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CONTEMPORARY PROCESSES IN CENTRAL ASIA AND CHINA'S DIPLOMACY IN THE REGION IN THE ERA OF UPGRADED COOPERATION

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Abstract. In this academic article, an attempt is made to present the perception of Chinese scholars on the development of contemporary processes in Central Asia and the policies of foreign states and unions in the region in the context of changing international and regional dynamics.

The research results shed light on the existing perceptions within Chinese academic circles regarding the current state and trajectory of Central Asian countries' relations

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with foreign actors, ongoing geopolitical changes, the process of strengthening intra-regional cooperation, and a significant shift in China's foreign policy in Central Asia.

Keywords: Central Asia, China, geopolitical competition, constructive cooperation, SCO, BRI, community of common destiny, summit.

ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯДАҒЫ ЗАМАНАУИ ПРОЦЕССТЕР ЖӘНЕ ЫНТЫМАҚТАСТЫҚ ЖАҢҒЫРУ КЕЗЕҢІНДЕГІ АЙМАҚТАҒЫ ҚЫТАЙ ДИПЛОМАТИЯСЫ

**Берік Табынбаев, Қайрат Абдрахманов, Светлана Кожирова,
Тамерлан Акниязов**

Аңдатпа. Бұл ғылыми мақала Қытай ғалымдарының Орталық Азиядағы заманауи процестердің дамуы және халықаралық және аймақтық конъюнктураның өзгеруі жағдайында шет мемлекеттер мен ұйымдар тарапынан аймақта жүргізіліп отырған саясатына қатысты түсініктерін ұсынады.

Зерттеу нәтижелері Қытайдың ғылыми топтарында Орталық Азия елдерінің шетелдік акторлармен қарым-қатынасының өзекті мәселелері мен бағыттары, болып жатқан геосаяси өзгерістер, аймақшілік өзара іс-қимылды нығайту процесі және ҚХР-дың Орталық Азияға қатысты сыртқы саясатындағы елеулі өзгерістер туралы қалыптасқан пікірлерді анықтауға мүмкіндіктер береді.

Түйін сөздер: Орталық Азия, Қытай, геосаяси бәсекелестік, конструктивті өзара іс-қимыл, ШЫҰ, БЖББ, бір тағдыр қоғамдастығы, саммит.

СОВРЕМЕННЫЕ ПРОЦЕССЫ В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ И ДИПЛОМАТИЯ КИТАЯ В РЕГИОНЕ В ЭПОХУ ОБНОВЛЕНИЯ СОТРУДНИЧЕСТВА

**Берик Табынбаев, Қайрат Абдрахманов, Светлана Кожирова,
Тамерлан Акниязов**

Аннотация. В этой научной статье делается попытка представить восприятие китайских ученых развития современных процессов в Центральной Азии и проводимой в регионе политики иностранных государств и объединений в условиях изменения международной и региональной конъюнктуры.

Исследование призвано пролить свет на имеющиеся в научных кругах Китая представления об актуальном состоянии и треке отношений стран Центральной Азии с зарубежными акторами, происходящих геополитических

изменениях, процессе укрепления внутрирегионального взаимодействия и существенном сдвиге во внешней политике КНР в ЦА.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, Китай, геополитическое соперничество, конструктивное взаимодействие, ШОС, ОПОП, сообщество единой судьбы, саммит.

Introduction

The rapid changes in the international environment surrounding Central Asia and China, observed over the past few years, are creating conditions for strengthening relations among the six states. A significant achievement in this process is the elevation of interaction levels to the format of a summit of heads of states of China and Central Asia. At the first meeting of the region's leaders in May 2023 in the ancient Chinese capital city of Xi'an, guidelines for future cooperation were formulated. The choice of location was not accidental, as it is from this city that the Great Silk Road was started more than 5,000 years ago.

Fidelity to history and traditions regarding the revival of this important route for the region and the continent as a whole aims to emphasize the scale and completeness of intentions, both for the population of China and for the peoples familiar with the history of the Great Silk Road.

Among the key changes in recent years, the Chinese academic circles give particular attention to the definitive official withdrawal of NATO forces from Afghanistan in August 2021, the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian military conflict in February 2022, the escalation of tension in the Taiwan Strait, the intensification of competition between the USA and

China, as well as internal upheavals in Central Asia. Under the influence of these factors, the region is witnessing the development of the following important trends

Firstly, there is a strengthening of geopolitical competition among major actors in Central Asia due to the exacerbation of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis. In the unfolding conditions in the region, countries such as Turkey, the European Union, the United States, and other players have noticeably intensified their efforts to advance their own interests. Meanwhile, the Central Asian republics maintain a course towards a balanced foreign policy.

Secondly, there is a strengthening of intra-regional ties among the countries of Central Asia, commonly referred to as regional integration, as a collective response to the changing international and regional landscape. This trend is accompanied by an increase in the region's independence and autonomy in developing relations with non-regional actors.

Thirdly, there is a significant shift in China's external policy focus on Central Asia. There is a transition from the traditional approach of being an "external observer" to engaging in "constructive interaction," along with an elevation in the level of cooperation among the six countries to regular meetings of the

heads of these states.

Amidst these ongoing changes, China and the Central Asian states maintain their course towards strengthening and deepening cooperation, aiming to overcome new challenges and seek opportunities to promote sustainable development.

Research Methods

The research methods employed in the preparation of this paper involved the use of systematic and comparative analysis of materials and data obtained during the search and monitoring of Chinese sources regarding current processes in Central Asia. The systematic method enabled an assessment of the international political processes in Central Asia and China over recent years.

A content analysis was conducted on sources containing information about cooperation results among countries, officially reached agreements, and plans for further development. Evaluating these results allows for conclusions to be drawn regarding the ongoing processes of modernization in this context.

“The New Great Game” in Central Asia

Unprecedented changes in contemporary international and regional processes contribute to the growth of competition among major foreign actors vying for expanded influence in Central Asia. In history, the rivalry for dominance in the Central Asian space was known as the “Great Game,” which took place in the late 19th and

early 20th centuries between the British and Russian Empires. Contemporary processes in the region are referred to as the “New Great Game.” [1] Considering increasing geopolitical turbulence, there is a noticeable escalation in its intensity and complexity. [2]

In The New Great Game, the influence of the Russian Federation in Central Asia remains strong. With the onset of military actions in Ukraine, the significance of the Central Asian region for Moscow has increased. The Central Asian republics are not only important economic and political partners but also hold strategic significance in terms of ensuring the security of Russia’s southern borders. [3]

The United States has increased the importance of its Central Asian foreign policy vector due to the loss of positions in Afghanistan, the onset of the war in Ukraine, and the heightened tension in U.S.-China relations. In the current geopolitical realities, the USA is utilizing various mechanisms of cooperation with Central Asian countries to pull them towards its side and play a leading role in the region for countering China. [2]

The European Union is intensifying steps to strengthen cooperation with the Central Asian republics in political, energy, and transportation spheres. In these new realities, the EU’s escalation of interaction with Central Asian countries aligns with the natural needs of the EU in preserving the stability of transportation corridors and energy supplies. However, there are indications of the European side’s aspirations to expand its presence in the Central Asian region while Russia’s

attention has shifted towards the Western direction. [4]

Among the non-regional actors, the Republic of Turkey holds the fourth position in terms of influence on Central Asia, following Russia, the EU, and China. The escalation of the conflict in Ukraine in 2022 significantly impacted Turkey's strategy, prompting more decisive actions in the region. [5]

The increased role of Turkey as a mediator in the processes surrounding the Russian-Ukrainian crisis has led to the integration of what is conventionally called a "give-and take tactics" into its foreign policy philosophy concerning Moscow. This approach assists Russia in matters unrelated to Central Asia, expecting in return a silent position from Russia regarding Turkey's actions in advancing its own interests in bilateral relations with Central Asian states in military, energy, and political fields.

Following the onset of the Russian-Ukrainian crisis, significant efforts by Ankara have also been directed towards promoting a multilateral format of interaction with the countries in the region within the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). Despite the limited agenda of this regional structure, it will undoubtedly lead its members to a dispersal of attention and distract them from regional economic cooperation issues within the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). [6]

Summarizing this section, the research by Chinese scholars concludes that a new stage of geopolitical competition has evolved in the region due to NATO's

withdrawal from Afghanistan, the escalation of the military conflict in Ukraine, and the heightened tensions between the United States and China. In this New Great Game, they highlight the following main tendencies in the foreign policy of foreign states.

First, a decrease in Russia's involvement in Central Asian processes after the start of the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. However, Russia's predominant position in the region continues to be preserved. Other countries use these circumstances to expand their ties with the Central Asian republics.

Second, the United States is gradually strengthening its connections with Central Asia in the new conditions. One of Washington's main objectives in the region is to create conditions for containing China's development through neighbouring countries.

Third, the European Union, faced with new fundamental challenges concerning energy resource imports and the redistribution of cargo flow from China to the EU via overland transportation routes, is expanding cooperation with Central Asian countries. In the political field, the parties also show an interest in elevating their interaction to a new level.

Fourth, the Republic of Turkey adeptly utilizes its position as a mediator in the Russian-Ukrainian conflict to implement a "give-and take tactics" with Russia, aiming for progressive advancement of its interests in Central Asia.

On their part, the Central Asian republics, amidst the intensifying geopolitical competition, strive to

maintain a balanced position in their foreign policy [3]. They advocate for upholding the principles of the United Nations and the supremacy of international law. These nations are committed to developing mutually beneficial cooperation with all interested states and are not inclined to take sides or align with any particular party.

Integration Processes in Central Asia

At the current stage, one of the significant trends in Central Asia is the revival of intra-regional integration. Changes in the security architecture around the region have prompted the five states to address mutual support for overcoming common external challenges and threats, as well as preserving independence and territorial integrity.

Regarding the institutional understanding of integration among the Central Asia countries, there is currently no clear definition of this process and its organizational goals. However, judging by the content and substance of this interaction format, it encompasses areas such as politics, economics, security, cultural-humanitarian ties, and other aspects. In a broader sense, this process can be termed as the regional cooperation of Central Asian republics.

The ongoing integration in Central Asia is accompanied by the development of two significant trends. [7] Firstly, there is an increasing awareness of a common regional identity. Each Central Asian republic understands that interacting with foreign states and

international organizations as a unified region enhances their international influence, allows for increased global recognition, strengthens their position on the international stage, and facilitates collaboration with interested parties. This has led to the emergence of the C5+1 format, which has found broad application in developing relations with non-regional actors. In 2023, China and the United States successively elevated the level of this format to meetings of heads of states.

The second trend involves strengthening the independence and autonomy of the region. Considering the historical development of the Central Asian republics, other states regarded them, to a greater or lesser extent, as zones of influence. However, this perception is gradually weakening. The restoration of integration within the Central Asian space is one manifestation of this trend.

Following the escalation of the Russia-Ukraine crisis, the Central Asian states maintained close relations with their northern neighbour. However, the countries of the region also demonstrated greater autonomy in enhancing cooperation with other players in politics, economics, and security. They have become more actively involved in creating favourable conditions to increase connectivity with other regions of the world through infrastructure development and transport routes.

Taking into account the increased external risks developed after February 2022, three important trends stand out in the foreign policies of the Central Asian

republics. Firstly, a shift away from perceiving the geopolitical belonging of the region's countries to the post-Soviet space. Secondly, the aspiration to change external political paradigms formed in the earlier years of independence. Thirdly, the movement towards developing a regional foreign policy strategy that pays greater attention to the region's interests and independence.

All of the above indicates that in an attempt to overcome new challenges, the Central Asian countries are becoming more active in shaping the regional order and independently expanding cooperation with all interested parties.

Chinese academic circles adopt a relatively sceptical view regarding the prospects of integration among the Central Asian countries, pointing to significant differences in their internal situations, political cultures, national interests, and weak economic interconnectedness. They emphasize the necessity of involvement of neighbouring major states. The scholars believe that achieving deeper integration seems unlikely without it. [7]

China's Relations with Central Asian Countries at the Present Stage

As a result of internal crises within and between the Central Asian republics, China's diplomacy is shifting from the traditional approach of being an "external observer" to a policy of "constructive interaction" [9], along with elevating the Central Asia-China format to the level of regular meetings between heads of states.

The internal disruptions in Central

Asia in 2022, including the so-called "January events" in Kazakhstan, the border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, and the "protests in Karakalpakstan" in Uzbekistan, have to some extent influenced China's re-evaluation of its foreign policy in the region. Traditionally, China's support for peace, stability, and development in neighbouring countries aligns with its national interests [10].

