

SECURING THE SELF: ONTOLOGICAL SECURITY AND ENERGY RELATIONS IN EU-CENTRAL ASIA ENGAGEMENT AFTER UKRAINE

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Abstract

This article analyses energy relations between the European Union (EU) and Central Asian countries through the lens of ontological security, seeking to understand how identity narratives shape cooperation beyond material interests. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the EU perception of ontological insecurity increased with the collapse of established energy interdependence routines, prompting a deepening of the engagement with Central Asia to reconstruct its biographical narrative. For Central Asian states, this partnership contributes to their post-Soviet identity construction as sovereign actors. The analysis shows how Central Asian states leverage their distinct energy profiles to craft separate security narratives, while engaging the EU as part of their diversification strategies, demonstrating



that sustainable cooperation depends on integrating partnerships into coherent identities amid geopolitical disruption and energy transition challenges.

Keywords

Central Asia, European Union, Energy, Ontological Security, Identity.

Resumo

Este artigo analisa as relações energéticas entre a União Europeia (UE) e os países da Ásia Central através da lente da segurança ontológica, procurando compreender como as narrativas identitárias moldam a cooperação para além dos interesses materiais. Após a invasão da Ucrânia pela Rússia, a percepção da UE de insegurança ontológica aumentou com o colapso das rotinas estabelecidas de interdependência energética, levando a um aprofundamento do envolvimento com a Ásia Central para reconstruir a sua narrativa biográfica. Para os Estados da Ásia Central, esta parceria contribui para a construção da sua identidade pós-soviética como atores soberanos. A análise mostra como os Estados da Ásia Central aproveitam os seus perfis energéticos distintos para criar narrativas de segurança separadas, ao mesmo tempo que envolvem a UE como parte das suas estratégias de diversificação, demonstrando que a cooperação sustentável depende da integração de parcerias em identidades coerentes em meio a perturbações geopolíticas e desafios de transição energética.

Palavras-chave

Ásia Central, União Europeia, Energia, Segurança Ontológica, Identidade.

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Introduction

The current context of increasing polarisation and dissension in international affairs, with multiple crisis affecting the European Union (EU)'s role and place, have rendered energy security a central element in self-perceptions of (in)security. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine on 24 February 2022 accelerated the perception of threat coming from this big neighbour and underlined the central role of energy security in the EU agenda. Energy is one of the most pressing issues in modern international relations, embedding economic and political power in security frameworks. Side-by-side fossil fuels, hydroelectric or renewable energy complexes form the basis of the economy of a number of countries, with national security closely interlinked to global energy security (Fayzulloev, 2018). The Central Asian region emerges here as a fundamental player, having enormous energy resources and potentiating beneficial cooperation with the EU. The 2019 new EU Strategy to Central Asia, titled "New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership" (European Parliament and Council, 2019), seeks to update relations between the EU and the Central Asian countries, by designing a relation that is adjustable and targeted, pragmatic and resilient. The document is structured around three 'interconnected and mutually reinforcing priorities': 'partnering for resilience', 'partnering for prosperity' and 'working better together', highlighting "the security of energy supply and diversification of suppliers, sources and routes of the EU, including assessing the possibility to build the Trans-Caspian Pipeline" as a key goal.

Underlining the EU's approach is a security driven agenda, that we argue is pushed by ontological insecurity in the framing of Russia as a threat. The EU's ontological insecurity, particularly in the energy sector here analysed, is rebalanced in the geopolitical relevance of Central Asia given "its share in EU energy imports and the market potential of eighty million inhabitants, as well as the EU's interests in regional security" (European Parliament and Council, 2019: p. 1). By establishing new energy partnerships in Central Asia, the EU is attempting to rebuild its disrupted biographical narrative of energy security and autonomy. The Russian invasion of Ukraine fundamentally challenged the EU's long-established narrative of peaceful energy interdependence with Russia, creating profound anxiety about both material energy supplies and the EU's self-identity as a secure and autonomous actor. EU's further engagement with Central Asia is pursued not just for material energy resources, but also to reframe a coherent identity narrative

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where the EU regains ontological security mainly through reinforced partnerships and diversification of supply routes.

The paper starts by mapping the ontological security framework and how energy security plays out high in the agenda of both the EU and Central Asian countries. Exploring the new EU Strategy and developments in relations of the EU with Central Asia, and how the EU has been perceived by these actors, is key to unpack processes of security building and how these allow to overcome threat perceptions and anxiety. To this effect, the article looks at concrete energy projects and the political narratives informing these. The article concludes that the strengthening of relations with Central Asian states has been contributing to EU's ontological security in face of Russia's threat, while it has also been providing space for Central Asian states agency in energy discussions.

Geopolitics, normative competition, and energy security in regional relations

The literature on the EU's role in Central Asia reveals complex debates about the EU's regional actorness, normative influence, and positioning within a contested geopolitical environment. Central Asia represents a particularly challenging space for EU foreign policy, with the EU seeking to establish itself as a significant player in a region where other major powers exercise considerable influence. As Kavalski and Cho (2018: 54) mention, "Central Asia barely registered on the radar of the external relations of the EU during the 1990s", with the region remaining largely peripheral to EU interests. A significant turning point came following the September 11, 2001 attacks in the United States, when Central Asia gained greater geostrategic significance. This eventually led to the EU's first comprehensive regional strategy in 2007, later updated in 2019 (Fawn, 2021). Despite these strategic initiatives, EU's effectiveness in the region has been questioned. For example, Vasa (2020: p. 121) argues that the EU "does not have a clear, real strategy towards the Central Asian region" and advances it "will lose in the game of great and middle powers for influence and control" (Vasa, 2000: p. 128). Similarly, Kavalski and Cho (2018: p. 63) suggest that "the cultural instincts of the EU's normative power entrap its agency in Central Asia and Afghanistan and make it difficult for Brussels to develop contextual approaches to the region". In a similar vein, Laumulin (2019) describes the EU's strategy for Central Asia as "incomplete", noting that the EU's visibility in the region remains limited despite its diplomatic presence and development assistance programmes.

