

# Hardly visible, highly admired? Youth perceptions of the EU in Kazakhstan

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## Abstract

Youth have always been one of the central target audiences of the European Union's (EU) policies towards Central Asia, which was once again emphasised in the recent EU Strategy for the region. This paper scrutinises how youth representatives in Kazakhstan, Brussels' closest partner in the region, perceive the EU and its policies. By doing so, the paper shifts the focus from the EU-centric assessment of its external activities, which has long dominated the academic literature, and provides a 'voice' to the targets of the EU's various initiatives. Examining data obtained through the method of *pictorial test* and focus group discussions with students of leading Kazakhstani universities, the paper argues that the issue Brussels faces among youth is not an image problem, rather it is a visibility issue. Although Kazakhstani youth are aware of the EU's main 'attributes' at the basic level, they have little knowledge that goes beyond stereotypical, yet positive, images of it. This stereotyped admiration towards *the EU*, however, is not necessarily an outcome of Brussels' successful policies, rather it is partly inherited from the historically idealised image of *Europe*. The paper suggests that increasing its visibility and better communicating its policies and messages need to be a priority for the EU in Central Asia.

## Keywords

European Union, Kazakhstan, perception, image, youth, visibility

## Introduction

In June 2019, after a long period of internal discussions and consultations with the Central Asian states, the European Union (EU) officially launched its revisited Strategy for Central Asia. Despite some criticism that the new Strategy resembles a 'Christmas tree' with a plethora of aims and goals, external commentators tend to admit it is a significant improvement compared to the previous Strategy of 2007: it is better structured, more specific and well-tailored to the needs of the region (Boonstra, 2019; Dzhuraev & Muratalieva, 2020). The Strategy also identifies the main target audiences of EU policies in the region. Among these, Central Asian youth are said to be paid 'special attention' by Brussels (European Commission, 2019, p. 2).

Indeed, engagement with youth has long been one of the central pillars of the EU's policy towards Central Asia. Such attention to youth is not surprising though as over half of the approximately 70 million people in the region are under 30 (Table 1).

To better address the needs of this huge segment of the population, Brussels has been assisting regional governments in reforming their education sectors. European universities have been cooperating with their Central Asian counterparts to improve the quality of education. Various academic exchange and mobility opportunities have been created for Central Asian youth. European diplomats on the ground have been engaging in regular dialogue with the youth, whereas European cultural centres have been acquainting interested youngsters with the history, culture and traditions of Europe, and providing support in language

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**Table 1.** Demographics of Central Asian states by age groups in percentage (2019).<sup>1</sup>

Country/Age groups	0–29, %	30–44, %	45–64, %	65+
<b>Kazakhstan</b>	49.5	22	21	7.5%
<b>Kyrgyzstan</b>	57	20.5	17	5%
<b>Tajikistan</b>	61.5	20	15	3.5%
<b>Uzbekistan</b>	55	22	18	5%

learning. What is important here is that by actively engaging with Central Asian youth, the EU, *inter alia*, tries to increase their awareness of the EU, making them more receptive to EU policies, its experiences, as well as the norms it spreads.

In this regard, several questions arise. After almost 30 years of EU-Central Asia relations, how familiar are Central Asian youth with the EU? What do they think about Brussels' role and policies in the region? Do they recognise it as an important partner? Have Central Asian youth become more pro-European in their external orientations? Addressing these and other similar questions, as I argue here, is important for at least two reasons.

On the one hand, studying perceptions of the EU in the eyes of third countries shifts the focus from the EU, and gives a voice to the targeted 'objects' of Brussels' various initiatives. It is a widely acknowledged fact that the literature on Brussels' external relations has been highly EU-centric until recently (Keuleers et al., 2016). This scholarship has long been 'too self-absorbed, looking at Europe through European eyes in a well-shaped European mirror' (Mayer, 2008, p. 8). Admitting this omission, some scholars started examining the way others perceive the EU and its international role, rather than what the EU wants to achieve internationally. The argument here speaks to the constructivist approach: others' perceptions are a constitutive part of the EU's international identity and roles (e.g. Elgström, 2007; Lucarelli, 2007). In other words, 'looking at external images means looking at one of the variables ... [of] European political identity' (Lucarelli & Fioramonti, 2010, p. 1). At *policy level*, it also implies that the outcome of Brussels' policies depends not only on how effectively the EU carries them out, but also on how receivers interpret proposed policy initiatives. '[W]hat the world thinks of the EU is an important factor in facilitating or opposing the achievements of EU-sponsored policies', as Lucarelli (2013, p. 430) points out. In this sense, perceptions held by others may also serve as one of the indicators of the outcome of EU-initiated policies.

Empirical research in this direction has rapidly increased in both quantity and quality since the mid-2000s (for review see Lucarelli, 2013; Mišik, 2013). Emerging as single-case papers, this body of literature today has risen into complex systematic studies covering different destinations, issue-areas, as well as time periods (Chaban & Holland, 2014).

But Central Asia is arguably one of the few regions that has remained beyond scholarly interest. It is only recently that scholars started paying attention to EU perceptions in the region in the context of the rise of academic interest in how Central Asians view external actors. These include perceptions held by elites (Arynov, 2021; Peyrouse, 2014; Spaizer, 2018), by media (Bekenova & Collins, 2019; Ospanova et al., 2017), and by the general public (Public Opinion Research Center, 2014). This paper intends to complement this emerging literature by focussing on EU perceptions in the eyes of a specific segment of the population: the youth.

On the other hand, the youth are always treated as possible future elites, who, a generation later, will shape the direction in which their countries develop. Today's youth in Central Asia are the representatives of a different epoch compared to their parents. Having no personal attachment to the Soviet Union, Central Asian youth were thought to be distinct from older generations, and would, therefore, lead the country in a different direction in the future (Junisbai & Junisbai, 2019, p. 25). In the case of Kazakhstan, for instance, a special hope has always been with the Bolashak generation,<sup>2</sup> those educated mainly in Western countries, and believed to be liberal and Western-oriented (Laruelle, 2019). However, this has proved to be only partly the case. Some studies found that Central Asian youth really adhere to the values of economic liberalism, and 'want to join the new middle classes and experience at least some of the material aspects of a "Western" lifestyle' (Roberts, 2010, p. 546). At the same time, a predisposition towards economic liberalism does not necessarily transform into political liberalism (Junisbai & Junisbai, 2019). In this context, examining youth perceptions of the EU, including what they think about the EU and its development model and values, how they see the nature of their countries' relations with the EU, as well as whether they want a more pro-European foreign policy from their governments, may partly contribute to the academic discussion on the orientations and values of Central Asian youth.