The transition to "constructive interaction" implies China's readiness to provide the necessary assistance to neighbouring countries in times of instability and their need for external aid, all while adhering to principles of sovereignty, territorial integrity, and international law.

China sees the application of this approach as particularly necessary in cases where disruptions have extraterritorial implications and pose a threat not only to national but also regional security. This shift also reflects China's growing awareness of its increased responsibilities and capabilities as a major power.

China's contribution to ensuring stability and development in the region is significant concerning the improvement of the security situation in the Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region of China. This is primarily addressed through three main pillars of China's foreign policy in Central Asia: the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation (SCO), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and the China + 5 Central Asian Countries format. Strengthening ties with neighbouring countries through these tools has substantially enhanced the

socio-economic situation in the western part of China [11].

In this New Great Game in Central Asia, China is pursuing its own policy. China's response to increased competition in the region, along with the adjustments made by Beijing in the Central Asian direction as mentioned above, involves increasing interaction with the five republics to the highest level – through regular meetings between heads of states. Specific directions and future goals of this multilateral format are outlined in the Xi'an Declaration, fundamental agreements, and cooperation initiatives adopted following the first China-Central Asia Summit in May 2023.

Amid the evolving geopolitical situation in the region, understanding China's current and future foreign policy vector and its position in Central Asia is essential. At the summit in May 2023, Chinese President Xi Jinping articulated the vision for processes in Central Asia focusing on stability, prosperity, harmony, interconnectedness, as well as the conceptual basis for ensuring sustainable regional development and bilateral relations – the Community of Common Destiny for China and Central Asia. This concept comprises four main directions, including mutual assistance and support, promoting joint development, ensuring comprehensive security, and strengthening centuries-old friendship [12].

The summit's final documents also reflect institutional development and various areas of cooperation within the new China-Central Asia format.

The parties agreed on creating meeting mechanisms at the ministerial level for key and priority cooperation spheres and exploring the possibility of establishing a Secretariat for China-Central Asia. The defined areas of interaction include trade, economics, transportation, energy, innovation, science, technology, and inter-civilizational dialogue.

Considering the aforementioned, it can be stated that China's relations with Central Asian countries, amidst increased geopolitical turbulence and internal upheavals in the region, are entering a fundamentally new level. In addition to establishing a mechanism for regular meetings between the heads of the six states, participants in the multilateral format have reached significant agreements on creating new interaction institutions, further expanding and deepening cooperation in various fields, signifying consensus on the necessity of strengthening cooperation and serving as a collective response to new international and regional challenges.

Overall, influenced by ongoing changes, the six countries in the region maintain their course towards further strengthening and deepening cooperation to overcome new challenges and seek opportunities for sustainable development. The current vision of China's Central Asian foreign policy vector can be described by the words of Chinese President Xi Jinping: "...China's relations with Central Asian countries are based on deep historical roots, driven by genuine demand, and possess a strong social foundation. In the new era, they

are full of vigorous vitality” [12].

Conclusion

An analysis of scientific papers and sources authored by Chinese political scientists and experts allows for an understanding of the prevalent vision and comprehension of the contemporary developments in Central Asia and China’s diplomacy in the region during this era of renewed interaction. Chinese scholars frequently highlight key trends in the Central Asian region: the rise of geopolitical competition, the strengthening of intra-regional ties, and the enhancement of regional cooperation with China.

The final part of the research also underscores the importance of including some conclusions and recommendations by Chinese scholars that consider the aforementioned regional trends:

- Changes in the configuration around Central Asia and the intensification of geopolitical competition among major players pose risks to future stability in the region. [3]
- Effectively countering U.S. and Western efforts to contain China’s development from the territory of Central Asian states requires China to continue promoting the Belt and Road Initiative, offering timely support to neighbouring countries for economic development and ensuring social stability. [2]
- Turkey’s influence on Central Asia is expected to gradually increase in the near future. This may pose a challenge to the established

relationships between major players in the region. China should pay special attention to this issue, considering the potential increase in competition between Beijing and Ankara, and possibly make adjustments to its foreign policy in Central Asia. [5]

- The current state of the political situation and security in the region can be described as stable. Regional countries are taking quite active and effective measures to overcome external shocks, implementing structural reforms aimed at solving social issues and improving people’s lives. [3]
- Improving China’s relations with Central Asia in the coming decade requires strengthening interaction with the Central Asian republics to enhance the sense of a community of shared destiny and increase the level of institutionalisation of bilateral cooperation. [11]

The main limitations of the presented work are the analysis based solely on public scientific works by Chinese scholars, which are open and accessible to the wider public, and the contemporary nature of the considered trends, influenced by rapidly evolving processes and a dynamic international environment.

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K-POP AS A MAIN TOOL OF KOREAN 'SOFT POWER' TOWARDS CENTRAL ASIA

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Abstract. The Republic of Korea plays one of the leading roles in the global economy and is a dynamically developing country. As one of the key elements of South Korea's success, many researchers in their works note the so-called concept of "soft power". The strategy of the contemporary notion of "soft power" of the Republic of Korea is based on the dissemination of traditional cultural values and pop culture. South Korea places a great emphasis on the "soft power" of culture, which helped it shape a positive image and create its South Korean attractive brand on the world stage.

The main focus of this paper is to examine the essence of the Korean popular culture and its implementation in Central Asian states. Toward this objective, this research first explores the emergence and diffusion of Korean popular culture, especially with regards to globalization, soft power and value change. Further, its impact on CA will be considered in different perspectives. The research concludes that the implementation of Korean popular culture works as an efficient 'soft power' policy instrument for South Korea's cultural diplomacy.

Keywords: *K-pop, Korean popular culture, soft power, Central Asia, South Korea.*

**К-ПОП КОРЕЯНЫҢ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯҒАДАҒЫ
«ЖҰМСАҚ КҮШІНІҢ» НЕГІЗГІ ҚҰРАЛЫ РЕТІНДЕ**

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Андатпа. Корея Республикасы әлемдік экономикада жетекші рөлдердің бірін атқаратын және қарқынды дамып келе жатқан мемлекет. Оңтүстік Кореяның жетістігінің негізгі элементтерінің бірі ретінде көптеген зерттеушілер өз еңбектерінде «жұмсақ күш» ұғымын атайды. Корея Республикасының қазіргі заманғы «жұмсақ күш» саясатының стратегиясы дәстүрлі мәдени құндылықтар мен поп-мәдениетті таратуға негізделген. Оңтүстік Корея мәдениетінің «жұмсақ күшіне» үлкен мән береді, бұл оның оң имиджін қалыптастыруға және әлемдік аренада өзінің оңтүстік корейлік тартымды брендин құруға көмектесуде.

Осы жұмыстың басты бағыты корейлік мәдениеттің мәні мен оның Орталық Азия елдерінде жүзеге асырылуын зерттеу болып табылады. Осы мақсатқа сәйкес, бұл зерттеу алдымен корейлік поп мәдениеттің пайда болуы мен таралуын, және оның алып келген өзгерістерін зерттейді. Әрі қарай, оның Орталық Азияға әсері түрлі тұрғыдан қарастырылады.

Түйін сөздер: *К-рор, корейлік танымал мәдениет, жұмсақ қуат, Орталық Азия, Оңтүстік Корея*

К-ПОП КАК ГЛАВНЫЙ ИНСТРУМЕНТ КОРЕЙСКОЙ «МЯГКОЙ СИЛЫ» В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

Айнамкөз Бақытжанова, Лаззат Тулешова

Аннотация. Республика Корея играет одну из ведущих ролей в мировой экономике и является динамично развивающейся страной. В качестве одного из ключевых элементов успеха Южной Кореи многие исследователи в своих работах отмечают так называемую концепцию «мягкой силы». Стратегия современного понятия «мягкой силы» Республики Корея основана на распространении традиционных культурных ценностей и поп-культуры. Южная Корея придает большое значение «мягкой силе» культуры, которая помогла ей сформировать положительный имидж и создать привлекательный южнокорейский бренд на мировой арене.

Основное внимание в данной статье уделяется исследованию сущности корейской поп-культуры и ее реализации в государствах Центральной Азии. Для достижения этой цели данное исследование сначала исследует возникновение и распространение корейской поп-культуры, особенно в том, что касается глобализации, мягкой силы и изменения ценностей. Далее его влияние на Центральную Азию будет рассмотрено с разных точек зрения. В исследовании делается вывод, что внедрение корейской поп-культуры работает как эффективный инструмент политики «мягкой силы» для культурной дипломатии Южной Кореи.

Ключевые слова: *К-поп, корейская популярная культура, мягкая сила, Центральная Азия, Южная Корея.*

Introduction

In just a few decades, South Korean culture has taken the world by storm. Since the country's democratization in the late 1980s, it started the global spread of its culture. Hallyu, or the 'Korean wave' of culture, especially Korean popular music (K-pop) has been a deliberate tool of soft power [1]. South Korea isn't alone in this; many countries invest in cultural councils and exchanges partly to strengthen diplomatic aims. However, the South Korean government's push for cultural power has had remarkably quick success.

It is obvious that there is a list of K-pop acts which have already established dominance in Asia, particularly in Central Asia. From fashion to television to music, South Korea has blossomed into a cultural force in the region. Young people in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan view Korea as the new "cool" country. Underneath the shiny veneer of rainbows, dancing, drama, pop hooks, and compulsory cuteness lies a force that could affect everything from perceptions of nationality to regional beauty standards [2]. Though many authors have praised K-pop's soft power potential, it is important to qualify how such influence could be realized.

The South Korean popular music draws an ultimate attention as it is spreading as a storm and different changes in social and political sphere are emerging. So, what changes have occurred since Korean popular music appeared in the CA region will be examined in this research. Moreover, this paper will cover the attitude and perception of fans of Korean pop-music towards South Korea and will test the argument if the K-pop's distraction may be an influential soft power of a country regarding its cultural diplomacy.

Studies on Korean wave refer to the significantly increased popularity of South Korean culture around the world. Kim writes that the term was coined in China in mid-1999 by Beijing journalists surprised by the fast growing popularity of Korean entertainment and culture in China [3]. Broadly speaking, it can be said that the popularity of Korean pop music and television soap operas in China and Taiwan sparked the Korean wave abroad. Since then, the boom of Korean popular culture in the neighboring Asian countries has remarkably increased and significantly penetrated them over the past several years, and in the years 2000 through 2002, according to Hyejung and Sue Jin Lee, "the Korean wave moved forward to diverse parts of Asia, including Southeast and Central Asia, and therefore this wave reached an active penetration stage" [4-5].

The scope of the literature consists articles and books, official web-sites on flow of Korean Wave and Korean soft power diplomacy. However, while telling Korean wave only Korean popular culture and its spread in Central Asian Region are taken into account. Although there are plenty of literature on Korean Wave and its growing importance all over the world, an official information (articles, books) relating its spread in Central Asia can hardly be found. In this case, I believe that this topic needs a future research.

Considering the importance of the K-pop spread to Asians Doobo claims that it is especially meaningful for the Korean government "since the country's national image has not always been positive in neighboring countries" [6, p. 6]. Lee depicts many Asians did not know much about South Korea or knew only a few simple, often stereotypical things about this country. Images associated with South Korea were negative and related to events

such as the Korean War, cycles of poverty and political instability [5]. These negative images have diminished dramatically due to modern entertainers, new technology, and the image of contemporary South Korean lives through dramas and movies. The impact of the Korean wave has not only permeated popular culture but is also a measure of positive lifestyle for many Asian people [7].

By the way, the Republic of Korea is considered to be among the leading places to use soft power in its external policy. As for Central Asia, Korean official electronic journal, Donga.com pronounces that Hallyu, or the Korean Wave, has swept not only Korea's major trading partners such as China, Japan, the U.S. and France, but also far-off countries in Central Asia [8]. The influence of Korean pop culture in Central Asia is the most pronounced in Kazakhstan. Popular cultural items in Kazakhstan instantly spread to neighboring countries including Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Olivia and Bondas give several points on why Korean soft power affects Central Asian countries: the experience of overcoming economic crisis, business, medical tourism, education, traditional and popular culture [9]. Jon Simons argues that though K-pop videos and K-drama often contain very little true "Korean-ness," the receiver can quickly consume the product and still recognize its Korean "coolness." That's why K-pop became well-known among the youth of CA states [10].

Observers generally agree that the most likely explanations for the popularity of South Korean shows, singers, and movies throughout Central Asia include South Korea's high-income levels, business, the close cultural proximity and education and a new image of "cool" Korea. As a result of these and other economic

developments, "South Korea is now the twelfth largest economy in the world, and its entertainment companies are able to finance shows and movies with production values much higher than in most of Asia" [7].

