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## **KAZAKHSTAN AND EUROPEAN INTEGRATION: FURTHER POTENTIAL**

**Abstract.** This article investigates the benefits for Kazakhstan and European Union that arise from strengthening the mutual cooperation. It follows that, for European Union the closer association with Kazakhstan is beneficial due to the number of reasons. In particular, the Kazakhstan's close relations with Russia and China could help Europeans to truly understand these great powers. Apart from that, the Kazakhstani role as emerging transport corridor, the strong position of Kazakhstan in the UN as well as the Kazakhstani experience of mitigation the international disputes are of great value for Europe. At the same time, Kazakhstan is likely to take advantage of closer ties with Europe due to possible interaction with the number of such reputable European institutions as ODIHR, OSCE and Council of Europe. In broader terms, the future collaboration between the Kazakhstan and European Union is most likely to occur on the dimension of political reforms.

**Key words:** *Kazakhstan, European Union, diplomacy, multi-vector foreign policy, cooperation, integration, political reform.*

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## **Сванте Корнелл ҚАЗАҚСТАН ЖӘНЕ ЕУРОПАЛЫҚ ИНТЕГРАЦИЯ: БОЛАШАҚТАҒЫ ӘЛЕУЕТІ**

**Аңдатпа.** Мақалада өзара ынтымақтастықтың Қазақстан мен Еуропалық Одаққа тигізетін артықшылықтары қарастырылған.

Еуропалық Одақ үшін Қазақстанмен тығыз байланыс бірнеше себептерге байланысты тиімді. Атап айтқанда, Қазақстанның Ресеймен және Қытаймен тығыз қарым-қатынасы еуропалықтарға осы алпауыт мемлекеттермен жақынырақ танысуға және зерттеуге мүмкіндік береді. Сонымен қатар, Қазақстанның дамып келе жатқан көлік дәлізі ретіндегі рөлі, Қазақстанның БҰҰ-дағы берік позициясы, сондай-ақ халықаралық дауларды шешуде Қазақстанның тәжірибесі Еуропа үшін өте маңызды. Сонымен бірге, ДИАҚБ, ЕҚЫҰ және Еуропалық Кеңес сияқты бірқатар беделді еуропалық институттармен өзара әрекеттесуді ескере отырып, Қазақстан Еуропамен тығыз байланыста болудың пайдасын көреді. Кеңірек түрде, Қазақстан мен Еуропалық Одақ арасындағы болашақ ынтымақтастық саяси реформалар аясында жүзеге асуы ықтимал.

*Түйін сөздер:* Қазақстан, Еуропалық Одақ, дипломатия, көпвекторлы сыртқы саясат, ынтымақтастық, интеграция, саяси реформалар.

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## Сванте Корнелл КАЗАХСТАН И ЕВРОПЕЙСКАЯ ИНТЕГРАЦИЯ: ДАЛЬНЕЙШИЙ ПОТЕНЦИАЛ

**Аннотация.** В данной статье исследуются выгоды для Казахстана и Европейского Союза, вытекающие из укрепления взаимного сотрудничества. Для Европейского Союза более тесная ассоциация с Казахстаном выгодна по целому ряду причин. В частности, тесные отношения Казахстана с Россией и Китаем предоставляют возможность европейцам поближе узнать и изучить эти супердержавы. Кроме того, большую ценность для Европы представляют роль Казахстана как формирующегося транспортного коридора, прочные позиции Казахстана в ООН, а также казахстанский опыт разрешения международных споров. В то же время Казахстану выгодны более тесные связи с Европой ввиду возможного взаимодействия с рядом таких авторитетных европейских институтов, как БДИПЧ, ОБСЕ и Совет Европы. В более широком ракурсе, будущее сотрудничество между

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Казахстаном и Европейским Союзом, вероятнее всего, будет происходить в разрезе политических реформ.

*Ключевые слова:* Казахстан, Европейский Союз, дипломатия, многовекторная внешняя политика, сотрудничество, интеграция, политические реформы.

