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Beyond Dualism: EU Policy Toward Central Asia Through Decarbonization, Problem Linkage, and Civil Society Engagement

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ABSTRACT

Despite the large reappraisal of the EU's security and economic interests in Central Asia, its foreign policy impact has remained weak. This article develops a constructivist, multi-level framework to examine how European and Chinese approaches to decarbonization are translated into policy in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. I argue that the EU and China advance fundamentally different conceptions of decarbonization, yet neither approach determines outcomes directly. Rather, domestic civil society organizations, policymakers, and local institutions selectively appropriate, reinterpret, and contest these competing ideas in light of local developmental priorities. The article advances the concept of problem linkage, arguing that the EU's effectiveness depends on its ability to connect decarbonization with broader developmental, distributional, and social priorities that matter to Central Asian governments and civil society, rather than treating climate action as a stand-alone policy objective. By bringing everyday political economy into the study of climate diplomacy, the article demonstrates that decarbonization is not simply exported by major powers but co-produced through interactions between their priorities and local agency.

A central question in the debate over the implications of Russia's war in Ukraine is how the European Union (EU) will meet three preexistent goals: decrease emissions, lower energy prices, and ensure energy security while grappling with the added imperative of drastically reducing dependence on Russian fossil fuels. Since the war began in February 2022, the EU has reduced the share of natural gas imported from Russia from 40% to 10%, prohibited the import of Russian seaborne crude oil; and banned coal imports from Russia.[1] In this new geopolitical order, Central Asia has emerged as a pivotal region that can supply uranium and critical raw materials for the EU's accelerating energy transition while also providing much-needed fossil fuels to replace imports from Russia.

Here, I explain the EU's recent energy overtures toward Central Asia at the heart of a dual process in its wider energy system transformation: a set of "no carbon" policies featuring an acceleration of the clean energy transition and a set of "new carbon" policies featuring renewed fossil fuel partnerships to support EU energy security (Bradshaw 2026).

In terms of speed, policies advancing the energy transition have strongly accelerated. In terms of geographic orientation, the Ukraine war has pushed the EU to cut imports of Russian fossil fuels. This coincided with an emerging trend of "friend-shoring" anchored in fortifying supply chains through political and strategic alignment with "like-minded countries" (Vivoda and Matthews 2023; Siddi and Prandin 2023) that led to a deepening engagement with Central Asia.

A structural vulnerability is at the heart of this: the costly and limited extraction of home-grown fossil fuels and insufficient decarbonization, which still anchor the EU to imported hydrocarbons.[2] It is this structural reality that has prompted a major reappraisal of security and economic ties to Central Asia. In November 2022, the EU had already launched two Central

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Asia-focused Team Europe Initiatives under the Global Gateway: on Water, Energy, and Climate and on Digitalization, with €700 and €40 million in support allocated, respectively.[3] Both initiatives are backed by the European Investment Bank (EIB) and the EBRD. They aim to strengthen sustainability and digital infrastructure in Central Asia and, together with the Middle Corridor, are part of the EU's strategy to build resilient global connections.[4] In parallel, the EU further expanded energy cooperation with Kazakhstan by signing an MoU on Critical Raw Materials, Batteries and Renewable Hydrogen, demonstrating the seriousness of its pursuit of new strategic partners.

This article argues that despite the rapid shift toward the region and the undeniably deepened relations, the EU's foreign policy impact in Central Asia has remained weak.

1 | Path-Dependent, Relational, and Contested: EU Foreign Policy Influence in Central Asia

The article examines the key determinants of the EU's energy and climate policy turn toward Central Asia post-2022. The pivot away from Russia is seen as a critical juncture (Collier 2003) occurring in the wake of war (Widmaier et al. 2007) that hastened the EU's green transition while exposing its persistent fossil fuel import dependence, a path-dependent lock-in built into existing socio-technical energy systems. I explain the EU's energy system transformation by drawing on the historical institutionalist literature that postulates a dual model of development. Such an understanding is characterized by long periods of path-dependent institutional stability and reproduction occasionally punctuated by critical junctures, when more dramatic change is possible (Collier and Collier 2002; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007). As scholars in the institutional economics literature have noted, limits to change may be imposed by the inertia of past practices or institutions that prove, through mechanisms of sunk costs, increasing returns, or other logics of convenience, resistant to change (North 1990; Pierson 2000; Mahoney 2000; Mahoney and Thelen 2009).

Based on this approach, I advance a dualist framework to understand the EU's energy system development based on an alternation between longer phases of relative stability and institutional reproduction (i.e., continuing fossil fuel investment) and moments of fluidity and rapid change (i.e., the hastening decarbonization imperative). What stems from this dual model is that the EU's engagement in Central Asia has gradually strengthened, but the war in Ukraine triggered a more substantial and swift policy shift by elevating Central Asia as a region that (i) can provide the critical materials for clean energy applications and (ii) offer fossil fuel supply diversification.

