

Illiberalism, Post-liberalism, Geopolitics: The EU in Central Asia

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The paper discusses how the new EU Strategy towards Central Asia issued in May 2019 might be analyzed through the lens of the intensely debated transformations from the liberal to a post-liberal international order. The author claims that the EU's normative power is transforming from the post-Cold War predominantly liberal/ value-based approach, with democracy and human rights at its core, to a set of more technical tools and principles of good governance and effective management of public administration. The paper problematizes a nexus between the dynamics of the EU's nascent post-liberalism and the geopolitical challenges of the EU's growing engagement with illiberal regimes, focuses on direct encounters between the post-liberal EU and the illiberal elites in Central Asia, and seeks to find out the impact of these connections upon the EU's international subjectivity. In this context geopolitical dimensions of EU foreign and security policies, along with the specificity of the EU's geopolitical actorship in Central Asia, are discussed.

Key words: Central Asia, the EU, Eastern Partnership, postliberalism, illiberalism

Introduction

This article discusses how the new EU Strategy towards Central Asia issued in May 2019 might be analyzed through the lens of the intensely debated transformations from the liberal to a post-liberal international order. Unlike those authors who ascribe normative characteristics to such countries as China and India (Kavalski 2007, 340), the paper starts with arguing that the EU is a major international actor committed to norm projection (Lenz 2013, 212) in(to) a region with apparently authoritarian domestic political systems surrounded by undemocratic external power contenders, primarily Russia and China, but also Iran and Turkey. These structural conditions explain both opportunities and limits of the EU's normative resource when it comes to its Asia policies (Balducci 2010).

The article's contribution to the extant academic debate on the topic consists in the claim that EU's normative power is transforming from the post-Cold War predominantly liberal / value-based approach, with democracy and human rights at its core, to a set of more technical tools and principles of good governance and effective management of public administration (Warkotsch 2008). This transformation, cogently conceptualized by David Chandler as a post-liberal turn, has been mostly studied as an internal phenomenon for Europe itself. What this article adds to this dominant outlook is an analysis of a nexus between the dynamics of EU's nascent post-liberalism and the geopolitical challenges of the EU's growing engagement with illiberal regimes. Thus, the article focuses on situations of direct encounters between the post-liberal EU and the illiberal elites in Central Asia, seeking to find out the impact of these connections upon the EU's international subjectivity. In so doing, the discussion turns to geopolitical dimensions of EU foreign and security policies and unpacks the specificity of EU's geopolitical actorship in Central Asia.

The terminology introduced above implies drawing lines of distinction between "liberal and non-liberal spheres" (Jahn 2018, 59). The *liberal* (oftentimes also dubbed "liberal-idealistic") concept of foreign policy is grounded in the promotion of universal norms of freedom, human rights, liberal democracy, the rule of law and market economy through mechanisms of good governance (Hindess 2010). The post-1991 liberal order, being an exteriorization of domestic principles of liberal democracy, envisaged a world in which free choices of states (including the choice of alliances in which they wish to participate) would be harmonious with the expanded space for individual rights and civic liberties. *Post-liberal* politics is characterized by transformation rather than denial or rejection of the ideas of liberalism; it is aimed at reaching political consensus on the basis of policy approaches publicly presented as technocratic, presumably self-

evident, administratively rational, and market-driven) and post-ideological (devoid of strong left-right or liberal-conservative distinctions). Finally, by *illiberal governance* I mean explicitly undemocratic, if not dictatorial, regimes that are increasingly eager to legitimize themselves as equal members of international society. As the case of Central Asia demonstrates, post-Soviet illiberal regimes have never been fully part of the system of liberal hegemony; conversely, they have evolved in divergent and sometimes conflictive ways, with a strong emphasis on the consolidation of state-building and national sovereignty, which has hindered the progress of regional and international integration. The option of integrating into an EU centric liberal international order was never on the table for countries of this region.

