

---

# The European Union and Central Asian Countries' Activities in the Field of Human Rights: Peculiarities and Directions

---

MERUYERT MALGAZH DAROVA\*,  
LEILA AKHMETZHANOVA\*,  
ZHANIBEK SHAIMARDANOV\*\*,  
SANIYA NURDAVLETOVA\* & RINAT BAIGONDIN†

\*Faculty of International Relations, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, 010000, 2 Satpayev Str., Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan. Email: [meruyert.malg@gmail.com](mailto:meruyert.malg@gmail.com)

\*\*Department of International Relations, Central European University, 1100, 51 Quellenstrasse, Wien, Austria

†Department of Social and Humanitarian Disciplines, Alikhan Bokeikhan University, 070000, 11 Lenin Str., Semey, Republic of Kazakhstan

This research aims to identify the features and characteristics of the policies of the European Union and Central Asian countries in the sphere of human rights by examining the main vectors and elements of governance at the national and international levels. The research methodology consists of system analysis, which reviews the general situation in the field of civil rights, outlines the problems of protection activities in individual states and regions, and identifies key areas for improvement. The basic elements and components of the activity of the European Union countries in the sphere of protection of fundamental human rights are considered, and the distinctive features of this type of activity in the Central Asian countries are outlined. Positive and negative tendencies of the legal protection of human rights in separate Central Asian states as well as probable scenarios of further development of the sphere in the region are presented. The uniqueness and peculiarities of the Republic of Kazakhstan's policy in the sphere of human rights protection as a key vector in the process of development of a democratic state are studied. Based on the results, practical recommendations are presented to improve the process of formation of the activity of the Republic in the sphere of human rights and freedoms.

## Introduction

Owing to increasing tensions on a global scale, the number of people suffering from restrictions due to their religion, gender or other beliefs is growing. The policy of the European Union on human rights is considered one of the most successful, and many of its aspects and elements have been taken as the basis of national strategies in this area (for example, the development of methodologies to guarantee the rights of prisoners in Kazakhstan) (Wouters *et al.* 2014; Rollan and Somerton 2021). Human rights are the fundamental rights and freedoms that every person is entitled to, including the right to life, liberty, freedom of expression, equality before the law, and freedom from discrimination. These rights are outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and other international human rights treaties (UN 2006). Brussels actively cooperates with humanitarian organizations not only on the issues of its citizens, but also takes care of protecting the rights of people of other regions, including Central Asia, which is considered quite unstable in terms of the legal protection of the population (power dispersals in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan) (Dzhuraev and Muratalieva 2020; Williamson 2023). The governments of the countries are trying to stabilize the situation through the development and improvement of normative documents, and cooperation with specialized missions, however, the overall state of the direction remains difficult (Axyonova 2014). The study of specifics of the activity of the Union and Central Asian states, first, Kazakhstan, in the field of human rights will allow the development of effective mechanisms of management of this area.

The research problem consists of updating the basic features and key features of policies of the European Union and Central Asia in the sphere of human rights by studying the main directions and specific mechanisms of activity of the states of these regions both at the national and international levels and within the framework of bilateral and multilateral contacts. The analysis of the European Union to promote universal values and strengthen its leadership in the field of the legal protection of the population was the main research topic of Perez (2022), and Keijzer and Bossuyt (2020) examined the evolution of the Union through the prism of its relations with non-governmental and public human rights organizations.

The purpose of the research is to examine the prevailing trajectories and fundamental nuances of human rights and freedoms protection policies in European and Central Asian states amidst the emergence of a new geopolitical landscape. The main aim is to update the fundamental features and key aspects of human rights policies in the European Union and Central Asia. This will be achieved by examining their primary activities at national and international levels, as well as their participation in bilateral and multilateral dialogues. Furthermore, this text aims to analyse the European Union's efforts to promote universal values and strengthen its leadership in protecting populations through legal means. It also explores the development of the EU in relation to its engagement with non-governmental and public human rights organizations. Although the introduction does not explicitly

acknowledge existing research gaps, it implies a need for further exploration to develop effective mechanisms for managing human rights, particularly within the context of Kazakhstan.

### **Materials and Methods**

The main methods used in the research were systematic-analytical and statistical. Using the systematic-analytical method, the main features and key aspects of the European Union policy in the field of human rights and freedoms protection were analysed and studied. The directions of the organization's activities within the framework of the implementation of the items of the basic legal and regulatory documents of the presented direction were examined. With the help of statistical methods, in terms of selection, processing and presentation of key qualitative and quantitative indicators of the effectiveness of responsible representatives' work, the process of formation and development of this policy direction was shown, primarily, in European countries and Central Asian states. The method of forecasting was applied for the assessment of the potential of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the issue of monitoring the sphere of human rights protection as well as for the development and provision of actual practical recommendations on the issues of stable and safe existence of the human being as a fully-fledged citizen in the conditions of the creation of a new geopolitical world order.

A wide range of different scientific literature was used, the main emphasis of which was placed on the study of the specifics and vectors of activity of subjects of international law in the field of basic human rights and freedoms: strategies and plans (The EU's New Central Asia Strategy (2019), EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024 (2020)); government programmes and reports (Kazakhstan Human Rights Situation Report 2021 (2022)); statistical materials (Rule of Law Index 2022 (2023)); analytical and critical publications.

