

## STRATEGIC CROSSROADS: GEOPOLITICAL DIMENSIONS OF EU–UZBEKISTAN RELATIONS (1991–2024)

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**Abstract:** This article provides a professional and data-driven analysis of political relations between the European Union (EU) and Uzbekistan from 1991 to 2024. Drawing on a broad range of scholarly literature and official sources, it traces the evolution of EU-Uzbekistan cooperation through stages of diplomatic engagement, sanctions, strategic recalibration, and institutional partnership. Special focus is given to legal frameworks, geopolitical realignments, mutual interests, and recent diplomatic developments. It concludes by outlining the potential trajectory of the relationship amid Uzbekistan's ongoing reforms and the EU's evolving priorities in Central Asia.

**Keywords:** European Union, Uzbekistan, political relations, EPCA, foreign policy, Central Asia

### 1. Introduction

The disintegration of the Soviet Union in 1991 fundamentally transformed the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia. Among the newly independent republics, Uzbekistan emerged as a key state due to its resource base, population size, and strategic geographic location. Recognizing this potential, the European Union (EU) promptly engaged with Uzbekistan to support democratic transition, regional cooperation, and market reforms. The EU's early strategy also aimed to contain potential instability in a region bordered by Afghanistan, Iran, and China.

In 1992, the EU formally recognized Uzbekistan's independence, setting in motion a diplomatic relationship that would grow increasingly strategic over time. As both parties navigated their interests—Europe's desire for energy diversification, and Uzbekistan's need for diversified foreign partnerships—the groundwork was laid for enduring cooperation.

### 2. Establishment of Diplomatic Relations (1991–1996)

Uzbekistan's declaration of independence on August 31, 1991, opened a new chapter in its foreign relations. The EU acknowledged Uzbekistan's independence in 1992, followed by the establishment of formal diplomatic ties. This led to the signing of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) in Florence in 1996, provisionally applied that same year and fully enforced by 1999 (European Commission, 2005).

The PCA laid the legal foundation for cooperation in trade, investment, institution building, and political dialogue. Early EU engagement was characterized by technical assistance under the TACIS program and the promotion of legal reforms, market liberalization, and administrative capacity (Bohr, 2004). Between 1996 and 2003, over €80 million was allocated to Uzbekistan through various EU instruments, underscoring Brussels' commitment to supporting transition reforms (European Commission, 2005).

According to Uzbek researchers Alimov and Toshmuhamedov (2000), the PCA was crucial in enabling Uzbekistan to diversify its foreign policy beyond Russian influence and to start building institutional links with Western partners.

### 3. Political Engagement and Sanctions Era (1997–2010)

During this period, EU-Uzbekistan political dialogue intensified through regular meetings and sectoral cooperation. However, a major turning point came in 2005 with the Andijan unrest. The Uzbek government's forceful response to riots led to casualties and international condemnation. In response, the EU imposed travel bans on senior Uzbek officials and suspended arms exports (Peyrouse, 2009).

The EU justified its sanctions by citing the need for an independent investigation, while Tashkent emphasized non-interference and national sovereignty. Scholars like Usmonov (2006) argue that Western reactions often ignored the internal security threats Uzbekistan perceived at the time. Despite the diplomatic chill, some EU member states maintained channels of communication, facilitating a gradual return to dialogue by 2009.

A. Sodiqov (2011) noted that EU sanctions, although rooted in principle, risked isolating civil society actors who depended on EU support for reform initiatives. The lifting of sanctions in 2009 signaled a cautious willingness on both sides to resume cooperation.

This era highlighted the tension between the EU's normative agenda—democracy, human rights, and rule of law—and the geopolitical imperatives of security and stability in a sensitive region. Even during this strained period, trade volumes continued to grow, with EU exports to Uzbekistan increasing by 20% between 2005 and 2008 (Eurostat, 2009).