Spaiser (2015) offers a more nuanced assessment, characterising the EU as a "minor but not marginal" security actor in Central Asia. While acknowledging that the EU lacks the security capacities of Russia and China, the author argues it has successfully developed a role on "'niche' areas of security which are not occupied by the other actors and where it can make a difference. Second, it successfully draws a picture of itself being an 'expert' without any geopolitical ambitions, and third, an intense discourse of 'far neighbourhood' helps to create legitimacy and proximity in its interaction with Central Asian leaders" (Spaiser, 2015: p. 97). The EU's approach has traditionally emphasised values such as democracy, human rights, and rule of law (Fawn, 2021). However, as Kobilov (2021, p. 144) points out, "The New Strategy made consequential amendments taking account of



these specific moments, providing a more balanced policy between values and interests of the EU". This suggests a recognition that an exclusively values-based approach may limit effectiveness in a region where authoritarian governance remains prevalent. Furthering the normative dimension of the EU's security, von Hauff (2019: p. 195) looks at how the "liberally informed EU" and the "politically distinctly illiberal China" interact in Central Asia, arguing that despite normative divergence, both actors ultimately contribute to regional security, albeit through different approaches. This creates a potential for "normative broad-mindedness" (von Hauff, 2019: p. 204) that could serve as a foundation for future cooperation.

The competitive aspect of EU engagement in Central Asia is noted by Fatima and Zafar (2014: p. 631), since the "involved actors can be identified as regional and trans-regional players", with Russia, China, and the United States being particularly influential. Russia maintains strong political and security ties through organisations like the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), while China has increased its economic presence through initiatives like the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) (Vasa, 2020; Fatima & Zafar, 2014). In this complex setting, energy cooperation represents a crucial dimension of EU-Central Asia relations, with multiple competing perspectives regarding regional influence, geopolitical strategy, and security implications. Fernandes and Simão (2010: p. 104) frame energy relations primarily as geopolitical competition, arguing that Russia and the EU are engaged in a rivalry for influence over Central Asia's energy sector. This competition, they contend, extends beyond mere economic interests to encompass broader geopolitical contestation. Differently, Delcour (2011: p. 98) identifies the strengthening of energy cooperation as one of three decisive factors determining the sustainability of the EU's political engagement in Central Asia. She connects this strategic pivot to the 2006 Russia-Ukraine energy crisis, which led the EU to seek for energy diversification by looking for alternative sources in Central Asia and the Caucasus.

Regional scholars offer alternative perspectives focused on cooperation rather than competition. Komron Rahimov (2024) advocates for strategic partnerships among Central Asian countries to ensure energy security, emphasising adaptation to global trends and environmental considerations. This approach envisions regional integration as a mechanism to preserve and enhance Central Asia's energy potential while addressing shared challenges. One of the central factors highlighted regarding energy security is the integration of Central Asia into global energy chains, which requires the active participation of countries in multilateral forums and agreements promoting joint infrastructure development and policy coordination. Amineh and Crijns-Graus (2018) highlight energy security as a crucial factor in the EU strategy, noting the EU's dependence on external energy supplies and the strategic importance of Central Asian energy resources, as complementary. Movkebaeva (2015) identifies a strategic shift in the EU's approach, characterised by intensified political engagement and increased financial investment, with the EU almost doubling the budget allocated to the region, suggesting the EU is moving beyond narrowly defined energy interests toward more comprehensive regional partnerships. Issova & Saryyeva (2015) also articulate a position of mutual benefit, arguing that the EU and Central Asia share "paramount interest in enhancing energy security as an important aspect of global security", emphasising diversification of export routes, supply structures, and energy sources as serving



common interests. The authors expand the energy security discussion beyond conventional fossil fuels to include water management and hydropower as crucial elements for regional stability in Central Asia and beyond, including Afghanistan and Pakistan. This same line of reasoning is highlighted by Basirov (2017) who argues that besides seeking to increase oil and gas imports from Central Asian countries, the EU has been focusing on aspects of sustainable development in the region and has been increasing investment in the renewable energy sector in Central Asia.

A concrete example of regional energy security strengthening is the CASA-1000 project, built on a cooperative approach to regional energy security. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have abundant clean hydropower resources, producing surplus electricity during summer months. Neighbouring Afghanistan and Pakistan contend with chronic electricity shortages, especially during hot summers, leading to frequent power cuts that hurt industrial production and endanger citizens during heat waves. This multinational initiative aims to transfer 1,300 megawatts of surplus hydroelectric power from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan through a shared system. This \$1.16 billion initiative, scheduled for completion in 2025, represents a shift from competitive energy geopolitics to collaborative development, addressing both energy surpluses and deficits across the region. By creating interdependencies between Central and South Asian countries through a unified electricity market, the project transforms energy from a source of competition to a foundation for regional stability, simultaneously addressing energy access insecurity, climate concerns, economic underdevelopment, and regional tensions. The EU has provided significant financial support to this regional electricity transmission project through the European Investment Bank and technical assistance (CASA-1000, 2025).

