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## Assessing EU perception in Kazakhstan's mass media

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## ABSTRACT

This paper explores the mass media perception of the European Union (EU) in Kazakhstan by utilizing the content analysis of the major mass media outlets. The authors examine news reports and periodical articles from four major national Kazakh newspapers using three measurement points. The first measurement point covers the early 1990s when Kazakhstan declared independence and began to establish its foreign relations. The second measurement point covers the periods before and after introduction of the EU Strategy for Central Asia (2006–2008). The third measurement point covers the years (2011–2013) associated with implementation with the EU Strategy and assessing its results.

Our main findings suggest that Kazakhstan's mass media positively perceives the role of the EU in the region. Moreover, they tend to portray the EU mainly as an economic powerhouse. Our findings support some suggestions by similar studies of the EU's external perception.

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## 1. Introduction

The scholarly reflection on the role of the European Union in world politics was traditionally focused on the EU's identity. The ideas ranged from the 'civilian power' concept (Bull, 1982; Duchêne, 1972; Hill, 1993) to the 'empire by example' (Zielonka, 2008), 'normative power' (Manners, 2002; Sjursen, 2006), 'postmodern state' (Cooper, 2000) and 'superpower in making' (Buchan, 1993). Among these concepts, 'Normative power Europe' (NPE) became the most prominent launching an academic debate on the unique role of the EU in global politics. The EU officials have depicted the Union as *sui generis* actor pursuing specific agenda in world politics. The idea was widely spread in their rhetoric on the

EU's role in the international community (Barroso, 2007, 2008; Ferrero-Waldner, 2006; Solana, 2002). However, the issue of the EU's perception outside its borders remained underdeveloped research topic until recently, although it might offer significant insight into the relation between EU's self-rhetoric and reality. The studies of EU's external perception contribute to understanding of whether the EU partners share its vision of global challenges and their solutions. Exploring external images of the Union contributes to understanding of the acceptance degree of the EU's self-representation as "a global player ... ready to share in the responsibility for global security and in building a better world" (European Council, 2003, p. 1). Moreover, the positive assessment of the EU as an international player is supposed to enhance its legitimacy in world politics and increase efficiency of the Union's policies and actions. Lucarelli and Fioramonti (2010) noted that "the way in which the EU is perceived by other countries is likely to have direct bearing on its success as a player in the international arena" (p. 2),

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implying correlation between EU's image and acceptance of its policies. Recently, Larsen (2014) indicated another important dimension of research on the EU's perception in the world. He argues, "studies of external perception of the EU offer some findings that are helpful for the debate whether the EU can be considered a normative power" (p. 897). Broadening his argument, the authors claim that exploring EU's external perception contributes to the validity check of the theoretical insights on the nature of the Union's power and actorness.

The research interest in exploring the EU's external perception coincided with the EU's concerns over its external image. Holland and Chaban (2005) conducted the pioneering research on the image of the EU outside Europe by focusing on Asia Pacific. This followed by various research projects focusing on the EU perception in China (Chan, 2010; Jing, 2006; Peruzzi, Polletti, & Zhang, 2007; Zhimin, 2012), Russia (Kaveshnikov, 2007; Utkin & Baranovsky, 2012), India (Jain, 2012; Jain & Pandey, 2010), Turkey (Eralp & Torun, 2012), Brazil (Gomes Saraiva, 2012), Japan (Oshiba, 2012) and South Korea (Park & Yoon, 2010). The important research results on the EU's external perception were published in collaborative works edited by Holland and Chaban (2008), Holland (2009), as well as Lucarelli and Fioramonti (2010). The recent publications include Stumbaum's working paper on the EU perception in Asia (Stumbaum, 2012), co-authored articles on perception of the EU's power (Chaban, Elgström, Kelly, & Yi, 2013) and EU's perception in emerging powers' media (Chaban & Elgström, 2014).

