

THE EUROPEAN UNION'S EXPERIENCE AS A CRUCIAL FOUNDATION FOR
CENTRAL ASIAN INTEGRATION

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Abstract: When studying the phenomenon of integration, it is necessary to rely on the foundations of state and public life, the system of international relations, and general political patterns. Political integration is an objective process that allows participating entities to achieve mutually beneficial results at low costs. But integration requires careful preparation from the entities, as well as the desire and ability to manage them. With the emergence and establishment of new integration political processes, old procedures and institutional difficulties are eliminated. The article scientifically analyzes the issues of studying and effectively using the experience of the European Union in Central Asian integration at this stage of historical development.

Keywords: European Union, Central Asia, integration, political processes, social reforms, intergovernmental cooperation, public diplomacy.

Today, the modern system of international relations is evolving in terms of quality, becoming enriched with new laws and factors. One of these is related to the formation and development of political integration models. Across different corners of our planet, various intergovernmental organizations and alliances are emerging. Although the trends in the formation and development of these unions may vary, common integrational principles are still evident.

Although integration processes are taking place in almost all regions of the world in one form or another, efforts to deepen and activate these integration processes face certain challenges and lead to very limited results. In this context, the European integration experience that led to the creation of the European Union can be considered a unique experiment for us.

It is well known that throughout history, economic processes have always developed in close connection with political factors. Therefore, alongside entering into financial and economic cooperation, the issue of forming a political union has been a pressing concern for the ideologists and politicians of European integration.

The idea of cooperation among European countries and uniting into a single socio-political system emerged long before the signing of the Rome Treaties. In the early 20th century, serious discussions were held about the creation of the United States of Europe (USE). One of the founders of the Pan-European movement, Austrian **C. Kalergi**, proposed the idea of the USE in 1923. This initiative and idea were based on historical experiences such as the formation of the Swiss Confederation in 1848, the creation of the German Empire in 1871, and the independence gained by the United States in 1776.[1] Shortly after, on September 5, 1929, French Foreign Minister **A. Briand** delivered his famous speech at the League of Nations Assembly in Geneva. With the support of his German counterpart G. Stresemann, he proposed the establishment of a European Union under the auspices of the League of Nations. Although the spread of fascism in Europe and the outbreak of World War II hindered the implementation of this idea, it was not

entirely abandoned. In 1941, exiled on the island of Ventotene, A. Spinelli and E. Rossi managed to prepare and distribute the Federalism Manifesto. They called for the creation of a European Federation, where, in order to prevent international anarchy and preserve freedom in Europe, the sovereign rights of participating states would be partially transferred to the federal level, taking into account the interests of all peoples of the region.[2]

After World War II, Europe was effectively divided into two blocs: Western Europe, politically inclined towards the United States, and Eastern Europe, which became part of the socialist camp. Germany was also divided. The Second World War, in turn, was replaced by the Cold War, a political and ideological conflict between socialism and capitalism, which was dominated by the Soviet Union and the United States, respectively.

In such a situation, the desire for political integration in Western Europe grew stronger. The integration process after the war developed based on the principle of "Atlantic unity." Its main directions were:

firstly, this unity trend was shaped based on the ideological slogan "never again." During the first half of the 20th century, Europe became the theater of military operations in two world wars, which severely damaged the economic and political potential of individual countries and the entire region. The peoples and societies of Europe were exhausted by the wars and no longer wished for the region to serve as a battlefield. In this process, the idea of "fatigue" (exhaustion from war) became dominant;

secondly, with the emergence of two superpowers on the world stage — the USA and the USSR — European countries realized that their geo-economic and geo-political potential was steadily diminishing. This weakness further intensified Europe's economic and political fragmentation, and contemporary researchers of the time compared this reality to a patchwork quilt covered with either the Soviet or American monolith.

It must also be acknowledged that the tendency towards political integration in Europe was not easily or simply achieved. Initially, countries had different understandings of the integration tasks and took various approaches to them. In the post-war period, Europe was divided not only into Eastern and Western blocs but also into groups: federalists, who advocated for the creation of a European United States by transferring certain national powers to international organizations, and those who were skeptical of any form of integration.

For example, although the United Kingdom was not opposed to the European Union, it was not ready to create any European international bodies that would limit national sovereignty. It was more interested in establishing separate relations with the countries of the British Commonwealth and the United States.