As a case study, this paper scrutinises perceptions of the EU among youth representatives in Kazakhstan, the country that has the most developed relationship with Brussels among the Central Asian states. Based on focus groups (FG) with university students in the two biggest cities of Kazakhstan – Nur-Sultan and Almaty, the article focuses on three aspects of perceptions of the EU: (1) what Kazakhstani youth's spontaneous associations with the EU are in general; (2) how they perceive EU-Kazakhstan/Central Asia relations and the EU's role in the country/region in particular and (3) to what extent they are pro-European in their foreign policy orientations. The findings indicate the visibility problem that the EU faces in Kazakhstan. Although Kazakhstani youth are aware of the general 'attributes' of the EU at the basic level, they have little knowledge that goes beyond stereotypical views of the EU. The stereotyped

admiration towards the EU is not necessarily an outcome of Brussels' successful policies, rather it is largely inherited from the historically idealised image of *Europe* in Kazakhstan. This paper suggests that increasing its visibility and a better communication of its policies and messages need to be a priority for the EU in Central Asia.

The article proceeds in several parts. The following section sets the contextual background, briefly mapping the EU's policies in the youth sector in Central Asia. Then section three outlines the methodological approach that the paper takes. The empirical findings of the paper are presented in section four, where I provide answers to the questions above. Finally, the last section outlines some concluding remarks.

## The EU and Central Asian Youth

The engagement with Central Asian youth has long been one of the key priorities for Brussels. Both strategies of 2007 and 2019 boldly emphasise this. The EU's policy mostly targets youngsters through initiatives in the education sector, because 'good education is essential in order to open up [development] potential for the younger generation' (Council of the European Union, 2007, p. 9). For instance, Brussels allocated €70 million in 2007–2013 for regional educational projects, which was roughly 10% of the EU's 635 million budget for Central Asia (European Commission, 2007, 2011). Another €115 million was allocated for education in 2014–2020 (European Commission, 2014c, p. 6). In general, the education sector has always been one of the focal points on Brussels' radar screen.

Both *indirect* and *direct* ways of engagement can be identified in Brussels' policies towards Central Asian youth in the education sector. By indirect engagement, I refer to those initiatives that do not presuppose in-person involvement of youth representatives, but rather are aimed at reforming education sectors of these states in general. One example of this is the creation of the Central Asia Education Platform designed to facilitate political and expert dialogue on education. Another flagship project was TEMPUS, implemented in 1994–2013, and aimed at assisting Central Asians in the modernisation of their education sectors. In total, 220 projects were carried out under TEMPUS, of which 71 projects (26.1%) in Kazakhstan (European Commission, 2014b, p. 3). Since 2014, similar projects have been sponsored under the overarching Erasmus+ programme (European Commission, 2020).

As for the *direct engagement*, this implies EU-led initiatives, where Central Asian youth are directly involved. Above all, it is about European scholarships and academic mobility programmes. In 2007–2013, 2226 Central Asian students benefitted from the Erasmus Mundus academic mobility programme, including 627 (28.2%) students from Kazakhstan (European Commission, 2014a, p. 14). In 2015–2019, another cohort of 5053 Central Asian students, researchers, and academic staff used a 3–12-month-long

mobility opportunity to visit European universities (58% visitors from Kazakhstan), whereas 343 students were awarded full-scholarships to obtain a master's degree in Europe in 2014–2019, including 176 from Kazakhstan (European Commission, 2020).

In addition, the EU assists in establishing and developing European Studies at local universities. In the past, several EU information centres used to operate at local universities. Between 2014 and 2019, eight Jean Monnet modules and three Jean Monnet chairs were awarded to Central Asian universities. Commonly, these initiatives are launched at departments of *International Relations* and *Area Studies* (see the next section). It is equally important to emphasise the role of European diplomats on the ground, who regularly visit local universities and schools, meet with interested young people and organise various events for them. Needless to say, national cultural centres such as the *Goethe Institute* and the *Alliance Française* also serve the common purpose of bringing Central Asian youth closer to Europe: to its culture, history and values.

In sum, despite certain criticism of the impact of European education projects (Jones, 2010; Merrill & Dukenbaev, 2011; Peyrouse, 2019), the majority of Central Asian observers tend to agree that the most visible impact in EU policies has been achieved precisely in the education sector (Chebotarev & Gubaidullina, 2013). Again, the purpose of this youth engagement was twofold: creating better opportunities for Central Asian youth, as well as raising their awareness of the EU and increasing their receptiveness to EU initiatives. In this regard, perceptions of the EU in the eyes of the youth, the target of such initiatives, could arguably serve as one of the indirect indicators of the extent to which the EU has reached its stated objectives.

## A Note on Methodology

As stated in Introduction, this paper scrutinises how representatives of youth in Kazakhstan perceive the EU and its policies. The data for this paper come from FG conducted with university students in Nur-Sultan and Almaty in March 2020. The sample included 2–4 year students majoring in *International Relations*, *Area Studies* and *Political Sciences* across five leading universities in selected cities.<sup>3</sup> This choice was driven by the premise that EU Delegations on the ground tend to target exactly these departments in their initiatives. For example, Al-Farabi University and Gumiyliv University used to host EU information centres in the past. Moreover, Gumiyliv University currently holds the Jean Monnet Chair. Likewise, European diplomats regularly visit these universities/departments with guest lectures. Partly because of these, and partly because of the academic courses generally taught in these departments, students from the chosen sample are more likely to be better informed about the EU and its policies than their average peers. In

other words, without the pretension of generalising the findings to the whole of Kazakhstani youth, I intentionally selected this sample to see what the, allegedly, best informed representatives of Kazakhstani youth know about the EU and its policies, and how they perceive it. Focus group participants confirmed that they had studied the EU either as a separate module or as part of broader modules such as *International Organisations* at their departments. Overall, nine FGs were conducted in Kazakh and Russian that brought together 79 participants.<sup>4</sup>