### **Results**

Article 2 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights states that everyone is entitled to all rights and freedoms without distinction of any kind (race, colour, sex, language, religion, etc.) (Dzhuraev and Muratalieva 2020). Human rights activities are one of the main vectors of the European Union (EU) (Kozuljevic 2014). The Union has a complete regulatory framework in the field of the rights and freedoms of citizens in its member countries: the Convention for the Protection of Human Rights and Fundamental Freedoms (1953), European Social Charter (1965), Charter of Fundamental Rights of the EU (2000), EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024 (2020). Respecting rights and freedoms is crucial for democratic development. Policies, both domestic and foreign, must adhere to the

**Table 1.** Central Asian Human Rights and Freedoms Indicators in 2022.

	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan*	Kyrgyzstan	Turkmenistan*
Global rating	65** (66 in 2021)	78 (85 in 2021)	–	100 (99 in 2021)	–
Government influence	106	114	–	104	–
Corruption	62	66	–	127	–
Government aid	85	122	–	64	–
Rights protection	100	107	–	97	–
Property protection	42	16	–	64	–
Normative regulation	62	99	–	110	–
Civil justice	43	75	–	95	–
Criminal justice	62	65	–	114	–

Note: \*no data;

\*\*a total of 140 countries are represented in the rating.

Source: Rule of Law Index 2022 (2023).

rule of law and prioritize human rights. Dialogue, respect, and legal resolution should be the primary means of addressing issues related to population protection.

Virtually the entire structure of the organization is designed to interact effectively in the field of human legal protection. The EU bodies whose tasks are to protect human rights and freedoms include narrowly focused institutions (EU Agency for Fundamental Rights), broad-based bodies (European Commission, Council of the EU), and individual human rights actors (European Ombudsman) (Kovalenko 2018). It is also common practice in the organization to carry out point activities in regions and states through the prism of cooperation in certain areas (Svante *et al.* 2019). One of the most promising and, at the same time, problematic segments of EU international cooperation is cooperation with Central Asian countries on democracy, the rule of law, and human rights.

2023 was the year of simultaneous membership of Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan in the Council of the United Nations (UN), the main purpose of which is the development and maintenance of the highest standards, and the implementation of mechanisms for the protection and defence of the rights and freedoms of people (Williamson 2023). The above states have a long history of development and formation of the sphere of the legal protection of the population (Afzal 2004). According to the international civil society organization, World Justice Project, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan have different situations in certain sectors of the sphere of rights and freedoms, but the problems and challenges they face are identical for the entire region (Table 1) (Elnazarov and Jamshedov 2019).

While rankings such as the World Justice Project's Rule of Law Index provide valuable comparative quantitative insights into human rights conditions around the world, it is important to recognize their inherent limitations. These rankings heavily rely on expert perceptions and third-party data, which may introduce subjective biases. Additionally, their quantification methodologies may overlook nuanced local contexts and recent developments, resulting in a somewhat backward-looking

perspective. Certain dimensions, such as political and civil rights, present challenges in objective measurement. Therefore, while these rankings can serve as useful reference points, they should be approached with caution. It is necessary to carefully interpret them, cross-verify information from diverse sources, and consider inherent blind spots or biases within the ranking process itself.

Although the EU has a comprehensive framework for safeguarding human rights within the Union, it also places great importance on promoting these values and democratic principles in its external relations, particularly in strategically significant regions such as Central Asia. Nevertheless, the Central Asian states have faced ongoing criticism for violating rights such as freedom of expression, assembly, and dissent. For example, during the violent dispersal by the police of the protests in Kazakhstan in 2022, the main demand of which was to create a fair society, favourable to ordinary Kazakhs, 238 people were officially killed (Rule of Law Index 2022 (2023)). When, on 1 July 2022, peaceful protests broke out in Karakalpakstan, an autonomous region of Uzbekistan, and as a result of forceful action against dissenters 21 people died, the country's leadership began looking for guilt among the victims, while not considering the possibility of police or other agencies' guilt. A similar situation was observed in Kyrgyzstan: independent journalists and human rights defenders were harassed and persecuted, whose activities focused on the search for the truth about the involvement of representatives of law enforcement agencies in the use of excessive physical force against protesters (Williamson 2023).

The situation in the region remains extremely tense: increased pressure on the independent media, the adoption of controversial laws, arrests and torture, and discrimination on various grounds – all these phenomena are present in one way or another in the political and social life of the citizens of Central Asian countries (Yanovskaya and Lipovka 2022).

Turkmenistan is known for its severe human rights issues, including lack of a free press, violations of minority rights, arbitrary detentions, and enforced disappearances. The European Union and the United Nations have engaged with Turkmenistan regarding human rights concerns. The EU has prioritized human rights in its relations with Turkmenistan, with an Interim Agreement on trade-related matters in place since 2010, pending ratification of a Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA). The EU has expressed interest in agreeing to the PCA with human rights conditions attached to its implementation. Additionally, the EU has established a medium-term human rights monitoring mechanism in Turkmenistan, which is overseen by a fully-fledged EU delegation in Ashgabat. The UN has also addressed human rights abuses in Turkmenistan (Einsiedel 2020). The report highlights the ongoing human rights violations in Turkmenistan, including enforced disappearances and lack of engagement with international bodies such as the EU and the UN. The UN has been involved in discussions and efforts to protect human rights in Central Asia, urging governments to increase their efforts to safeguard human rights, particularly in the context of regional issues such as the crisis in Afghanistan (Country Reports on Human Rights Practices 2022).

