



UZBEKISTAN–EUROPEAN UNION COOPERATION ON MIGRATION AND BORDER SECURITY: POLITICAL APPROACHES AND PRACTICAL INITIATIVES

Obidov Sanjar Obidovich

Recent graduator of MA International Relations

Sanjarobidov079@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

This article explores EU–Uzbekistan cooperation on migration and border security, analyzing projects like BOMCA and MIEUX, and assessing challenges, institutional impact, and future prospects.

СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВО УЗБЕКИСТАНА И ЕВРОПЕЙСКОГО СОЮЗА В СФЕРЕ МИГРАЦИИ И ПОГРАНИЧНОЙ БЕЗОПАСНОСТИ: ПОЛИТИЧЕСКИЕ ПОДХОДЫ И ПРАКТИЧЕСКИЕ ИНИЦИАТИВЫ

Обидов Санжар Обидович

Недавний выпускник магистратуры по международным отношениям

Sanjarobidov079@gmail.com

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ABSTRACT

В статье рассматривается сотрудничество ЕС и Узбекистана в области миграции и охраны границ, анализируются проекты BOMCA и MIEUX, а также их влияние, вызовы и перспективы.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, the strategic collaboration between Uzbekistan and the European Union (EU) has transitioned into a new stage, especially concerning border security and migration control. These two domains have become significant due to increasing regional threats like terrorism, human trafficking, and irregular migration — many of which are exacerbated by instability in nearby Afghanistan and geopolitical changes in the broader Eurasian region (Clingendael Institute, 2025). Considering the risks, both sides have agreed to work more closely—both politically and practically—to support shared goals in security, stability, and development. While the EU–Uzbekistan partnership has evolved through numerous



initiatives, the actual impact and sustainability of these efforts remain under-examined. This article addresses the research question: ***To what extent has the cooperation between Uzbekistan and the EU improved institutional resilience and regional coordination on migration and border control?***

One of the EU's main efforts in Central Asia is the Border Management Programme (BOMCA), now in its 10th phase. It aims to help border agencies improve their skills, modernize infrastructure, and strengthen cooperation between countries in the region. (ICMPD, 2021). In Uzbekistan, BOMCA has supported legislative enhancements and the implementation of integrated border management methods that comply with EU standards (Clingendael Institute, 2025). Simultaneously, migration governance is being tackled through initiatives like the MIEUX+ programme and the Prague Process, which focus on enhancing policy responses, managing data, and safeguarding migrant rights (EIAS, 2023).

Although the EU has historically focused on security issues regarding migration, there is an increasing awareness of the socio-economic aspects of mobility in Central Asia. Labour migration continues to be an essential livelihood strategy for millions of Uzbeks, with Russia as the primary destination country. However, because of changing political circumstances, such as Russia's conflict in Ukraine and growing xenophobia, there is a heightened interest in expanding migration options and enhancing local capabilities (EIAS, 2023). Projects like the Prague Process show the EU's efforts to stop illegal migration, support migrants who live in the region legally, and improve how countries handle asylum and protection issues.

The political connection between Uzbekistan and the EU has grown in recent years, particularly after they signed the EPCA agreement in 2022. Uzbekistan has also taken part in high-level talks with the EU and other Central Asian countries on political and security issues. These steps show that Uzbekistan is serious about working more closely with the international community, while still keeping its independence and aiming for a leading role in the region.

Nonetheless, substantial obstacles persist. The politicizing of radicalism by various Central Asian governments, gaps in institutional capacity, and differences in legal frameworks frequently obstruct effective cooperation (Clingendael Institute, 2025; Zafari, 2019). To reduce such obstacles, both parties need to improve evidence-driven policy development, inclusive participation with civil society, and sustained investment in border zones. This article analyzes the development, processes, and consequences of relationship between the EU and Uzbekistan about migration and border security. It examines recent policy efforts, regional changes, and programmatic resources to evaluate how this collaboration impact on promoting shared security and stability in Central Asia.

METHODOLOGY

This research utilizes a qualitative methodology grounded in the analysis of documents. Primary sources consist of official policy documents, program reports (like BOMCA and MIEUX), and strategic frameworks released by the European Union and its associated bodies. Secondary sources include scholarly commentaries, expert evaluations, and policy documents from research organizations like the Clingendael Institute, EUCAM, and EIAS. Through thematic coding of these texts, the research uncovers significant patterns and trends in the development of EU–Uzbekistan collaboration regarding migration and border security.



RESULTS

Cooperations on border security.

The European Union regards Central Asia as one of the most strategically significant areas. Challenges that span regions like human trafficking, drug trafficking, organized crime, and terrorism impact EU interests. The EU has been assisting the Central Asian States via different development and cooperation initiatives. The foundation of the EU's strategy regarding Central Asian States is emphasized in the document EU and Central Asia: Strategy for a New Partnership, which was approved by the European Council in June 2007. This approach demonstrates that the EU has established a series of cohesive measures to assist Central Asia, aiming not only at individual countries but also tackling challenges regionally.

