

## **The European Union's Soft Power Dynamics in Kazakhstan**

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### **Abstract:**

The collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics in 1991 presented the European Union with an opportunity to extend its influence into the heart of Eurasia, and particularly into Kazakhstan. Within Joseph Nye's theoretical framework on soft power, this study explores three key sources with respect to soft power, namely culture, foreign policy and political values. Through an examination of the European Union's involvement with Kazakhstan, the study provides valuable insights into the multifaceted mechanisms employed by the former to exert influence on this strategic partner in Central Asia over the past three decades.

**Keywords:** European Union, Kazakhstan, Central Asia, soft power, public diplomacy

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## Introduction

After gaining independence in 1991, Kazakhstan immediately became the focus of heightened attention from several European countries and subsequently the entire European Union (EU). Initially, Brussels and leading European states were interested in Kazakhstan primarily due to their concerns about global security, and specifically Kazakhstan's inheritance of nuclear weapons from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the voluntary renunciation procedures associated with these.

Only later did energy-related issues take precedence, in light of Kazakhstan's significant reserves of hydrocarbons and uranium, which would enable the possibility of substantial supplies to Europe. Today, after 30 years of cooperation<sup>1</sup>, the EU's main interest in Kazakhstan remains unchanged. As to actual cooperation, the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA)<sup>2</sup> between the two entities notes that Kazakhstan holds a significant position as a crucial ally for the EU in Central Asia, a position primarily attributed to the former's substantial reservoir of energy resources and the economic prospects associated with Eurasian connectivity in terms of trade and investment<sup>3</sup>.

In addition, and considering the strategic position of Kazakhstan as a state occupying extensive geographic space in the heart of Eurasia at the crossroads of Russia and China, the EU has placed increasing importance on the task of bringing Kazakhstan into the sphere of Western influence. It endeavours to extend normative influence on the latter, specifically emphasizing the cultivation of European values in the terms of democracy, effective governance, human rights and rule of law. These

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<sup>1</sup> 2 February 2023, the 30<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations of the Establishment Of Diplomatic Relations in the EU and Kazakhstan, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan/celebration-30th-anniversary-establishment-diplomatic-relations-between-european-union-and\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan/celebration-30th-anniversary-establishment-diplomatic-relations-between-european-union-and_en)

<sup>2</sup> The European Union-Kazakhstan Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement entered into force on 1 March 2020.

<sup>3</sup> EU-Kazakhstan EPCA, Official Journal of the European Union, L 052, 25 February 2022. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=OJ%3AL%3A2020%3A052%3ATOC>

principles are actively advocated as crucial prerequisites for fostering bilateral connection between the two<sup>4</sup>.

On gaining independence, Kazakhstan too expressed interest in closer ties with Western states, including those in Europe, and this readiness for enhanced interaction with the EU persists, largely as a result of Europe's development of 'passive soft power'<sup>5</sup>. As asserted by Nielsen, the allure of the EU was so compelling that numerous non-member states aspired not only to establish close connections with it but present themselves as EU membership candidates<sup>6</sup>.

In 2008, Kazakhstan launched a new, and unprecedented, foreign policy initiative whereby, at the directive of the Kazakhstan head of state, its Ministry of Foreign Affairs developed the State Program of the Republic of Kazakhstan's 'Path to Europe'. This consisted of ten priorities with respect to improving vital points in areas related to cooperation with the EU and envisaged a set of measures to enhance the state's interaction with the EU across several areas; technological and energy cooperation, transport, the development of relations in economy and trading, collaboration in the development of small and medium-sized businesses, cooperation involved in improving life quality, as well as humanitarian dimensions. It also aimed at improving the institutional and legal framework of Kazakhstan using the positive European experience<sup>7</sup>.

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<sup>4</sup> Rustem Kurmanguzhin, "O vklade Kazakhstana v sozdanie Strategii novogo partnerstva Evropejskogo Soyuza so stranami Central'noj Azii na 2007-2013 gg," *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, 360 (2012): 90-93. [Kazakhstan's contribution of elaboration of "The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership for 2007-2013"], *Vestnik Tomskogo gosudarstvennogo universiteta*, 360 (2012): 90-93.

<sup>5</sup> Passive soft power refers to the attractiveness and influence that naturally emanate from a country's culture, policies, and values without intentional efforts to project or promote them. It is more about the inherent appeal and influence that arise organically. Joseph S. Nye, *The Future of Power* (New York, N.Y.: Public Affairs, 2011), 94.

<sup>6</sup> Kristian Nielsen, "EU Soft Power and the Capability-Expectations Gap", *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 9(5) (2013): 729.

<sup>7</sup> Gosudarstvennaya Programma "Put' v Evropu" na 2009-2011 gody: utv. Ukazom Prezidenta Respubliki Kazakhstan ot 29 avgusta 2008 goda, No. 653." Retrieved from 22.04.2023. // [The State Program "Path to Europe" for 2009-2011: Approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated August 29, 2008, No. 653]. Retrieved from [http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/U080000653\\_22.04.2023](http://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/U080000653_22.04.2023)

Kazakhstan's strong leanings towards Europe are evident in the related robust and animated engagement with organizations in Europe. It has an important role in the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE) and assumed its chairmanship in 2010. Kazakhstan maintains prominent relationships with large numbers of international organizations including the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), the European Council and the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). These extensive and active relationships with European organizations are of particular importance in Kazakhstan's European mission.

Thus, given Kazakhstan's interest in Europe, there is reason to believe that Kazakhstan is influenced by European soft power. Guided by Nye's theoretical perspective on soft power resources, this article provides a thorough analysis of European soft power in Kazakhstan from 1991 to 2022. It explores key resources of European soft power such as culture, political values, and foreign policies, and offers a comprehensive understanding of how the EU, as a supranational entity, has strategically employed soft power to build influence in Kazakhstan.