Ontological (in)security in EU-Russia relations and the Central Asia rebalancing game

Ontological security can be understood as the reflective capacity of adapting routines and systems of meaning to new situations in order to overcome anxieties and fears. In the context of EU-Central Asia energy relations, this theoretical lens illuminates how the EU's energy policies respond not only to material supply concerns but to deeper anxieties about identity and continuity. Material security references focus on concrete threats to supply, infrastructure, and economic stability (e.g., supply disruptions, price volatility). Ontological security concerns, by contrast, emerge through language about European identity, values, and continuity (e.g., strategic autonomy, resilience). When EU documents frame energy challenges primarily in terms of preserving European unity or upholding climate leadership rather than addressing immediate supply risks, this signals ontological rather than purely material security logic. For example, Germany's response to energy shortages shows how material crises trigger ontological anxiety. Chancellor Scholz (2022) framed energy independence not merely as supply security but as "sovereignty", which reads along 'strategic autonomy' – language indicating concerns about German/European identity and self-determination beyond immediate material needs. The German case demonstrates how material and ontological security concerns operate in tandem. While Germany experienced genuine material constraints requiring



production adjustments and consumption moderation, the broader EU response revealed ontological anxiety about European energy autonomy. Material security logic would predict pursuing the most cost-effective alternatives regardless of supplier. However, the EU's emphasis on 'strategic autonomy', its investment in more expensive Central Asian partnerships, and its acceleration of renewable transition despite higher short-term costs indicate that identity concerns shaped policy choices beyond pure material calculation. The ontological dimension thus explains not whether material threats exist, but how actors interpret and respond to them in ways that maintain coherent self-narratives.

The EU's decades-long energy relationship with Russia constituted a set of routinized practices that helped define the EU's self-perception as a stable, prosperous entity capable of managing complex interdependencies. When Russia's actions in Ukraine shattered these routines, the resulting ontological insecurity prompted the EU to seek not just alternative energy sources but new narratives of energy security that could restore its sense of continuity and agency. The EU's construction of itself as a 'secure energy user' emerges clearly in key policy documents following major energy crises. The European Commission's 2022 REPowerEU plan explicitly frames Europe as moving from vulnerability to resilience, with the concrete example of EU dropping its share of Russian gas imports from 45% to 19% between the launching of this programme and 2024 (European Commission, 2025), and the energy security strategy that it involves has been positioning the EU as a reliable partner that must diversify suppliers and routes (Sarno & Colantoni, 2023). These framings consistently present energy challenges as temporary disruptions to an inherently secure European energy system, rather than fundamental vulnerabilities. The REPowerEU Plan, adopted in May 2022 as a direct response to Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, exemplifies the EU's narrative shift toward energy autonomy through renewable acceleration. The programme's ambitious renewable energy targets and rapid capacity increases represent more than technical achievements – they constitute the EU's attempt to reconstruct its identity as a self-reliant energy actor no longer dependent on Russian supplies.

Therefore, ontological security can lead to readjustments not only in the actor himself, but also in the identity narrative that is articulated and becomes part of the process of identifying how we want to define ourselves (Browning and Joenniemi, 2017). This is a process that allows us to better understand the ability to adjust to change in contexts of uncertainty, visible through narratives. In the case of European energy security, from the point of view of the EU towards Russia, the discourse has shifted to the formula "the other as a threat", following the understanding that energy became a threat to the collective well-being.

Several authors have worked on ontological security at this "collective level" (Browning, 2018; Hansen, 2016; Kinnvall, 2006; Mitzen, 2006; Steele, 2008; Zarakol, 2017), where self-identification is a central reference point for the way we feel threatened or instead reinforced in our own identity/security. Routines are part of this process of self-identification and autobiographical narratives become legitimisers of an actor's existence and continuity. These autobiographical narratives are defined in fundamental documents, such as the EU Strategy for Central Asia, the Global Gateway Initiative and SECCA (Sustainable Energy Connectivity in Central Asia) project. The negotiation of new-generation Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (EPCAs) with Central



Asian states has also provided a strong vehicle to forge a more modern and diversified partnership beyond a “trade and aid” agenda and promote cooperation and regulatory convergence in areas which are relevant to the reform processes underway in the region. In this way, these institutional cooperation mechanisms foster a narrative of cooperation and assurance building on the normative agenda routinised in EU collaboration.²

By outlining priorities and practices that build routinised relations, these documents create the autobiographical narrative that allows the perception of policies and actions to be implemented. From an ontological security perspective maintaining routine and stability prevails, fulfilling the defined objectives and allowing a self-defined position as autonomous. When routine is disrupted and uncertainty and anxiety prevail, ontological insecurity arises. This leads actors to seek to reorient strategies to restore stable narratives or conduct changes that seek a repositioning where the self regains the feeling of security. The anxiety caused by Russian political action and narrative, with the war in Ukraine since 2014 and the full-scale invasion in 2022, materialised ontological insecurity (Freire, 2020), forcing a readjustment of systems of meaning – the EU-Russia partnership crumbled down, and a new antagonistic narrative took shape, where potential cuts in supplies fuelled insecurity. Political resistance from the EU, through a policy of increased autonomy from Russia’s supplies, including through strengthening relations with Central Asian states, signalled a change in the policy and practice in search of reassurance. Indeed, “ontological security is not just a question of stability, but also of adaptability, that is, openness and ability to deal with change” (Browning and Joenniemi, 2017: p. 32).