Focus groups consisted of two parts. The *first part* utilised the method of *pictorial test* applied by Shestopal et al. (2016) in their study of images of the EU in Russia. All participants were given a blank sheet and coloured pencils, and asked to depict the image of the EU as they see it. Participants were instructed to draw or write down the general associations they had of the EU. In psychology, it is widely acknowledged that pictures are powerful carriers of information, and they ‘may tell us as much about perception as an apple falling tells us about physics’ (Kennedy, 1974, p. ix). For example, Cherney et al. (2006) argue that children’s drawings are ‘a mirror to their mind’, that is they can be used as means of gathering data about children’s worldviews, whereas John (2012) claims that drawings can be a tool of self-expression among adults too. In a similar vein, Shestopal et al. (2016, p. 89) postulate that a pictorial test can be helpful in revealing unconscious elements of perceptions that are difficult to infer from verbal discussions. It is worth noting here that EU Delegations, organise, from time to time, drawing contests among Central Asian youth and children related to the EU and its various initiatives.<sup>5</sup>

In total, 78 drawings were collected from the participants.<sup>6</sup> Some of them had a complex plot behind them, while others simplistically listed down words/symbols an author associated with the EU (see Figure 1 as an example). In a few cases, where correctly interpreting the drawings was a challenge, I privately asked authors to explain what was depicted and what they wanted to deliver. All collected

drawings were later coded in terms of their content, that is the informative elements they contained. For example, *Picture 1* in Figure 1 below was coded as having three informative elements: Euro, member states (flags of France, Italy and Germany), and the European Flag (five-pointed stars). *Picture 2*, in contrast was more complex in terms of the attributes it contains, and was coded into 10 thematic elements after an explanation was received from the author (European flag, successful integration, Euro, EU values, member states, education, Brexit, tourism, donor and suspicion). Such a coding of all collected drawings allowed the most salient associations that participants had of the EU to be identified.

In the *second part* of the FGs, I held a group discussion with participants, where open-ended questions related to various aspects of the EU and its policies were asked. Specifically, discussion questions were designed to reveal three aspects of perceptions of the EU: (1) participants’ spontaneous associations with the EU in general – a continuation of the previous pictorial test; (2) their knowledge and perception of EU-Kazakhstan/Central Asia relations in particular and (3) the extent of participants’ pro-Europeanness in terms of their foreign policy orientation. The nine group discussions were conducted, recorded and then transcribed. The transcripts of group discussions were later inductively coded to identify and analyse dominant patterns related to the three aspects of perceptions above.

I intentionally chose FGs over individual in-depth interviews because the aim was to reveal multiple perspectives, including conflicting ones, in a dynamic discussion, instead of digging into an individual’s personal perceptions in an ‘isolated’ context. Obviously, group discussions have their drawbacks too. For instance, there is always a possibility that some participants may feel uncomfortable publicly revealing their ‘real’ opinions on certain issues, especially when they contradict dominant discourses in society. Thus, those participants may simply provide socially acceptable answers because of this pressure. This

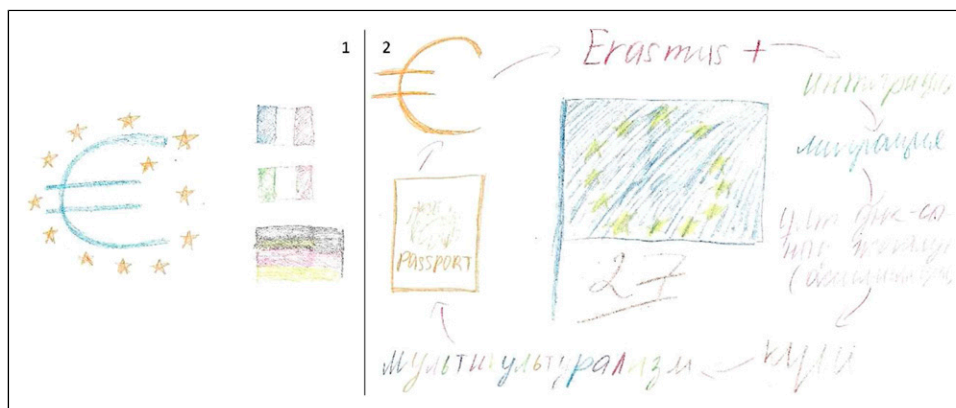


Figure 1. Samples of collected drawings.<sup>7</sup>



**Figure 2.** Basic associations with the European Union.<sup>8</sup>

issue is fully acknowledged. To minimise its possible consequences, I tried to create an enabling atmosphere for all possible opinions. In cases, where I observed the dominance of certain perspectives, I tried to give more opportunities to speak to those, who expressed less popular opinions. On the other hand, as a moderator of FG discussions, I did not observe any signs of participants' hesitance to touch upon certain issues. Instead, students actively participated in discussions and openly expressed all kinds of opinions, which, in some cases, led to heated debates. Arguably, this can be explained by the fact that many participants of FGs, being from the same department or faculty, already knew each other. Therefore, they might feel pretty comfortable interacting with each other.

Lastly, I would like to briefly mention the issue of positionality. I had no personal relationship to FG participants. For many of them, these FGs were the first experience to participate in this kind of study. Therefore, they were curious about the process. Also, being a local Kazakh citizen, as well as a representative of the relatively younger generation seemed to allow me to establish good contact with participants. On top of that, my position as a graduate of the prestigious Western university, as well as a scholar from the most prestigious Kazakhstani university, seemed to give me some kind of authority or prestige in the eyes of participants. After FGs, some participants stayed for longer to ask about my background, education abroad, as well as my work as a researcher. These factors might have potentially influenced the quality and quantity of the collected data, yet I believe that in a very minimal way. The following section presents in detail the findings from pictorial and verbal data.

### The EU in the Eyes of Kazakhstani Youth

The pictorial and verbal data collected during FGs indicate that FG participants generally have highly complex and multidimensional perceptions of the EU. As a rule, they depicted and articulated multiple associations while contemplating the EU and its policies in Kazakhstan. Both the positive and negative sides of the EU appear to be known, with positive elements visibly dominating in many aspects.

For example, one FG participant separately listed both sides, where we can see references to multiple elements of the EU's image (Figure 2). Consequently, it is challenging to bring Kazakhstani youth's perceptions of the EU into one denominator.

