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PUBLIC DIPLOMACY OF EUROPEAN UNION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Annotation. The article analyzes the public diplomacy of the European Union in Central Asia. The peculiarities of the EU's public diplomacy in Central Asia are largely determined by its lack of "hard power" resources, which saves it from the temptation to combine normative humanitarian goals

with power calculations. The main component of European public diplomacy in the region is cultural, educational and humanitarian projects, whose "soft-power" nature is its main competitive advantage.

Key words: soft power, public diplomacy, European Union, Central Asia

Central Asia came to the attention of the EU almost immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Initially, however, the interest of Europeans in it was quite superficial (with the exception, perhaps, of the energy factor), but then the EU realized that penetration into the region opens up new opportunities for it to strengthen its position in the world. Given the ongoing search for models of economic and social development in the Central Asian countries and their interest in expanding the range of partners, the EU could count on solving such domestic and foreign policy tasks as strengthening its identity and subjectivity, demonstrating collective readiness to promote European values, and increasing awareness on the world stage. In other words, by spreading its activity to the Central Asian region, the EU was solving two tasks at once, on the one hand, confirming its unity and capacity in the eyes of its own citizens, on the other — forming the image of a global player and a reliable partner.

It is important to emphasize that, unlike other leading external players in Central Asia, the EU, which does not have "hard power" resources, relies mainly on social and humanitarian resources in its regional strategy. This circumstance, which saves the EU from the temptation to combine normative humanitarian goals with power calculations, largely determines the peculiarities of European public diplomacy in the region.

A turning point in the development of the Central Asian direction of European policy was the adoption in 2007. The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership (The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership), which consolidated the EU's common foreign policy towards Central Asia. According to this document, the EU's attention to Central Asia was conditioned by three factors:

— the influence of political and economic events and trans-regional challenges in the region on the interests of the EU;

— the geographical proximity of Central Asia to the borders of the EU after the last round of enlargement of the Union and the inclusion of the South Caucasus in the European Neighbourhood Policy;

— the presence of significant reserves of energy resources in the region and the desire of the Central Asian countries to diversify their imports, which corresponded to the EU's interest in expanding the range of suppliers of these resources.

As part of the Strategy, the European Union has collectively allocated more than 700 million euros to the countries of the region to solve various socio-economic problems. Such attention to the pressing problems of these countries, as well as consideration of sensitive political issues for them, contributed to the formation of a positive image of the EU in Central Asia. In this regard, many Central Asian researchers believe that in terms of "soft power", the EU's prospects in the region are higher than those of other players.

There are three main factors that ensure the attractiveness of the EU for the Central Asian states, thereby creating a favorable environment for them to use the tools of public diplomacy.

First, the EU acts as a value alternative to Russia and China, whose influence in the region is very large. A soft and pragmatic approach to issues that are sensitive for Central Asia, even if they are among the fundamental ones for the EU, convinces the regional elite of the neutrality of the European Union and the geopolitical disinterestedness of its participation in regional affairs. Brussels pays considerable attention to them, conducting so-called Human Rights Dialogues with the countries of the region, during which specific cases of human rights violations are discussed and mechanisms for legal reforms are developed.

Secondly, the EU initiates really important socio-economic projects. One of these projects is Central Asia Invest, which aims to help small and medium-sized businesses (SMEs). Since 2007, 28 regional SME programs have received funding under the project. However, even more important is the

EU's contribution to the development of education and bringing it into line with European standards. The Erasmus+ educational program, the implementation of which is considered one of the most important areas of EU public diplomacy, promotes academic exchange not only within the region, but also between it and the EU.

Third, positive changes in relations between the Central Asian countries open up opportunities for turning the EU into a facilitator of regional cooperation. Its reputation as an experienced, neutral and reliable actor allows it to become an important partner of the states of the region in solving a wide range of problems — from water use issues to border disputes.

These factors can indeed contribute to improving the effectiveness of the EU's public diplomacy in Central Asia. However, in order to maintain a positive dynamic, Brussels must not only maintain its inherent flexibility, but also take into account the interests of Russia and China, which in recent years have increasingly used their "soft power" in the region.

В связи с этим в принятой в 2019 г. обновленной стратегии был сделан акцент именно на сотрудничестве в социально-экономической сфере и развитии человеческого капитала.