This study is based on a particular methodological approach known as political discourse analysis. It looks at agents' practical reasoning (Fairclough and Fairclough 2013, 336), presuming that discourses "construct or reinforce power" (Schiffrin, Tannen, Hamilton 2015) relations. As seen from this perspective, "to engage in political discourse analysis would be to seek to draw attention to the intended, unintended, real, anticipated and/or imagined effects of discourses either directly upon behaviour or indirectly – on the context in which people find themselves and with respect to which they orient their behaviour and thinking" (Hay 2013, 324). What is of particular importance for this study is that political discourse analysis is attentive to "normative evaluation of people's argumentative conduct" (Finlayson 2013, 316), which is an indispensable element of appraising the doctrinal documents of EU strategy in Asia in general and Central Asia in particular, including "Connecting Europe and Asia", "Shared Vision, Common Action. A Stronger Europe. A Global Strategy for the European Union's Foreign and Security Policy" (2016), "The EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership" (2007), European Parliament resolution of 13 April 2016 on implementation and review of the EU-Central Asia Strategy (2015), "Connecting Europe and Asia - Building blocks for an EU Strategy" (2018), and "EU Rule of Law Initiative for Central Asia (2007), EU Strategy in Central Asia (2019). These documents were "chosen on the basis of their generation of salient categories of analysis that illustrate the conceptual contours of the broader discourse" (Tatum 2018, 353) on EU's policies towards post-Soviet countries. Political discourse analysis of these documents implied a focus on specific policy measures stipulated by EU's guidelines.

The article starts with a conceptual preamble that juxtaposes post-liberalism and illiberalism as both concepts and policy practices. Then it discusses some trajectories of EU projection of its normative power, from the neighborhood policy to engagement with more remote regions of the former Soviet Union, followed by a closer look at the peculiarities of EU's geopolitical roles in Central Asia, explaining them through the

prism of the post-liberal momentum.

Post-liberal versus Illiberal Politics

The broad definition of liberal international order includes rule-based foreign policies, multilateralism, longing for peace and prosperity, and market economy. Issues of human rights and environmental protection became part of the global liberal agenda only after the fall of the Berlin wall. Despite its obvious emphasis on internationalism, the liberal order is an explicitly Western construct (Szewczyk 2019) most effectively exemplified by EU's international actorness.

However, liberal institutionalism largely espoused by the EU was constantly under criticism. Many scholars would agree that “the normative power of the Union is hidden under seemingly neutral or positive expressions that emphasize commonality and partnership” (Horky-Hluchan and Kratochvil 2014, 263). In the meantime, many academic voices expect EU's liberalism to transform into a more realist type of foreign policy (Donnelli 2019, 13-34). Other authors would say that a major problem with the liberally-driven foreign policy is a dichotomic vision of the world as allegedly divided into adherents and promoters of liberalism, on the one hand, and their illiberal opponents and rivals, on the other. As Natalie Koch cogently noted, instead of constantly reproducing the narrative of “a world divided between the democrats and their enemies”, we need to imagine more sophisticated “geographies of the liberal and illiberal” (Koch 2019, 918). Presumably, these “new geographies” might be operated through “assemblages of objectives, knowledges, techniques, and practices of diverse provenance... (The ensuing – Author) polycentric networks ... need to be seen as both plural and volatile: that is, not as one solid or stable thing, but as an always temporary and contingent arrangement of forces that can splinter off in different directions, have different impacts in different contexts” (Savage 2019, 11). Thinking along similar lines, one may agree that “ideas that transcend the territorially defined state can result in the emergence of a nomos that is not coeval to political spatial boundaries, giving individuals the possibility to find meaning – and belonging – in a number of broader communities” (Mabon 2019, 11).

In a long historical run, liberalism has shown a remarkable capacity to mix and intermingle “with all the other major forces that have shaped the modern global system—imperialism, nationalism, and capitalism” (Ikenberry 2018, 9). Liberal components in international orders are always a matter of degree, and the nature of liberal content also varies, largely depending on the contestations and disavowals the liberal doctrine has

to face. Currently, the concepts of post-liberalism and illiberalism represent two major yet dissimilar challenges to the liberal doctrine, the former being mostly an endogenous phenomenon for Western democracies, while the latter representing, by and large, an exogenous challenge to – and a constraint of – the Western hegemony.