### Predictable Stereotypes

Generally speaking, the inferred perceptions of the EU do not come as a big surprise, as they are largely consistent with the existing literature on EU perceptions reported from different regions and countries. Symbols such as the *European flag*, *its geographical map*, *Euro* and *the Schengen visa* appeared among the most common spontaneous images of the EU in the eyes of FG participants (Table 2).

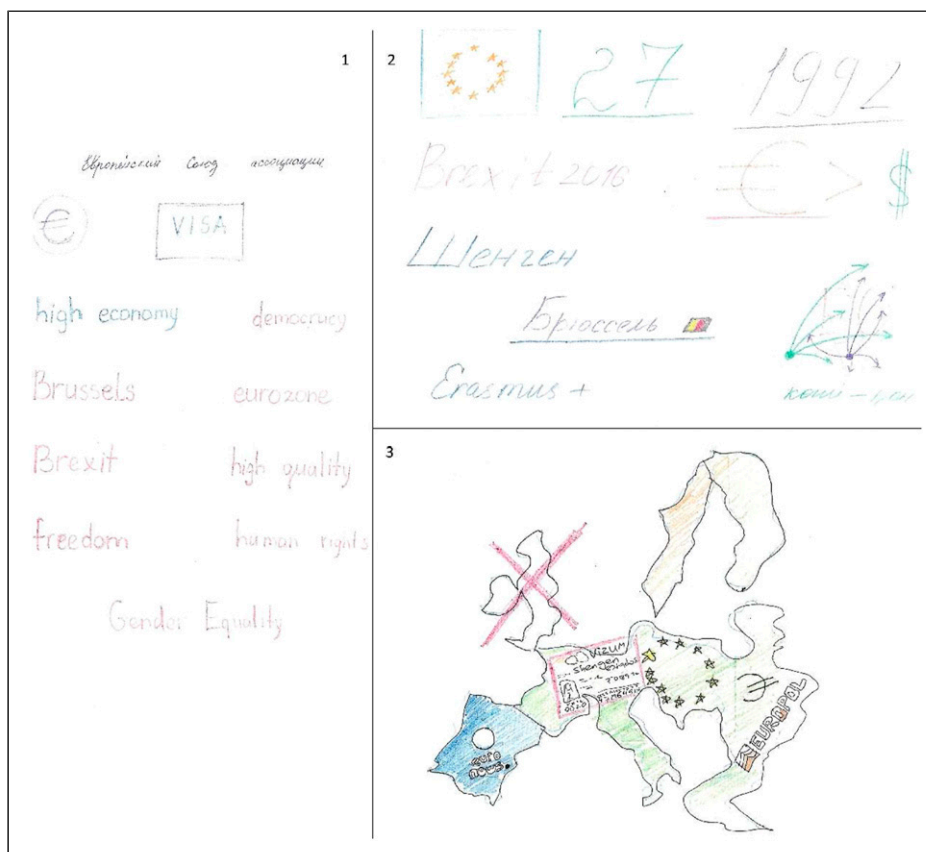
These elements were repeatedly depicted in the majority of drawings (Figure 3). For instance, some FG participants immediately articulated that their first association with the EU is 'Euro... because we do not encounter the EU in our everyday life. Even when we do, it is related to Euro',<sup>9</sup> or 'what attracts me is the Schengen visa, [because] it allows travelling to European countries'.<sup>10</sup> Similarly, other scholars have found that these elements top the list of spontaneous images of the EU in a number of Asian countries (Holland et al., 2007), as well as in Russia (Shestopal et al., 2016).

Likewise, Kazakhstani youth commonly associate the EU with economic power. In general, the image of the EU as an economic giant (but a political dwarf) is widespread across the globe (e.g. Chaban et al., 2013; Lucarelli & Fioramonti, 2010), and is shared by elites in Kazakhstan, too (Kourmanova, 2014, p. 7). A similar pattern is also observed in the case of the youth. Focus group participants commonly stated that 'for me, the EU is a giant with strong economy',<sup>12</sup> or 'the most developed integration among all integrations'.<sup>13</sup> A strong currency, common market, free trade, export/import volume, investment capacity and technology and innovation appear as visible associations with Brussels' economic capabilities (Figure 4).

As a consequence, images of the EU as a key economic partner for Kazakhstan, a source of technological advancement,

**Table 2.** The most frequent elements of the EU's image depicted in drawings.

No	Elements of the EU's image	Depicted in N of pictures	No	Elements of the EU's image	Depicted in N of pictures
1	EU flag	51	5/6	Brexit	21
2	Member states	28	7	Schengen visa	20
3/4	Geographical map	27	8	Economic prosperity	18
3/4	Euro	27	9	Education	17
5/6	Values	21	10	Integration/Cooperation	15