The Scandinavian countries were also not fully prepared for genuine political alignment. In the context of the intensification of the Cold War, the formation of the United States of Europe would lead to the emergence of a third party in conflicts, and the Scandinavians sought to isolate themselves and avoid involvement in these confrontations.

In Southern Europe, authoritarian regimes existed in Spain and Portugal. In Greece, under conditions of high political instability, the influence of communist forces continued to grow. In this regard, Central European countries did not consider the southern countries from the

perspective of political unification; instead, they focused on preventing them from joining the socialist bloc and tried to involve them in an anti-Soviet coalition.

In the post-war period, the efforts of European countries to unite were realized through the creation of various and unrelated international organizations.

For example, in 1946, the European Federalist Union was established in Paris. In 1948, based on the initiative and financial support of the United States (the Marshall Plan), the Organization for European Economic Cooperation was created, which later transformed into the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) in 1960 with the inclusion of the United States and Canada. In 1949, the United States, Canada, and most Western European countries signed the North Atlantic Treaty (NATO), a military pact. In 1954, in the field of security and defense cooperation, and to strengthen Europe's position in the Atlantic Treaty, the Western European Union was established.[3]

In 1952, a treaty was signed in Paris to establish the European Defence Community, consisting of the Federal Republic of Germany (FRG), France, Italy, and the Benelux countries. In 1953, a draft treaty for the establishment of the European Political Community, with the same composition, was adopted. However, both of these treaties, which had been fully supported for the restoration of the military and political positions lost by the FRG, were rejected by the French parliament and thus never came into force.

In 1949, the Council of Europe was established to promote political cooperation. It is also important to note that the Council of Europe did not aim to create a federation or union in the region and did not interfere with the sovereignty of the participating countries. It served as an intergovernmental consultative organization on a wide range of issues: political, economic, cultural, social, and legal matters. One of the Council's most significant achievements was the adoption of the **"European Convention on Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms"** in 1950 [4]. Overall, the Council of Europe gradually became the main consultative and debate club for supporters of European federalism.

A fundamentally new stage in the development of political integration is associated with the establishment of the European Coal and Steel Community (ECSC) in 1951 and the signing of the Rome Treaties in 1957, which led to the creation of EURATOM and the European Economic Community (EEC). From a legal perspective, all three organizations continue their independent activities. However, from a political reality standpoint, they form a cohesive whole, laying the foundations for the system that was initially called the European Community and later evolved into the European Union (EU) starting in 1993.

A distinctive feature of the European Union is the creation of international (supranational) governing bodies and the voluntary relinquishment of a portion of the sovereignty of member states.

Economic integration served as a true and solid foundation for the gradual creation of the conditions for political unification. However, the process proceeded slowly and on a highly contentious basis. Even among the six founding countries of the European Economic Community, there was no unity regarding the level of political unification. The sharpest conflicts were observed between Germany and France. Germany sought to create a closer political alliance to increase its "weight" in political matters. As one of the ideologists of European

integration, **Walter Hallstein**, emphasized, "We are not integrating the economy, but politics." Germany, with the majority vote, supported granting national-level powers to the central institutions of the European Economic Community and making decisions binding on member states. France, on the other hand, proposed focusing on the economic aspects of integration and supported the principle of unanimity in making the most important decisions. While Germany adhered to the federal principle of building Europe, France pushed for a confederation-style political union.

The struggle between these two approaches is relevant to the entire history of the European Union and to the present day. This conflict has **functional** and **institutional** aspects.

The functional aspect is expressed in the division of a state's internal and foreign policy directions into local or international authority functions. The fate of national sovereignty depends on how the political balance configuration in Europe evolves. The institutional aspect, on the one hand, involves the issue of EU membership, and on the other hand, it includes the structure of competent international bodies and the decision-making mechanisms at the international level.

By the end of the 1980s, the EU member states had achieved significant progress. A unified system of regional institutions was created and began to function successfully. The Union expanded from 6 to 12 member states, and high-level coordination of internal and foreign policies was achieved[5].

In the new phase, the Maastricht Treaty of 1991 and the Treaty on European Union (EU) of 1993 accelerated political integration. According to the new treaty, a common European citizenship was established. This was a significant innovation and served as a real foundation for the future creation of a confederation or even a federation. Citizens of all participating states automatically acquired EU citizenship.