The study employs a qualitative research methodology, combining documentary analysis and elite interviews. Official documents, policy statements and diplomatic exchanges form the primary sources, offering insights into the rhetoric and strategies employed by the EU and Kazakhstan. Elite interviews with key diplomatic figures provide nuanced perspectives on the motivations, challenges and outcomes of EU soft power initiatives in Kazakhstan.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Joseph S. Nye, an American professor and scholar at Harvard University, first introduced the concept of 'soft power' in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*.

According to Nye, soft power refers to one country persuading other nations to align their interests with its own – a concept characterized as co-optive or soft power, as opposed to the hard or command power of

ordering others to comply with its desires<sup>8</sup>. While hard power involves coercion, sanctions, payments, bribery and other resources within the behavior spectrum, soft power relies on creating an agenda, building appeal and drawing others through institutions, values, culture and policies. Soft power then, as defined by Nye, is the 'second face of power', and primarily involves creating a center of attraction. Through this center of attraction, which is fed by various sources, other states or public opinions come to embrace your ideals and policies and begin to act accordingly. The essence of soft power is to persuade others to accept foreign policy preferences without the use of force. States effectively employing soft power on the three-dimensional chessboard achieve their goals by creating an allure for other states without the need for hard power tools<sup>9</sup>.

#### *Sources of soft power*

Using this Nye theoretical framework that identifies three sources of soft power (culture, political values and foreign policy), this article examines EU soft power in Kazakhstan<sup>10</sup>.

Nye defines *culture* as a set of values and practices that create meaning for a society<sup>11</sup>. In the modern age, branding created through popular culture figures allows us to see these influences in different parts of the world. Music, art, cinema, gastronomy, fashion, traditions, education, architecture, sports and literature - all are part of the comprehensive phenomenon called culture and are 'marketed' as soft power sources for countries.

Another soft power source is the *political values* demonstrated by a country through domestic and foreign policy. Ease of access to information and increasing demands for all kinds of freedoms enhance the gravitational

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<sup>8</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), 6.

<sup>9</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics* (New York: Public Affairs, 2004), 5.

<sup>10</sup> *Idem*, 11.

<sup>11</sup> *Idem*, 11.

power of those countries which put forward and implement political values with respect to peace, sustainability, rule of law and human rights<sup>12</sup>.

*Foreign policy* also plays an important role in relation to soft power; countries become influential in international politics when their foreign policies are perceived as 'legitimate and moral'. In today's world, it is difficult for states to sustain policies that are not approved of /supported by international and regional organizations, as acting in the face of reaction from the international community may result in various political and economic sanctions. Therefore, states' demonstration of political values admired by others and their following a foreign policy correlated with these values increases their prestige in the international community and encourages other countries to follow their respected foreign policy. In this context, the term 'soft power' is used in such foreign relations<sup>13</sup>.

Within the context of EU-Kazakhstan relations, adopting Nye's soft power theory offers a comprehensive analytical framework for understanding how the EU aims to influence perceptions, promote collaboration, and establish a firm footing in Kazakhstan. Nye's threefold categorization of the roots of soft power, which encompass cultural and political values, and foreign policy provides the foundational structure for our examination.

### **What is EU Soft Power?**

Conventional soft power analyses have traditionally focused on the nation-state as the primary unit of examination. However, given its intricate structure comprising diverse political issues and decision-making centers at both the national and supranational levels, the EU introduces a multilayered complexity to the study of soft power. Many European institutions have been able to interact directly with national citizens both within and outside the EU's borders thanks to the EU's use of public diplomacy as a key tool of soft power. The nuanced dynamics of EU soft

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<sup>12</sup> *Idem*, 14.

<sup>13</sup> *Idem*, 16.

power are illustrated by this multifaceted approach, distinguishing it from traditional state-centric analyses<sup>14</sup>.

A dominant debate considered the EU and its various predecessors as peace initiatives or models of peace at the beginning of Europe's integration in the 1950s<sup>15</sup>. Since that time, what is now the EU has demonstrated a noteworthy commitment to public diplomacy, a commitment evident in its official discourse. The explicit aim of the EU to assert its identity at the global level is spelled out in its Common Foreign and Security Policy, which was adopted in 1993 under the Maastricht Treaty<sup>16</sup>. This emphasis on identity assertion implies that the primary mechanisms employed in EU public diplomacy – branding, enhancing the EU's international image, and promoting the incremental institutionalization of public diplomacy – all play their part as a comprehensive component of EU foreign policy.

Within the institutional structure of EU public diplomacy, EU representatives are key players. These delegations work together with the Brussels headquarters of the European External Action Service (EEAS) – the EU's diplomatic service – as well as with separate units within the EC dedicated to foreign affairs. This special cooperation extends to general departments specializing in foreign trade, international expansion and development. The delegations are responsible for overseeing a range of public diplomacy initiatives in countries outside the EU. These initiatives include monitoring websites in local languages, coordinating events such as the 'Europe Day' festival, facilitating official visits and exchanges with civil society organizations and local associations, promoting culture and education, and producing promotional materials in line with local media and newsletter.

In order to carry out these activities, there is a need for close coordination among EU delegations, national embassies and EU member

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<sup>14</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: The Means to Success in World Politics*, 77.

<sup>15</sup> Philippe Raynaud, "De l'humanité européenne à l'Europe politique," *Les Études philosophiques*, 3/1999, 375-381.

