

Проект Цифровой взаимосвязанности для Центральной Азии как механизм противостояния ЕС и Китая

Ольга А. Тимакова

Дипломатическая академия МИД России, Москва, Россия,

o.timakova@dipacademy.ru

Аннотация: Статья посвящена анализу проекта Цифровой взаимосвязанности Европейского союза (ЕС) для Центральной Азии как механизма инициативы «Глобальные ворота» по противодействию влиянию Китая и других геополитических акторов в регионе. Рассматриваются цели и особенности стратегии ЕС, направленной на минимизацию влияния Китая через продвижение собственных цифровых стандартов и европейских ценностей. В работе использован комплексный подход, включающий анализ ключевых документов ЕС, сравнительный анализ проектов ЕС и Китая в Центральной Азии, а также изучение геополитических и экономических факторов, влияющих на реализацию цифровых проектов. Анализ показал, что проект Цифровой взаимосвязанности ЕС в рамках инициативы «Глобальные ворота» ориентирован на развитие цифровых технологий, европейских стандартов и нормативно-правовых реформ в Центральной Азии. Одновременно, предлагаемые проекты должны реализовываться в соответствии с приоритетами европейских ценностей устойчивости, закрепленных в основных документах Союза. Несмотря на заявленные цели инновационности и устойчивости, проекты ЕС сталкиваются с проблемами, связанными с медленной реализацией, ограниченными ресурсами и противоречиями между геополитическими интересами Евросоюза и продвигаемыми ценностями. В то же время китайские проекты демонстрируют более высокие темпы реализации и масштаб, что представляет вызов для ЕС. Успех цифрового взаимодействия ЕС со странами Центральной Азии будет зависеть от способности Евросоюза интегрировать региональные особенности, повысить координацию между странами-членами и предложить конкурентоспособные инициативы. Быстрая цифровизация остается актуальной задачей для стран Центральной Азии, стремящихся сократить цифровой разрыв. Однако без учета местных интересов и более прагматичного подхода к реализации проектов ЕС рискует потерять влияние в регионе.

Ключевые слова: Европейский союз, Китай, Глобальные ворота, Один пояс, один путь, Центральная Азия, цифровизация, Россия, стратегические интересы

Для цитирования: Тимакова О.А. Проект Цифровой взаимосвязанности для Центральной Азии как механизм противостояния ЕС и Китая. *Проблемы постсоветского пространства*. 2025;12(2):114–125. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24975/2313-8920-2025-12-2-114-125>

Поступила 29.01.2025

Принята в печать 14.02.2025

Опубликована 30.06.2025

Digital Connectivity project for Central Asia as a mechanism of confrontation between the EU and China

Olga A. Timakova

Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Moscow, Russia,

o.timakova@dipacademy.ru

Abstract: The article focuses on analyzing the European Union's (EU) Digital Connectivity project for Central Asia as a mechanism of the "Global Gateway" initiative to counterbalance the influence of China and other geopolitical actors in the region. It examines the objectives and specific features of the EU's strategy aimed at minimizing China's influence by promoting its own digital standards and European values. The study employs a comprehensive approach, including an analysis of key EU documents, a comparative analysis of EU and Chinese projects in Central Asia, and an examination of geopolitical and economic factors affecting the implementation of digital projects. The analysis reveals that the EU's digital connectivity project within the "Global Gateway" initiative focuses on the development of digital technologies, European standards, and regulatory reforms in Central Asia. At the same time, the proposed projects are designed to align with the EU's sustainability priorities, as outlined in the Union's key policy documents. Despite the stated goals of innovation and sustainability, EU projects face challenges related to slow implementation, limited resources, and contradictions between geopolitical interests and the values being promoted. Meanwhile, Chinese projects demonstrate faster implementation and larger scale, posing a challenge to the EU. The success of the EU's digital engagement with Central Asia states will depend on its ability to integrate regional specificities, enhance coordination among member states, and offer competitive initiatives. Rapid digitalization remains a pressing task for Central Asian countries seeking to close the digital divide. However, without considering local interests and adopting a more pragmatic approach to project implementation, the EU risks losing influence in the region.

