



JOURNAL OF

3 (95)

CENTRAL ASIAN STUDIES



**GLOBAL SHIFTS, REGIONAL PERSPECTIVES:
ANALYZING SOCIAL, ECONOMIC,
AND STRATEGIC DYNAMICS IN CENTRAL ASIA**

JOURNAL OF

JCAS

CENTRAL ASIAN
STUDIES

№ 3 (95)

July – August – September

Founded in 2003
Published 4 times a year

Astana
2024

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Re-registration certificate No. KZ72VPY00088070 dated 23.02.2024.

Journal of Central Asian Studies is a multidisciplinary, peer-reviewed journal specializing in social and political sciences relating to Central Asian countries. Its scope includes a comprehensive examination of Central Asia's geopolitical, economic, social, and cultural aspects, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. The journal also explores the interactions between the region and important neighboring regions and powers, such as Afghanistan, Caucasus, China, and Russia.

Published by **Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan**

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Societal Shifts in Central Asia: Figures and Trends

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ABSTRACT. *Central Asia has been undergoing considerable transformations by becoming mature independent states in international arena and experiencing socio-demographic shifts. It clearly resembles the dynamics described in Moises Naim's "The end of power" where he argues that "the more, mobility, and mentality" revolutions challenge political leaders with fluid and unpredictable environment. This article aims to do an empirical analysis of the socio-demographic changes in Central Asia to test the assumption in the regional context.*

KEYWORDS: *Societal shifts in Central Asia, human capital, demographic changes, social development, population growth*

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia, a region known for its geopolitical significance, has been undergoing considerable transformations not only becoming mature independent states in the international arena but also experiencing internal socio-demographic shifts – more than half of the region's population is under 30 years old (Stoll, 2023)

The changes reflect not only the evolving composition of the population including population growth, urbanization, educational development, migration patterns, and evolving societal values, but also the changing expectations and needs of citizens.

This presents both opportunities and challenges. On one hand, it can be a driving force for innovation, economic growth, and social change. On the other hand, if the needs and aspirations of this young demographic are not adequately addressed, it could potentially lead to social unrest and political instability.

The current pivotal moment for Central Asian countries resembles the dynamics described in Moises Naím’s “The End of Power”, where he argues that “the more, mobility, and mentality” revolutions challenge political leaders with fluid and unpredictable environments.

This article aims to review existing literature on managing socio-demographic changes as well as look into a range of data sources to provide insights into societal change patterns in Central Asia. It will allow us to reveal key variables and trends for drawing more evidence-based conclusions.

Our research seeks to contribute to academic knowledge and spur more similar research focused on the multifaceted challenges and opportunities in Central Asia.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach to analyze socio-demographic changes in Central Asia, combining quantitative data analysis with a review of relevant academic literature and theoretical frameworks. The methodology is designed to investigate the underlying trends and dynamics of societal shifts in the region, as well as to contextualize these changes within broader global patterns.

The study relies on a variety of secondary data sources, including demographic statistics, population projections, and socio-economic indicators provided by international organizations. It employs statistical methods to analyze the collected data, focusing on identifying trends and patterns over time. This includes calculating growth rates, median values, and other relevant indicators to assess demographic changes in Central Asia from 1990 to 2024, with projections extending to 2050. The article compares demographic indicators across different Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) and against selected global benchmarks, including Russia, China, Europe, and the United States. This comparative approach helps to contextualize the socio-demographic changes in Central Asia within a global framework.

The concepts from Moises Naím’s “The End of Power,” are applied to interpret the data. This theoretical lens allows the study to explore how increased mobility, changing mentalities, and the proliferation of new societal actors are influencing the socio-demographic landscape in Central Asia.

The study acknowledges certain limitations, including the potential for data discrepancies due to varying data collection methods across different sources. Additionally, the reliance on secondary data may introduce biases inherent in the original data collection processes. The projection of future trends is based on existing data and established models, which may not fully account for unforeseen socio-political developments or shifts in regional dynamics.

By combining quantitative analysis with a theoretical framework, this study aims to provide a nuanced understanding of the socio-demographic changes in Central Asia, offering insights that are both empirically grounded and theoretically informed.

MANAGING SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES: ACADEMIC VIEW

The mainstream academic view towards the management of socio-demographic changes is mainly based on the debate on how human capital should be managed, covering the question from both very broad and very specific perspectives.

In particular, the issues of inequality and redistribution of wealth risen widely in the books of Nitzan and Bichler (2009), Piketti (2014), and Mokyr (2017) encourage an academic dispute over what should be the line of action for developing countries in the global capitalist reality.

Scholars generally agree that the key component in human capital management appears to be economic incentives and interests. However, if previously the mainstream idea was that income, both individual and social, stems from productivity (Marx, 1954; Clark, 1899; Wicksteed, 1932), contemporary scholars such as Fix (2021) argue that the level of the population's income is largely dependent on people's power rather than their productivity. Yet there is still a scholarly controversy in the quantitative dimension on how skilled workers' relative earnings should be determined (Jones, 2014; Caselli & Ciccone, 2019). This corresponds with the model built by Acemoglu (2003), who argues that skill premia differing over time and across countries, can be used to explain the impact of international trade on wage inequality.

Another direction of scientific research is the exploration of nature and sources of economic power. Kurz (2018) basing his focus on modern economics, states that power is largely embodied in various institutions, social and political institutions, which impose the laws, political order, and norms, eventually leading to economic gains of particular interest groups. Klomp and de Haan (2013) attempt to examine the relationship between the political regime and human capital, as a result of which they find out that democracies and stable governments positively affect both basic and advanced human capital, while unstable ones tend to have a negative link having a limited impact on income.

This idea is complemented by the view that a significant impact can also be made by the values of political elites and societal structures. Rubin (2017) looking at human capital management from the perspective of history and religion, gives the debate an interesting input implying that the values the ruling economic elite pursues may also have a significant say in a country's development level. This idea is also mentioned by Weber (2012), which is then broadly summarized in the overview of the role of religious values in economic history by Becker & et al (2020).

On top of that, it is necessary to point out an attempt to find a balanced method to measure human capital by varying approaches made by Abraham and Mallatt (2022), who see considerable correlations in investments in formal education, when cost and income approaches are used. It is worth mentioning that this kind of view was anticipated by corresponding studies (Cohen & Soto, 2007; Björklund & Kjell, 2011; Gang and Fraumeni, 2020).

Despite the abundance of theoretical considerations of human capital management at a global level, there is a certain limitation of academic discussion looking at the specifics of this issue in Central Asia. Yet, the scientific attention on gleaning peculiar trends in Central Asian human capital development is notable, including the recent works of Yormirzoev (2023), Isiksal & et al. (2022), Ovezmyradov & Kepbanov (2021), Demirgüç-Kunt & Torre (2020).

Meanwhile, the theory of Moises Naím, indicated in his book called ‘The End of Power’ appears interesting for researching socio-demographic changes in Central Asia. He described a revolution of “the more, mobility, and mentality,” which has the potential to shed light on the dynamics of socio-demographic changes in Central Asia.

This “revolution” outlined by Naím can be particularly insightful when considering the rapid socio-demographic transformations in Central Asia. His concept of “the more, mobility, and mentality” suggests that the increase in the number of players in any given field (more), the greater movement of people, goods, and information (mobility), and the evolving mindset and attitudes of people (mentality) are key factors driving the dispersion of power. In the context of Central Asia, this framework can be used to analyze how these elements interact and influence the region’s human capital development.

For instance, the increase in educational institutions and training centers (the ‘more’) in Central Asia enhances the accessibility of education, potentially leading to a more skilled workforce. The mobility factor can be seen in the migration trends, both internal and external, which impact the labor markets and cultural exchanges within these nations. Finally, the changing mentality, particularly among the younger generations in Central Asia, who are more connected to global trends and ideas, could be reshaping traditional views on employment, education, and social roles.

Applying Naím’s framework to Central Asia, researchers could examine how these factors contribute to the region’s socio-demographic changes. This includes studying the evolving dynamics of power in Central Asian societies and how they relate to changes in human capital development. Such an analysis might reveal unique insights into the region’s adaptation to global trends and its internal socio-economic evolution.

Furthermore, considering the historically unique position of Central Asia, sandwiched between powerful neighbors and with a rich cultural heritage, the application of Naím’s theories could uncover specific regional dynamics of power shifts. It raises the question

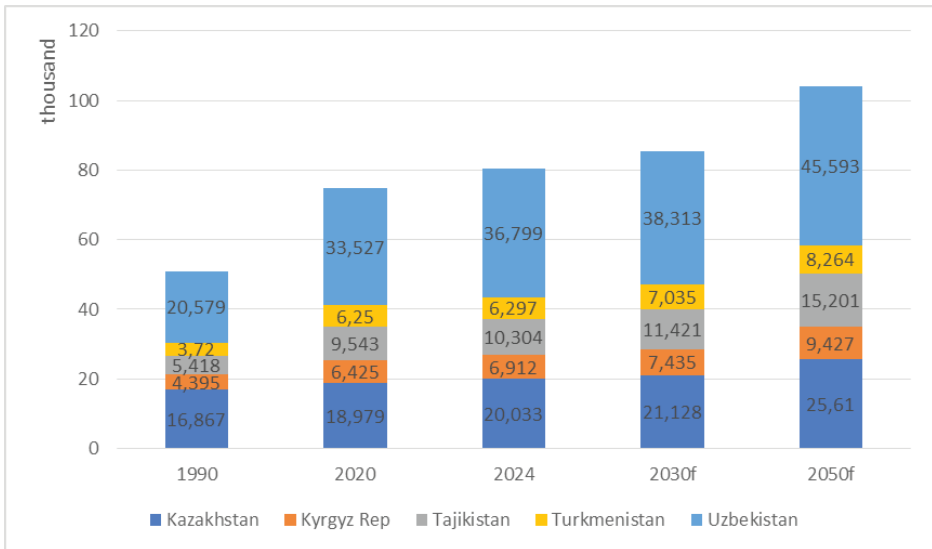
of how traditional structures and hierarchies in Central Asian societies are adapting or resisting these global trends of power dispersion.

SOCIO-DEMOGRAPHIC CHANGES IN CENTRAL ASIA: THEORY IN REALITY

The “revolution of the more,” as articulated by Moises Naím, is unfolding robustly within the Central Asian region through population growth, changing birth and fertility rates, infant and maternal mortality as well as life expectancy.

From 1990 to 2024, the **collective population** of the Central Asian countries surged from 50 to 80 million, marking an increase of 60 percent or an addition of nearly 30 million people¹. This substantial demographic expansion, albeit at a decelerating absolute growth rate, is poised to persist across the region. Projections for 2050 estimate the population to exceed 103.9 million, with Uzbekistan (45.5 million) and Kazakhstan (25.6 million) maintaining their status as the most populous nations, followed by Tajikistan (15.2 million), Kyrgyzstan (9.4 million), and Turkmenistan (8.2 million). These figures reflect a significant demographic transformation, underlying the region’s increasing socio-political and economic influence on the global stage.

Figure 1: *Population of Central Asian countries, selected years*



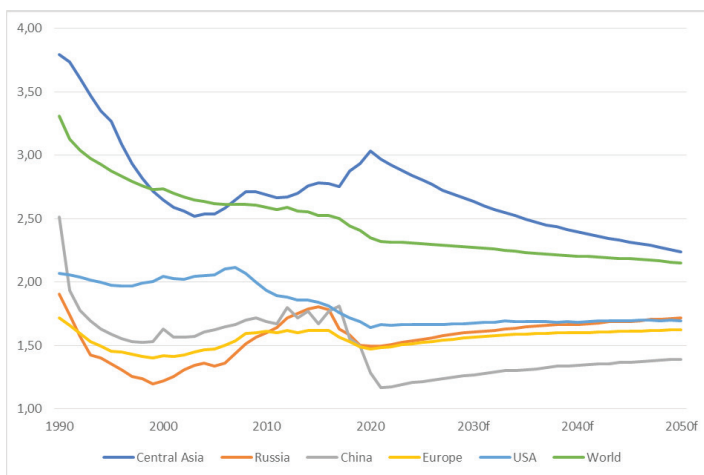
Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). *World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition.*

¹(Экономика Центральной Азии: новый взгляд [Economy of Central Asia: New View], 2022)

Population growth in Central Asia will not continue indefinitely. There is an observable deceleration in **birth rates** across most of the region, with Kazakhstan being an exception; it had a relatively low birth rate in 1991 at 22 per 1,000 population, in contrast to Uzbekistan's 35 and Tajikistan's 41 per 1,000. By 2022, Kazakhstan's birth rate remained stable at 23 per 1,000, whereas Uzbekistan and Tajikistan experienced marked reductions to 26 and 27 per 1,000, respectively. Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan also witnessed notable declines in fertility, with the former decreasing from 29 to 24 births per 1,000 from 1991 to 2022, and the latter from 34 to 22 per 1,000 in the same period.²

Nevertheless, the total **fertility rate** in the region remains above the global average; in 2021, Central Asian women had an average of 2.97 children, surpassing figures in Russia (1.49), China (1.16), Europe (1.48), the United States (1.66), and even the world average of 2.32. This sustained fertility underscores the region's demographic resilience, suggesting a youthful demographic profile that may have profound implications for its future socio-economic development.

Figure 2: Total Fertility Rate (live births per woman) in selected countries and regions



The **median age** in Central Asian countries has been experiencing a notable upward trend, indicative of changing demographic profiles in the region. From 1990 to 2024, the median age in Kazakhstan has increased from around 24.7 to over 32 years, demonstrating a significant shift towards an older population. Similarly, in Kyrgyzstan, the median age has risen from approximately 20.5 to nearly 31.5 years. Tajikistan, starting at the lowest median age of 17.2 years in 1990, has seen a steady rise to about 29.4 years by the forecast year of 2050. Turkmenistan's median age has also ascended from 18.8 to a projected 30.1 years, while Uzbekistan shows a progression from 20.8 to 27.6 years in the same period. This trend suggests an overall increase in the median

² (Birth rate, crude (per 1000 people), 2023)

age across the region, reflecting a combination of declining fertility rates, increasing life expectancy, and potential shifts in migration patterns. By the middle of the 21st century, the median age in these countries is projected to align more closely with global averages, pointing to a maturing demographic structure with profound implications for labor markets, healthcare systems, and social services.

The median age trajectory in Central Asia, when compared globally, demonstrates a marked increase, yet remains lower than selected other regions. From 1990, where the Central Asian median age was approximately 20.5 years, it is projected to rise to 30.5 years by 2050. This is a considerable increase but still below the global median age, which is expected to advance from around 23 to 35.9 years within the same timeframe.

In contrast, more developed regions exhibit significantly higher median ages, indicative of older populations. China's median age shows a steep ascent from around 23.7 years in 1990 to a projected 50.7 years by 2050, the highest among the compared groups. The median age in the USA is also increasing, from roughly 33.8 years to an anticipated 43.1 years, while Europe's is set to rise from about 33.6 to 47.3 years, reflecting its rapidly aging population due to historical one-child policies. Russia's median age follows a similar upward trend, from nearly 32.2 years in 1990 to a forecasted 43.6 years by 2050.

This data illustrates diverse demographic dynamics across the globe, with Central Asia's relatively youthful population providing potential demographic dividends, while more developed regions may face challenges associated with aging populations, such as increased pressure on pension systems and healthcare services.

Figure 3: Median age of the total population of Central Asian countries

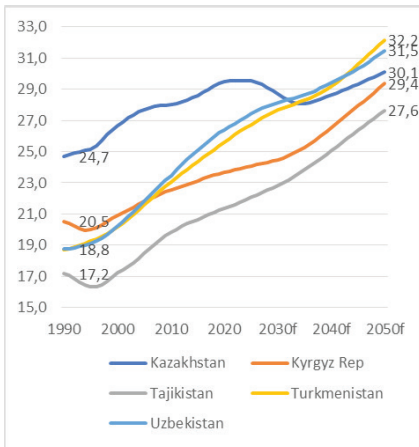
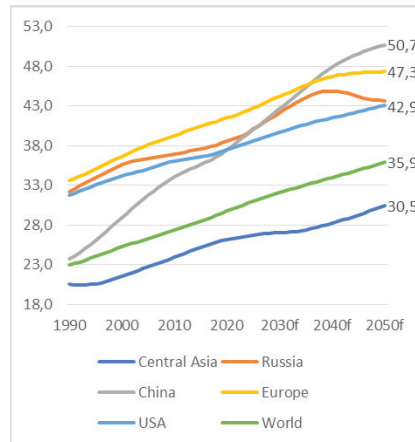


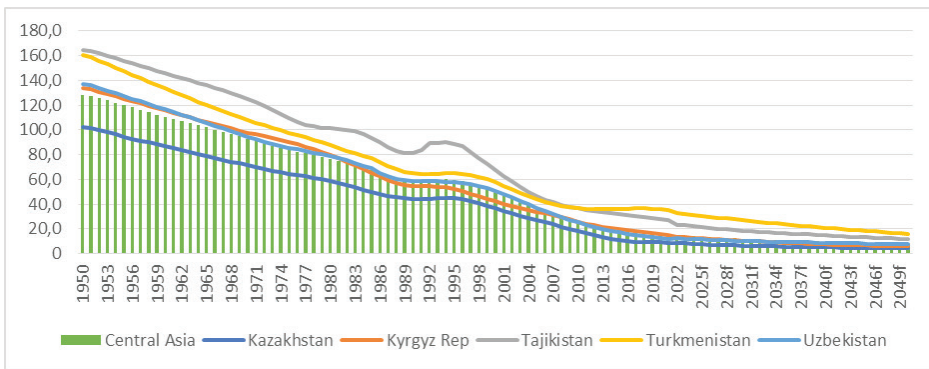
Figure 4: Median age of the total population of selected regions



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition.

Over the past decades, Central Asian countries have witnessed a remarkable decrease in mortality rates, encompassing both infant and maternal categories. Since the year of 1991, the **Infant Mortality Rate (IMR)** in the region has seen a steep decline, dropping from 58.6 to a regional average of 15.4 by 2021. Kazakhstan leads the advancement with the lowest IMR at 8.9, followed by Uzbekistan at 11.7, Kyrgyzstan at 15.0, Tajikistan at 27.1, and Turkmenistan at 35.1. This positive trajectory is expected to continue, with projections suggesting a further decline to an average IMR of 7.7 by the year 2050, signaling ongoing improvements in public health initiatives and healthcare systems across the Central Asian nations.