When assessing the tool base of the EU public diplomacy in Central Asia on the basis of such key indicators as information, culture, education and humanitarian assistance, the weight of cultural and educational resources is first of all evident. According to the results of public opinion polls presented in the report of the Center for Integration Studies of the Eurasian Development Bank "Integration Barometer EDB — 2017", European education, artistic creativity and cultural products are popular among the population of Central Asia.

Today, one of the promising instruments of EU cultural and educational diplomacy - The European Union National Institutes for Culture (EUNIC), a network and relatively autonomous structure - has only two functioning clusters in Central Asia - in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Organizing various events (music festivals, educational fairs, exhibitions, etc.), EUNIC acts as an agent of pan-European cultural diplomacy, but the EU members themselves prefer to carry out their cultural activities in the region on their own. There is no doubt that the EUNIC mechanism is quite capable of helping to solve this problem. Its strategy until 2025 sets the task of further expanding and increasing activity, which may also affect the Central Asian direction.

Unlike cultural diplomacy, EU educational activities in Central Asia are developing mainly within the framework of common projects. Back in 2008, the European Union launched the European Education Initiative for Central Asia, which aims to unite all educational programs it conducts in the region and aims to create new communication channels in the field of education and coordinate educational policy.

Along with cultural and educational activities, humanitarian aid is increasingly seen as an instrument of public diplomacy. The EU's humanitarian activities in Central Asia began in 1994, when the Europeans began to provide assistance to Tajikistan, which was in a civil war. In subsequent years, EU humanitarian aid was received by victims of natural disasters and other tragic events in the region (for example, the interethnic conflict in Kyrgyzstan in 2010). In general, the volume of EU humanitarian aid to Central Asian countries exceeds 228 million euros³³ - and this is without taking into account the amounts that individual members allocated for these purposes on an individual basis [1].

Also, it can be added the main direction of the EU policy here is the involvement of the states of the region in the so-called Bologna process (building a single pan-European higher education area). The locomotive European program in Central Asia in the period 1994-2014 was the TEMPUS program (Trans-European Mobility Program for University Studies, TEMPUS, for the improvement of higher education).

About 13 years after the start of the TEMPUS program, in 2007, another European program, Erasmus Mundus (EM, for the exchange of students, scientific and pedagogical personnel), was launched in Central Asia.

Approximately two years after the launch of the Erasmus Mundus program, in 2009, the European Union launched the Central Asia Research Education Net (CAREN) program in the region to support cooperation between EU research institutions and CA countries). However, this program did not receive such recognition and fame as TEMPUS or even "Erasmus Mundus" [2, p. 15-18].

In June 2017, on the tenth anniversary of the first Central Asia Strategy, the Council of the European Union invited High Representative Federica Mogherini and the European Commission (EC) to draw up a proposal for a new Strategy by late 2019.

By presenting four possible strategies for future EU engagement, this policy brief argues that rather than increasing or reducing 'hard' commitments or keeping the same agenda, the new Strategy should enhance EU cultural diplomacy in the region. In line with the increased emphasis on the role of culture in European external action, EU cultural diplomacy should meet local citizenry's aspirations and demands, and give Brussels a comparative advantage over other regional powers.

EU could pursue four main strategies to review its current plans on Central Asia: Retreating, Keeping, Hardening, Softening.

In the Retreating approach, the EU would decide to reduce its engagement in the region drastically. With Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan classified as upper middle-income countries according to World Bank classification, Brussels could narrow its focus on Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which depend significantly on Western bilateral aid. Based on their modest results, initiatives on Rule of Law and Education would be removed from the future strategy.

While a 'retreating' option could suit some needs at the EU level, it is maybe the least appropriate approach to target Central Asia. In spite of some general improvements, Central Asia remains insecure and problematic, with risks of terrorism and other forms of violence, which could be home-produced or stemming from neighbours such as Afghanistan and Pakistan. Also, uncooperative postures of political elites cannot help but deteriorate the already delicate regional environment. Given that retaining a role in Central Asia would ultimately be in Brussels's core interests, other options should be envisaged.