<sup>16</sup> Treaty on European Union (TEU) / Maastricht Treaty (Title I, Article 2), <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/about-parliament/en/in-the-past/the-parliament-and-the-treaties/maastricht-treaty>.

states' cultural institutes in host countries as well as with the EU Presidency<sup>17</sup>.

### *Normative Power of EU*

The 'normative power' concept needs to be defined in order to understand how the EU's softer powers are implemented. The theory of normative power, first put forward in 2002 by Ian Manners, presented the EU as an international political actor capable of expressing a sense of normality and respect for norms amongst other international players, and hence Manners argues for EU coherence in modelling international relations.

According to Manners, normative power is closely associated with 'ideological power' or 'power over opinion', denoting the 'ability to shape conceptions of normal'<sup>18</sup>. He underscores the core of European soft power as its capacity not merely to promote norms but to do so in a normative manner. This 'normative diffusion of norms' can manifest itself through diverse channels, including contagion (where the EU, perceived as a positive example, prompts others to emulate it, as observed with Mercosur), transference (entailing linking the sharing of mutual certain goods and the welcoming of specific adjustments or norms), information (via policy announcements disseminating EU norms), or cultural filters (through the establishment of political identity by those influenced by European normative power, as in, for example, the propagation of human rights in Turkey). Given the significance of the normative diffusion of European norms across borders, Manners argues that it is impossible to conceive of the ideological power of the EU's international role without considering the normative dimension of its impact. This dimension advocates universally-recognized norms and values such as rights and freedoms, democracy and equality, and shapes the foundational principles that guide the EU foreign policy agenda<sup>19</sup>.

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<sup>17</sup> About the European External Action Service, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/about-european-external-action-service\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/about-european-external-action-service_en)

<sup>18</sup> Ian Manners, "Normative Power Europe: A Contradiction in Terms?," *Journal of Common Market Studies*, 40(2), (2002): 236.

<sup>19</sup> *Idem*, 244.



In other words, in wielding its normative power the EU stands as a dynamic and transformative force in the realm of international relations. Through the establishment and promotion of shared norms and values, the EU's activities have a considerable influence on the behaviour of external actors. By setting high standards and expectations, the EU not only shapes its own policies, but also moulds the conduct of global affairs. As a key player in the field of international politics, the EU's normative power is instrumental in fostering cooperation, dialogue and the pursuit of common objectives on the world stage.

### **European Union Engagement in Kazakhstan: Key Aspects**

On February 2, 2023, the EU and Kazakhstan celebrated thirty years of diplomatic relations<sup>20</sup>. In 1993, Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian nation to forge diplomatic agreements with the EU, which reciprocated by opening its own representation in the region in November 1994. This was initially established in Almaty and marked the EU's inaugural diplomatic existence in the area. Later, when Astana was designated the new capital city of Kazakhstan in 2007, the EU Delegation to Kazakhstan relocated there, and the Almaty office ceased operations on November 1, 2010, with all relevant personnel transitioning to Astana.

The primary responsibilities of the EU Delegation in Kazakhstan encompass representing EU interests in the country, fostering coordination with EU member states' embassies, cultivating relations across various domains including political cooperation, economy, trade, and external assistance, and especially as these relate to the EU-Kazakhstan enhanced partnership and cooperation agreement. The delegation actively monitors and implements EU policies across all sectors, with a particular focus on the EU-Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership. Additionally, this delegation is committed to promoting and safeguarding EU values and

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<sup>20</sup> European Commission, 2023

<https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan/celebration-30th-anniversary-establishment-diplomatic-relations-between-european-union-and-en>.

interests, while simultaneously enhancing awareness and understanding of the EU in the region<sup>21</sup>.

The EU-Kazakhstan Partnership and Cooperation Agreement was signed in Brussels in 1995 and came into force on July 1, 1999. It was the first legal basis for Kazakhstan's relations with the EU, and was the first such document signed by the EU with a Central Asian state<sup>22</sup>.

Considering changes in both internal and external circumstances, the two entered a new Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) in 2015. This enhanced EU-Kazakhstan cooperation, and having been ratified by all EU member states and the European Parliament, came into force on March 1, 2020. Economic and financial cooperation, Justice and Home Affairs, Energy and Transport, Environmental Protection and Climate Change, Employment and Social Policies, and Cultural and Scientific Research are the main areas of support for trade and investment development. Currently, the EPCA is making steady progress and strengthening cooperation between the EU, its member states and Kazakhstan with respect to labour policy, social policies, and cultural and scientific research<sup>23</sup>. Sectoral cooperation involves EU-Kazakhstan collaboration in many various areas; the development of civil society, strengthening consumer rights, education, culture, research and innovation, media, the audiovisual sector, sports, civil protection, and public service.

In its engagement with Kazakhstan, the EU also acts through various regional initiatives. *The EU Strategy for Central Asia*, adopted in 2019, sets out a strong framework to increase cooperation among regions, make use of new opportunities and deal with common threats<sup>24</sup>. The European Commission, along with the EU High Representative, launched

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<sup>21</sup> Delegation of the European Union to the Republic of Kazakhstan,

[https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan\\_en?s=222](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan_en?s=222).

<sup>22</sup> Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between Kazakhstan and the EU, <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/delegations/en/enhanced-partnership-and-cooperation-agr/product-details/20170614DPU07842>.

<sup>23</sup> EU-Kazakhstan EPCA, Official Journal of the European Union, L 052, 25 February 2023. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/en/ALL/?uri=OJ%3AL%3A2020%3A052%3ATOC>

<sup>24</sup> [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/kazakhstan/evropeyskiy-soyuz-i-kazakhstan\\_ru?s=222](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/kazakhstan/evropeyskiy-soyuz-i-kazakhstan_ru?s=222)

a *Global Gateway Initiative* in 2021. This includes a new Europe Strategy to strengthen the intelligence, sustainability and security of interconnections in the fields of information and communications technology, energy and transport, while also strengthening world health, education and research systems. The launch of this initiative is seen as a reaction to China's Belt and Road Initiative, the vast and geopolitically significant network of infrastructure and transportation investments being utilized by Beijing to connect its exporters with Western markets<sup>25</sup>.

