



NAVIGATING DIPLOMATIC HORIZONS: MAPPING ITALY-KAZAKHSTAN RELATIONS AFTER TOKAYEV'S VISIT IN 2024

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ABSTRACT. *The visit of Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to Italy in January 2024 represents a pivotal moment in shaping the bilateral cooperation between Kazakhstan and Italy. Discussions during the visit emphasized the mutual desire to deepen economic integration, expand trade and investment ties, and collaborate in diverse sectors such as energy, tourism, and infrastructure. Moreover, cultural exchanges, scientific cooperation, and reciprocal understanding of security issues underscored the diverse array of shared interests between the two countries. This article critically examines the new trajectory of Kazakh-Italian relations following President Tokayev's official trip. Drawing upon official documents and authoritative sources, the goal is to explore the multifaceted implications and opportunities arising from this diplomatic engagement. Methodologically, this study provides a qualitative assessment based on two intersected approaches: the content analysis of official documents and press releases related to the event and the discourse analysis of the transcript of an interview given by the Italian Ambassador in Kazakhstan Marco Alberti to "The Astana Times" on January 29th. Through a structured examination of the outcomes of this diplomatic endeavor, this article provides valuable insights into potential paths of development and cooperation between Kazakhstan and Italy, amidst the changing landscape of global order and economic conditions.*

KEYWORDS: bilateral relations, diplomacy, Italy, Kazakhstan, Tokayev.

INTRODUCTION

Most of the existing literature on Kazakhstan's foreign policy has primarily focused on its relations with major powers such as Russia, China, and the United States. On the contrary, there is a noticeable gap in academic research that specifically explores the evolving diplomatic ties between Kazakhstan and Italy. This paper seeks to fill this knowledge gap by offering a detailed study of current developments in the Kazakh-Italian partnership, particularly in the context of President Tokayev's 2024 visit to Rome.

Despite some remarkable political differences and noteworthy geographical distances, Italy and Kazakhstan share common interests and goals, which have led to cohesive, constructive, and trustworthy economic, political, and cultural relations. Italy is one of Kazakhstan's key trading partners within the European Union. In recent years, Italy has consistently been one of the top EU importers of Kazakhstani goods, particularly in sectors such as oil and gas, minerals, and raw materials. Conversely, Kazakhstan

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imports a variety of goods from Italy, including machinery, vehicles, pharmaceuticals, and food products. The commercial exchange between these two countries has already achieved and passed the outcomes of the pre-Covid period. In 2019, Kazakhstan's exports to Italy amounted to approximately \$8 billion, while imports from Italy were around \$950 million. By 2022, these figures had increased, with exports reaching approximately \$14 billion and imports growing to about \$1 billion (Kazinform, 2024b).

Italian businesses have also made significant investments in Kazakhstan, particularly in the energy industry. The Kashagan and Karachaganak fields in Kazakhstan are among the oil and gas projects in which ENI, a global oil and gas firm based in Italy, has been actively involved. These investments have promoted economic development in industries such as manufacturing, agriculture, and construction while also facilitating technology and knowledge transfer. The approximately \$7 billion in total investments made by Italy in Kazakhstan in 2022 demonstrate the breadth and intensity of economic cooperation between these two countries (Akorda, 2024).

The roots of such an advanced partnership can be traced back to 1992 when Italy and Kazakhstan established formal diplomatic relationships. As a result, the two countries signed the "Joint Declaration on the Principles of Relations" and the "Joint Declaration on Economic Cooperation" in 1994. Later on, in 1996, Italy inaugurated its embassy in Kazakhstan. The successive year (1997), Italy and Kazakhstan signed the "Treaty of Friendship and Cooperation". However, the real turning point occurred with the opening of Kazakhstan's embassy in Rome in 2009. Such a moment marked the establishment of robust diplomatic relations between the two countries and fostered the signature of the "Strategic Partnership Treaty" on November 5th, 2009. Successively, diverse initiatives have been taken to further enhance the cooperation between Italy and Kazakhstan. Such constructive efforts produced multiple outcomes including, for example, the opening of the Italian Cultural Center in Almaty in 2023 (ANSA, 2023).