Keeping strategy in the light of Central Asia's strategic significance, the EU could be better advised by keeping the holistic approach of the 2007 Strategy and combining hard and soft priorities. As such, the new document would be a review rather than a revision, perhaps with a new balance between regional and bilateral engagement, based on Uzbekistan's renewed multilateral engagement. The Strategy would reaffirm the role of dialogue with Central Asian countries and stress the success of the format of cooperation of the last decade.

If keeping things as they are would better serve EU interests rather than the retreating option, it would also lack foresight. The shortcomings of the 2007 Strategy explained in this brief require a clear reorientation at the EU level and in particular, a simplified strategy demonstrating to its regional stakeholders that the EU is willing to close the gap between objectives and resources.

In the Hardening strategy to seek a concrete policy impact, the EU could follow Washington's example and come up with a renovated interest-driven agenda. This would include priorities in the areas of security and stability, trade, and energy, with a combined bilateral and multilateral approach. In principle, as emphasised in the 2017 Council Conclusions, Brussels would target enhanced cooperation on border management and the extension of the Southern Gas Corridor. Other points of the future agenda could be defined in collaboration with Central Asian countries, which might welcome the reduced focus on democracy promotion and human rights. Following the path of the last decade, the intercultural dialogue would be virtually or practically removed from the priorities of the new Strategy.

Finally, in the Softening approach, among EU options in Central Asia, this brief argues that one could provide a significant added value and genuinely renew the approach to the region. Rather than increasing or reducing hard engagements, or going down the same route, a new direction should enhance EU cultural diplomacy. Such a choice would be in line with other broader policy declarations, such as the 2017 Communication 'Towards an EU Strategy for International Cultural Relations',

advancing cultural cooperation with third countries and mainstreaming culture in European external action. At least at the discursive level, the Strategy aims to signal that EU MS are ready to combine cultural efforts abroad.

To bring positive change in the cultural sphere, this brief recommends a number of measures. As a first point, and as a kick-off event of the New Strategy, a high-level meeting between EU and Central Asian Ministers of Culture should take place, similarly to what Latvian EU Presidency did in June 2015, when Riga hosted the first meeting of the 28+5 Ministers of Education. As a complement and to strengthen ties between European and Central Asian cultural operators, high-level events should be coupled with regional and bilateral initiatives with at least two objectives: reaching out local stakeholders and tailoring an approach to their needs. For instance, in Kazakhstan, increased attention should be paid to the work of European ethno-cultural centres, which could facilitate cultural exchanges through their ties to the government and both 'homeland' and 'host land' communities.

Finally, a renewed Strategy with a heavy focus on culture should also provide clear indicators against which EU policy-makers and relevant stakeholders could review the proposed actions. This should include the creation of Brussels-funded Central Asian barometers in cooperation with local survey institutes, analysing EU more comprehensive policies in the region, and EU cultural action in particular [3].

A joint document entitled "The European Union and Central Asia: New opportunities for a stronger Partnership" was presented in Brussels today. The new EU strategy aims to create a "stronger, more modern and non-inclusive partnership with the countries of Central Asia" for the development of the region as a sustainable, prosperous and closely interconnected economic and political space.

In the hope of bringing the benefits of partnership with Brussels to the public in the region, the EU intends to strengthen public diplomacy, in other words, the Europeans will strengthen information campaigns in the Central Asian states. The EU intends to carry out such work through social networks and other "new communication technologies". The target audience will be: young people, opinion makers, popular bloggers, well-known civil society activists, scientists, and the media [4].

To conclude, the realization by the European Union, which initially showed little interest in building relations with the Central Asian countries, of the strategic importance of Central Asia had a serious impact on its policy in the region. Public diplomacy plays an essential role in this policy, aimed primarily at promoting the European model of political development. The main component of such diplomacy is educational and other humanitarian projects, whose "soft-power" nature is the main competitive advantage of the EU in the context of Central Asia. One of the specific features of European public diplomacy is a unified approach to all countries in the region, which, despite the presence of controversial issues, has a positive effect on its perception by the Central Asian countries.

It is also limited by the presence in the region of other players with whom the Central Asian countries have historically developed close relations. In part, these factors were taken into account in the new EU strategy, in which the Russian power circles immediately saw "an attempt to draw the Central Asian states into the EU's orbit of influence" and "discourage" them from Russia. However, it is too early to judge whether this strategy can change the situation and positively affect the effectiveness of the EU's public diplomatic activities in Central Asia, since its implementation has just begun.

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