The question of *why* and *how* in the face of the Ukraine war, the EU pursued both rapid decarbonization and more Russia-free fossil fuels—two seemingly contradictory objectives—has received overwhelming attention in the literature (Kuzemko et al. 2022; Goldthau and Youngs 2023; Herranz-Surralles 2024). Meanwhile, the question of what the EU's renewed engagement means for "receiving" fossil fuel regimes and how it is perceived by the elites and civil society therein remains surprisingly understudied. This matters as Europe has historically been the largest aid donor to Central Asia and, until recently, also has been Central Asia's largest trade partner. Yet, the EU has neither achieved much net economic and political impact in Central Asia nor has it been successful in promoting noneconomic goals (Boonstra 2015). From Central Asia's perspective, the EU's interest—seen as assistance to the "neighbors of neighbors with valuable fossil fuels to extract through transactional minerals-for-investments schemes" (Kassenova 2023, 26)—has had extractive (Moisé and Sorbello 2022), incoherent, and neocolonial-like qualities (Doolotkeldieva 2024).

One of the key questions that remain unanswered relates to the relationship between EU policy and local practices. Specifically, the character of the EU's external energy policy in Central Asia will not only depend on the scope of the EU's material investments, but also on how local elites and its civil society discursively construct this engagement in the first place (Dukeyev 2024). Existing scholarship covers the factors potentially framing the choices of EU leadership (Zipatolla 2025; Vakulchuk 2025), but work is needed to trace their effects on decisions and behavior of local policymakers. This article is a step in that direction.

The political discourse mobilized by a wide range of actors across Central Asia about the EU's normative agenda, preexistent conditionality policies, and its new dual interest in engaging the region as suppliers of fossil fuels and as mere sources of raw materials for clean energy applications—priorities that have increased in light of the Ukraine war—will affect *how* the EU's policies are perceived in the "receiving" states of Central Asia, and thus *whether* the EU can overcome the previous pattern of "limited to no impact." To be effective, the EU needs to understand how, for whom, and to what effect its engagement may or may not become salient.

As emphasized by analytical approaches on the EU's external "pro-energy transition" and "pro-climate" policy (Smith and Ely 2015), initiatives focusing on the grassroots levels appear to be the most promising in terms of the diffusion of good climate governance ideas. Contrary to most literature, which has been concerned with the EU's ability to find the right balance between critical pressure and positive engagement (Hoffmann 2010; Youngs 2020), this article is interested in retrieving the agency of actors who are "at the receiving end" of EU foreign policy. Rather than grappling with finding an EU-centered "right balance" as an important predictor for the "success" of external action, this article holds that projects mindful of the concerns at the grassroots level appear to have better prospects.

The article thus lays the foundations of a new contextually minded approach to the study of the EU's external climate and energy engagement, centered on how the EU's policies interact with broader geopolitical trends, the emergence of winners and losers, and perception of receiving countries' actors in shaping the EU's interventionist approaches. Above all, the author argues that local civil society actors are decisive players in how climate and energy policies by the EU—and its competitors—are perceived and why some are more successful than others and should be at the center of future analyses.

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1.1 | Global Discourses and Local Agency: A Multi-Level Framework

This article employs a constructivist approach to analyze the fluidity and multiplicity of "national role conceptions" (Holsti 1970; Walker 1987; Thies 2017) as they function in national formation and the practice of internal and foreign policy. Whereas climate politics are structured around global norm setting, the politics of decarbonization hinge on translating goals into investable and administratively actionable pathways.

I am attentive to which actors—identified as theoretically relevant—are doing what and when to spur decarbonization in Central Asia, which is invariably a gradual social and relational process (Collington 2026; Collington and Hasselbalch 2026). To examine the EU's and China's policy, the article combines qualitative foreign policy analysis (FPA) with discourse analysis of legislative texts, official speeches, and national and international reports.

Discourse analysis emphasizes how ideas frame categories of thought and action and thereby influence outcomes in powerful ways (Phillips and Hardy 2002). In FPA, ideas are not merely "cheap talk." They wield specific kinds of power that can disrupt or reinforce existing institutions (Schmidt 2026). Dominant ideas by either the EU or China on decarbonization policy matter in Central Asian politics, but they matter in very different ways. As the article demonstrates, the way EU and Chinese policymakers interpret the world, build coalitions, invest, and mobilize for decarbonization in Central Asia shapes local ideas about how legitimate decarbonization policy *is* and *should* be made.