Figure 5: *Infant Mortality Rate (infant deaths per 1,000 live births) in Central Asian countries, selected years*



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). *World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition.*

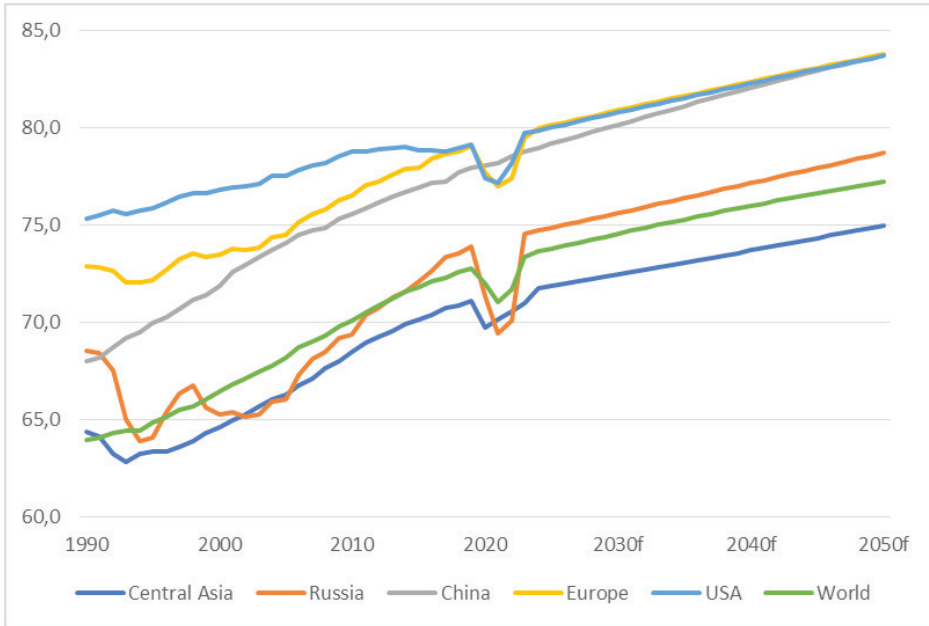
In two decades, Kazakhstan has achieved a remarkable reduction in **maternal mortality**, with rates plummeting from 56.3 to 13.4 deaths per 100,000 live births between 2000 and 2020. Kyrgyzstan also reported significant progress, albeit at a more modest pace, with maternal mortality decreasing from 86.9 to 50.4 in the same period. Tajikistan's reduction was profound, with rates declining from 67.5 to 16.6. Turkmenistan exhibited the most dramatic improvement, with a decrease from 26.1 to a mere 5.1, while Uzbekistan's decline was more gradual, from 42.6 to 30.2³. These figures not only reflect the enhanced healthcare frameworks in place but also underscore the region's dedicated efforts towards improving maternal health outcomes.

Consequently, these health advancements have led to an elevation in regional **life expectancy**, averaging at 70.1 years in 2021, despite the setbacks from the Covid-19 pandemic. The rise in life expectancy from an average of 64.1 years in 1991 to 70.1 years

³[https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/vis?fs\[0\]=Area%2C1%7CCountries%20or%20Territories%23COUNTRIES%23%7CKazakhstan%23KAZ%23&pg=0&bp=true&snb=2&df\[ds\]=ds-demo-design&df\[id\]=SDG_Dataflow&df\[ag\]=ESCAP&df\[vs\]=2.7&pd=%2C&dq=UZB%2BTKM%2BTJK%2BKGZ%2BKAZ.G03_01_01..A&ly\[rs\]=INDICATORS_SDG%2CSERIES&ly\[rw\]=REF_AREA&ly\[cl\]=TIME_PERIOD&to\[TIME_PERIOD\]=false&lo=2023&lom=LASTNPERIODS](https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/vis?fs[0]=Area%2C1%7CCountries%20or%20Territories%23COUNTRIES%23%7CKazakhstan%23KAZ%23&pg=0&bp=true&snb=2&df[ds]=ds-demo-design&df[id]=SDG_Dataflow&df[ag]=ESCAP&df[vs]=2.7&pd=%2C&dq=UZB%2BTKM%2BTJK%2BKGZ%2BKAZ.G03_01_01..A&ly[rs]=INDICATORS_SDG%2CSERIES&ly[rw]=REF_AREA&ly[cl]=TIME_PERIOD&to[TIME_PERIOD]=false&lo=2023&lom=LASTNPERIODS)

in 2021 has not been steady. The tumultuous 1990s saw a decline to 62.9 years amidst the dissolution of the Soviet healthcare system and diminished investment in social services.⁴ Nevertheless, the region has shown resilience, with life expectancy recovering and surpassing pre-transition levels, reflecting a broader trend of health improvement despite socio-economic challenges.

Figure 6: *Life Expectancy at Birth in selected countries and regions*



Source: United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division (2022). *World Population Prospects 2022, Online Edition*.

Primary markers of the mobility revolution are evidencing themselves with a growing proportion of the population residing in urban areas, involvement in worldwide web use and world's migration processes.

The regional **urbanization** level has reached 45.2 percent, mirroring the worldwide shift towards urban living, albeit with notable inter-country variability. World Bank data indicates that Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have the lowest urbanization rates; Tajikistan's urban population decreased from 31 percent in 1991 to 28 percent in 2022, while Kyrgyzstan's remained static at 37 percent across the same period, despite a dip to 35 percent between 1999 and 2011.

Conversely, Uzbekistan has experienced the most pronounced surge in its urban populace, ascending from 42 percent in 1991 to 50 percent in 2022. Turkmenistan too

⁴ (Life expectancy at birth, total (years), 2023)

saw its urban population rise from 45 to 53 percent. Kazakhstan, meanwhile, boasts the highest proportion of urban dwellers. Despite a modest increase from 56 percent in 1991 to 58 percent in 2022, the latest figures from 2023 show an uptick to 61 percent.⁵ This growth is indicative of the expanded availability of advanced education, healthcare, and technology for its urban residents, reflecting the broader socio-economic evolutions within the region.

The urban landscape has also undergone significant transformations, with the proportion of the **population living in slums** in Kazakhstan dramatically decreasing from 24.5 percent in 2000 to just 0.8 percent in 2020. Similar trends are observed in Kyrgyzstan, where the figure has dropped from 15.9 to 2.4 percent, and in Tajikistan, from 60.3 to 17.1 percent. Turkmenistan's reduction is more modest, from 9.3 to 8.5 percent. However, there is a notable gap in data for Uzbekistan, precluding a comprehensive regional analysis. These figures underscore the strides made in urban development and the improvement of living conditions within these transitioning economies.

The technological landscape of Central Asia presents a dynamic picture of connectivity and internet penetration. With over 71 million SIM cards distributed among a population of 78 million,⁶ mobile connectivity is widespread, indicating a substantial embrace of mobile technology.

Internet access, however, exhibits stark regional disparities. In 2021, Kazakhstan led the way with a staggering 94.5% of households having internet access at home, a figure that climbed to 96.2% by 2022. Uzbekistan followed closely with a steady increase from 95.1% to 95.5% in the same period. Kyrgyzstan also demonstrated high access rates at 91%. Turkmenistan, on the other hand, lagged at 66%, while Tajikistan had the lowest at 32.5%.⁷

When it comes to Internet usage, Kazakhstan again topped the chart with 90.9% of its population using the Internet in 2021. Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan reported lower, yet significant, usage rates at 77.9% and 76.6%, respectively⁸. The lack of recent data for Tajikistan and Turkmenistan suggests a need for further research to understand the full scope of internet engagement in these countries. These figures underscore the rapid adoption of digital technologies in Central Asia, which is reshaping access to information, education, and economic opportunities across the region.

Along with that, people are now traveling much more frequently, with millions of citizens going abroad, primarily to Russia, South Korea, the EU, and the USA. More

⁵ (Уровень урбанизации в Казахстане достиг 61,5% [The Level of Urbanization Reached 61,5%], 2023)

⁶ (Note: 71 mln is the sum of number of sim cards in each country. "How is Mobile Communications and the Internet Developing in Central Asia?", 2021)

⁷ <https://datahub.itu.int/query/>

⁸ [https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/vis?fs\[0\]=Area%2C1%7CCountries%20or%20Territories%23COUNTRIES%23%7CKazakhstan%23KAZ%23&pg=0&bp=true&snb=2&df\[ds\]=ds-demo-design&df\[id\]=SDG_Dataflow&df\[ag\]=ESCAP&df\[vs\]=2.7&pd=%2C&dq=UZB%2BTKM%2BTJK%2BKZ%2BKAZ.G17_08_01%2BG11_01_01%2BG11_0a_01..A&ly\[rs\]=INDICATORS_SDG%2CSERIES&ly\[rw\]=REF_AREA&ly\[cl\]=TIME_PERIOD&to\[TIME_PERIOD\]=false&lo=2023&lom=LASTPERIODS](https://dataexplorer.unescap.org/vis?fs[0]=Area%2C1%7CCountries%20or%20Territories%23COUNTRIES%23%7CKazakhstan%23KAZ%23&pg=0&bp=true&snb=2&df[ds]=ds-demo-design&df[id]=SDG_Dataflow&df[ag]=ESCAP&df[vs]=2.7&pd=%2C&dq=UZB%2BTKM%2BTJK%2BKZ%2BKAZ.G17_08_01%2BG11_01_01%2BG11_0a_01..A&ly[rs]=INDICATORS_SDG%2CSERIES&ly[rw]=REF_AREA&ly[cl]=TIME_PERIOD&to[TIME_PERIOD]=false&lo=2023&lom=LASTPERIODS)

and more diasporas from the region's countries are also appearing in Western countries, especially in the United States. According to some reports, about 50,000 immigrants from Uzbekistan live in New York alone.⁹

Central Asian states are increasingly dependent on labor migrants for two main reasons. First, remittances from labor migrants, mainly from Russia, are a critical source of wealth in Central Asia. According to the World Bank, by the end of 2021, the volume of transfers was equivalent to 35 percent of Tajikistan's GDP and 33 percent of Kyrgyzstan's GDP. In Uzbekistan, the share of remittances was still quite significant at 13 percent of GDP. At the same time, Kazakhstan had the smallest share – only 0.2 percent of GDP.¹⁰

Secondly, the number of Kyrgyz citizens living in Russia, which accounts for around 1 million,¹¹ constitutes a critical mass that could influence the outcome of the elections in Kyrgyzstan. In addition, the potential simultaneous return of millions of migrants, mostly young men, to their homelands due to force majeure in Russia could lead to serious tension in the region's countries and deterioration in the economic and political situation.

The population of the region has become mobile not only outside the region but also within countries, although internal migration is highly dependent on legal restrictions and the labor market in each country. In Kazakhstan, where all restrictions on movement have been lifted, more than a million people annually participate in internal migration, 88 percent intra-regionally and 12 percent inter-regionally. This dynamic entails overcrowding in major cities and regions and population imbalances elsewhere. The main vector of internal migration remains movement from different regions of the country to the cities of Astana, Almaty, and Shymkent. These three cities' share of the total population of the country increased from 11.1 percent in 1992 to 22.6 percent in 2021.¹²

Similar trends are observed in the Kyrgyz Republic, where more than one-third of the population changed their place of residence between 1996 and 2011 and where the largest cities were also the main points of attraction: Bishkek, Osh, and Jalal-Abad (Belekov, 2011).

In Uzbekistan, about 5 percent of the population lived in a region other than where they were born. Similarly, in 2018, about 0.3 percent of the population changed their place of residence (Seitz, 2023). The difference in migration cannot, of course, be explained by purely legal norms; one must take into account the traditions and mentality of the

⁹ (Узбеки в США: переезд, адаптация, открытие бизнеса [Uzbek in US: moving, adaptation, opening business], 2020)

¹⁰ (Как спад денежных переводов из России отразится на Центральной Азии? [How will the decline in remittances from Russia affect Central Asia?], 2022)

¹¹ <https://eurasianet.org/kyrgyzstan-national-bank-predicts-20-decline-in-remittances>

¹² (Более 1 млн казахстанцев ежегодно становятся мигрантами внутри страны [More than 1 million Kazakhstanis annually become migrants within the country], 2021)

local population. Uzbeks and Tajiks have stronger ties with their *mahallas*, their place of birth, than traditionally more mobile peoples like Kazakhs and Kyrgyz.

In terms of the revolution of mentality, it can be said with confidence that the Central Asian region is already a completely different region than it was 30 years ago. The speed of change is astonishing. Moreover, the population has become younger. In 1990, the average age was 34 years; now, it is 28.7 (Kazakhstan's average age of 31.7 is slightly older) (Shabalina, 2022). Thus, the majority of the population was born after the collapse of the USSR, and they are generally alien to nostalgia for the collapse of the USSR. They are distinguished by national identity and at the same time, openness to everything new, including new technologies.

In the region's countries, obviously, to varying degrees, there is a growing demand for the decolonization of consciousness – the deconstruction of the Soviet legacy, a demand for understanding the historical past as a way of determining the future of their countries as national independent states. The region's countries are still at the beginning of a long journey of building sustainable and high-quality ideological constructs based on tradition, national identity, and, at the same time, the modernity of current societies. One such obvious evidence of this is the absence of a broad public discourse on the issue of decolonization. Individual and sporadic scientific articles and speeches by scientists have not yet had much influence.

CONCLUSION: WHAT DO WE END UP WITH?

Most of the population of the region is young people under 30 years old; they are more mobile, urbanized, and better educated than their parents, with incomparable opportunities to receive information and communicate with the whole world. The population naturally wants to live better and freer lives and is much more critical of the authorities and bolder about expressing the will to remove barriers.

The revolutions of the more, mobility, and mentality have also come to Central Asia, and they pose serious challenges to the old models of state governance.

In a positive scenario, their pressure and energy could become engines for developing the region's countries, building more sustainable and inclusive models of public administration, and removing barriers to cooperation within the region.

But in a negative scenario, these changes could bring several challenges for the authorities in the face of which the existing models of public administration will not be so effective; this could become a source of many conflicts both within these countries and between them.

This means the political elites must take into account the ongoing unprecedented social changes in the region and quickly adapt to them and use these “revolutions” for the benefit of the development of Central Asia.

The countries of Central Asia have yet to find their formula for a narrow corridor between the need for a strong and effective government and the development of a strong civil society, the emergence of which, taking into account these revolutions, may not be far off.

The “revolutions of the more, mobility, and mentality” taking place in Central Asia should not necessarily lead to a decline in power, but they certainly have an impact on the established political and economic systems of the region’s countries.

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Do Global Excellence Initiatives Lead to an Increase in Research Productivity: The Case of Kazakhstan's World-Class University

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ABSTRACT. *Global excellence initiatives have been widely implemented across various regions to elevate the quality and standing of higher education institutions. The establishment of world-class universities has been one of the most frequent approaches to global excellence initiatives. A notable example of the successful establishment of a novel world-class university is Nazarbayev University in Kazakhstan, which is expected to transform Kazakhstani society by training high-qualified cadre, stimulating research and innovative activity in the country, and serving the larger society in terms of intellectual leadership and global citizenship initiatives. Despite the great promise, the university has been greatly scrutinized for the financial burden associated with its creation and maintenance. The public attention, however, has not resulted in a sufficient number of studies evaluating the various impacts of the university on Kazakhstani society and the Central Asian region at large. This study attempts to fill the gap by analyzing bibliometric data from the Web of Science to estimate the effect of the creation of Nazarbayev University on research productivity measures in Kazakhstan. More specifically, interrupted time series is applied to the data panel from 2000 to 2010 to determine whether trends in research productivity measured in terms of the number of publications, number of citations, and the size of the scholarly community (as a proxy for research capacity strengthening effect) have been affected by the establishment of the world-class university in the country. The study fills the existing gap in prior research on global academic excellence initiatives and world-class universities by suggesting quantitative insights on the research productivity effects of the initiatives.*

KEYWORDS: *Academic excellence initiatives, world-class university, research productivity, bibliometric, Nazarbayev University*

INTRODUCTION

Global excellence initiatives (GEI) are comprehensive strategies and efforts undertaken by countries, regions, institutions, or organizations to enhance the quality, competitiveness, and impact of education, research, and innovation on an international scale (Yudkevich, Altbach, & Salmi, 2023). These initiatives typically involve substantial financial investments aimed at transforming select institutions into world-class universities, i.e., institutions that excel in three key areas: high concentration of talent, abundant resources, and favorable governance (Salmi, 2009).

Global excellence initiatives have been widely implemented across various regions to elevate the quality and standing of higher education institutions (HEIs). Examples include (1) China's *Double First-Class Initiative*, aimed at increasing the status of its top research HEIs (Cao & Yang, 2023); (2) *the Top Global University Project* in Japan, which has funded 37 universities to enhance their international competitiveness and global ranking (Yonezava, 2023); (3) *the Brain Korea 21 project*, which focuses on fostering research talent and improving research infrastructure of the highest ranked Korean universities, contributing to significant advancements in academic output and international collaboration (Rhee & Yin, 2023). Similar initiatives have been pursued in Malaysia, Taiwan, Holland, France, Germany, and Russia (Yudkevich, Altbach, Salmi, 2023).

Kazakhstan has also become a prime example of pursuing GEIs by establishing its acclaimed Nazarbayev University (NU) (Kuzhabekova et al., 2018). Founded in 2010 with significant state support, Nazarbayev University has quickly become a leading research and educational institution in the region. It emphasizes international partnerships, high standards in education and research, and a strong focus on science and technology (Katsu & Saniyazova, 2018). In 2024, NU has debuted in the top 30 percent of international research universities in the Times Higher Education (THE) World University Rankings (NU, 2023). The successes of the university have recently inspired several other countries in Central Asia, such as Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, to establish their world-class universities similar to NU.

While many countries have launched GEIs assuming that these initiatives have a promise of increasing the research capacity of higher education, the broader effects of the initiatives on the overall higher education system and society at large have not been sufficiently studied or understood (Salmi, 2009). Studies such as those by Hazelkorn (2013) suggest that the initiatives might have an immediate impact reflected in global rankings, however, a comprehensive understanding of their broader impacts is still lacking (De La Roza et al., 2023). Moreover, the propagation of WCUs around the world may be associated with some negative outcomes. Salmi, for example, argues that focusing solely on boosting a few universities can lead to negative consequences, such as diminished teaching quality and reduced opportunities for students from underprivileged backgrounds. Instead, Salmi advocates for a holistic approach that

enhances the overall quality and diversity of the entire higher education system (Salmi, 2011). In addition, multiple case-study explorations of AEIs by Yudkevich, Altbach, and Salmi (2023) have also revealed that AEIS can enhance research capabilities and global standings, but they may also inadvertently create disparities within the broader higher education system by concentrating resources on a few institutions.

Given the lack of studies exploring the impact of GEIs, the purpose of the paper is to evaluate the potential effect of one such initiative, the creation of Nazarbayev University, on the research productivity of a country. The study uses bibliometric data from the Web of Science to conduct descriptive and inferential statistical analysis to estimate the difference in research productivity trends in Kazakhstan in the quasi-experimental condition created by the establishment of Nazarbayev University. The research question of the study is: What is the effect of the creation of Nazarbayev University on research productivity as measured in terms of (1) the number of publications, (2) the number of citations, and (3) the size of the scholarly community/number of contributing authors?

REVIEW OF THE PRIOR RESEARCH

Most of the prior research has been devoted to conceptualization and the analysis of examples of GEIs and WCUs. The initiatives usually have a number of shared characteristics. Many GEIs are guided by long-term strategic goals and objectives aimed at achieving excellence and competitiveness in education, research, and innovation on a global scale (Feng, Guo, & Gia, 2024). They involve significant investments of financial resources, infrastructure, and human capital to support the development and implementation of initiatives and programs (Marginson, 2017). They emphasize collaboration and partnership with institutions, organizations, and stakeholders from different countries and regions to leverage expertise, resources, and opportunities for mutual benefit (Salmi, 2011). They focus on attracting and retaining top talent, including students, researchers, faculty, and professionals, through competitive funding, incentives, and support programs (Marginson, 2017). They incorporate mechanisms for assessing and monitoring performance, quality, and impact to ensure accountability, transparency, and continuous improvement (Yudkevich, Altbach, & Salmi, 2023). They promote innovation, knowledge creation, and technology transfer through research collaborations, entrepreneurship support, and industry partnerships (Salmi, 2009). Finally, they aim to enhance the global visibility, reputation, and influence of participating entities through active engagement in international networks, partnerships, and initiatives (Yudkevich, Altbach, & Salmi, 2023).