Methods and Results of Study

The work draws on several methodological approaches. Firstly, critical analysis of the literature and resources relating Korean Wave and its diffusion in the world, particularly in CAR is done. Secondly, quantitative study (survey) to measure Korean music supporters in Kazakhstan was conducted. Also, when writing the paper, such scientific method as structural approach in determining the implementation of K-pop in CA states was used.

The research results that the implementation of Korean popular culture works as an efficient 'soft power' policy instrument for South Korea's cultural diplomacy. Korean popular culture has spread to CA states, mostly to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan because of the Korean diasporas living there since 1930-s. Countries of Central Asia view Korea as a model of implementing its "soft power" diplomacy. Meanwhile, young people of all five countries has a great image of being 'cool' from k-pop and their supporters becoming more and more year by year. Tendencies of changing lifestyle, taste for food and an ultimate will to become and look alike k-pop celebrity is growing rapidly.

The Role of Korean Wave as a 'Soft Power' Instrument in the Foreign Policy of South Korea

In modern international relations, "soft power" is an important component of a successful foreign policy. The concept of "soft power", introduced into scientific

circulation by Harvard University professor Joseph Nye in 1990, implies the ability to achieve a set goal by influencing the behavior of other factors, not through coercion, but through cooperation and persuasion [11]. In foreign policy, "soft power" is used by the United States, China, Japan, South Korea, Great Britain, Turkey, India and a number of other states

The Republic of Korea turned to the concept of "soft power" about twenty years ago. It was then that the Korean nation first seriously considered the importance of cultural technologies and public diplomacy in promoting an attractive image of the country on the world stage. President Kim Yong Sam recognized the exceptional importance of the national cultural identity, its popularization abroad in the face of growing globalization and international economic rivalry [12].

The modern strategy of "soft power" of South Korea is based not only on the promotion of national culture and traditional cultural values, but also the state of the Republic of Korea is actively engaged in the distribution of products of the pop industry. V.O. Zhidkov in his work "Elements of the South Korean soft power" writes that: "We cannot fail to note the country's efforts in exporting its culture - from kimchi to K-pop (Korean pop) [13]. The peculiarity of Korean pop culture is that it combines both elements of traditional Asian culture and Western culture, which allows to talk about it as a mixed nature. Thanks to such a unique nature, Korean pop culture is interesting and at the same time such combination is the key to its success. Already starting around the 1990s, Korean culture has been gaining worldwide popularity step by step.

Such a phenomenon as "hallyu" or "Korean wave" first appeared after the establishment of diplomatic relations

between the Republic of Korea and the PRC in 1992. From 1992 to 1997 many Korean movies and TV shows have been shown on Chinese television. Since 1997, the broadcasting of the program "Seoul Music Agency" started in Beijing and the Korean, especially dance, music has become popular among young people. When referring to the success of Korean mass culture in the Korean media, the term "hallyu" or "Korean wave" has been widely used [14]. In 2009, J. Nye characterized this phenomenon as follows: "... in the late 1990's saw the rise of "Hallyu," or "the Korean wave" – the growing popularity of all things Korean, from fashion and film to music and cuisine ... As a result, South Korea is beginning to design a foreign policy that will allow it to play a larger role in the international institutions and networks that will be essential to global governance" [15]. "Korean wave" has also contributed to the building of diplomatic relations between the Republic of Korea and other states. Examples include Korea Foundation, such events as Korean oral speech contest, a series of lectures on Korea, bilateral forums, musical performances of traditional Korean music in a modern way, etc. [16].

In one of his works on the "soft power" of the Republic of Korea, J. Nye said: "The Republic of Korea has an exceptional potential of "soft power", as it has an extremely successful experience of economic development, modernization and technological breakthrough, as well as a highly developed democratic political system with a deferred mechanism for the peaceful transition of power from party to party, ensuring universal protection of human rights and freedoms" [12, 15]. The strategy of the modern concept of "soft power" of the Republic of Korea is based on the dissemination of traditional

and modern cultural values. For example, the phenomenon considered in this paper as the "Korean wave" is very popular in many countries.

To sum, The Republic of Korea places a great emphasis on culture, which can be explained by the cultural peculiarities of the countries of the Far East. For Asian countries, culture, especially traditional, has a high value due to its uniqueness and great difference from the culture of other countries. Therefore, to date, culture as one of the elements of "soft power" of South Korea is one of the most developed and actively used by the state. Thanks to such a phenomenon as "Korean wave", the Korean lifestyle, Korean fashion, Korean cuisine, etc. became popular. The main achievement was the formation of a positive image and the creation of its South Korean attractive brand on the world stage. The creation of a positive image and attractive brand makes it possible for South Korea to implement its national interests without conflicts, to pursue foreign policy without the threat of using force and confrontation.

Distraction of Korean Popular Music in Central Asian Region and Emerging Changes

K-pop in South Korea itself is a multi-billion dollar industry and one of the country's main export commodities. Promotion of Korean culture for Seoul is a matter of national importance. It all started with the reform of South Korean television in 1996 and the decision of former President Kim Dae-Jung to focus resources on developing the country's technology and pop culture. Korean Wave have got its popularity in CA when in 2012 [1], PSY's Gangnam Style became the first Korean hit to capture the world's music charts.

Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan experienced

the Korean Wave when South Korean dramas and movies started entering the country in the mid-2000s [18]. This phenomenon, assisted by the increasing accessibility of internet, sparked more interests in South Korean pop culture among Kazakhstanis, which helped the popularization of K-pop music genre in Kazakhstan [19-20]. K-pop is regarded as an attractive, less-restrictive and unique genre. The high popularity of K-pop in Kazakhstan spurred the creation of the first Q-pop project in 2014, when JUZ Entertainment formed Ninety-One [21]. After the group debuted in 2015, they became instantly popular among youth, due to its high-quality music and the use of Kazakh in its songs.

For the first time, the Korean dramas "Sorry. I love you", "Winter Sonata", "Full House" on Kazakh television started broadcasting at the beginning of 2000 [18], but the starting point, which marked the "boom" of the Korean wave in Kazakhstan, is the "Jumong" series and "Boys after flowers". 2011 was declared the year of Korea in Kazakhstan. On this occasion, a concert was held in Astana, where for the first time Korean pop stars, JQT, T-max groups, solo singer Seo Yeon Eun, Korean traditional theatre and actor Song Il Guk, who played the title role in the popular Jumong series "Prince", were invited [19]. Korean performers Super Junior, Girl's Generation, EXO, TVXQ, Big Bang, BTS fell in love with the Kazakh listeners. In 2011, the production center SM Entertainment carried out a global casting in the CIS countries, including Kazakhstan. Also, there are annual K-pop festivals and flash mobs organized by Korean culture fans. Also, the organizers of such events sometimes invite Korean idols such as MYNAME, Boyfriend, Highlight, AOA, ASTRO, BNF, etc.

2022-2023 years are considered to be the Year of Cultural Exchange between the Republic of Korea and the Republic of Kazakhstan. This year, on July 22 the large-scale festival “Meeting with Korean Culture”, organized by the Korean Cultural Center of the Embassy of the Republic of Korea, was successfully held at the Astana Ballet Theatre. This festival featured guest artists such as K-Pop idol group TRENDZ and K-Street Dance team Justevee Crew. In this regard, under the slogan of “a culturally attractive country,” the Center is promoting the “Getting to Know Korea and Korean Culture” program through K-Culture. Moreover, the Center, being at the forefront of exporting K-Culture in Central Asia, can rightfully be considered the national representative, “sales associate” of Korean tourism. In order to successfully commemorate

the “Visit Korea Years 2023-2024” this year, the Center is implementing various projects to expand the base of the Korean Hallyu Wave in Kazakhstan [22].

Today, Kazakh youth are attracted by the Korean lifestyle. Preference is given to clothing, cosmetics and equipment of Korean production. It was the spread of the Hallyu phenomenon that to a large extent contributed to the popularization of other components of the South Korean soft power model, and also helped to increase tourist flows.

This research was conducted to estimate whether Korean Soft power strategy is successful in Kazakhstan or not. The research was based on quantitative data obtained as a result of the survey (opinion poll) [17]. The survey was done by social networks and involved 100 respondents from several parts of Kazakhstan.

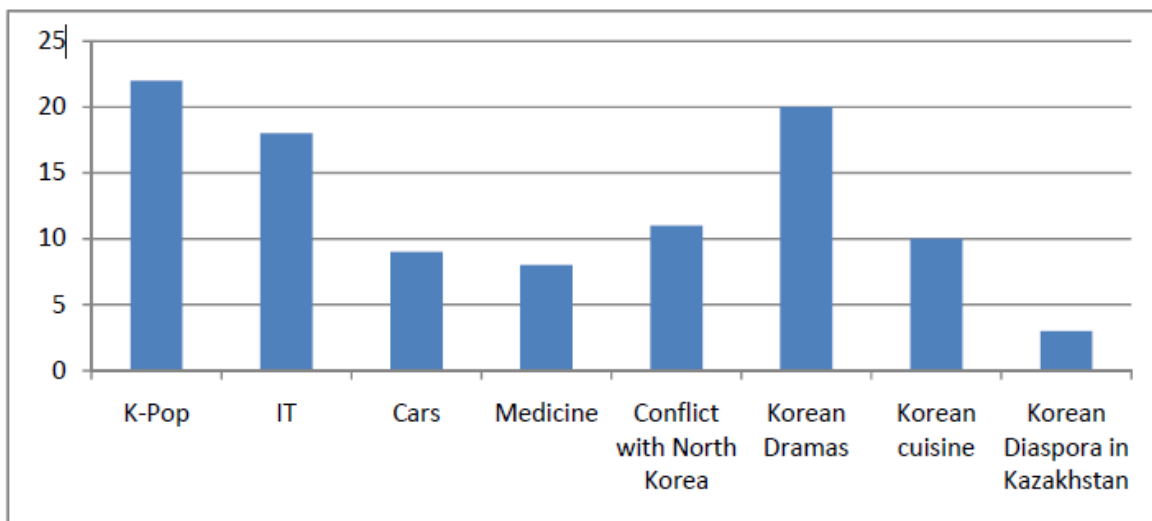


Figure 1. What do you associate with South Korea?(%)

As we can observe from the chart above the Republic of Korea mostly known for Kazakh people by their K-pop culture. So, this says that the realization of Korean soft power policy through Korean wave is working in a high level in our country.

Kyrgyzstan. Korean culture is not new to Kyrgyzstanis: the country is home to so-called Soviet Koreans who were

deported from the border regions of the Far East in the 1930s [23]. Thanks to them, Kyrgyz people, for example, have long been familiar with Korean cuisine, which differs from modern South Korean food both in products and spices.

The effectiveness of promoting Korea’s soft power can be measured by the activities of KOCIS and Korea.net. KOCIS

(Korea Cultural Information Service) is the service that has been operating on promoting everything Korean in the world, providing up-to-date background information [24].

Korea.net is an online platform in 9 languages that provides contemporary information on Korea in almost every area, from government announcements to information on musicians and upcoming events [24].

Hallyu attracts different age groups in the country through video games, music, TV series and films. There are several directions within Hallyu that are popular there:

-K-pop is popular with young performers, and family toi (wedding) and celebrations are hard to imagine without Gangnam Style. Having a desire of being “cool” young people of Kyrgyzstan are looking at South Korea. At the streets of Bishkek, it is possible to see young men and women dressed in black with extravagant hairstyles and perfectly aligned face tone - this is how Kyrgyz fans of the so-called Korean wave look like. "It is quite easy to calculate a Korean man: they are mainly teenagers and young people aged 14-25 in expensive sneakers, skinny jeans, T-shirts with the names of Korean pop groups and colored hair," says Adinai Ermatova, an employee of the Korean Embassy in Kyrgyzstan [23].

-Doramas – Korean drama series, that are well-known for their short duration, and which hold viewers’ attention until the end. By the way, the name Ku Joon Pyo (or Goo Joon Pyo) is known to many. In Kyrgyzstan, they even filmed the movie “How to Marry Gu Jun Pe” in 2011 with a budget of \$ 20,000 [25].

There is also a new wave of influence from Seoul: over the past three years, according to the South Korean embassy, the number of South Koreans entering

Kyrgyzstan has grown by 30%. K-poppers (fans and performers of Korean pop hits) are not shy about showing love for Korean idols. In Kyrgyzstan, K-pop fans not only closely follow their work, but also perform K-pop hits themselves, imitating the artists in everything.

The Korean subculture in Kyrgyzstan is not limited to music and TV series: numerous Hallyu fans are creating a market for the import of Korean clothing, cosmetics and even Korean food. The governments of the two countries are negotiating the launch of a direct flight Bishkek-Seoul. South Korea is also helping Kyrgyzstan move its public service system online and is providing a loan to Bishkek to modernize a public hospital. However, Korean investors are still investing cautiously in Kyrgyzstan - mainly small and medium-sized businesses enter the market [23].