The growing EU's image research focuses on the Union's public, mass media and elites' perceptions in partner countries, though some regions and states remain neglected. Central Asia falls under this category of neglected regions along with ENP countries. The little research interest might be explained by the low profile of Central Asian countries in the list of the EU's global economic partners. In 2015, the combined share of five Central Asian republics' trade with the EU amounted only 0.7% in EU's total merchandise trade (EU Commission, 2015). However, the Union had constantly invested efforts to become more visible and significant actor in the region along with Russia, China and the US since 2001 (Cameron, 2009; De Pedro, 2009). Considering the EU's commitment to engage with the region, investigating the perception of the EU in Central Asia contributes to expanding knowledge of the EU's image in so far neglected region. It also offers avenue for further exploration of correlation between the EU's image and efficiency of its policy.

So far, the research on the EU–Central Asia relations is focused on several main topics: first, a number of scholars have examined the rivalry of great powers in Central Asia and the EU's role in that game (Cameron, 2009; Kavalski, 2010, 2012; Meister, 2009; Williams, 2007). Second, some observers concentrate on the issues of implementation of the EU Strategy for Central Asia (Emerson & Boonstra, 2010; Kassenova, 2008; Melvin, 2008; Pirro, 2013; Shao, 2008). Other researchers focus on the EU's promotion of democracy, human rights and rule of law in the region (Axyonova, 2011; Crawford, 2008; Dave, 2008; Hoffmann, 2010). Moreover, some research is aimed at explaining the EU role in

Central Asia and the challenges for European policy in the region (De Pedro, 2009; Demirtaş, 2009; Melvin, 2007).

The topic of EU perception in Central Asia had been studied occasionally. Bossuyt concludes that "the EU is perceived as more neutral and benevolent actor" in the region based on her interviews with government officials from several Central Asian countries (Bossuyt, 2010, p. 205). Another work is Chernykh's study (Chernykh, 2011) of the public perception of the actors active in Central Asia, which is based on a public survey of 2010. It illustrates Kazakh public opinion on Kazakhstan's foreign partners. More recently Peyrouse provided a working paper (Peyrouse, 2014) on the EU perceptions of the Central Asian elites.

This paper seeks to contribute to two various dimensions of the existing EU studies. First, the authors aim to complement the expanding research on the EU's external perception by introducing mass media depiction of the Union in the most prominent partner of the EU in Central Asia. The paper concentrates on mass media publications of Kazakhstan as it is the first trade partner of the EU in Central Asia in terms of bilateral trade turnover and is the first country in the region to sign Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the Union. Moreover, we intend to contribute to the existing studies on the EU–Central Asia relations via exploring different dimension of this interaction. The exploration of the EU's perception in the region might shed a light on the shortcomings of the Union's efforts to upgrade its role in the region. Previous studies indicate that the media visibility and media framing affect the perception of the EU's importance as a partner among general public and elites (Zhang, 2010, p. 173). The EU might be an important player in Central Asia, however, it could fail to be recognized as such if its visibility remains low and its image is fragmented.

Our paper utilizes content analysis of the four national newspapers at different measurement points in order to evaluate the peculiarities of published opinion on the EU in Kazakhstan. Then, it employs discourse analysis to the selected publications from the dataset to reveal a variation in description of the EU by local and European elites. These analytical techniques allow us to explore and highlight different dimensions of the EU's image in Kazakhstan. Finally, this work compares our findings with similar studies and offers different avenues for further studies.

## 2. Methodology

The methodological framework of this paper is influenced by the established research on the EU's external perception. The authors rely on Holland and Chaban's (2008) as well as Kaveshnikov's (2007) approaches for analyzing mass media's content about the EU. However, our dataset includes only those publications, which are primarily concerned with the Union. Additionally, this paper seeks to trace the changes in mass media coverage of the Union to assess the EU's visibility transformation over time. Therefore, it analyses publications at the different measurement points: the early 1990s, when relations between the EU and Kazakhstan was established; the mid-2000s, when the EU began to implement its Central Asian Strategy, and the recent years. This work follows Kaveshnikov's (2007) design of

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