Illiberalism is used in this article as an umbrella term for a variety of bureaucratic-authoritarian (Remington 2018) and dictatorial regimes with non-competitive and non-transparent political systems. These regimes learn from each other how to resist democratic norm diffusion (Vanderhill 2017), which leads to the proliferation of illiberal practices across borders (Burnell 2010). As some authors argue, it is the sense of ontological insecurity that makes many illiberal elites support such regionalist projects as, for example, Eurasian Economic Union (Russo and Stoddard 2018). It might be particularly posited that “Russia and China model and advance illiberal norms of conflict management and, unlike western powers, do not expect Central Asian republics to adopt liberal approaches” (Russia and Eurasia Program 2016, 3), which facilitates Moscow’s and Peking’s communication with Central Asian elites.

When it comes to post-liberalism, interpretations are more diverse. For the dominant group of authors, the concept of a post-liberal international order connotes the much-discussed diminishing importance of the trans-Atlantic West in the world. In this respect, the “old” liberal order is associated with “openness and rule-based relations enshrined in multilateral institutions such as the United Nations and norms such as multilateralism”, while a ‘new’ (dis)order is expected to align with “fragmented system of blocs, spheres of influence, mercantilist networks, and regional rivalries” (Duncombe and Dunne 2018, 28).

By the same token, there is an alternative explanation of the idea of post-liberalism as denoting transformations within the dominant paradigm of European governance. As David Chandler puts it, the liberal project was grounded in a “rights-based framing of political legitimacy in terms of autonomy and self-determining state authority, while the discourse of governance focuses on technical and administrative capacity, or the way of rule, rather than the representative legitimacy of policy making or its derivational authority” (Chandler 2010, 70). He also claims that for post-liberal governance sovereignty is accepted, but not “as something that inheres to state institutions per se, but rather as a variable quality or capacity for good governance” (Chandler 2010, 74). And finally, Chandler critically argues that “where the liberal paradigm of sovereign autonomy clearly demarcated lines of policy accountability, the post-liberal paradigm of international governance and state-building blurs them. In this context, domestic politics has no real content. There is very little at stake in the political process. In fact, political responsibility for policymaking disappears with the removal of the liberal rights-based

framework of political legitimacy” (Chandler 2010, 82). The concepts of EU-sponsored trans-governmental networks (Shyrokykh 2019) and “dis-embedded liberalism”, both having “drastically reduced the scope for national economic management with the goal to extend the role of transnational markets” (Bruszt and Langbein 2017, 311), can serve good additions to Chandler’s reasoning.

Other authors directly relate post-liberalism with Michel Foucault’s concept of governmentality which is understood as a set of productive and “calculated rationalities” (Ettlinger 2011, 538) of policymaking, a type of knowledge-power that functions at a distance (Collier 2009, 97). This approach resonates with the idea of liberal normativity (Merlingen 2007, 441), and translates into the medicalized concept of ‘therapeutic domination’ that “entails the expert application of an instrumentally rational technical procedure, typically a treatment protocol, to a subordinated individual or population in a situation of emergency, crisis, or disease, always to the supposed benefit of the treated” (McFalls and Pandolfi 2012). In this interpretation, post-liberalism appears to be tantamount to a technology of biopower that aims at a more fundamental control over human lives, expands space for potential social manipulations, and challenges “the transcendent qualities of the autonomous, rational ... subject” (McFalls and Pandolfi 2012).

Therefore, post-liberal – and post-political, in a wider sense - forms and models of policymaking acknowledge the dominance of economic rationale politics. Against this backdrop, de-politicisation might be “understood as the denial of political choice, the delegation of decision-making to technocratic experts and growing public disengagement from politics” (Beveridge 2017, 592). De-politicization implies the hegemony of policy paradigms “which could be described as normalised” (Wood 2016, 530) or “naturalized” though “the uncontested telos” of calculability, steering, and administration (Barder and Levine 2012, 598). Post-liberalism is one of these major policy paradigms (Gugushvili 2017), with the EU being widely considered as a locomotive in the global transformation towards “anti-political”, consensus-oriented and potentially totalizing modes of governance, administration, and regulation (Garsten and Jacobsson 2013).

In fact, these two versions of post-liberalism elucidate the two sides of the same coin – geopolitical (liberal actors’ gradual loss of global power) and managerial (the internal transformations of the liberal rule itself), which still leaves much space for normative approaches. Thus, the Council’s conclusions on Central Asia said that the practical implementation of EU strategy in this region directly depends on “the altering geopolitical situation around it”, and literally few lines later “emphasises the fundamental importance of democratisation, respect for human rights and the rule of law”. The

‘post-liberal’ reference to good governance practices is immediately complemented by a normatively liberal reference to the importance of “the empowerment of women as an essential component of longer-term stability and resilience in the region” (Foreign Affairs Council 2015, 4).