Furthermore, like in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyz youngsters are creating their own k-pop groups calling it Z-pop and Kg-pop. Compared to 2015, the level of popularity of k-pop in Kyrgyzstan has grown significantly. There are people teaching dances, and quite popular Kyrgyz groups have appeared [23].

Uzbekistan. Korean popular culture has reached to our neighbor Uzbekistan as well. However, the distraction of k-pop is not like in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. The Embassy of the Republic of Korea in the Republic of Uzbekistan together with the fan club "K-POP Association in Uzbekistan" conducted a regional tour "2019-K-POP World Festival in Uzbekistan" in Uzbekistan. This kind of fest has been conducted for 8 years in Uzbekistan. This shows that K-POP or Korean contemporary music is gaining popularity every year. The number of fans of this musical genre is growing at an incredible progression. The Association

of Korean Businessmen in the Republic of Uzbekistan, headed by the Head Mr. Pak Si Nam, which in every possible way contributes to the Korean business operating in the Republic of Uzbekistan, presented all the participants with music albums of the world's most famous K-POP groups "BTS" and "Black Pink". Here, we can observe the active participation of Korean diaspora in Uzbekistan in promoting its cultural values within Uzbekistan [27].

K-Pop is the locomotive of Hallyu's popularity in Uzbekistan, the main stars of which are Infinity, Miss A, B2ST, EXO, Airlie, etc. K-Pop is especially popular with young people and students aged 15 to 25 who are learning Korean. In 2013, at the World K-Pop Festival, which was attended by representatives of about 50 countries, a group from Uzbekistan Aladdin (a female group of 5 people) received the award "For the best performance" [28]. The members of this group are also very popular in Uzbekistan, which in turn increases the interest of Uzbek youth in Korean cultural events.

Turkmenistan. The Embassy of the Republic of Korea in Turkmenistan has been holding the Korea Cultural Week annually from 2016 [29]. Every time the event is held, rapidly growing interest in Korean culture among Turkmen people, especially young people can be witnessed. Korean Wave has just started gaining its popularity in Turkmenistan. According to fans of the k-pop group "BTS" there are hundreds of supporters and lovers of Korean pop music. However, the spread of k-pop will take time because it has been holding only by the implementation of the Korean Embassy in Turkmenistan.

Tajikistan. The spread of Korean culture, in contrast to the spontaneous Korean wave of Hallyu, occurs mainly through the efforts of employees of the

Embassy of the Republic of Korea in the Republic of Tajikistan through various cultural events. There are practically no Korean enterprises in Tajikistan, and the number of Korean citizens living is very small (about 100 people), in addition, as a result of the 1992-1997 civil war [30], a large number of Korean compatriots left the territory of Tajikistan, which severely restricts the ways of penetration of Hallyu and restrains its growth in comparison with neighboring states.

Currently, K-Pop in Tajikistan is mainly common among Korean language learners, but there is still no formation of fans or K-Pop circles. As a result of the worldwide popularity of PSY's song "Gangnam Style" in 2012, the youth of Tajikistan also showed interest in it. However, until now, residents of Tajikistan receive basic information about the Korean variety art through the Internet, and not through the broadcasting of TV channels or radio, which indicates a low level of its distribution. After the "I Tajik K-Pop Festival", which was a qualifying round for the World K-Pop Festival 2015", in 2016, the "II Tajik K-Pop Festival" was opened within the framework of the Karavan Korea-Central Asia 2016" forum, at which performances of Korean pop stars were held in support with M-107, GAMBLERZ CREW, B-boy, which received a great response from the residents of Tajikistan [30].

In this way, we can see that South Korea has managed to attract the Central Asian countries through soft leverage. And they managed to create their own national "soft power" model, capable of competing with the "soft power" of such powers as Japan, USA, Great Britain. By introducing modern technologies and innovations, Korea has managed to preserve its traditional flavor, culture and customs and through "soft power" to

spread the language and culture in Central Asia. In general, the passion for music, dramas and films contributes to the intensification of interest in the Korean language, culture, cuisine, and the state as a whole, which undoubtedly increases the symbolic capital of the Republic of Korea in the Central Asian region.

Conclusion

The Republic of Korea places a great accent on culture. Consequently, culture as one of the elements of "soft power" of South Korea is actively used by the state. As phenomenon "Korean wave" has been spreading to the world the Korean lifestyle, fashion, music, movies, cuisine, became popular everywhere. The main achievement for Korea was the formation of a positive image and the creation of its attractive brand on the world stage.

Korean industry has gained prominence due to its widespread use on the Internet. K-pop has gone from a region of a little-known Asian music genre to an incredibly popular youth subculture around the world. Hallyu fans are driven by an interest in contemporary South Korean fashion and style, which includes more than just music.

As seen in the paper the realization of Korean popular music in Central Asia is growing year by year. Young people from Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are starting their own music bands (Q-pop, Z-pop) imitating or having a heavy impact from K-pop. The majority of people, especially youth, view Korea as a new 'cool' country because of its significant influence in the minds of society. Here, we can see the developed use of soft power diplomacy of South Korea in our region.

The impact of k-pop has its own pros and cons. The good sides are that it entered the country to a new culture, cuisine, new modern market. As k-pop

becomes popular the tourist flow to South Korea also grows. Moreover, bilateral, cultural and economic relations between Korea and Central Asian states increased as well. However, where is a good, also bad things can happen. By gaining new culture, young people in CA countries could start forgetting their own culture. As youth is the future of the country itself, one of the most important goals they have to do is to promote their native culture to others.

In conclusion, South Korea was able to quickly and successfully implement its policy due to a number of factors:

- Firstly, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have a strong Korean diasporas, which are not just a living bridge between the two countries, but also an active element in the development of bilateral relations. The formed positive perception of Korea and Koreans by the population of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is one of the main factors contributing to the easy promotion of South Korean business in the republic;
- Secondly, South Korea has created the image of a technologically advanced country, a leader in solving global problems, an advanced state in the field of economic and democratic development. This appeals to the countries of Central Asia.
- The popularity of Korean culture in CA, the successful operation of human resource development centers, and active humanitarian exchanges testify to the interest of the region's residents in the Land of the Rising Sun.

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ENHANCING CONNECTIVITY OF THE COUNTRIES OF CENTRAL AND SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract. The article explores the prospects for the development of regional connectivity between Central and South Asian countries, analyzing the initiatives and projects being implemented in the spheres of energy and transit-transport cooperation. Special attention is paid to understanding the direction in which the regional connectivity between Central and South Asian countries will develop in the foreseeable future.

The idea of developing regional connectivity is something familiar to the two regions. Historically, the states and peoples of Central and South Asia had extensive trade ties, being an essential part of the Silk Road that connected the East with the West. In the Middle Ages, one of the pilgrimage routes from Central Asia to Hejaz passed through Afghanistan and South Asia, and there were active migration flows and cultural exchanges between the peoples of the two regions.

Today, the primary condition for reuniting Central and South Asia is establishing long-term peace and stability in Afghanistan. The situation in Afghanistan, which serves as a bridge between the two mentioned regions, directly affects the security of neighboring countries and can change the course of global politics in this part of Asia towards a positive trend.

Keywords: *regional connectivity, energy and transit-transport cooperation, infrastructure projects, Central Asia, South Asia, Afghanistan.*

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ОРТАЛЫҚ ЖӘНЕ ОҢТҮСТІК АЗИЯ ЕЛДЕРІ АРАСЫНДАҒЫ АЙМАҚАРАЛЫҚ БАЙЛАНЫСТЫ ДАМУ

Мұхит Асанбаев

Аңдатпа. Бұл зерттеу жұмысында Орталық және Оңтүстік Азия елдері арасындағы аймақаралық байланыстың даму перспективалары қарастырылып, олардың арасындағы энергетика және транзиттік-көліктік ынтымақтастық салаларында жүзеге асырылып жатқан бастамалар мен жобалар талданады. Жұмыста Орталық және Оңтүстік Азия елдері арасындағы аймақаралық байланысының жақын болашақта дамитын бағыттарына ерекше көңіл бөлінген.

Аймақтық байланысты дамыту идеясы екі аймақ үшін жаңалық емес. Орталық және Оңтүстік Азия мемлекеттері мен халықтары Шығыс пен Батысты байланыстыратын Жібек жолының маңызды буыны бола отырып, тарихи тұрғыдан кең ауқымды сауда қатынастарына ие болған еді. Орта ғасырларда Орталық Азиядан Хиджазға зиярат етушілердің бір жолы Ауғанстан мен Оңтүстік Азия арқылы өтіп, екі аймақтың халықтары арасында белсенді көші-қон ағындары мен мәдени алмасулар орын алған еді.

Бүгінгі таңда Орталық және Оңтүстік Азияны біріктірудің басты шарты Ауғанстанда ұзақ мерзімді бейбітшілік пен тұрақтылықты орнату болып табылады. Осы екі аймақтың басын қосатын Ауғанстандағы жағдайдың тұрақталуы көршілес елдердің қауіпсіздігіне тікелей әсер етіп ғана қоймай, сондай-ақ Азияның осы бөлігіндегі жаһандық саясат бағытының оң динамикаға өзгеруіне үлесін қоса алады.

Түйін сөздер: аймақаралық байланыс, энергетикалық және транзиттік-көліктік ынтымақтастық, инфрақұрылымдық жобалар, Орталық Азия, Оңтүстік Азия, Ауғанстан

РАЗВИТИЕ РЕГИОНАЛЬНОЙ ВЗАИМОСВЯЗАННОСТИ СТРАН ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ И ЮЖНОЙ АЗИИ

Мухит Асанбаев

Аннотация. В данной исследовательской работе рассмотрены перспективы развития региональной взаимосвязанности стран Центральной и Южной Азии, проанализированы реализуемые между ними инициативы и проекты в сферах энергетического и транзитно-транспортного сотрудничества. Особое внимание в работе уделено пониманию того, в каких направлениях будет развиваться региональная взаимосвязанность стран Центральной и Южной Азии в обозримой перспективе.

Идея развития региональной взаимосвязанности не является чем-то

новым для двух регионов. Государства и народы Центральной и Южной Азии исторически имели обширные торговые связи, будучи важным звеном Шелкового пути, связывавшего Восток с Западом. В средние века один из путей паломников из Центральной Азии в Хиджаз пролегал через Афганистан и Южную Азию, а между народами двух регионов шли активные миграционные потоки и культурный взаимообмен.

Сегодня главным условием воссоединения Центральной и Южной Азии является установление долгосрочного мира и стабильности в Афганистане. Ситуация в Афганистане, являющегося мостом между двумя указанными регионами, непосредственным образом влияет на безопасность соседних стран и может изменить ход глобальной политики в этой части Азии в сторону позитивной динамики.

***Ключевые слова:** региональная взаимосвязанность, энергетическое и транзитно-транспортное сотрудничество, инфраструктурные проекты, Центральная Азия, Южная Азия, Афганистан.*

Introduction

The prospects for developing regional connectivity between Central and South Asian countries are closely related to the security and long-term stability in Afghanistan. However, no external actors or efforts can ensure stability in this country. It depends exclusively on the Afghan authorities and their willingness in stabilizing the situation by building a genuinely inclusive society and political structure. Only when Afghanistan steers towards sustainable development will the country have the opportunity to become an integral player in trade, transit, and interregional economic cooperation, serving as a convergence point in linking the economies of Central and South Asia.

Notably, global powers offer various initiatives to the Central Asian countries aimed at economic convergence with South Asian countries. While the United States has recently unsuccessfully attempted to promote the idea of creating shared transit and trade infrastructure for Central Asia, taking into account the concept of transforming Afghanistan,

China is now reasonably successful in promoting the Belt and Road initiative. China promises economic stability by integrating the two regions' infrastructure within the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. Regarding Russia, it aspires to dominate the states of Central Asia economically by creating an economic convergence zone in cooperation between the Eurasian Economic Union and other regions, including South Asia.

All these trends indicate that today, the establishment of regional connectivity between Central and South Asia has become one of the vectors of global policy development. Considering the new realities in Afghanistan, achieving regional connectivity involving Afghanistan is a guarantee for ensuring regional stability in Central and South Asia.

Meanwhile, years of instability and civil war in Afghanistan have separated the countries of Central Asia from South Asia. According to recent World Bank estimates, current trade between Central and South Asia remains low. Trade

between the two regions ranges from 0.2% to 4% of the total trade volume. Moreover, less than 5% of the total trade volume in Central Asia occurs within the region, while in South Asia, this figure only reaches 1.5% [1].