In this regard, official visits between high representatives of the two countries have played a pivotal role in strengthening bilateral relations. Among them, it is possible to mention the visits of Italian former Prime Minister Romano Prodi to Kazakhstan in 1997, Kazakh former President Nursultan Nazarbayev to Italy in 2009, and Italian former Prime Minister Matteo Renzi to Kazakhstan in 2014. These visits are crucial for discussing bilateral cooperation, signing agreements, and reinforcing mutual commitments. Indeed, the recent visit of President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to Rome in January 2024 underscores the growing importance of Kazakh-Italian relations and symbolically marks the beginning of a new course of action.

Beyond the political and economic relations, there are also notable relationships in education and culture. Multiple universities and research institutions in Italy and Kazakhstan have developed collaborative programs, including student exchange initiatives and joint research projects. These academic partnerships contribute to cross-cultural understanding and educational enrichment for students and faculty members from both countries. An example is the partnership between Al-Farabi Kazakh National University and the University Ca Foscari of Venice, which fostered academic mobility as well as the opening of the Center of the Kazakh Culture in Venice. Likewise, numerous cultural events, including music concerts, art exhibitions, and film festivals,

have been arranged between Kazakhstan and Italy. Among these, is the recurring participation of Kazakh directors and artists in the Rome International Film Festival and Venice Biennale International Art Exhibition. These gatherings promote a deeper sense of respect and understanding between the two countries while honoring their unique cultural histories.

These factors highlight the importance of President Tokayev's visit to further foster the collaboration between Italy and Kazakhstan across various sectors. However, navigating their relationship's future requires an in-depth understanding of the evolving dynamics and strategic goals of these states in a volatile, uncertain, and complex global context. One of Kazakhstan's key dilemmas lies in balancing its longstanding ties with Russia – rooted in historical relations, military cooperation through the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and economic partnership within the Eurasian Economic Union – against its aspirations to deepen its multi-vector foreign policy by fostering stronger engagement with other international strategic partners (Frigerio, 2023). In this context, the EU and its member states – Italy foremost among them – are actively seeking to explore new opportunities for cooperation with Kazakhstan, as evidenced by the increasing number of visits by heads of state and ministers to Astana. Nevertheless, even though Tokayev has explicitly reaffirmed that a multi-vector foreign policy is the best way to safeguard the national interests of Kazakhstan (Satubaldina, 2024), a variety of endogenous and exogenous factors contribute to the sustained collaboration between Kazakhstan and Russia, ensuring that their partnership remains a central pillar in both countries' foreign policies (Laruelle et al., 2019). This factor might represent a potential obstacle, especially considering the erosion of diplomatic relations between the EU and Russia after the conflict in Ukraine.

Through an integrated content and discourse analysis of official documents and diplomatic statements released in the framework of Tokayev's official visit to Rome, this article critically examines the new trajectory of Kazakh-Italian relations. While diplomatic visits are a common practice in international relations, President Tokayev's 2024 visit to Italy stands out due to its timing, scope, and strategic implications. It marked a pivotal moment in Kazakhstan-Italy relations, resulting in the signing of 18 agreements spanning economic cooperation, energy transition, and cultural diplomacy. Furthermore, this visit occurred amid shifting global dynamics, where Kazakhstan seeks to reinforce its multi-vector foreign policy while Italy strengthens its engagement in Central Asia as part of its broader foreign policy strategy. Finally, Tokayev's visit is the final piece of a carefully and patiently constructed puzzle: it took place just a few months after Italian Foreign Minister Tajani visited Kazakhstan in October 2023 and the opening of the Italian Cultural Institute in Almaty in November 2023 – the first of its kind in Central Asia.

To critically assess the impact of this visit, this study addresses the following research questions:

- How does President Tokayev's 2024 visit to Rome redefine the trajectory of Italy-Kazakhstan diplomatic relations?
- What are the key strategic outcomes following such an event?

- How has Italian diplomacy responded to these agreements, and what are the broader implications for bilateral cooperation?