Seen from this perspective, Brussels’ global actorship seeks to counter-balance the deficit of geopolitical resources with a strong emphasis on technologies of good governance at a distance, of which Central Asia might serve as a good example. This approach seems to be consonant with Richard Youngs’ idea of a “hybrid or liberal-redux geopolitics” of the EU that he views as a “more selective and calibrated” (Youngs 2017) mix of normatively and institutionally cooperative and geopolitically self-assertive policy tools. A good illustration at this juncture is BOMCA – Border Management program in Central Asia – tasked with developing trade corridors, managing migration flows, and eliminating drug trafficking across Central Asia (BOMCA, n.d.). As EU’s Central Asia Strategy might be considered as a region-specific ramification of the ENP, BOMCA in a similar way is integrated into a broader EU-sustained framework of policy platforms aimed at promoting migration partnerships among the countries of the Schengen Area, EaP, Western Balkans, Central Asia, Russia, and Turkey, including the Prague Process (Prague Process, n.d.) and the Budapest Process (Budapest Process, n.d.). Through obviously enhancing security in the region, BOMCA can be considered as having geopolitical content, while a clear emphasis of effectiveness and efficiency attests to the program’s post-liberal functions. Another example is EU-sponsored Central Asia Drug Action Program (CADAP) aimed at engagement with Central Asian partners to help further strengthen their national policies in drug demand reduction (CADAP, n.d.). Again, CADAP might be regarded as one of the specific tools reflecting EU’s vision of geopolitics, which in the meantime is harmonious with the biopolitical tilt in Brussels’ agenda exemplified in this specific case by investment in such elements of public health infrastructure as drug prevention, improvement of penitentiary and medical infrastructure (hospitals and rehabilitation centers), and developing effective youth policies. None of these landmarks and milestones contradicts EU’s commitments to liberal norms or damages the EU’s reputation as a normative power.

However, the intricate combination of illiberalism, post-liberalism, and geopolitics may become more challenging and volatile when it comes to what Lawrence Broers dubs “fractured regions” that “offer opportunities for great power penetration, (yet – Author) their fractured nature also obstructs their incorporation into regional organizations and structures. External hegemony over such regions is often itself fractured, partial, and inconsistent. Although marginal in world politics, fractured regions threaten global security as sites where local conflicts and external agendas cannot be absorbed into a

regional fabric, and spillover is a risk” (Broers 2019). The so-called “post-liberal limbo” (Broers 2019) might ultimately diminish EU’s ability to effectively use normative tools and exert normative impact upon its partners in the east, which is the case of Central Asia where the EU shares a competitive environment with a group of explicitly illiberal actors, all projecting their power resources onto the region.

A major problem looming large at this juncture is that the post-liberal *modus operandi* in combination with the intense engagements with illiberal regimes beyond the Western core might “undermine liberalism itself” (Jahn 2018, 31) and transform the EU into “a monster bureaucracy concerned with technical matters” (Leconte 2015, 256). In particular, as some authors assume, the post-liberal engagement with illiberal regimes might lead to “the co-production of non-liberal regimes via foreign policies and international regulatory frameworks (which – Author) is well documented in recent analyses of the networked character of Central Asian authoritarian regimes... The concentration of illegal wealth and coercive capacities goes along with the recasting of corrupt elites as “respected business people and philanthropic cosmopolitans”, or, put bluntly, the “normalization of ‘everyday kleptocracy”” (Lottholz 2019). In a similar way another author speaks about “embedded plutocracy” as a key characteristic of the emerging world order (Lee 2019). The next section will demonstrate that many in the EU are well aware of these gloomy assessments, which however did not prevent Brussels from making another step in the direction of further engaging with Central Asian governments.