In 2021, the EU ratified the multi-annual Indicative Programme MIP2021 to 2027 within the framework of the Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument (NDICI-Global Europe). Within a targeted strategic framework, the EU has dedicated €16 million to reinforcing its collaborative partnership with Kazakhstan over 2021-2027<sup>26</sup>. In addition, Kazakhstan is due to benefit from several EU regional programs and investments under the Europe Fund for Sustainable Development Plus (ECND+) which will be a key financial instrument in implementing the Global Gateway Initiative<sup>27</sup>.

In Kazakhstan, the EU is considered as having a major economic and political role. It is Kazakhstan's biggest overall trading partner, the destination for 39% of total Kazakh exports and accounting for 29.4% of its entire trade in 2021<sup>28</sup>. Also in 2021, the EU emerged as the largest foreign shareholder in Kazakhstan, contributing foreign direct investment (FDI) stock of \$61.5 billion, a figure up by 23% on the previous year. This underscores the EU's growing economic agreement with Kazakhstan. The main investing countries are the Netherlands (\$5.1 billion), Belgium (\$791

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<sup>25</sup> EU launches 'Global Gateway' to counter China's Belt and Road  
<https://www.politico.eu/article/eu-launches-global-gateway-to-counter-chinas-belt-and-road/>.

<sup>26</sup> Republic of Kazakhstan. Multi-annual Indicative Programme 2021-2027,  
[https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/mip-2021-c2021-9095-kazakhstan-annex\\_en.pdf](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/system/files/2022-01/mip-2021-c2021-9095-kazakhstan-annex_en.pdf).

<sup>27</sup> Kazakhstan. Our partnership,  
[https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/countries/kazakhstan\\_en](https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/countries/kazakhstan_en).

<sup>28</sup> "Indicators of Foreign Trade / Committee of State Revenues of the Ministry of Finance of the Republic of Kazakhstan // [https://kgd.gov.kz/en/exp\\_trade\\_files](https://kgd.gov.kz/en/exp_trade_files), 22.09.2023.

million), France (\$693.5 million), Luxembourg (\$323.5 million), and Germany (\$265.2 million)<sup>29</sup>.

Kazakhstan, in turn, remains the EU's largest trading partner in Central Asia, and its trade turnover with the EU significantly exceeds the combined trade turnover of the other Central Asian countries<sup>30</sup>. With the aim of diversifying the EU's energy supply, exports of Kazakh crude oil are very important.

The dynamics of Kazakhstan-European relations are vividly illustrated by the number of high-level contacts, including leadership, between Kazakhstan and the EU. The First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Nursultan Nazarbayev, visited Brussels nine times (four official visits in 1993, 2000, 2002, 2010, and five working visits in 2006, 2010, 2014, 2016, 2018).

President Kassym Jomart Tokayev's maiden visit to Brussels took place on November 25, 2021 and included meetings with European Council president Charles Michel and European Commission president Ursula von der Leyen. Kazakhstan, in turn, has been visited twice by the presidents of the European Council; Herman Van Rompuy in 2010, and Donald Tusk in 2019, and once in 2013 by then president of the European Council, José Manuel Barroso<sup>31</sup>.

### **Soft Power of EU in Kazakhstan: Cultural Dimension**

The UN Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) designates culture as a special form of soft power given the diversity of its manifestations. According to UNESCO, cultural activities are a soft power instrument aimed at facilitating exchanges of views and

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<sup>29</sup> Direct Investments by Direction / National Bank of the Republic of Kazakhstan // <https://nationalbank.kz/en/news/direct-investments-by-direction>, 22.09.2023."

<sup>30</sup> Данные Агентства Eurostat // Data from the Eurostat Agency [https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ext\\_lt\\_maineu/default/table?lang=en](https://ec.europa.eu/eurostat/databrowser/view/ext_lt_maineu/default/table?lang=en)

<sup>31</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/about/structure/departments/npa/380/1?ang=ru>.

ideas, supporting the understanding of other cultures as well as fostering links between communities<sup>32</sup>.

Robert Schuman, a key architect of the EU and one of its founding fathers, expressed a fundamental perspective in his work *Pour l'Europe*, stating that 'Europe, before being a military alliance or an economic entity, must be a cultural community in the highest sense of the term'<sup>33</sup>. This articulation underscores the paramount importance of cultural unity as a foundational element in the conception of the European project.

On examining the importance of the EU's existence in realm of soft power, we see that it is strategically positioned to leverage its cultural richness and shared values.

Most European countries have long used cultural diplomacy as a valuable component of diplomatic tools. As for the EU, it is a fairly recent addition to the Europeans' toolbox. In 2016, the EU announced the 'Strategy for International Cultural Relations'. Support or cultural cooperation between the EU and partners in other countries is a key objective of this strategy. Emphasizing the pivotal role of culture, Mogherini asserted that it serves as an unequivocal driving force guiding the entire EU in addressing common challenges. She envisioned culture as a unifying factor capable of constructing an alliance of civilizations to counteract forces attempting to divide European society<sup>34</sup>.