By focusing on these aspects, the study moves beyond a general discussion of diplomatic visits and instead highlights the tangible outcomes and strategic shifts that distinguish this particular visit in the evolving Kazakhstan-Italy relationship. Understanding the diplomatic impact of the visit would also provide valuable insights for policymakers, analysts, businesses, and investors, enabling them to shape future strategies for bilateral engagement while identifying opportunities for trade, investment, and cooperation between Italy and Kazakhstan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Research on Kazakhstan's foreign policy has largely focused on its relationships with major powers such as Russia, China, and the United States, particularly in the context of its multi-vector diplomacy (Vanderhil et al., 2020; Arynov, 2022). Scholars have analyzed Kazakhstan's balancing act between these global actors, exploring how it navigates geopolitical pressures while maintaining strategic autonomy (Ambrosio, 2023; Laruelle et al., 2019). However, significantly less attention has been given to Kazakhstan's diplomatic engagements with European states such as Italy, which play an increasingly strategic role in Kazakhstan's networking. Similarly, existing literature on Italy's foreign policy mainly focuses on its core priorities: Atlanticism (relations with the U.S. and NATO), European integration, and the Mediterranean (Felsen, 2018). Differently, Italy's engagement in Central Asia, particularly with Kazakhstan, has received little scholarly attention.

The available literature on Kazakhstan-Italy relations has primarily addressed three areas: economic and trade cooperation, Kazakhstan's energy exports, and the role of cultural diplomacy in fostering constructive ties between these two countries. The study of Tulibayeva and Serikbayeva (2013) focused on those factors that contributed to the development of foreign trade relations between Kazakhstan and Italy from the 1994 agreements to the successive cooperation in the extraction and supply of hydrocarbons. More recently, Nursultanova, Bokayeva, and Kasymova (2024) have further extended the study on such a matter. Taking into account the strategic partnership progressively built in the last decades, the authors concluded that Italy and Kazakhstan would most plausibly keep moving on in strengthening their economic ties and extending their constructive cooperation in multiple spheres.

Another study conducted by Nurgaliyeva (2015) emphasized the role of Italy in opening Kazakhstan's opportunities for energy cooperation in the European Union. To a certain extent, such a study continued the analysis of a former publication by Yun (2010), who addressed the EU's policy in Central Asia with a focus on Italy and Poland. In short, Italy played an important role for Kazakhstani companies in terms of export and strategic partnership, creating necessary conditions for the development of business, access to quality and innovation, the attraction of foreign direct investments, and the formation of a sustainable market economy. As a result, despite a significant geographical distance, the countries become closer partners, as manifested in the community of cultural roots, business mentalities, and culinary preferences.

Several studies have highlighted the significance of the cultural element in fostering positive relations between Kazakhstan and Italy, particularly with regard to the points mentioned earlier. Among them, Kenzhalina et al. (2020) analyzed how cultural diplomacy helped them to create cooperative diplomatic and economic relations, Azmukhhanova and Aitmagambetov (2020) reported specific samples of cultural partnerships between Kazakhstan and Italy, while Kuzembayeva and Dayardi (2016) examined the role cultural diplomacy as a core component of Italian soft power abroad.

While these studies acknowledge the importance of bilateral ties, they tend to lack a systemic assessment of the overall transformation of the relations between Kazakhstan and Italy from a broader long-term perspective. Likewise, they do not provide an in-depth analysis of how recent diplomatic engagements, such as President Tokayev's 2024 visit to Rome, are shaping the trajectory of this partnership. Therefore, unlike previous works that tended to focus on a specific area of analysis, this research examines the political, economic, and cultural dimensions of the Kazakhstan-Italy partnership from a comprehensive perspective, thus offering a more holistic understanding of the evolving relationship between the two countries. From a broader perspective, the focus here is on the role played by Italy in Kazakhstan's broader diplomatic strategy and how Italy positions itself within the Central Asian framework.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The analysis of the relations between Kazakhstan and Italy can be theoretically examined from the perspective of their foreign policy strategies. Kazakhstan is nowadays considered an emerging middle power (Jordaan, 2003), which is embracing a multi-vector foreign policy, "a diplomatic strategy based on building relations with the international community in general and with the neighboring states in particular on a pragmatic and balanced basis" ("O Kontseptsii vneshnei politiki Respubliki Kazakhstan", 2020). Various authors (e.g. Ambrosio, 2023; Vanderhil et al., 2020) have considered Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy as a successful strategy for a middle power, for example, considering its balancing capacity to keep a cordial tie with Russia while rejecting its war aims and enhancing openness toward the West. Likewise, Nyshanbayev et al. (2024) raised attention to the benefits produced by Kazakhstan's multi-vector policy in maintaining national security and exploring new economic opportunities notwithstanding the difficulty of operating from a complex geopolitical framework such as the Central Asian region. Following such an approach, Kazakhstan has been able to position itself as a regional hub for Eurasian connectivity, participating actively in initiatives such as the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), while maintaining strong ties with European nations. The most pressing concern, however, is the ability to sustain this policy effectively amid global uncertainty, shifting alliances, and intensifying competition among major powers, as seen today (Arynov, 2022).