Today, only Kyrgyzstan is a country where relatively free and fair elections have taken place (Chaney 2022b). However, there are several human rights challenges that persist, including issues related to judicial independence, media freedom, ethnic tensions, and women's rights. The judiciary's independence is compromised by laws that allow the President to overturn Constitutional Court decisions based on subjective interpretations of 'moral values and social norms', which undermines the impartiality and autonomy of the judicial system. Meanwhile, the freedom of the press is facing significant threats, as evidenced by criminal cases against independent journalists and bloggers, coupled with laws penalizing 'false' information without judicial oversight. Ethnic tensions are exacerbating social discord, with ethnic discrimination, hate speech, and ethnic profiling by law enforcement agencies targeting groups such as Uzbeks, Turks, Uyghurs, Mugats, and Tajiks. These tensions are contributing to human rights violations and social instability within the country (World Report 2024). Although Kyrgyzstan has made progress in combating domestic violence, there is still a problem with impunity for such crimes, which hinders the protection of women's rights. Limited access to redress for survivors and challenges in effectively addressing cases of violence against women and girls remain pressing concerns (United Nations 2022).

The rest are still ruled by authoritarian regimes that differ only in the intensity of applying pressure on their populations. Recently the situation in the region has begun to change. Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and other states began the process of a gradual understanding of the essence of human rights and their importance for state development (Hamidov *et al.* 2022). Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have engaged with various international bodies regarding human rights, including the EU and the UN. Uzbekistan has made efforts to address human rights issues by adopting national strategies and action plans to implement recommendations from Human Rights Mechanisms. Uzbekistan is also a party to numerous international human rights treaties and agreements and maintains regular dialogue with UN bodies and mechanisms (UN Country Team Uzbekistan 2020). However, Tajikistan has encountered difficulties in implementing its legal framework for democracy and human rights in practice. The country has moved towards a more centralized model, which has raised concerns about the limited space for human rights and political discourse. Although some legislative measures have been taken to promote gender equality and prevent torture, concerns persist regarding the independence of the judiciary, electoral regulations, freedom of expression, and association (European Bank for Reconstruction and Development 2020).

But the evolutionary process has not stood still, and democratic values are increasingly influencing events in Central Asia. Conflicts in some countries (Georgia and Ukraine) exacerbated the situation in the context of the preservation of human rights, but, at the same time, forced governments in the region to gradually depart from old policy methods (Perez 2022).

In Kazakhstan, human rights policies are primarily set by the president, presidential administration, and parliament through relevant legislation. Implementation is carried out by key government agencies such as the Ministry

**Table 2.** Kazakhstan's indicators of rights and freedoms at the regional level (Eastern Europe and Central Asia) for 2022.

	Rating (region)	Income per capita	Rating (global)
Government influence	9/14*	35/42**	106/140***
Corruption	4/14	17/42	62/140
Government aid	10/14	30/42	85/140
Rights protection	10/14	34/42	100/140
Property protection	6/14	7/42	42/140
Normative regulation	2/14	17/42	62/140
Civil justice	1/14	8/42	43/140
Criminal justice	3/14	17/42	62/140

*Note:* \*a total of 14 countries are represented in the rating (Georgia, Kosovo, Northern Macedonia, Kazakhstan, Moldova, Bosnia and Herzegovina, Ukraine, Uzbekistan, Serbia, Albania, Belarus, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Turkey); \*\*Kazakhstan is in the above average income group, with 42 countries represented; \*\*\*a total of 140 countries are represented in the rating.  
*Source:* Rule of Law Index 2022 (2023).

of Justice and state human rights bodies. Changes in the political, economic, and social components of Kazakhstan's state development have recently contributed to the fact that the situation in these sectors is likely to improve in the future (Rollan and Somerton 2021). This also applies to the area of human rights, which remains a problematic topic during meetings between Kazakh and international representatives (Bankoff and Oven 2019). It can be concluded that Kazakhstan has long been working in this area, in particular concerning the fight against corruption, regulatory and legal support, and civil justice (Karatayev *et al.* 2017). But questions are raised by the mechanism of execution of these tasks (Table 2).

After winning the presidential election on 20 March 2019, K.Z. Tokayev announced the beginning of work to strengthen the legal framework on the rights and freedoms of citizens (Rollan and Somerton 2021). The President called for special attention to the elimination of gender inequality, close cooperation with humanitarian and civil organizations, the inclusion of people with disabilities in social life, and compulsory education for such categories of people. The President of Kazakhstan emphasized the need to update the policy of legal protection of the population. Thus, the Decree of the President of Kazakhstan on Further Measures of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Field of Human Rights (2021) was issued, and the Government adopted a Resolution on the Approval of the Plan for Further Action in the Field of Human Rights and the Rule of Law (2022).