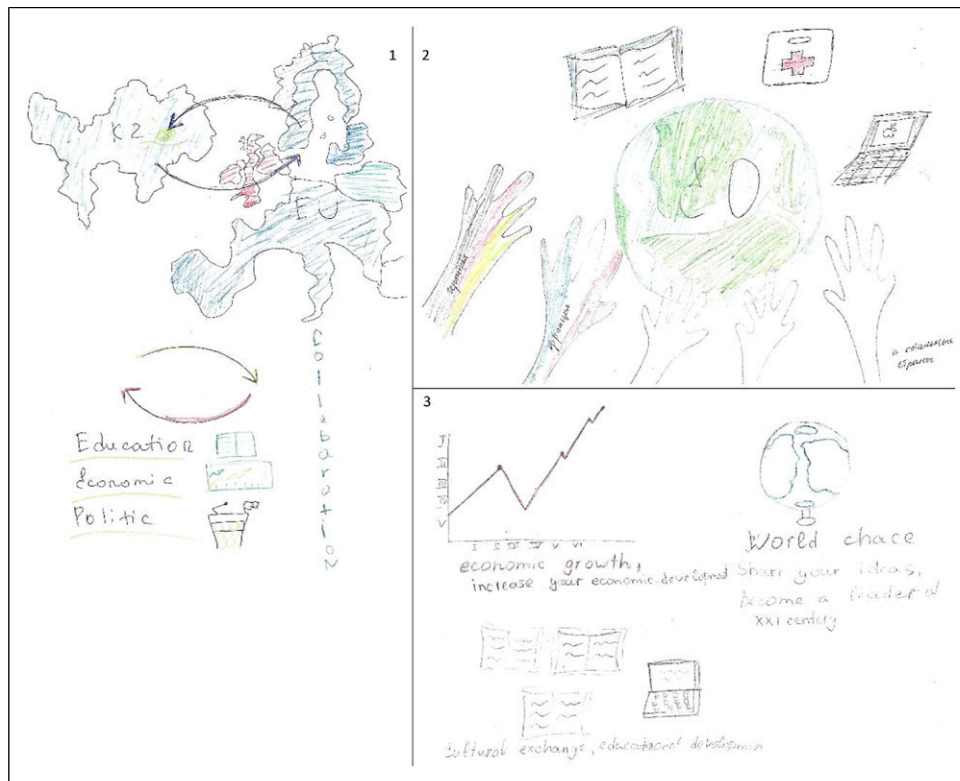


**Figure 3.** Spontaneous associations with the European Union.<sup>11</sup>

and a model of integration dominated among participants. Again, it had already been reported that these images prevailed among Kazakhstani elites, too (Arynov, 2021; Spaiser, 2018). Even rare public polls reveal that highly similar associations with the EU are held by the wider population (Public Opinion Research Center, 2014).

Furthermore, Nargis Kassenova stated recently that the EU is perceived as ‘the epitome of a “good life”’ in Kazakhstan (Boonstra, 2020, p. 4). Data collected for this research also suggest that a perceived high quality of life in European societies is another highly admired aspect of the EU. In particular, its education system, and the opportunities it provides in the education sector largely attract Kazakhstani youth: ‘Education. Erasmus. This is what I

immediately recall [about the EU],<sup>15</sup> or ‘[the EU is] an opportunity for me, because the Erasmus programme allows [me] to get an education abroad’,<sup>16</sup> as some students stated (Figure 4). Such a salience of European education could arguably be explained by the fact that FG participants, students of leading universities in Kazakhstan, tend to be interested in various opportunities in the education sector, including those provided by Brussels. Another facet of the perceived ‘good life’ in the EU is said to be the values championed in EU member states (Figures 2 and 3). In this regard, democracy, human rights, freedom, equality and diversity are mentioned the most: ‘I associate the EU with liberal values, democracy, and freedom... It seems all countries, including non-European, strive for these values’.<sup>17</sup> Moreover,



**Figure 4.** The European Union as an economic giant.<sup>14</sup>

female participants tended to pay special attention to gender equality in the EU, which is gradually gaining significance in Kazakhstan's public discourse. Adopting these values in Kazakhstan is viewed as bringing 'a change in the mentality of our society', much needed for its development.<sup>18</sup>

Again, all these basic perceptions articulated by FG participants are neither exclusive nor unexpected, because they are largely in line with what has already been reported from different corners of the world. What might this extensive similarity suggest? Among others, this might point to dominant stereotyped images of the EU spread across the globe and shared by Kazakhstani youth, too. Scholars working on international images argue that the more a person has knowledge of an object, the more complex that person's image of an object becomes (Scott, 1965). In the case of the EU, we see that FG participants' awareness of the Union barely goes beyond a 'standard' set of associations, as will be elaborated in the following section. Moreover, it can even be argued that these stereotypical, predominantly positive, images of *the EU* are not always an outcome of Brussels' activities, but are rather partly derived from the historically idealised image of *Europe* (see also Arynov, 2021, p. 12). Lucarelli (2013, p. 439), for example suggested that the link between the two needs to be better explored. A recent comparative study carried out by Barcevičius et al. (2015, pp. 58–60) concluded that in many parts of the world

*Europe* positively contributes to certain aspects of the *EU's* image associated with social welfare, culture, history, research and innovation. In the case of post-Soviet countries, the image of *Europe* as a prosperous region has historical roots too. For example, few authors demonstrate in relation to Russia, that *Europe* has played the role of its admired Other for centuries, and Russia has long attempted to become a part of this 'Heaven' – that is Europe (Buranelli, 2014; Neumann, 1996). Similarly, the authors of *Identities and Foreign Policies in Russia, Ukraine and Belarus* demonstrate the importance of *Europe* not only for Russia, but also for Ukraine and Belarus (White & Feklyuinina, 2014). Arguably, this partly relates to other countries in the post-Soviet space too, including Kazakhstan.

What we can observe from FG materials is that in some cases participants struggled to clearly demarcate the boundary between *Europe* and *the EU*. Very often these two notions were used interchangeably during group discussions (Figure 5).

As one student stated:

from my school years, I remember saying 'like in Europe'... We always strove to be like them. But it is difficult to draw a line here: are we talking about Europe and individual EU countries, or are we talking about the EU [as an organisation]?<sup>20</sup>



**Figure 5.** The European Union as *Europe*.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, it can be claimed that some elements of stereotypical perceptions of the EU discussed above are partly inherited from this historically idealised image of *Europe*, rather than being informed by participants' thorough knowledge of the EU.

### **Beyond Stereotypes: Lack of Awareness**

According to Friedrich Ebert Stiftung's (FESs) survey conducted among Kazakhstani youth, about 60% of respondents described themselves as interested in events happening in Europe (FES, 2016, p. 156). Related to the EU, FG discussions also demonstrated that at the basic level participants were familiar with the Union. They were able to depict and articulate certain elements generally related to the EU and its policies, but, as argued above, some of those elements come as widespread oversimplifications and stereotypes. Beyond those general stereotypical views, however, FG participants, on average, were found incapable of demonstrating in-depth awareness of the EU and its policies, despite the assumption that the sample chosen for this study was more likely to be informed about the EU given their educational background.