Like Kazakhstan, Italy has been frequently referred to as a middle-ranking power (e.g. Chelotti, 2010; Siddi, 2019). However, its foreign policy approach is distinct in key ways, shaped by diverse historical contexts and geopolitical environments. While domestic politics and ideological divisions have significantly influenced its foreign policy (e.g. Carbone, 2007; Andreatta, 2008), certain strategic priorities have remained consistent over time. As a member of the European Union, NATO, and the G7, Italy

operates within a well-structured multilateral framework that amplifies its influence in global governance, trade negotiations, and security alliances. Moreover, its foreign policy strategy relies heavily on economic diplomacy and cultural influence (Castellini, 2021; Kuzembayeva & Dayardi 2016). In this regard, the presence of Italian cultural institutes, trade centers, and academic partnerships worldwide is a key component to enhance its diplomatic outreach. As a result, Italian foreign policy is increasingly centered on the concept of “diplomazia del fare”, which involves enhancing diplomatic relations through the achievement of tangible outcomes across various spheres (e.g., cultural, economic, environmental, security, and so on).

RESEARCH METHODS

This study employs a qualitative approach, integrating three intersecting methodologies: a systematic literature review, a thematic analysis of official documents and press releases, and a discourse analysis of an ambassadorial interview. These methods have been chosen to ensure comprehensive coverage and triangulation of findings regarding the diplomatic relations between Italy and Kazakhstan.

First, the literature review was conducted using a structured approach to identify relevant academic publications (vom Brocke et al., 2015). Search keywords included “Italy and Kazakhstan”, “bilateral relations”, “diplomatic relations”, “economic cooperation”, and “cultural ties”. Articles were sourced from Scopus, Google Scholar, and ResearchGate, and a preliminary check of abstracts was conducted to assess relevance before proceeding with an in-depth evaluation of the selected papers. Backward citation analysis was also employed to ensure thorough coverage. The results provided a framework for the analysis, helping to identify relevant patterns and establish the main codes that were subsequently examined in depth during the thematic analysis.

Second, the thematic analysis in this study was applied to a collection of official documents, agreements, and press releases associated with President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev’s visit to Italy in 2024. This method allowed for a systematic identification of recurring themes, providing insights into the key areas of bilateral collaboration. The data consisted of official statements, government documents, and reports from reputable media outlets, including the memoranda of understanding signed during the visit, joint declarations by Kazakhstan and Italy, and press releases from the Kazakh presidential office. These documents were formatted for analysis in QDA Miner Lite, a qualitative data analysis tool. This preparation included reporting in the software paragraphs or sections of text for coding.

A hybrid coding approach was adopted, combining predefined codes, derived from existing literature, such as “energy cooperation”, “cultural diplomacy”, and “investment opportunities”, and emergent codes, which were identified during the initial readings of the data, capturing unexpected themes like “historical reconciliation” and “green transition”. Each document was carefully analyzed, and segments of text were assigned to one or more codes accordingly. Codes were then organized into broad thematic categories to align with the research objectives as shown in Table 1. Finally, thematic trends were identified and synthesized to uncover the multidimensional nature of Italy-Kazakhstan relations.

Table 1. Thematic Categorization

THEMATIC CATEGORIES	DESCRIPTION
Economic Collaboration	Encompassing trade agreements, investment plans, and infrastructure projects.
Sustainable Development	Highlighting renewable energy initiatives and climate change mitigation efforts.
Legal and Institutional Development	Reflecting partnerships in governance and legal frameworks.
Cultural and Educational Ties	Including agreements on cultural exchange programs and collaborative academic projects.
Historical and Symbolic Acts	Representing gestures of mutual respect, such as the burial sites agreement, and opening to future enhanced relations.

