



## Introduction

### Competing Visions and New Regional Order in Central Asia and the Caucasus

Special issue editor

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The special issue examines cooperation within the Europe-Caucasus-Asia (ECA) region and the interdependence among its participating countries. The ECA represents a distinct geopolitical grouping of states where historical institutional structures shape both the dynamics of cooperation and the challenges it faces. These factors also influence interactions with neighbouring regions, fostering collaboration or resistance. The ECA serves as a compelling case study of overlapping regional influences driven by three key actors: the People's Republic of China (PRC), the Russian Federation (RF), and the European Union (EU).

The ongoing Russian invasion of Ukraine has further heightened the strategic significance of studying ECA cooperation. The war has disrupted traditional geopolitical alignments, trade routes, and energy supply chains, pushing countries in the region to reassess their economic and security dependencies. As Russia's actions create new divisions and tensions, understanding the evolving roles of China and the EU in the region becomes increasingly crucial. This special issue provides valuable insights into how shifting alliances, trade realignments, and security concerns are reshaping cooperation within the ECA and its broader geopolitical landscape.

The contribution "*External Forces in Central Asia: Shaping the Regional Balance*" by Mubinzhon Abduvaliev, Ricardo Bustillo, and Crina Viju-Miljusevic explores the influence of external powers on regional cooperation in Central Asia. It highlights key regional initiatives led by the European Union, Russia, and China, focusing on their objectives, involved actors, and achievements. The variety of regional organizations offers a valuable case study for comparing different models of regionalism. Given that many of these organizations are established by authoritarian states, their goals, structures, and approaches to regional integration differ significantly from those triggered by democratic actors. Rather than fostering deep regional cohesion, these initiatives often reflect the geopolitical ambitions of their founding states. The authors argue that external powers frequently employ divide-and-conquer strategies to maintain leverage over Central Asian states, therefore deterring the development of regionalization. This fragmentation not only limits cooperative mechanisms within the region but also reinforces the dependency of individual states on external actors.

Assylzat Karabayeva's article, "*China-Central Asia Regionalization and Its Impact on the Central Asian Region and Beyond*," examines the effects of China-Central Asia relations on region-building in Central Asia and their relations with an important external actor, Russia. The article highlights intra-regional cooperation among Central Asian countries, which increasingly reflects characteristics of the Chinese model of regionalism. These include policy coordination, infrastructure connectivity, unimpeded trade, financial integration, and strengthened people-to-people ties. This form of regionalism, driven by pragmatic economic collaboration and flexible institutional arrangements, contrasts sharply with Russia-led initiatives, which tend to emphasize political alignment, security

cooperation, and tighter institutional control, as seen in organizations like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). In contrast to the arguments presented by Abduvaliev, Bustillo and Viju-Miljusevic, Karabayeva asserts that regional cooperation in Central Asia exists as a result of China's indirect, recipient-driven influence.

The third article in the special issue, "*New Regional Alignment in the Post-Soviet Space: The EU as an Active Player in the Eastern Partnership Countries (Case of Georgia)*" by Beka Chedia, examines the evolving role of the European Union in the Caucasus, with a particular focus on Georgia. The author argues that the EU's geopolitical interest in the region has grown over time, leading to a partial shift away from its traditional emphasis on soft and transformative power toward a more strategic effort to expand its sphere of influence. Using a five-concept framework—indifference, neighbourhood, soft power via partnership, Great Europe, and four-speed Europe—Chedia analyzes the trajectory of EU-Georgia relations. He identifies two primary factors that have slowed their development: Georgia's geographical remoteness and Russia's regional influence. However, the EU's strategic pivot toward a "Great Europe" and the impact of Russia's war in Ukraine have served as key catalysts for a closer alignment between Georgia and the EU.

The final article in this issue, *The Digital Silk Road in Europe: China's Soft Power Maneuvers at Euro 2024*, examines how China utilized its soft power capacity and diplomacy, particularly sports diplomacy, in support of its Digital Silk Road initiative in Europe in connection with the 2024 UEFA European Football Championship. The author argues that China was able to use the event as a vehicle for attracting European consumers and thus increase the level of acceptance of Chinese digital influence. This occurred through sponsorships at UEFA, relying on the capacity of Chinese tech companies to promote their services. The author argues that these efforts challenged negative images of China and provide a potential bases for increasing the scope of Chinese investment in Europe.

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