Nevertheless, several significant external initiatives can ensure transport and energy connectivity between Central and South Asia. Among them, there are several major infrastructure and energy projects, such as the construction of the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India gas pipeline (TAPI), the Central Asia-South Asia energy corridor (CASA 1000), and the Trans-Afghan Railway between Mazar-i-Sharif - Kabul - Peshawar.

It is important to note that connecting Central and South Asia requires political will and determination from respective governments to ease travel restrictions, visas, and trade barriers. It also necessitates cooperation between academic and policy-oriented institutes. In this regard, significant work has been accomplished by the Faculty of Political Science and Pakistan Studies at the University of Punjab in collaboration with the Konrad Adenauer Regional Programme in South Asia – an international conference on “South and Central Asia Re-Connected” was held in Lahore on May 8-10, 2023, attended by experts from Pakistan, the United Kingdom, Germany, Turkey and Central Asia. The conference extensively examined measures to reconnect Central and South Asia by developing trade, commercial, cultural, educational, and tourist connections.

Similarly, with the support of the Konrad Adenauer Regional Programme in South Asia, two more international conferences were organized: one by the Faculty of International Relations

at the University of Karachi – “South Asia and Regional Connectivity in the 21st Century”, Karachi, November 21-22, 2023, and the other by the School of Politics and International Relations at Quaid-e-Azam University – “Pakistan Afghanistan Geoeconomics Opportunities and Geopolitical Constraints”, Islamabad, November 24, 2023.

The discussions, conclusions and recommendations of the above-mentioned international conferences have been used in the preparation of this article, as one of the objectives of the article was to bring it to stakeholders and policymakers. This message is needed to initiate practical steps to enhance the links between Central and South Asia.

Research Methods and Results

The article utilized the theory of economic integration, but economic prospects are regarded as the ultimate goal without linking them to the issue of political unification. The article also uses several principles of the economic connectivity theory, focusing on exploring the specifics of the regions under consideration, encompassing both economic and political aspects. In particular, employing the theory of economic connectivity in this article justifies the necessity of implementing a policy aimed at connecting the economies of Central and South Asia. This task remains pertinent for Central Asia, which needs more access to global markets, with countries needing more regional connectivity with other regions. Similarly, this task holds significance for South Asian markets, where the need for access to raw materials increases each year, and its resolution could aid in addressing economic and political issues

at national and international levels.

At the same time, it should be presumed that there is no neat single operational definition of connectivity that has been widely adopted. Therefore, we set out different approaches to definition in this article, starting with historical approach and a general definition, then breaking this down into the key analytical components of connectivity, and finally identifying possible approaches, such as systematic and comparative analysis to measuring them in practice. The historical method aided in identifying the primary directions of development regarding the regional interconnectedness between Central and South Asia. The systemic and comparative research delineated similarities and differences in the development of Central and South Asian countries and allowed to examine various facts and trends reflected within them.

Interaction between Central and South Asian countries in the energy and transit-transport cooperation.

As Balassa states, political motives may prompt the first step in economic integration, but economic integration also reacts on the political sphere. Similarly, if the initial motives are economic, the need for political unity can arise at a later stage. And besides, taking advantage of inter-regional trade potential also necessitates a political decision-making and acting on any multilateral political issue contributes to an economic matter [2]. In other words, regional connectivity encompasses both economic and political issues, wherein political willingness does propagate economic gains as the ultimate goals.

Paraphrasing Balassa, we must regard the economic prosperity and political stability in Central and South Asia, and the re-establishment of Afghanistan as a

natural bridge between these two regions as political goals that would be served by developing regional connectivity between Central and South Asian states.

At the same time achieving the goal of a clear definition of connectivity is the more important because, without it, no meaningful analysis of its impact on transport and the economy of a particular region or regions can be undertaken. Fundamentally, connectivity relates to the ability and ease with which destinations may be reached from potential points of origin and vice versa. It captures how they are linked, both spatially and temporally. The more destinations that can be accessed, the greater the potential to supply transport services between these destinations—and the more frequent the services to the destinations in question, the greater the level of connectivity. However, the value of connectivity is affected by other characteristics, such as the relative importance of the destinations served and the cost of accessing them. It is not straightforward to incorporate all these factors into a single definition [3].

Taking into account the above-mentioned it should be noted that there is significant economic justification for developing regional connectivity between Central and South Asian countries, which possess complementary economic characteristics, wherein their economies do not compete but rather supplement each other. For instance, improving ties with South Asia will enhance access to international markets for energy-rich Central Asia, which lacks access to the sea. These connections will provide energy-thirsty South Asia with access to substantial natural resources in Central Asia while also opening new transit routes to the global market. It is no coincidence that the list of currently

implemented energy infrastructure projects aimed at connecting the two regions instills optimism. These include the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline, with a capacity of 33 billion cubic meters per year. This pipeline is planned to run from the Turkmen Galkynysh gas field through Afghan cities Herat and Kandahar, Pakistani cities Quetta and Multan, to Fazilka in western India. Construction started in the Turkmen section in December 2015, and the Afghan section was laid in February 2018. Organizations such as the Asian Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, Islamic Development Bank, Saudi Development Fund, and others have expressed intentions to participate in financing TAPI. The overall project cost is estimated at \$8-10 billion [4].

Another significant project is the construction of power transmission lines along the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan route. According to Turkmen experts, this project is expected to be launched in approximately two years. Currently, the Turkmen side has completed the route's power transmission from the Mariy State Power Station to the Watan Dam and from the Afghan city of Mazar-i-Sharif to Kabul. The Afghan side plans to finish the work on its section within the next two years.

A notable initiative was the commencement of the Central Asia-South Asia Electricity Transmission Project or CASA 1000, which will transport surplus electricity from hydroelectric power stations in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to Afghanistan and Pakistan over 1270 km [5].

Furthermore, Russia and Pakistan are currently considering the project of

a major gas pipeline called the Pakistan Stream, envisioning the construction of a pipeline with a capacity of 12.4 billion cubic meters per year. This pipeline will facilitate gas deliveries from the southern LNG terminals in Pakistan to the northern region, serving significant industrial consumers [6].

Russia is considering three options as sources of gas for the Pakistan Stream project: 1. Gas supplies through Central Asia from Russia to Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan; 2. Constructing a gas pipeline along the shortened route of Iran-Pakistan, for which Russia is prepared to extend necessary support and participation based on existing swap agreements between Russia and Iran; 3. The Russian side has repeatedly noted Russia's participation in the TAPI project as a politically attractive alternative [7].

Considering that Iran and Russia remain under long-term sanction pressure from the USA, the most viable option in the long term is the route for delivering Russian gas through the Central Asian gas pipeline system. Specific agreements can be reached based on this option since the US itself has been seeking to integrate the economies of Central and South Asia for many years.

The agreement signed in February 2021 between Uzbekistan, Afghanistan, and Pakistan for the construction of the Mazar-i-Sharif – Kabul – Peshawar railway is of significant importance. This transportation corridor, known as the Trans-Afghan railway, spanning 573 km, aims to connect the EU, Russia, and Central Asian countries with Afghanistan, Pakistan, India, and Southeast Asian nations. Implementing this \$5 billion project will reduce transportation time for goods, for instance, from Uzbekistan

to Pakistan, from 30-35 days to 10-15 days. Cargo transportation via the new railway can decrease transportation costs between Central Asian countries and Pakistan by 30-35% [8].

Additionally, Uzbekistan and Afghanistan have recently agreed on the reconstruction of the Afghan section of the Hairaton – Naibabad – Mazar-i-Sharif railway, which is expected to be carried out by specialists from Uzbekistan Temir Yullari presumably starting from December 2023.

In turn, South Asia has strong interest in the Central Asian countries since the latter are rich with natural resources. In particular, Central Asia's oil and gas resources are the closest and most economical response to energy-deficient South Asia. In addition, in the second half of the twenty-first century, South Asian countries will need assistance from Tajikistan in accessing freshwater resources, which account for 4 per cent of the world's hydropower resources and 53 per cent of Central Asian resources [9].

It is no coincidence that the two major South Asian countries, India and Pakistan, have consistently pursued policies aimed at connecting with the Central Asian countries, but solely on the basis of their interests.

For instance, geopolitics of transport communications forces India to actively promote with the countries of Central Asia the use of the Iranian port of Chabahar within the international transport corridor «North-South», whereas within the framework of the SCO, India will promote its access to the free trade agreement with the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), with a view to reaching a free trade agreement that will directly link the Central Asian member

states of the EAEU with India.

Meanwhile the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), which is considered to be a flagship corridor under Chinese “The Belt and Road Initiative” [10], might be the foremost regional integration initiative not only between China and Pakistan, but with Central Asian states as well. The point is that the CPEC may provide a gateway for Pakistan to enhance its trading relationships with Central Asian states and Gwadar Port will provide the means. Thus, CPEC may benefit Pakistan in terms of transporting the goods from Central Asia more easily and gain competitiveness in regional and global markets.

Enhancing Geopolitical and Economic Connectivity between Central and South Asia.

The convergence of these two regions entails significant geopolitical and economic advantages. Central Asia is surrounded by Russia and China, which dominate the region's imports and exports. Establishing overland corridors through Afghanistan will provide Central Asian countries access to Iran in one direction and to Pakistan, India, and the vast Indo-Pacific region in another. It will also present Central Asia with an alternative to its inefficient and costly routes via China to access the global market and reduce its isolation and dependence on Russia and China.

In turn, regional connections will help revitalize the Afghan economy by integrating Afghanistan into the largest regional market in India. Enhanced infrastructure will allow countries to trade a variety of goods via land routes, which are more cost-effective than existing air routes. The economic ties arising from this new infrastructure will also encourage collaboration between

South and Central Asian countries with Afghanistan, both in the public and private sectors [11].

Pakistan will also benefit from a peaceful Afghanistan. A direct overland route to Central Asia through Afghanistan will provide Pakistan with a more efficient and convenient alternative to its current routes via Iran or China. Through this connection, Pakistan could gain access to new product markets and strengthen ties with Central Asian countries. For instance, Pakistan could establish sustainable export channels for its agricultural produce to the Central Asian countries.

Thus, it involves a geopolitical shift in transport communications that will significantly impact the logistics sector of Central and South Asia and the entire Eurasian continent. The changing dynamics of global economic activity are making a noticeable shift, with the center of gravity moving towards Asia and the Indo-Pacific region. These regions will shape the development of the global economy in the long term.

China, Pakistan, and India are the most active players in this arena. Beijing strongly promotes the creation of a transport corridor from China to the Pakistani port of Gwadar via the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor (CPEC), aiming to achieve several objectives simultaneously: establish a shorter path for its exports to the West, ensure a reliable route for transporting Middle Eastern hydrocarbons to China, and facilitate the development of its western territories.

China is actively involved in creating a direct communication route from Afghanistan to China. On November 29 of this year, China launched the construction of the Wakhan Corridor

in the Afghan Badakhshan province, directly linking the two countries [12]. Shortly, China aims to revive projects in the Mes Aynak Valley, which holds vast copper reserves to the south of Kabul, and oil drilling in northern Afghanistan (under a 2008 agreement between the then Afghan government and the Chinese state-owned enterprise Metallurgical Group Corporation, involving a \$3 billion, 30-year concession that was suspended due to security concerns). Consequently, China has embarked on expanding the CPEC by including Afghanistan, formally initiated after Afghanistan's Minister of Commerce and Industry, Haji Nuruddin Azizi, participated in the Belt and Road Summit in Beijing in October 2023 [13].

Developing Gwadar Port and the Karakoram Highway for Pakistan could become a starting point for directing its goods towards the Eurasian region. The Karakoram Highway already holds significant interregional importance. This route's uniqueness lies in being one of the shortest overland connections linking South Asian countries to Kazakhstan via China and Kyrgyzstan's adjacent territories. The primary destination is Almaty, Kazakhstan's principal financial and economic center. Today, this highway has the capacity to support substantial trade flows from Pakistani seaports in the Indian Ocean to Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries. According to the most optimistic estimates, the road from Islamabad to Almaty via this route typically takes 6-8 days, significantly shorter than existing alternative routes. Notably, the Karakoram Highway bypasses Afghanistan, considerably enhancing the safety and security of cargo transportation and exchanges.

The Iranian port of Chabahar, not

subject to US sanctions, could serve as a convergence point for India. India's active involvement in this infrastructure project would potentially grant it access to natural resources and markets in Afghanistan and Central Asia. It would also supply goods to Eurasian markets through the North-South route, including its eastern branch through Kazakhstan's territory.