The lack of knowledge among participants was especially visible regarding EU-Kazakhstan/Central Asia relations. When asked about the current state of EU-Kazakhstan relations, rarely did FG participants go beyond general assumptions that the sides cooperate in trade, the EU invests in oil or it promotes values. These general articulations seem to emanate from students' general associations with the EU discussed above, rather than their knowledge of relations between Kazakhstan and the EU. In fact, participants often

directly admitted that following EU-Kazakhstan relations is of little interest to them: 'I do not know much about the EU, because it is not that interesting to me',<sup>21</sup> or 'I do not follow the EU [in Kazakhstan]. I may hear of it only in the context of global events'.<sup>22</sup> A striking example is participants' scant level of awareness about the EU's 2019 Strategy. The adoption of the Strategy has been the biggest event in EU-Central Asia relations in recent times. When asked whether they had heard of it, only a very few participants confirmed they had, but struggled to give details. The typical answer, however, was 'no': 'it is our specialty [at the university], but we do not know [about the Strategy]', claimed one student of Area Studies, whose educational focus at the university was on Europe and North America.<sup>23</sup> Even when some participants illustrated more awareness of, and interest in, EU affairs, it seemed to be mainly conditioned by their personal experience. For instance, one student said their European Studies lecturer used to make them bring 'weekly news' about the EU to classes and it became a habit for her to follow EU affairs;<sup>24</sup> another student linked her interest in the EU with the visit of the Belgian Ambassador to their high-school several years before;<sup>25</sup> the third participant stated that she was interested in the EU because she had spent some time in Europe with an academic exchange programme.<sup>26</sup>

Generally, the main reason for low awareness of the EU in Kazakhstan is perceived to be Brussels' invisibility as a major actor, especially in the media. From this angle, the EU is often compared to Russia and China, who are said to be way more visible and important in Kazakhstan. Therefore, the EU is called upon to better develop 'the EU brand',<sup>27</sup> and be more decisive in openly articulating its position on important questions in Central Asia, 'as did [Mike] Pompeo last month'.<sup>28</sup>

### **Situative Suspicion**

In the existing literature, the EU is frequently described as a force for good, which pursues not just self-interest, but rather helps other actors and intends to positively shape the whole international environment (Smith, 2003, p. 107). Also in the case of Central Asia, it was argued that 'the EU is always eager to present itself as a sensitive partner who has no geopolitical interests and who is empathetic and trustful' (Spaiser, 2018, p. 72). Overall, FG participants appear to share this point on the comparatively benign nature of the EU in Kazakhstan. From this aspect, the EU is sharply distinguished from China and Russia, who are viewed as being more dominating or even threatening neighbours: 'the EU is not like Russia or China, it is a more neutral player',<sup>29</sup> or 'we should be friends [with the EU]. There is nothing threatening coming from Europe',<sup>30</sup> as some students stated.

At the same time, this does not imply that Brussels is perceived as a purely altruistic actor, as it represents itself. In that sense, trust of the EU is not absolute, but relative: it is in

relation to other countries that Brussels is recognised as a more trustworthy actor (Arynov, 2021, p. 13). In fact, the majority of participants agreed that while interacting with Kazakhstan, the EU, first of all, pursues its own interests:

it seems they have some hidden plans in mind, but not in a military sense. Why does such a big union come here? ... It seems they just want to make a profit. Yes, they help us, create opportunities here. But they seem to benefit more than us.<sup>31</sup>

Commonly, this relates to Brussels' perceived geopolitical and hydrocarbon interests in Kazakhstan, that is having a foothold next to Russia and China and exploiting Kazakhstan's oil reserves for its economic benefits.

Furthermore, certain aspects of the EU's policies cause suspicion and rejection among participants, despite its predominantly positive and benign image discussed above. It is said that over-idealisation of the EU may have certain side effects for Kazakhstan. First, there is a fear of *losing national identity and culture* because of emulating the European lifestyle. Some participants agreed that Kazakhstani and European culture have certain differences. An often repeated example is a respectful relationship between older and younger generations in Kazakhstan, which is perceived as irrelevant in European societies. In this context, admiration towards Europe should not lead to the abandonment of local culture, values and traditions, as often articulated: 'bringing European culture to Kazakhstan may lead to the loss of our own culture',<sup>32</sup> or 'national and cultural values need to be preserved. We often see emulation [towards Europe] among the youth. There is a threat that traditions inherited from our ancestors will be lost'.<sup>33</sup> Such a concern was especially salient among Kazakh-speaking participants.

Another ambiguous issue is *the rights of sexual minorities*, which is perceived to be championed in EU countries. In general, it has been found that Kazakhstani youth are particularly intolerant towards sexual minorities (FES, 2016, p. 102). Data collected for this research, however, offers more nuanced findings. FG participants were found to have a polarised opinion on this issue. One group has neutral-positive attitudes and believes that the rights of sexual minorities are an indivisible part of human rights. Another group, however, perceives the promotion of these rights as culturally unsuitable for Kazakhstan (for additional discussion, see Arynov, forthcoming). This arguably was the most negative aspect associated with the EU among FG participants.

We are not conservative, we are not negative, and we are very tolerant towards all minorities. But traditional cultural aspects need to be taken into consideration. Therefore, [the EU's] cultural influence regarding the support of sexual minorities is not good.<sup>34</sup>

Brussels' support of the rights of sexual minorities is interpreted as undermining local traditional norms and values. Another student articulated that '[the EU's] negative influence is tolerance. Tolerance to LBGT is not suitable for Kazakhstan... Our mentality is not ready for that'.<sup>35</sup> Hence, the promotion of 'untraditional values' by the EU should be 'kept within the boundaries of normal', as one student stated.<sup>36</sup>

Finally, some representatives of Kazakhstani youth tend to believe that the education and academic mobility programmes offered by the EU have negative side effects, too. This relates to the perceived *brain drain* from Kazakhstan to European countries. There is a perception that the population in Europe is inevitably ageing, therefore, the EU tries to attract skillful and well-educated young people from other countries.

It may not be visible externally. But their [Europeans'] main objective is to attract educated young people. If you know German, you can get free education in Germany. There is hidden strategic thinking behind it. Brain drain.<sup>37</sup>

This is recognised as a challenge for Kazakhstan, which needs its well-educated people to contribute to the development of the country.

In the context of this suspicion, it is articulated that Kazakhstan should be careful and act decisively to secure its own interests and foresee the negative consequences while interacting with Brussels.

### Restrained Pro-Europeanness

In terms of foreign policy, Kazakhstani youth were reported to hugely favour close ties with Russia but, compared to the older generation, this pro-Russianness is less expressed among the youth (Shaukenova 2014, p.104). About 40% of Kazakhstani youth would like to develop closer ties with the EU (FES, 2016, p. 157). This is visibly below that for Russia (72%), and slightly more than China's indicator (30%). Moreover, in terms of a model for development, about 20% of youth want their country to follow the EU, which is still below the support expressed towards the Russian model (46.7%), but ahead of other external alternatives like China (9.5%) and the US (7.9%) (FES, 2016, p. 158). In other words, these polls indicate that the EU is the second most desired external actor for youth in Kazakhstan immediately after Russia, which could arguably be interpreted as a positive sign for Brussels.