Prior research has attempted to conceptualize the various impacts of WCUs and GEIs. Articles on the impact of world-class universities highlight their potential multifaceted contributions to society, ranging from economic growth and technological innovation to global leadership and cultural enrichment (Altbach & Salmi, 2011; Hazelkorn, 2011; Salmi, 2009). Overall, the potential impacts can be classified in terms of the following

key areas: economic impact, effect on the national innovation system, concentration of talent, global influence, and socio-cultural impacts. Economic impacts refer to how WCUs contribute to local and national economies through job creation, research commercialization, and attracting investment (Altbach & Salmi, 2011). Innovation and research impacts refer to scientific breakthroughs, technological advancements, and innovation ecosystems, which emerge as a result of the creation of WCUs (Hazelkorn, 2011). Talent concentration effects refer to the ability of AEIs and WCUs to attract top talent, both students and faculty, from around the world, as well as to serve as hubs for intellectual exchange and collaboration, fostering a culture of excellence and innovation (Altbach & Salmi, 2011). The global influence of WCUs is often interpreted in terms of the ability of the universities to shape global discourse and policy through their research, partnerships, and alumni networks; as well as to act as thought leaders on pressing global issues, such as climate change, public health, and social justice (Salmi, 2009). Finally, social and cultural impact is understood as the significant role in shaping societal values, cultural norms, and public debate (Yudkevich, Altbach, & Salmi, 2023). They often serve as cultural hubs within their communities, hosting events, exhibitions, and performances that enrich the cultural landscape.

Empirical studies of impacts of WCUs and GEIs are limited. Some discussions are usually included in case-studies of WCUs creation in various countries of the world, for example in the edited volume exploring such cases by Yudkevich, Altbach, & Salmi (2023), as well as in earlier country-specific explorations (Chong, 2019). More extended studies, which entailed intentional data collection include the quantitative analyses of the effects of a world-class university in Taiwan on research productivity in the country (Chou & Chan, 2016; Fu, Baker, & Zhang, 2020), a bibliometric analysis of intended and unintended effects of a WCU initiative in Saudi Arabia (Schmoch, Fardoun, & Mashat, 2016), the analysis of the survey-based faculty members' perceptions of the various effect of a WCU in the context of China (Yang & You, 2018), and an interview-based investigation of the perceived impacts of the WCU initiative in Taiwan (Tang, 2018).

The effects of the establishment of Nazarbayev University have not yet been systematically analyzed. Only several studies have been conducted on the impact of international faculty members employed at the university on the development of local research capacity. These include a descriptive bibliometric analysis of publication data by Kuzhabekova and Lee (2018) and an interview-based study exploring factors shaping knowledge transfer between international and local faculty members at NU by Kuzhabekova and Lee (2020). More studies are necessary to understand both the effects of the creation of the university on research productivity in the country, as well as to assess other impacts of the institution on the country's development. This study contributes to previous empirical research on the impacts of the GEI in Kazakhstan by conducting a longitudinal statistical analysis of trends in research productivity from publication data using an interrupted time-series estimation.

METHOD

A quantitative longitudinal approach (Audulv et al., 2022) was used in this study to analyze publications-based research productivity measures in Kazakhstan during the period from 2000 to 2020 using metadata extracted from four indexes of the Web of Science (WoS): The Science Citation Index-Expanded (SCI-Expanded); the Social Sciences Citation Index (SSCI); the Arts & Humanities Citation Index (A&HCI); and the Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI). The longitudinal approach is appropriate to use when observing continuous measures over an extended period of time to explore the outcomes of some naturally occurring treatment (Caruana et al., 2015).

A number of reasons underlie the choice of WoS over other bibliographic databases as a source of data for analysis. First, the WoS remains as the standard and most widely used for bibliometric analysis (Singh et al., 2021). Second, the WoS is a multidisciplinary database and includes publications from a natural science and social science disciplines in more than 20,000 journals (Asubiaro et al., 2024). One limitation of the interdisciplinary database, which it shares with another widely used database – Scopus, is that it discriminates against publications in humanities and social sciences and is biased in favour of English-language publications (Mongeon and Paul-Hus, 2016). Compared with Scopus, however, WoS has been shown to be more accurate in its journal classification system (Wang and Waltman, 2016).

The data was gathered from the database in May 2024. The goal was to compare publication-based research productivity measures from 10 years before and 10 years after the creation of Nazarbayev University. The data from 2021, 2022, and 2023 were excluded intentionally to eliminate the potential effect of the COVID-19 pandemic, which could have had a negative effect on productivity measures. The data from 2024 was excluded because the year had not ended at the point the data was gathered.

The advanced search capability of the WoS was used to search for all publications in Kazakhstan (Cu=Kazakhstan). The resulting dataset was constrained to publications from the period of interest by applying filters (years from 2000 to 2010). No restrictions to language and the type of publications were applied because over 90% of publications were journal articles in English and other types of publications or publications in other languages were expected to not produce any significant effect on the patterns of change in productivity measures.

The search strategy retrieved a total of 25,321 hits. After the removal of duplicates, 23,467 publications were finally selected and retained for the study. For each of the documents obtained in the search, metadata was extracted including the title of the paper, the year of publication, the journal, the number of citations, and the authors' name, organization, and country. This metadata was then imported into Excel and was used in the actual analysis.

The resulting dataset was analyzed using descriptive and inferential statistics. First, frequency counts were obtained for the number of publications, number of citations, and number of authors in the dataset for each year of interest. Then, the general trends in the number of publications, authors, and citations per year were calculated. The trends were graphed with the help of Excel. Second, interrupted time series analysis (ITS) was used to determine whether the creation of NU had any significant effect on the level of research productivity in Kazakhstan as measured in terms of the number of publications, number of citations, and number of authors publishing on Kazakhstan or together with Kazakhstani authors in a particular year. A time series is a continuous sequence of observations on a population, taken repeatedly (normally at equal intervals) over time. ITS is a robust quasi-experimental design extensively utilized to evaluate the effects of interventions over time, particularly in policy research (Bernal, Cummins, & Gasparrini, 2017). ITS is used to assess immediate and long-term changes in outcome measures following an intervention, providing a clearer understanding of causal relationships than simple before-and-after comparisons (Wagner et al., 2002). In this study, ITS allowed us to assess the potential effects of creating Nazarbayev University on patterns of growth in research productivity in Kazakhstan.

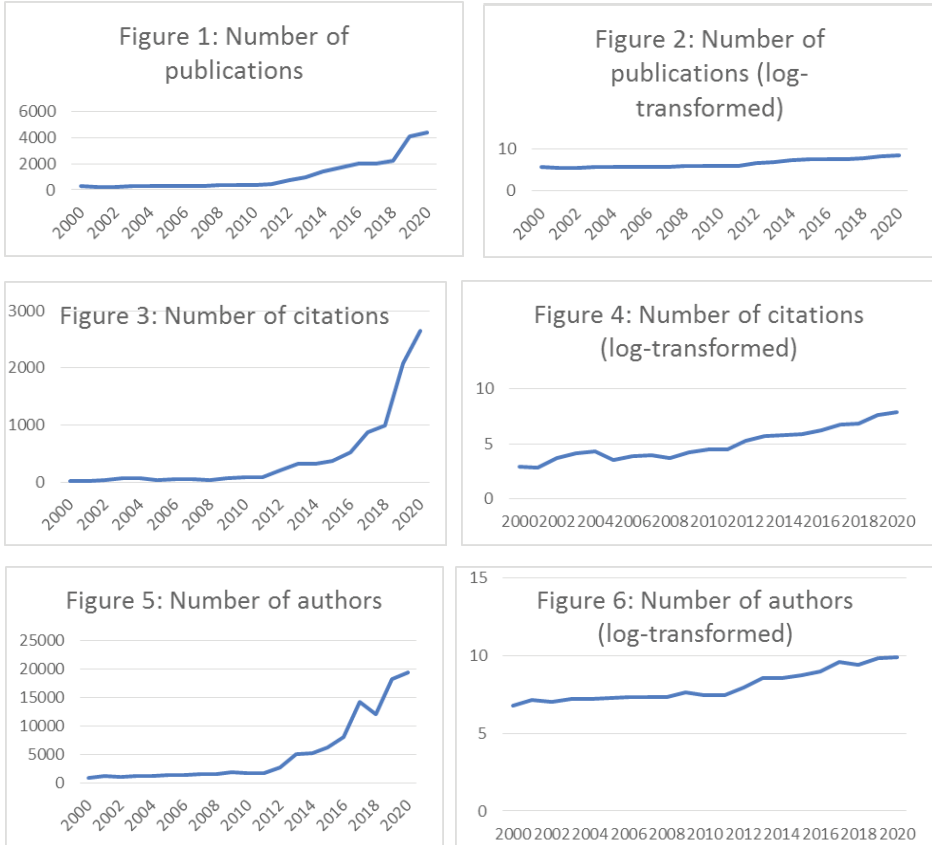
The inferential analysis was implemented in Excel alongside the descriptive analysis. Because the change in the productivity measures was exponential in nature, logarithmic transformation was applied to the data before analysis. The trends were graphed both in the original and the transformed formats. Research productivity was operationalized using three variables – number of publications per year of interest, number of citations per year of interest, and number of authors per year of interest. The latter measure is not conventionally used to assess research productivity. However, in the context of Kazakhstan, this measure makes sense. The country has a relatively low level of research capacity with a small number of publishing scholars and a low interest among the representatives of the global research community in any research on the country or in collaboration with authors from the country. We assumed that an effective intervention aimed at increasing the level of research productivity should also have a positive effect on the size of the scholarly community in the country or interest in writing about or collaborating with scholars from the country.

RESULTS

Throughout analysis, the total number of publications has grown from 283 in 2,000 to 4418 in 2020. The number of citations has grown from 18 to 2,644 correspondingly. Finally, the number of authors has increased from 886 in 2000 to 19,381 in 2020. The data is presented here in the form of figures showing the trends in the productivity data changes. Figures 1 and 2 present a change in the number of publications per year from the dataset vs. a change in logarithmically transformed data. Figures 3 and 4 present a change in the number of citations per year from the dataset vs. a change in logarithmically transformed data. Finally, Figures 5 and 6 provide a comparison between the change in the number of authors per year from the original dataset vs. a change in the transformed

data. One can see the apparent changes in the trends in the data growth, which occurred after the creation of Nazarbayev University. These changes are visible both in the original and transformed data for all three chosen measures of research productivity.

Figure 1. Search Strategy



To test whether the creation of NU has influenced the trends in productivity data, we used the interrupted time series analysis. The model included terms for the baseline trend, the immediate level change post-intervention, and the change in trend post-intervention. The model was specified as follows:

$$Y_t = \beta_0 + \beta_1 T_t + \beta_2 D_t + \beta_3 P_t + \epsilon_t$$

Where:

- Y_t = Outcome variable – level of research productivity measured as the number of publications, number of citations, or number of authors within a period of time t .
- T_t = Time since the start of the observation period at time t .

- $DtDt$ = Indicator variable for time periods post-intervention (0 before intervention, 1 after).
- $PtPt$ = Time since the intervention at time tt (0 before intervention, time since intervention after).
- $\epsilon t\epsilon t$ = Error term at time tt .

The coefficients in the model were interpreted in the following way:

- β_0 = Baseline level of the outcome at $Tt=0Tt=0$.
- β_1 = Pre-intervention trend (slope) of the outcome.
- β_2 = Immediate change in the level of the outcome following the intervention.
- β_3 = Change in trend of the outcome following the intervention.

We conducted the analysis using three measures of research productivity – number of publications, number of citations to the publications, and number of authors in the scholarly community. Given the exponential nature of the pattern of productivity growth in the graphs above, logarithmic transformation was applied to the data before ITS analysis with the values of coefficients recalculated to the original scale after the application of the statistical analysis.

In the rest of the section, the results of the inferential analysis for each of the versions of the outcome variable are summarized.

For the analysis of the effect of the creation of NU on research productivity measured in terms of number of publications, we obtained the following coefficients and the associated probability values:

Table 1. *Results of ITS analysis for the outcome variable measured in terms of number of publications*

<i>Coefficients type</i>	<i>Coefficients value</i>	<i>Standard Error</i>	<i>t Stat</i>	<i>P-value</i>	<i>Lower 95%,</i>	<i>Upper 95%,</i>
β_0	5.51	0.089	62	0.000	5.32	5.69
β_1	0.04	0.017	2	0.045	0.01	0.07
β_2	-1.88	0.239	-8	0.000	-2.39	-1.38
β_3	0.21	0.022	9	0.000	0.16	0.25

Based on the results of the segmented regression analysis shown in Table 1, before the creation of NU, the number of publications was increasing in Kazakhstan at the rate of 4% per year (95% CI (1, 7), $p < 0.05$). After the creation of NU, the rate of change has increased to 21% per year (95% CI (16, 25), $p < 0.05$). This allows us to conclude that the intervention was effective in increasing research productivity as measured in terms of the number of publications.

For the analysis of the effect of the creation of NU on research productivity measured in terms of the number of citations we obtained the following coefficients and the associated probability values:

Table 2. Results of ITS analysis for the outcome variable measured in terms of number of citations

Coefficients type	Coefficients value	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%
β_0	3.22	0.190	17	0.000	2.82	3.63
β_1	0.11	0.036	3	0.007	0.03	0.18
β_2	-2.11	0.511	-4	0.001	-3.18	-1.03
β_3	0.22	0.047	5	0.000	0.12	0.32

Based on the results of the segmented regression analysis shown in Table 2, before the creation of NU, the number of citations was increasing in Kazakhstan at the rate of 11% per year (95% CI (3, 18), $p < 0.05$). After the creation of NU, the rate of change has increased to 22% per year (95% CI (12, 32), $p < 0.05$). This allows us to conclude that the intervention was effective in increasing research productivity as measured in terms of the number of citations.

For the analysis of the effect of the creation of NU on research productivity measured in terms of the number of authors in the dataset we obtained the following coefficients and the associated probability values:

Table 3. Results of ITS analysis for the outcome variable measured in terms of the number of authors

Coefficients type	Coefficients value	Standard Error	t Stat	P-value	Lower 95%	Upper 95%
β_0	6.93	0.086	81	0.000	6.75	7.11
β_1	0.06	0.016	4	0.001	0.03	0.10
β_2	-2.03	0.230	-9	0.000	-2.52	-1.55
β_3	0.19	0.021	9	0.000	0.15	0.24

Based on the results of the segmented regression analysis shown in Table 3, before the creation of NU, the number of citations was increasing in Kazakhstan at the rate of 6% per

year (95% CI (3, 10), $p < 0.05$). After the creation of NU, the rate of change has increased to 19% per year (95% CI (15, 24), $p < 0.05$). This allows us to conclude that the intervention was effective in increasing research productivity as measured in terms of the number of authors.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of the interrupted time series analysis revealed that the GEI in Kazakhstan has been very effective in increasing research productivity as measured in three different ways – number of publications, number of citations, and the size of the research community (number of authors). The impact was somewhat higher on the number of publications and the number of authors, and somewhat lower on the number of citations to the articles published. These results are consistent with the conclusions of another statistical study, which used the difference in differences approach to compare the rate of change in the number of publications for Taiwanese universities, some of which were affected, and some, which were not affected by the global excellence initiative (Fu, Baker, & Zhang, 2018). The prior study also pointed to a modest effect of the GEI initiative on research productivity in Taiwan. In addition, the findings of this study are consistent with the results of a quantitative analysis of data collected from a faculty survey in China (Yang & You, 2017). The Chinese study revealed that the WCU project in China exhibited a positive effect on publications. However, the study also found that the effect was present only for international publications, while no significant impact on domestic publications and technology transfer took place. The latter specific observation from the Chinese analysis aligns with the results of a qualitative study of international faculty contribution at NU in Kazakhstan (Kuzhabekova & Lee, 2018), which concluded that international faculty tend not to collaborate with local scholars while pursuing extended international collaborations and publications.

This observation from the previous quantitative study in China and the qualitative study in Kazakhstan points to a potential limitation of this study. Our interrupted time series model did not account for a potential differentiation of the effect of the GEI on research output as measured in terms of international and domestic publications. Another limitation of the study is related to the relatively short observation period, which included only 10-time points before and 10 times points after the intervention. The short period of analysis could have several undesirable effects on the estimation (Bernal, Cummings, & Gasparrini, 2017). First, the short period of observation could have decreased the statistical power of the analysis. In addition, fewer data points could have led to increased variability, making it harder to distinguish between random fluctuations and real changes due to the intervention. A short pre-intervention period might have failed to provide a robust baseline to understand the natural trends and seasonal variations in the data, leading to inaccurate estimations of the intervention's effect. Finally, the intervention might have had a short-lived effect. Additional studies would need to be conducted to demonstrate whether the intervention's effects are long-lasting.

Despite the limitations, the study has filled the gap in the existing understanding of the GEI in Kazakhstan and offered some useful insights for the implementation of similar

initiatives in the region. It has provided the first statistical evidence of the positive effect of the policy intervention on the development of research capacity in Kazakhstan. This finding is particularly important in light of the current criticism of NU as an overly expensive project with dubious value for society (The Vlast, 2024). Our study reveals that the creation of NU has had positive effects and that there is a definite return on the government investment in the project.

However, further studies need to be conducted to provide additional evidence and a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of Nazarbayev University. One potential approach is to apply a difference-in-differences approach to explore the effect of the intervention by comparing changes in the patterns of research productivity before and after the implementation of the GEI for universities in Astana, where Nazarbayev University is located, and for the universities in Almaty, where no similar institution exists. In addition, another application of the interrupted time series model used in this study could attempt to differentiate the output variable in terms of publications in international and domestic journals. The suggested time series analysis might also be repeated after a certain period to include more time points in the analysis to increase the robustness of the estimation. A more detailed understanding of the impacts can be also achieved by the application of qualitative approaches, entailing interviews with faculty members and administrators of the WCU. In the long term, a comparative analysis of the impacts might be useful for NU and similar GEIs in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. Such an analysis should entail mixed-methods approaches, which would allow to identify factors, which might contribute to differentiation of the impacts across the country contexts in the region.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT:

The authors do not have any conflicting interests in the study.

FUNDING STATEMENT:

This research was not supported by any funding.

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Immigrants Through the Eyes of Citizens of Kazakhstan: The Attitude of the Host Society to the Immigrants' Health

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines the attitudes of Kazakhstani citizens towards health problems among immigrants. Respondents (N=401) from different regions of Kazakhstan took part in the study in 2023. According to the results of the study, it was found that (1) male respondents demonstrated significantly higher engagement with news about migrants compared to females. (2) Age and level of education were not associated with news engagement. (3) The probability of emigration correlated negatively with age but positively with education level, and positively with frequency of following migration news. (4) Individuals with conservative ideological orientations and liberal economic perspectives were more likely to follow migration news. (5) Attitudes towards immigrant health varied, with the majority supporting continuous health monitoring but divided opinions on whether immigrants pose a danger to public health. (6) Socio-demographic factors such as language, gender, experience living abroad, and ideological orientation influenced attitudes toward immigrant health. Therefore, understanding*

the complex attitudes of citizens towards immigrant health issues is essential for developing targeted interventions and policies that promote integration and address the diverse needs of both immigrants and the host population in Kazakhstan.