Keywords: European Union, China, Global Gateway, Belt and Road Initiative, Central Asia, digitalization, Russia, strategic interests

For citation: Timakova O.A. Digital Connectivity project for Central Asia as a mechanism of confrontation between the EU and China. *Post-Soviet Issues*. 2025;12(2):114–125. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24975/2313-8920-2025-12-2-114-125>

Received 29.01.2025

Revised 14.02.2025

Published 30.06.2025

INTRODUCTION

China is one of the most important economic partners of the European Union. Concurrently in recent years, the EU has increasingly drawn attention to political disagreements with China and has positioned relations between the two sides as one of “competition” and “systemic rivalry”. The EU’s greatest concerns include its technological dependence on China and the decline of its global influence due to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI).

A central element in the EU’s geopolitical strategy to counter China is the new project Global Gateway. Global Gateway is intended to serve as a framework program for implementing a wide range of projects in various regions of the world. The first projects were launched in 2022 in Central Asia – Water, Energy, and Climate and Digital Connectivity.

Overall, it is important to note that since the early 2020s, the EU has regarded Central Asia as an arena of geopolitical competition for resources and decisive political-value influence. Developments in the international arena have placed Central Asia at the intersection of three geopolitical spaces – Russia, China, and the Islamic world – where anti-Western narratives are actively taking shape. Despite the fact that economic interaction with Central Asian countries remains relatively limited – since the region’s states are not among the EU’s top ten trading partners – the EU considers cooperation crucial.

The Digital Central Asia project aims to expand regional countries’ access to secure digital technologies, provide technical assistance, and support reforms aligned with European digital standards and norms. The European Union seeks to become the primary provider

of digital services in Central Asia, surpassing China in this sector – establishing its own technological leadership, defining technological standards, and controlling technology supplies.

CHINA THREAT IN THE EUROPEAN UNION’S DISCOURSE AND INSTITUTIONALIZATION OF “GLOBAL GATEWAY”

The relationships between the European Union and China are developing dynamically; however, both sides adhere to different approaches in international affairs. China’s ambition to become a leader in the development of advanced digital technologies, including 5G networks and artificial intelligence, has intensified discussions about threats to the European Union’s strategic interests.

Several key events have shaped the prevailing narrative of systemic rivalry with China. As early as 2018, an extensive report by the EU member states’ ambassadors in Beijing listed the threats posed to the European Union by China’s global projects. The report also raised concerns that China was seeking to deepen divisions among EU member states¹. Later, in a report by the EU Chamber of Commerce in China, titled “The Upcoming Events: The Battle for Control Over Technical Standardization”², the specifics of China’s standardization policy were examined in greater detail. The report described the establishment of technical standards as a “battleground” where states compete for dominance in strategic technologies [1].

Finally, in September 2024, Mario Draghi presented the European Commission with a report titled “The Future of European Competitiveness”, which thoroughly analyzed the technological aspects of the EU’s

¹ Heide D., et al. China First: EU Ambassadors Band Together Against Silk Road. 17.04.2018. URL: <https://www.handelsblatt.com/today/politics/china-first-eu-ambassadors-band-together-against-silk-road/23581860.html?ticket=ST-844320-UIBOv6YS37cNbeHRfwNz-ap1> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

² The Shape of things to come: the race to control technical standardisation. 02.12.2021. URL: <http://www.european-chamber.com.cn/en/publications-standardisation-report> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

development in the context of competition with China. The report highlighted that the EU lags significantly behind the US and China in innovation and technology, particularly in artificial intelligence, semiconductors, and digital services. In global politics, China was accused of using economic coercion against key EU partners – particularly in Central Asia and Africa. Consequently, Draghi's report urged EU countries to develop the Global Gateway program as an alternative to China's BRI³.

According to European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, "Global Gateway is, above all, a geopolitical project aimed at strengthening the EU's position in the international market"⁴. The initiative aligns with a similar G7 project launched several months earlier. In the communiqué following the Cornwall summit, the participating countries defined their goal as restoring global stability and developing partnerships by gradually shifting their approach to investment in infrastructure projects, including clean and green growth initiatives⁵.

The conceptual foundation of the EU program is the notion of "connectivity". This has become the leitmotif of cooperation between the European Union and Central Asian countries⁶. According to former EU High Representative for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy F. Mogherini, the EU defines connectivity as "the physical and non-physical

infrastructure through which goods, services, ideas, and people can move freely" [2]. At the same time, all proposed initiatives must be "rule-based", ensure rights, and meet the EU's "high standards of social and environmental protection"⁷.