Gender inequality and unfair distribution of opportunities for professional advancement is a problem not only for Kazakhstan but also for other countries in this region and the world. To reduce the level of discrimination against women based on sex, the Law on the Introduction of Amendments and Additions to Some Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the Issues of Social Protection of Certain Categories of Citizens (2021) was adopted. The document removed restrictions on the employment of women in some professions. Almost immediately,



a wave of discontent arose among lawyers and public figures over the fact that now dishonest employers could force women to work in these professions while receiving lower wages than men.

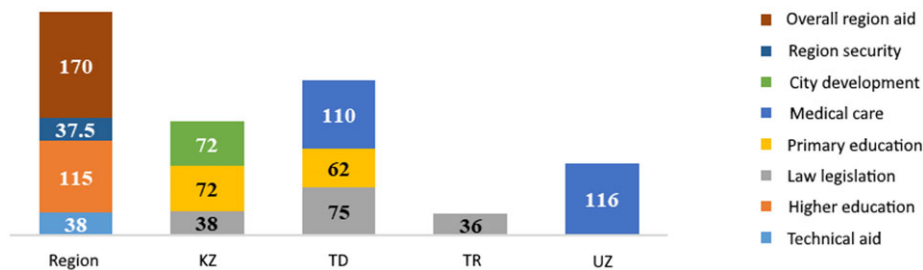
It is difficult to overestimate the problems and difficulties of people with disabilities. In addition, cases of kidnapping and sale of people from this category are not uncommon (Alexandrov *et al.* 2018). To improve the quality of life and to more fully enshrine their rights and freedoms, the Law on the Introduction of Amendments and Additions to some Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Improving the Quality of Life of Persons with Disabilities (2022) was signed. In addition to clarifying several definitions (e.g., instead of ‘disabled person’ the wording ‘person with disabilities’ should be used), the following changes were made expanding the competence of authorized bodies in the field of social protection of the population; defining the right to priority services for persons with disabilities in health care organizations.

The situation with the detention of prisoners in the republic also raises questions. Thus, in recent years, there have been increasing cases of abuse by prison and law enforcement officials (Rollan and Somerton 2021). In this regard, a series of training courses was held in Astana with the participation of international trainers. The main topic of the seminars was the rules of conduct with prisoners, as well as the moral and ethical component of the detention of the perpetrators of the most serious crimes. In addition, in the framework of cooperation with international humanitarian organizations, the government of Kazakhstan ordered the updating of detention norms, adapting them to the requirements of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE). Emphasis was placed on the need to introduce a system of round-the-clock monitoring of prisoners, as well as expanding the rights of such citizens during their stay in medical facilities.

On 1 February 2022, Kazakhstan began processing and considering inquiries from human rights treaty bodies, as part of its ongoing interaction with international organizations to protect human rights and freedoms (Chaney 2022b). Looking at the main normative documents of Kazakhstan in the sphere of human rights in recent years, it can be predicted that the implementation of the goals and objectives outlined in these documents will help to establish the state as a responsible member of the international human rights framework. This will also strengthen the protection of the population in the country, provided that positive actions are taken, abuses are responded to adequately, and all laws and regulations are complied with.

The Union considers the Central Asian region as one of the priority areas of activity in the field of human rights and freedoms (The EU’s New Central Asia Strategy 2019). The European Union’s approach to Central Asia underwent significant changes between 2007 and 2019, reflecting shifting priorities and geopolitical dynamics. The strategy aimed to promote stability and prosperity in Central Asian countries by fostering open societies, the rule of law, democratization, and cooperation on security and environmental issues. The initial strategy emphasized the region’s strategic importance as a link between Europe and Asia and highlighted the need for resilience and prosperity in Central Asia. However, by





**Figure 1.** EU Financial Assistance for Human Rights in Central Asia 2014-2020. KZ – Kazakhstan, TD – Tajikistan, TR – Turkmenistan, UZ – Uzbekistan. Source: Central Asia. Fact Sheets on the European Union (2022).

2019, the EU’s approach had become more comprehensive and flexible, with a focus on resilience, prosperity, and connectivity. The new strategy acknowledges migration as a crucial aspect linking these areas and calls for a more active approach focused on promoting migration opportunities rather than solely addressing security concerns. This shift in strategy reflects the EU’s broader engagement in Central Asia, adapting to the changing needs and challenges of the region (Dzhuraev and Muratalieva 2020).

Vectors of cooperation are comprehensive cooperation in the protection of human rights, combating climate change, protection of borders and territories, and the fight against terrorism and extremism. In 2021, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and other states in the region celebrated 30 years of diplomatic relations with the EU (Central Asia. Fact Sheets on the European Union 2022). The Union’s strategy for the region legislated regional cooperation and emphasized the importance of fruitful cooperation between the EU and the states of the region, both for the Central Asian countries and for the Union itself. The EU’s financial support for the protection of rights and freedoms in Central Asia between 2014 and 2020 amounted to about €1 billion (Figure 1).