The article's framing is thus designed to move past a monolithic discourse of what decarbonization is and does, and it provides important guidance for thinking at a more granular level of analysis: specifically, when competing ideas on economic policy by big blocs, such as the EU and China, hurt and when they help the cause of decarbonization. The case of decarbonization in Central Asia provides one such targeted window for analysis.

At the same time, the study ultimately emphasizes the agency of marginalized local civil society actors in the selection of policy-relevant decarbonization ideas. IPE tends to neglect or exclude some topics, debates, and questions from the core of the field (LeBaron et al. 2020; Clift et al. 2022). Dominant discursive practices—like all practices—are founded not on universal truths but on historically contingent knowledge structures that define the realm of the possible, legitimate and permissible in global environmental politics (Falkner 2026) and normalize these reflections of power in the everyday practices of countries on the receiving end.

By focusing on the everyday forms of climate change discourse in Central Asia, this study explains the priorities of local civil society actors by looking from the ground up, rather than just focusing on what the big external powers are doing (Hobson and Seabrooke 2009; Elias and Rethel 2016). Similar to Johnson's (2016) examination of central bankers in the post-communist world, I find that today's ruling elites in Central Asia find themselves torn between (1) allegiance to their EU-centric transnational community and its neoliberal principles on decarbonization, (2) an opening to Chinese ideas and expertise, and (3) the emergence of particular civil society networks who debate new ideas and form a "critical mass" of ordinary people to confront the need for increasingly complex and locally grounded responses to climate change. These grassroots groups are often better attuned to the specific spatial, economic, and institutional exigencies of decarbonization in Central Asia. To analyze these bottom-up dynamics, the article draws on in-depth interviews and a self-compiled dataset mapping all environmental NGOs operating in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Finally, the article employs process tracing to explain observed outcomes by reconstructing the sequence of events through which they emerged (Mahoney 2015). This sequential approach identifies critical junctures at which key decisions redirected policy trajectories (Collier and Collier 2002; Capoccia and Kelemen 2007), while also highlighting path-dependent processes through which earlier institutional choices continue to shape contemporary patterns of decarbonization (Mahoney 2000; Pierson 2004).

The findings contribute to broader debates on the EU's external climate action in times of geoeconomic competition, including in decarbonization policies, and underscore the need for EU engagement models that reflect the complex realities of semi-peripheral contexts. The study has important practical implications for understanding the EU–Central Asia deepening partnership, assessing the EU's evolving energy and climate diplomacy in the Global South, and determining how best to support green industrialization in Central Asia and beyond. Above all, the analysis has considerable implications for EU policymakers mindful of the agency of receiving countries.

2 | Dynamics of the EU'S Duality: Ambitious Climate Goals and Enduring Petro-Needs

At the EU–Central Asia Connectivity Summit in Samarkand in November 2022, Josep Borrell, EU High Representative, told leaders "We must deepen our ties with Central Asia and tap into the vast energy supplies, critical raw materials and new transport corridors it has to offer."[5] Then, in April 2025, the EU–Central Asia Samarkand Summit became the stage for what the EU calls "a new chapter" in its strategic relationship with the region.[6]

The EU established diplomatic relations with the five then newly independent Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—in 1992, but there was little progress until the early 2000s. The EU's new Central Asia Strategy, adopted in 2019, devoted more attention to climate change, whereas the emphasis on fossil fuels was toned down compared to the 2007 Strategy (Kaczmarski and Siddi 2021). Between 2014 and 2020, funding under the EU's Development Cooperation Instrument amounted to €1.1 billion ($1.2 billion) in grant funding, technical assistance, and direct budget support, making the EU the largest donor in the region.[7] Despite a greater focus on good climate and energy governance, the EU's diplomatic profile in Central Asia remained low, at least compared to that of Russia and especially that of China.

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Even before Russia's invasion, experts drew attention to Central Asia's mineral wealth as key to supporting Europe's energy security and green transition, and shielding the bloc from critical material supply chains dominated by China (Overland and Vakulchuk 2021). Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan—the main economies of the region—have touted their uranium and critical minerals wealth as key in bolstering energy cooperation with the EU (Kassenova 2023; Qoraboyev 2024). To advance energy ties with Western economies, the elites of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have developed narratives about making their economies carbon neutral and have trumpeted their participation in the race to net-zero emissions.[8]

Scholars (Blondeel 2020; Semenov et al. 2024) note this new "standard of appropriateness" as a matter of international influence and bargaining, while in practice Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan remain heavily dependent on the export of oil and gas.