KEYWORDS: *migration, immigrants, interpersonal and intergroup perceptions, attitudes, public health.*

INTRODUCTION

The contemporary phenomenon of global migration presents a myriad of inquiries to scholars and professionals regarding its repercussions on the psychological and physiological welfare of migrant populations. Annually, a considerable number of individuals embark on international migration, contending with adversities such as bereavement, prejudice, linguistic obstacles, and constrained healthcare accessibility. Scientific inquiry within this domain furnishes insights into the adversities encountered by migrants, while also proffering strategies to enhance their overall well-being. As of mid-2020, the tale of international migrants surpassed 281 million individuals, encompassing 30.5 million refugees and asylum seekers, underscoring the scale and complexity of this societal dynamic (McAulife & Triandafyllidou, 2021). Thus, in the period from January to September 2023, Kazakhstan experienced an influx of 19,136 individuals, while 12,732 people departed the country, resulting in a net migration gain of 6,404 individuals. Compared to the same period in 2022, there was a notable increase in arrivals, amounting to a 74% rise. The primary migration exchange of the country occurs with Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, with 88% of arrivals and 78.1% of departures directed towards this region (National Statistics Bureau of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023).

Migrants are individuals who have changed their country of residence, and such migration can be either voluntary (due to employment, family reunification, or education) or forced (resulting from armed conflicts, persecution, or disasters). Those, who are forced to move to receive refugee status, while those who have not yet been officially granted such status are referred to as asylum seekers (McAulife et al. 2019). Immigrants may encounter various health and well-being challenges, as presented in Table 1.

Table 1. *Main health and well-being challenges of immigrants.*

Barriers	Description
Language and Cultural Barriers	Immigrants may face difficulties in accessing healthcare services due to language barriers and differences in cultural norms, which can lead to misunderstandings and inadequate care
Mental Health Issues	The stress of immigration, including leaving behind familiar environments, and social networks, and facing uncertainties in the new country, can contribute to mental health issues such as depression, anxiety, and post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD)

Discrimination and Social Exclusion	Immigrants may experience discrimination and social exclusion, which can negatively impact their mental and physical well-being. This may manifest as increased stress, reduced self-esteem, and limited access to resources and opportunities.
Limited Access to Healthcare	Some immigrants may face challenges in accessing healthcare due to financial constraints, lack of health insurance, or bureaucratic barriers. This can result in delayed or inadequate medical treatment, exacerbating health issues.
Infectious Diseases and Health Risks	Immigrants may be at higher risk of infectious diseases due to factors such as overcrowded living conditions, limited access to healthcare, and exposure to new environments. Additionally, they may face challenges in accessing preventive measures such as vaccinations.
Nutritional Challenges	Immigrants may experience dietary changes and challenges in accessing culturally appropriate and nutritious food, which can impact their overall health and well-being.
Trauma and Past Experiences	Immigrants may have experienced trauma, persecution, or violence in their home countries or during the migration process, leading to physical and psychological health consequences that require specialized support and care.

According to Bogic et al. (2015), migrants/refugees face a high prevalence of mental disorders such as depression and PTSD, as well as risks associated with traumatic events, loss, instability in the new country, and limited access to medical and psychological assistance. These factors collectively impact the mental health of refugees, emphasizing the need for the development of effective support and intervention programs. Jung & Kim (2020) investigated the impact of depression and social support on the quality of life of migrants, as well as the mediating effect of “health-promoting behavior.” The authors utilize various instruments to measure social support and depression, as well as develop their tool to measure health-promoting behavior. The research findings indicate that depression and social support influence the quality of life of migrants, with health-promoting behavior partially mitigating these effects. The authors suggest that enhancing access to social support and promoting health-promoting behavior among migrants may contribute to improving their quality of life.

A significant inquiry into the medical support of migrants was addressed in the review by Pattillo et al. (2023), wherein the authors identified three primary aspects in which racism manifests in healthcare for migrants: a general bias against migration, prejudiced attitudes towards migrant health and healthcare, and differential medical treatment. The conclusion highlights that racism exacerbates inequalities in access to and quality of healthcare for racially marginalized migrants, underscoring the need for further research in this area considering individual racism embedded within institutional and structural levels. Concurrently, Scarso et al. (2023) investigated that access to vaccination for newly arrived migrants is a pressing issue requiring urgent attention in EU countries. This study aimed to develop a General Conceptual Framework for understanding how to improve vaccination coverage among migrants, by characterizing and critically analyzing systemic barriers and potential vaccination enhancement strategies.

The work by Cho et al. (2023) provided an extensive review of health-related quality of life among migrants in the context of their labor activities, using Korea as an example.

The study identified that migrants encounter numerous issues such as language barriers, discrimination, poor working conditions, and limited access to healthcare. They also experience higher levels of stress, anxiety, and depression compared to the general population. The authors recommend that policymakers and employers take steps to improve working conditions, provide language and cultural training, and increase access to healthcare for migrants. Additionally, they suggest that future research focus on developing interventions to enhance the health-related quality of life of migrants.

Furthermore, Miller et al. (2019) analyze obstacles and assistance in ensuring the mental well-being of migrants in Japan. The authors highlight key factors such as language difficulties, lack of social support, and the importance of social networks and cultural identity for mental health. Recommendations include improving support services for migrants and increasing intercultural understanding among the Japanese public.

Herold et al. (2023) conducted a systematic review revealing a lack of research on the working conditions of migrants and refugees/asylum seekers in Europe and their impact on mental health. Migrants and refugees face organizational shortcomings, such as more frequent engagement in low-status, unskilled labor, requalification, increased reliance on temporary contracts and shift work, as well as low remuneration. They also encounter social disadvantages, including interpersonal discrimination compared to the local population across all European host countries. For both migrants and locals, most adverse work conditions are associated with deteriorating mental health. Consequently, labor legislation in European countries should pay attention to and regulate working conditions to ensure equal opportunities for migrants and locals. There is a partial need for explicit specification of laws regarding migrant workers. As migrants constitute a significant portion of the labor force in Europe, preserving their mental health by improving working conditions should be a long-term goal. Politically, this can be achieved, for example, through broader recognition of foreign qualifications by governmental bodies. At the enterprise level, this can be implemented through measures to combat discrimination, team-building programs, as well as workplace health measures such as training on occupational hazards and information on workers' rights in various languages.

The study by Li et al. (2023) underscores the significant influence of socioeconomic status on people's well-being, particularly in the context of immigration, using China as an example. The impact of this status varies depending on various factors, such as household registration status, duration of residence, and type of migration status. This highlights the importance of considering subjective aspects when analyzing socioeconomic status and overall well-being.

Legal provision of healthcare for immigrants

In both Kazakhstan and Russia, foreign nationals have access to medical services through the compulsory medical insurance system. In Russia, free treatment in state institutions requires possession of compulsory medical insurance (CMI) policy, obtainable by

individuals with temporary residence permits, residency permits, or temporary asylum. Emergency medical care is provided free of charge even without a CMI policy, while paid services are available in private clinics or through self-payment (Approval of the Rules for Providing Medical Care to Foreign Citizens in the Territory of the Russian Federation (with amendments and additions), 2013). Similarly, Kazakhstan operates a compulsory medical insurance system. To receive free medical care in state institutions, individuals must have a CMI policy and be registered in the system. Emergency medical care is provided free of charge, even without a CMI policy. Foreign citizens with residency or temporary residence permits in Kazakhstan can obtain CMI policies (Approval of the Rules for Providing Immigrants with Medical Care - IPS "Adilet," 2011). Thus, in both countries, foreign citizens can access medical services through compulsory medical insurance, although the requirements for obtaining a policy and access to free medical care may vary slightly. Psychological assistance is covered under CMI at state medical institutions.

In Germany, medical care for migrants depends on their length of stay and status. Those who have been in the country for less than 18 months have access only to emergency care and must obtain vouchers before visiting a doctor. Medications prescribed by a doctor can be obtained from a pharmacy free of charge (Healthcare for Refugees, n.d.). For those who have lived in Germany for more than 18 months, a "Health Card for Refugees" is issued, allowing access to medical care without vouchers. They receive all standard compulsory medical insurance services, except for long-term care. Psychiatric treatment is subject to payment or may be partially covered according to legislation (Healthcare for Refugees, n.d.). Medical services are also available without documents but through organizations providing medical care anonymously. In case of a medical emergency, emergency services should be called at 112 or the hospital's emergency department should be visited (Healthcare for Refugees, n.d.).

Overall, Germany provides a more structured healthcare system for migrants, whereas, in Russia and Kazakhstan, access to medical care mainly depends on insurance status or willingness to pay for services. Issues such as high levels of mental disorders, difficulties in accessing medical care, and social discrimination require a comprehensive approach and the development of effective support measures. Considering socio-economic status, traumatic events, and working conditions is key to creating policies and programs that promote the overall well-being of migrants and refugees. These findings provide a basis for developing specific strategies for enhancing the quality of life and supporting the migrant population in contemporary Kazakhstan. Therefore, this study aimed to study the attitude of the local population of Kazakhstan to the issues of medical and psychological assistance to immigrants.

METHODS

Study design

This cross-sectional questionnaire-based study was carried out from October to November 2023.

Procedure

The study was conducted by The Center for the Study of Public Opinion (CIOM, Kazakhstan). CIOM strictly complies with international and domestic standards (International Code of Market Research ESOMAR, Code of Professional Researchers of Public Opinion and Market of Kazakhstan KAPIOR). The survey of respondents was conducted by qualified interviewers on tablets using the Simple Forms platform and providing an audio recording of the interview for each respondent. Participation was entirely voluntary; confidentiality and anonymity were guaranteed. All participants had the opportunity to get acquainted with the study's aim and objectives. Informed consent to participate was obtained from all of the participants.

Measurement

The questionnaire included items on socio-demographic and personal characteristics (sex, age, ethnicity, occupation, the highest education level, experience of living abroad, and political-ideological and political-economical orientation). Respondents were also asked about the degree to which they are inclined to closely follow news about population migration in the country and in the world. This question had a 5-point response scale, where 1 = I don't follow at all, 5 = I follow every day. The likelihood of moving from Kazakhstan for permanent residence to another country in the next 3-5 years was assessed on an 11-point scale, where 0 = definitely not, and 10 = definitely yes. Items about respondents' attitudes toward immigrant health issues had a 7-point Likert-type agreement scale.

Statistical analysis

Data analysis was conducted using SPSS version 20.0 and Jamovi version 1.2.17.

Descriptive statistics were performed using mean and confidence intervals (95% CI) for quantitative variables. Percentages were computed for qualitative variables. These data analysis methods were used to describe the socio-demographic characteristics of the study population. Independent sample t-test/U-test and ANOVA with post-hoc test were used to assess the differences of variables between two and more than two groups, respectively. We performed correlation and binominal logistic regression analysis to evaluate associations of the independent variables with attitudes towards immigrants' health issues. A statistically significant difference was accepted at a p-value of less than 5%.

Ethics approval

The study was approved by the Research and Ethics Committee of M. Narikbayev KAZGUU University (extract from protocol No. 2, held on September 25, 2023).

RESULTS

The study involved 401 respondents from the following regions of Kazakhstan: the cities of Almaty (n=200), Shymkent (n=59), Aktobe (n=50), Oral (n=50), and Turkestan (n=42). Table 2 provides details of the study population. The age of study participants ranged between 22 and 63 years, with a mean age of 40.9 ± 12.7 . More than one-third (n=150, 37.4%) of respondents answered questions in Kazakh language. Half (49.9%) of the study participants were of the Kazakh ethnic group, and over a quarter (25.9%) were Russian. Table 2 also presents other sociological characteristics of respondents, such as occupation, level of education, family status, experience of living abroad, political orientation, frequency of viewing news about migrants, and the likelihood of their emigration.

Table 2. *Study population (N=401).*

Variables	n (%) / M\pmSD (Me)
Gender	
Male	148 (36.9%)
Female	243 (63.1%)
Age	40.9 \pm 12.7 (Me=39)
Ethnic group	
Kazakh	200 (49.9%)
Russian	104 (25.9%)
Uzbek	24 (6.0%)
Ukrainian	14 (3.5%)
Other	59 (14.7%)
Occupation	
Student	16 (4.0%)
Employer	234 (58.4%)
Unemployed	48 (12.0%)
Retired	32 (8.0%)
Self-employed	71 (17.7%)

Education level

Middle School (9-classes)	3 (0.7%)
High School (11-classes)	58 (14.5%)
Specialty / College	116 (28.9%)
Bachelor/Master degrees	219 (54.6%)
Academic/scientific degrees	5 (1.2%)

Family status

Single	101 (25.2%)
Married	241 (60.1%)
Divorced	48 (12.0%)
Widowhood	11 (2.7%)

Experience of living abroad

No	337 (84.0%)
Yes	64 (16.0%)

Political-ideological orientation

Liberal (Left)	90 (22.4%)
Middle	135 (33.7%)
Conservative (Right)	176 (43.9%)

Political-economical orientation

Socialistic	95 (23.7%)
Middle	93 (23.2%)
Liberal	213 (53.1%)

News on migration (1-5) 3.08±1.35 (Me=3)

Possibility of emigration (0-10) 2.32±3.18 (Me=0)

Male respondents (3.39 ± 1.26) significantly more often noted that they follow news about migrants compared to females (2.91 ± 1.37), U-test $p=0.001$. At the same time, age and level of education were not associated with the tendency to follow news about population migration in the country and in the world. The probability of emigration correlated negatively with age ($r=-0.290$, $p<0.001$), but positively with the level of education ($r=0.101$, $p<0.05$). Moreover, the more likely emigration was, the more often respondents followed news about migration processes ($r=0.143$, $p=0.004$).

Respondents with more conservative views according to ideological orientation ($r=0.158$, $p=0.001$) and those who were more liberal with economic orientation ($r=0.308$, $p<0.001$) were more likely to follow migration news. Married study participants (3.249 ± 1.32), compared to single ones (2.733 ± 1.23), more often followed news about migration processes ($p=0.004$), but were less likely to emigrate shortly (1.863 ± 2.98 vs 3.505 ± 3.27 , respectively, $p<0.001$).

Table 3 presents the results of a survey of citizens of Kazakhstan (the host country) about their attitude towards immigrant health issues. More than four-fifths (83.5%) agreed that continuous monitoring of the physical and mental health of immigrants should be introduced, and just under three-quarters (71.8%) believed that immigrants should have the financial resources to deal with health problems. At the same time, 68.6% and 63.6% of respondents answered that preventive medical services, such as immunization, and psychological care, respectively, should be paid for by the Government. On the question of whether immigrants pose a danger to the life and health of citizens of Kazakhstan, the opinions of respondents were almost equally divided.

Table 3. *Attitude towards immigrant health issues among citizens of Kazakhstan.*

Q	Variables	M±SD	Disagree n (%)	Neither nor n (%)	Agree n (%)
1	Immigrants pose a danger to the life and health of people in Kazakhstan	3.85±1.88	187 (46.6%)	44 (11.0%)	170 (42.4%)
2	It is necessary to introduce constant monitoring of the physical and mental health of immigrants	5.52±1.45	50 (12.5%)	16 (4.0%)	335 (83.5)
3	Immigrants should have financial opportunities in Kazakhstan to independently solve health problems	4.87±1.79	90 (22.4%)	23 (5.7%)	288 (71.8)
4	Immigrants should receive preventive services such as immunization (vaccination) at the expense of the Government	4.71±1.81	103 (25.7%)	23 (5.7%)	275 (68.6%)
5	Immigrants should receive psychological assistance at the expense of the Government	4.49±1.83	124 (30.9%)	22 (5.5%)	255 (63.6%)

The idea that immigrants may pose risks to the health and life of citizens of Kazakhstan correlated positively with the opinion that it is necessary to introduce constant monitoring

of the health of immigrants ($r=0.190$, $p<0.001$), while negatively correlated with the fact that the state should bear the financial costs of preventive ($r=-0.136$) and psychological ($r=-0.116$) supports from migrants ($p<0.05$). Moreover, the opinion that it is necessary to introduce constant monitoring of the health of immigrants was positively correlated with the migrants' financial opportunities to independently solve health issues ($r=0.155$), and facts that the Government should bear the financial costs of preventive ($r=0.120$) and psychological ($r=0.153$) supports from migrants ($p<0.05$).

Subsequently, we assessed the role of socio-demographic factors in respondents' attitudes toward immigrant health issues (Table 4) using binomial regression analysis. The opinion that immigrants pose a threat to the health and life of the population of Kazakhstan was positively associated with the frequency of viewing news about migration processes; it was more than twice as often noted among the Kazakh-speaking population in comparison with the Russian-speaking population, while the least among people with a liberal orientation in terms of from the point of view of ideology.

Table 4. *Socio-demographic predictors of the attitudes toward immigrant health issues (N=401).*

Predictor	Q1		Q2		Q3		Q4		Q5	
	R ² =0.0545,		R ² =0.0556,		R ² =0.121,		R ² =0.0582,		R ² =0.0906,	
	p=0.002		p=0.046		p<0.001		p=0.002		p<0.001	
	OR	p	OR	p	OR	p	OR	p	OR	p
Gender										
Female vs Male	0.837	0.427	1.102	0.745	1.751	0.030	0.652	0.078	0.739	0.202
Age	0.996	0.647	1.013	0.278	1.009	0.393	1.013	0.173	1.019	0.050
Education	0.958	0.754	0.844	0.360	0.702	0.033	1.100	0.510	1.394	0.021
Language										
Russian VS Kazakh	0.449	<0.001	0.492	0.026	3.864	<0.001	0.774	0.286	0.892	0.628
Experience of living abroad										
Yes VS No	1.038	0.900	1.779	0.188	2.798	0.011	1.744	0.106	1.209	0.547
News of migration	1.190	0.046	1.201	0.116	0.972	0.772	1.027	0.771	1.185	0.065
Emigration possibilities	0.979	0.551	1.053	0.313	1.032	0.442	1.139	0.002	1.120	0.005
Ideological orientation										
Middle VS Liberal	2.224	0.009	1.835	0.097	0.475	0.035	0.578	0.085	0.370	0.002
Conservative VS Liberal	1.533	0.136	1.869	0.068	0.930	0.829	0.851	0.599	0.782	0.418
Economical orientation										
Socialistic VS Liberal	1.091	0.756	1.303	0.479	0.641	0.167	1.941	0.032	2.785	0.001
Middle VS Liberal	0.704	0.215	1.192	0.638	0.734	0.329	1.333	0.328	1.325	0.327

The statement that it is necessary to introduce constant monitoring of the health of immigrants was reliably associated only with the language in which respondents filled out the questionnaire, while the Russian-speaking population less often noted this fact in comparison with the Kazakh-speaking population. In contrast, the Russian-speaking population more often noted the need for immigrants to have financial resources to solve their health problems. In addition, predictors of this attitude were also: gender (more often among women than men), experience of living abroad (more often among those who lived abroad), and the ideological orientation of the respondents (least likely among conservatives according to ideological orientation).

