

National University of Political Studies and Public Administration

Doctoral Programme in Political Sciences

Doctoral Thesis

Promoting Democracy in Authoritarian States:

The Politics of the EU and USA towards Central Asia

(2001-2021)

Summary

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Bucharest

2023

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Summary

Adopting a comprehensive perspective on democracy promotion, this doctoral thesis analyses comparatively the policy instruments used by both the United States of America (US) and the European Union (EU) in their democracy promotion policies towards the five Central Asian states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. Taking into account the regional context of Central Asia, as well as the wider policy framework and interests of the two Western actors, the thesis approaches also various factors deemed as obstacles to democracy promotion, connected to both democracy promoters and receivers, at their internal and external environments. Thus, the thesis explores the links between the context in which democracy promotion policies are implemented, and the nature of those policies.

In the beginning of the 21st century, democracy promotion has become one of the central topics in the foreign policies of the EU and USA. Both actors committed to democracy promotion in their official rhetoric, including it in various statements, strategies and policies. In the case of the US, the administration of George W. Bush emphasized international democratisation as a foreign policy imperative, articulating it especially in the wake of the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 (also known as 9/11) (Omeličeva 2015, 40). For the EU, external democratisation became a central piece in its external action with the 2007 Treaty of Lisbon, which enshrined democratic norms in all of EU's foreign policies (Holzhacker and Neuman 2019, 27). Even though the EU and the US recorded disparate evolutions in their democracy promotion policies, and different dynamics marked their international democratisation endeavours since the beginning of the 21st century, the two actors have been regarded as the main Western democracy promotion actors (Burnell 2007, 1; Huber 2015, 18).

Relatively concomitantly with the greater importance attached to the agenda of democracy promotion, the US and the EU developed also a stronger interest for Central Asia. This region, composed of the five former Soviet republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, has been “rediscovered” after the terrorist attacks of 9/11 and the subsequent Western intervention in Afghanistan (Lewis 2008, cited in Kavalski 2010, 4). Engaging with the international community after gaining their independence, in 1991, the republics of Central Asia drew much attention from the US and the EU due to their potential in terms of trade, energy and, especially, security (Cooley 2012, 10-11). The significance of Central Asia for the US and the EU has been acknowledged throughout the time both by scholars and officials of the two international actors alike.

From a geopolitical perspective, Zbigniew Brzezinski approaches the potential of Central Asia in world politics, especially from the point of view of the energy resources harboured by the states in the region. Accordingly, he argues that the main interest of the US should be to prevent the domination of Central Asia by any single power (Brzezinski 1997, 148). His arguments were inspired, in part, by the work of Halford Mackinder, one of the most influential thinkers in geopolitics. Mackinder introduced the concept of “geographical pivot of history”, an area in Eurasia which included Central Asia. In his theory, the characteristics of this area favour military mobility and economic development, and therefore those who control it, might gain a significant advantage in world politics (Mackinder 1904, 434-437). Coming closer to the present times, Olga Spaiser argues that Central Asia is a region of unique relevance in current world politics, due to multiple factors, which include the proximity to conflict zones, Afghanistan standing out with its long US presence, and the rich oil and gas deposits (Spaiser 2018, ix). Among the five Central Asian states, Kazakhstan holds the largest reserves in terms of oil. Turkmenistan, on the other hand, holds the largest reserves of gas in the region and among the largest in the world. Uzbekistan also holds large reserves of both gas and oil, but in fewer quantities than its energy-rich neighbours (Burghart 2018, 248-252). Besides its endowments in terms of energy, Spaiser argues that Central Asia stands out also by attracting a strong interest from a large number of international actors, which contributes to the region’s unique relevance (Spaiser 2018, ix). While geopolitical arguments might be prone to criticism (Kavalski 2010, 2), the potential of Central Asia has been assessed also politically. In this regard, both the EU and the US developed significant interests related to Central Asia, expressed in multiple strategy documents issued by the two actors after 2001.

Central Asia came to the forefront of the US agenda after the terrorist attacks of 11 September 2001 and the strategic imperatives raised by the operations conducted in Afghanistan. Due to their adjacency to Afghanistan, the Central Asian states proved valuable partners for the US’s War on Terror (Cooley 2012, 20-21). In the case of the EU, the security concerns raised after 9/11 also prompted, in part, its interest for Central Asia. However, the EU also approached Central Asia from the perspective of energy security, with an interest of accessing its energy resources (Spaiser 2018, 53; Cornell and Starr 2019, 29-39). In addition to their strategic and security interests, both the EU and the US included in their agendas towards Central Asia also normative objectives related to the promotion of democracy and human rights (Omelicheva 2015, 2-3, 7).