Overall, the new initiatives in regional cooperation within the interaction of South and Central Asian countries represent a rational chance to shield against external economic, political, and ideological influences and competition. Establishing a sustainable land corridor for transit trade between South and Central Asian countries and attracting a substantial flow of international transportation could potentially create conditions for constructing and expanding the Trans-Afghan railway network. This network should provide access to Pakistani seaports - Karachi, Qasim, and Gwadar- and link the South Asian railway system with the Central Asian and Eurasian railway systems. All this would contribute to reviving Afghanistan's historical role as a bridge connecting Europe and Asia via the shortest overland route.

Conclusion

The development of regional connectivity between the economies of Central and South Asia will be a lengthy and intricate process, primarily dependent on the ability of Afghan authorities to ensure long-term peace and security in Afghanistan and its neighboring border areas. To achieve this objective, Kabul must take concrete steps towards building an inclusive society within the country.

Establishing peace and political stability in Afghanistan would signify communication and connectivity stability for Central and South Asian countries. It would enable regional and international institutions to fully engage in enhancing and reconstructing Afghanistan's transit and transportation infrastructure to link the economies of Central and South Asia. Cross-border infrastructure projects and growing relations between Central and South Asian countries have the potential to swiftly revitalize natural trade, economic, and transit transport routes between the two regions.

The primary challenge today lies in translating the concept of connectivity between Central and South Asian countries into practical policies aimed at achieving tangible short-term results. First and foremost, the nations within these two regions should implement comprehensive measures to eliminate both tariff and non-tariff trade barriers, resulting in reduced transportation time and significant cost reductions.

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ANALYSIS OF THE PROBLEMS OF "GENDER EQUALITY" IN THE COUNTRIES OF THE MIDDLE EAST AND CENTRAL ASIA

<https://doi.org/10.52536/2788-5909.2023-4.04>

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Abstract. The article presents an analysis of the current state of gender equality in the countries of the Middle East, as well as the problems of implementing gender policy in the region and the prospects for its development. The main method in this work is the analysis of content data of available electronic resources. The authors analyzed socio-cultural and religious factors in the context of historical development, and also carried out a comparative analysis of the state of gender equality in the countries of the region and ways to resolve problems arising from discrimination based on gender. A analysis of the gender situation in the region is given in order to give a general assessment of the state of gender inequality. In addition, some aspects of gender inequality in the countries of Central Asia are analyzed. In the course of the work done, the need to revise the main provisions of the gender policy of the countries and its modernization was identified in order to achieve sustainable gender development.

Keywords: *gender equality, Middle East, Central Asia, content data, discrimination, gender policy.*

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ТАЯУ ШЫҒЫС ЖӘНЕ ОРТАЛЫҚ АЗИЯ ЕЛДЕРІНІҢ «ГЕНДЕРЛІК ТЕНДІК» МӘСЕЛЕЛЕРІН ТАЛДАУ

Айгерим Турханова, Юлия Лагуткина

Аңдатпа. Мақалада Таяу Шығыс елдеріндегі гендерлік теңдіктің қазіргі жай-күйіне талдау ұсынылған, сондай-ақ өңірде гендерлік саясатты іске асыру проблемалары және оның даму перспективалары қарастырылған. Бұл жұмыстағы негізгі әдіс-қол жетімді электрондық ресурстардың деректерін талдау. Авторлар тарихи даму контекстіндегі әлеуметтік-мәдени және діни факторларды талдады, сондай-ақ аймақ елдеріндегі гендерлік теңдіктің жай-күйіне және гендер белгісі бойынша кемсітушілік негізінде туындайтын проблемаларды реттеу тәсілдеріне салыстырмалы талдау жүргізді. Гендерлік теңсіздіктің жай-күйіне жалпы баға беру үшін аймақтағы гендерлік жағдайға талдау келтірілген. Сонымен қатар, Орталық Азия елдеріндегі гендерлік теңсіздіктің кейбір аспектілері талданады. Атқарылған жұмыс барысында орнықты гендерлік дамуға қол жеткізу мақсатында елдердің гендерлік саясатының негізгі ережелерін қайта қарау және оны жаңғырту қажеттігі анықталды.

Түйін сөздер: гендерлік теңдік, Орталық Азия, Таяу Шығыс, контент-деректер, кемсітушілік, гендерлік саясат.

АНАЛИЗ ПРОБЛЕМАТИКИ «ГЕНДЕРНОГО РАВЕНСТВА» В СТРАНАХ БЛИЖНЕГО ВОСТОКА И СТРАН ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

Айгерим Турханова, Юлия Лагуткина

Аннотация. В статье представлен анализ современного состояния гендерного равенства в странах Ближнего Востока, а также, рассмотрены проблемы реализации гендерной политики в регионе и перспективы ее развития. Основным методом в данной работе выступает анализ контент-данных доступных электронных ресурсов. Также, авторами, были проанализированы социокультурные и религиозные факторы в контексте исторического развития, а также, проведен сравнительный анализ состояния гендерного равенства в странах региона и способов урегулирования проблем, возникающих на почве дискриминации по признаку гендера. Приведен анализ гендерной ситуации в регионе, для того чтобы дать общую оценку состояния гендерного неравенства. Кроме того, проанализированы некоторые аспекты гендерного неравенства в странах Центральной Азии. В ходе проделанной работы была выявлена

необходимость пересмотра основных положений гендерной политики стран и ее модернизация, с целью достижения устойчивого гендерного развития.

Ключевые слова: Гендерное равенство, Центральная Азия, Ближний Восток, контент-данные, дискриминация, гендерная политика.

Introduction

At present, the issue of gender inequality has firmly entrenched itself in all spheres of human activity, significantly impacting the economy and social development of countries. Modern progressive society continually makes new attempts to establish gender equality to achieve one of the central UN Millennium Development Goals [1]. However, the gender situation in many countries remains unstable and marked by increasing discrimination based on gender and violations of fundamental human rights and freedoms. Inconsistent gender norms, shaped over many years and currently sparking numerous discussions, have come to the forefront, making it a relevant research topic. Despite the active engagement of existing international women's organizations, the issue of gender inequality annually takes the lead in discussions, revealing new consequences requiring solutions, especially pertinent in countries where the dominance of traditions and religious dogmas prevails in society.

The problem of gender inequality in the Middle East attracts numerous researchers since the situation regarding the observance of fundamental human rights and freedoms without gender discrimination is particularly critical in the region under study. In many Middle Eastern countries (Syria, Sudan, Egypt, Bahrain, Iran, Iraq, etc.), the rights of the female segment of society are still limited by religious or traditional frameworks. Each year, thousands of women in Middle Eastern countries

suffer social and legal injustice because of gender-based discrimination. In some countries, girls are deprived of the right to attend schools on par with boys, and adult women face obstacles to enrolling in universities. Even if they acquire the right to education, as in the United Arab Emirates, they struggle to pursue their professional interests after graduating from university, as employers refuse to hire them due to their gender.

As is known, a series of socio-political changes and processes (author's note: the 'Arab Spring,' democratic transformations, etc.) have occurred in the Middle Eastern countries over the past decade, which could not but affect the gender-related situation. The contemporary state of gender equality is reflected in the content data of electronic resources, which include official websites of international organizations and various institutions, as well as articles published in the online space. Analyzing both electronic and traditional media concerning gender issues allowed the authors to provide an evaluative analysis of the current state of gender equality in Middle Eastern countries.

The second part of this article involves an analysis of gender inequality in the countries of Central Asia. The authors did not intend to conduct a comparative analysis between the Middle East and Central Asia regions within the framework of studying gender inequality issues, as these regions differ in their cultural, historical, and social developmental definitions. Nevertheless, we found it interesting to analyze certain

aspects of gender inequality problems in the countries of Central Asia and present a brief analysis of this issue. Despite the differences between the regions, the ‘problem’ remains the same. Therefore, this article will provide a quick analysis of the gender situation in the countries of Central Asia. The authors hope that future research (articles, monographs, post-doctoral research, etc.), including this analysis of gender issues in Central Asia, will begin more extensive study.

Research Methods

The primary research method chosen was the method of internet content analysis, using which the authors of the article collected various data on the state of gender equality in the countries of the Middle East and Central Asia. Additionally, the authors applied methods including retrospective analysis, synthesis, deduction, and induction, which enabled an assessment of the current state of gender equality in the Middle Eastern countries. An overview analysis of the issues in the Central Asian Republics (CAR) was also conducted.

Discussion of Results

Overall, the question of the current state of gender equality in the region with a predominantly Islamic population is highly relevant. Based on the data obtained during the analysis of Professor Leyla Ahmed’s research, the following politico-economic factors influencing the development of gender policy in Middle Eastern countries can be outlined: violation of norms of ratified conventions and accepted commitments; inadequate implementation of gender policy in the region’s countries; domestic laws beyond international law that limit women’s opportunities; low representation of women in top

managerial positions in the political and economic spheres; high levels of gender segregation in the professional sphere; gender imbalances in the labor market – barriers to employment; maintenance of the gender pay gap; and consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As observed, gender inequality can be found in all major spheres of societal development, leading to regional imbalances. The social sphere is the most vulnerable in the conditions of contemporary realities because the primary reason for the absence of gender equality in Middle Eastern countries lies in the preservation of traditionalism and the influence of religious beliefs. Additionally, the role of gender stereotypes and sociocultural beliefs is increasing.

For the Middle East countries, achieving gender parity has been challenging for many years. Primarily, this is due to Islamic fundamentalism, which has solidified the patriarchal social structure [3]. Additionally, the intensified influence of gender and cultural stereotypes slows down the region’s social development process. Consequently, entrenched notions of gender roles persist, where women are primarily depicted as homemakers. Moreover, polygamy is widespread in many countries, where the overwhelming majority of women, due to religious convictions, are compelled to wear hijabs and care for the continuity of the lineage [4, p.48].

Some researchers note that Islamic patriarchy is evident in the reluctance of Muslim states to sign the United Nations Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women – without any reservations, most of which concern women’s equality within the family. For example, there are family laws, also known as personal status

codes, in all Arab countries, which limit women in such crucial aspects of social life as marriage, divorce, child custody, and inheritance [4, p.52]. Subsequently, due to the enduring importance of values such as family honor and modesty, women’s engagement in non-agricultural or unpaid labor is associated with social stigma, while paid work is not perceived as part of women’s role. Additionally, women are predominantly engaged in “female” positions, in most cases without the opportunity for career advancement.

Furthermore, in most countries of the region, a husband has the full right to prohibit his wife from working or engaging in any activity.

Analyzing the legal norms of the countries of the Middle East, we relied on available data from Internet resources. As a result, we obtained data on the following countries belonging to the Middle East region: Kuwait, Algeria, United Arab Emirates, and Morocco. The results are shown in Table 1.

Countries of the Middle East	
Kuwait	1. Draft law on combating family violence. 2. Law No. 6/2010 on employment in the private sector includes the following definition of an employee: "a man or a woman who performs manual or intellectual work for an employer, under his supervision and control, in exchange for a wage." The specified law includes an entire section dedicated to women's employment issues and lays down the legal basis for expanding women's rights and opportunities. Article 26 of this law states, "Men and women receive equal pay for equal work." Thus, Kuwait fulfills its obligations regarding equal remuneration for work of equal value by its accession to Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention No. 111 of the International Labour Organization.
Algeria	The Constitution and various codes guarantee equality between women and men.
United Arab Emirates	In 2019, the UAE government issued a federal decree to ensure gender equality in the judiciary system. According to UAE legislation, female employees performing the same functions as men receive equal pay. They are also free to choose the desired position.
Morocco	Inclusion of provisions in favor of gender equality in the new Constitution of this country, adopted in July 2011. Article 19 explicitly establishes equality between men and women in the enjoyment of civil, political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights. The new Constitution also effectively introduces the principle of gender equality in several articles, mentioning the government's obligation to create conditions for achieving equality of all genders and equal representation of men and women in all spheres of activity and their equal access to decision-making bodies.

Table 1. Regulatory Acts in the Middle Eastern Countries (regarding gender issues)

Conclusion to the table: Based on the data from the four presented Middle Eastern countries, we conclude that gender issues are addressed in some countries within the framework of the Constitution, as well as norms regulating labor rights, equal pay, etc.

Despite the legislative acts in some Middle Eastern countries regulating women's rights, traditions still play a significant role in oppressing women's rights and their social status. For instance, female genital mutilation is a cultural practice that represents an extreme form of discrimination against women and girls¹. This practice, while receiving dubious endorsement in Islam, remains largely unknown in most Muslim countries. However, it is still performed in rural areas of both Muslim and non-Muslim parts of the region. Experts agree that this tradition originated from pre-Islamic beliefs and among tribal peoples. However, female mutilation in some countries is justified by religious beliefs, the validity of which lacks explicit confirmation. Presently, female genital mutilation is practiced in over 30 countries worldwide, primarily in the Middle East and Africa.