European economies, in turn, remain major consumers of and investors in Central Asian fossil fuels despite the EU's ambitious green transition which, as discussed above, has been path-dependent rather than revolutionary (Sovacool 2016). Path-dependent commitments across many jurisdictions resistant to deep decarbonization are very consequential, as they have locked in legacy fossil fuel infrastructure and crowded out renewables.

In recent decades, several scholars have identified the impact of institutional legacies on a host of economic development outcomes (Acemoglu et al. 2001; Pierson 2000). But relatively few scholars have examined the deep roots of the EU's links to Central Asian petro-elites and how since the early 1990s Central Asian economic development and sheer statehood have been shaped by the transnational links to Western oil and gas companies. For example, the impact of foreign investment, trade, European corporate culture, and the role of deeply embedded and durable personal relationships over the long run between Western oil executives and local elites has been underresearched (for exceptions, see Ostrowski 2010; Heathershaw and Schatz 2017; Cooley and Heathershaw 2017).

For three decades, various oil and gas companies from the West have been at the forefront of reordering their "carbon infrastructure" and supplying local elites with petroleum revenues. Like colonialism or Soviet-style systems, since the early 1990s, these transnational links are said to have produced certain informal ties that have proven difficult to change (Ostrowski 2010). But this was most certainly not inevitable.

Rather than taking it for granted, we should pay attention to the *process* by which, often via consortia, the US Chervon and ExxonMobil, the Dutch/UK Shell, the Italian ENI, the French TotalEnergies, and the British BP and many other smaller Western oil and gas companies have formed durable relationships with local elites and have thus had a discernible impact on local corrupt governance structures. This article holds that the process by which these decisions were made is best understood under the rubric of historical path dependence.

Ostrowski (2010, 80) has demonstrated the importance of Western oil companies to local regime security. His empirical analysis shows how Western energy companies are complicit in Kazakhstan's petro-corruption by paying bribes, and that they do this because their profits are best guaranteed by the stability of the authoritarian government rather than its reform.

These informal practices, and the logics of internationalization that underpin them are integral to local state power and regime security, thus challenging neo-Weberian definitions of Central Asian states as "weak" (Heathershaw and Schatz 2017; Beissinger 2017; Engvall 2017; Cooley and Heathershaw 2017).

Today, EU-based companies continue to be major sources of oil and gas revenues for Central Asian state budgets and local elites and are still a political asset to their authoritarian rulers. By extension, they continue to have a direct impact on the nature of state power. Thus, a genuine push toward the "green economy" is undermined by these path-dependent relationships. Given this, Central Asian elites have cast themselves as strategic partners in the EU's "reproduction" approach to securing external fossil fuels through the emerging notion of "friend-shoring," and a rebalancing toward Russia-free fossil fuel supplies. Imbalances such as traditionally subsidized energy prices, an outdated energy network infrastructure, and low energy efficiency are further obstacles that continue to hold back domestic support for "greening" across the region.

2.1 | Defining "Weakness" in the EU's Foreign Policy Approach

Determining what constitutes a "strong" or successful, and, on the flipside, a weak or unsuccessful foreign policy is hardly a simple issue, making the effect of "success" difficult to assess. Success is a slippery concept. To the extent that human behavior is purposeful, everyone may be said to pursue success. This is because success is defined in terms of favorable or desired outcomes. Both the definition of success and the implicit rules used in applying it suggest that costs are an important part of the concept. Successful undertakings are those without excessive costs (Baldwin 1999). Following this logic, in evaluating successful foreign policies, one should determine the conditions under which foreign policies produce an intended (on the part of their architect) change in policy in the target state.

If success is defined in terms of favorable policy outcomes (or a resulting reorientation of the receiver's foreign policy in the direction desired by the sender), it is necessary to consider both costs and benefits in assessing the success of such an undertaking. In that respect, one may argue that given the large resources invested (the EU remains the second largest trading partner, largest foreign investor, and number one donor to Central Asia), it is China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) rather than the EU's policies that have played a more dominant and impactful role.

For over a decade, China has been the dominant investor in large energy infrastructure and logistics corridors connecting China with Europe through Central Asia. The impact of such large-scale transport corridors and logistics hubs is immediately visible, facilitated by China's rapid loan disbursement and state-backed financing (policy banks, SOEs). Central Asia is the core artery to these land-based Silk Road corridors, which is why

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local rulers tend to regard them as politically attractive. The EU's Global Gateway Initiative is favored for its higher project quality and oversight but ultimately loses influence due to slow implementation, complex project approval processes, and the broader sense that Central Asia remains peripheral to its overall strategic vision.