The attitude that the state of the receiving country should pay from its funds the financial costs of preventive medical and psychological care for immigrants was positively associated with the likelihood of moving abroad and a more socialistic orientation from an economic point of view.

DISCUSSION

The influx of migrants to Kazakhstan, reflected in the substantial increase in arrivals compared to previous years, illustrates the scale and relevance of migration dynamics in the region. Notably, the majority of migration exchanges occur within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, emphasizing regional migration patterns and their implications for health and well-being. The challenges faced by immigrants, including mental health disorders such as depression and PTSD, underscore the need for targeted support and intervention programs to address their unique health needs (Sheath et al., 2020; Alegría et al., 2021). Thus, research indicates that social support and health-promoting behavior play crucial roles in mitigating the adverse effects of migration on mental health and overall well-being (Vila, 2021; Acoba, 2024). Racism and systemic barriers exacerbate inequalities in healthcare access and quality for migrants, emphasizing the importance of addressing structural issues in healthcare provision (Kang, Tomkow, & Farrington, 2019; Rivenbark, & Ichou, 2020; Hamed et al., 2022). Migrants often face precarious labor conditions, which can adversely affect their mental health. Policies aimed at improving working conditions and recognizing foreign qualifications are essential for safeguarding migrant well-being (Alvarado, 2020; Boufkhed et al., 2022; Koseoglu Ornek et al., 2022). Moreover, socioeconomic status significantly influences the well-being of immigrants, highlighting the need for nuanced approaches to address the diverse needs of migrant populations (Fassbender, & Leyendecker, 2018; Hamed et al., 2022; Pattillo et al., 2023).

The comparison of healthcare systems reveals variations in access to medical services for migrants across countries. While Kazakhstan and Russia provide access through compulsory medical insurance, Germany's system is more structured, offering different levels of care based on migrants' length of stay and status. Notably, psychological assistance is covered under compulsory medical insurance in Kazakhstan and Russia, highlighting a crucial aspect of migrant healthcare provision. The discussion underscores common

challenges such as high levels of mental disorders, difficulties in accessing medical care, and social discrimination faced by migrants in all three countries, necessitating comprehensive support measures. Addressing issues related to socio-economic status, traumatic events, and working conditions is imperative for developing effective policies and programs aimed at promoting the overall well-being of migrants and refugees. These findings lay the groundwork for the development of tailored strategies to enhance the quality of life and support the migrant population in contemporary Kazakhstan, emphasizing the importance of a holistic approach to migrant health and well-being. By synthesizing these insights, policymakers and healthcare professionals can work towards creating inclusive healthcare systems and support networks that cater to the diverse needs of migrant populations in Kazakhstan and beyond.

In the current study, the attitude of the host population, citizens of Kazakhstan, to the health of immigrants was also investigated. A total of 401 respondents from the southern and western regions of the country took part in the study. The findings of this study provide valuable insights into the attitudes of citizens of Kazakhstan towards health issues concerning immigrants, shedding light on various factors that influence these attitudes. One significant result is the gender disparity observed in the frequency of following news about migrants, with male respondents demonstrating a higher propensity for engagement compared to females. This gender disparity in information consumption could potentially reflect differences in awareness, interests, or information-seeking behaviors between genders within the context of migration issues. The Pew Research Center reports that there are notable differences in the types of news stories that men and women follow closely, which could reflect broader societal trends in gender-specific interests and behaviors (Pew Research Center, 2021). This pattern might suggest that men are more likely to be exposed to, and thus more engaged with, migration-related news, which often intersects with political and international topics. This disparity in engagement and awareness could have implications for social and political mobilization, policy support, and community responses to migration issues.

Interestingly, the study did not find any significant associations between age or level of education and the tendency to follow news about population migration. Traditionally, news habits have been closely linked to demographic variables. For example, older adults and individuals with higher educational attainments are generally more engaged with news media due to higher levels of civic engagement or a greater understanding of the complexities involved in political and social issues (Esser, & Steppat, 2017). However, the unique nature of migration issues, which resonate across various socio-demographic groups due to their universal and compelling human-interest aspects, may explain the broader appeal.

This suggests that factors beyond demographic characteristics might shape individuals' interest in or awareness of migration-related news. Understanding these factors is essential for developing targeted communication strategies to enhance public awareness and engagement with immigration-related issues.

Moreover, the study revealed intriguing patterns regarding the probability of emigration, ideological orientation, and marital status. Notably, individuals with more conservative ideological orientations and those with more liberal economic orientations were more likely to follow news about migration processes. Research suggests that conservative and liberal orientations influence selective exposure to news content, with individuals preferring news that aligns with their existing beliefs (Garrett, 2009). This phenomenon, known as “confirmation bias,” could explain why those with certain ideological leanings are more engaged with migration news, as they seek information that reinforces their political and economic viewpoints.

Regarding attitudes towards immigrant health, the majority of respondents expressed support for measures such as continuous monitoring of immigrant health and the provision of preventive medical and psychological care. However, opinions were divided on whether immigrants pose a danger to the health and life of citizens of Kazakhstan. This division reflects the complexity of public perceptions and underscores the need for nuanced approaches to addressing immigrant health issues. Moreover, this sentiment aligns with global health directives that emphasize the need for inclusive health policies which are critical for maintaining public health security (WHO, 2022).

The study also identified several socio-demographic factors associated with attitudes towards immigrant health. For instance, Kazakh-speaking respondents were more likely to perceive immigrants as posing a threat to public health compared to Russian-speaking respondents. Language often serves as a marker of identity and can influence perceptions through the lens of cultural and social narratives. The difference in perceptions between Kazakh-speaking and Russian-speaking respondents may reflect underlying cultural attitudes that are informed by historical, social, and political contexts unique to Kazakhstan. Moreover, the divergent perceptions between the two language groups may also relate to differential media consumption patterns, where language influences the type of media accessed and thus the narratives encountered. Media portrayal of immigrants can significantly impact public perceptions, potentially exacerbating fears of health risks associated with immigrants.

Additionally, women, individuals with experience living abroad, and those with a more socialistic economic orientation were more supportive of state-funded preventive medical and psychological care for immigrants. The support for state-funded health care among women and individuals living abroad experience may stem from a broader empathy and understanding of the challenges faced by immigrants. Women often show higher levels of empathy and pro-social behavior, which could translate into more supportive attitudes toward welfare policies that benefit disadvantaged groups, including immigrants (Eagly, 2009). Moreover, living abroad can increase one’s awareness of the difficulties associated with migration, thereby fostering more supportive attitudes towards policies that ease these challenges.

Overall, these findings highlight the multifaceted nature of public attitudes towards immigrant health issues in Kazakhstan. Understanding these attitudes and the factors that shape them is crucial for developing evidence-based policies and interventions aimed at promoting the health and well-being of both immigrants and the host population. Future research could further explore the underlying reasons behind these attitudes and investigate their implications for healthcare delivery and social integration efforts.

CONCLUSION

This study offers valuable insights into the attitudes of citizens of Kazakhstan towards health issues concerning immigrants, revealing nuanced patterns influenced by demographic, socio-economic, and ideological factors. Our findings underscore the importance of understanding public perceptions and attitudes towards immigrant health, which play a crucial role in shaping policies and interventions aimed at promoting the well-being of both immigrants and the host population. By integrating these insights into policy-making and healthcare delivery, we can work towards fostering inclusivity, promoting immigrant health, and fostering positive social integration within the host community. Future research should continue to explore the underlying determinants of these attitudes and their implications for public health policy and practice.

DECLARATION OF CONFLICTING INTERESTS

The author(s) claim that they do not have a conflict of interest concerning the research.

FUNDING

The publication was carried out within the framework of granted financing of the Committee of Science of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023–2025, project IRN API9679651.

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Migration Trajectories of Uzbek Students in France and the UK

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ABSTRACT. *This paper offers a comprehensive overview of select findings extracted from a PhD dissertation, employing a comparative analysis to investigate the trajectories of Uzbek students in both France and the UK during the period from 2004 to 2009. The paper advocates for the integration of the trajectory element into existing theories on international student mobility and international migration, with a particular emphasis on the context of South-North mobility.*

Utilizing qualitative research methods, including interviews¹, surveys, and participant observation, the study underscores the significance of tracking migrants' pathways over an extended period for a nuanced comprehension of migrant strategies and state policies with which they contend. The evidence suggests that stringent measures significantly influence the trajectories of migrants, not necessarily compelling a return to their countries of origin.

Migration for studies goes beyond financial considerations as it also addresses the demands of a new social hierarchy emerging within the home country. In essence, migration for studies exposes individuals to diverse perspectives, surpassing the simplistic notion of a linear journey from point A to point B.

KEYWORDS: *International student mobility, student migration, Uzbekistan, France, UK*

INTRODUCTION

Studies examining the mobility of international students often reference the concept of “brain drain,” originally applied to British researchers who emigrated to the United States (Balmer et al., 2009). This piece, based on the field research conducted between 2004-2009, aims to explore the intersection of migration and education, with a specific focus on student migration, to better understand its impact on both individual experiences and broader educational systems. Initially supported by some Central Asian governments through public grants, such as Kazakhstan's Bolashak program and Uzbekistan's Umid program following the fall of the USSR, outward student mobility from the region continues today, now primarily relying on private funding. According to the UNESCO Institute of Statistics, this mobility remains significant, exceeding 10% (UNESCO Data,

¹ Pseudonyms were employed in the study.

2024).² The net migration ratio indicates that the Central Asian region has one of the highest outgoing mobility ratios globally.

Our primary hypothesis was based on the consideration that students enjoy a greater degree of personal agency compared to migrant workers. Young students move intending to pursue their education, while also considering potential opportunities for professional integration in host countries. Their diploma, linguistic capacities, and preparedness can be regarded as assets in navigating different cultures, rendering them particularly intriguing subjects for research examining the outcomes of such cultural intersections.

This paper examines a distinct temporal phase marked by the termination of the official *Umid* scholarship initiative. During this period, alternatives were scarce, and individuals had limited recourse, with embassy-sponsored scholarships and those from the Open Society Institute (OSI) foundation³ being notable exceptions. Concurrently, this epoch coincides with the pivotal events in Andijon, contributing significantly to alterations in diplomatic relationships and the issuance dynamics of study visas (Axyonova, 2015).

Young students also navigate the intricate landscape of migration opportunities presented by countries instituting frameworks to attract migrants. Notably, these opportunities often unfold under conditions characterized by precariousness. It is noteworthy that these host countries have officially transitioned away from the recruitment of migrant workers based on state agreements, as was the norm during the 1960s (Van Mol & de Valk, 2016).

Most of the young Uzbeks in London were enrolled in language schools⁴, and not in universities. During my survey conducted in the United Kingdom in 2004, a significant portion of European migrants were also enrolled in these language schools (Home Office, 2003; MacLeod, 2004). The practice of enrolling in such a school and working simultaneously is not a recent innovation but rather a “politically correct” tool to access inexpensive labor. With the crisis, criticism has increased not only towards these schools but also towards foreign students in general, also implicating the government (Lomer, 2018). With the economic crisis in 2008, public authorities became aware that a portion of private institutions was involved in the migration process, where students were working in various jobs, and their studies were merely a “cover” (Whitehead, 2009). The UK government began searching for the “ideal culprit” to change its migration management policy and in 2009 targeted language schools, which it perceived as contributing to illegal immigration. The UK Border Agency believes that up to 85% of the schools inspected have used this system. In March 2010, the government decided that non-EU

² The discernible increase in Central Asian outbound student mobility, particularly evident since 2014, has surpassed a notable threshold, exceeding 10 percent, as reported by the UIS. This growth has now ascended to 15 percent. Notably, such a substantial growth ratio is not universally observed in other regions globally.

Other policy-relevant indicators: Outbound internationally mobile students by host region (unesco.org)

³ <https://www.opensocietyfoundations.org/>

⁴ According to UK, an association of over four hundred language schools in the UK, over 500,000 students came to learn English in 2008, which puts the UK well ahead of other countries, with 30% of the global market at that time. Their success is also based on the “agent” system, through which the various establishments abroad work and promote their language courses.

foreign students should have a minimum level of B1 (corresponding to intermediate level) before coming to study English, replacing the previous requirement of A1 (elementary) level. Furthermore, this decision led to other changes, such as the denial of the right to invite dependents for studies lasting less than six months, along with a reduction in the number of working hours allowed from twenty to ten per week. That also impacted our sample, among the forty-seven Uzbek students interviewed in London in 2004, only one remained after five years.

Most interviewed students in France were currently enrolled in university programs. The diversification of countries in terms of hosting foreign students was also part of the discourse in France during the time of our research. The proportion of visas issued for third-party countries is notably low within the overall figures, ranging from 5,671 in 2003 to 6,223 in 2008. The consistent decrease in the issuance of “student” visas aligns with the accession of certain European nations (Romania, Bulgaria) to the European Union.

France perceived the presence of Uzbek students more as a cultural and, predominantly, academic connection supported via various types of scholarships. Established institutions such as the Victor Hugo Center and the French Institute of Central Asian Studies (IFEAC) were recognized entities in the country. There are no other equivalent institutes to IFEAC, which has emerged as a leading contributor to social research in the Central Asian region. Furthermore, the Franco-Uzbek relations in higher education emerge as notably dynamic. According to French CNOUS data covering the period from 1995 to 2006, over 141 students arrived for degree programs, with an additional 330 participating in short-term courses. The institutions hosting students from Uzbekistan were in Paris (INALCO, Paris XI, and Paris I), Toulouse (Toulouse I), Marseille (Aix-Marseille II), Bordeaux (Bordeaux I), and Strasbourg. INALCO stands out as particularly familiar to Uzbek institutions, having established cooperation agreements with five higher education institutions in Uzbekistan. The sustained relevance of these agreements primarily relies on individual initiatives rather than institutional strategies.

This work is structured as follows, first, the article engages in a theoretical discussion, followed by an exploration of public policies that can redefine the role of intervening obstacles in the pathway. Finally, it delves into how students redefine their plans and the subsequent impact on their trajectories.

METHOD

Some of these students participated in scholarship programs, but the majority did not receive any grants and relied on personal funding. This section of the study is based on primary data collected through one-on-one and group interviews, participant observation, and questionnaires organized via snowball sampling conducted in England, Uzbekistan, and France. The sample includes 40 students from France enrolled in both degree and non-degree programs, and over 40 students from the UK, primarily

enrolled in non-degree studies. Key attributes analyzed include students' financial backgrounds, motivations for studying abroad, and the challenges they faced during their educational experiences. Secondary data were gathered from a variety of sources, including government websites such as the UK Home Office reports, prefectures in France, and the ministries of the interior in both the UK and France. Additionally, data were collected from embassies of the UK and France in Uzbekistan, as well as from international organizations like UNESCO and the OECD, and research centers specializing in migration and education. These data covered student mobility rates, visa policies, and scholarship programs, offering a comprehensive view of the trends and policies affecting Central Asian students abroad.

In France, the capital city of Paris was designated as the primary research location, while the city of Toulouse was specifically chosen due to its significant Uzbek population with whom we had prior acquaintance. Similarly, in England, London was selected as the research site, mirroring the choice of the French capital, owing to its logistical convenience and the substantial presence of Uzbeks within the city. The initial phase of fieldwork was conducted in London, where I resided for a duration of five months alongside Uzbek students in 2004 to pursue participant observation. Initially, my accommodations in London were situated in the Limehouse neighborhood, followed by a transition to White Hart Lane. I used my personal connections comprised individuals who were either friends or classmates that had been awarded scholarships to pursue studies in the UK. Notably, networks from both my secondary education at Turkish Lyceums and my tertiary education at the University of World Economy and Diplomacy (UWED) played a pivotal role in facilitating contact with Uzbek students in London, as language learning within these rather elitist institutions was efficiently implemented. The composition of the snowball sample was determined after the stay in London. Various methods were available for contacting Uzbeks residing in London, including online platforms and through personal acquaintances. I opted for the latter approach in both countries, acknowledging the potential for errors (convenience bias) inherent in such a snowball sampling method. All the students participating in our study had student status at the time of our survey, either for language studies or for various academic levels. Gender parity could not be achieved, especially in the case of English studies, where only 15 percent of the responses came from female students. The data concerning the experiences of students were gathered through two questionnaires, each completed by 40 students from France and the UK, respectively. Most of the participants in our study came from large cities, attended reputable schools and universities, and came from families where parents had cultural capital (diplomas). Most were unmarried at the beginning of our study, although some of them were married or already divorced, although this was rare.

The questionnaire utilized in London was designed to be more concise, focusing predominantly on aspects related to work and living conditions. In contrast, the questionnaire employed in France provided a more nuanced examination of study conditions. One to one interview conducted with 32 students in France and 18 students

in the UK proved to be more substantive than the questionnaires. Two group interviews were conducted in London, Paris and Toulouse. They afforded a comprehensive understanding of students' pathways, while also offering critical insights into Uzbek migrants' integration projects, as perceived by both their compatriots and other migrant groups (Kazakh or Turkish communities). Additionally, participant observation of the daily lives of "migrant students" served as a valuable supplementary method. The criterion of a three-year residency in the respective countries was employed to assess the trajectories of students' experiences following an extended period within the host nation. Names provided in the research are pseudonyms, and to uphold anonymity, certain details regarding place of birth or educational background have been slightly modified in the study.

NAVIGATING BORDERS: THEORETICAL EXPLORATIONS OF STUDENT MOBILITY AND MIGRATION

Student mobility and migration in Central Asia are frequently examined through the lens of internationalization of higher education. Hwami et al. (2024) offer a systematic review of internationalization across the region, drawing from an extensive body of literature to provide a thorough overview of trends and developments over the years. It completes the work of Huisman, Smolentseva, and Froumin (2021), discussing the transformations of higher education systems in post-Soviet countries. Sagintayeva and Kurakbayev (2013), Sabzalieva (2015), Ruziev and Burkhanov (2018), and Mukhitdinova (2015) provide a broader perspective on the challenges and reforms in higher education throughout Central Asia, highlighting efforts to integrate international standards while addressing local issues.

On a more specific level, Azimbayeva and Harford (2017) compare changes in higher education governance across Kazakhstan, Russia, and Uzbekistan. Moldashev & Tleuv (2022) investigate local academic responses to international research policies. In Kazakhstan, Akkari et al. (2023) focus on the implementation of internationalization policies, while Jonbekova et al. (2022) explore the contributions of graduates from international scholarship programs to their home country. Del Sordi (2017) examines the Bolashak program in Kazakhstan, emphasizing its impact on student mobility and domestic politics. In Uzbekistan, Uralov (2020) and Ubaydullaeva (2019) analyze the role of foreign university branches in the internationalization of higher education.

Student mobility and migration are defined within somewhat different theoretical frameworks. The literature on International Student Mobility (ISM) encompasses study abroad experiences for shorter durations or, at times, for the entire duration of a degree program. However, the concept of ISM aligns well with the concept of North-North mobility, while in the case of South-North and South-South mobility, using the term "mobility" may not be entirely appropriate. Students from the Global South encounter similar procedures and administrative challenges, and in practice, their mobility is not as pronounced as that of students from the Global North. Hence, I opt for the term

“student migration” in this context, a term previously employed by other scholars in similar contexts (Blaud & Célestin, 2001).