The European Union's projects follow a hierarchical structure and are also integrated into several broader framework initiatives under the umbrella of Team Europe – an EU program aimed at supporting the priorities of partner countries and regions by coordinating the efforts of EU member states, the European Commission, and financial institutions such as the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). Team Europe focuses on sustainable development, digital transformation, the green economy, and other key areas of cooperation between the EU and its partner regions. The initiative was launched in 2020 as part of the EU's global response to the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and within the framework of the Next Generation EU project.

The Global Gateway projects are closely linked to other strategic EU overtures, including the 2018 EU-Asia Connectivity Strategy, which aims to strengthen interregional cooperation, and the Digital4Development Hub. Within the latter initiative, Central Asia was selected as a pilot subregion for implementing

³ Draghi M. The future of European competitiveness. 09.09.2024. URL: https://commission.europa.eu/topics/strengthening-european-competitiveness/eu-competitiveness-looking-ahead_en (accessed: 15.01.2025).

⁴ Global Gateway: First meeting of the Global Gateway Board. 11.12.2022. URL: https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/IP_22_7656 (accessed: 15.01.2025).

⁵ 2021 G7 Leaders' communiqué: Our shared agenda for global action to build back better. 13.06.2021. URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2021/06/13/2021-g7-leaders-communiqué/> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

⁶ EU-Central Asia Ministerial: Remarks by High Representative/Vice-President Josep Borrell at the joint press conference with Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan Vladimir Norov. 17.11.2022. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/eu-central-asia-ministerial-remarks-high-representativevice-president-josep-borrell-joint-press_en (accessed: 15.01.2025).

⁷ Connecting Europe and Asia – Building Blocks for an EU Strategy – Council Conclusions. 15.10.2018. URL: <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/media/36706/st13097-en18.pdf> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

digital projects under the Asia-Pacific branch of the program.

Since 2021, project funding within the European Union has been carried out through the Global Europe: Neighbourhood, Development, and International Cooperation Instrument⁸. In Central Asia, funding is implemented through three main mechanisms⁹. First – Sectoral budgetary support through which partner countries develop objectives and indicators aligned with their national strategies, for which they are held accountable. The EU collaborates with the relevant ministries, and if the EU is satisfied with the reporting, the funds are transferred to the country's Ministry of Finance. The second is Blending and guarantees – Global Europe funds are combined with private financing, with the European Investment Bank assuming guarantees for investment returns. Third financing mechanism is carried out via Thematic programs – these are not directly tied to any specific region. Currently, Central Asian countries receive support through the Human Rights and Democracy program and the Civil Society Organizations program. These programs operate through grant competitions that bring together non-profit organizations from Europe and Central Asia.

PROBLEMS OF DIGITALIZATION IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES AND EU INITIATIVES

The geographical conditions of Central Asia do not allow for the region to be connected to a fiber-optic network, making high-quality broadband Internet extremely expensive [3]. Data on internet access among citizens of Central Asian countries varies¹⁰. According to the UN, nearly half of the population in Central Asia lacks access to digital services, mainly in rural and remote areas¹¹. A study by the World Bank group supports these findings, showing that three out of five Central Asian countries fall below the global average in terms of Internet users¹². Researchers from the region provide more detailed statistics: in Kazakhstan, 73% of the population has Internet access; in Uzbekistan – 50%; in Kyrgyzstan – 43%; and in Tajikistan – 19% [4]. Additionally, data from digital companies indicate that connection speeds in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are among the lowest in the world¹³.

Despite differences in potential and national conditions, all Central Asian states face similar digitalization challenges. These include the digital divide and high broadband costs, a shortage of experienced IT specialists,

⁸ Global Europe: Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument. URL: https://commission.europa.eu/funding-tenders/find-funding/eu-funding-programmes/global-europe-neighbourhood-development-and-international-cooperation-instrument_en (accessed: 15.01.2025).

⁹ Boonstra J., Smagulov K. European development cooperation with Central Asia: From abstract to concrete. December 2024. URL: https://eucentralasia.eu/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/EUCAM_PB40_EU-Central-Asia-EU-development-cooperation-with-Central-Asia-From-abstract-to-concrete_261124.pdf (accessed: 15.01.2025).