The EU has transformed itself into a global player capable of fostering intercultural dialogue through international cultural cooperation projects. This type of intercultural dialogue is capable of mitigating tensions, preventing crises, facilitating national reconciliation and supporting new story developments in the framework of using soft power as a tool. Importantly, it serves as a strategic response to one major threat the EU faces today, namely radicalization, and reinforces the crucial role of cultural diplomacy as a means of addressing and counteracting

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<sup>32</sup> Culture Sector Knowledge Management, 2016, <https://en.unesco.org/themes/protecting-our-heritage-and-fostering-creativity/culture-sector-knowledge-management-tools>.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Schuman, *Pour l'Europe*, (1950), (Fondation Robert Schuman; 5e édition, 2010): 119.

<sup>34</sup> European Commission, 2016, [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/speech-hrvp-federica-mogherini-culture-forum-brussels\\_en](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/speech-hrvp-federica-mogherini-culture-forum-brussels_en).

contemporary challenges, aligning with the broader objectives of promoting understanding and cooperation on an international scale.

Against the backdrop of the considerable informational influence of the West (the US and Europe) the EU has succeeded in establishing numerous mechanisms of soft power for interaction with Kazakhstani society. These include various cultural activities, grant programs, projects and institutions that offer broad opportunities for employment and education. In this context, it is not coincidental that culture and education emerge as the central and leading focuses of European soft power in Kazakhstan. In particular, it is a demonstration of the EU's achievement in promoting European education standards in Kazakhstan. European cinema and literature, and academic exchanges are pivotal in shaping perceptions and fostering a beneficial picture of the EU in Kazakhstan. In this context of EU engagement with Kazakhstan, the influence of the former's culture, education and media are examined below.

### *Culture*

The EU pays close attention to how Europe's cultural values, ideals and principles are explained/expressed in Kazakhstan, and the official EU institution for the promotion of European culture is the European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC). This is a network of European national institutes of culture and national bodies engaged in cultural and related activities beyond their national borders. EUNIC brings together organizations from all 28 EU member states, and designs and implements European policy on culture inside and outside the EU. Currently, EUNIC operates in more than 100 countries around the world through a network of 139 clusters, and its annual budget amounts to \$2.2 billion<sup>35</sup>.

One of the two clusters of EUNIC in Central Asia is located in Almaty. Its founding members are France Alliance Almaty, the British Consulate, the Dante Alighieri Committee, the Goethe Institute of Kazakhstan, and Hungary's Consul General. In 2012, the Swiss Embassy also joined the founders of 'EUNIC-Almaty'. Greater impetus was given to

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<sup>35</sup> European Union National Institutes for Culture-About, <https://www.eunicglobal.eu/map>.

such work last year (2022) when the EU's National Institutes of Culture approved creating the 'UNICAAlmaty' organisation in Kazakhstan. Promoting an increase in EU-Kazakhstan cultural communication is an extremely important objective of this organisation. In Kazakhstan's cities the EU and its member governments organise and hold a variety of activities during which events such as Days of Europe are held<sup>36</sup>.

#### *TEMPUS/ERASMUS+*

In order to raise education levels among university pupils, a Trans European Mobility Programme on University Studies (TEMPUS) has been running quite successfully in Kazakhstan since 1994.

Under TEMPUS, between 1994 and 2013, funding was secured for more than seventy projects involving forty-six representatives of higher education schools and forty-eight partners from outside the academic world of Kazakhstan. This program has had a significant impact on governance processes in higher education institutions in Kazakhstan. Approximately 26% of TEMPUS appropriations in Central Asia were earmarked for Kazakhstan projects between 1994 and 2012. In view of the increase in overall EU funding for the region from €5 million to €15 million between 2007 and 2012, this meant amounts ranging from €1.4 million to 4.5 million<sup>37</sup>.

Thirteen years after the launch of TEMPUS, the EU established another program in Kazakhstan: Erasmus Mundus (EM). This focused on exchanges of students, scholars and academic teams. This initiative has contributed significantly to Kazakhstan becoming a part of the EU's education system. According to an EM report, under the program Kazakhstan received €1.3 million in 2007-2008, a figure that accounted for more than 30% of funding allocated to Central Asian regions. In 2007, there

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<sup>36</sup> *Idem.*

<sup>37</sup> *The main achievements of the Tempus programme in central Asia. 1994-2013,* [http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/ac6ecbab-0775-4a79-96a4-576f19c53dbc.0002.03/DOC\\_2](http://publications.europa.eu/resource/cellar/ac6ecbab-0775-4a79-96a4-576f19c53dbc.0002.03/DOC_2).

were approximately sixty scholarship recipients for student mobility in Kazakhstan<sup>38</sup>.

Characteristic of both the TEMPUS and EM programs is their comprehensive coverage, right from inception, of virtually all key segments and directions of soft power influence.

In 2014, the EU introduced a number of changes to its education policy. The Erasmus+ programme was thereby substituted for the TEMPUS and EM programmes. Erasmus+ is dedicated to the development of educational mobility, innovation, cooperation, exchange of good practices and support for educational reform.

The management of the Erasmus+ Program in Kazakhstan is carried out by the national office of Erasmus+. The key tasks of the office are to provide a wide range of consultancy services, coordinate activities on higher education reforms within Kazakhstan's National Expert Team, and monitor ongoing TEMPUS projects<sup>39</sup>.

For the 2021-2027 period, the EU has allocated €76 million specifically for the Erasmus+ program in Central Asia. In its 1993-2021 phase Erasmus+ played a pivotal role by offering Kazakh students and staff over 3,300 short-term scholarships to facilitate their educational experience and training endeavours in Europe. A noteworthy achievement since 2014 has been the provision of scholarships to 328 Kazakh MA students, enabling them to engage in joint MA programs across European institutions.