Focus groups conducted for this paper complement this with interesting nuances. What the collected data indicate is the *restrained pro-Europeanness* among participants. On the one hand, the EU, with some caveats, enjoys a predominantly positive image, as discussed above. The European model of development, including its social-economic conditions and political values, makes it a desired external actor that Kazakhstan could build closer ties

with. On the other hand, a great majority of participants questioned to what extent a deeper partnership with Brussels is feasible in practice. Two concerns were commonly expressed by students.

The first concern relates to the possible deterioration of Kazakhstan's relations with Russia (and China) as a result of the shift towards the EU. Participants were in agreement that closer cooperation with Brussels should not be built at the expense of friendly relations with Kazakhstan's neighbours. Even those who demonstrated negative attitudes towards Russia's dominance in Kazakhstan agreed that the country, first of all, is destined to sustain friendly ties with Moscow: 'no matter how much we want closer ties with the EU, Russia's and China's influence will always prevail [in Kazakhstan]... It is good that we put an emphasis on the EU, but hardly anything will change',<sup>38</sup> or 'we know what happened in Ukraine. We know what happened in Georgia when it decided to join the EU. Russia made it clear that it is [Russia's] sphere of influence'.<sup>39</sup> In other words, there was a doubt among participants that Kazakhstan should prioritise the EU over its immediate and more powerful neighbours. In this context, what has become popular is the multi-vector foreign policy implemented at the official level. Within this policy, the EU is seen as one of the main directions, but not the only dominant one: 'we should seek closer cooperation with the EU. But no country should dominate. The balance

needs to be ensured with multi-vector policy', as one respondent stated.<sup>40</sup>

The second concern refers to the broader issue of Brussels' geopolitical capability. The EU, despite its perceived economic might, is not seen as a strong geopolitical actor, which can provide an equal alternative to other powerful actors. Brussels is often described as lacking internal unity to exert notable influence beyond its territory: 'in terms of how they use hard power, [the EU is] very weak. Nobody listens to it and considers it a hard-power player', as one student claimed.<sup>41</sup> Such scepticism is further fuelled by the perception that Brussels is currently suffering from critical internal issues, which are said to limit its external activities. In particular, participants commonly referred to the refugee/migrant crisis and Brexit (Figure 6).

Some authors have already reported on the negative impact the refugee/migration crisis has had on third countries' perception of the EU (Arynov, 2018; BarceVICIUS et al., 2015). The same can be argued about the impact of the long-lasting Brexit process. The UK is mentioned as having been 'one of the leading member states'<sup>43</sup> in the past. Its departure from the EU therefore is perceived to inevitably lead to the decline of Brussels' overall influence. Recently Bossuyt (2020) also assumed that the difficulties the EU is encountering during the COVID-19 crisis might further worsen perceptions of the EU as a credible and capable actor in Central Asia.

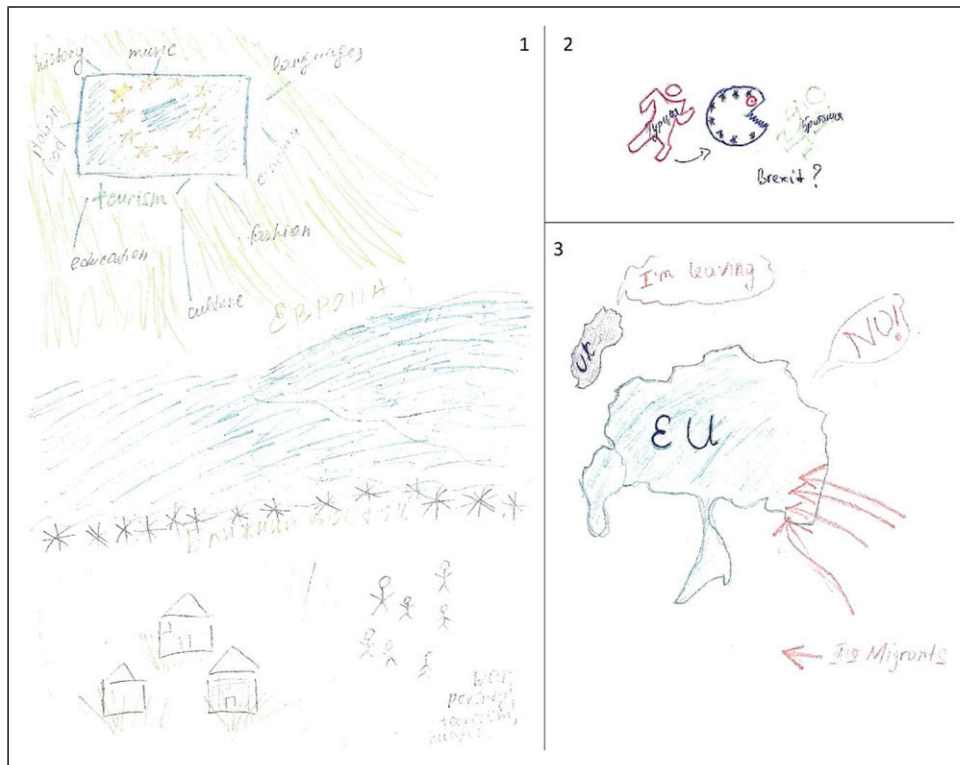


Figure 6. Refugee crisis and Brexit.<sup>42</sup>

Again, these two issues articulated by participants do not imply that closer partnership with the EU is not supported, but rather the scepticism refers to whether Kazakhstan will be 'allowed' by its powerful neighbours to drift towards the EU, and whether the EU itself has the capability to satisfy Kazakhstan's request of closer ties. It is in this sense that pro-Europeanness expressed by participants is *restrained*.