¹⁰ Burunciuc L. How Central Asia can ensure it doesn't miss out on a digital future. 21.06.2021. URL: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/europeandcentralasia/how-central-asia-can-ensure-it-doesnt-miss-out-digital-future> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

¹¹ UN E-Government Survey 2020. 10.07.2020. URL: <https://publicadministration.un.org/egovkb/en-us/Reports/UN-E-Government-Survey-2020> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

¹² Burunciuc L. How Central Asia can ensure it doesn't miss out on a digital future. 21.06.2021. URL: <https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/europeandcentralasia/how-central-asia-can-ensure-it-doesnt-miss-out-digital-future> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

¹³ Worldwide broadband speed league 2024. URL: <https://www.cable.co.uk/broadband/speed/worldwide-speed-league/#-speed> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

a generally low level of digital literacy, and public distrust of digital technologies.

The flagship initiative for the digitalization of Central Asia under the Global Gateway is intended to address these issues. It was announced at the EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference for Sustainable Development in Samarkand in 2022¹⁴. This summit followed the agenda set at two previous events – the International Conference on Connectivity between Central and South Asia in July 2021 and the EU-Central Asia Economic Forum in the same year.

According to the EU-Central Asia declaration, the initiative aims to reduce the digital divide in the region and promote the introduction of inclusive digital services. Alongside investments in infrastructure, the EU will support reforms in digital governance, including in the telecommunications sector, data protection legislation, human rights, and cybersecurity, aiming to bring “high EU standards and best practices to the region in line with EU digital diplomacy”¹⁵.

The European Union has approved funding of 40 million euros for technical assistance in managing digital technologies and infrastructure investments. The document also highlights additional participation from EU member states and international financial institutions.

As part of the project, the EU proposes connecting Central Asian countries to the European satellite data transmission system.

The first ground-based satellite communication stations are expected to be installed in Kazakhstan in 2025¹⁶. These stations will be connected to “green” data centers, planned for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. These centers will enable the countries to become key hubs for redistributing internet traffic in the region, helping to address the issue of limited Internet access in remote and rural areas.

In the long term, the EU is considering laying a cable along the bottom of the Caspian Sea. So far, the EU is encouraging Central Asian countries to join Azerbaijan’s Digital Silk Road project¹⁷, which aims to connect Central Asian countries, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the South Caucasus, Turkey, and EU countries via terrestrial and submarine fiber-optic cables across the Black Sea.

The EU also aims to promote its own standards for e-government and a unified regulatory framework in the ICT sector. According to experts, the EU encourages the implementation of digital governance reforms, with a particular focus on areas such as telecommunications, data protection, cybersecurity, and human rights compliance¹⁸. The proposed legislative changes in Central Asian countries align with the EU’s general legal framework *Acquis communautaire*, particularly the EU Digital Services Act and the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR). Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan have already introduced reforms to support digital services

¹⁴ Global Gateway: Team Europe launches two initiatives in Central Asia on energy and on digital connectivity. 18.11.2022. URL: https://www.europarl.europa.eu/meetdocs/2014_2019/plmrep/COMMITTEES/DEVE/DV/2022/11-30/TeamEuropeinitiativesinCentralAsiaonenergyandondigitalconnectivityEN.pdf (accessed: 15.01.2025).

¹⁵ Joint Declaration: EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference: Global Gateway. 18.11.2022. URL: https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/joint-declaration-eu-central-asia-connectivity-conference-global-gateway_en (accessed: 15.01.2025).

¹⁶ Verbeeck N. Digital transformation, a cornerstone in EU-Kazakhstan economic and trade partnership. 10.10.2024. URL: <https://www.euractiv.com/section/central-asia/news/digital-transformation-a-cornerstone-in-eu-kazakhstan-economic-and-trade-partnership/> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

¹⁷ Do not confuse this with China’s “Belt and Road Initiative” project. See: Digital Silk Way. URL: <https://digitalsilkway.az> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

¹⁸ Komilov A. Digitalization: How the EU Can Transform Central Asia. 23.08.2023. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2023/08/digitalization-how-the-eu-can-transform-central-asia/> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

and e-commerce. These changes include tax incentives for IT companies and the creation of new legal frameworks for digital payments and online business, facilitating the operation of European companies in the regional market. The laws also regulate the legal status of electronic documents and signatures.