Each citizen of the European Union gained the following common rights under European law: the right to move freely and reside within the EU territory; the right to participate in municipal and common European elections within their country of residence; the right to use the diplomatic missions and consular services of any EU member state when outside the Union; the right to petition the European Parliament. These rights marked a significant step in integrating EU citizens more fully into the political and legal framework of the Union.

According to the agreement, the political union should include several key components:

- A common foreign and security policy, which would include:
 - Developing a common defense policy.
 - Addressing security and cooperation issues in Europe.
 - Disarmament and arms control in Europe.
 - Non-proliferation of nuclear weapons and the economic aspects of security.
- Increasing the role and importance of the European Parliament.
- Expanding the powers of the Union.

- A common policy in the areas of internal affairs and justice, particularly regarding asylum, immigration, visa regimes, and others.

These provisions were designed to create a more unified and coordinated approach to the key issues affecting the EU both internally and in its relations with the wider world.

In the 1990s, the composition of the European Union expanded further, incorporating 27 member states up to the present day. Additionally, the issue of further enlargement remains on the agenda. Countries such as Turkey, Ukraine, Moldova, and Georgia are focusing on Eurointegration as a key priority. These nations are seeking closer ties with the EU, aiming for membership or deeper political and economic cooperation, which reflects the EU's ongoing role in shaping regional stability and development.

It should also be emphasized that the enlargement of the European Union is not merely a quantitative matter, but rather a qualitative and political one. With the EU extending to almost all European countries, including the former socialist bloc states, the international geopolitical landscape has undergone fundamental changes and significantly influenced the global balance of power. On one hand, this expansion led to a re-evaluation of the economic and political space of the former socialist bloc and a gradual narrowing of Russia's vital interests and international sphere of influence. On the other hand, it demonstrated the EU's increasingly positive role in the processes of globalization and integration, contributing to the formation of a multi-vector system of international relations.

The development of European integration also envisions the advancement of governance systems at the international level. This issue gained particular relevance at the beginning of the 21st century in connection with the eastward expansion of the European Union, which led to changes not only in Europe but also in the global geopolitical landscape. The political configuration of Europe and the mechanisms for exercising authority have been steadily evolving, adapting to new circumstances and the emerging geopolitical environment.

Although the European Union has faced a number of difficulties, obstacles, and challenges in its activities, it has truly proven itself as an integration project. For instance, the United Kingdom's withdrawal from the EU in 2020 (based on the 2016 referendum) led to a surge in statements among Eurosceptics claiming that the Union had no future. Nevertheless, the European Union continues to advance along the path of progress within its integration platform. Throughout this process, the EU has demonstrated that it is not dependent on any single member state but rather operates from a pan-European perspective.

When examining various models of integration, we can observe both universal and distinctive characteristics within them. First and foremost, it becomes clear that integration can only develop on stable and well-defined foundations. Researchers interpret such foundations differently, but the core principle, goal, and idea of any regional integration should be rooted in the shared interests of the people. In this context, the active involvement of civil society is of great importance—not only as a participant in the integration process, but primarily as a representative of the will, desires, and aspirations of the people, beyond just the interests of the states themselves.

In the context of the growing development of integration processes worldwide, the projection of global governance principles at the regional level and the broader involvement of civil society in

managing these factors are gaining significant interest. In this regard, the experience of civil society institutions in European countries—with their varying development parameters—proves invaluable. The role of civil society in the formation of a complex and multidimensionally integrated entity like the European Union is truly unparalleled. Their participation has been instrumental in ensuring transparency, democratic legitimacy, and public engagement throughout the process of European integration.

Nowadays, scholars from various fields are thoroughly studying governance challenges in the European Union countries and the role of civil society in this process. This issue is clearly reflected in the political discourse found in the European Commission's publication, the White Paper on Governance. It is noteworthy that calls for greater participation of civil society in EU governance have continued to this day, sometimes taking on a political character. Various proposals to involve civil society in the process of making political decisions at different levels are often seen in the statements of politicians and high-ranking officials of European administrative structures, in debates between organizations and institutions, as well as in political discussions at all levels. However, there are also certain specific aspects to consider when discussing the effective participation of civil society in the governance system. In fact, this issue is directly related to resolving the problem of legitimacy in the European governance system.