For example, Maracchione notes (2026) that factories such as the BYD-UzAuto joint venture in Jizzakh have become emblematic of China's move toward sustained industrial presence rather than episodic construction work, which is decisive in developing regions. Central Asian governments also prefer fewer conditions, making Chinese offers more attractive to ruling elites. In a region prioritizing rapid development and regime stability, China's cost–benefit profile is simply more attractive—making its foreign policy more successful despite its risks.

Going beyond a narrow cost–benefit "behavioristic" definition of success in exercising political influence in Central Asia, a successful policy can be defined more broadly to include beliefs, attitudes, opinions, expectations, emotions, and/or predispositions to act not readily susceptible to material cost–benefit calculations. In such a case, the image of a state's foreign policy, or their ability to influence a receiving country through attraction and persuasion may also be studied. These policies are usually placed under the broad rubric of "soft power." Once again, the effect of the EU's "soft power" versus its competitors in Central Asia is difficult to assess and, in evaluating the sender's success, it is essential to specify the receiver (i.e., the elites or the general public) of such a "soft" power approach. Many scholars have documented a growth in Sinophobia among the general public across Central Asia (Peyrouse 2016; Vakulchuk and Overland 2019; Jardine et al. 2025), but others have noted that the EU's values-based and subtle approach largely remains less impactful than China's elite-driven visible influence in shaping government behavior (Bossuyt 2018). Others yet have argued that in climate politics, policies inspired by "embedded environmentalism" (Dolšak and Prakash 2022) and "just transition" (Newell and Mulvaney 2013), are more likely to yield long term success among the general public (Kuzemko 2026). Arguably, compensation policies to reduce the economic costs borne by fossil fuel communities should accompany climate mitigation. This is the crux of the type of "embedded" safety nets (Ruggie 1982) that China has been able to provide through its recent attention and lead in industrial localization in Central Asia (Skalamera 2025). Its compensation policies have included funding for local infrastructure development, job retraining, tax incentives for Chinese companies to establish facilities across Central Asia, and so forth. This heralds a new phase in China's local economic policy; one that revolves around deepening its everyday imprint and opening spaces for local agency. Local institutions, labor brokers, family networks, and state authorities, shape the terms of production, including access to jobs, and expectations around working conditions (Maracchione 2026).

Given the article's focus on the multi-dimensional, relational, and contested nature of the EU's foreign climate and energy policy in Central Asia, it is imperative to provide a comparative perspective to ascertain how the development of the EU's policy influence is itself conditioned by geoeconomic competition with China and its new localized forms of cooperation and conflict management.

3 | The EU's Policies Meet China's "Localized" Green Industrialization

The EU recently approved the so-called Carbon Border Adjustment Mechanism (CBAM), part of its flagship Green Deal plan to make its economy carbon-neutral by 2050.[9] The landmark measure adds a pollution price on certain carbon-intensive imports. This concerns Central Asia as its exports largely focus on a few resource and raw material commodities, particularly crude oil, gas, metals, and cotton fiber.[10] Carbon taxes for different fuels can be regressive (Zachmann et al. 2018). Moreover, energy-intensive countries like those of the region still lack effective national carbon pricing schemes, which makes them subject to greater distributional impacts once CBAM is implemented. In line with the CBAM, in its 2019 Strategy on Central Asia, the EU put a strong emphasis on promoting renewable technologies, cutting fossil fuel emissions, and supporting local policies to slow climate change.[11] After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, however, the EU singled out the region for its potential to provide Russia-free fossil fuel supplies, transport corridors, and critical raw materials[12] rather than focusing on creating green jobs and value added through local green industrialization. Furthermore, most investments by EU companies in Central Asia are still concentrated in fossil fuels, thus supplying local oligarchs with petroleum revenues and perpetuating resistance to change.

Meanwhile, China's BRI has electrified energy-poor regions, offered alternatives for coal-dependent communities, and helped local coal workers with retraining and relocation in exchange for their support for China-led renewable energy (RE) investments. For instance, in 2024, a consortium of Chinese companies invested in Kazakhstan's first tungsten processing plant, a $300 million project that is expected to generate up to 1000 local jobs.[13] China's investors are also committing a substantial $2.7 billion toward developing copper and silver deposits in Uzbekistan's Bobotog area, with a promise of creating 2000 local jobs.[14] In 2024, China's BYD started building what will be its largest electric vehicle factory outside of China in Uzbekistan, with planned annual production capacity of 300,000 vehicles.[15] The intention of China's state-owned companies to manufacture equipment for wind power plants in Kazakhstan and RE equipment in Uzbekistan is further examples of Chinese companies bringing in capital and (re-)training assistance, thereby adapting to local government requirements (Skalamera 2025).