Debates have arisen in the EU–Kazakhstan cooperation on human rights regarding several issues, including torture and ill-treatment in prisons, restrictions on the right of association and assembly, gender inequality, trafficking of children and women, and persecution for religious reasons (Pierobon 2019). Brussels and Astana coordinate on the aforementioned issues through various institutions and mechanisms. These include the European Instrument for Democracy and Human Rights, which provides financial and economic assistance, the programme ‘Non-State Actors – Local Authorities’ for information and non-material support, and special bilateral projects aimed at promoting democratic reforms in Kazakhstan, peaceful solutions to social issues, eliminating gender inequality, protecting people with disabilities, and ensuring the rights of migrants (Keijzer and Bossuyt 2020). In March 2022, the 19th meeting of the EU–Kazakhstan Cooperation Council took place. The meeting discussed the results of the reforms carried out by the Republic in various spheres of state development (Chaney 2022b). The positive assessment of Astana’s desire to bring national legislation on human rights closer to the European

standard was noted. It was also acknowledged that the state's movement towards democratic values and legal development has contributed to its rapid economic growth.

Since Kazakhstan is a transit country for migrants, their problems become part of the issues that need maximum attention from the local authorities (Svante *et al.* 2019). This problem is especially acute for migrant children and those forced to leave their homes owing to various tragic reasons (environmental disasters, military actions). In this connection, in 2022 Kazakhstan, together with the EU and the UN Children's Fund, began training specialists to provide social and psychological support to families and children who have returned from disaster zones (Kazakhstan, the European Union and UNICEF are working together, 2022). This programme is funded by the European Union, and its main priority is the systematic reintegration of women and children into society, their protection, support, financial assistance, and educational and professional assistance.

On 11 February 2021, the EU Parliament adopted a resolution on the unsatisfactory state of human rights and freedoms in Kazakhstan, in which the Union called on Astana to strictly comply with all of its obligations, in particular concerning guarantees of freedom of expression, assembly and movement, and protection against discrimination on various grounds – race, religion, gender (Kazakhstan Human Rights Situation Report 2021 (2022)). Despite the list of unresolved problems and controversial issues, the work of responsible Kazakhstani bodies on the direction of overall human freedom as an individual (specifically, the development of the legal framework) is seen as quite effective. However, the activity in this direction is far from being completed, and many acute aspects still need to be resolved.

Following the conclusions of many researchers, since 2020 European and Asian countries began to strengthen authoritarian methods of politics (Kuldysheva *et al.* 2021). The phenomenon was caused by various reasons, but the main ones were the outbreak of the coronavirus infection COVID-19, and the Black Lives Matter protests in the United States in 2020 (Chaney 2022a). Because of this movement, there was an increase in racist and homophobic conflicts, as well as armed conflicts and wars in different parts of the world. Various concerning trends have emerged in recent years across different regions. Governments, particularly in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, have expanded surveillance measures, threatening citizen privacy and freedom. Reforms to judicial systems in some countries have compromised the independence of the judiciary, undermining human rights protection (Peyrouse 2022). Additionally, there's been a disturbing pattern of using force against dissenters, especially in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Discrimination based on gender, race, and sexual orientation persists, with ethnic minorities and LGBT individuals facing legal persecution in certain countries (Einsiedel 2020). People with disabilities struggle with social inclusion, as is evident in alarmingly high unemployment rates in places such as Kyrgyzstan (Kuldysheva *et al.* 2021). The plight of refugees remains dire, with issues ranging from assimilation challenges to

lack of adequate healthcare and employment opportunities, exacerbating their already vulnerable situation, particularly in Central Asia (Keijzer and Bossuyt 2020).

After analysing trends in the rights and freedoms of citizens of Europe and Central Asia, considering the key components of policy in the rapid transformation of the old-world order, it is possible to identify some factors and elements that may be useful in the practical implementation of tasks in the field of human rights protection in the Republic of Kazakhstan. Efforts are being made to decentralize decision-making in social policy. This is aimed at reducing state influence by revising existing mechanisms and transferring certain powers to non-governmental entities. The goal is to encourage greater community involvement and responsiveness to diverse social needs. Measures are being taken to fortify the integrity of judicial institutions through legal regulations. These regulations prohibit the inclusion of certain individuals in judiciary panels and impose stricter penalties for the dissemination of confidential information.

In addition, initiatives are being pursued to comprehensively address social inequalities, emphasizing equal rights for all citizens regardless of gender, race, religion or other differences. Efforts are being made to accelerate the social integration of people with disabilities by mandating state enterprises to employ a specific quota from this demographic. Regionally, powers are being augmented in areas particularly affected by refugee challenges, reflecting a broader strategy to distribute responsibilities effectively across the nation. Furthermore, there is a strong emphasis on international engagement, including increased collaboration with institutions such as the EU and UN, as well as promoting cultural and educational exchanges among citizens. It is important to ensure that all individuals within the country have equal access to essential services and information.

## **Discussion**

When examining human rights and freedoms, and the means and tools used to guarantee and protect them, it is clear that legal mechanisms for protecting the basic rights of the population in the European Union and Central Asian countries, including the Republic of Kazakhstan, are frequently discussed. Central Asian scientists from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have been the main focus of the study on problems and solutions related to ensuring access to basic needs for citizens of different countries. In addition, practical recommendations and methodologies for the studied topic were developed based on reports and analytical reports from state bodies of European countries, republics of Central Asia, and international humanitarian organizations. The information presented in these documents covers a wide range of aspects of human rights, including the systematization and structuring of approaches to addressing the most acute issues in the area. The materials mentioned above have contributed to the development and presentation of practical recommendations for improving the quality of monitoring and control over the fulfilment of obligations by subjects of international law in the field of human rights.