### 4. Strategic Realignment and EPCA (2011–2024)

The 2010s marked a new phase, starting with the establishment of the EU Delegation in Tashkent in 2011. This permanent diplomatic presence fostered more structured political, economic, and civil society engagement. Through programs such as the Development Cooperation Instrument (DCI) and Instrument for Stability (IfS), the EU supported judicial reform, public administration modernization, and education policy (European External Action Service, 2020).

Following President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's accession in 2016, Uzbekistan underwent wide-ranging reforms. These included lifting restrictions on media and civil



society, simplifying business procedures, and improving judicial independence. This reform momentum was well received in Brussels and triggered the launch of negotiations for an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) in 2019. The agreement was signed in 2022, signaling a new strategic phase (European Commission, 2022).

The EPCA enhances cooperation in areas including human rights, rule of law, energy sustainability, transport infrastructure, and education. High-level exchanges—such as visits by President Macron, Chancellor Scholz, and Prime Minister Meloni in 2023—reinforced the EU’s strategic interest in Uzbekistan.

The EU-Central Asia Connectivity Conference held in Samarkand in November 2023 further anchored Uzbekistan in Brussels’ regional strategy. It emphasized digitalization, green energy, and trans-Eurasian connectivity, reflecting both economic and geopolitical imperatives (EEAS, 2023).

The EU views Uzbekistan as an anchor of stability and a gateway to South Asia and the Caucasus via the Middle Corridor. In a speech delivered at the 2023 Samarkand Conference, Foreign Minister Bakhtiyor Saidov emphasized Uzbekistan’s readiness to be a “connective bridge” between Europe and Asia (Saidov, 2023).

According to Egamberdiyev (2023), the compatibility of Uzbekistan’s multi-vector diplomacy with the EU’s normative power model creates a favorable climate for long-term cooperation rooted in mutual respect and pragmatism.

### 5. Prospects and Geopolitical Implications

The future trajectory of EU-Uzbekistan relations will be shaped by both domestic reforms in Uzbekistan and the EU’s evolving foreign policy under its Global Gateway strategy. Uzbekistan has emerged as a frontrunner in EU-Central Asia relations, as acknowledged in the EU’s 2024 Central Asia Strategy revision (European Council, 2024).

Analysts such as Haukkala and Gromadzki (2024) argue that the EU’s shift towards Central Asia reflects broader global recalibrations driven by the Russia-Ukraine war, energy diversification, and the search for reliable transit partners.

The institutionalization of cooperation via the EPCA, connectivity platforms, and trilateral dialogues involving Afghanistan and Kazakhstan further illustrates the strategic depth of the partnership. In 2022, the EU’s BOMCA program trained over 500 border and customs officers in the region, enhancing cross-border security and trade facilitation (BOMCA, 2022).

The EU’s support for education has resulted in multiple dual-degree programs with European institutions, creating academic bridges and enhancing soft power influence (Abdurahmonov, 2019).

According to data from the Delegation of the EU to Uzbekistan (2023), trade turnover between Uzbekistan and the EU reached €3.7 billion in 2022, reflecting a 34%

increase compared to the previous year. Key exports included precious metals, textiles, and chemicals, while imports featured machinery and pharmaceutical products.

## 6. Conclusion

EU-Uzbekistan political relations have evolved significantly since 1991, transitioning from a foundation of cautious cooperation to a broad-based strategic partnership. Institutional frameworks like the PCA and EPCA reflect the depth and breadth of this relationship.

Uzbekistan's role as a reformist and neutral actor in a volatile region enhances its strategic relevance to the EU. Although challenges remain—particularly in democratic governance and civil liberties—the relationship continues to progress through critical engagement and shared objectives.

The geopolitical significance of Uzbekistan, as a pivot state in Eurasian connectivity, positions it as a vital partner in the EU's long-term foreign policy calculus. The relationship now stands as a potential model for EU engagement beyond its traditional neighborhood.

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