## Conclusion

The discussed findings, first of all, imply that the problem the EU faces among Kazakhstani youth is not that of an image issue, but rather it is a visibility problem, despite the youth having always been one of the main target audiences of EU policies. In general terms, FG participants appear to understand *what the EU is*: the 'standard' set of its attributes such as a successful integration, developed economy, progressive values, Euro, and the Schengen visa, largely reported by other scholars from different regions and countries, are easily recalled by participants of this study, too. Yet, rarely did FG participants demonstrate a thorough awareness of *what the EU does* in particular and *what impact it makes* in the country. In other words, their knowledge of the EU and its policies hardly go beyond widespread stereotypical views. What is striking here is that the low visibility is observed among young people, who are supposedly better informed about the EU than their average fellow citizens given their specific educational background. If even this group demonstrates scarce awareness of the EU and its policies, this can arguably be treated as one of the indicators of the insufficient reach of EU-led initiatives in the region. In this regard, the paper argued that the predominantly positive, yet stereotypical, image that the EU enjoys among this group may not necessarily be an outcome of Brussels' successful policy implementation in the country, but could partly result from the historically idealised image of *Europe*. In the long run, this positive image may vanish under the pressure of the increasingly negative information flow concerning the EU's future. Therefore, boosting its visibility, effectively communicating the impact of its policies, and better articulating its main messages need to be the top priorities for Brussels to preserve the positive image that the EU currently enjoys. The new EU Strategy for Central Asia clearly acknowledges this issue, and aims 'to develop a more dynamic and better-targeted communication strategy' (European Commission, 2019, p.16). In this regard, social media platforms and other new communication technologies may represent a better opportunity for the EU than the traditional media given the overall situation with freedom of media in Kazakhstan.

Furthermore, the findings also suggest that<sup>44</sup> the assumption that a new generation of Central Asian youth, for whom the Soviet Union is a distant past, might demonstrate relatively more pro-European/Western orientation seems to be only partially true. Admiration for many aspects of the EU

(or Europe) is highly visible among FGs participants. But this is rather *passive* admiration, which does not necessarily transform into *active* lobbying of a pro-European direction of foreign policy. Kazakhstani youth tend to express a more balanced and pragmatic vision when it comes to whether their country should move towards closer ties with Europe.

One more point needs to be emphasised. This paper dealt with perceptions held by a specific group of Kazakhstani youth: those, who currently reside in the biggest and most developed cities in the country; who study in the leading universities; who take specific academic courses related to *International Relations* or *Political Sciences*; and who speak at least one foreign language. This group is untypical of the country's youth as a whole. The legitimate question in this regard is to what extent the findings of the paper are generalisable. As stated in the methodology section, there is no intention to project the findings to the whole of Kazakhstani or Central Asian youth. The reported findings therefore need to be treated keeping this in mind, although I sometimes refer to 'Kazakhstani youth' in the course of the paper. At the same time, given the dominance of stereotypical images of the EU within this group, will a representative study find considerably different perceptions? The existing literature suggests that Kazakhstani/Central Asian youth are more likely to articulate more or less similar perceptions, which will be in line with mainstream visions of the EU. But such a discussion goes beyond the scope of this paper and is a subject for new studies.

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## Notes

1. All numbers are taken from official web-sites of Statistics Committees/Agencies of Central Asian states. In the case of Turkmenistan, the website was inaccessible, but it can be assumed that the numbers are not significantly different in Turkmenistan either.

2. 'Bolashak' (*lit.* Future) is a state program established in 1993, which provides scholarships for Kazakhstani citizens to study abroad, predominantly in Western countries.
3. *In Nur-Sultan*: Nazarbayev University, and Gumilyov Eurasian National University (Gumilyov University). *In Almaty*: Al-Farabi Kazakh National University (Al-Farabi University), Kazakh Abylai Khan University of International Relations and World Languages (Abylai Khan University), and Narxoz University.
4. Two focus groups in Kazakh and Russian were conducted in each university except Narxoz University, where I had only one focus group discussion in Kazakh. To recruit participants, I mainly used assistance of friends and colleagues (academic staff) from the mentioned universities. They helped me in reaching out to students in their respective departments and organising introductory sessions with them. During these introductory sessions, I provided detailed information about the project to students and asked them to decide whether they wanted to participate in focus group discussions. Written consent forms were obtained from those, who agreed. It is also worth mentioning that focus group discussions were not attended by outsiders.
5. For example, the EU Delegation to Turkmenistan organised the children's drawing contest 'Border cooperation/border guard' in October 2018. Similarly, the Delegation to the Kyrgyz Republic conducted the contest 'Imagining European Union' in May 2017.
6. One participant refused to provide his picture.
7. Focus group, (1) (2) Narxoz University.
8. Focus group, Abylai Khan University.
9. Focus group, Nazarbayev University.
10. Focus group, Al-Farabi University.
11. Focus group, (1) (2) (3) Al-Farabi University.
12. Focus group, Nazarbayev University.
13. Focus group, Al-Farabi University.
14. Focus group, (1) (2) (3) Abylai Khan University.
15. Focus group, Nazarbayev University.
16. Focus group, Narxoz University.
17. Focus group, Nazarbayev University.
18. Focus group, Al-Farabi University.
19. Focus group, Narxoz University.
20. Focus group, Nazarbayev University.
21. Focus group, Nazarbayev University.
22. Focus group, Al-Farabi University.
23. Focus group, Gumilyov University.
24. Focus group, Nazarbayev University.
25. Focus group, Nazarbayev University.
26. Focus group, Abylai Khan University.
27. Focus group, Narxoz University.
28. Focus group, Nazarbayev University. US State Secretary Mike Pompeo paid a visit to Kazakhstan in February 2020, where he publicly criticised China over its treatment of Muslim minorities in Xinjiang, including ethnic Kazakhs. This is one of the hot topics in Kazakhstan's internal discourse. The student was referring to the fact that a high-ranking US official was not restrained from openly speaking about the issue that bothers many people in Kazakhstan. Thus implying that the EU would not risk such a bold gesture.
29. Focus group, Gumilyov University.
30. Focus group, Narxoz University.
31. Focus group, Nazarbayev University.
32. Focus group, Al-Farabi University.
33. Focus group, Abylai Khan University.
34. FG, Gumilyov University.
35. Focus group, Gumilyov University.
36. Focus group, Narxoz University.
37. Focus group, Narxoz University.
38. Focus group, Narxoz University.
39. Focus group, Nazarbayev University.
40. Focus group, Narxoz University.
41. Focus group, Gumilyov University.
42. Focus group, (1): Abylai Khan University: Prosperous Europe and refugees running away from 'the Middle East' engulfed in 'war, poverty, terrorism, hunger'; (2) Al-Farabi University: Turkey, the EU ('Pac-Man'), and the UK chasing each other; (3) Narxoz University: Brexit, the EU and migrants.
43. Focus group, Narxoz University.

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