Source: compiled by the authors

Third, to get deeper insights and contextualize the findings obtained from textual resources, the authors have also conducted a discourse analysis of an interview with the Italian ambassador in Kazakhstan Marco Alberti. In the interview, which was conducted by “The Astana Times” and publicly released on January 29th, the ambassador openly discussed the implications of the visit of Kazakh President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to Italy. The interview transcript was uploaded to Monkey Learn for initial text processing, generating a word cloud to identify recurring terms such as “opportunity”, “cooperation”, and “future”. Through Voyant Tools frequent words were mapped to broader themes, revealing key focus areas like “creative industries” and “long-term strategic planning”. The word links graph was chosen by the researchers as the best means of visualization to show the connections between recurring terms. For instance, the term “opportunity” was associated with themes such as “innovation” and “tourism”, highlighting emerging areas of bilateral interest, and offering a visual overview of the ambassador’s key points.

By examining and cross-referencing multiple sources of data from literature, thematic analysis, and discourse analysis, the researchers tried to enhance the credibility and depth of their analysis, uncovering nuanced insights, identifying recurring themes, and gaining a comprehensive understanding of the complex diplomatic relationships between Italy and Kazakhstan. This integrated approach provides a robust foundation for analyzing the evolving dynamics of Italy-Kazakhstan relations and formulating informed policy recommendations.

As a main limit, although the coding process was conducted individually by two independent researchers to ensure consistency and transparency, with discrepancies resolved through consensus, the absence of intercoder reliability statistics limits the ability to quantitatively assess the degree of agreement between coders, which could have further strengthened the validity of the thematic analysis. Moreover, only official documents and authoritative interviews directly addressing Italy-Kazakhstan relations were included in this analysis. The omission of critical perspectives, such as independent commentary, academic critiques, or diverse media reports, limits the ability to present a balanced narrative, potentially overlooking challenges or alternative interpretations of the opportunities within this bilateral relationship. Including such perspectives in future research would enrich the analysis and provide a more comprehensive understanding of the complexities involved.

THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF DOCUMENTS RELATED TO THE VISIT OF TOKAYEV TO ROME

Around twenty documents were signed following the official visit of Kazakhstan's President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev to Italy from the 17th to the 19th of January 2024. As highlighted in Table 2, each of these agreements lays the foundation for enhanced collaboration and partnerships across a diverse range of strategic sectors between Kazakhstan and Italy, fostering a durable and mutually beneficial relationship. Here, the focus will be on the most relevant of them.

Firstly, the agreement between Samruk-Kazyna and Cassa Depositi e Prestiti demonstrates a commitment to strengthening economic relations between Kazakhstan and Italy. This agreement aims to promote economic growth and development in both nations through the establishment of a joint investment fund and support for investments in key sectors such as manufacturing, energy, and logistics. Aside from the agreement, there were significant talks with senior representatives of various Italian companies including, Eni, Neos, Maire Tecnimont, Bonifiche Ferraresi, and Leonardo. These discussions focused on expanding their investments and operations in Kazakhstan as well as enhancing technological exchange in strategic sectors such as oil and gas, petrochemicals, and agriculture.

Additionally, the Joint Investment Decision between KazMunayGas and ENI highlights their commitment to enhancing cooperation in the renewable energy sector. ENI has started its operations in Kazakhstan in 1992. Historically, it is active in the oil and gas extraction from the large fields of Karachaganak and Kashagan. But more recently it has also got involved in the development of green energy with two wind farms in the north-western region of Aktobe and a photovoltaic plant in the Turkistan region. By collaborating on the construction of a hybrid power station, both countries are demonstrating their dedication to sustainable development, reducing dependence on traditional energy sources, and contributing to global efforts to combat climate change. Cooperation in renewable energy can lead to technology transfer, innovation, and job creation while also enhancing energy security and environmental sustainability for both Kazakhstan and Italy.

The Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation between the Ministries of Justice signals an intention to deepen legal collaboration. By enabling the exchange of legal knowledge and cooperative endeavors in, for instance, tackling transnational crime, this agreement seeks to bolster adherence to the rule of law and foster mutual assistance in legal affairs. Moreover, a strengthened legal collaboration has the potential to cultivate a more stable and secure atmosphere for commercial activities and trade between Kazakhstan and Italy, thereby stimulating economic expansion and investment prospects. Furthermore, the Memorandum of Understanding between the Academies of Public Administration underscores a commitment to sharing best practices in governance and public administration through training programs, knowledge-sharing sessions, and exchanges of administrative personnel. Enhancing efficiency and effectiveness in governance can improve the business environment and attract foreign investment, further boosting economic cooperation between Kazakhstan and Italy.

The Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministries of Culture signifies a commitment to fostering cultural exchange and collaboration. This memorandum aims to produce joint cultural events, heritage preservation projects, and initiatives to promote mutual understanding. It reflects how both states recognize that cultural diplomacy plays a crucial role in building bridges between nations and fostering people-to-people connections. Similarly, the Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministries of Science and Higher Education highlights a shared interest in advancing scientific research and higher education cooperation. This memorandum may result in joint research projects, academic exchanges, and collaborative programs aimed at fostering innovation and knowledge-sharing.

The Agreement on the Status of Burial Sites has a noteworthy symbolic value. It underscores the shared commitment to honoring the sacrifices of military personnel who lost their lives during the Second World War. This agreement demonstrates a mutual recognition of historical bonds and a dedication to preserving heritage and fostering a sense of unity. Shaping a joint memory over a traumatic historical event can serve as a foundation for deeper cultural understanding and diplomatic relations between the two countries. Likewise, the “Joint Statement of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Italian Republic and the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan” (“Joint statement by the President”, 2024) serves as a thorough road map for future cooperation, reaffirming the joint political commitment to strengthening and expanding bilateral ties. It emphasizes a common goal for enhanced cooperation and acts as the cornerstone for all agreements and activities.

Table 2. Strategic areas of cooperation after the official visit of Tokayev in 2024

Subject	Agreements	Implications
Economic Cooperation	Agreement between Samruk-Kazyna and Cassa Depositi i Prestiti to create a joint investment fund.	Strengthens economic relations and fosters growth in manufacturing, energy, and logistics sectors. Generates employment opportunities and technological transfer. Spurs infrastructure development and prosperity
Sustainable Development	Joint Investment Decision between KazMunayGas and ENI to build a hybrid power station.	Reduces reliance on traditional energy sources and promotes renewable energy. Contributes to global efforts to combat climate change. Enhances energy security and environmental sustainability.
Legal and Institutional Development	Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperation between the Ministries of Justice. Memorandum of Understanding between the Academies of Public Administration.	Bolsters adherence to the rule of law. Enhances mutual assistance in legal affairs. Creates stable and secure conditions for commercial activities and trade. Enhances efficiency and effectiveness in governance. Improves the business environment and attracts foreign investment.

Cultural and Educational Ties	Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministries of Culture. Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministries of Science and Higher Education	Leads to joint cultural events, heritage preservation projects, and initiatives to promote mutual understanding. Strengthens diplomatic relations and people-to-people connections. Results in joint research projects, academic exchanges, and collaborative programs.
Historical and Symbolic Acts	Agreement on the Status of Burial Sites. Joint Statement of the Chairman of the Council of Ministers of the Italian Republic and the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan.	Honors sacrifices of military personnel and preserves heritage. Fosters unity and remembrance. Strengthens historical ties and cultural understanding. Establishes a road map for enhanced future cooperation.

Source: compiled by the authors

DISCOURSE ANALYSIS OF THE INTERVIEW WITH THE ITALIAN AMBASSADOR IN KAZAKHSTAN, MARCO ALBERTI

Analyzing the word cloud of the most relevant words used in the speech given by the Italian ambassador in Kazakhstan offers useful insights into the main issues and focus points discussed in the context of Italy-Kazakhstan ties after President Tokayev's official visit (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Word cloud analysis of Italian Ambassador Marco Alberti's interview for The Astana Times



Source: compiled by the authors

The frequent use of “Kazakhstan” (31 times) and “Italy” (25 times) is expected considering the theme under discussion. However, it also highlights the primary emphasis of the speech on the bilateral relations between the two countries. The frequent use of the word “visit” (21 times) indicates a strong focus on diplomatic meetings and engagements, underscoring the significance of President Tokayev's official visit in influencing the development of bilateral ties.

The ties related to “industry”, “creative”, and “tourism” indicate a significant focus on economic collaboration, innovation, and promising areas for growth such as the creative industries and tourism. In this regard, the Italo-Kazakh Trade Association (ACIK), the Italian Cultural Institute, and the Italian Trade Commission will play a key role in identifying new opportunities and ensuring their effective implementation. Similarly, the direct flights from Milan to Almaty provided by the Italian carrier Neos since 2022, along with the proposal to establish a new route between Rome and Astana in the future, would incentivize the enhancement of exchanges and bolster visitor flows. Finally, the connections to words such as “people”, “word”, and “think” arguably suggest a focus on public perception, communication tactics, and the significance of narrative in building constructive relations.