## **Introduction**

Kazakhstan is both a European and an Asian state. This reality might appear self-evident to many Kazakhs, but it has not been internalized by Europeans. Indeed, perhaps because it is known as part of Central Asia, many Europeans and Americans view Kazakhstan as a purely Asian state, though one of the post-Soviet variety. But this view is largely mistaken, as Kazakhstan exhibits many aspects of a European state.

Most obvious is the geographic issue. Kazakhstan is, along with Russia and Turkey, one of three trans-continental states that have territory in both Europe and Asia. And like both of those, Kazakhstan exhibits both European and Asian characteristics. But geographic definitions are by definition arbitrary, as the dividing line between Europe and Asia is by no means obvious. More interesting is the question of the attributes of a state and a nation.

What makes a state European? Aside from geography, there are a number of elements that are common to European states. One is self-identity – the very fact of considering themselves to belong to European either geographically or spiritually. From this perspective, Kazakhstan is definitely European, because the understanding of Eurasian identity that is central to Kazakhstan’s self-perception is one that is inclusive and complementary. In other words, while some Russian ideologues define “Eurasian” in opposition to European, Kazakhstan’s understanding of Eurasianism is one that combines European and Asian and seeks complementarities between them.

A second key aspect is that Kazakhstan’s understanding of its nation is predominantly civic. While Kazakhstan is the homeland of the Kazakh people, membership in the national community is determined by citizenship and not by ethnicity. In other words, it is inclusive rather than exclusive, something that is the established norm across Europe.

A close corollary to this is the relationship of religion and state. European states without a fault separate religion from politics. This, in fact, is one of the biggest differences between European states and Middle Eastern ones, where the establishment of a state religion remains the norm. Of course, European states have diverging understandings of secularism – one is the Anglo-Saxon model that focuses on the religious freedom of the individuals, while another is the French model, whose main purpose is to prevent the domination of any organized religion on society and the state. While the Anglo-Saxon model has become the dominant one across Europe, Kazakhstan resembles the French model. This important attribute of Kazakhstan is one that strengthens its European identity.

Unfortunately, Kazakhstan's approach to religious issues has been one that has caused friction with Europe, whereas it should be the opposite. Part of the reason is Kazakhstan's occasionally excessive restrictions on religious freedoms, as well as the abuses committed by predominantly local officials against religious figures that deviate from the majority. But a bigger reason is that the Anglo-Saxon model of secularism has become dominant in the West. By contrast, Kazakhstan's situation is similar to that of France or other Catholic countries a century ago, which all sought to mitigate the dominant influence of the Roman Catholic Church, a highly politicized religious tradition that challenged state sovereignty. Similarly, Kazakhstan and other Central Asian states gained independence at a time when Sunni Islam, their own dominant religious tradition, was highly politicized at the global level. This led Kazakhstan and its neighbors to adopt an approach to religion that focused on freedom *from* religion rather than freedom *to* religion, a distinction that is not fully understood or appreciated by Europeans. But that does not change the fundamentally European inspiration of Kazakhstan's approach to religion.

Furthermore, Kazakhstan's education system is decidedly European. This is in part a legacy of the Soviet education system. But since independence, Kazakhstan has taken conscious policy decisions to align its education system further with Europe. In particular, the new education law of 2007 took Kazakhstan's education system in a European direction, and in 2010 Kazakhstan adopted the Bologna model for its

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higher education. Kazakhstan still lags behind most European states in terms of its level of funding of education, but it has made clear its ambition to develop a European-style education system, something that will ensure the continued European outlook of its citizenry.

The main area where Kazakhstan differs from Europe is in terms of the model of political governance. European states strongly hold that a society is best governed by a highly liberalized model of political contestation, where government policy is the result of compromises made in a parliamentary setting by competing political parties built around diverse ideologies. Kazakhstan's leadership does not in principle oppose that notion. However, in the 1990s it concluded that this model was not suitable for a newly independent state, squeezed between great powers, with serious internal, external and transnational challenges. Instead, Kazakhstan's leaders adopted an evolutionary model of governance, which rested on elite consensus and a prioritization of economic development before the introduction of political liberalization.