Despite the strong interests generated by the US and EU in relation with Central Asia, the policies of democracy promotion put in place by the two Western actors in the region remained relatively unsuccessful in generating lasting systemic democratic reforms (Omelicheva 2015, 2; Sharshenova 2018, 239). As it is shown in this research, both through the literature reviewed regarding democracy promotion in Central Asia, and the brief assessment conducted on the political evolution of the states in the region, the positive results of the US and EU policies of democracy promotion in Central Asia remained fairly limited or, in some cases, absent, which suggests a rather ineffective democracy promotion process. The Central Asian states generally drifted towards stronger authoritarianism in their short period of independence. In this context, this study is driven by an interest in understanding why the democracy promotion policies of the US and the EU in Central Asia have had limited results. Thus, the main research question underlying this research is: *Why are the US and EU democracy promotion policies ineffective in Central Asia?*

In order to answer this question, this study adopts a holistic approach on democracy promotion, involving factors related to both promoters and recipients of democracy, building on the existent work on the topic (Sharshenova 2018). However, this thesis aims to develop further this perspective, by enquiring the links and interplay between domestic and foreign factors influencing democracy promotion, in accordance with the work of Seva Gunitsky (2017; 2018). For this purpose, this research distinguishes between the foreign and domestic dimensions, of both promoters and receivers of democracy. Using this approach to undertake a comparative analysis on the case study of the US and the EU democracy promotion policies in Central Asia, and analysing the factors influencing them, further research questions can be addressed. Thus, the secondary research questions are: *What are the differences and similarities between the US and the EU policies of democracy promotion in Central Asia?* and *How can the democracy promotion policies of the US and the EU, in Central Asia, be explained from a theoretical point of view?*

In connection with these questions, the following hypothesis is tested in this research: *The ‘difficult’ context of Central Asia determines the EU and the US to adopt cooperative democracy promotion policies towards the states in the region.* Using the dichotomy proposed by van Hüllen and Stahn (2009), based on the analysis framework developed by Magen and McFaul (2009), this study refers to “cooperative” democracy promotion policies to designate those actions based on cooperation with the recipients, such as “persuasion and capacity-

building” or assistance, as opposed to the “conflictual” approaches, given by coercive means such as sanctions and public accusations (van Hüllen and Stahn 2009, 119).

The cooperative-conflictual dichotomy is used to analyse the EU and US democracy promotion policies, in connection with the context of Central Asia. By ‘difficult’ context this study refers to the conditions adverse to democracy promotion. Drawing from the metaphor of “difficult terrain”, used by Bossuyt and Kubicek (2011) to describe the regional authoritarian background in Central Asia, unfavourable for democracy promotion policies, this study addresses a wider ‘difficult’ context, which implies also factors related to both the US and the EU, as democracy promoters. Thus, the hypothesis suggests that the nature of the democracy promotion policies of the US and the EU in Central Asia is dependent on both domestic and foreign factors, of both the recipients and promoters of democracy (which create the context).

By answering the research questions stated above, the argument proposed by this thesis is that democracy promotion policies depend on a diverse and interconnected array of factors related to both promoters and receivers’ internal and external environments. Thus, this research challenges the conclusions reached by van Hüllen and Stahn, who, applying the above-mentioned analysis framework on case studies located in the Middle East and Eastern Europe, argued that the domestic context of the recipient states influences the democracy promotion policies elaborated by the democracy promoters (van Hüllen and Stahn 2009, 121, 141). As it is shown in this research, the Central Asian states offer a valuable case study, with domestic regimes ranging from hard authoritarianism in the case of Turkmenistan, to soft or hybrid regimes in the case of Kyrgyzstan. Nonetheless, this study finds that the EU and the US put in place generally cooperative policies of democracy promotion with all of the Central Asian states, fact which suggests a connection of these policies also with foreign factors of both recipients and promoters. Additionally, unlike van Hüllen and Stahn’s work, this study also offers a theoretical background for the analysis framework of the democracy promotion policies, based on the concept of smart power.

The time frame of the analysis undertaken in this study spans from 2001 to 2021. Its starting point was chosen due to the surge in the Western interest for Central Asia, in the context of the 9/11 terrorist attacks and the following operations conducted in Afghanistan. Its ending point, in 2021, is given by the US and its allies’ withdrawal from Afghanistan. Additionally, historical evolutions from 1991 and earlier are also taken into account, to set the historical background on which some arguments are drawn.