On the whole, the official visit of Tokayev to Rome has generated great satisfaction and expectations among Italian government officials and diplomats. This event is viewed as a premise to further nurture the bilateral relations between Italy and Kazakhstan and explore new opportunities in strategic business areas such as creative industry and tourism. These remarks reinforce the conclusions drawn from the textual study.

DISCUSSION

Tokayev's official visit to Rome marked a fundamental shift in Kazakhstan-Italy ties, moving beyond traditional economic cooperation and toward a more diverse and strategically sophisticated collaboration. While economic connections, historically dominated by oil commerce, remain important, the agreements struck during the visit indicate a shift toward investment in renewable energy, infrastructure, manufacturing, and technology. This trend is consistent with Kazakhstan's overall economic diversification plan and Italy's growing interest in Central Asia as a significant trade and investment hub. As a result, bilateral collaboration is likely to open the way for the discovery and development of new business fields, as previously foreseen by Nursultanova, Bokayeva, and Kasymova (2024).

However, there is more. Kazakhstan's growing engagement with European partners reflects its broader aspiration to emerge as a leading player in the Eurasian region, offering a model of regional connectivity and global partnership. Italy's role in this process, as supported by findings from previous studies (Nurgaliyeva, 2015), highlights its strategic significance as a facilitator of Kazakhstan's European integration. Indeed, by integrating Kazakhstan into European supply chains through the middle corridor, Italy aims to enhance its role as a gateway for Central Asian trade into the EU market. Such a strategy seems to be viewed by both actors as a win-win condition.

As for the key strategic outcomes of the event, the Joint Investment Decision between KazMunayGas and ENI on the development of a hybrid power station signals a shift toward sustainable development, aligning both nations with global energy transition efforts. Similarly, the agreement between Samruk-Kazyna and Cassa Depositi e Prestiti to establish a joint investment fund lays the groundwork for long-term industrial and technological collaboration. In addition, the agreements with Italian firms such as Eni, Maire Tecnimont, and Leonardo pave the way for technological exchange and industrial growth, reinforcing the role of foreign direct investment as a catalyst for Kazakhstan's

economic modernization. The signed legal agreements deserve also a mention, as they might foster cooperation in the public administration sector as well as in legal consulting areas, as already shown by the expressed interest of companies like IBC International Business Consulting and Italy4East International. The Italian-Kazakh Trade Association's forum on "Kazakhstan – Italy Trade Investment Opportunities on the Road to Kazakhstan," hosted in October 2024 in Milan, exemplifies a structured mechanism to maintain momentum and explore new business avenues. Cooperation in traditional areas such as energy and logistics is expected to persist, while new business-to-business (B2B) opportunities in strategic sectors like tourism and renewables will be further developed.

Beyond economics, the visit emphasized cultural diplomacy as an important component of bilateral ties. The signing of the Memorandum of Understanding between the Ministries of Culture, as well as the expansion of the Italian Cultural Institute in Almaty and the establishment of a Kazakh Cultural Center in Venice, demonstrates the growing importance of people-to-people connections in promoting long-term diplomatic stability (Azmukhanova & Aitmagambetov, 2020; Kenzhalina et al., 2020). These activities are consistent with Italy's overall foreign policy objective of harnessing cultural diplomacy to increase international engagement (Kuzembayeva and Dayardi, 2016). Furthermore, the symbolic agreement on the status of burial sites emphasizes the importance of historical reconciliation in establishing diplomatic connections, providing a distinctive cultural and humanitarian component to the cooperation.

From a geopolitical perspective, the signed agreements reflect Italy's strategic push to expand its influence in Central Asia, an increasingly critical region for global trade and energy security. Italy seeks to position itself as a reliable partner that can facilitate Kazakhstan's access to European markets through technical expertise, investment, and cultural diplomacy. This strategy is part of a broader framework of "open diplomacy" (Alberti, 2021), which prioritizes relationship-building, trust, and shared solutions to complex geopolitical challenges. At the same time, the agreements further consolidate Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, enabling the country to mitigate over-reliance on any single partner while expanding its economic and political outreach within Europe. However, this balancing act requires careful diplomatic navigation to maintain stable relations with Russia and China, given historical and geopolitical sensitivities. Despite these challenges, Kazakhstan has demonstrated growing diplomatic autonomy, actively shaping its foreign policy engagements (Ambrosio, 2023).