The reconceptualization of energy relation in Eurasia is part of this process, where Central Asia has been taking on a central role. Furthermore, the construction of the narrative seeking to reinforce routinised behaviours and biographical continuity, can be challenged both internally through a self-reflective process as well as external challenges. EU-Central Asia energy relations encapsulate these dynamics of readaptation to a differentiated context, where new narratives are framing ontological security drivers related to energy security and different competitors in this great game. This framework allows us to look at how energy security narratives impact the international and the domestic contexts, and how autobiographical narratives and competitive dynamics contribute to feelings of ontological (in)security.

Setting the context: EU-Central Asia energy relations

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the energy resources of Central Asia became crucial not only for material reasons but for how major powers constructed their post-Cold War identities and narratives. For Russia, maintaining influence over Central Asian energy resources reinforced its autobiographical narrative as a continuing great power despite the Soviet collapse. For Western powers, engaging with these states aligned with narratives of expanding liberal market democracy. The EU’s later entry into this competition – accelerated by ontological insecurity following Russia’s actions in Ukraine

² The EPCA with Kazakhstan has come into force. The EPCA with Kyrgyzstan was initialled in 2019 and work proceeds on preparing the text for signatures. EPCA negotiations with Uzbekistan are nearing completion. The EU is preparing to engage in EPCA negotiations with Tajikistan.



– demonstrates how disruptions to established security narratives can provoke new engagement patterns as actors seek to restore coherent self-identities. The strategic rivalry between Russia, China, and the United States makes the importance of the region very noticeable, rich in natural resources, in particular oil, gas, and coal (Sirochiddin, 2020).

Acknowledging a renewed geopolitical interest in Central Asia based on the mineral wealth of the region, in 1996, The New York Times published an opinion piece titled “The New Great Game in Asia” stating:

While few have noticed, Central Asia has again emerged as a murky battleground among big powers engaged in an old and rough geopolitical game. Western experts believe that the largely untapped oil and natural gas riches of the Caspian Sea countries could make that region the Persian Gulf of the next century. The object of the revived game is to befriend leaders of the former Soviet republics controlling the oil, while neutralizing Russian suspicions and devising secure alternative pipeline routes to world markets. (The New York Times, 1996)

According to Umirserik Kasenov (2021), the most important factor determining the new geopolitical role of the Central Asian region is its energy resources, and above all, oil from Kazakhstan and natural gas from Turkmenistan. In essence, the “New Great Game” is fundamentally different from the Great Game of the late 19th and early 20th centuries in Central Asia. In the old Great Game, the main players were Tsarist Russia and the British Empire. In the New Great Game, the main players are Russia, the United States, China, the European Union, and a number of regional powers, such as Islamic Republic of Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, India, South Korea and Japan. The New Great Game focuses to a great extent on oil, gas, and hydropower resources, while simultaneously trying to narrow each other’s position in the region. Unlike the other powers, the EU entered the game later, and this has been to a great extent mobilised by an ontological security framework. The need to respond to Russia’s threat has led to a shift in the narrative and readjustment of EU energy policies both within its space and with regard to external players, such as further engagement with Central Asia. This shift signals the effort to reconnect to stability and a cooperative narrative in energy terms. The EU has shown its interest in the region’s oil and gas resources, and positioned itself to contribute to the security of Central Asia. That is why, with the initiative and assistance of the EU, several projects have been implemented in the region in the areas of hydropower and renewable energy. The implementation of the BOMCA, CADAP and LEICA programmes by the side of EU demonstrate how security and stability of Central Asia is very important for the EU’s own security.

The Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA) is the flagship and largest EU-funded programme in the region with an overall budget of 21.65 million euro and an implementing period of 54 months. Since its launch in 2003, it has focused on capacity building and institutional development, developing trade corridors and the facilitation of trade, improving border management systems and eliminating drug trafficking across the Central Asia region, spanning through critical issues. Security and stability in the region



are thus at the core of the initiative, mainly by fostering sustainable economic development through integrated border management (BOMCA, 2025). CADAP is the Central Asia Drug Action Programme, an initiative of the EU to promote the development of effective drug demand reduction policies in Central Asian countries. Also launched in 2003, it has been supporting the governments of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in the implementation of strategies and measures to reduce the demand for drugs, promoting prevention initiatives and improving the treatment offered by public institutions to drug users in the region. Cooperation has developed in the context of different projects and frameworks put forward in mutual agreement (CADAP, 2025). The Law Enforcement in Central Asia project (LEICA) seeks to build law enforcement capacities in the five Central Asian countries to enhance security both on a national and regional level. In other words, the overall objective of LEICA is to partner with Central Asian countries in order to prevent and to counter terrorist activity, underlining the security considerations in the agenda (LEICA, 2024).