Of particular significance is the sustained interest in capacity-building projects within Kazakh universities. Having actively participated in forty-nine of the seventy projects based in Central Asia between 2014 and

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<sup>38</sup> P. Jones, The EU-Central Asia education initiative. EUCAM Working Paper 9. (2010), [http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1604444](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1604444).

<sup>39</sup> Erasmus+ Representation in Kazakhstan, <https://www.eas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan/44-kazakh-students-join-european-unions-erasmus-programme-en>.



2020, the universities continued their involvement by contributing to the selection of four projects among nine in Central Asia in 2022.

The selected projects strategically address critical areas such as curriculum development and modernization, integrating innovative teaching and learning practices. Furthermore, they aim to enhance university governance and establish robust connections between higher education institutions and the professional sphere. This ongoing commitment to academic collaboration exemplifies the enduring impact of Erasmus+ in fostering educational exchange and cultivating meaningful linkages between Kazakhstan and the EU in the field of education<sup>40</sup>.

The EU's efforts to exert influence align and operate in tandem with its member states' promotional institutions such as Alliance Française, Campus France, and the Goethe-Institut. This collaboration aims to enhance EU-bound student mobility and provide access to prestigious universities in third countries. Concurrently, EU initiatives involve establishing European studies centers to strategically influence culturally-oriented principles<sup>41</sup>.

In reciprocation, Kazakhstan has consistently exhibited significant interest in fostering ties with the EU within the realm of soft power, with a particular emphasis on the educational sector. The nation has committed substantial resources to aligning its educational system with global standards.

A new law on education was adopted in 2007. This was designed to bring Kazakhstan into line with education models in the Western world and Europe, and incorporated a pathway to a minimum of twelve years of schooling and the integration of tertiary level higher education. Dedicated efforts to assimilate the best practices of the West, with a particular focus on European models, have been an important factor in these initiatives. As early as 2010, Kazakhstan took a pioneering step by becoming the first Central Asian country to formally engage with the Bologna Process, a

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<sup>40</sup> Official web site of Representation of the European Union in the Republic of Kazakhstan, [https://www.eas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan\\_ru?s=222](https://www.eas.europa.eu/delegations/kazakhstan_ru?s=222).

<sup>41</sup> From Interview 2, 2023.

strategy that attempts to foster a unified European higher education space. This diplomatic decision underscores Kazakhstan's proactive approach to aligning itself with European norms and standards within the sphere of international relations<sup>42</sup>.

At the state level in Kazakhstan, outbound mobility of citizens for education abroad, primarily in the West, is actively encouraged. The Bolashak scholarship programme, a government sponsored international scholarship initiative, was launched by Kazakhstan at the beginning of 1993. This program has facilitated the education of numerous Kazakh students abroad, particularly in Western nations, including Europe. In order for the home country to reap the benefits of such programs, on completion of their studies abroad, the scholarship candidates are obliged to return to Kazakhstan and contribute to the country's development by working in their respective fields for a mandatory period of five years. This strategy has proven effective in maintaining a connection between the skilled younger generation and their home country, contributing to the nation's development and growth. Many of them, upon returning to Kazakhstan, assume various positions in state structures. Any citizen of Kazakhstan who aims to obtain an academic degree or undergo internship may participate in the program<sup>43</sup>.

Kazakhstan is actively working to create conditions to foster increased interaction between itself and the EU. In 2014, despite not yet seeing clear reciprocation from the EU, the Kazakhstani leadership took a unilateral step to enhance ties with Europe by simplifying the visa regime with several European countries.

Since then, a pilot initiative for visa-free travel to Kazakhstan has been in place for citizens from various countries around the world, including Monaco, Norway, Australia, Hungary, Malaysia, Belgium, Spain, the Netherlands, Sweden, Italy, the UAE, the US, Singapore, the UK, France, Germany, Japan, Finland, and Switzerland. It should be noted that

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<sup>42</sup> Kazakhstan in the Bologna process, ENIC-Kazakhstan. Higher education development national center,

[https://enic-kazakhstan.edu.kz/en/bologna\\_process/kazahstan-v-bolonskom-processe](https://enic-kazakhstan.edu.kz/en/bologna_process/kazahstan-v-bolonskom-processe).

<sup>43</sup> From official web site of the Bolashak scholarship programme, <https://bolashak.gov.kz/en>.

thirteen of these regions are European. For up to thirty days, citizens of EU member states may enter Kazakhstan without a visa<sup>44</sup>.

In brief, the EU's educational and cultural initiatives, with their primary emphasis on the intellectual segment of society, play a role in shaping pro-European (and generally pro-Western) sentiments among the elites in Kazakhstan. This unquestionably guides the reinforcement of the EU's impact and standing in the target region<sup>45</sup>.

### **EU Soft Power in Kazakhstan: Political Values**

Political values play a crucial role in determining the attractiveness of a political system. This section will explore how the EU, with its emphasis on democratic governance and respect for human rights, has sought to influence Kazakhstan. The alignment (or lack thereof) of political values between the EU and Kazakhstan will be examined as a key factor in soft power dynamics.

One primary source of tension between Europe and Kazakhstan lies in the realm of governance, since there is a notable distinction between their political models. European governments and entities have consistently raised concerns about Kazakhstan's perceived democratic deficiencies and electoral limitations, and underscored the necessity for improvements in human rights and democratic progress<sup>46</sup>.

Meanwhile, Kazakhstan's leadership has been consistently committed to implementing a progressive reform strategy, choosing economic changes over political ones. The government's rationale is that there is an intricately connected relationship between each stage of political

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<sup>44</sup> Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan, <https://www.gov.kz/memleket/entities/mfa/press/article/details/6764?directionId=3053&lang=ru>.

<sup>45</sup> From Interview 3, 2023.