Among the notable frameworks related to Central Asian students’ case, Chankseliani proposes Wallerstein’s world-system theory to explain student migration in the post-Soviet space (Chankseliani, 2015). Chankseliani (2015; 305) also suggests that “outgoing mobility can be explained by the availability of higher education and jobs in the students’ home countries”. However, world-system theory struggles to provide a comprehensive explanation for Kyrgyzstan’s position as both a source and destination or it does not consider the complexities of migration categories. While the world-system theory positions the Russian Federation as a core for Uzbekistan, there are also practical reasons for an ad hoc situation.

Another theoretical explanation supported by Syed Zwick (2019) is called motivation-opportunity-capacity model. This model is based on the model initially developed by Carling J. (2002) and Haas H. (2010), which is grounded in the capabilities and aspirations of migrants, providing an interesting framework to apply in the context of Central Asian students.

Both theories help to explain student migration from Central Asia but do not sufficiently account for the political dimension of regimes (de Haas & Natter, 2015). Beyond that, the less “opportunity availability” for students from Central Asia (scholarship, admission, recognition, visa-free regime) could explain the inequality of students based on their origins determining the vectors of student mobilities and migrations.

Finally, rather than the concept of a “migration project,” this study privileges “migration trajectory” which “falls within a longitudinal approach, allowing the reconstruction of temporal successions of mobility, events, situations, and projects” (Odden, 2010). The starting point of a trajectory is not the date of arrival in the host country or the attainment of employment as its endpoint. A trajectory does not come to a halt but is constantly reconstructed, allowing for tailored measures at any given time. Indeed, “the dichotomy of success versus failure is a social construct directly linked to the context of its use” (Paivandi, 2018). My interest in this article lies in the impact of public policies on the construction of trajectories for international students. In future studies, the concept of “persistence” (Tinto, 1993) could also be used as individuals faced with a decline in support at a certain point in their trajectory may be compelled to reconsider their initial goals and diminish their persistence within migration trajectory.

OBSTACLES IN THE EDUCATIONAL TRAJECTORY: ENCOMPASSING VISA PROCESSES AND STAY PERMIT ACQUISITION

Despite the essential role of international students in the higher education system, both European countries adopt unfavorable conditions for students, particularly those coming from outside the European Union. While in the UK, an international student is viewed

as a source of income, in France, their role is discussed differently, serving political and economic considerations at different times (Ennafaa & Paivandi, 2008). I explore the existence of a “double barrier”⁵ for Uzbekstudents, as they must overcome crucial steps to study in Europe. The significance of these barriers extends beyond economic costs, encompassing psychological challenges for some and legal hurdles for others. These students invest more effort, money, and work to pursue their studies. In return, they undergo scrutiny from embassies before departure and local authorities once on-site. These controls, deemed absurd by some and unjust by all, illustrate how students are reduced to mere foreigners, limiting not only their economic opportunities but, more importantly, their academic potential.

In the British case, the question of the visa often arises in the discussions of young Uzbeks. It represents a barrier to overcome, the most challenging aspect for the majority. It is not uncommon to find inquiries on online forums regarding the means of obtaining a British visa. To obtain a student visa, the applicant is subject to certain obligations such as enrollment, proof of self-financing, and specifying the purpose of the stay in a questionnaire designed exclusively for students. While in the past, a candidate meeting the required conditions had the right to have an interview with the Consulate staff, later the application was sent by mail, and the questionnaire replaced the interview. For many students, the most difficult barrier has always been the interview with the Consul, as the assessment of the candidate's file depended on the personal decision of the official.

These barriers fuel an endless “game,” as one side will try to create more and more obstacles, and the other will find solutions to circumvent them. For example, documents such as “evidence of support and accommodation,” defining proof of finances, or “evidence of sponsor’s finances,” defining the employer’s accounts, are subtle documents requested in the first stage. They can be a reason for rejection because official salaries may appear very low compared to the British currency, while presenting accurate figures may raise suspicions.

However, candidates quickly put together the necessary documents, triggering the interview. In these conditions, the interview becomes the decisive element because the presentation of the file remains routine. The certainty of the candidate who believes in their dossier disappears, as the decision is personal, with academic factors ranking second. In the case of Hamid, who submitted his enrollment documents like others, his high level of English, known to the consulate, was an obstacle. The reasons for rejection are rarely explained but always assumed. In his case, the level of the school where he had enrolled was lower than his English proficiency. The formal way to obtain a British visa without taking risks, for most students, was to use intermediary agencies.

⁵ The concept of the “double barrier” originates from Sayad’s notion of “double absence” (1999) and Lee’s concept of the “Intervening Obstacle” (Theory of Migration, 1966). According to Lee, obstacles may manifest in various forms such as legal, geographic, and political barriers. However, these impediments can be encountered from both the origin and destination sides, encompassing challenges like exit visas, visas, and residency permits. Thus, the term “double barrier” is employed to underscore the prevalence of the “double absence” phenomenon.

The conditions set by the French Embassy in Uzbekistan remain rooted in a reality imposed into the local context with many administrative documents that were difficult to produce, especially during the early 2000s. The Embassy easily issues visas for those who have obtained scholarships, the chances increase for candidates who have previously been to France and communicate in French before departure. None of the respondents in our study managed to enroll while still in Uzbekistan without assistance from someone already present in France. Typically, the application files were acquired in France and completed with the help of friends. These individuals translated and provided the necessary documents. Students use networks, which is why certain French faculties continue to include Uzbek students among their enrolled students. Financial commitments are frequently resolved similarly to secure the visa. For example, Davron used friends who opened an account for him in France and deposited the required sum. Similarly, Rustam sought assistance from his relatives living in France. Funds flow extensively within the network to aid those in need, as obtaining the bank statement that verifies the presence of a specific sum on a particular date is crucial. The French Consulate is aware that its requirements do not apply to Uzbeks in Uzbekistan, and those meeting the necessary conditions certainly have connections in France⁶.

Students adapt to the unfavorable conditions set in both countries upon their arrival that do not favor their academic success. In both countries, they often find ways to navigate administrative difficulties. Frequently, they have no choice but to falsify documents because they cannot meet the conditions set by administrative authorities.

In the British case, the reputation of the school ensures the extension of the stay, while a poorly reputed school or a fake school guarantees the opposite. Some believe that one should not economize on money for the school because it is the only element taken into consideration in their file. This logic prevails even after several years in the Uzbek students in London. For example, Tolibjon believes that having a lot of money in one's bank account does not guarantee success in extending the visa if the candidate pays a minimal amount for studies, as this can arouse suspicions among officials. A change in migration policy regarding international students emerged during our study. Some officials of the Home Office request the candidate's NI (Insurance Number), based on which they collected the exact number of hours worked by the students. This tactic allows employees to refuse visa extensions for students who work more than 20 hours per week as permitted by law. Moreover, the processing time for the applications went from three months up to a period of nine months to obtain a permit.

To renew their stay permit via Prefectures in France self-financed students overcome serious challenges. For instance, Suxrob explains: *"In order to present the resources for the academic year, I had to find a solution. I did not have money in my account, and besides, I had debts. No one could lend me money because everyone needed it to get*

⁶ Several students mentioned during the interviews that if they were able to come to France, it was only thanks to the students already there, as otherwise they could not fulfill the requirements in any way, and that the consulate was also aware of these practices, as the documents originated from France.

their papers. That is why I decided to do as Frenchmen do because in France the big volume of the dossier can make it appear 'more serious.' I prepared several letters with stamps made by myself in which, for example, my mother vouched to transfer a certain amount every month, even though my mother was unaware of such a letter, and that worked."

Although the 2006 immigration law allowed master's degree holders to seek employment during the six months following the completion of their studies, that was also followed by the circular from the Ministry of Immigration, Integration, National Identity, and Solidarity Development dated October 7, 2008, focuses on assessing the real and serious nature of foreign students' studies. Another circular – Guéant, adopted in 2011, badly impacted many students doing graduate studies and some students from Uzbekistan, who were forced to return to their home country.

Students understand that these measures aim to discourage foreigners through administrative delays or repeated requests for documents, sometimes the same ones, under the pretext of misplacement. In 2004, only 29% of interviewed Uzbek students in London believed that administrative issues could prevent them from staying, while the majority indicated cultural differences. In 2009, the Home Office managed to reverse the situation because for more than 50% administrative issues were the primary obstacle.

THE INTERPLAY OF PUBLIC POLICIES AND ESCALATING INEQUALITIES IN SHAPING MIGRATORY TRAJECTORIES

Public policies adopted by both countries to regulate non-EU international students indicated quite similar objectives. Beyond attracting the brightest and the best, both governments created channels for employment for non-EU students after their graduation but severely restricted traditional channels employed by students.

UK government focused on the HSMP program, which enabled holders of an MBA degree from selected universities to directly obtain a residency permit. In parallel, the government restricted visas issued for English language studies, as it perceives this avenue as evolving into a pathway for immigration. In September 2007, the government decided to implement two types of student visas: the student visitor visa (with a maximum stay duration of non-renewable 6 months) and the student visa for an academic year (renewable) which directly impacted the channel previously taken by Uzbek students. Since 2006 French government allowed graduate students to extend their stay to look for a job, but on the other hand, adopted a more severe position in renewing the stay permits of students and PhD candidates. Therefore, the network strategy is more pronounced within the United Kingdom, where individuals adhere to established paths charted by their compatriots which affords the advantage of ensuring employment and housing security. A more individual strategy is discernible among students in France as young students have prioritized educational pursuits as a trajectory. The diploma being more esteemed in the employment landscape, informs their proclivity towards

long-term migration plans. This strategic recalibration among the younger arrivals is notably grounded in the prevailing conditions within France, the United Kingdom, and Uzbekistan.

The pathways of Uzbek students are largely intertwined with the academic endeavors they undertake. Pursuing studies in reputable institutions and participating in internships not only augments their academic credentials but also broadens their prospects for employment within local companies. In addition to academic considerations, other factors such as gender, marital status, geographical origin, and migratory experience also appear to exert their influence.

In capitals, a higher prevalence of qualified employment opportunities is observed, extending beyond small, student jobs. This circumstance facilitates the transition from the status of a student to that of a professional worker, as for many students their plans were reconstructed during their migration trajectory. For example, the desire to change status from “student” to “salaried worker” seemed in 2004 discussions to be driven by financial considerations. Some Uzbek students in London have expressed a wish to change their status due to potentially more attractive income opportunities in jobs that are not accessible to students, such as painting or in the construction sector. This suggests that the change in status is seen as a strategy to improve financial prospects after gaining experience and a deeper understanding of life and work in London. However, over time, and especially during the interviews in 2009, I noticed a stronger interest in changing status, not only to earn more money but especially because of stability. For example, in the case of Nodir, who has been living in London for 10 years, the change is necessary to secure his family's future.

Abdujabbor, who graduated in international relations from the University of Manchester, also changed his status through the HSMP (Highly Skilled Migrant Programme) in 2009. He worked within the university in the management of the development aid program in Anglophone African countries. However, he notes that the crisis has forced authorities to review the conditions for changing status. *“They simply increased the minimum salary to access the change of status. Now, with my old salary, I can no longer have a residence permit. Moreover, we depend on several organizations that make it impossible for me to increase my salary, and we are towards the end of the program,”* Abdujabbor.

The students' narratives in London also seem to crystallize distinct categories when it comes to their trajectories even from the beginning. There is an “Us,” consisting of Uzbek students often enrolled in language courses and working, and then there is a “Them,” comprising those studying at universities without doing small jobs, but later parachuting to important jobs either in Uzbekistan or in skilled jobs in the UK. According to Rasul, *“The wealthy don't come here to London; they go to reputable schools in the provinces. They mingle with the English, go to pubs.”* But Hamid argues: *“There are some Uzbek students in British universities who are not coming from wealthy families. Some come with Soros scholarships or other programs. There are also children of officials who take*

advantage of their status to enroll their kids in the best universities and pay nothing out of their pockets, using state funds. But some Uzbeks arrive, work, and decide to study at universities, saving or changing their status.”

This is exemplified by Kamoliddin, specializing in English language education. Initially, following a similar trajectory as the majority of compatriots, he decides to enroll in university studies and pay his savings for studies. Alongside his university studies, he decides to work at the Post Office and do night shifts, positively influencing colleagues who see that “the poor can also study.” University education attracts many Uzbek students, but their financial conditions do not always allow them to fulfill their dreams. “*Can you imagine what we are missing? We are at the heart of the knowledge center, but we cannot take advantage of it. There is, for example, LSE (London School of Economics), SOAS (School of Oriental and Asian Studies), King’s College, and we pass by these institutions every day,*” remarks Bahodir. He also plans to change his status and become a “Home Student” – the status allowing him to pay the same fees as local students. The outcome for the four interviewed Uzbek students with a university background is mixed. Two returned to Uzbekistan due to contractual obligations with the state. One decided to stay and work in the private sector and moved to Scotland. Another one chose to work in the banking sector in London.

The desire for change was more significant among the students in France because they believed that their graduate studies could allow them to work after completing their education. Access to “salaried worker” status has several advantages compared to the student status in the eyes of the students. The beneficiary of this status can benefit from full-time employment, as well as unemployment benefits in case of dismissal or job loss. Beyond that, “salaried worker” status grants a 10-year stay permit after 2 years, while the students usually renew their stay every year.

Paris appears to present greater opportunities for Uzbek students, encompassing part-time employment and career trajectories aligned with their educational backgrounds. Every Uzbek student who successfully pursued a career matching their study profile has passed through Paris. The experiences of students in Paris suggest that, on average, five years are necessary to change their status, signifying successful employment in their chosen field. Notably, Parisian students who have transitioned to a different employment status have predominantly done so after completing internships within the same company.

In provincial cities too, some students achieved to change their status, but not directly linked to their diploma. For instance, Botir in Grenoble decides to establish his own construction company, enabling him to change his status. Similarly, Jahongir in Bordeaux changed status due to family reasons and opened his construction company. However, one of the students received a refusal to change status when his application was based on a receptionist job. Therefore, while the strategies of “Parisian” students are more focused on Paris, those of students from provincial cities are much more uncertain.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

It would be imprecise to narrowly characterize Uzbek migration in purely economic terms, as our sample has demonstrated structural changes within Uzbek society. Migration dynamics, as indicated, extend beyond economic indicators to encompass social factors. Students perceive a distinction between the Soviet era and their contemporary reality. Consequently, their decision to migrate aligns with a perspective wherein the younger generation hesitates to embrace their new societal roles. As inheritors of middle-class backgrounds, notably the offspring of professors, engineers, and doctors, they harbor concerns about occupying a social status lower than that of their parents. Thus, migration for studies transcends financial considerations and investment; it represents a rejection of the new social hierarchy in their country of origin, where material deprivation increasingly parallels professional and familial setbacks.

Host countries, such as France and the United Kingdom, exhibit recurring contradictions in migration management. Unlike France or Germany, the United Kingdom has never officially called for foreign labor. Nevertheless, economic booms have underscored the necessity of migration, fulfilled through student migration. Policies have leveraged this avenue while being cognizant of the consequences. Foreign students have not only brought financial benefits through their enrollments but have also contributed by working in service sectors or temporary jobs. The British experience demonstrates how successive governments have managed the international students issue while linking it both to the economy and immigration. When the need for qualified or even unqualified migration arose, the government utilized the academic and university “label” to attract foreign students, also involving private entities. However, during the economic recession, the government easily closed the migratory flow it had created itself. In France, initiatives, and suggestions for optimizing the use of foreign students have often fallen on deaf ears. Under the Sarkozy government, despite a more restrictive migration policy, more attractive conditions were offered to the most talented foreign students.

The duration of young people’s migration also indicates that their departure is predominantly voluntary and aligns with their plans long before entering university in their home country. Departure is an integral part of Uzbek youths’ plans, irrespective of their socio-professional category. For the less privileged, it is an opportunity for success and a change in status for themselves and their families. This underscores that individuals now position themselves with a plural perspective, contemplating the possibility of living in various countries. While the ability to reside in multiple countries was once considered a “luxury” or an exception, this phenomenon now extends to almost all societal strata. The trajectory of many Uzbek students attests that migration is no longer a one-country journey; on the contrary, migration vectors multiply with individuals’ increasing qualifications.

What does this work represent compared to other research on student mobility, particularly concerning mobility from Central Asia? Despite its somewhat dated

timeframe (2004-2009), it explains that specialists discuss different matters depending on their situations, as mobility or study exchanges are rare in Central Asia. This suggests a need to reconsider terms, including in other contexts and regions, as the term “migration” appears to be more fitting than “mobility.” Given that a large portion of mobile students are not European or Western but predominantly Chinese, Indian, Vietnamese, or from other non-mobile student groups, it seems necessary to reconsider the dominant terminologies as well. The work also calls for a reconsideration of the theoretical approaches utilized concerning student mobility, particularly the “pull” and “push” theory predominantly employed to explicate student mobilities and migrations across diverse geographical contexts. While Chankseliani and Syed Zwick contribute theoretically to elucidate situations at both macro and micro levels, this study complements previous research by incorporating aspects of migration policies frequently overlooked in the discourse on student mobility, which is highly significant in the Central Asian region. The paper also demonstrates that the implementation of barriers aimed at impeding migrations as designed by migration policies does not necessarily halt migrations, but rather may alter their directions. Additionally, such barriers contribute to a potentially significant increase in costs, making it challenging to quantify the consequences. A political ambiguity towards international students from host countries, caught between international competition and a desire to control foreigners, also reflects a lack of clear and coherent policy on this aspect, including in leading international student destination countries.

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Transboundary Water Management in Central Asia and the Iberian Peninsula: Path Dependence Approach

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines the historical background and the state of the art of transboundary water management in the Central Asian region, which includes the republics of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, on one hand, and the Iberian Peninsula, which consists of the Kingdom of Spain and the Republic of Portugal, on the other hand. These distances from each other regions are studied for the reason that both of them are located in arid landscapes and further climate change is posing grave challenges to transboundary water security. By highlighting the differences and similarities in the water management practices of Central Asia and the Iberian Peninsula, this article employs a path-dependence approach to shed light on new perspectives on good water management. As a result of identified opportunities, the Central Asian states could enhance their policy in the water management system and adopt new measures based on positive foreign experience.*

KEYWORDS: *water security, transboundary water management, Iberian Peninsula, Central Asia*

INTRODUCTION

Since the 1950s, the world population has tripled and reached 8 billion people (UN, 2023). According to the latest calculations, it is expected to reach up to 10 billion people by 2050 (UN, 2015). The constant rise of the global population comes with serious challenges in providing basic human needs. As a result of this, on a larger scale, water, food, and energy security are in jeopardy. Thus, creating food, water, and energy nexus has become a global challenge. It is becoming crucial to comprehend how these resources are interdependent as demand for them is constantly rising (de Amorim et al., 2018).

Moreover, climate change is posing another challenge. Alongside political, economic, and social factors, it is severely impacting the intensification of the rupture of the water,

food, and energy nexus (Miralles-Wilhelm, 2016). Among these, water plays a crucial role for the reason that lack of access to water resources may have an impact on economic development, geopolitics, and social stability.