Another socio-cultural issue is the so-called "honor killing."² in countries like Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia, Jordan, and others, which have no grounds whatsoever. Besides the fact that potential perpetrators often go unpunished, justifying their actions by claiming the girl has dishonored the family, the victim's body is often buried in an unmarked

grave, visiting which is also considered shameful. According to data from The Guardian news portal, the number of "honor crimes," including rape, death threats, and assaults, increased from 884 in 2016 to 1599 in 2020, showing an 81% rise.

It can be observed that since the early 1990s, countries in the Middle Eastern region have made significant progress in reducing the gender gap in education and access to healthcare. Many young girls now have the opportunity to receive education and free medical assistance. However, these achievements have yet to lead to a more equal role for women in political and economic life. Thus, ensuring gender equality is essential to democratizing society and improving the population's lives. In a broader sense, it means providing equal rights and opportunities for both men and women, excluding any form of discrimination. In other words, gender equality is the foundation of stable social development. According to Article 1 of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, equality between both genders is their fundamental right to life, which necessitates addressing gender issues [6].

Notwithstanding the implemented changes, the countries of the region still show a significant gender pay gap and unequal economic opportunities. Each year, the level of unemployment among women increases, and women face various barriers to employment. According to the National Organization for Women, in 2019, the unemployment rate among young women in the Middle East reached 38.5%, which is twice the rate among men. Additionally, the average lifespan of women in many countries is half that of

¹ Female genital mutilation includes all procedures that involve altering or injuring the female genitalia for non-medical purposes. This practice is recognized as a violation of women's and girls' rights on an international level.

² 'Honor killing' is a crime, the murder of a family member, often (but not necessarily) female, committed by relatives due to bringing shame or dishonor upon the family. Shame usually refers to forbidden sexual acts within that culture: adultery, premarital sex, rape, and homosexual relationships, among others, as well as apostasy.

men. For instance, in Kuwait, Lebanon, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates, the birth rate for each woman is less than two [7].

Analyzing statistical data, it's evident that there has been an increase in the gender gap worldwide over the past few years. Women in the Arab region, on average, find themselves in a more unfavorable economic, political, and social position. When considering the level of education and literacy among women in Middle Eastern countries in the context of urbanization and the region's oil wealth, there is a tendency toward relatively low indicators, especially among the adult female population. Women are also underrepresented in managerial and leadership positions, have limited economic and political opportunities, and face decision-making obstacles. For instance, only two countries – Israel and Tunisia – have reduced the gender gap by more than 20%, while the rest still need to overcome the 10% threshold for gender equality [7].

The influence of stereotypical gender roles instilled in women from childhood, which act as barriers to obtaining education and contribute to intolerance of domestic violence and harassment in the workplace, is also significant. According to UN Women for 2021, every third woman in the Middle East became a victim of physical and emotional violence. The situation worsened during the COVID-19 pandemic, with increased cases of murders and gender-based rapes [8]. According to CNN's official data, women's rights activist Hanan Al-Barassi was shot dead in Benghazi in 2020, and prominent woman politician Sheham Sergiwa was abducted from her home in 2019.

According to the Arab Barometer³, non-partisan research network, the region also experiences prevalent sexual harassment. Based on a 2019 survey, 39% of women respondents reported being subjected to sexual harassment in public places [9].

As noted earlier, the Middle Eastern region is known for its adherence to religious values and socio-cultural norms, which partly accounts for the high level of sex and gender-identity-based discrimination. Professional segregation is predominantly developed here, with high levels of gender pay gaps. Countries with lower levels of development tend to be at greater risk of gender inequality, considering that socio-economic poverty disproportionately affects women and girls. These issues are increasingly drawing public attention and often become the focus of the media, which, in one way or another, influences the situation in the region. In this context, it is advisable to conduct a comprehensive analysis of content data from electronic resources and identify their level of impact on addressing gender inequality issues [10, p.7].

Today, the media are one of the main tools shaping public opinion and creating a general picture of what is happening. They significantly influence people's behavior and actions, contributing to the widespread coverage of current issues. According to data from the Consortium of Women's Non-Governmental Organizations website, negative attitudes towards Arab women on social media amounted to 79%, with 81% of the content consisting of gender stereotypes

³ The Arab Barometer is a non-partisan research network that provides an understanding of ordinary citizens' social, political, and economic views and values across the Arab world. It conducts public opinion surveys in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region since 2006.

and negative comments about the position of women in the region, creating an unfavorable image for Middle Eastern countries [11].

However, the influence of the media also has positive aspects. For example, according to a recent survey, an average of 54% of social media users in 8 Middle Eastern countries report that they have become more tolerant because of using social media [12]. In addition, social media contributes to the rapid dissemination of necessary information and, consequently, swift mass reaction. One notable example is the Instagram page of Queen Rania of Jordan, where she actively promotes ideas of equality and expanding opportunities for the female population of the country [13].

An essential factor in implementing gender policies is the modernization of society in all spheres of life, which will subsequently impact the population's living standards. However, considering many wealthy countries in the Middle East (such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Kuwait, Bahrain, etc.), there's a trend where stable economic status doesn't necessarily correlate with sustainable gender development. Moreover, these countries exhibit a significant gender imbalance in top leadership positions. According to the WEF (World Economic Forum), the region's average score for the political rights and opportunities sub-index is 10.2%, the worst among all regions [14, p.54]. According to the ranking of countries by the percentage of women in parliament for 2018, Middle Eastern countries have the lowest representation of women in parliamentary positions. For example, in Jordan's parliament, women constitute 15.4%, with 7.5% in Bahrain and 9.8% in Qatar. There are no women in the Yemeni parliament at all [15]. Overall, the average representation of women in

parliament is 15%, the lowest among all regions.

The resolution of gender issues is influenced by the fact that countries in the region are at different stages of economic, social, and demographic transformations. Therefore, it cannot be asserted that the gender situation in the region is solely built on religious and sociocultural grounds. There's even an opinion that high revenues from oil sales contribute to the formation of a conservative view of women's societal roles, and repressive political movements further exacerbate the situation. This is evident in the gender gap between countries with the best and worst indicators in the region, which is a significant 28% in the education level sub-index and more than 2% in health and survival indicators. The differences in gender parity are equally substantial in terms of economic involvement and opportunities, as well as the expansion of political rights, with an average difference of 32% in the gender gap between countries in the region [16]. All these factors lead to a severe wage gap, which, according to the Global Gender Gap Index's annual assessment, reached 61.1% over the past five years [17]. Thus, the Middle East region has the lowest score among all regions. If the gender situation remains unchanged, it will take approximately 150 years to eliminate the gender gap in this region.

Referring to the numbers provided by the World Economic Forum in 2020, gender equality has not significantly changed over the past 20 years. Israel, the country with the best indicators, ranks 64th in the overall index, while the rest of the region's countries did not even make it into the top 100 list. It is worth noting that low female involvement and unjustified gender discrimination against them are specific to the labor markets in

Middle East countries [18]. This affects the region's economic growth and the social cohesion of the population. For instance, the average regional score for the sub-index of economic participation and opportunities is 42.5%, which is the second-highest after South Asia (36.5%). In many countries, less than half of women are engaged in the labor market. In six countries, this figure is even below 20%, including Yemen, where the female labor force participation rate of 6.3% is the lowest in the world. Additionally, women's estimated earned income averages 28% of what men earn. In six countries, this figure is less than one-fifth [19].

The current state of gender equality in Middle Eastern countries can also be viewed through the lens of the development of feminism and activist movements advocating for women's and minorities rights. Due to several reasons, including resource scarcity and high levels of accountability, the actions of the social movement were covert and largely undocumented. The Iranian Revolution of 1979 is considered a pivotal point in establishing feminism in this region, prompting the development of

feminist movements. Subsequently, in the 1990s, the Zanan magazine became an influential platform for social justice and gender equality for Muslim women in the Middle East [4].

The beginning of the 21st century brought about significant changes in the development of feminism. In 2003, Iranian lawyer, writer, and educator Shirin Ebadi received the Nobel Peace Prize for her active involvement in promoting democracy and defending human rights in Iran, particularly those of women and children. This event was pivotal in the history of feminist movements, as Ebadi became the first Muslim woman and the first Iranian to receive this award. Following this, campaigns were initiated to repeal discriminatory laws against women, large-scale human rights movements emerged, and international protests were staged to defend women's fundamental freedoms — notably, the online initiative 'Women2Drive' aimed to express discontent regarding the ban on women driving. Moreover, women throughout the region actively participated in events from 2010 to 2012, asserting their civil stance and vocally advocating for their rights [20].

Figure 1. Data on Gender Gaps in some Middle Eastern Countries as of 2020.

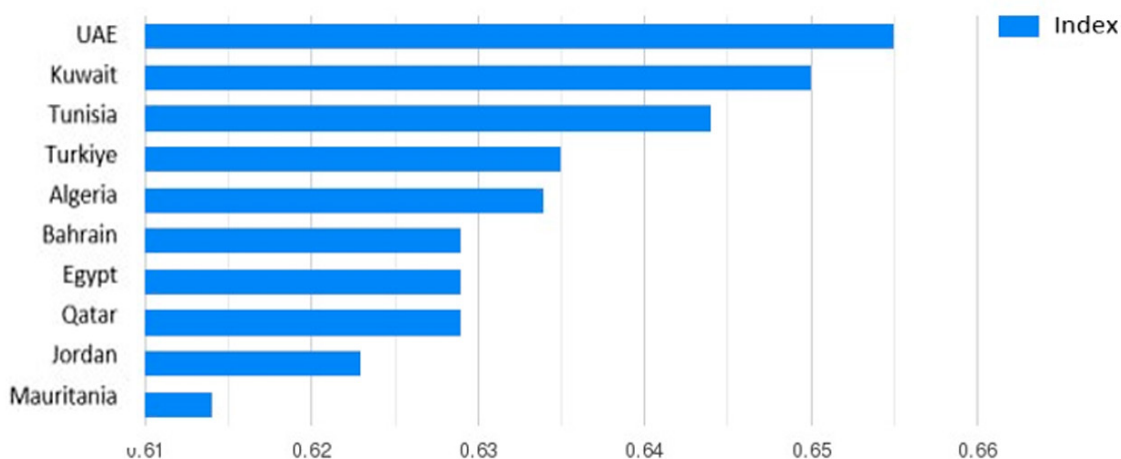


Figure 1. The diagram presents data on gender gaps in some Middle Eastern countries in 2020, where an index of 1 indicates a high level of gender equality, while ‘0’ signifies the absence of gender equality altogether.

Source: Gender Gap Index according to the Humanitarian Research Portal of the World Economic Forum [21].

Today, due to the active position of regional and local organizations advocating for gender equality and women’s rights, we can observe positive shifts in expanding the rights and opportunities for women across the entire region [22]. However, it is essential to consider that achieving gender parity occurs unevenly. For example, comparing the two countries in the region with the lowest and highest gender gap index (Mauritania and the UAE, respectively), it can be noticed that the distribution of equality between men and women varies due to different economic and social indicators. Additionally, according to the ranking of countries based on gender equality levels [23], it is evident that the overall status of gender equality in the region remains similar.

Thus, we have examined the issue of gender inequality in Middle Eastern countries. However, it is stereotypical to assume that violations of women’s and men’s rights based on gender aspects are more prevalent only in Muslim nations with deep traditions and firm moral motives. Inequality is typically observed between the rich and poor, as those with financial means can solve problems, while others lacking economic power cannot resolve household or other issues. However, paradoxically, one of the most acute and pertinent problems of recent decades in the 21st century is the issue of gender inequality.

Representatives of the female gender, being an integral part of modern society, gain education, acquire and develop professional skills, contribute to societal

development, hold official positions, and make decisions of national importance. However, it hasn’t always been this way, and even today, unfortunately, not all women have these opportunities. What is the reason for this, and what are the current trends in the issues related to women’s rights in Central Asia? It is important that despite the prevailing opinion about the perceived lack of demand for scientific research in the field of gender inequality in Central Asian Republics, scholars have conducted significant research in the area of gender policy in Central Asia.