The EU also offers regional countries the opportunity to integrate into intra-European programs in the field of digital technology. Specifically, this includes initiatives outlined in the priorities of the EU's Digital Diplomacy, approved by the Council of the European Union in 2023¹⁹. Among other objectives, the EU seeks to encourage its digital partners to adopt the European consensus position and promote key principles underlying the EU's common legal framework.

One promising area for cooperation is cybersecurity. If Central Asian countries engage with European satellite communication operators and ICT service providers, the EU will have the opportunity to integrate these nations into its cybersecurity agenda. For instance, there is consideration of conducting military and civilian cyber-training operations in the region under the framework of the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP). This is justified by the fact that at the proposed level of investment, physical and cyberattacks on infrastructure become inevitable, making the EU's active involvement a necessary measure to ensure the security of transit for critical resources, goods, and energy, as well as to maintain a favorable investment climate [5].

COMPETITIVENESS POTENTIAL OF THE GLOBAL GATEWAY

Like many other European Union projects, the Global Gateway initiative sets ambitious goals. Consequently, officials, experts, and the public have high expectations for it, as it represents the EU's largest geopolitical project of the 21st century. At the same time, there are also skeptical assessments regarding the feasibility of implementing its projects²⁰.

For example, the 300 billion euros investment volume has been questioned²¹. On the one hand, some argue that this amount is insufficient to achieve the stated objectives. On the other hand, such large-scale investments may be beyond the EU's financial capacity. Moreover, none of Brussels' previous geopolitical projects aimed at fostering energy and transport connectivity between the EU and Central Asia have been successfully implemented – not TRACECA, nor Nabucco, nor the Trans-Caspian Gas Pipeline [6]. Other experts question the attractiveness of the proposed projects for private investors, who are expected to cover a significant portion of the 300 billion euro investment²².

In general, assessing the history of EU-Central Asia relations, Professor Y. Leksiutina concludes that, despite Brussels' stated goals in the region over the past decades, the EU has neither facilitated the democratic transition of Central Asian countries nor fostered regional integration following the EU model. "The EU's use of normative power in the region can hardly be considered a success story, as impulses for regional integration and foreign economic

¹⁹ Council conclusions on EU Digital Diplomacy – Council conclusions approved by the Council at its meeting on 26 June 2023. 26.06.2023. URL: <https://data.consilium.europa.eu/doc/document/ST-11088-2023-INIT/en/pdf> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

²⁰ GT Voice: EU's 300 bln euro plan doomed to fail competing with BRI. 01.12.2021. URL: <https://www.globaltimes.cn/page/202112/1240424.shtml> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

²¹ Furness M., Keijzer N. Europe's Global Gateway: A New Geostrategic Framework for Development Policy? 2022. URL: https://www.idos-research.de/uploads/media/BP_1.2022.pdf (accessed: 15.01.2025).

²² Teevan Ch., Bilal S., Domingo E., Medinilla A. The Global Gateway: A recipe for EU geopolitical relevance? 13.06.2022. URL: <https://ecdpn.org/work/global-gateway-recipe-eu-geopolitical-relevance> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

openness in Central Asia have emerged from within the region itself rather than under the EU's influence" [6].

Furthermore, Brussels' initiatives are criticized for lacking a focus on regional specifics – an area where other actors operating in Central Asia have an advantage. According to Professor S. Zhiltsov, the EU is primarily interested in projects that, in the long run, aim to undermine Russia's economic capabilities, limit or exclude it from supply chains, and reduce its level of cooperation with Central Asian states [7].

Expanding on the theme of insufficient understanding of political processes in Central Asia, researchers criticize the EU for its lack of expert preparation. EU delegations in the region lack a centralized pool of European specialists who are not only proficient in Russian but also speak local languages and possess deep professional knowledge of regional characteristics and needs. As a result, they argue that this shortage of well-educated Central Asia experts prevents both the European External Action Service and the European Commission from fully utilizing the potential of their regional programs [8].