From Eastern Partnership to the New Central Asia Strategy

This section looks at EU’s Central Asia Strategy in the context of the Eastern Partnership (EaP) program that represented a major engagement with post-Soviet regimes, including illiberal ones. Both documents ought to be approached as closely related to the European Neighbourhood Policy (ENP) developed in 2004 and followed by the first EU Strategy for Central Asia of 2007 and the EaP introduced and commenced in 2008/2009. It would be therefore logical to expect that the further EU advancement to Central Asia should have been based on the lessons drawn from the previous experiences in Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus. Of course, EaP itself was only partly a success story of institutional association with eastern neighbors: “Notwithstanding minor technical achievements, even the EU tacitly recognises that major challenges remain for the future of the partnership: restoring the rule of law, enacting judicial reforms, and tackling corruption are high on the priority list” (Tokhvadze 2019).

EU policies in Central Asia were always even more ambiguous and more limited in practical results. Unlike Eastern Europe and the South Caucasus, Central Asia was never developing policies aimed at integrating with the post-Cold War Western-centric normative order, which can be explained by two factors. Domestically, Central Asian regimes stopped at the fringes of the hegemonic international order, since proceeding from the “periphery” to the “Western core” would decrease rent-seeking opportunities critical for regime survival. From an international perspective, the EU made clear to them that they would never join the Union as they are not geographically part of Europe, which left to Central Asian regimes no other option than maintaining a relative freedom of hands through maneuvering and balancing between Russia, China, and the West.

EU officials do recognize that in many respects the situation with democracy, human rights, and freedoms in most of the Central Asian countries remains much below European expectations, and this region is not considered as a profitable area for European enterprises. “EU’s assistance is widely viewed to lack concrete results and have a low impact” (Bossuyt 2018, 619) when it comes to democracy promotion, a key concept in the arsenal of the value-ridden model of EU as a normative power (Kotthaus 2015). The EU is fully aware of the multiple problems with Central Asian political systems: in particular, the European Parliament dubbed the overall situation with democracy and human rights in the region “poor and worrying... legal obligations vested in the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements for upholding democracy and the rule of law have not been properly implemented... respect for democratic standards, human rights, and fundamental freedoms has not yet reached an acceptable level” (European Parliament... 2016).

Under these unfavourable conditions the EU faces a challenge of being further marginalized in Central Asia by Russia and China. Local policy experts in their narratives might completely ignore the EU when discussing Central Asian regional integration (Somzhurek et al. 2018); in the meantime, the role of other actors such as Russia and China (Koh and Kwok 2017) is consensually recognized as pivotal.

However, in spite of the multiple flipsides, the EU Council - probably impressed by the positive political dynamics in Uzbekistan (Putz 2019) - came up with a quite optimistic appraisal of the potential for future interaction with Central Asian governments in those policy areas where the EU role would be different from other key players, yet crucial. In this respect, it is important that for such Central Asian countries as Kazakhstan “neither relations with Russia nor China possess such symbolic importance. The core image of the EU ... revolves around those values and standards that Kazakhstan most wants to project as its own. By openly subscribing to such ideals, the political elite

wishes to bolster both its legitimacy at home and its ambition for an active global role by suggesting shared and fundamentally parallel paths” (Bekenova and Collins 2019, 1201).

Indeed, one of the lessons to be drawn from EaP implementation is that the EU needs to perform “differently from most other actors such as China and Russia” (Boonstra 2012), yet not in terms of carving out its own spheres of influence, but rather in terms of offering a normative understanding of key concepts pertinent to regional politics. In this vein, “the more the EU directly supports pro-democratic civil society organizations and indirectly supports the modernization of target societies through contacts, diversified trade, aid, and investment as well as educational programmes, the more the linkage model of democracy promotion will be effective” (Lavenex and Schimmelfennig 2011, 892).

By the same token, in remodelling its Central Asian strategy in 2019, the EU should have learned from EaP that normative power is not universal, but contextual, and it works only under specific circumstances. This explains a shift from promoting democracy and human rights as concepts to operationalising and integrating these concepts into the good governance framework and adjusting them to specific political, economic, and social policy areas. It is at this juncture that the major controversy arises: on the one hand, the language of the EU is still very much embedded in normative projection of “shared values”; yet on the other hand, there is a clear understanding that “without security, transformation and democratization will not be successful” (Meister 2019). The high resonance of security matters in Central Asia, therefore, explains the evolution of EU’s policies in the region from development assistance to security with strong geopolitical notes. Several mentions of Afghanistan in EU official documents in conjunction with Central Asia are a lucid indication of the geopolitical vision of the region in Brussels (Crombois 2019, 92). This perspective is grounded in the understanding that security challenges Central Asia faces might reach Europe as well, which necessitates finding a balance between interests and norms.