Owing to its arguments, this study approaches two interrelated topics. Firstly, there is the main topic of democracy promotion, which narrows to the more specific issue of the factors that influence democracy promotion. As Schatz points out, in spite of the existing literature on the conditions under which democracy promotion can be effective, as for instance the works of Levitsky and Way (2010) on internal democratisation, there are still unanswered questions about the underlying factors which facilitate or hinder the emergence of these conditions (Schatz 2006, 267-268). This study aims to address these underlying factors, with a particular focus on the hindrances, or the obstacles, which hamper democracy promotion, as it is illustrated by the case of Central Asia. The second topic of this thesis emerges from the comparison of the US and EU policies in the region. Regarding this topic, the study aims to identify the similarities and differences between the democracy promotion policies set up by two distinct types of international actors, and find a suitable explanation for them in the theories of International Relations.

The relevance of this study is highlighted in the context of the global hegemony of liberalism, in both economic and political spheres, which marked the '90s. Under these conditions, the US and the EU, the main representatives of liberalism (Schatz 2021, 110), are also the main democracy promoters in the world. Thus, given the limited progress of the Central Asian states towards democracy (Omelicheva 2015, 12), despite the regional involvement of the US and the EU, an inquiry on the limits of democracy promotion becomes justified. The importance of understanding the obstacles faced by democracy promotion has been underlined recently also by the political evolutions in Afghanistan, in the context of the US withdrawal from this country. As Lieven argues, a thorough assessment of the particularities and conditions in which democracy promotion takes place can have deep policy implications, as it is revealed by the absence of such an evaluation in the case of Afghanistan and the consequent failure of these policies (Lieven 2021, 16-19). Furthermore, the relevance of Central Asia, as it is explained above, underlines also the importance of understanding the EU and US policies in this region.

Thus, the objectives of this research are both of an empirical and theoretical nature. On the one side, the study aims to identify the main limits of both EU and US democracy promotion policies in Central Asia, highlighting their similarities and differences. On the other side, given the empirical particularities, the study aims to identify also the theoretical framework which best explains the democracy promotion approaches of the EU and US in Central Asia. Finally,

the study holds also a policy related potential, by highlighting those issues which hamper democracy promotion, providing recommendations for the policies of democracy promotion.

In order to answer the research questions, the main methodological approach employed in this study is qualitative, focusing mostly on historical analysis, document analysis and semi-structured interviews. The interviews were conducted by author in 2021, both online and in person, during study visits at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, Kyrgyzstan, and at the University of Tartu, Estonia. The secondary methodological approaches are quantitative, being given by statistical analysis which includes several political and economic indicators, and an online survey conducted by author in Kyrgyzstan. Based on the above research methods, throughout the study various sources are employed, such as research articles, analyses and academic books of renowned scholars based in the West, but also in Central Asia; media reports and coverage mostly from local news outlets; and official documents and statements issued by the EU, US and the Central Asian states taken into consideration. Mostly, these research materials have been studied in English, and, in a few cases, in Russian language.

Laying the theoretical grounds of this study, the first chapter aimed to identify theoretical links between democracy promotion and power in International Relations. For this purpose, in the first part of the chapter, the concept of democracy promotion has been defined and operationalized in a wider understanding, involving an asymmetric exercise of power (Archibugi 2009; Wolff 2015, 219-220, 230), including both state and non-state actors, among the promoters and the recipients alike, as well as a wide range of instruments from the softest to the hardest (Burnell 2007, 2), and instances of both coercion and cooperation between the promoters and the receivers (Schmitter and Brouwer 1999, 13-14). Further, the study adopted a liberal perspective on democracy, aptly depicted by the mid-range model of Wolfgang Merkel (2014). Additionally, several aspects of democracy promotion have been reviewed, highlighting the importance of the context in which international democratisation actions take place, based on Gunitsky's work (2017; 2018) on the interplay between domestic and foreign factors which facilitate or hamper democratisation.