As the global economy races forward and regions clash, the pressure on natural resources is reaching a breaking point. Regionally, water resources have become a focal point, with nations vying for control of this vital driver of economic development and national security. While the peaceful division of transboundary water resources is possible in water-abundant regions, the same idea cannot be said with certainty for the regions located in arid areas such as Central Asia and the Iberian Peninsula. Despite being situated in distant areas from each other, these two historically and geographically defined regions share similar problems regarding water security. Whereas the Aral Sea has been shrinking for half a century now, the Iberian Peninsula for decades has been a hotspot of climate change (Soares et al., 2023).

Both Central Asia and the Iberian Peninsula consist of upstream and downstream countries. In the latter region, Spain is the upstream country whereas in Central Asia, consisting of the Aral Sea basin, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan hold 80% of water resources. The legal and institutional frameworks governing water rights and allocation differ significantly between Central Asia (former Soviet republics) and the Iberian Peninsula (European Union member states). This comparison can offer insights into the effectiveness of centralized versus more decentralized water management models.

The countries of both regions have signed agreements on fair water distribution among them and have implemented or are still implementing the principles of integrated water resources management (IWRM). The IWRM plays a crucial role in preventing the water crisis and securing sustainability. According to the definition of the Global Water Partnership, the IWRM is “a process which promotes the coordinated development and management of water, land, and related resources, to maximize the resultant economic and social welfare equitably without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems” (Nagata et al., 2021).

Nevertheless, why do states as actors achieve such different outcomes even when wielding the same instruments for managing shared water resources? Should the water management at the regional level be centralized or decentralized? How have certain historical events altered the course of water cooperation? Should the water interests of downstream countries be considered? These questions highlight the importance of considering factors beyond the tools themselves.

This article conducts a historical comparative study of how regional actors in Central Asia and the Iberian Peninsula have cooperated in managing shared water resources. This study can identify successful strategies and policies implemented in one basin that could be adapted and applied in the other. For example, if the Iberian Peninsula has a

well-functioning water allocation framework through agreements and institutions, these could be studied and potentially modified to fit the Central Asian context.

RESEARCH MATERIALS AND METHODS

This study employs a comparative historical approach centered on the *path dependence theory*. Path dependence posits that past decisions, policies, and institutional frameworks create a trajectory that shapes future choices and outcomes. By comparing two regions facing similar water resource challenges – Central Asia and the Iberian Peninsula – this research investigates how historical legacies and institutional development influence transboundary water management practices.

The research also employs a *similar systems design* for the comparative study. This approach focuses on two cases (Central Asia and the Iberian Peninsula) that share similarities in terms of water resource challenges (transboundary rivers, upstream-downstream dynamics) but differ in their historical and institutional contexts. This allows for isolating the impact of these contextual factors on water management outcomes.

The data for this study will be drawn from a variety of sources aligned with the historical and path dependence focus:

Historical documents: Official records, treaties, and agreements related to water management in both regions are analyzed.

Official statements: Policy documents, speeches, and reports from government agencies will be examined to understand current water management policies and objectives.

International agreements: Treaties and agreements between stakeholders in each region will be reviewed to understand the existing legal framework for transboundary water management.

RESEARCH RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Transboundary Water Management in Central Asia in Historical Retrospective

The water usage in Central Asia for agriculture purposes dates 8,000 years back (Suleimenova, 2021). Nevertheless, the first documented attempts to administer the transboundary water resources in Central Asia trace back to the 19th century. The Turkestan Governorate within the Russian Empire consisted of all territories which are now so-called the Aral Sea basin (Figure 1). At the given period, the economic consequences of the Crimean War (1853-1856) and the American Civil War (1861-1865) jeopardized the import of cotton to the Russian Empire, thus the new frontiers in Central Asia represented an opportunity for decreasing the dependence on foreign cotton materials (Azimzhon, 2023).

Figure 1. *Turkestan Governorate in the 1900s within the Russian Empire, CC BY-SA 3.0 DEED*



The water resources management in the Turkestan Governorate was mentioned for the first time in the “Regulations on the administration of Turkestan” dated 1886, in which Article 256 stated: “Water in the main ditches, streams, rivers, and lakes is provided to the population for use, according to existing local custom” (Polozhenie ob upravlenii Turkestanskogo kraja, 1886). The Governorate studied the water division issues between upstream and downstream areas and various recommendations for developing irrigation systems were made.

However, Alimdzhanov A. argues that not a single irrigation project was implemented by the Russian Empire in the region for the reason that the administration was reluctant to develop a legislation basis and implement a water code regarding water resources management (2015). Meanwhile, Bochkareva I. states that the Russian Empire’s policy was directed at consolidating its influence and strengthening its security in the region due to the new threat of competition with the British Empire in Central Asia (2021). She also notes that with the beginning of the World War I the irrigation system plans in the Turkestan Governorate were abandoned and eventually lost its priority.

Following the fall of the Russian Empire, the Communist Party of the USSR continued the initial ideas of the Tsarist regime on expanding the cotton fields and developing the irrigation systems in the now-renamed Turkestan Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic (TASSR) and directed financial resources from the central funds (O’Hara, 2000). Nevertheless, the water management in TASSR in the 1920s was characterized by the intensification of water shortage problems, reduced crops, mutual water issues, and, in particular, transboundary water conflicts with Iran, which required the diplomatic intervention of the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (Choriev, 2014).

The solution to these problems required a more systemic approach. Thus, in 1922, the Water Law of the TASSR was accepted by the Decree of the Central Executive Committee of the TASSR Councils, where Chapter 6 stated that “using water basins, which are common with bordering countries, are regulated by special decrees” (Vodnyj zakon Turkestarskoj Respubliki, 1922). Later, in 1971, the High Council approved the “Fundamentals of Water Legislation of the Union of the SSR and the Union Republics” where Part 2 Article 36 stated that “Water use in the border waters of the USSR is carried out based on international treaties. To the extent that water use in the Soviet part of the border waters is not regulated by international treaties with the participation of the USSR, it is carried out per the legislation of the USSR and Union Republics” (Zakon ob utverzhenii osnov vodnogo zakonodatel'stva SSSR, 1970). Thus, all transboundary water resources in Central Asia, despite having developed national water regulations, became the subject of all-union Soviet law. Meanwhile, it is interesting to note that according to this law, the Soviet Command of the border troops had also competency in dealing with the border waters. Later on, in 1987, Syrdarya and Amudarya Basin Administrations for inter-republican distribution of water resources were created (O sozdanii Uprvodhoz «Syrdar'ja», 1987).

After the dissolution of the USSR in 1992 the five newly-created states of Central Asia signed an agreement “On cooperation in the field of joint management of the use and protection of water resources from interstate sources”, in which Article 1 recognized the commonality and unity of the region's water resources (O sotrudnicestve v sfere sovместnogo upravlenija, 1992). This agreement set the framework for further cooperation. Having held many other bilateral and multilateral meetings, the states decided to create the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea and defined its status in 1999 (O statute MFSA, 1999). This was the last document that was signed by all members of the Aral Sea basin. While numerous other agreements exist in the sphere of regional water management, none encompass all Central Asian nations, i. e. each multilateral agreement lacks at least one signatory country of the region.

Meanwhile, the Central Asian states continued to face problems such as border conflicts, uneven distribution of natural resources, lack of electricity, etc. For instance, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were rich in water resources and poor in energy, while Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were rich in energy resources, but water-poor. This could lead to mutual exchange by “water-for-energy” and “energy-for-water” formulas (Gleason, 2003). Carius A. states that “dependence on the same water resources can... create communities of diverse users and stakeholders, fostering cooperation”, which eventually leads to a win-win sum (2006).

However, the existence of interstate structures that were created during the Soviet Union and many agreements on water management between the Central Asian states could not solve the transboundary water management problems and the old system was collapsing (Ormysheva et al., 2016). Moreover, Sharipova (2023) argues that the transboundary water cooperation in the Aral Sea basin is not prospering to its full potential and the problem may lie in the lack of trust and mistrust dimension between the upstream and downstream countries.

Thus, it is stated necessary to rethink the cooperation in the sphere of transboundary water management in the Aral Sea basin involving a wide range of specialists such as energy engineers, ecologists, economists, international lawyers, and water specialists (Kabilov, 2012). One of its first conditions is that all countries must join the 1992 and 1997 UN Conventions on the protection and use of transboundary watercourses and international lakes, and the right of non-navigational uses of international watercourses, thereby demonstrating the will and recognition of fairness and equal rights to the use of water, as countries of downstream did. As for now, two upstream countries – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – have not yet signed these conventions.

Furthermore, the exclusion of any party from the negotiation process leads to the failure of a whole system. For instance, Afghanistan was not a signatory of the 1992 agreement on joint management of transboundary waters in Central Asia. Afghanistan's population is growing rapidly, which will lead to a rising demand for water resources within the country. Recently, the Taliban government has built a new channel on the watercourse of Amudarya. This could potentially lead to disputes with downstream countries that rely on the Amudarya. Thus, the Afghan factor is challenging the prospects of peaceful management of water resources in the Aral Sea basin. Engaging Afghanistan in regional water management discussions and assisting with infrastructure development could foster cooperation and trust.

Transboundary Water Management in the Iberian Peninsula in Historical Retrospective

In the Iberian Peninsula, the Kingdom of Spain and the Republic of Portugal had shared a common history in all spheres. In terms of water divisions, five river basins cross the national borders of Spain and Portugal. They are Miño, Limia, Douro, Tajo, and Guadiana River basins (*sorted by north to south*) which cover around 45% of the land mass of the Iberian Peninsula (Figure 2) (Lopes, 2012).

Figure 2. Transboundary river basins in the Iberian Peninsula, CC BY-NC-ND 4.0



In terms of actual water resources, these five basins account for 45% of the peninsular water (surface and aquifers), with Portugal yielding 32% and Spain 68% of the water (Lopes, 2012).

One of the first agreements on transboundary water regulation was “Treaty on boundaries between Spain and Portugal from the mouth of the Minho River to the junction of the river Caya with the Guadiana” signed at Lisbon in 1864, Article 28 of which stated that “In consideration of the fact that in various parts the international line follows water courses or the direction of roads and touches some springs, it is agreed that such roads, water courses, and springs shall be for common use by the peoples of both kingdoms” (Treaty on Boundaries between Spain and Portugal, 1864). In addition to this agreement, many protocols were signed and official notes were exchanged to clarify or add specific topics in 1866, 1912, 1951, 1976, and 1980 (Lopes, 2012).

Between 1864 and 1968, four international instruments were signed to promote hydroelectric power production. However, significant steps towards bilateral cooperation in transboundary river basin management were only taken from 1994 onwards (Council of the EU, 2008). After some negotiations, in 1998, Spain and Portugal decided to sign the “Convention on Cooperation for the Protection and Sustainable Use of Waters in Portuguese-Spanish River Basins” or the Albufeira Convention, which entered into force two years later in 2000.

The Albufeira Convention was a breakthrough document on the background of the transboundary water crisis in the Iberian Peninsula. In 1993, Spain attempted to adopt the National Hydrological Plan (PNH), which included large projects on altering the water flow within the country thus changing the water amount of the transboundary rivers unilaterally, without consultations with Portugal. By the downstream country, immediate actions were taken which led to bilateral cooperation. Moreover, the Iberian Peninsula suffered from a severe drought and the mass media showed Spain as “stealing the water” that belongs to Portugal too (Thiel, 2004).

Bukowski J. reveals that the negotiations between Spain and Portugal over the transboundary water crisis were covered by initial mistrust and disjuncture in solving the problem (2011). She highlights that in Portugal the question of downstream waters that had been affected by Spain was discussed at the highest state level and was a part of the 1994-1995 and 1999 electoral campaigns. Meanwhile, she compares, that in Spain the water shortage in Portugal was not considered a serious problem (Bukowski, 2011).

At the same time in Europe in the 1990s, the negotiations on adopting a common water regulations policy kicked off as well. Thus, Spain and Portugal participated in the 1996 to 1998 consultations on the European Water Framework Directive (WFD). It is stated that Portugal used this opportunity to put into force the political leverage of the European Commission “to informally pressure” Spain to negotiate based on Portuguese concerns about transboundary water resources management (Bukowski, 2011). Thus,

Portugal secured the Spanish guarantees on water amount and consumption, as well as the ecological condition of transboundary water.

On the other hand, the Albufeira Convention initially set out a minimum yearly flow of water from Spain to Portugal for each river basin, but this proved inadequate for meeting downstream requirements. Consequently, in 2008, the agreement was updated to include minimum flow standards on a quarterly and weekly basis. Additionally, it introduced a drought exception clause, allowing Spain to be exempt from adhering to the specified minimum flow levels during periods of drought (Martínez-Fernández et al., 2020).

The WFD, along with supplementary legislation such as the Groundwater and Floods directives, has served as a catalyst for reform in water policy and institutional frameworks in the Iberian Peninsula. For two nations sharing river basins, the implementation of the WFD required coordination and alignment with the pre-existing bilateral Albufeira Convention and needed adjustments to conform to the new pan-European water management standards.

Lopes P. wonders about the stable character of the water relations between Spain and Portugal. She states that for some, upstream Spain dictating the conditions, and downstream Portugal complying with them is the reason for water relations stability. In contrast, others argue that this is the outcome of neighborly good water cooperation based on both sides' national goals of developing agriculture and increasing hydro-energy production (Lopes, 2012).

Central Asia and the Iberian Peninsula: parallels and differences

The formation of transboundary water management in Central Asia and the Iberian Peninsula has been taking place under various circumstances and historical periods. Consequently, the factors which affected the necessity of transboundary water management cooperation were different as well. Nevertheless, it is interesting to identify some similar aspects.

Firstly, considering the path dependence approach in historical retrospectives, we can identify certain stages of transboundary water management in both regions.

For example, the Russian Empire during its presence in Central Asia kept the status quo on transboundary water management in the background of the fear of discontent of the indigenous people. The actions of the Tsarist regime mainly were directed at enforcing its military position in the region and preventing the further occupation of the British Empire in Central Asia. Thus, the type of transboundary water management can be identified as “local management of transboundary water”.

Later on, the Tsarist regime was overthrown and the Soviets continued the previous plans of building irrigation systems in the Central Asian region and, at the same time, faced

transboundary water issues with Iran. The Soviets developed the normative bases for regulating the transboundary water resources at national levels and later they switched to the approach of “union management of water resources” with the participation of the official Moscow.

Nevertheless, after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, the five republics of the Central Asian region developed separate water policies and adopted the approach of “national management of water resources”.

However, considering the commonality of water resources in the Aral Sea basin as well as taking into account the importance of cooperation in the sphere of shared water resources, the countries of Central Asia are transitioning towards the level of “international management of water resources”. The creation of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea was the first step in this direction.

Thus, depending on the historical period and various internal and external factors, the states of the Central Asian region come from the local management to the international management of transboundary water resources (Figure 3a).

Figure 3a. *Stages of transboundary water management in Central Asia*



Meanwhile, in the Iberian Peninsula, the Treaty of Lisbon in 1864 demarcated the borders between Spain and Portugal. The agreement between the two nations admitted the commonality of shared water resources and encompassed the clause of common use of transboundary water resources. Thus, the Spanish-Portuguese transboundary water management was at the outset based on “local management of transboundary water”.

Later on, both countries developed national plans for water usage to the end of agriculture and hydropower production. This period can be classified as the “national management of water resources”.

However, the intensification of water usage in agriculture and hydropower generation in both countries led to the compromise of water security in the downstream country of the Iberian Peninsula. Thus, urgent actions were taken and the Albufeira Convention entered into force in 2000. This agreement was the result of discussions that lasted for almost a decade between Spain and Portugal. Thus, this period can be defined as the time of “international management of water resources”.

At the same time, the official Brussels began taking steps to consolidate the water management system at the European level. With the introduction of the Water Framework

Directive of the European Union (WFD) which became the main law for water protection in Europe, water management in the Iberian Peninsula entered the stage of the “union management of water resources”.

Thus, the stages of the transboundary water management of the Iberian Peninsula are slightly different from Central Asia due to historical factors. In particular, Spain and Portugal came to the union management of the transboundary water resources in the 1990s with the beginning of the discussions on WFD, whereas at that time Central Asian countries were switching from union management to national management of transboundary water resources as a result of the USSR dissolution (Figure 3b).

Figure 3b. *Stages of transboundary water management in the Iberian Peninsula*



Secondly, the actions of countries both in Central Asia and the Iberian Peninsula demonstrate that they have switched from a competitive strategy of water resources control to a cooperative one. For instance, in the 1990s the states of Central Asia by developing national strategies for water management allowed the competition in terms of water usage due to the lack of mutual trust. Later on, the need to save the Aral Sea fostered the cooperation. Meanwhile, Spain and Portugal overcame this issue in the 1990s as well by signing the Albufeira Convention and implementing the WFD. It should be noted that this type of cooperative water management is essential for fostering environmental peacebuilding in both regions.

On the other hand, we can see that the states in both regions wield the same set of instruments to deal with water management issues. However, Spain and Portugal could demonstrate a positive outcome in terms of transboundary water management: both of them implemented IWRM, set national hydrological plans, secured national agricultural goals, and ensured ecological aspects.

Moreover, at the Iberian Peninsula, various historical events and circumstances led to a condition where mutual cooperation in water management was inevitable for Spain and Portugal. Partially, this was due to the interests of the downstream Portugal, which used available political tools at national and supranational levels.

What is more, the countries of the Iberian Peninsula yielded some of their rights in the sphere of transboundary water regulations to the European Union and complied with the WFD. This action improved the cohesion of national, international, and all-union aquatic policy within the European Union. Thus, the transboundary water management is being centralized in Europe. For instance, currently, policies regarding water quality and flood prevention are implemented at the supranational level.

Concerning the states of the Aral Sea basin, since the dissolution of the USSR their cooperation in the sphere of transboundary water management slowed down and to some extent received the form of tokenism. The institutional and infrastructural basis of the Soviet legacy in the sphere of transboundary water management, despite offering a holistic solution at the regional level, became outworn. Only now some of its remains are being renovated, e.g., the United Energy System of Central Asia, which balances the energy deficit and surplus of upstream and downstream states depending on the amount of water resources. Thus, the historic events of the rise and fall of the USSR fostered and slowed down the development of sustainable transboundary water management in Central Asia.

Nevertheless, new problems arise as the states in Central Asia try to cooperate in managing the water resources. The upstream countries of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and the downstream countries of Afghanistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan have not yet developed the dispute settlement mechanism, thus, their interest being non-alignable concerning the access to transboundary water resources.

At the same time, there is no strong institution that could solve the problems with a holistic approach taking into account the interests of all states in the region. Thus, the question of centralizing the competencies of transboundary water management and distribution encounters the problems of the trust and mistrust layer between the upstream and downstream countries.

CONCLUSION

The study of transboundary water management in Central Asia and the Iberian Peninsula revealed both similarities and stark differences. Employing the path dependence approach, the analysis highlighted how historical legacies and political contexts shaped the water management strategies adopted by each region.