Border security is an important factor for the stability of the entire region, prompting the EU to create a specific initiative in 2002, the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA), designed to improve security, combat illegal trafficking, and promote trade in Central Asia. Since its establishment, the Programme has been directly associated with several of the EU goals outlined in its strategic documents. Since its onset in 2003, the BOMCA Programme has actualized phases aimed at enhancing capacity and institutional growth, creating trade corridors, refining border management systems, and combating drug trafficking throughout Central Asia. Across its first **nine phases**, the EU distributed **over €40 million** to support capacity building, infrastructure modernization, and the promotion of **Integrated Border Management (IBM)** principles. (EEAS, 2019)

BOMCA's initial activities began in Central Asia in 2003. Even more troubling, the border authorities of Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan (with Turkmenistan joining in 2006) were widely recognized for their inconsistency in personnel, resources, training, and facilities. Uzbek border officials were heavily armed, often closing the border without caution, and considered the notion of easing movement strange. In contrast, border officials in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan did not have adequate equipment and manually entered passport information at official border points. In this setting, BOMCA encountered its initial challenges. Officials from France and Austria involved in the program disagreed on the most effective way to distribute BOMCA's limited resources to meet the extensive border control requirements of the region. The program faced immense requests from member countries for border patrol gear, resulting in officials committing to supply equipment far exceeding the budget limits. (Gavrilis, 2009)

In 2006, BOMCA broadened its action plan and obtained funding from additional EU member countries. Although this weakened the Austrian influence on the program, it provided BOMCA with a more robust pan-European identity and allowed it to address further events. The new plan of action consisted of twelve projects, including legal reforms in border management, establishment of canine units for drug interdiction, support for intelligence sharing, and mine prevention in border regions. Here are the projects:

- legal reforms affecting border management;
- training for officers in border service management;
- regional cooperation in border management;
- intelligence sharing across member states;
- dissemination of information on border management;



- construction of training centres;
- establishment of joint border posts to promote synergy;
- creation of mobile border control units for remote frontier areas;
- creation of dog units for drug interdiction;
- professional development of airport authorities;
- facilitation of ties between local communities and border guards;
- mine prevention in frontier areas. (Gavrilis, 2009)

The ongoing 10th phase is carried out by a consortium of border management agencies from chosen EU member countries and ICMPD, with the State Border Guard of the Republic of Latvia at the helm. Launched on 1 April 2021 with an overall budget of EUR 21.65 million for 54 months, this is the most extensive phase of the programme so far. This project aims to promote regional economic growth to improve living standards in border regions, highlighting human rights, gender equality, and support for vulnerable populations. The intended beneficiaries comprise local governments, civic organizations, and non-profit entities. The funded initiatives focus on border regions susceptible to migration in Central Asian countries, including Tursunzade and Shahrinav districts of republican subordination, as well as Sughd and Khatlon regions in Tajikistan; Batken, Osh, Zhalal-Abad, and Talas regions in Kyrgyzstan; Turkestan region in Kazakhstan; Lebap and Dashoguz provinces in Turkmenistan; and Tashkent region in Uzbekistan. (ICMPD, 2024)

On 27 and 28 February 2023, in collaboration with the Prosecutor General's Office of Uzbekistan, the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA 10) hosted a Roundtable in Tashkent focused on assisting women living in the border regions of Uzbekistan. The Roundtable increased awareness of the difficulties faced by women living near borders and acted as a platform for discussions among state agencies to share current information, and, crucially, to formulate collaborative ideas and solutions to assist this group of women. The Programme's specialist team shared effective approaches from the European Union and Eastern Partnership nations in solving the challenges faced by women living in border regions. In the interactive sessions, alongside international experts, officials from Uzbek state agencies examined the current conditions of women in border areas, emphasizing human rights, domestic violence prevention, involvement of elderly women, and enhanced job opportunities. (EEAS, 2023)

The EU additionally supports the Law Enforcement in Central Asia (LEICA) initiative, which seeks to assist Central Asian law enforcement bodies in fighting terrorism in the area. This is achieved through strategic and operational interactions between EU and Central Asian law enforcement, enhancing capabilities, and regional partnership to address terrorism-related issues. LEICA seeks to make substantial advancements on three key outcomes and expected results (ER) as outlined: Strategic and operational dialogues on CT (Counter-Terrorism) between the European law enforcement community and their Central Asian counterparts are improved; the capacities of Central Asian law enforcement and judicial authorities to combat the terrorist threat while adhering to International Law, Human Rights, and the Rule of Law are enhanced; regional cooperation among Central Asian law enforcement agencies tackling terrorism-related issues is promoted. (LEICA, 2024)

EU's engagement on Migration with Uzbekistan and its neighbors



In 2019, the EU updated its strategy for Central Asia. It searched the way to establish a stronger partnership with Central Asia, allowing the region to develop into a more resilient, flourishing, and interconnected political and economic landscape. Generally, the EU has not emphasized migration in Central Asia, focusing more on trade, sustainability, and security. Rather, it is acknowledged as a concern in both the 2007 and the 2019 EU strategies for the region (Peting de Vaulgrenant, 2023).