Researchers such as S. Shakirova, in her article ‘Women’s and Gender Issues in Scientific Periodicals in Kazakhstan: A Quantitative Analysis’ [24], examine 100 articles, including those in foreign languages, analyzing gender issues and the level of academic writing in articles. Equally interesting is the research within R. Sarbayeva’s doctoral dissertation on Gender Policy of International Organizations – UN and OSCE: Historical and Contemporary Aspects [25], as well as the works of Yerimpasheva A.T., Lipovka A.V., Tarakbayeva R.E., and Zakirova A.A. on Comparative Analysis of Gender Stereotypes in Central Asia and Central Europe [26]. Temirbekova Z., Yergebekov M., Beisembayev S., Bekmurganova M., ‘Issues of Gender Equality in Kazakhstan: Women in the Economic, Political, and Socio-Cultural Spheres’ [27], Garibova F.M., Gender Equality in Tajikistan’ [28], Marzabayeva B.T., Tashybayeva A.K., Asanakhunova Z.M., and Babakulova R.B., ‘Legislative Support for Gender Equality in the Kyrgyz Republic’ [29].

All these works explore various aspects of gender issues in Central Asia. The substantial number of authors on gender-related topics speaks to the interest and relevance of such studies.

Today, among the current issues raised within gender studies in Central Asian Republics, the problem of violence is increasingly being addressed. The issue of violence against girls and women must be a gender-related issue, which aligns with the priorities in the field of gender issues outlined by the United Nations (UN).

Unfortunately, in Central Asia, as well as worldwide, violence against women and girls remains a widespread phenomenon. According to event organizers, nearly 80% of sexual violence victims in almost all Central Asian countries are women and girls [30].

A sociological study titled ‘Ensuring equal participation of women in local government’ conducted within one of the UNDP projects showed that 53% of respondents noted the necessity of dedicating themselves to family caring for elderly parents and children. In comparison, 44% of survey participants highlighted the stereotypes of a traditional family, where women are expected to stay at home and manage household chores taking care of children. Independent

analysts recognize that while addressing gender issues, it is crucial to consider that in Uzbekistan, women’s wages are 35% lower than men’s. During job interviews at major companies, despite experience and knowledge, women may still be denied employment in favor of male applicants. The reasons for this could be the potential maternity leave, children who might get sick, and the most banal reason – the assumption that she might not cope with the responsibilities entrusted to her. Not all husbands are pleased with the career growth of their wives, with many believing that a woman must guard the family hearth rather than pursue a career [31].

Since the legislation and other normative legal documents of Central Asian states enshrine the rights and opportunities for the entire population without gender discrimination, it remains puzzling that women’s rights violations persist. Moreover, headlines in the press and articles on social media occasionally highlight harsh stories of harassment and violence against girls in public places and workplaces.

In exploring the issues of gender policy in Central Asian countries, we decided to examine the availability of normative legal acts in these countries, as shown in Table 2.

Table 2. Legislative Acts in Central Asia

CAR	
Kazakhstan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan on the National Commission on Family Affairs and Gender Policy under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, dated February 1, 2006, No. 56. 2. Strategy for Gender Equality in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2006-2016. Approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, dated December 29, 2005, No. 1677. 3. Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated July 1, 1998, No. 220-I On State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women. 4. Kazakhstan 2030 Strategy adopted by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan on May 4, 1998.

	<p>5. National Plan for Gender Equality for 2006-2016, approved by the Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan on January 16, 2006.</p> <p>6. Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated November 30, 2012, No. 34-V ZRK on Amendments and Additions to Some Legislative Acts of the Republic of Kazakhstan on Guarantees of Women’s Rights and Gender Equality.</p> <p>7. Strategy for Gender Equality in the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2016-2020, approved by the Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan on February 18, 2016.</p>
Uzbekistan	<p>1. The Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Additional Measures to Support the Actions of the Women's Committee of Uzbekistan was issued on May 25, 2004.</p> <p>2. National mechanisms for promoting gender equality and enhancing the role of women have been improving since 1995. By the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated March 2, 1995, on Measures to Increase the Role of Women in the State and Public Construction of the Republic of Uzbekistan, a new position of deputy prime minister overseeing family, motherhood, and childhood social protection issues was introduced. Similar roles were established in all regional government structures.</p> <p>3. Action Strategy of Uzbekistan for 2017-2021 and UN Sustainable Development Goals until 2030 (2017). United Nations, Tashkent, Uzbekistan.</p> <p>4. Presidential Decree No. 4235 of March 7, 2019, on Measures to Further Strengthen Labor Rights Guarantees and Support Women’s Entrepreneurship.”</p>
Tajikistan	<p>1. By the Government Resolution of the Republic of Tajikistan dated May 29, 2010, No. 269, the National Strategy for Activating Women's Roles in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2011–2020 was approved.</p> <p>2. On March 1, 2005, the Law on State Guarantees of Equality of Men and Women and Equal Opportunities for Their Implementation was adopted. It proclaims state guarantees to ensure equal opportunities for men and women in public service, socio-economic spheres, exercising electoral rights, etc.</p> <p>3. The President of the country issued the Decree on Enhancing the Role of Women in Society on December 3, 1999. The decree aims to expand women’s representation in leadership positions of state bodies. The country’s government, state authorities, and management began appointing women, based on their competence, professional and business qualities, to the management of ministries, state committees, agencies, state-owned enterprises, institutions and organizations, higher educational institutions, country’s government, state authorities, and management began appointing women, based on their competence, professional and business qualities, to the management of ministries, state committees, agencies, state-owned enterprises, institutions and organizations, higher educational institutions, and other educational establishments, as well as appointing experienced, competent women-specialists to positions of one of the deputy heads.</p> <p>4. By the Law of the Republic of Tajikistan on Amendments to the Family Code of the Republic of Tajikistan dated July 21, 2010, No. 613, the marriage age was increased from 17 to 18 years. Raising the marriage age aims to ensure girls’ rights to education and prepare them for independent life.</p>

	http://docstore.ohchr.org/SelfServices/FilesHandler.ashx?enc=6QkG1d%2FPP RiCAqhKb7yhsqWC9Lj7ub%2FHrJVf1GxZMHFUaPKd6QbFQ5ZhuzDqzvl KJGCKQuGvBFjgyit10YSVsFw60b9xaedHsa32uQYp2ng9trIt0EupOVJrVGx hhJpfnEdnPZ4wFgpnHfS59SUwgA%3D%3D
Kyrgyzstan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. THE NATIONAL STRATEGY of the Kyrgyz Republic for Achieving Gender Equality by 2030. http://cbd.minjust.gov.kg/act/view/ru-ru/159472 2. Resolution of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic dated November 19, 2018, No. 537 on Amendments to the Resolution of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic on the National Strategy of the Kyrgyz Republic for Achieving Gender Equality by 2020 and the National Action Plan for Achieving Gender Equality in the Kyrgyz Republic dated June 27, 2012, No. 443. 3. Decree of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic dated December 31, 2013, No. 527-r (On an interdepartmental commission to assess the effectiveness of legal norms providing for responsibility for violence against women). 4. Resolution of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic dated December 31, 2012, No. 872 on the Fourth Periodic Report of the Kyrgyz Republic on implementing the norms of the UN Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination against Women. 5. THE NATIONAL STRATEGY of the Kyrgyz Republic for Achieving Gender Equality by 2020, according to the Resolution of Government for the Kyrgyz Republic dated June 27, 2012, No. 443. 6. Since 2020, the Jogorku Kenesh (Supreme Council) has amended the Criminal Procedure Code, alimony law, and guaranteed legal assistance law, supported by the UN-EU Initiative, Beacon of Light. Amendments to the Labor Code, Code of Administrative Offenses, and Criminal Code to combat workplace sexual harassment have also been developed. Projects on Amendments to Some Legislative Acts of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Field of Ensuring and Protecting Against Domestic, Sexual, and Gender-based Violence, on Amendments to the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic, on State Guarantees of Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Men and Women, and a draft law combating discrimination are expected to be considered soon.
Turkmenistan	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Law of Turkmenistan dated August 18, 2015, No. 264-V on State Guarantees for Ensuring Equal Rights and Equal Opportunities for Women and Men (with amendments and additions as of December 10, 2017). 2. The Constitution of Turkmenistan (new edition) dated September 14, 2016. Article 29: A man and a woman in Turkmenistan have equal rights, freedoms, and opportunities for their implementation. Violation of equality based on gender entails responsibility established by law. https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/2022-12/Report%20NAP%20gender%20PDF.pdf

Conclusion based on the table: the highest number of laws related to gender policy is in the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Kyrgyzstan, while Turkmenistan shows the lowest number.

Several standard features can be highlighted when assessing the gender policy of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Firstly, all countries have joined international legal mechanisms for gender equality. Consequently, at least at a declarative level, there is a common understanding of the need to expand women's rights and opportunities: specifically, the elimination of their discrimination in the country's political and social life and ensuring their right to participate in policy formulation and hold top positions, as well as work at all levels of government. Secondly, most reviewed countries have adopted and begun to implement national strategies to observe women's rights and interests, particularly in the political sphere, and to some extent, are refining legislation. However, based on the example of the gender development strategy in Kazakhstan, we have noted a trend of moving away from designating gender policy as an independent direction, resulting in the focus shifting from overcoming gender gaps to addressing a broader set of social policy tasks. Thirdly, all Central Asian countries acknowledge the significant role of gender statistics and publish statistical reports on the status of women.

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Nevertheless, none provides data on all significant indicators included in the System of Global Sustainable Development Goal Indicators and the set of gender indicators of the Statistical Commission of ECOSOC. This complicates the cross-country comparison of women's political participation. The absence of official statistical data is considered an attempt to present statistics about their country in a more favorable light than it actually is. Progress in collecting gender-disaggregated statistics that meet the criteria of availability, openness, and completeness is observed in Kazakhstan. Enhancing the representativeness of data will facilitate the development of practical measures to eliminate gender inequality in political life. Fourthly, despite individual attempts, the mechanism of gender budgeting has not yet gained widespread use, which could indirectly impact the expansion of women's opportunities in politics. Fifthly, as a characteristic policy instrument of the post-Soviet space, gender quotas should be noted. Two countries – Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan – have introduced gender quotas in

electoral lists. Nevertheless, considering the complexities in implementing this measure (mainly the existence of legal ways to bypass quotas), it is challenging to assess the effectiveness of this tool [32].

Conclusion

The current state of gender equality in the Middle East remains unstable. There is still a gender gap in all spheres of public activity, with discrimination based on gender and violence against fundamental rights and freedoms of minorities.

Following the analysis of content data from electronic resources, it has been found that today, in the Middle East, the gender issue is viewed in the context of social contradictions, conditioned by the continuing influence of religious and cultural values. Additionally, gender stereotypes and perceptions concerning the role of women in social institutions continue to have a pervasive impact on the development of the gender situation in the region.

Therefore, it is necessary to resolve the identified problems through the modernization and development of society, eradication of gender stereotypes, and reducing the influence of religion and cultural values. Furthermore, the modification of the fundamental principles of gender policy in most countries of the region, with the aim of a comprehensive analysis of the gender situation in the Middle East, holds particular importance. One of the fundamental solutions in addressing gender problems is increasing the representation of women in the political and economic spheres, as well as the adoption of legal norms capable of protecting fundamental rights and meeting the basic needs of the female population. It is necessary to bridge the gender pay gap by providing economic freedom to women and creating new

jobs that correspond to the demand for potential employees. Additionally, there is a need to review the Criminal Code and strengthen penalties for domestic violence, physical and sexual harassment, and ultimately eliminate practices related to “crimes of honor” and illegal operations that violate the rights of women and girls.

A distinctive feature in attempts to address the problem of gender inequality is the activity of international non-governmental women’s organizations, which also advocate for women’s rights and solutions to the problem of discrimination against women in social, economic, educational, and other spheres of life. However, despite the existing laws, organizations, and projects fighting for equal rights, the issue of gender inequality in the Middle East remains largely unresolved.

Thus, the current state of gender equality in the Middle East can be assessed as unstable due to the identified contradictions and low gender equality index indicators.

An overview analysis of the gender situation in the Central Asian Republics shows that in comparison to the Middle East, “traditional” discriminations, such as the prohibition of girls’ education, refusal to employ women, unequal pay to men and women, etc., are not as pronounced. Women participate in society, study equally with men, get jobs, and are not discriminated against in wages. However, if we consider the issue of gender inequality within any specific CAR country, significant differences can be observed. Mainly, a trend of increased oppression of women’s rights has been manifested in recent years in Turkmenistan. Women are prohibited from undergoing cosmetic procedures, using makeup, driving cars, sitting in the front seat of a vehicle, and more. In other

words, the “freedom” of women in terms of rights is curtailed by existing laws of Turkmenistan, which are being reinforced by societal perceptions of the role and position of women in society. Such facts, along with the increased violence overall in all CAR countries during and after the

COVID-19 pandemic, also indicate the necessity to revise the legislation of some countries concerning women’s rights since the non-observance of women’s rights can be considered a violation of human rights.

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