Thus, paradoxically, the growing emphasis on post-liberal (and in a sense post-political) management of relations with illiberal regimes goes hand-in-hand with the geopolitical momentum in EU’s *modus operandi*. The geopolitical dimension is discernible in discussions around a possible inclusion of Afghanistan, Pakistan, and India into EU’s cooperation with Central Asia, a hypothetical connection between Kazakhstan and the EaP (Laumulin 2019), establishing synergies between Central Asia, the EaP countries, and Afghanistan (Bossuyt 2019), or preventing Beijing’s version of “debt-trapped” connectivity in East-West transport corridors (Blockmans and Sahajpal 2019). These debates resonate with Christopher Browning’s (2018, 107) characterization of the EU as a “fundamentally geopolitical actor”, sticking in the meantime with a “more complex

understanding” of what contemporary geopolitics is. It is this complexity that will be addressed in the next section.

‘Invisible Influence’ and ‘Hybrid Geopolitics’

This section looks for specific explanations of how EU’s tackling of geopolitics can be understood. The general claim is that EU geopolitical actorship is an unintended consequence of its post-liberal role identity. Locally, according to multiple evidences, the EU is largely seen as an actor “without substantial geopolitical interest in the region” (Boonstra and Panella 2018), whose influence remains “invisible” (Peyrouse 2017). However, as seen from the perspective of pro-Kremlin discourses, the EU does have geopolitical ambitions allegedly aimed at preventing the Eurasian integration from unfolding (Eriomina 2018). Good illustrations of this point are EU’s Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreements signed with Kazakhstan in 2017 and Kyrgyzstan in 2019, and the commencement of similar negotiations with Uzbekistan since 2019. These policy tracks geopolitically enhanced multi-vectoral foreign policies of these Central Asian countries who are looking for a balance between Moscow and Brussels, rather than for a submission to Russian sphere of influence.

In the meantime, the EU’s geopolitics in Central Asia is, *firstly*, short of a strong political momentum. Arguably, “the concept of normative power tends to depoliticize EU external policies” (Wagner 2017, 1401). Indeed, the dominant EU discourse is grounded in a post-political strategy that in this specific context implies the downgrading of liberal values and elevating the importance of practical policy arrangements that are supposed to stay detached from politically divisive or – moreover – inflammable issues. Looking for a balance “against possibly conflicting norms and values” (Wagner 2017, 1406), the EU often avoids raising and discussing truly political questions such as, for example, “how and if to cooperate with China and/or Russia in Central Asia” (How Central... 2019), or whether EU policy “requires a security component or if it should focus on soft areas like the modernization of security institutions and its response to the common cyber threat rather than on hard security. Is a division of labor with NATO possible?” (Meister 2019).

This context explains the projection of the concept of resilience, known as one of the key words in EU foreign policy vocabulary, onto Central Asia. With all “vagueness and malleability of the term”, the EU seems to prefer it to “more ‘tainted’ and politically riskier concepts such as democratization” (Juncos 2017, 3). Conceptually, resilience “turns from the grand projects of social engineering and universal rights to take a much

more pragmatist view” (Joseph 2016, 379) meant to reconcile norms and pragmatism, which by and large fits in the post-liberal frame as discussed above (Humbert and Joseph 2019, 216).

However, post-liberal approaches to resilience are formulated in a vague and ambiguous language of EU documents: “non-exclusive partnership”, “new-generation bilateral agreements”, “level-playing field”, or “inclusive education” (Boostra 2018) can serve as good examples of politically neutral wording implying a very broad spectrum of meanings suitable for both post-liberal and illiberal language registers. The same goes for concepts of “circular economy” or “sustainable tourism” borrowed from UN vocabulary and linguistically implanted into the body of EU Strategy in Central Asia. The 2018 document “Connecting Europe and Asia” (2018, 4) also builds on the logic of dissolving political meanings in a technical vocabulary. For example, the reference to the heavily loaded concept of “political will” can be found in mostly technical discussions on connectivity strategy and transportation; thus, when the EU speaks about “political dialogue” with Central Asian governments, it basically means a post-liberal (and post-political in a wider sense) sharing of good governance practices and instruments with illiberal regimes.