China has also launched several workshops and capacity-building educational centers to train Central Asia's workforce in technical skills. The nature of these workshops is defined by local needs ranging from a focus on AI, electric vehicles, energy, and urban infrastructure, thus creating a trained workforce that can be directly engaged in many infrastructural and industrial projects spearheaded by China. Most crucially, this effort legitimizes China's clean energy investment among local civil society groups (Tskhay 2026).

There is a telling contrast between these investments and European joint ventures in Central Asia. EU-based investments

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in renewables are growing but remain small compared to oil-based projects that bolster the influence of local petro-elites, especially in Kazakhstan (Skalamera 2023). The roughly €550 million that the EU allocated for development assistance to Central Asia in 2021–2027[16] is also perceived to be too "spread out" across different issue-areas and thus ineffective in shielding vulnerable communities with social protection measures to counter job losses as the region transitions from coal, oil, and gas (Bossuyt 2023).

Conscious of these weaknesses and of the rapidly changing geopolitical context, at the first Central Asia-European Union Summit in Samarkand on April 4, 2025, European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen announced the launch of the Global Gateway strategy worth €12 billion, with priorities including transport, raw materials, green energy, and digitalization. In addition, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) plans a package of projects by 2027 worth approximately €7–8 billion, which includes areas such as critical minerals and RE.[17]

At the event, Von der Leyen stressed EU's concern about winners and losers in Central Asia's energy transition when an energy justice lens is applied. "Many [global players] are only interested in extraction and export. Europe's proposal is different. We want to be your partners in developing local processing industries. The added value must remain local,"[18] the head of the European Commission said. However, the EU's €12 billion is dwarfed by China's $50 billion pledge for the BRI in Central Asia, focused on RE projects, and the Chinese companies' adaptation to localization demands.[19]

Meanwhile, local elites who view CBAM as a threat to Central Asian countries have sought alternative alliances to push for a "balanced energy system in which renewables and cleaner fossil fuels coexist to generate affordable energy while fossil fuels are gradually and safely phased out (Zhou 2023)." This pushback has changed Central Asia's earlier stances toward the EU. There is a sense that the EU's funding for the region has continued to lack strategy and clear objectives with its double goals of (i) trying to tap into the region's vast fossil fuel, uranium, and critical mineral wealth in the wake of a partial decoupling from Russia and China and (ii) a parallel imposition of the EU's stringent climate agenda via the CBAM. These have been criticized for failing to foster a just, affordable regional energy transition aligned to the needs of local populations. But another layer of duality must be added to these contradictions: despite the energy transition, EU-based investment in Central Asia's green sector has been slow while oil and gas investment continues to grow.

The EU does remain the largest foreign investor in Central Asia, accounting for over 40% of total FDI. EU investment stock in the region exceeded €100 billion in the past decade alone (2014–2024).[20] Over that period, however, a majority (often 60%–80%) of EU investment has been hydrocarbon-related, especially in Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. In some countries, up to 98% of FDI projects were in hydrocarbon-related sectors (OECD 2025). In contrast to its massive oil and gas investment, the EU has had comparatively slow and limited results in job and value creation in the local RE industry, where China leads the way. Von der Leyen has acknowledged as much when she emphasized, "But we can do much more—build local production along the entire value chain, from extraction to processing, opening laboratories and training personnel."[21]

4 | Empowering Local Civil Society Through *Problem Linkage*

To gain a more holistic understanding of why in the years since the adoption of the EU's 2019 Central Asia Strategy activities concerning the implementation of good energy and climate governance are still rather weak one needs to look beyond a Brussels-centered evaluation of the EU's external action. In analyzing the success or failure of EU good governance promotion in Central Asia, most observers have noted that, rather than the oft-criticized stringent and conditional nature of the EU's funding mechanisms, it is the EU's fundamentally Eurocentric and neoliberal approach that hinders the effectiveness of its policies (Axyonova and Bossuyt 2016; Youngs 2020; Mukasheva et al. 2024). The EU's neoliberal understanding of societal resilience appears to externalize European modes of governance to local communities, who are then expected to integrate these approaches in their local practices.

Building on in-depth interviews and a dataset mapping all environmental NGOs active in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan,[22] the article shows how at the grassroots level "nature conservation," "environmental degradation," and new "energy-related social imbalances" feature as much more central priorities than climate action. For example, the Regional project EU4SustainableCentralAsia has taken place annually since 2019 as part of the "Green Central Asia" and *Team Europe* Initiatives and is the most visible testimony of the EU's reinvigorated support for an "inclusive, decentralized and gender-sensitive" integration of RE into the power grids of Central Asia. Most of its projects focus on international exchange and advice to local decision-makers, electricity grid operators, and state actors to improve conditions for the integration of RE.[23] Despite the ostensible focus on decentered civil society, state-led liberal civil society entities are the main interlocutors for its programs, revealing a differentiation between civil society groups promoted in EU strategic documents *and those that are supported in practice*.