Western political scientists increasingly acknowledge that civil society may offer an alternative form of legitimacy at the pan-European level, which serves as a functional manifestation of legitimacy shaped by the governments of the member states. It is becoming ever clearer that the relationship between civil society institutions and the European Commission or other EU governance structures cannot be built solely on nationally accumulated experience. In this context, civil society's involvement in the development and implementation of EU policy is undoubtedly vital — as it helps to address certain governance issues by establishing a new and broader foundation for legitimacy.

It is well-known that there are certain principles (laws) governing the relationship between governance institutions of integration-focused unions and civil society actors. These principles primarily revolve around using NGOs as a social channel to gain the trust of various socio-political groups within society, involving them as advisors, consultants, and experts, and fostering scientific, technical, and humanitarian cooperation, all of which are continuously improving. However, the experience of major integration organizations demonstrates that, in fact, civil society is capable of performing much broader functions. For example, the results of referendums on the European Union Constitution held in France and the Netherlands, or the referendum on Ukraine's acceptance as a partner of the EU, show that civil society can play a decisive role in making long-term political decisions related to the future.

Another distinctive feature of civil society's participation in the governance of modern Europe is that the European Union is not just a political and economic project, but also an innovative social project that encompasses the support and direct recognition of the majority of the region's citizens. In this regard, official Brussels pays attention not only to economic and political factors but also to humanitarian reforms related to the further development of democratic institutions in strengthening the EU's fundamental principles. All of these measures play a decisive role in realizing the true "European dream."

This historical and political experience can certainly be applied to Central Asia as well. It is evident from the foreign policy activities led by President Shavkat Mirziyoyev that Central Asia, and particularly Uzbekistan, is a priority direction in the country's foreign policy. Under his leadership, Uzbekistan has been actively working to enhance its regional cooperation, strengthen diplomatic ties with neighboring countries, and engage in initiatives that promote stability, security, and economic development in Central Asia[6].

President Sh. Mirziyoyev, in his speech at the 72nd session of the UN General Assembly, stated: "Uzbekistan today places a priority on the Central Asian region in its foreign policy. This is a well-thought-out and carefully selected path. Located at the heart of Central Asia, Uzbekistan is directly interested in the region becoming a zone of stability, consistent development, and good-neighborly relations... A peaceful, prosperous, and economically developed Central Asia is the most important goal and key task that we strive for." [7] His words indicated that Uzbekistan has taken on the responsibility for the Central Asia region. From this platform, the initiative **to hold regular meetings of the heads of Central Asian states** also became an important historical event.

In recent years, based on the geopolitical and geoeconomic processes occurring in Central Asia, we can observe trends towards regional cooperation and political integration. This integration is important not only at the government level but also through civil society, encompassing cultural, educational, religious, intellectual, and other potentials.

The first summit of Central Asia and the European Union, held on April 3-4, 2025, in the historic city of Samarkand, was of significant political importance. During this event, the leaders of Central Asian countries and the European Union participated directly, discussing broad-ranging issues such as strengthening economic cooperation between our regions, interconnectivity in transportation, sustainable development, ecology, and humanitarian cooperation. The relations between Central Asia and the European Union were elevated to the level of strategic partnership. As a result of this first summit, the Samarkand Declaration was adopted.

In conclusion, it can be emphasized that in the integration of Central Asian countries, it is essential to carefully study, analyze, and utilize the positive achievements of the European Union's experience. In this regard, it is advisable to develop a general strategy aimed at accelerating regional cooperation and integration, based on broad public opinion, and to create a "roadmap" for its practical implementation. In the context of complex geopolitical processes, security threats, and the global economic crisis, Central Asian countries are required to pursue an open and pragmatic foreign policy. As a result of firm actions on the international stage, this would not only enhance the national but also the entire region's prestige and reputation. In this regard, it is more appropriate to ensure the participation of Central Asian countries in international affairs collectively, rather than individually.

The conclusions in this regard can be summarized with the thoughts of the American scholar Frederik Starr. In his work *Lost Enlightenment: Central Asia's Golden Age from the Arab Conquest to Tamerlane*, Starr eloquently discusses the remarkable heroism and great history of the region's countries and peoples. Undoubtedly, this glorious past serves as a source of inspiration and spiritual wealth for all the peoples of Central Asia. Regionally, as Starr emphasizes on the final pages of his book, this heroic era may have been forgotten, but today there are signs of its rediscovery by the youth, he concludes.



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