Indeed, this divergence has been the main thorn in the relationship between Kazakhstan and European institutions. In practice, Kazakhstan's reluctance to embrace immediate political liberalization has likely been mostly beneficial to the country's development. By contrast, the upheavals across Eurasia and the Middle East that led to the introduction of immediate political liberalization have not fared well. Whether Russia in the 1990s, the "color revolutions" of 2003-5, or the "Arab Spring" of 2011, these experiments all failed to yield long-term sustainable democratic government. Only in east-central Europe in the 1990s was such a process successful; but there, it rested on historical democratic antecedents, and benefited from considerable assistance of West European states as well as the prospect of membership in the European Union and NATO. None of those characteristics was present in Kazakhstan.

In the past thirty years, however, Kazakhstan has succeeded in building a stable, sustainable state and society. For some time, therefore, the question has been how long it would be defensible to further delay a process of gradual liberalization of the political system. From time to time, public activism among Kazakhstan's population has indicated that a demand for political reform has grown among the population.

Happily, the country's leadership has answered this demand. While there have been many initiatives toward political reform in recent decades, they have been particularly pronounced since 2019, when President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev announced that Kazakhstan would henceforth engage in political and economic reform simultaneously, rather than allowing the latter to have precedence over the former. His concept of a "listening state," as well as his stated intention to combat corruption in government bureaucracy and fundamentally transform the meaning of being a civil servant, bodes well for the future. The difficulty, of course, will be to transform these ideas to actual change implements across the vast bureaucracy of the country at all levels. This process will undoubtedly take time and require support from Kazakhstan's partners.

### **Methods**

This in turn once again raises the question of Kazakhstan's relationship with European institutions. Could this process of political reform, if implemented, lead to a further integration of Kazakhstan to European institutions? To discuss this, this article will investigate the benefits for Europe of closer association with Kazakhstan, as well as the advantages for Kazakhstan of European integration.

### **Kazakhstan's Benefits to Europe**

European initiatives in the EU's neighborhood are often framed in terms of assistance. Seldom are they framed in terms of why they are in the European interest. That said, there are numerous reasons why a closer association with Kazakhstan is in Europe's interest.

The simple answer is that Kazakhstan plays an overwhelmingly positive role on the international scene, aligns with European priorities, and holds knowledge that European states do not but could benefit from.

First of all, Kazakhstan has a multi-vector foreign policy that sees Europe as one important vector. But from a European perspective, it may be the other vectors that matter more. Kazakhstan has a close partnership with Russia and China, great powers of the Eurasian continent that are both extremely important for Europe itself. Clearly, Kazakhstan's close relations with its two large neighbors can be of considerable benefit to Europe – as Kazakhstan's perspective on Russia

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and China could be of considerable value in informing European understanding of these great powers.

Beyond this, Kazakhstan plays an obvious role in the emerging corridor of land transportation linking Europe to Asia, as the country's landmass forms the main connector between China and Europe

In addition, an important vector of Kazakhstan's foreign policy is the country's important role in multilateral institutions, particularly the United Nations. This embrace of multilateralism and in the support for diplomacy as a key to resolving international disputes is one area where Kazakhstan aligns closely with Europe. This was visible not least during the presidency of Donald Trump, which took America's occasional unilateralist instincts to an extreme. Whereas the Trump Administration embraced unilateral approaches to issues ranging from climate change to the Iranian nuclear program, Kazakhstan and Europe were aligned in urging for further diplomacy and multilateral solutions.

Building on this "fourth" vector of Kazakhstan's diplomacy (beyond the three main bilateral relations with Russia, China and the United States) is a fifth vector: that of international mediation. The international community may not have fully comprehended the role played by Kazakhstan in taking an active role to resolve disputes. This role dates back to the 1990s, when President Nursultan Nazarbayev offered Kazakhstan's good offices in resolving the conflict between Armenia and Azerbaijan as well as the civil war in Tajikistan. More recently, Kazakhstan's initiatives have been backed by its more developed statecraft. It is well known that Kazakhstan convened discussions on the Iranian nuclear program almost a decade ago; and that it more recently hosted numerous rounds of talks on the Syrian civil war. Less known is Kazakhstan's role in lowering tensions in Kyrgyzstan's 2010 crisis, its efforts to promote dialogue on the Ukraine conflict, and its successful effort to mediate between Turkey and Russia in 2015. The point here is that this type of activism in international mediation is normally a role embraced by European states, particularly small and neutral countries. Kazakhstan's involvement in international mediation is a further manner in which the country appears to engage with the world in a way that resembles European states.