Subsequently, the second part of the theoretical chapter approached the rather underdeveloped topic of power in the context of democracy promotion (Wolff 2015, 219-220), identifying links between democracy promotion and the theories on power in International Relations. Briefly stated, the chapter argues that, in the framework of this study, a context-specific relational approach on power, comprising both coercive and cooperative instances,

based on Dahl's (1957) and Baldwin's (1979; 2013) perspectives, is consistent with the relational context required by democracy promotion, at a conceptual level. After establishing the relevance of relational power in democracy promotion, the chapter further questioned the type of power exerted in a relational context. Thus, by reviewing theoretical accounts from realism, neoliberalism and constructivism, at a theoretical level, the chapter challenges Wolff's (2015) arguments regarding the concept of power proposed by Barnett and Duvall (2005a; 2005b) as suitable for explaining democracy promotion. Instead, it is argued that the concept of smart power (Nye 2004, 2011), offers a better alternative for this study, being able to comprise and explain the full range of soft and hard instruments involved by democracy promotion, including material incentives and persuasion. Thus, the concept of smart power, due to its relational dimension, is used to underpin the democracy promotion cooperative-conflictual dichotomy elaborated by van Hüllen and Stahn (2009), based on the analysis framework proposed by Magen and McFaul (2009). This analysis framework is subsequently applied on the US and EU policies in Central Asia.

The second chapter assesses the historical development of the Central Asian states, in order to provide the background on which the EU and US policies took place after 2001. Aiming for a comprehensive perspective, the chapter starts by describing the pre-Tsarist Central Asia. Further, the chapter approaches the historical influence of the Russian colonial rule over Central Asia, during the Tsarist Empire and, having a greater weight, during the Soviet Union. The violence of the policies put in place during these periods, in the context of the Russification and Sovietisation, together with the national delimitation of the people in Central Asia, significantly impacted the development of the Central Asian republics, shaping their existence also after independence.

By applying a path dependence theory perspective, the chapter argues that these 'historical legacies' of Central Asia manifest in two ways. Firstly, there is identified a stronger connection to Russia, especially in the cases of Kyrgyzstan (Sharshenova 2021), Tajikistan and, to a lesser extent, Kazakhstan. However, the chapter takes into account also the involvement of China in Central Asia, especially in the economic and energy fields, but growing also in the security field, as well as the involvement of Turkey and Iran in the region.

Secondly, and more importantly for the argument of this study, the political and institutional practices developed especially during the times of the Soviet Union resisted after the independence of the Central Asian states, translating in authoritarian political systems of

various forms, coupled with pervasive corruption, proving resistant to change. In this respect, the chapter also argues that the Central Asian states exhibit an intricate set of similarities and differences, developing authoritarian systems of various degrees, from hard authoritarianism in Turkmenistan, to softer or hybrid regimes in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan respectively. These political dynamics are assessed both through an enquiry of the most significant political developments in each of the Central Asian republics after 1991, and with the help of the statistical indicators on the domestic politics of the Central Asian states. The indicators used were provided mainly by the Freedom House, the Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance, and the Polity Project. Additionally, taking into account the liberal perspective on democracy, also more specific indicators were taken into account, such as the World Press Freedom Index (provided by the Reporters without Borders) and the Index of Economic Freedom (provided by the Heritage Foundation).

After analysing the regional context in which the democracy promotion policies of the US and EU unfolded, the third chapter analyses comparatively the policies of democracy promotion implemented by the EU and the US in Central Asia, during the 2001-2021 time frame. For this purpose, the analysis is divided in two parts. The first part assesses the regional policies set up by the EU and the US towards Central Asia, in a comparative perspective, in order to identify the approaches to democracy promotion in the wider policy framework of the two Western actors. The findings of this part highlight the variations in the engagement of the EU and the US with Central Asia. In terms of the engagement level with the Central Asian states, after 1991 both Western actors initiated diplomatic contacts with the states in the region, and developed policy frameworks which included the newly independent Central Asian states. However, despite providing assistance on various levels, the US and EU interest for the region remained rather limited until 2001. Thus, during the 1990s, both the US and the EU included democracy promotion among their objectives for Central Asia, alongside other interests, such as security and nuclear disarmament, in the case of the US, and economy and energy, in the case of the EU, which had an important place on their agendas.

Subsequently, after the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks, the Western engagement with Central Asia increased substantially. The policies of the US and the EU included, at a rhetorical level, democracy promotion, alongside other normative goals, such as increasing regional connectivity and fostering environmental protection, but also security and stability interests related to Afghanistan, as well as energy security, connected with the access to the energy resources located in the region. However, while Brussels developed a more consistent

approach over time, espousing stronger interests also in the energy resources found in Central Asia, Washington tied its engagement with the region primarily to its involvement in Afghanistan. Therefore, while the US engagement in Central Asia receded after 2014, the EU increased its involvement in the region. While the policies of both actors can be regarded as revolving around security considerations of various types, democracy promotion still permeated the policy documents adopted by both actors, considered for the instrumental purpose of enhancing regional stability and prosperity.