Other European analysts criticize Global Gateway for being reactive—arguing that the initiative is not fundamentally innovative but merely a response to China's strategic projects [9]. As previously mentioned, both officials

and experts often view Global Gateway as a countermeasure against China's global influence²³. Symbolically, the initiative's first summit took place in Samarkand in 2022, mirroring China's BRI, which was also launched at a Central Asian summit in 2013.

Experts generally remain skeptical about the EU's ability to compete with China. The PRC holds undeniable advantages in several areas: geographical proximity and its readiness to provide large-scale investments. Under the Digital Silk Road, a key component of the Belt and Road Initiative, the Chinese government and corporations subsidize the development of the sector in Central Asia [10]. Among Beijing's key achievements in the region's digitalization are: Chinese companies Huawei and ZTE have already completed nearly 100 projects to build 5G tower systems, connecting the region's countries to high-speed Internet server networks. China is estimated to control up to 80% of the telecommunications services market²⁴ and up to 70% of ICT equipment supplies in Central Asia²⁵. Leading Chinese companies involved in the region include Huawei, Hikvision, CEIEC, and Dahua. A particularly notable case was when the China National Electronics Import & Export Corporation (CEIEC) – a major exporter in the defense and security sector – allegedly donated 20 next-generation facial recognition cameras to Kyrgyzstan free of charge²⁶.

²³ Lau S., Moens B. EU to launch Global Gateway projects, challenging China's Belt and Road. 20.12.2021. URL: <https://www.politico.eu/article/global-gateway-european-union-launch-china-belt-and-road/> (accessed: 15.01.2025); Global Gateway vs. Belt and Road Initiative. 11.01.2022. URL: <https://www.bruegel.org/event/global-gateway-vs-belt-and-road-initiative> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

²⁴ Jardine B. China's Surveillance State Has Eyes on Central Asia. 15.11.2019. URL: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/11/15/huawei-xinjiang-kazakhstan-uzbekistan-china-surveillance-union-launch-china-asia/> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

²⁵ Yam Y.T. Smart Cities or Surveillance? Huawei in Central Asia. 07.08.2019. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2019/08/smart-cities-or-surveillance-huawei-in-central-asia/> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

²⁶ Gundal A., Gusseinov E. Competing Digital Futures: Europe and China in Central Asia's Tech Development. 23.05.2024. URL: <https://thediplomat.com/2024/05/competing-digital-futures-europe-and-china-in-central-asias-tech-development/> (accessed: 15.01.2025); Toktomushev K. From Ecuador to Kyrgyzstan: A Quieter Story of China's Digital Belts and Roads. 17.12.2019. URL: <https://www.chinausfocus.com/finance-economy/from-ecuador-to-kyrgyzstan-a-quieter-story-of-chinas-digital-belts-and-roads> (accessed: 15.01.2025).

Contrary to the idea that the BRI and Global Gateway are inherently conflicting projects, some experts have suggested the potential for their integration. Researchers advocating for greater synergy between these initiatives – particularly to reduce Russia's influence in the region – still insist that the EU cannot abandon its norms and values for geopolitical interests [11]. Overall, the EU narrative presents China's BRI as a policy of "debt-trap diplomacy", accusing Beijing of pursuing its geopolitical interests at the expense of its partners [12]. China is also frequently criticized for failing to align its projects with European ESG standards. Furthermore, the EU and China have fundamentally different approaches to connectivity and development policies. The situation is further complicated by the fact that, in EU policy, development is linked to security, while the EU and China's approaches to stability and security differ significantly. This creates major obstacles to establishing a constructive dialogue in the region [13]. Lastly, the EU operates on the principle of prioritizing its own norms and standards in foreign policy projects, which further complicates efforts to align with China's initiatives.

CONCLUSION

Since 2022, the European Union has launched a series of projects aimed at the digitalization of Central Asia, which have become the first initiatives within the Global Gateway framework. The EU aims to position itself as the primary provider of digital services in Central Asia, which will deepen economic cooperation and regional connectivity, as well as enhance the geopolitical status of the integration bloc. One of the EU's undeniable advantages is its institutional potential to influence many international institutions, allowing it to more effectively promote the EU's standards and norms in digital governance.