An important emphasis was that the modern system of the legal protection of human freedoms in Central Asia was built on the principles of Soviet governance, authoritarian control, and communist mechanisms for achieving state goals. Bankoff and Oven (2019) reached this conclusion based on their field research in eastern Kazakhstan on the political, economic, cultural, educational, as well as environmental and other factors influencing the emergence of civic engagement in different areas. The experts summarized that the combination of the Soviet past and the unique national characteristic of modern Kazakhstan is the basis for the construction of a mature democratic civil society, headed by the individual, his rights and freedoms.

The thesis concerning the European Union's rational approach to dealing with discrimination on the grounds of racism, extremism, gender, and other differences in different regions of the planet, which is the basic principle of certain bodies of the organization, in particular those whose main functions are to protect the fundamental rights and freedoms of people in states with authoritarian regimes, was voiced in the article presented. Pierobon (2019) noted that among a large number of reports and analyses of the Union's governing institutions for all the years of its existence, there are quite a few materials on Central Asia; the main reason for this circumstance, according to the expert, was the fact that, 30 years ago, this region was considered in the context of an integral unit, and individual states were not a priority in various kinds of cooperation in Brussels owing to the strong influence of neighbouring countries, such as China, on them.

The updated strategy of cooperation between the European community and the country of Central Asia is the main tool for cooperation between the two entities on various issues: regional, environmental, economic, and political cooperation, as well as cooperation in the field of security, human rights and the rule of law. This circumstance was considered in the research, and a similar position was voiced by Dzhuraev and Muratalieva (2020), proclaiming specialized bilateral and multilateral treaties between the European Union and individual Central Asian republics as ideal methodological guidelines for implementing policies in various areas of interaction. Although the authors were confident that, given the documents and the unconditional fulfilment of all the conditions and agreements specified in them, it was possible to do without frequent meetings, dialogues, and joint activities.

The problem of gender inequality, emphasized in the research, especially in the professional environment, career development and development of a person as a fully-fledged representative of civil society, is still relevant for the Central Asian republics. In the region there is still a significant difference between men and women in such spheres as politics, economy, and public administration – this, following Zharkynbayeva et al. (2020), generates other problems, such as bullying in schools and institutions of higher education. Following experts, this issue can be partially solved by improving some national aspects, such as the role and importance of women in the traditional culture of Kazakhstan. However, at the same time, the authors believe that excessive overlapping of ethnic factors in addressing

contemporary issues of human rights and freedoms will only prevent their successful resolution.

After studying a wide range of scientific literature, the key focus of which was on explaining the essence of the concept of human rights and freedoms, analysing the principles and mechanisms of guaranteeing the protection of basic needs of the population, as well as studying the specifics and characteristics of human rights policies in the European Union and Central Asian countries, it can be concluded that the dynamics of this process will maintain its momentum in the foreseeable future. The results of research on how different actors interact in the field of human rights and freedoms in Europe and Asia demonstrate their desire to improve the quality of work on these issues. Ultimately, however, it is possible to assess the real consequences, both positive and negative, of the states' activities to guarantee citizens' fundamental freedoms, as well as to forecast further steps and development scenarios, provided that all tasks and requirements specified in normative documents of the national, regional, and international level are strictly fulfilled. This circumstance applies to the Central Asian states, where the human rights situation remains quite complicated and unpredictable.

### **Conclusions**

The specifics and distinctive features of political decisions of European and Central Asian states in the sphere of protection of human rights and freedoms were considered. Positive and negative aspects of regional countries' activities at the national, regional, and international levels were identified.

The study indicates that the Central Asian region is one of the most promising areas of cooperation for the European Union's foreign policy in the sphere of legal protection of the population, both in economic and image terms. However, it is also the most complex vector of cooperation on human rights issues. In Central Asian countries, the protection and support of rights and freedoms are hindered by non-compliance with the norms and rules outlined in national and international agreements and treaties. It has been revealed that the Republic of Kazakhstan scores relatively high on the basic criteria for human rights and freedoms compared with other states in the region. However, the issue of compliance with all norms and standards in this area remains unresolved. To reduce the occurrence of human rights violations, Astana should collaborate more closely with European missions and organizations to promptly monitor and control situations, respond appropriately to emerging conflicts, and keep up with global developments in the legal protection of human rights.

The novelty of the research is determined by examining the modern trends in protecting human rights and freedoms in Kazakhstan. This is done by studying the peculiarities of state activity in the Central Asian region, particularly in the context of cooperation with the European Union, during the construction of a new geopolitical system with the key objective of prioritizing human beings. Future

research should focus on gender inequality in Central Asian states, particularly regarding professional implementation and career advancement in the republic.

### Author Contributions

**MM:** conceptualization, project administration, writing the original draft; **LA:** data curation, methodological guidance; **ZS** and **SN:** visualization, writing the original draft – review, and editing; **RB:** supervision, writing the original draft. All authors have contributed to the concept of the study, revised the manuscript, and read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

### Funding

None to declare.

### Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

### References

- Afzal A** (2004) Human rights in Central Asia. *Strategic Studies* **24**(1), 152–176.
- Alexandrov T, Jorayev G and Tutumlu A** (2018) Ethno-cultural associations in Kazakhstan: the Soviet footprint and resources for civil society. *Cambridge Journal of Eurasian Studies* **2**, 1–20.
- Axyonova V** (2014) Evaluation of the EU's human rights policies and engagement in Central Asia. Available at: <https://eucentralasia.eu/evaluation-of-the-eus-human-rights-policies-and-engagement-in-central-asia/> (accessed 9 March 2023).
- Bankoff G and Oven K** (2019) From nomadic communitarianism to civil socialism: searching for the roots of civil society in rural Kazakhstan. *Journal of Civil Society* **15**(4), 373–391.
- Chaney P** (2022a) Civil society, rights and welfare: exploring the implementation of the convention on the rights of persons with disabilities in the commonwealth of independent states. *Europe-Asia Studies* **74**(5), 734–759.
- Chaney P** (2022b) Exploring civil society perspectives on the situation of human rights defenders in the commonwealth of independent states. *Central Asian Survey* **42**(2), 293–318.
- Country Reports on Human Rights Practices** (2022) *Turkmenistan 2022 Human Rights Report*. Washington, DC: Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor.
- Dzhuraev E and Muratalieva N** (2020) EU strategy in Central Asia. To the successful implementation of the new strategy. Available at: <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/bischkek/16168.pdf> (accessed 9 March 2023).

- Einsiedel J** (2020) *The Effectiveness of International Civil Society Organizations in Protecting Human Rights in Countries with Limited Human Rights. A Case Study of Turkmenistan*. Glasgow: The University of the West of Scotland.
- Elnazarov D and Jamshedov J** (2019) Guarantees of the rights and freedoms of man within the new constitution of the Republic of Tajikistan. *Advances in Social Science, Education and Humanities Research* **312**, 112–116.
- EU Action Plan on Human Rights and Democracy 2020–2024** (2020) Available at: [https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu\\_action\\_plan\\_on\\_human\\_rights\\_and\\_democracy\\_2020-2024.pdf](https://www.eeas.europa.eu/sites/default/files/eu_action_plan_on_human_rights_and_democracy_2020-2024.pdf) (accessed 9 March 2023).
- European Bank for Reconstruction and Development** (2020) Tajikistan Country Strategy 2020–2025. Available at: <https://www.ebrd.com/what-we-do/strategies-and-policies/tajikistan-strategy.pdf> (accessed 22 March 2024).
- Fact Sheets on the European Union** (2022) Central Asia. Available at: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/178/central-asia> (accessed 9 March 2023).
- Hamidov A, Daedlow K, Webber H, Hussein H, Abdurahmanov I, Dolidudko A, Seerat A, Solieva U, Woldeyohanes T and Helming K** (2022) Operationalizing water-energy-food nexus research for sustainable development in social-ecological systems: An interdisciplinary learning case in Central Asia. *Ecology and Society* **27**(1), 12.
- Karatayev M, Rivotti P, Sobral-Mourao Z, Konadu D, Shah N and Clarke M** (2017) The water-energy-food nexus in Kazakhstan: Challenges and opportunities. *Energy Procedia* **125**, 63–70.
- Kazakhstan Human Rights Situation Report 2021** (2022) Available at: <https://kz.usembassy.gov/ru/ru-2021-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices-kazakhstan/> (accessed 17 March 2023).
- Kazakhstan, the European Union and UNICEF are working together to Successfully Reintegrate Families and Children who have returned from Conflict Zones** (2022) Available at: <https://matritca.kz/old/news/109750-kazahstan-evropeyskiy-soyuz-i-yunisef-sovmestno-rabotayut-nad-uspeshnoy-reintegratsionnyimi-merami-i-detey-vernuyshihya-iz-zon-konflikta.html> (accessed 17 March 2023).
- Keijzer N and Bossuyt F** (2020) Partnership on paper, pragmatism on the ground: The European Union's engagement with civil society organisations. *Development in Practice* **30**(6), 784–794.
- Kovalenko Y** (2018) Analysis of the activities of the European Union bodies, whose competence includes the protection of human rights. *Bulletin of the Penitentiary Association of Ukraine* **1**, 184–190.
- Kozuljevic N** (2014) The EU strategic framework on human rights and democracy – possibilities, challenges and implication to Bosnia and Herzegovina. In *Europe in Global Politics*. Brno: Masaryk University, pp. 1–19.
- Kuldysheva G, Mamazakirov R, Shookumova D, Dzhunusova D, Marazykov N, Chynykeeva G, Tanatarova F, Toktobaeva E, Kuldyshev A and Abdullaeva Z** (2021) On the women social rights legislative regulation in the Kyrgyz Republic. *Open Journal of Political Science* **11**(1), 169–175.
- On Further Measures of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Field of Human Rights** (2021) Available at: <https://www.akorda.kz/ru/o-dalneysih-merah-respubliki-kazahstan-v-oblasti-prav-cheloveka-9505> (accessed 17 March 2023).
- On the Approval of the Plan for Further Action in the Field of Human Rights and the Rule of Law** (2022) Available at: <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/P2200000258> (accessed 17 March 2023).