Secondly, the EU’s geopolitics lacks a strong regional background, despite the frequent references to regionalist concepts in the official documents. The idea of regionalism in the Central Asian Strategy seems to be used as a post-liberal inversion of the originally liberal (Börzel and Risse 2019, 1254) approaches to regions as flexible social and political constructions that need more relational than territorial thinking: “region represents a contingent ‘coming togetherness’ or assemblage of proximate and distant social, economic and political relationships, the scale and scope of which do not necessarily converge neatly around territories and jurisdictions formally administered or governed by the nation-state” (Jonas 2012, 263).

However, EU approaches appear to be largely influenced by another series of language games betraying some kind of conceptual uncertainty: thus, the EU expects to transform Mediterranean, Middle East, and Africa into “peaceful and prosperous” regions; the Atlantic is wished to become “closer”, and Asia – more “connected” (Shared ... 37-38). EU Global Strategy of 2016 introduced a number of operational concepts, such as “cooperative regional orders” as “critical spaces of governance” (Shared... 2-16, 32), while the “Connecting Europe and Asia” (p. 6) document refers to “advance cooperation with key Asian partners” based on “interoperability of networks”, All these concepts are politically sterile and inherently open to multiple and potentially competing interpretations.

The EU pledged to “pursue a regional approach to cooperation”, yet the current

debate leaves unexplained how exactly Brussels wishes to “move beyond the 2007 framework of mainly bilateral relations to better integrate the region into its multilateral fold of institutional and financial instruments” (Korosteleva and Bossuyt 2019, 3). When it comes specifically to Central Asia, the EU sees it more as a terrain for exporting European experiences of good governance, rather than a region-in-the-making. For instance, the document presumes that EU’s eastern neighbors might benefit “from the experience of those EU member states in Central Europe which underwent a similar process in the 1990’s” (EU Rule of Law... 2007). Some voices are sympathetic with very general ideas of the Visegrad model of integration as allegedly appropriate to consider in Central Asia as well (Patnaik 2019, 158). In an official document, one may read: “The EU can offer experience in regional integration leading to political stability and prosperity. Lessons learnt from the political and economic transformation in Central and Eastern Europe can also be offered. With their rich traditions and century-long exchanges, the EU and Central Asia can contribute actively to the dialogue between civilizations” (The EU and ... 2017, 2).

In the opinion of some observers, it was a group of Central European countries that lobbied for strengthening EU’s cooperation with Central Asia: “the Visegrad group may be trying to have not only the Danube but also, metaphorically, the rivers of Europe flow through to Central Asia to unify with China’s emblematic Yangtze River” (Dimov 2018, 2). Yet the Strategy remains vague about the alleged Central Europe – Central Asia nexus. The 2007 document posits that “with EU enlargement, the inclusion of the South Caucasus into the European Neighborhood Policy and the Black Sea Synergy Initiative, Central Asia and the EU are moving closer together” (The EU and ... 2007, 4), yet how exactly Central Asia might be connected with the South Caucasus, a region where the EU had heavily invested in the recent years, remains obscure, especially in the absence of voices from Caucasian countries in the debate. The EU does not seem to consider the South Caucasus as a “springboard” to Central Asia, an intermediary or an experience-sharer. The same goes for the Baltic Sea Region that is mentioned in the “Connecting Europe and Asia” document and is known as a pioneer in environmental protection, border management, soft security, and digitalization – all priorities clearly articulated in the EU Strategy in Central Asia; yet – again – it remained unexplained how exactly the Baltic experiences might be utilized for the sake of EU engagement with other regions.

Thirdly, EU’s geopolitics is grounded in a very broad understanding of security, inevitably interlacing with other functional concepts. Security is understood mainly in the non-military sense as part of a broader idea of sustainability (Shared... 2016, p. 23) and safeguarding “preemptive peace” (Shared... 2016, 29). Causes of insecurity are

“poverty, social exclusion and marginalization, limited political participation, institutional weaknesses, corruption and mismanagement of natural resources”. Climate change is mentioned in one row of security challenges with conflict prevention and disaster risk reduction.