The energy landscape in Central Asia – where Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan possess rich oil and gas reserves while Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have abundant hydropower resources – provides opportunities for the EU to reconstruct its energy security narrative. These complementary resources align with the EU's post-2022 narrative seeking stability and continuity by emphasising diversification, sustainability, and reduced dependency on Russian supplies. The EU's focus on renewable energy partnerships with hydropower-rich Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, for instance, reinforces its self-identity as a green transition leader. Similarly, its engagement with Kazakhstan on both traditional and renewable energy sources allows the EU to narrate a transition story that maintains continuity (energy security) while embracing change (diversification away from Russia). For Central Asian states, their different energy profiles enable distinct identity narratives: Tajikistan positions itself as a "green energy" leader, while Kazakhstan balances its fossil fuel wealth with nuclear energy ambitions, each constructing separate ontological security frameworks through energy diplomacy. Indeed, with only a few wind and solar power plants operating within their territories, Central Asian governments keep a strong drive on fossil fuels (Kedar, 2021). Regarding gas reserves in the world, Turkmenistan ranks 5th (13.6 trillion m³), Kazakhstan ranks 15th (2.3 trillion m³), Uzbekistan ranks 18th (0.8 trillion m³), Tajikistan ranks 91st (6 billion m³), and Kyrgyzstan ranks 92nd (6 billion m³) (BP, 2022). In terms of oil reserves, Kazakhstan ranks 12th (30 billion barrels), Turkmenistan ranks 50th (600 million barrels), Uzbekistan ranks 51st (million barrels), Kyrgyzstan ranks 82nd (40 million barrels), and Tajikistan ranks 93rd (12 million barrels) (EIA, 2023). In the EU, oil and gas are scarce, with import coming from Russia, Asian countries, Norway and the United States. Germany and France have large coal reserves, and the EU countries are trying year after year to reduce the amount of coal-fired energy due to its high greenhouse gas emissions. The EU has achieved unprecedented success in renewable energy, with Sweden, Finland, Latvia, Denmark, Estonia, Austria, Albania, Montenegro, Portugal and Lithuania being the leading countries in this area. Renewable energy in these countries accounts for between 30 and 70 percent of the energy used (Eurostat, 2025).

As part of the European Green Deal, in order to encourage this smart sector integration, the Commission presented an EU strategy for energy system integration in July 2020, promoting direct electrification of end-use sectors and involving various existing and



emerging technologies, processes and business models, such as ICT and digitalisation, smart grids and meters and flexibility markets (OECD, 2020). In particular, the scale up of renewable energy production has been at the centre of the REPowerEU Plan's objective to build a secure and decarbonised energy system in the EU. Adopted in May 2022 as a response to Russia's war of aggression in Ukraine, the programme aims at phasing out Russia's fossil fuel imports (European Commission, n.d.). The latest data show substantial results with the increase of installed wind and solar capacity by 36% between 2021 and 2023, saving approximately 35 billion cubic meters (bcm) of gas over 2 years. With 56 GW of new solar energy capacity installed in 2023, the EU has set yet another record surpassing the additional 40 GW installed in 2022. These figures represent important steps in the right direction, but further acceleration is needed to meet the REPowerEU targets under the EU Solar Energy Strategy and reach a total of at least 700 GW capacity by 2030, up from the estimated 263 GW installed at the end of 2023. Over the last years, the EU has taken several initiatives to strengthen the support to the European photovoltaic manufacturing sector by launching the European Solar PV Industry Alliance, adopting a Solar Charter, and setting up a public-private co-programmed partnership to support its coordinated R&I efforts (Eur-lex, 2022). As for wind power, 16 GW of new capacity was installed in the EU in 2023, reaching a total 221 GW. While this shows good progress, the power sector needs to increase the pace of installation to meet the EU's ambitious renewable energy targets, a challenge to which the Commission has responded with the adoption of the Wind Power Package (October 2023) (European Commission, 2023), while striving for a balanced deployment in collaboration with local citizens to avoid that the energy transition is challenged because of concerns over landscapes, biodiversity, cultural heritage and lifestyles, especially in rural areas (European Commission, 2024).

The EU aims to become fossil fuel independent by 2050, coal-free by 2030, and gas-fired and nuclear-fired power generation (Gurkov, 2021). However, this narrative is not matched in Central Asia, where there is no talk of abandoning coal and gas-fired power plants. In Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan alone, more than 90 percent of electricity is generated from hydropower, and these two countries are also planning to increase their electricity generation from renewable sources. In the remaining countries, coal-fired power plants are a priority, and even Uzbekistan has decided to build a nuclear power plant (with Russian assistance) (World Nuclear News, 2024). Nevertheless, discussion on how to better integrate energy-related cooperation and enhance regional security in the Euro-Asia region have intensified. For example, on February 13, 2024, a telephone conversation took place between the President of the Republic of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, and the then President of the European Council, Charles Michel. Further strengthening dialogue and expand cooperation in political, economic and commercial areas were mentioned as key. The parties also discussed security issues, including the situation in Afghanistan and the strengthening of the Tajik-Afghan border. In this regard, it was expressed confidence that cooperation within the framework of such programmes, such as BOMCA, CADAP and LEICA would continue. The President of Tajikistan expressed his support for more active cooperation in the implementation of "green economy" and "green energy" policies (MFA Tajikistan 2024).

Central Asian states have developed distinct approaches to post-Soviet identity construction since 1991, each crafting national visions that reflect their energy profiles



and security needs. Kazakhstan's 'Strategy 2050' emphasises multi-vector foreign policy and nuclear non-proliferation leadership, positioning the country as a bridge between major powers while leveraging its energy resources for identity construction (Nazarbayev, 2012; Satubaldina, 2021). Uzbekistan's 'New Uzbekistan' approach under President Mirziyoyev has focused on regional reintegration and economic modernisation, using energy cooperation to signal its transition from isolationist policies (Nadirova, 2024). Tajikistan centers its strategy on energy independence through hydropower development, constructing an identity as a 'green energy' leader, while Kyrgyzstan has pursued multi-vector diplomacy that balances competing external relationships (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Tajikistan, 2013; Masalbekova, 2024).