This approach is illustrated in the second part of the chapter, which analyses democracy promotion in the bilateral relations of EU and the US with each of the Central Asian states. Besides finding multiple cases in which the normative considerations were relegated in favour of pragmatic interests in the cases of both the EU and the US, this analysis primarily shows that the EU and the US pursued mostly cooperative approaches in their relations with Central Asian states. By applying comparatively the framework proposed by Magen and McFaul (2009), the study highlights that both the EU and US employ mostly positive normative persuasion, ex-ante and positive material incentives and capacity-building actions, which give the cooperative nature of their democracy promotion policies towards the Central Asian states. The only major exception, in this regard, has been the brief period of conflictual democracy promotion towards Uzbekistan, in the aftermath of the 2005 Andijan events, when both the EU and the US adopted sanctions and public criticism against the Uzbek authorities.

However, some variations are identified in the democracy promotion actions of the EU and US in Central Asia. On the one side, it is observed a stronger normative dimension in the case of the EU's relations with the Central Asian states, due to Brussels continuous and enhanced normative engagement with the region in comparison with the US. In this regard, the EU stands out especially through new initiatives designed for the region, but also through the increasingly larger budget allocations throughout the studied period. On the other side, despite being generally based on cooperation, their approaches differ, with the US investing more in the civil society, while the EU has been paying more attention to governmental and administrative reforms. Despite these particularities of the EU and US democracy promotion policies in Central Asia, the research highlights their relatively similar approaches, based on cooperation with the recipient states.

Thus, the US and EU policies of democracy promotion in Central Asia provide a rich case study, which blends a large array of instruments, and combines a general cooperative

stance, with instances of conflictual relations. Testing the theoretical arguments of this thesis, the democracy promotion policies of the US and EU in Central Asia can be approached from the perspective of the smart power concept. From this point of view, the policies of the two Western actors blended hard means of promoting democracy (such as sanctions, payments, and name and shame actions) with soft means (such as persuasion and economic attractiveness).

Finally, the last chapter acknowledges the limited results in the democratisation of the Central Asian states and inquires the factors which contributed to this outcome. By adopting a comprehensive perspective inspired from earlier works on the topic (Sharshenova 2018), the chapter aimed to identify the links between domestic and foreign factors, in accordance with the perspectives developed by Gunitsky (2017; 2018). Thus, the analysis approaches multiple factors located at the foreign and domestic environments of both democracy promoters and receivers, which act as obstacles to the policies of democracy promotion set up by the EU and the US.

Thus, in order to answer the main research question of this study, *Why are the US and EU democracy promotion policies ineffective in Central Asia?* it can be argued that, based on the findings, the US and EU democracy promotion policies in Central Asia face a large and diverse array of factors which limit their effectiveness. These factors are related not only to the recipient states and their regional context, but also to the democracy promoters and their various external pressures. Among the factors which hamper the democracy promotion policies, related to the domestic dimension of the promoters, this study discussed the internal institutional divergences, the low interest in democracy promotion, and the lack of understanding of the local particularities of Central Asia.

In addition, on the topic of the domestic obstacles related to the promoters, due to EU's special nature (Kreuder-Sonnen and Zangl 2015, 569), an assessment of its actorness in Central Asia has been conducted using the *opportunity, presence, capability* analysis framework proposed by Bretherton and Vogler (2006). This analysis shows that although the EU is an important actor in Central Asia, active in several fields of action, its actorness is limited, especially by factors related to opportunity and capabilities. This conclusion is supported also by the findings of other scholars who argue that EU lacks meaningful leverage in Central Asia (Sharshenova 2018, 187, 190).

The foreign factors related to and influencing the promoters include the demanding regional security environment in Central Asia, the unofficial involvement in corruption

practices with the Central Asian elites, and the proximate or systemic security issues. These factors suggest an overall prevalence of the security considerations over the normative objectives stated by both the EU and the US regarding Central Asia. These factors are combined also with the pressures from Russia and China against the presence of the Western actors in Central Asia.

Regarding the democracy recipients, several obstacles to democracy promotion approached in this study include the entrenched authoritarianism, the pervasive corruption, and the authoritarian legacies, from a domestic perspective. From a foreign perspective, the study discussed the influences of Russia and China, which encourage the development of authoritarian policies in the region, the authoritarian regional context, and the role of Afghanistan. Of these, suggestive for the internal-external interplay of factors hampering democracy promotion is the Western involvement in corruption practices with the authoritarian regimes in Central Asia, on the background of the prevalence of security considerations.