The European Union considers China to be an important partner but has never recognized that the infrastructure and other development projects under the BRI are almost identical to the EU's Global Gateway initiatives. The effective realization of the stated goals of the Global Gateway is also hindered by several characteristics inherent in the EU's foreign policy.

Chinese projects are often implemented at a faster pace, which allows for the timely resolution of urgent development tasks in Central Asian countries. EU investment initiatives, on the other hand, are usually more procedural, requiring extensive bureaucratic coordination within the Union. Additionally, the reporting on their implementation is much more detailed and time-consuming. Moreover, Central Asian governments are also aware that any investment projects and development assistance from the EU inevitably include a values component embedded in the foundation of each initiative. Although the Global Gateway promises to attract 300 billion euro in investment to implement global projects by 2027, the actual investment volumes for each sector are much more modest. For example, the entire Central Asia digitalization project currently amounts to 40 million euro, which is significantly less than China's investments. The Global Gateway program aimed at promoting connectivity in Central Asia has significant potential but requires increased funding, political, and institutional support from the EU.

As with its relations with other regions of the world [14], the EU's policy reflects not the actual political situation in the region but rather a securitized domestic political discourse about threats to EU interests. Furthermore, the classic issue for the EU remains: national priorities of member states hinder the harmonization of a common European policy. Political disagreements between member states lead to the achievement of consensus

that includes too many heterogeneous goals with limited resources.

The geopolitical conditions the European Union has faced over the past five years require it to first address internal problems. These include the need for recovery after a series of crises, strengthening European solidarity, counteracting the political influence of Eurosceptic parties, and developing a common European strategy towards the United States during the second presidency of Donald Trump. Moreover, Central Asia continues to have a lower priority compared to regions that directly neighbor the

EU – Eastern Europe, the Western Balkans, and the Southeast Mediterranean.

In the long term, the main factor determining the success of the EU's projects to counter China will be the ability to achieve internal cohesion and reconcile the diverse interests and priorities of member states regarding a common strategy in the region. The EU's inability to realize even the declaratively stated ambitious goals of the Global Gateway project will strengthen the positions of actors offering alternative models of world order for developing countries.

ЛИТЕРАТУРА:

1. Тимакова О.А. Китай как «системный вызов» стратегическим интересам НАТО. *Проблемы постсоветского пространства*. 2024;11(1):20–32. DOI: 10.24975/2313-8920-2024-11-1-20-32
2. Russell M. The EU's Central Asia Strategy. Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service; 2019. 12 p.
3. Pantucci R., Yau N. Paving the Digital Silk Road with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. *The RUSI Journal*. 2022;167(3):28–41. DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2022.2125653
4. Kurmangali M., Yeraliyeva Y., Beimisheva A. Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence in Central Asia: Governmental Responses and Further Implications. *Public Policy and Implementation*. 2024;23(2):146–159. DOI: 10.13165/VPA-24-23-2-03
5. Leino J. (ed.) The Return of Central Asia: the EU's engagement with a region threatened by the Dragonbear. Brussels: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; 2023. 27 p.
6. Лексютина Я.В. Эволюция подхода ЕС к Центральной Азии: от «доброжелательного наблюдателя» к геополитическому игроку. *Сравнительная политика*. 2024;15(2):31–49. DOI: 10.46272/2221-3279-2024-2-15-2
7. Жильцов С.С. Роль транспортных коридоров в развитии Центральной Азии. *Проблемы постсоветского пространства*. 2024;11(3):188–197. DOI: 10.24975/2313-8920-2024-11-3-188-197
8. Daminov I. EU-Central Asian Cooperation on Border Management, Migration and Mobility // in Khan K.H., Mihr A. (eds.) Europe-Central Asia Relations. Europe-Asia Connectivity. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan; 2023. 270 p. DOI: 10.1007/978-981-19-8707-6_4
9. Fawn R., Kluczevska K., Korneev O. EU-Central Asian interactions: perceptions, interests and practices. *Central Asian Survey*. 2022;41(4):617–638. DOI: 10.1080/02634937.2022.2134300
10. Yau N. Chinese Governance Export in Central Asia. *Security and Human Rights*. 2022;32(1-4):28–40. DOI: 10.1163/18750230-bja10009
11. Cornell S., Swanström N. Compatible Interests? The EU and China's Belt and Road Initiative. Stockholm: Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies; 2020. 80 p.
12. Andžāns M., Džatkovica E. The Global Gateway and Central Asia Toward an EU-led Post-New Silk Road. Riga: Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga; 2023. 33 p.