All in all, this suggests that Kazakhstan's role on the international scene is one that is not only compatible with Europe but very much complementary to Europe and has the potential of adding value to Europe's own international role.

### **European Institutions and Kazakhstan?**

If Kazakhstan should be an attractive partner for Europe, is the reverse also the case? The answer would appear to be in the affirmative. The variety of institutions that have been set up in Europe in the past three quarters of a century would appear to hold considerable value for Kazakhstan.

First among these institutions is the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe. It is the broadest among European cooperative structures, being open essentially to all states wishing to participate in it. In this sense, it fulfills an important role as it is the only regional organization where European states and Russia are members. There is some controversy over the role of the OSCE, where European states have sought to emphasize its Office of Democratic Institutions and Human Rights (ODIHR) whereas Russia and several other states have argued that the organization should focus more of its role on security cooperation. Notwithstanding such disagreements, the OSCE plays an important role as an organization where all EU members and Central Asian states are included, and is an organization to which Kazakhstan has paid close attention. Kazakhstan chaired the OSCE in 2010 and organized its first summit in a decade.

The Council of Europe is a more curious case, because it is an organization that should have a closer relationship with Kazakhstan but does not. Founded in 1949 with ten West European member states, the Council has an important but often underestimated role in supporting the development of democratic institutions and the rule of law. It also hosts the European Court of Human Rights, the pre-eminent judicial body in Europe to which individuals can appeal for redress of grievances.

After the collapse of communism, the Council's membership expanded greatly to the current number of 47, leaving only three countries with part of their territory in Europe outside of the organization: Belarus, the Vatican, and Kazakhstan. Theoretically,



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membership is open to countries wholly or partly located in Europe and “whose culture is closely linked with the European culture” [1]. This definition has applied to both Russia and Turkey, and should therefore apply to Kazakhstan as well. In practice, this has not been the case. The Council appears to treat Kazakhstan differently from Belarus, another European former Soviet state that the organization considers to possess deficiencies in the area of democracy and human rights. Its Committee of Ministers declared in 2012 that the full integration of Belarus remains the organization’s “Strategic Objective” [2]. It has made no similar declaration with respect to Kazakhstan, and sent mixed signals on whether it considers Kazakhstan as a country that is eligible for membership.

Importantly, however, nowhere has the Council of Europe explicitly excluded Kazakhstan’s membership in the organization on geographic grounds. Subsequently, the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe (PACE) officials clarified that although they found it desirable to integrate Kazakhstan into the European institutional framework, this would only be an option if certain conditions were fulfilled, such as a moratorium on the death penalty, the ratification of all European human rights conventions and a significant improvement in the protection of human rights in the country [3].

There have, however, been encouraging steps. Since 2004, members of Kazakhstan’s legislature are able to attend PACE and there is a special representative of Kazakhstan at the Secretariat of the Council. The Council is also involved in election monitoring in Kazakhstan, and PACE has offered to assist Kazakhstan in improving civil rights and rule of law in the country. Consequentially, Kazakhstan in 2011 became a full member of the European Commission for Democracy through Law (in common parlance known as the Venice Commission), which it had been associated with since receiving observer status in 1998. In recent years, the most intensive area of Kazakhstan-CoE relations has been a step-by-step Action Plan on Kazakhstan’s accession to the Council of Europe’s target conventions in criminal justice. In 2017, Kazakh officials also requested an opinion from the Venice Commission on the Constitutional Amendments proposed early in the year. In response, the Venice Commission issued a report that, with some reservations of a largely technical nature, praised the proposed amendments [4].