Of particular interest at this point is a strong emphasis on *biopolitical* aspects of post-liberal security, governance, and resilience, properly articulated in the academic literature referred to earlier. In this specific context, the biopolitical turn in EU Central Asian policy implies focusing on the social groups “in need of international protection”, including empowering women, securing children’s and particularly girls’ rights, as well as protecting minorities (ethnic, linguistic, sexual) against discrimination. Other long-term biopolitical measures in the EU Central Asia Strategy include prevention and eradication of torture; implementation of core labour standards; fight against migrant smuggling, trafficking in human beings and in illicit drugs; managing irregular migration and the reintegration of the returnees; improving human health and quality of life; biodiversity protection, conservation of ecosystems and environmental awareness-raising; addressing rapid population growth; improving water quality and agricultural irrigation systems; introducing sanitary and phytosanitary measures to strengthen food safety systems in Central Asian countries.

This biopoliticization implies inclusion of a strong human security component (Larrinaga and Doucet 208) into the EU’s agenda in Central Asia, which is fully compatible with both liberal and post-liberal international actorship. The human-centric and corporeal security philosophy professed by the EU might be interpreted as a “biopolitics of hope” (Wragel 2019) (in the sense of taking care and empowering the most disadvantaged social groups in countries of Central Asia), and as promotion of freedom which is, according to the French political philosopher Michel Foucault, an indispensable condition of liberal security. Yet, in the meantime, the “neutralization of politics” in what Chandler dubbed a “post-liberal” paradigm turned security provision into a major source of both domestic and international legitimation (Dillon 2015). This may serve as another evidence of EU’s alignment with the post-liberal *modus operandi* that, with all its tilt towards “governance of life” (Lemm and Vatter 2014), remains inherently normative.

Concluding Remarks

This study exposed a double nature of EU normative power built upon two pillars: liberal values and post-liberal good-governance techniques. The resilience of EU

policies, especially in illiberal political environments, might be explicated through an ability to combine both approaches and make an accent on the technical / administrative / managerial understanding of normativity when appropriate, without compromising the value-based philosophy of EU international subjectivity as a type of actorship containing a strong identity-related component. In this vein, the pursuance of EU post-liberal geopolitics can be formulated in the liberal categories of market expansion and promotion of effective governance.

Nevertheless, the duality of EU normative power might render a structural effect: “There is increasingly a combination of stronger EU commitment to liberal order, on the one hand, and an EU move away from liberalism, on the other hand” (Smith and Youngs 2018, 55). However, the dichotomy embedded in this conceptualization looks simplistic. EU policies in Central Asia reflect a broader policy shift caused by the challenges the liberally minded actors are facing when dealing with their illiberal partners. The analyzed case unveiled a tendency of normatively liberal countries and institutions to increasingly invest their resources in creating springboards to – and playgrounds for – interaction with non-democratic or overtly dictatorial powers. The post-liberal paradigm, as articulated by Chandler, allows the EU to establish sets of practices and policies that would be relatively insensitive to distinctions between the liberal and the illiberal. The open nature of many key concepts leaves in the EU hands the freedom of their interpretation, depending on policy contexts.

To build on Natalie Koch’s logic of “post-triumphalist geopolitics”, major international actors, including those committed to normative policies, are likely to pursue “diffuse goals” (Koch 2019, 919) aimed at supporting liberal practices and creating liberal spaces in overwhelmingly illiberal environments. The spheres of education (Koch and Vora 2019) and good governance seem to be the most promising in terms of creating “islands” of liberal normativity propelled through discourses of modernization and development rather than democracy promotion. What the EU can ultimately do is to contribute to world politics that “generates not the closed binary alternative «either this or that» but an open-ended series of alternatives, «this or that or this....» (Holland 1991, 55). The EU Strategy in Central Asia is a good vindication of the “reified forms” (Savage 2019, 19) – that is, policy presumed upon universality, including the initial version of EU’s “normative power” – gradually giving way to less ambitious policies focused on carving out particular spaces, or “islands” of normativity in an “ocean” of the illiberal rule. This approach remains liberal in its conceptual underpinnings, even if conducive to a more fragmented and patch-worked, rather than networked region.

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