13. Bossuyt F., Dessein B. The European Union, China and Central Asia: Regional Cooperation in a New Era. London: Routledge; 2021. 312 p.
14. Тимакова О.А. Политика безопасности Европейского союза в Африке: на примере деятельности в регионе Сахеля // в колл. монографии Меняющийся ландшафт международной безопасности: конфликты и сотрудничество. Под ред. О.П. Иванова. с. 179-196. Москва: Квант Медиа; 2025. 304 с.

REFERENCES

1. Timakova O. China as a 'systemic challenge' for NATO strategic interests. *Post-Soviet Issues*. 2024;11(1):20–32. DOI: 10.24975/2313-8920-2024-11-1-20-32 (In Russ)
2. Russell M. The EU's Central Asia Strategy. Brussels: European Parliamentary Research Service; 2019. 12 p.
3. Pantucci R., Yau N. Paving the Digital Silk Road with the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. *The RUSI Journal*. 2022;167(3):28–41. DOI: 10.1080/03071847.2022.2125653
4. Kurmangali M., Yeraliyeva Y., Beimisheva A. Digitalization and Artificial Intelligence in Central Asia: Governmental Responses and Further Implications. *Public Policy and Implementation*. 2024;23(2):146-159. DOI: 10.13165/VPA-24-23-2-03
5. Leino J. (ed.) The Return of Central Asia: the EU's engagement with a region threatened by the Dragonbear. Brussels: Konrad Adenauer Stiftung; 2023. 27 p.
6. Leksyutina Ya.V. Evolution of the EU Approach to Central Asia: from Positive Observer to Geopolitical Player. *Comparative Politics Russia*. 2024;15(2):31–49. DOI 10.46272/2221-3279-2024-2-15-2 (In Russ)
7. Zhiltsov S.S. The role of transport corridors for the development of Central Asia. *Post-Soviet Issues*. 2024;11(3):188–197. DOI: 10.24975/2313-8920-2024-11-3-188-197 (In Russ)
8. Daminov I. EU-Central Asian Cooperation on Border Management, Migration and Mobility // in Khan K.H., Mihr A. (eds.) Europe-Central Asia Relations. Europe-Asia Connectivity. Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan; 2023. 270 p. DOI: 10.1007/978-981-19-8707-6_4
9. Fawn R., Kluczevska K., Korneev O. EU-Central Asian interactions: perceptions, interests and practices. *Central Asian Survey*. 2022;41(4):617–638. DOI: 10.1080/02634937.2022.2134300
10. Yau N. Chinese Governance Export in Central Asia. *Security and Human Rights*. 2022;32(1-4):28–40. DOI: 10.1163/18750230-bja10009
11. Cornell S., Swanström N. Compatible Interests? The EU and China's Belt and Road Initiative. Stockholm: Swedish Institute for European Policy Studies; 2020. 80 p.
12. Andžāns M., Djatkovica E. The Global Gateway and Central Asia Toward an EU-led Post-New Silk Road. Riga: Center for Geopolitical Studies Riga; 2023. 33 p.
13. Bossuyt F., Dessein B. The European Union, China and Central Asia: Regional Cooperation in a New Era. London: Routledge; 2021. 312 p.
14. Timakova O. The European Union's Security Policy in Africa: The Case of the Sahel Region // in Ivanov O. (ed.) The Changing Landscape of International Security: Conflict and Cooperation. p. 179-196. Moscow: Kvant Media; 2025. 304 p.

INFORMATION ABOUT THE AUTHOR / ИНФОРМАЦИЯ ОБ АВТОРЕ

Ольга А. Тимакова

Кандидат политических наук,
Дипломатическая академия МИД России,
Москва, Россия; 119021, Россия, Москва,
ул. Остоженка, д. 53/2;
o.timakova@dipacademy.ru

Olga A. Timakova

Ph.D. (Political Science),
Diplomatic Academy of the Ministry
of Foreign Affairs of Russia, Moscow, Russia;
bld. 53/2, Ostozhenka str. Moscow,
119021, Russia;
o.timakova@dipacademy.ru