

*The European Union's Influence in Central Asia: Geopolitical Challenges and Responses.* By Olga Alinda Spaiser. London: Lexington Books, 2018. 245 pp. (ISBN: 9781498542234). doi: 10.22679/avs.2021.6.1.011

The manuscript under review assesses the EU's strategic thinking and policies toward Central Asia, and examines the EU claim that its policies are not driven by geopolitical considerations (such as a new "great game") and purely selfish economic interests, but by "fundamentally a cooperative" approach (p. vii). The study of EU political and economic activities in Central Asia has been particularly critical for understanding the emerging regional, inter-regional, and international cooperation architecture in the context of the decades-long rivalry between China, Russia, and the USA for influence in the region. The book's author Olga Alinda Spaiser is an associate scholar at SciencesPo (Paris) and project manager for the Directorate-general for Crisis Prevention, Stabilization, and Post-Conflict Reconstruction in the German Federal Foreign Office. As a part of this research monograph project, Spaiser not only collected primary and secondary materials from both the EU zone and Central Asia but also conducted a series of interviews with diplomats and foreign policy officials from various EU institutions (p. xviii). In addition, she completed three case studies assessing cross-border security disputes, governance crises, and environmental cooperation on water issues in Central Asia and evaluated the EU's responses.

This research is an attempt to assess the extent to which EU policies towards the Central Asian region have differed from those of all the superpowers. It addresses a set of puzzling research questions and focuses on a major one: "Which instruments and strategies does the European Union apply in order to exert influence in Central Asia?" (p. x). The author argues that EU policy towards Central Asia crystallized quite recently compared to other players – between 2007 and 2013 – with the launch of the EU strategy for Central Asia supported by the first seven-year budgetary plan (p. xii). In fact, she believes that before 2007 these policies were not formulated within a specific strategic long-term framework as the EU considered the Central Asian region within a broader "post-Soviet space."

The book's first part sets up a conceptual framework that analyzes the EU's influence in the region from three angles: "(1) the EU's self-conception through discourse as an external actor, (2) the instruments and strategies applied, and (3) the reception of its action in Central Asia" (p. 3). According to the author, policymakers from the EU preferred to use "soft power tools" such as "persuasion, negotiation, and diplomacy" (p. 8), which were cornerstones of the Union's economic and trade policies. However, the use of these soft tools became complicated when the EU faced dilemmas in interplaying the objectives of its economic policies with its commitments to the "promotion of human rights, good governance, rule of law, and democracy" (p. 11).

The four chapters of the second part of the book deal with an analysis of the emergence of EU policy towards Central Asia, including the ways in which geopolitical challenges and geostrategic considerations impacted the political discourse among policymakers, as well as choices of the specific instruments of influence in the region. The Union looked at the region taking into consideration three major factors: mineral resources (especially hydrocarbon), security issues (especially in the context of the need to stabilize Afghanistan), and the vulnerability of the region itself (especially as some politicians called the region the “next tinder box” (p. 32)). Yet, the EU carefully avoided phrasing its policies around purely geo-economic/geopolitical vocabulary or power politics. Instead, it intensively cultivated its image as the “role model” (p. 70) and “honest broker without geopolitical ambitions” (p. 72). However, in reality – despite the idealism manifest both in self-image building and in policy actions – the EU emerged as another geopolitical player alongside the USA, with its “ambitious and complex” New Silk Way initiative (p. 110); the Russian Federation, with its attempts at “comprehensive” economic (re)-integration initiatives (p. 113); and China, with its vision of Central Asia in the context of the Silk Road Economic Belt (p. 127).

The third part of the book presents and interprets the three case studies, which illustrate the actions of the EU in response to geopolitical realities and a shifting paradigm in the course of foreign policy implementation, by illustrating how the Union has dealt with three different challenges emerging in the Central Asia region over the past two decades. In the case of settling border issues, the EU emerged as a “welcome donor” with its financial support, technical assistance, and access to knowledge (p. 153). In the case of governance crisis, the Union became a “consultant” without normative authority (p. 172). Finally, in the context of water conflict negotiations, the EU became a “mediator and consultant” without being a role model (p. 191).

This book makes a valuable contribution to the decade-long debates about the activities of global powers in the Central Asian region. Moving away from the clichés of the “new great game,” it introduces a different paradigm for understanding the interaction of foreign players with their Central Asian counterparts. In the past, a significant body of literature has focused on geopolitical challenges emerging in Central Asia and directed less attention to the numerous instruments of influence used by different actors. Unfortunately, the author uses a very limited number of publications and bypasses a rapidly growing body of literature coming from the region itself on the perception of foreign activities written by policy makers in Bishkek, Nursultan (formerly Astana), Tashkent, and other capitals in the region. Overall, this monograph should be considered as an important step in studying the EU instruments of influence in the region and beyond, and in building a more nuanced understanding of the policy challenges in this “terra incognita” of the Eurasian heartland.

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