What is MIEUX? MIEUX is a collaborative project financed by the European Union (EU) and executed by the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). The Project Steering Committee offers overall oversight and is responsible for evaluating and authorizing the requests for support. The Committee includes the European Commission Directorate-General for International Partnerships (DG INTPA), the Directorate-General for Migration and Home Affairs (DG HOME), the European External Action Service (EEAS), the Directorate-General for Neighbourhood and Enlargement Negotiations (DG NEAR), along with the ICMPD MIEUX team. (MIEUX, n.d.)

Prague Process is one of the project of MIEUX, an advancing conversation focused on migration and fostering migration collaborations in the EU, Schengen Areas, Eastern Partnership, Western Balkans, Central Asia, Russia, and Turkey. The initiative began in 2009 during the presidency of the Czech Republic in the EU. Its six areas of cooperation reflect the EU's external policies on migration and asylum. The Prague Process is acknowledged for its outcomes and for effectively aiding the advancement of global collaboration on migration (Peting de Vaulgrenant, 2023).

Starting in 2009, the Prague Process has served as an important regional dialogue linking the EU with Central Asian countries—Uzbekistan included—enhancing cooperation on migration management through projects like Building Migration Partnerships and the creation of the Prague Process Knowledge Base. From 2010 to 2011, Extended Migration Profiles were developed and approved for Uzbekistan and other nations, alongside an interactive i-Map for visualizing migration data. (Global Forum on Migration and Development, n.d.). Uzbekistan engaged in capacity-building activities like expert missions and knowledge-sharing workshops, as part of the Prague Process Targeted Initiative (PPTI) designed to improve national migration statistics and policy development. (Migration Research, 2012). The nation also set up migration information and training center in Shakhrisabz, backed by Germany, to boost financial literacy and entrepreneurship skills among returning migrants. (Global Forum on Migration and Development, n.d.).

DISCUSSION

BOMCA has numerous accomplishments in Central Asia: it has supplied equipment valued in millions of euros to countries in the region. BOMCA has funded several major infrastructure initiatives throughout the region. These encompass the crossing of terminals at the Kyrgyz-Kazakh border and the building of housing for border guards and customs facilities in isolated regions of the Tajik border with Afghanistan. Nonetheless, BOMCA has not consistently achieved its complete action plan. It has educated numerous border agents throughout Central Asia, but corruption persists widely. BOMCA has constrained capacity and budget for training, offering classes and workshops to only a limited number of eligible border officers. BOMCA has had minimal success in ensuring that Central Asian officials consistently



adopt practices related to IBM. Officials in Central Asia have been hesitant to disclose intelligence and rosters of high-priority suspects. The success of BOMCA is attributed more to the efforts of its country teams executing their action plans in challenging political and geographical contexts than to the distinctive collaboration between the EU and UNDP. Projects are frequently carried out at distant border crossings that are removed from country team offices, often with less than ideal accommodations. All of these necessitate the Commission and UNDP to operate more effectively in addressing the requirements of country teams and in managing their interactions with each other.

Through organized dialogue, data collection, and improving institutional capabilities, the Prague Process has improved migration governance across Central Asia. It facilitated the development of an Extended Migration Profile for Uzbekistan and supported reintegration through local training center initiatives, aligning national plans with EU standards. However, it has not been as impactful because of political apathy, divided execution among countries, and poor evaluation of sustained impact. It is true that the initiative aims at a wide regional scope; however, the lack of compulsory frameworks and reliance on voluntary cooperation blunts impact. To increase effectiveness, upcoming initiatives must prioritize involving civil society organizations, enhancing data compatibility, and broadening localized assistance systems for migrant reintegration. Enhancing collaboration with other EU-funded initiatives like MIEUX or BOMCA may promote more consistent migration and border management throughout the region.

CONCLUSION

In the last twenty years, the cooperations between Uzbekistan and the European Union regarding migration and border security has transformed into a more strategic and organized partnership. The EU has assisted Uzbekistan in enhancing its institutional capabilities, modernizing its infrastructure, and conforming to international standards through significant initiatives such as BOMCA, MIEUX, LEICA, and the Prague Process. These initiatives have offered training and resources while promoting cross-border relations and fostering more inclusive, rights-based policies, particularly related to the reintegration of migrants and gender-sensitive management of borders.

In spite of these favorable results, the partnership continues to encounter various restrictions. Obstacles like institutional weakness, corruption, restricted data exchange, and political sensitivities in the area persistently obstruct the complete enactment and sustainability of reforms. Additionally, numerous initiatives rely significantly on global funding and do not have systems for sustained local ownership. To achieve a more enduring effect, upcoming collaborations must emphasize stronger local involvement, increased transparency, and sustained capacity development—especially at the community and regional tiers.

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