Despite the different nature of the US and the EU, both actors faced similar domestic obstacles to promoting democracy: divergences between the internal institutions, the relatively low interest in promoting democracy, and the lack of a proper understanding of the region. As the analysis shows, the two Western actors frequently subordinated democracy promotion considerations to the more important security interests. This trend has been visible in the case of the US, especially in regard to Uzbekistan, in the field of hard security, and in the case of the EU, especially in its relations with Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, in the field of energy security. The prevailing tendency of relegating democracy promotion can be explained in a realist perspective, in which moral or normative objectives are relativized in face of security interests. In addition, given the mix of factors impeding democracy promotion, which creates the context of the power relation between the democracy promoters and the receivers, it can be argued that the US and the EU could not exert significant smart power, in the very specific context of democracy promotion in Central Asia.

Specifically, framing the EU and US policies of democracy promotion in the perspective developed by Nye and Keohane, a case of asymmetrical interdependence can be observed. Thus, on the one side, the EU and the US can be regarded as dependent on the Central Asian states willingness to cooperate, due to the Western actors' security interests in Central Asia. On the other side, the Central Asian states are also interested in the assistance, security included, and the economic and legitimacy benefits gained from cooperating with the EU and

the US. In this setting, democracy promotion still figures on the Western agenda, even though on secondary positions. Thus, under the conditions generated by the ‘difficult context’ created by both promoters’ and receivers’ domestic and foreign factors, in the asymmetrical interdependence relation, the EU and the US have been more vulnerable and sensitive than the Central Asian states, the latter having the alternatives of cooperating also with Russia and China. In other words, given the overarching security interests of the EU and the US in Central Asia, the Western actors do not seem willing to accept the costs implied by a conflictual approach with the Central Asian states.

Based on these findings, the hypothesis stated in the beginning of the study, *The ‘difficult’ context of Central Asia determines the EU and the US to adopt cooperative democracy promotion policies towards the states in the region* is confirmed. This underlines the argument of the thesis, that democracy promotion depends on a diverse and comprehensive array of factors located in both internal and external environments, of both democracy promoters and receivers. In this regard, this study challenges the conclusions reached by van Hüllen and Stahn (2009). The EU and the US pursued largely cooperative policies with the Central Asian states, despite the varying authoritarianisms of the latter.

The cooperation dimension of the democracy promotion policies put in place by the EU and the US with all the Central Asian states is reflected by the agreements concluded, and by the assistance provided. Similarly to the conclusions of van Hüllen and Stahn, who identify general cooperative policies, differentiated only by variations in terms of the level of cooperation in the EU’s and US’s democracy promotion (van Hüllen and Stahn 2009, 118), also this study finds variations in the general cooperative approach of the EU’s and US’s policies with the Central Asian states. However, in contrast to the conclusions of the above-mentioned authors, who argue that the variations are connected with the domestic openness for reforms of the recipients, rewarding or not their progress (van Hüllen and Stahn 2009, 141), in the case of the EU’s and US’s policies towards the Central Asian states, the variations seem connected rather to the security interests of the Western actors, and to the humanitarian needs in the region. Thus, while the relations of the EU with Kazakhstan were elevated to an *Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement* level, EU’s relations with Kyrgyzstan are still organized under the lower, *Partnership and Cooperation Agreement* level, similarly to those of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, while the relations with Turkmenistan are placed under the *Interim Trade Agreement*. Similarly, the US concluded an *Enhanced Strategic Partnership* with Kazakhstan, and a *Strategic Partnership* with Uzbekistan. Under these circumstances, the

state with the highest potential in terms of democratization, Kyrgyzstan, doesn't seem to benefit of the largest attention from the Western actors. This conclusion points towards the influence exerted also by factors located outside of the internal environment of the recipients of democracy promotion, highlighting the importance of adopting a comprehensive perspective which takes into account also foreign factors, in addition to the domestic ones, not only of the receivers, but also of the promoters of democracy.

While this study answers the questions stated in the beginning of the research, its conclusions are prone to several limits. Besides the knowledge obtained from the field research, this study employed only publicly available information. The use of mostly English-language sources, and the relatively limited ground research, conducted mainly in Kyrgyzstan, may confine the results of this study. However, even though the analysis undertaken in this study is not exhaustive, the empirical elements discussed highlight the interconnection between the factors related to democracy promoters and recipients' internal and external environments, and their impact on democracy promotion, with potential policy implications.

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