Scholars have noted that engagement with newer civic actors should involve alliance building, advice, and support for home-grown community-based groups, including Islamic organizations and other bodies representing traditional forms of self-governance (Hoffmann 2010; Bossuyt 2021), as well as, arguably, environmental and labor organizations that are concerned with issues that go beyond the uptake of renewables. Such groups may care more about *other* problems at the intersection of climate and environmental issues, such as the worsening of the frequency and severity of natural disasters like floods, landslides and mudflows, or job security in a new green tech economy.

In interviews conducted by the author across the region,[24] civil society respondents considered flooding, drought, and air pollution to be the most pressing "climate-related issues" in the region. This highlights the types of climatic threats perceived

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as the most urgent for communities that are still very much reliant on agriculture and pasture. Among such respondents, very few were informed about their countries' climate change policies and climate neutrality strategies. Most were unaware of the Paris Agreement, indicating a lack of awareness of key international climate initiatives. In addition, the leaders of such communities worried that without careful management, the region's newfound critical minerals wealth could deepen commodity dependence, thus worsening environmental degradation and exacerbating social inequalities in rural communities.

Systematic national polling on public attitudes toward climate change in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is absent, so it is difficult to assess the overall mood across a more comprehensive sample. However, based on this study's ethnographic observations, we can safely conclude that the traditional, community-based forms of civil society are in the very incipient stages of engaging with the climate agenda. As has been noted in existing work on everyday IPE, we should pay closer attention to the priorities of ordinary people and the choices made within their civil society networks, as these shape distinctive understandings of how climate policy is, and should be, formulated (Hobson and Seabrooke 2009; Elias and Rethel 2016).

The EU should do more to show itself as receptive, or less dismissive, of civic groups whose priorities and beliefs may not fall within a standard liberal policy agenda but whose concerns are still very much linked to the EU's climate priorities. In that respect, the EU's external climate governance campaigns are more likely to succeed when the actions they prescribe can be framed as solving additional problems that are important to local civil society addressees. For example, the EU has recently pursued deeper engagement with Central Asia's leaders for geopolitical reasons. In return for buying more critical raw materials from the region or delaying the start of CBAM certificate sales, the EU could insist that communal civil society organizations be given seats at the table in several new areas of climate engagement.

This kind of *issue linkage* is still rare; along with Youngs (2020), I argue, however, that (the EU's) external governance campaigns are more likely to succeed when the actions they prescribe can be used to solve additional problems that are of immediate importance to the broader civil society addressees, beyond the "strategic cause" that originally motivated the action.

In a seminal study, Haas (1980) establishes that states rarely have equal power in every area. By linking issues, a country can use strength in one domain to influence another. For example, the EU can use its economic prowess to unlock climate negotiations with Central Asian elites. As states learn over time through cooperation, their ideas and political processes may change through interaction, negotiation, and mutual adaptation with other countries (Reus-Smit 2018). Such an interaction builds gradually and may be contested. This notwithstanding, through a strategy of issue-linkage, EU officials could enhance reputational incentives for Central Asian elites to comply with global climate change policies and to integrate the voices of their own civil society representatives into national policies.

Overall, problem linkages offer a useful lens for considering political and policy change (Blondeel et al. 2019). Doing so broadens the coalition of actors that support the EU's external action. Not only does the EU's foreign policy practice have to "fit" with the receiving country's policy environment but a deliberate and active process of linkage to problems outside the top-down policy entrepreneurs' initial priorities is often required to achieve higher degrees of success. *Issue linkage*, or the idea that one problem can be solved by linking it to a second problem, should become the norm and be incorporated more formally into the EU's overarching foreign policy practice.

5 | Discussion and Recommendations

The EU's confused energy policy toward Central Asia has a number of practical implications. The EU is perceived as exporting its climate policy through trade while still importing critical raw materials and polluting fossil fuels from Central Asia. Using the prism of a dual model of development, the article has discussed how EU companies continue to be major technology suppliers and investors in Central Asia's fossil fuel sector. Historical institutionalism has identified a variety of mechanisms of "path dependency" through which actors gain increasing returns for behaving in ways that are consistent with how they behaved in the past. EU companies' strongly path-dependent behavior has been punctuated by a turn to green energy, but Europe's reliance on imported fossil fuels remains a strategic vulnerability.