<sup>46</sup> From Interview 3, 2023.

reform and fostering economic issues in the country. This underscores the divergence in soft power dynamics between Europe and Kazakhstan<sup>47</sup>.

In the early 1990s, EU policy on Central Asia was formulated with the aim of achieving tactical political objectives; stabilizing the post-Soviet field, helping in urgent economic issues, and fostering democracy, pluralism and market connections. Attainment of these goals was envisioned through both direct economic aid and the exertion of political pressure through international and European organizations and institutions.

Overall, the strategic goals of the EU at that time centred on establishing liberal democracy, law doctrines, and human rights in the region, along with promoting liberalization, democratization, and opening up the region to European and international economic systems.

### *TACIS*

The first EU program aimed at post-Soviet countries in the new Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which includes Kazakhstan, was ‘Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States’ (TACIS). For the Europeans, TACIS was designed to assist the newly independent countries in their efforts towards economic and political reforms, liberalization, democratization, the transition to a free market, and law doctrines.

The TACIS initiative operated from 1991 to 2006, during which approximately €7.3 billion was allocated, and over 3,000 projects implemented. However, until the 2000s, a significant portion of TACIS funding was directed towards projects in Russia, while around €366 million was allocated to activities in Central Asian states. Only in the years 2002-2004 did the EU budget for the region double from €25 to €50 million per

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<sup>47</sup> J. Engvall, S.E. Cornell, “Asserting Statehood: Kazakhstan’s Role in International Organizations”, (2015), <https://www.silkroadstudies.org/publications/silkroad-papers-and-mono-graphs/item/13178-asserting-statehood-kazakhstans-role-in-international-organiza-tions.html>.

year, and by 2005 and 2006, the required funding for projects in Central Asia stood at around €60 million annually<sup>48</sup>.

#### *CADAP, BOMCA*

After September 11, 2001, there emerged the potential for European contributions to ensure the security of the Central Asian region and for greater EU involvement in regional policies. The European Commission recognized that Caspian resources would play a crucial role in Europe's future energy security (while simultaneously reducing the EU's dependence on Russia)<sup>49</sup>.

In July 2005, to ensure coordination and coherence of EU external actions in Central Asia, the European Council established the position of EU Special Representative for Central Asia. This role operates under the direct authority and operational guidance of the EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy.

The activities of the Special Representative for Central Asia have led to a significant intensification of EU policy in the region. The EU began to pay considerably more attention to issues of democratic transformation, including the protection of human rights and the development of the non-governmental sector in the countries of the region. In this respect, a significant event was the introduction in December 2006 of a new EU program; the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights (EIDHR).

Additionally, the EU was concerned about issues such as the illegal drug trade. In 2001, to facilitate the development of a strategy to control this trade in Central Asia, it initiated the Central Asian Drug Action Program (CADAP), and in 2002, made attempts to reassess its approaches to the region. The Strategic Document for 2002–2006, as well as the Indicative Program for 2002–2004 adopted by the European Commission, emphasized the need to focus assistance to Central Asia on sectors in which

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<sup>48</sup> T. Tsertsvadze, J. Boonstra, "Mapping EU Development Aid to Central Asia", (EUCAM, 2013), [www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx\\_icticontent/EUCAM-FS-1-EN.pdf](http://www.eucentralasia.eu/uploads/tx_icticontent/EUCAM-FS-1-EN.pdf).

<sup>49</sup> From Interview 3, 2023.

countries in the region wanted to involve themselves. These included ensuring stability, security, permanent economic success, and a reduction in poverty.

A Regional Cooperation Programme aiming at promoting cooperation among the countries of Central Asia in areas of EU interest such as transport, energy, natural resources and environmental management, justice and internal affairs, was proposed as a key instrument. Additionally, the EU suggested a regional program tailored to national needs concerning trade and border management, while simultaneously creating an experimental scheme to reduce poverty in specific areas<sup>50</sup>.

In 2003, the EU launched a special program called the Border Management Program in Central Asia (BOMCA). This initiative aimed at fostering security, combating smuggling and promoting trade in Central Asia.

Despite the limitations and an incomplete understanding of the challenges facing regional cooperation, the 2002 Strategic Document marked the EU's first consistent political attempt to establish regional frameworks for Central Asia. It presented specific development goals, moving away from the bilateral approach used earlier. The budget allocations for Central Asia from 1991 to 2002, amounting to approximately €944.4 million, indicated that the EU was focused not only on developing political relationships based on individual country needs, but also on creating a model applicable to the entire region<sup>51</sup>.

As for political values, after the events of January 2022, Kazakhstan launched a wave of political reforms. In his address to Parliament on March 16, 2022, President Tokayev announced a plan for the accelerated modernization of institutions and political life in Kazakhstan. Brussels enthusiastically embraced the program of political reforms and recognized

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<sup>50</sup> From Interview 2, 2023.

<sup>51</sup> Official web site of the Border Management Programme in Central Asia, <https://www.bomca-eu.org/en/history>.

the legality of the constitutional referendum held in the country on June 5 and launched the New Kazakhstan project<sup>52</sup>.

### **EU Soft Power in Kazakhstan: Foreign Policies**

Soft power is intricately linked with a nation's foreign policies. This section will assess how the EU's foreign policies contribute to its soft power, particularly in its engagement with Kazakhstan in areas such as trade, development aid and diplomatic cooperation. The section also analyses the extent to which the EU's approach is fruitful in fostering positive perceptions and cooperation.

