2021).

The element dominating the issue of EU–Turkmenistan relations is whether the EU will be able to apply the PCA bilateral agreement in a pragmatic manner, reducing its expectations of real reforms in Turkmenistan. By focusing on issues that directly translate into the strength of its influence in the country, such as facilitating the EU's access to Turkmen natural gas, without real demands for domestic political reforms, the EU can achieve a seemingly easy advantage on this part of the geopolitical competition for influence in Central Asia. However, the EU's seemingly idealistic adherence to democratisation or human rights requirements in cooperation with Turkmenistan, may force it, hoping to take advantage of the privileged position afforded by the PCA in trade with the EU, to make real reforms, which would place it organically closer to Brussels, as well as increase the EU's soft power in Ashgabat, and thereby reduce the unpredictability of Turkmen geopolitical drift.

Conclusions

The region of Central Asia is the arena of growing geopolitical rivalry between the EU, Russia and China. This situation is conditioned by its significant potential in terms of both the size of its deposits of energy resources and the scale of their export. The multiplicity of countries interested in cooperation with the region in terms of importing raw materials affects the occurrence of competition not only for their limited amount (taking into account the capacity of infrastructure), but also for political influence, which translates indirectly into the final cost of imports and its accessibility. The more political connections or influence of a given political centre, the greater the possibility of proportional weighting of political issues over economic ones in the process of evaluating cooperation costs. The EU, as the entity with the world's largest economy (also in terms of demand for energy resources), may be a significant beneficiary of such form of cooperation. The EU's way (in contrast to e.g. China's model of subsidising strategic companies to dominate the local market) is to increase the attractiveness of trade cooperation and to create a geopolitical environment, to which countries such as Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan or Turkmenistan will aspire due to EU's civilisational gravity.

The strategic importance of individual Central Asian exporting countries for EU energy security may vary depending on the future structure of the Member States' energy sectors. Regardless of whether Central Asia were to provide supplies to secure the growth in demand for natural gas or oil, the region may be important in the process of diversifying the directions of supply of these resources, and thus indirectly reduce the vulnerability of the EU internal stability to political tensions between the Member States, as it is emerged in the case of natural gas imports from the Russian direction. Kazakhstan being in the structure of the EPCA, but also Uzbekistan, which is developing cooperation with the EU

currently within the PCA, are examples of the fact that some of the main states of the region in terms of hydrocarbon export potential see the opportunity to use it to achieve the goal of building stable cooperation with the EU. However, Turkmenistan is especially important, not only in terms of hydrocarbon exports, as currently the largest exporter of natural gas in the region, but also as an example of demonstrating the challenges that the PCA/EPCA faces as a potentially universal model for building relations between the EU and countries in Central Asia.

Moving within the existing legal framework for the EU's cooperation with the countries of the region, the PCA, and ultimately the EPCA, is currently the only formal option for building a long-term relationship. Turkmenistan, which was enjoying the benefits of its status in trade with the EU under the GSP, after being deprived of the opportunity to maintain a favourable trade position without incurring significant political costs, has returned to the PCA accession talks. The situation in which Turkmenistan, being a country that will be required to deeply reform its political system to meet the conditions for cooperation contained in the PCA, assumes that facilitated access to the European market is worth the potential costs, demonstrates that the EU's role in the region is already significant and the very fact of the attractiveness of the European market makes the countries of the region ready (at least declaratively) to adjust to the model of state promoted by the EU. The rapprochement of actors, initially motivated by economic benefits, may indirectly translate into political reforms within the Central Asian countries, and as a result, according to the conceptual assumptions and requirements of the PCA, be an effective expansion of EU values, further increasing its ability to influence these countries with its soft power.

However, a crucial factor that the EU's foreign policy strategy must consider is the fact that there are alternative directions for countries like Turkmenistan to build geopolitical ties with China or Russia, where the framework of cooperation could be exclusively economic. The EU, wishing to compete for influence in that country, may be forced in the future to lower its requirements regarding implementation of EU values by its partners. This could undermine the role of these values in building international cooperation, and thus lessen their importance in building relations with the remaining states in the region. To remain an attractive geopolitical option for the analysed states, the EU may have to find an equilibrium between trying to expand its values, which translate into soft power, and remaining effective in competition with states that do not set axiological requirements for economic cooperation.

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