Even though Central Asia's net-zero pledges are to be understood as mainly symbolic acts of political elites seeking international recognition, fruitful clean energy cooperation with the EU would make Central Asia more prosperous. Integrating Central Asian RE endowments into Europe's green supply chains would enable local economies to divert funds into energy efficiency, thereby weakening petro-elites' reliance on subsidized energy prices as a tool of domestic control. As the countries of the region have a vast potential in RE deployment, climate and energy diplomacy could form the backbone of the EU's renewed engagement with Central Asia and help the region come closer to their carbon neutrality pledges. Yet the EU's normative stance that "Central Asia should decarbonize" comes into contradiction with its massive role in the region's petroleum infrastructure and current growth of oil and gas imports from the region. Thus, the EU ought to decide whether (i) it should no longer buy hydrocarbons from the region, (ii) fine or ban EU fossil fuel companies from investing in the region, or (iii) avoid "normative teaching" when EU-based companies continue to heavily invest in and buy oil and gas imports from the region. As long as these goals co-exist, EU normative recommendations on "greening" will have little to no effect.

Unsurprisingly, the persistent duality in the EU's approach to Central Asia has been criticized for its lack of coherence and hypocrisy. To overcome it, this article calls for a more decisive turn to green energy and EU governance models that are more attentive to the complex realities of semi-peripheral contexts. The EU should promote innovative partnerships between local state authorities, the traditional, community-based forms of civil society, and EU-based policy entrepreneurs through networks, platforms, and alliances to ensure a substantive and continued policy dialogue with local actors that are closer to the social realities, and thus more aware of the people's needs than

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the neoliberal-type NGOs based in the capitals. Such a process of hybridization would allow the EU's external interventions to *interact better with local realities and meanings*.

European policy makers must develop policies that help local populations who perceive its top-down climate interventionism with skepticism. Thus far, insufficient attention has been focused on supporting local production along the entire value chain, thereby aiding Central Asian countries not only in increasing exports of critical raw materials and fossil fuels to the EU, but in moving up the value chain and attracting higher-margin activities such as mineral processing. Doing so would build more local trust in supply chain relationships with the EU. Other useful actions may include aiding local civil society groups in seeking their own funds and raising money from local, low-cost sources of financing, rather than international sources for upgrading the local electricity grid infrastructure and for other green infrastructure projects. Such a locally owned approach would help make green grassroots groups more resilient against government restrictions on external funding. Such investments would, in turn, spur local economic development, thus increasing the EU's institutional "capacity" to address current distributional concerns.

These outcomes have policy relevance for Europe's efforts at supporting green transition in Central Asia and beyond. Central Asian perceptions of EU overtures matter much more since the EU has significantly transformed the goals and instruments of its external energy policy, with Central Asia emerging as an essential partner. Central Asian countries' own external economic policies are embedded in a "multiplex" world that provides them with many alternatives to EU engagement. So, even as Central Asia gains more salience for Brussels, high levels of diplomatic skill will be needed to turn this newfound interest into successful policy.

6 | Conclusions

The EU's broader turn to strength projection and geopolitics has been driven by China's deepening regional involvement. Central Asia has become politically salient, but the EU's embrace of diplomatic partnerships across the region has not been followed by substantial investment in areas such as digital, climate, and energy technologies, areas where the EU's efforts are dwarfed by China.[25] The largest challenge is limited investments by EU-based companies in crucial low-carbon technologies. A more focused, climate-smart, and collaborative approach is essential to make a stable, green bridge to Central Asia from Europe. To enhance local acceptance of the EU's greening policies, Brussels will need to sway ruling elites and bureaucracies as well as work "on the ground" with small- and medium-sized green enterprises. Existing research has demonstrated that companies with nonstate alliances display higher readiness to publicly expose vested interests in highly clientelistic petro-societies (Markus 2012). Beyond developing policies that rein in demand for oil and gas and increase investment in clean energy technologies, the most important step the EU should take is to create tools that support regional sustainable development. An "on the ground" establishment of energy-efficient industries, job creation, and sustainable economic alternatives for coal-dependent communities, such as skill upgrading and retraining for displaced coal workers are some examples of such tools.

Ultimately, this article argues that if the EU is genuinely committed to enhancing its role in Central Asia's greening processes, it should foster a deeper understanding and alignment between the EU's agenda and local perceptions and goals, some of which may still be sidelined by the EU. The EU needs to shift from worthy projects of renewable energy promotion to a more comprehensive foreign policy strategy of bottom-up political support for energy transition and climate change action through targeted political, financial, and institutional support. Actual gains from European climate leadership will depend on the extent to which EU climate action dovetails with structural economic fragility arising from the energy transition, including distributional and social costs in partner regions such as Central Asia. Helping to build a robust safety net for those who struggle in the ongoing green transformation of Central Asia is the best way for the EU to exert positive authority in this region.

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Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

Endnotes

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