Vulnerability in European foreign policy has manifested itself on various occasions. The persistence of divergent national foreign policies advocated by certain member states and the inadequacy of military capabilities have collectively contributed to rendering the EU relatively ineffective as a hard power in global politics<sup>53</sup>. Michalski contends that the inability of the EU and its member governments to establish a unified foreign policy and thus have the EU take its place in international political arenas constitutes a primary obstacle for its aspirations to assert itself as an independent power on the global stage<sup>54</sup>, and highlights the challenges inherent in its achieving a cohesive and impactful foreign policy stance.

Influenced deeply by developments in the 2003 Iraq war, with the 2003 European Security Strategy EU members agreed on the need for the Union to become a 'major soft power' in international politics so as to counteract prevailing American unilateralism. The approach delineated in this document primarily relies on leveraging the EU's role in an international manner, or the EU as an entity dedicated to peacekeeping, the

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<sup>52</sup> From interview 3, 2023.

<sup>53</sup> Ben Tonra, Thomas Christiansen (eds.), *Rethinking European Union Foreign Policy* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004).

<sup>54</sup> Anna Michalski, "The EU as a Soft Power: The Force of Persuasion," *The New Public Diplomacy. Soft Power in International Relations*, Ed. Jan Melissen, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 140.

promotion of universal values and multilateralism. Accordingly, the various roles played by EU soft power are of great significance<sup>55</sup>.

One source of EU soft power lies in its role as stabilizer and mediator in conflicts in international politics. In this context, the EU has also tried to play the 'humanitarian' role, especially in opposition to the US failures at mediation. In line with these stances, the EU has also tried to create a picture of itself on the international stage as an intermediary voice between South and North, poor and rich. In this position, the EU contributes development funds via the UN Millennium Development Goals.

The EU continues to have a central place in multilateral frameworks and global governance, including participation in the G7 and G20. Prior to the 2008 financial crisis, the EU's economic prosperity served as a compelling force, attracting numerous developing countries and highlighting the appeal and positive attributes of the 'European economic model'<sup>56</sup>. Finally, the EU has also contributed to building distinct foreign policy positions on a wide number of global issues including international law, multilateralism, the ICC, and global warming (i.e. Kyoto Protocol, COP21). In sum, all these different roles may arguably reflect the vital role of this soft power in the creation of a more effective EU foreign policy<sup>57</sup>.

Over the past twenty years, the Government of Kazakhstan has been making consistent efforts to widely introduce advanced environmental practices into public policy. Among the Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan has undertaken the most ambitious environmental transition goals-the achievement of carbon neutrality is envisaged in 2060. This Strategy, approved by the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan on February 2, 2023, sets goals for zero carbon emissions to combat climate change and defines the main technological transformations needed to

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<sup>55</sup> Christopher Hill, "Cheques and Balances: The European Union's Soft Power Strategy," *Soft Power and US Foreign Policy: Theoretical, Historical and Contemporary Perspectives* (London: Routledge 2010), 182-198.

<sup>56</sup> K. L. Nielsen, "EU Soft Power and the Capability-Expectations Gap," *Journal of Contemporary European Research*, 9(5),2013), 735.

<sup>57</sup> Christopher Hill, "Cheques and Balances: The European Union's Soft Power Strategy".



decarbonize the country<sup>58</sup>. In support of these efforts, the Expert Group on Sustainable Consumption and Production of the SWITCH-Asia Program, funded by the EU, is assisting Kazakhstan in strengthening the integration of sustainable consumption and production (SCP) models into policy and practice, in order to eventually contribute to the country's transition to a green economy, poverty reduction and mitigation of climate change.

The war that began in Ukraine shortly after the 'bloody January' events in Kazakhstan and the ongoing crisis in Afghanistan have highlighted the overlapping views of Europeans and Kazakhstanis, as well as their mutual desire for dialogue. In this respect, in May 2022, in the format of the EU-Central Asia Dialogue on Afghanistan, a meeting of special representatives of the EU and five Central Asian republics was held in Almaty.

### **Conclusion**

The phenomenon of soft power has become increasingly important in world politics since the 1990s. While the end of the Cold War explains a decreasing interest in military objectives, soft power roots itself mainly in globalization, as increasingly shaped by economic, cultural and commercial factors. In such a complex and interdependent context, the EU presents a unique case of a non-state international figure benefiting from soft power as its main instrument in foreign strategy.

Taking into account cultural dimensions, political values and foreign policies, this article has provided a comprehensive examination of EU soft power as it operated in Kazakhstan from 1991 to 2022. EU influence in Kazakhstan has evolved over the years, reflecting the dynamic nature of soft power. Understanding its dynamics is essential for policymakers and scholars alike in navigating the complex terrain of the Central Asia.

Kazakhstan's close alignment with European values and its robust economic and political connections with the EU position Astana as the EU's primary shareholder in the related geography. EU involvement here covers

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<sup>58</sup> Kazakhstan's prospects for achieving carbon neutrality, <https://qazaqgreen.com/en/journal-qazaqgreen/expert-opinion/596/>.

a wide spectrum that includes development of regional and local governance, and initiatives for economic, social and judicial reforms. Most notably, interest and investments play pivotal roles in fostering collaboration between Kazakhstan and the EU. Kazakhstan has devoted substantial efforts to nurturing its ties with European entities, setting ambitious standards for its own future growth. If these standards are met in the coming decades, Kazakhstan could increasingly resemble European states in its legal, political, economic and social frameworks. In other words, become a reflection of a form of soft power whereby cultural, economic, and diplomatic influences contribute to shape the state's trajectory in alignment with European norms and values.

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### **Interviews:**

Interview 1: Conducted with a retired French diplomat in Astana on July 5, 2023.

Interview 2: Conducted with a representative from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Kazakhstan in Almaty on 28 June, 2023

Interview 3: Conducted with a researcher from The Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (KazISS) in Astana on 27 June, 2023.