These differentiated approaches reveal a common pattern: all Central Asian states have gradually shifted from Russian-dominated frameworks toward diversified partnerships that reinforce their self-narratives as independent actors (DCAF, 2020). The ability to engage multiple external partners – including the EU, China, and the United States – serves ontological security needs by demonstrating sovereign agency and providing narrative flexibility in their ongoing identity construction. In this context, the EU has positioned itself as a relevant partner that allows these states to diversify their security relationships while constructing new post-Soviet identities.

EU-Central Asia energy relations: from strangers to partners

The evolution of EU-Central Asia energy relations can be understood as part of an identity construction where both actors used energy cooperation to build and maintain coherent autobiographic narratives about their roles in the post-Cold War order. For the EU, engagement with newly independent Central Asia states through the Technical Assistance to the Commonwealth of Independent States (TACIS) programme represented an opportunity to construct a narrative of itself as a transformative power capable of extending liberal democracy values beyond its immediate neighbourhood (International Crisis Group, 2006). The European Commission's 1995 document "The EU's relations with the Newly Independent States of Central Asia" marked the first attempt to articulate a coherent autobiographical narrative about the EU's regional role, though its simultaneous identification of geopolitical and economic interests alongside serious political concerns over human rights and democracy revealed the fundamental tension in EU identity construction between normative aspirations and strategic interests (European Commission, 1995).

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States created profound ontological disruption for both sides, forcing rapid revision of established security narratives and compelling both actors to reconstruct their narratives around new security imperatives (Kluczevska & Dzhuraev, 2020). The EU's 2002 Strategic Paper for Central Asia represented an attempt to reconstruct its regional identity around crisis management and security cooperation, with the allocation of fifty million euros annually signalling investment in maintaining the EU's self-image as a capable international actor (European Commission, 2002). However, the 2005 Andijan massacre created another moment of profound ontological anxiety, forcing the EU to confront the impossibility of



maintaining coherent narratives that simultaneously emphasised human rights promotion and strategic partnership with authoritarian states (Drost et al., 2025: 47).

The Council of the European Union's "Strategy for a New Partnership" with Central Asia (2007) marked a critical juncture in ontological security construction, representing the EU's attempt to establish routinized practices that could stabilise its regional identity (European Council, 2007; Fawn, 2021). The Czech Presidency's 2009 emphasis on the Southern Corridor initiative demonstrated how energy cooperation served identity construction needs beyond material diversification, allowing the EU to narrate itself as a strategic connectivity facilitator while providing Central Asia states with opportunities to construct identities as energy partners rather than peripheral suppliers (Hubinger, 2009).

Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 created the most profound ontological disruption in EU-Central Asia energy relations since the Soviet collapse, fundamentally shattering established narratives of energy interdependence and peaceful cooperation (Drost et al., 2025: 8). Russia's 2014 annexation of Crimea and intervention in eastern Ukraine first cracked the EU's established energy interdependence narrative, prompting initial diversification rhetoric. However, the EU's response remained largely within existing frameworks, seeking to maintain the possibility of restored relations with Russia while gradually reducing dependence. The 2022 full-scale invasion represented a qualitatively different rupture, with no illusion about energy partnership with Russia and pushing for a comprehensive reorientation, which accelerated EU engagement with Central Asia. The Strategic Partnership memoranda of Understanding with Kazakhstan (November 2022) and Uzbekistan (April 2024) represent more than diversification strategies – they constitute attempts to reconstruct autobiographical narratives of energy security and autonomy (European Commission, 2022b; Delegation of the European Union to Uzbekistan, 2024). EU energy relations with Central Asia have evolved from minimal post-Soviet engagement to comprehensive strategic partnerships. Currently, we can see how ontological security needs drive energy cooperation beyond material calculations, as both the EU and Central Asian states use these partnerships to reconstruct coherent self-narratives that can accommodate geopolitical disruption while maintaining identity continuity.

Energy relations: building blocks or competing insecurities?

The relationship between the European Union and Central Asian states has evolved significantly in recent years, marked by increased diplomatic engagement, strategic framework development, and expansion of cooperation across multiple domains. EU-Central Asian relations have been institutionalised through a series of strategic initiatives, most notably the adoption of a new European Union Strategy for Central Asia in 2019 (EU Strategy, 2019). The New EU Strategy to Central Asia also sought to reinforce relations in a context of tension with Russia (EU Strategy, 2019). One of the points of the 2019 Strategy is the exchange of knowledge in the field of renewable energy and energy efficiency. Indeed, in their mutual cooperation, the EU and Central Asia pay serious attention to the energy sector. This is why over the course of more than 30 years of cooperation between the two sides, many energy projects have been renovated or built in the region. As the current EU strategy for Central Asia declares, "the strategic



geographical location at the crossroads of Europe and Asia, its share of the EU's energy imports and the market potential of eighty million inhabitants, as well as the EU's interest in regional security, have made Central Asia an increasingly important partner for the EU" (European Parliament and Council, 2019). In light of the Ukrainian crisis, relations between Central Asian countries and the EU could be significantly strengthened by the Team Europe Initiative on Water, Energy and Climate Change and the Team Europe Initiative on Digital Connectivity, within the Global Gateway Project (European Commission, 2022a).

The EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference on November 17-18, 2022 in Samarkand was the first meeting since the EU Global Gateway Strategy was adopted on December 1, 2021 and marked the intensification of the Union's policy towards the region, demonstrating the growing importance of Central Asia for the EU. The meeting was attended by Central Asian leaders and the High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy, Josep Borrell. This event was accompanied by the launch of a number of EU initiatives covering areas such as energy, transport, climate change, water and digital connectivity (European Commission, n/d). This framework has been complemented by the establishment of regular high-level dialogue mechanisms, including the Heads of State of Central Asia and European Union summit format, which has convened twice already - first in Astana (October 2022) and subsequently in Cholpon-Ata (June 2023). In April 2025, the first EU-Central Asia Summit took place, hosted by the President of Uzbekistan, where it was stated the need to address common security challenges, and explore new possibilities for engagement between the regions, along with furthering cooperation and investments within the Global Gateway project (European Council, 2025). These meetings, and particularly the Summit at the highest level in 2025 represent a significant elevation in diplomatic engagement between the regions (European Council, 2025).

Other example of how the energy crisis caused by the Russia war on Ukraine and the need for alternative energy suppliers became pressing is the agreement on a large-scale project "Sustainable Energy Connectivity in Central Asia" (SECCA), the budget of which is 6.8 million euros (Andžāns & Djatkoviča, 2023; see also Strulkova, n/d). The main objective of the SECCA project is to support the transition to sustainable energy systems by exploiting the region's potential in solar, wind and hydropower in line with EU best practices. The programme supports the implementation of pilot projects aimed at demonstrating the viability and benefits of renewable energy technologies. In addition to this, the SECCA project also focuses on energy efficiency measures. This includes providing technical assistance and capacity building to improve energy efficiency by reducing energy intensity in industry and improving the energy efficiency of buildings (NUZ UZ, 2022). In addition, the SECCA project aims to increase access to energy in remote and underserved areas of Central Asia. Access to basic energy services remains a challenge for the region's predominantly rural population. This involves supporting the development of off-grid and mini-grid systems based on renewable energy sources (Stantec, 2022).

The frequency and substantive nature of these dialogues indicate a mutual recognition of the strategic importance of interregional cooperation. President Emomali Rahmon of Tajikistan explicitly acknowledged satisfaction with the level of cooperation with the EU,



while Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev credited the EU with helping strengthen intra-regional dialogue in Central Asia despite "unprecedented geopolitical aggravation". This suggests the EU is achieving a measure of normative influence in the region.

Economic cooperation forms a cornerstone of EU-Central Asian relations, with the EU emerging as a significant trade and investment partner for the region. President Tokayev's statement that the EU is "Kazakhstan's largest trading partner, accounting for more than 40% of our foreign trade" with bilateral trade reaching \$40 billion in 2022 is particularly illustrative of this economic interdependence. Furthermore, European investment constitutes approximately half of Kazakhstan's \$350 billion in foreign direct investment accumulated since independence. The economic dimension of the relationship appears to be characterised by ambitious growth targets, as evidenced by Kazakhstan's stated goal of increasing trade with the EU to \$50 billion by 2025. This economic cooperation extends beyond traditional trade to encompass infrastructure investment, particularly through the newly established *EU-Central Asia Connectivity: A Global Gateway to Sustainable Development* framework launched in Samarkand in November 2022.

Transport infrastructure development, particularly the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, has emerged as a strategic priority in EU-Central Asian relations. Multiple Central Asian leaders, including Presidents Tokayev, Mirziyoyev, and Berdimuhamedov, emphasised the importance of this corridor in their diplomatic communications. Turkmenistan, positioning itself as a "reliable transport bridge between Asia and Europe", has actively engaged with the EU on developing North-South and East-West transport corridors. This focus on transport connectivity appears directly connected to Central Asian states' aspirations for economic diversification and reduced dependence on traditional trade routes. President Mirziyoyev directly characterised the "diversification of transport routes" as an "urgent task for all countries in our region", suggesting the EU engagement addresses a core strategic need of Central Asian states. President Tokayev, while participating in the Central Asia-Germany meeting on September 17, 2024 in Astana, said that "Kazakhstan welcomes the decision of European partners to allocate 10 billion euros as part of the Global Gateway programme for the development of the Middle Corridor. We count on Germany's assistance in connecting this route with the Trans-European Transport Network (TEN-T) and the Global Gateway strategy". According to President Tokayev, further integration of transport and logistics systems between Central Asia and Europe remains an urgent task (Tokayev, 2024). The Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, also known as the Middle Corridor, connects China and European countries through Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Turkey, offering Central Asia a safe, short and inexpensive route given its rich resources (European Parliament, 2023).

Energy cooperation constitutes a significant dimension of EU-Central Asian relations, with emphasis on both traditional and renewable energy sources. The references to "green energy" in statements by Presidents Rahmon and Mirziyoyev suggest alignment with the EU's own climate objectives and external energy policy. Notably, President Rahmon outlined Tajikistan's Strategy for the Development of the "Green Economy", which aims to increase renewable energy capacity to at least 1,000 megawatts by 2030. In fact, the



Republic of Tajikistan has had fruitful cooperation with the EU in the energy sector since its independence, with a significant role in the reconstruction of Tajikistan's energy networks, the introduction of new technologies for electricity metering, energy security, and the construction of hydroelectric power plants, such as the Sebzor hydroelectric power plant, located in the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (Delegation of the EU to Tajikistan, 2020; Interfax, 2024).