- On the Introduction of Amendments and Additions to Some Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the Issues of Social Protection of Certain Categories of Citizens** (2021) Available at: [https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc\\_id=33623622&show\\_di=1](https://online.zakon.kz/Document/?doc_id=33623622&show_di=1) (accessed 17 March 2023).
- On the Introduction of Amendments and Additions to some Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Improving the Quality of Life of Persons with Disabilities** (2022) Available at: <https://adilet.zan.kz/rus/docs/Z2200000129> (accessed 17 March 2023).
- Perez MT** (2022) European Union protection of human rights through its global policy: the implementation of the regime of restrictive measures against serious violations and abuses of human rights. *The Age of Human Rights Journal* **19**, 255–269.
- Peyrouse S** (2022) China's impact on democracy and human rights in Central Asia. *Security and Human Rights* **32**(1-4), 53–68.
- Pierobon C** (2019) EU's Support to civil society in Kazakhstan: a pilot evaluation of the social capital generated. *Evaluation* **25**(2), 207–223.
- Rollan K and Somerton M** (2021) Inclusive education reform in Kazakhstan: civil society activism from the bottom-up. *International Journal of Inclusive Education* **25**(10), 19–24.
- Rule of Law Index 2022** (2023) Available at: <https://worldjusticeproject.org/rule-of-law-index/global/2022> (accessed 17 March 2023).
- Swante E, Cornell S and Starr F** (2019) A Steady Hand: The EU 2019 Strategy & Policy Toward Central Asia. Available at: <https://isdpc.eu/content/uploads/2019/11/EU-Central-Asia-25.11.19-Print-V-wCover.pdf> (accessed 20 March 2023).
- The EU's New Central Asia Strategy** (2019) Available at: [https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633162/EPRS\\_BRI\(2019\)633162\\_EN.pdf](https://www.europarl.europa.eu/RegData/etudes/BRIE/2019/633162/EPRS_BRI(2019)633162_EN.pdf) (accessed 20 March 2023).
- United Nations** (2006) The Core International Human Rights Treaties. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/sites/default/files/documents/publications/coretreatiesen.pdf> (accessed 22 March 2024).
- United Nations** (2022) In Dialogue with Kyrgyzstan, Experts of the Human Rights Committee Commend Legislation Promoting Freedom of Religious Belief, Raise Issues Concerning Corruption and Detainees' Access to Lawyers. Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/press-releases/2022/10/dialogue-kyrgyzstan-experts-human-rights-committee-commend-legislation> (accessed 24 March 2024).
- UN Country Team Uzbekistan** (2020) United Nations Common Country Analysis: Uzbekistan. Available at: [https://uzbekistan.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/United%20Nations%20Common%20Country%20Analysis%20Uzbekistan\\_en.pdf](https://uzbekistan.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-10/United%20Nations%20Common%20Country%20Analysis%20Uzbekistan_en.pdf) (accessed 22 March 2024).
- Williamson H** (2023) Prominence of Central Asian countries on the Human Rights Council is an opportunity for change. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/news/2023/02/24/prominence-central-asian-countries-human-rights-council-opportunity-change> (accessed 20 March 2023).
- World Report** (2024) Kyrgyzstan – Events of 2023. Available at: <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2024/country-chapters/kyrgyzstan> (accessed 22 March 2024).
- Wouters J, Beke L, Chane AL, Hachez N and Raube K** (2014) Enhancing cooperation between the European parliament and EU national parliaments on EU human rights policy. Available at: <https://data.europa.eu/doi/10.2861/52456> (accessed 20 March 2023).

**Yanovskaya O and Lipovka A** (2022) Gender stereotypes and family decision-making: Comparative study of Central Europe and Central Asia. *Central European Management Journal* **30**(3), 61–84.

**Zharkynbayeva R, Abdiraimova A, Sarsenbayev A and Bekzhanova N** (2020) Societal perspectives: gender equality in Central Asia, between desideratum and realities. *Codrul Cosminului* **26**(2), 331–356.

### **About the Authors**

**Meruyert Malgazhdarova** is a Master, Doctoral Student at the Faculty of International Relations, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan. Her scientific interests include human rights, civil law, internal relations, international organizations, Central Asia, and the European Union.

**Leila Akhmetzhanova** is a PhD, Associate Professor at the Faculty of International Relations, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Astana, Republic of Kazakhstan. Her scientific interests include internal relations and historical sciences.

**Zhanibek Shaimardanov** is a Master at the Department of International Relations, Central European University. His scientific interests are politology, human rights, and international affairs.

**Saniya Nurdavletova** is a PhD, Associate Professor at the Faculty of International Relations, L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University. Her scientific interests are actual problems in international relations, the foreign policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, international organizations, world integration processes, and international economic relations.

**Rinat Baigondin** is a Senior Lecturer at the Department of Social and Humanitarian Disciplines, Alikhan Bokeikhan University. His scientific interests include sociology, human rights, international organizations, and Central Asia.