On the whole, Italian diplomacy has responded positively, viewing the agreements as an opportunity to expand its presence in Central Asia and strengthen its economic footprint in Kazakhstan. Italian Ambassador Marco Alberti emphasized Italy's commitment to long-term strategic cooperation, framing the agreements as part of Italy's "diplomazia del fare" approach—diplomacy rooted in pragmatic, result-oriented engagement. The broader implications of these agreements include stronger EU-Central Asia integration, and reinforcing EU connectivity initiatives such as the Global Gateway strategy, which seeks to enhance economic, infrastructure, and energy cooperation between Europe and Central Asia (Yun, 2010). As a result, Italy's partnership with Kazakhstan may

serve as a model for other EU member states seeking to expand engagement in the region. The presence of major Italian firms in Kazakhstan is likely to grow, particularly in energy, logistics, and creative industries, fostering increased trade and investment flows. In addition, strengthening cultural ties and academic exchanges will likely create a more sustainable and institutionalized foundation for long-term bilateral relations, transcending short-term economic interests.

CONCLUSION

This study has demonstrated how President Tokayev's 2024 visit to Rome has redefined Kazakhstan-Italy diplomatic relations by expanding economic cooperation, enhancing cultural diplomacy, and strengthening geopolitical ties. In response to the research questions posed, the analysis has highlighted that the visit catalyzed a transition from traditional energy-based economic relations to a more diversified partnership, incorporating renewable energy, manufacturing, and infrastructure. The agreements signed during the visit underscore a shared commitment to technological advancement, economic integration, and cultural exchange. Furthermore, Italy's diplomatic response reflects a strategic recalibration of its engagement in Central Asia, aiming to position itself as a crucial gateway for Kazakhstan's entry into the European market while contributing to regional connectivity. In the broader geopolitical framework, these agreements reinforce Kazakhstan's multi-vector foreign policy, allowing it to balance relations with multiple international actors while mitigating external dependencies.

Unlike other European nations, Italy's relationship with Kazakhstan is distinguished by a combination of deep economic ties, strategic positioning, and cultural engagement. While major European countries like Germany and France tend to address Central Asia through broader EU frameworks, Italy has taken a more direct and pragmatic approach. As one of Kazakhstan's main trade partners in Europe, Italy plays an important role in enabling exports while also investing in technical innovation and infrastructure. Furthermore, Italy's emphasis on cultural diplomacy and legal collaboration adds a new dimension to the relationship, encouraging long-term people-to-people interactions that go beyond commercial transactions. Therefore, Kazakhstan-Italy ties are an intriguing case study within the larger terrain of EU-Central Asia connections due to their distinct blend of economic, political, and cultural involvement.

Beyond its empirical findings, this study contributes to the academic literature by offering a comprehensive, multi-dimensional assessment of Kazakhstan-Italy relations—an area that has received limited scholarly attention to date. This study illustrates how cultural diplomacy, legal collaboration, and geopolitical realignments are becoming integral to this bilateral relationship. Italy's role as a diplomatic and economic bridge between Kazakhstan and the European Union is another significant contribution, shedding light on how middle powers can engage in mutually beneficial partnerships beyond their immediate regional spheres.

Despite these contributions, certain aspects require further academic inquiry. First, future research should examine the long-term impact of these agreements on Kazakhstan's economic diversification and technological modernization. While the visit has set the stage for new industrial and financial partnerships, its tangible effects

on Kazakhstan's domestic economy remain an open question. Second, the evolving dynamics between Kazakhstan, Italy, and broader EU policies toward Central Asia require continued monitoring, particularly in light of shifting global trade patterns and geopolitical uncertainties. Lastly, examining how cultural initiatives translate into tangible political and economic benefits could provide deeper insights into the effectiveness of soft power strategies in bilateral relations.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

AF: conceptualization, validation, writing of the methodological section, the discourse analysis of the interview, discussion section. LI: conceptualization, validation, introduction writing, thematic analysis of officially signed documents.

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