Concurrently, Kazakhstan's President Tokayev emphasised the importance of nuclear energy development, including accelerating construction of the country's first nuclear power plant and creating a "nuclear cluster" to address "growing energy deficit". This diversity in energy priorities across Central Asian states presents both opportunities and challenges for EU energy diplomacy in the region, requiring a differentiated approach that acknowledges varying national priorities while promoting broader sustainability objectives. The EU's engagement with Central Asia on security matters appears to be welcomed by regional leaders, suggesting recognition of the EU's potential contribution to addressing complex security challenges in the region.

While the EU-Central Asia relationship has a strong multilateral component, bilateral relations between the EU and individual Central Asian states display significant differentiation. Kazakhstan appears to have the most developed economic relationship with the EU, as evidenced by substantial trade and investment figures. Kyrgyzstan's President Japarov characterised the EU as "one of Kyrgyzstan's reliable partners, providing support to the country for sustainable development since independence", while Turkmenistan emphasised the development of "long-term ties" on both bilateral and multilateral bases. This differentiation reflects varying levels of economic development, resource endowments, and strategic orientations across Central Asian states, necessitating a calibrated EU approach that balances regional frameworks with bilateral engagement.

EU-Central Asian relations have evolved toward a more strategic partnership characterised by regular high-level dialogue, diversified cooperation areas, and increasingly institutionalised frameworks. Economic relations, particularly trade and investment, form the foundation of this relationship, complemented by growing cooperation in energy, security, transport connectivity and digital development. The emphasis on formal dialogue mechanisms, particularly the establishment of regular summits at the heads of state level, indicates mutual recognition of the strategic importance of this interregional relationship. However, significant differentiation exists across individual Central Asian states in terms of their specific priorities and depth of engagement with the EU.

The European Parliament's 2025 assessment of EU-Central Asia relations provides compelling evidence for the ontological security dimensions of energy cooperation, revealing significant disparity between strategic rhetoric and material outcomes. Despite total bilateral trade of only 52.8 billion euro in 2023 and limited concrete energy flows, the EU has committed 12 billion euro through the Global Gateway initiative specifically to enhance energy and transport connectivity with the region (European Parliament, 2025). This disproportionate investment becomes particularly evident in the EU's ongoing negotiations with Turkmenistan for the Trans-Caspian Interconnector, a project that has been under discussion since 2021 but involves only 10-12 billion cubic meters annually



– a relatively modest contribution to EU energy needs. The document's emphasis on using Central Asian partnerships to "reduce dependence on China and Russia in the context of global geopolitical changes" explicitly frames energy cooperation as serving broader identity reconstruction purposes beyond material supply security. Moreover, the Parliament's focus on "enormous potential" for renewable energy cooperation and critical raw materials partnerships with countries like Kazakhstan suggests the EU is constructing future-oriented narratives of energy autonomy and green transition leadership, using Central Asian partnerships as vehicles for autobiographical narrative reconstruction rather than immediate material energy security gains. For Central Asian states, particularly those transitioning from post-Soviet identities, partnerships with diverse international actors represent opportunities to assert sovereign agency and construct new national narratives. The ability to negotiate and maintain multiple external relationships, rather than remaining exclusively within Russia's sphere of influence, reinforces these states' self-realisation as independent actors. As both the EU and Central Asian states navigate shifts in the context of the war in Ukraine regarding routes' diversification, and regarding renewable energy sources, these transitions challenge established identities tied to traditional energy production and consumption patterns. This explains why cooperation frameworks that acknowledge identity needs, not merely material interests, tend to generate more sustainable partnerships.

Conclusion

Through the lens of ontological security, this article looked at the evolving relationship between the EU and Central Asian states, focusing on energy cooperation as a critical domain where identity narratives and security anxieties intersect. The analysis reveals that EU-Central Asia energy relations cannot be understood solely through material or geopolitical frameworks, but must be situated within broader processes of identity construction and narrative continuity that shape how both regions perceive and respond to threats. The Russian full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022 represented a critical juncture in the EU's autobiographical narrative, fundamentally disrupting established routines of energy interdependence with Russia that had structured the EU's self-understanding for decades. This disruption generated profound ontological insecurity, compelling the EU to seek not just alternative energy sources but new narratives that could restore a sense of continuity and purpose. Central Asia emerged as a key space for this narrative reconstruction, with the EU developing frameworks like the Global Gateway Initiative, SECCA, and enhanced institutional cooperation mechanisms that serve both practical and identity functions.

Ontological security considerations help explain policy choices that might appear suboptimal from purely material perspectives. The EU's extensive investment in capacity-building programmes alongside energy initiatives reflects an attempt to construct a comprehensive narrative of partnership that stabilises its identity as a normative power even as it pursues energy diversification. Similarly, Central Asian states' willingness to engage with multiple external actors reflects not just hedging strategies but efforts to maintain narrative flexibility in their ongoing identity construction. The ontological security framework shows how energy cooperation serves distinct identity reconstruction purposes for both sides. For Central Asian states, engagement with the EU offers



opportunities to strengthen their post-Soviet identity narratives as sovereign actors with agency in international relations. For the EU, these partnerships reinforce its self-narrative as a normative power promoting sustainable development and regional integration beyond its immediate neighbourhood. Thus, energy security is revealed to be not simply about securing physical supplies but about maintaining coherent self-narratives in a world of disruption and change.

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