Still, among countries with territory in Europe, Kazakhstan stands out as the only country for which the CoE has not established some form of clarity regarding its intentions. The Council has been reluctant to move too far, perhaps given its problematic experiences with Russia, Turkey, and South Caucasus states.

## Results

As for the European Union, Kazakhstan is the EU's most important partner in Central Asia. In 2015, Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian country to successfully sign an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) with the EU. The agreement covers a broad spectrum of areas and provides EU support for Kazakhstan's efforts at political reform.

Kazakhstan, however, remains outside the Eastern Partnership, the most ambitious instrument created by the EU for its eastern neighborhood. It is tasked with promoting and intensifying political association and deepening economic integration between the EU and these countries. It offered a new type of EU commitment to support approximation of eastern neighbors to EU norms, including the offer of a Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreement (DCFTA). For that, partner countries adopt and fully apply a broad range of EU standards and regulations, including in technical fields such as transport, environment and taxation. In essence, through these agreements, partner states can choose to implement a considerable proportion of the EU's *acquis communautaire*, a fact that obviously would make them closer to actual membership if and when such accession would be politically feasible.

But the Eastern Partnership in practice drew a hard line in the Caspian Sea, as it provided countries only to the west of the sea with a pathway to integration. Any such prospect has been missing from EU strategies for Central Asia. Kazakhstan's EPCA does not foresee a possible expansion into a free trade agreement, and does not imply the unilateral adaptation to the *acquis communautaire*, as the DCFTA does.

But things have changed since the Eastern Partnership's creation. It has moved from a one-size-fits-all character to a more tailored approach, that accommodates the difference ambitions of partner states. As a result, the agreements that the EU has with Armenia

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and Azerbaijan differ in degree but not in kind with what it has with Kazakhstan. There is no longer anything that dictates that Kazakhstan's relationship with the EU is less developed than that of a member of the Eastern Partnership.

### **The Road Ahead**

As Kazakhstan embarks on further political reform within the concept of creating what President Tokayev calls a “listening state,” the main outside support for this effort is likely to be found in European institutions. While the OECD and OSCE can play a role, the two key institutions are likely to be the Council of Europe and the EU.

While full membership is unlikely to be a short-term prospect, the Council of Europe is underrated as an agent of political reform. Indeed, the Council has successfully assisted in institutional reform and political transformation across eastern Europe, seconding experts and bureaucrats for this purpose that carry out important work without making headlines. More than ever, the presence in Council institutions of east European nationals with experience of their own transitions and reforms constitute an unparalleled reserve of expertise that Kazakhstan could benefit from as it seeks to implement the goals for institutional reform. In this context, it would seem that the relationship between Kazakhstan and the Council of Europe has a lot of under-utilized potential. A very positive step in this regard is the abolition of the death penalty in Kazakhstan, which removes a key impediment for closer integration of Kazakhstan into the Council of Europe.

As Kazakhstan continues on a path of political reform that would put it on a path to a more European form of government, not only can the Council be an important partner in this endeavor; but full membership could become a political objective in the course of such a journey.

As for the European Union, it is entirely possible that an arrangement in substance similar to the Eastern Partnership is extended eastward – i.e. the unilateral adaptation to EU regulations and norms without the stated prospect of membership. Because no other Central Asian state has a comparable relationship with the EU, this would likely take the shape of a bilateral arrangement with Kazakhstan.

## Conclusion

Whether Kazakhstan pursues deeper integration with the EU or not, the EU is likely to play a role, as it does presently, in Kazakhstan's balanced foreign policy in various individually limited but collectively significant ways. Going forward, it is also likely that the EU will play an important role in supporting the domestic reform agenda in Kazakhstan.

Looking ahead, Kazakhstan's relationship with the Council of Europe and EU will play an important role in the difficult but necessary effort toward political reform. These organizations can serve as important partners in Kazakhstan's practical implementation of reform. Moreover, a closer formal association with these organizations could also prove important milestones offering recognition for Kazakhstan's gradual success in reforming the country's political system.

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