While both regions exhibited multi-level governance of water resources (local, national, international, and union), the order and effectiveness of these levels differed significantly. The Iberian Peninsula exemplifies an evolutionary approach, where cooperation gradually strengthened over time. In contrast, water management in Central Asia has been heavily influenced by the shifting political landscape, leading to periods of both progress and regression.

The contrasting experiences of the Iberian Peninsula and Central Asia highlight the complex interplay of factors influencing transboundary water management. While both regions possess similar tools (IWRM, national plans), historical context, political will, and institutional frameworks play a critical role in determining their effectiveness.

The success of the Iberian Peninsula stems from a combination of factors: geographical necessity, shared history, and the unifying influence of the European Union. Centralization under the EU Water Framework Directive fostered cooperation and a cohesive approach.

Central Asia, on the other hand, faces significant challenges. The dissolution of the USSR dismantled existing institutions, leaving outdated infrastructure and unequal water distribution among upstream and downstream countries. This asymmetry fuels tensions, further complicated by the lack of a dispute settlement mechanism. The political instability in Afghanistan and the absence of cooperation put more challenges.

Centralizing water management presents a potential solution, but replicating the EU model might not be feasible. Building trust, revitalizing institutions, and establishing a framework for dispute resolution are crucial steps toward achieving sustainable and equitable water management in the Aral Sea basin. Learning from the Iberian case study and adapting solutions to the specific context of Central Asia offers a path forward for fostering cooperation and securing this vital resource.

Thus, to achieve sustainable water management in the Aral Sea basin, Central Asian countries should consider strengthening cooperation at the regional level. The International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea can serve as a starting point for this endeavor. The inclusion of Afghanistan in the negotiation processes is essential. This environmental peacebuilding effort is necessary to ensure equitable and sustainable water management for the entire region. By implementing these recommendations and fostering a more collaborative approach, Central Asian nations can work towards a future where water resources are managed effectively for the benefit of all.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

The authors express their sincere gratitude to the staff of CEU Universidad San Pablo (Madrid, Spain), in particular, to the European Documentation Center for allowing us to carry out the scientific research at their venue and providing the necessary materials.

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Kazakhstan-EU Relations in the Realities of the Geopolitical Turbulence: A Textual Analysis of Before and After Design

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ABSTRACT. *Global security concerns have impacted both domestic and foreign policies of international actors. A regional geopolitical crisis after 2022 has certainly impacted the relations between Kazakhstan and its external partners. This research aims to explore how the regional geopolitical turbulence shaped the dynamics of Kazakhstan's relations with the EU, one of the major actors in Kazakh multi-vector foreign policy. This research is concentrated on Kazakhstan-EU relations after 2022 and includes two studies: an analysis of press materials and a qualitative content analysis with some quantitative approach. An analysis of 191 press materials from the European External Action Service of 2018-2021 and 2022-2024 as well as content analysis of 2018-2021, 2022, and 2023-2024 press materials revealed the intensification of Kazakhstan-EU relations*

KEYWORDS: *Kazakhstan, the European Union, cooperation, geopolitics, energy, democratization, economy.*

INTRODUCTION

The ongoing geopolitical crisis has significantly influenced the geopolitical landscape in the region and the world in general. The European energy sector was impacted considerably when Russia, as the major energy supplier, cut off the export of natural gas to the European market in response to the economic sanctions imposed by Western countries (Milov, 2024). Nevertheless, it is possible to supply Europe with energy by using alternative energy sources, reducing dependence on crude oil, considering that the EU has been aiming to ensure carbon neutrality for a long time now. To achieve this goal, the Union decided to pave the way to Kazakhstan, with its rare earth elements and uranium.

There are a few studies that examine the EU's relations with Kazakhstan following since 2022. Thus, forecasting the effect of the military conflict on economic cooperation, Muratova et al. (2023) assume the geopolitical situation provides the Central Asian states with a chance to advance their economies beyond those reliant on natural resources since the EU expresses interest in the region through numerous economic activities. Some studies suggest that the EU paid greater attention to human rights issues in its new Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) compared to its predecessor Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), while other studies argue that for the EU, economic and political competition with Russia and China, as well as defense, security, and economic ties with the region, are more important than promoting democracy. As for energy cooperation, the EU faces challenges in diversifying its energy supplies away from Russian dependence, whereas cooperation with Kazakhstan is maintained through such initiatives as the Global Gateway and Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR). However, the country encounters a decline in interest from the European side due to insufficient volumes of resources from Kazakhstan that would justify the investment, as well as the EU's reduced demand for coal and gas because of the transition to green energy (Martínez-García et al., 2023; Moisé & Sorbello, 2022; Muratova et al., 2023).

Taking into account the new geopolitical circumstances, this study seeks to explore the dynamics of Kazakhstan-EU relations. Therefore, the research question is established as: How has the ongoing geopolitical crisis impacted the dynamics of Kazakhstan's relations with the EU?

The purpose of this exploratory study is to examine the Kazakhstan-EU relationship within the context of the present geopolitical situation. To this end, a textual analysis of bilateral relations based on economic prospects, energy, democratization, and development, as well as a content analysis of the published press materials in 2018-2024 will be conducted.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Economic Prospects

This year, Kazakhstan and the European Union celebrate 33 years of partnership that have been established since the country's independence in 1991. The EU is the most crucial trading partner for Kazakhstan, as it accounts for 40% of the latter's external trade (EEAS, 2023).

Konopelko (2017) argues that Kazakhstan and the EU are cooperating mainly in the fields of investment and trade diversification. Drieniková and Zubalova (2021) and Kembayev (2016; 2021) identify some barriers to economic cooperation within the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA). The violation of human rights, the absence of common borders, taking part in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), and a lack of compelling strategy for long-term investments are only a few of them. To overcome these obstacles and ensure a bilateral Free Trade Agreement (FTA), energy supply, and stability, the EU and EAEU should forge a strategic partnership, such as in the context of the Silk Road Economic Belt (SREB), which became unfeasible in the circumstances of the current Russo-Ukrainian stand-off. The importance of strategic partnership and the role of Kazakhstan as an energy provider and a transit route for Chinese products to the EU are arguments generally supported in existing studies (Kašťáková & Barinková, 2019). Muratova et al. (2023) suggest that the present geopolitical situation is an opportunity for Central Asian countries to move beyond resource-dependent economies due to the EU's immediate interest in the region, whereas the EU's development programs aim to strengthen cooperation and craft a shared agenda for regional development.

As observed from the literature, Kazakhstan is important to the EU's trade, and despite having some barriers, the future of relations seems to be prospective.

Further Measures to Implement Strategic Development between Kazakhstan and the EU

Despite the promising trade cooperation, some issues remain a stumbling block to realizing the full potential of bilateral relations. Strengthening accountability, and democratic processes, and promoting transparency in Kazakhstan could lead to better long-term relations with the EU.

In this vein, Konopelko (2017) emphasizes the need for considerable effort to enhance liberal values by supporting civil society, attributing the stagnant due to a consolidated "authoritarian regime". Likewise, Kembayev (2016) highlights human rights violations as obstacles to realizing the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA). He proposes the "Wider Europe" approach to involve all the post-Soviet countries in building shared values and enhancing democratic institutions. A content analysis

conducted by Mukasheva and Akhmedyanova (2023) reveals that the EU places greater emphasis on human rights in the EPCA compared to the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA), indicating a shift in the EU's priorities towards Kazakhstan. Yesdauletov et al. (2017) conclude that Kazakhstan's leadership is moving towards Europeanization, based on the Five Institutional Reforms initiative, but note that the authoritarian nature of the government impedes this process. Their analysis of President Nazarbayev's speeches from 2010-2015 shows an increasing focus on transparency, rule of law, and accountability, which could be seen as the Kazakhstan government trying to address the EU's critique. Bhavna (2007) emphasizes the importance of liberal institutions like the EU and OSCE for extensive democratic changes in Kazakhstan, as continued authoritarianism may cause economic harm (Bhavna, 2007).

Fawn (2022) challenges the EU's positioning as a non-geopolitical actor in the Central Asian region, claiming that it is engaged in geopolitical competition covertly to offset the influence of China and Russia. Through "ideational geopolitics," or the defense of its "universal" values that challenge the prevailing norms in Central Asia, the Union asserts its influence. This is done by leveraging its competitive advantages, such as regional programs, democracy advancement, and normative principles. In this vein, Fawn et al. (2022) highlight that Kazakhstan serves as a crucial testing ground for EU policies based on beneficial cooperation between the two actors. However, limited research on the interactions of Central Asia with international organizations complicates the process of trial and integration of EU policies in the region.

However, Winn and Gänzle (2023) question the significance of democratization as the EU's top priority in Central Asia, noting a shift since 2019 towards "principled pragmatism" and resilience, considering geopolitical dynamics and powerful neighbors like Russia and China.

Energy Sector

According to the European Council, with the acceptance of the Versailles Declaration in March 2022, EU countries agreed to promptly reduce dependence on Russian energy resources. This transition is challenging due to rising oil and gas prices, leading to higher inflation and transportation issues (Martínez-García et al., 2023). The Council has taken measures to guarantee this phase-out, including adopting a regulation to cut gas demand by 15% and ensuring adequate gas supply for colder seasons (European Council). Collins and Bekenova (2016) note that Kazakhstan adopted the same strategy of decreasing energy dependence after the Crimean crisis, reducing reliance on Russian policy, and expanding energy channels.

There is a general agreement in the existing literature on the idea that Central Asia-EU relations are largely driven by common interests in energy sector policy. Thus, Adnan and Fatima (2016) argue that the EU's approach to Kazakhstan is primarily driven by its energy prospects, as the EU aimed to import gas and oil from Central Asia bypassing

Russian territory. Similarly, Anceschi (2014) highlights the close energy ties between Kazakhstan and the EU during the Nazarbayev rule, though domestic governance saw no improvement. Mantel (2015) concurs that Kazakhstan's role as a transit country for energy exports is an attractive alternative that would potentially reduce dependence on Russian exports, violation of human rights and lack of democracy though remain persistent.

Despite the current geopolitical crisis, the Kazakhstan-EU partnership continues to be focused on energy projects through the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route (TITR) and the EU's "Global Gateway" initiatives (Muratova et al., 2023). However, Moisé and Sorbello (2022) argue that the EU's interest in Central Asian energy has decreased as the region cannot supply enough resources to justify investment. Additionally, there is ineffective collaboration between EU institutions and transnational corporations, with limited competition among TNCs in the region, which is in contradiction with the fair and open market principles of the EU.

In countries with transitioning economies like Kazakhstan, the energy sector continues to be a crucial factor for cooperation with the EU. Strengthening democratic processes, respecting human rights, and promoting transparency at all levels of government can help reduce obstacles in bilateral relations.

Focus of the Current Study

The reviewed literature discusses the obstacles and prospects of cooperation. What remains to be studied is how the current geopolitical turbulence echoed the EU and Kazakhstan relations. Based on the reviewed literature, we hypothesize that it may increase cooperation between Kazakhstan and the EU, as the strategy based on a pragmatic approach to the region by the EU may allow immediate reforms in Kazakhstan.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research is grounded in an interpretive philosophy, aiming to understand the meanings embedded in the policy documents of the EU towards Kazakhstan. The research design is a case study that enables an in-depth investigation and analysis of complex interactions in the context of the current geopolitical situation. It describes how the EU and Kazakhstan partnership developed within the context of the current regional dynamics. The research consists of two parts.

For the first part, a databank containing all press materials of the European External Action Service (EEAS) in Kazakhstan was analyzed. Additionally, there are some media articles regarding EU-Kazakhstan relations. Data is collected from two periods of 2018-2021 and 2022-2024 and divided into three sections: Economic Prospects, Energy Sector, Democratization and Development. These sections were pre-coded based on the reviewed literature. The selection of the first period is justified by the

COVID-19 outbreak, which was at its peak in 2019-2020; due to which there was not much cooperation between Kazakhstan and the European Union. The period of 2018-2021 was included in the analysis as a baseline comparison because it was a relatively quiet time, free of global crises.

The second section is a qualitative content analysis with elements of a quantitative approach. It was tasked with uncovering the meaning of press materials about the development of EU-Kazakhstan relations. The quantitative part of the content analysis includes counting the number of times specific terms and categories of words appear in the texts (Halperin & Heath, 2020).

It is worth mentioning that only press materials covering activities between the EU and Kazakhstan and the EU and Central Asia with mentions of Kazakhstan were chosen for analysis. The total number of analyzed press materials is 191: 58 in 2018-2021, 86 in 2022 and 47 in 2023-2024.

The terms are divided into 7 categories: Democratization and Development, Economy, Energy, Security, Initiatives, Parties and Verbs. These categories were identified by classifying the most frequent words into the themes. They allow researchers to observe the changes in cooperation between two actors throughout the period and reveal the priorities of the EU towards Kazakhstan and Central Asia.

Some of these categories need further elucidation. The “Democratization and Development” category is defined as actions taken on the promotion of human rights, transparent government, tackling climate change, social policies including children’s well-being and infrastructural improvements such as water and housing management that directly influence the prosperity of a nation. The “Economy” implies the economic activity between parties. The “Energy” sector covers the initiatives regarding both renewable and non-renewable energy source management. Whereas issues such as border security along with international threats, for example, terrorism lie in the “Security”. The “Initiatives” category denotes all the official actions, such as agreements, programs and events initiated by and held between two parties. The “Parties” implies the actors mentioned in the press materials. The “Verbs” section demonstrates the purpose of initiatives.

The “*” sign is used to identify words with the same root but with different endings. For instance, by using “democra*”, the Yoshikoder software identified all the words possessing the same root, such as ‘democracy’, ‘democratic’, ‘democratically’ and ‘democratization’.

The first category encompasses 36 specific words, as follows: anti-corruption, child*, climate, constitut*, corrupt*, covid*, democra*, development, dignity, disaster, discriminat*, educat*, elect*, environment*, equal*, erasmus, free*, gender*, girls, housing, human*, ill-treatment, journalis*, justice, law, media, press, rights, stud*,

sustain*, training, transparen*, university, violence, water, and women. The “Economy” comprises 6 particular terms such as econom*, invest*, market*, sanction*, trade and transport*. The “Energy” category has 14 terms: alternative, atom*, batter*, critical, energ*, gas, green, hydro*, nuclear, oil, plant, power, raw, and renewable. The category of “Security” contains 13 words: Afghan, arm*, extremis*, geopolit*, military, peace*, security, stabil*, terror*, terror*, traffic*, war and weapon*. The “Initiatives” comprises 16 terms as follows Action*, Agreement*, Conference*, Cooperat*, Dialogue*, Event, Forum*, Initiative*, Meeting*, Partner*, Platform, Polic*, Program*, Project*, Reform* and Strateg*. This category enabled us to see how often initiatives were conducted in the different timeframes before and after the the military conflict. The next category is “Parties” with 5 particular words: Central Asia*, EU+Europe*, Kazakh*, Russia* and Ukrain*. The last category “Verbs” consists of develop, enhance, foster, implement, improve, intensify, promote, and support with 8 words in total. This category allows us to understand the EU's intentions towards Kazakhstan during that time.

The software used to facilitate the process are Yoshikoder and Excel. Yoshikoder counts the frequency words in a text and allows researchers to categorize them. Excel is used to visualize data in graphs and tables. The data is pre-coded based on the literature review, as a result of which the terms were classified into the first 3 categories: economy, democratization and development, and energy. However, the rigorous analysis of press materials revealed 4 new categories, namely, security, initiatives, parties, and verbs. To make the comparison clear, each category's top five frequent terms were chosen.

The results are explained through the prism of structural realism theory. Concerning ethical considerations, the research obtains information through legitimate channels, such as the EU's official websites and recognized news outlets. Potential limitations of the study pertain to the chosen timeframe (2018-2024), which includes the pre-pandemic times, the COVID-19 pandemic period, and the beginning of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Economic Prospects

2018-2021. The EU plays a significant role in establishing a sustainable environment for foreign investments and business development in Kazakhstan. The Union contributed to the financial development of the Central Asian region through the EU's multiannual indicative program for 2014-2020 (Council of the European Union, 2019). Moreover, the European Commission has allocated €1 billion to enhance the business environment (EEAS, 2020).

The economic aspect of the Kazakhstan-EU partnership during these years was characterized mainly by supporting the post-pandemic recovery. The EU-Central Asia Dialogue on Partnership for Prosperity was held online in 2020 (EEAS, 2020). The EU also expressed its intention to assist the small business environment through the Ready4Trade program (EEAS, 2020).

Economic cooperation was still relevant for both parties in 2021, and the evidence could be the launch of the European Union-Central Asia Economic Forum (EEAS, 2021). The EU demonstrated its anticipation for enhancing trade relations between the EU and Central Asia by embracing the new EU Ready4Trade programme (EEAS, 2021). The results of the forum were discussed at the 17th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting, stressing the need for transparent investments and corruption combat (EEAS, 2021). In order to overcome the trade obstacles between Central Asian states and the EU, another meeting was held in June 2021. The main impediments that hinder trade, such as lengthy lines on physical borders and difficulties with obtaining certificates, were mentioned (EEAS, 2021).

2022-2024. The transition to a green economy has become one of the main priorities for the EU since the onset of the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine. A Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) on Strategic Partnerships on Sustainable Raw Materials, Batteries, and Renewable Hydrogen Value Chains was signed in November 2022. (EEAS, 2023).

Other actions taken since the outbreak of the military conflict in Ukraine include the EU-Central Asian Connectivity Conference. At this conference, representatives of Central Asian countries discussed the possible ways to continue work on trade infrastructure in the context of the Russian reality (EEAS, 2022). As a result, the Investors Forum for EU-Central Asia Transport Connectivity took place in January 2024. During the forum, €10 billion was committed by European institutions to accelerate the process of building efficient Central Asian trade routes in the realm of the geopolitical situation (European Commission, 2024). The emergency and strong demand for reliable infrastructure were highlighted, referring to the refusal of transit through Russia (European Commission, 2024).

Energy Sector

2018-2021. Global interest in moving towards a renewable, sustainable energy model bound Kazakhstan and the EU. In 2019, the EU's policy on Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership was introduced to assist Kazakhstan in moving towards sustainable management of natural resources and a low-carbon economy (EEAS, 2019). Furthermore, the Low Enriched Uranium Bank, funded by the EU, started operating in Kazakhstan in the same year (EEAS, 2019).

During the 17th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting and the EU-Central Asia Economic Forum in 2021, the Union showed support for Central Asia's efforts to transform into a greener economy and stressed the relevance of green investments (EEAS, 2021).

2022-2024. In May 2022, a workshop, within the EU – Central Asia Water, Environment and Climate Change Cooperation (WECOOP) program, was organized to exchange European experiences in the field of solar and wind power generation. In the next month, the EU introduced Sustainable Energy Connectivity in Central Asia (SECCA) to boost investment, efficiency, and knowledge in alternative energy, as well as reinforce policies aimed at

transitioning to a renewable energy system (EEAS, 2022). November 2022 marks a crucial step in relations, namely signing the Strategic Partnerships on Sustainable Raw Materials, Batteries, and Renewable Hydrogen Value Chains during the COP27 in Egypt. In light of the present geopolitical events, this initiative aims to improve Europe's supply of vital raw materials used in the manufacturing of batteries and earth magnets used in wind turbines (EEAS, 2022). Following this partnership, in June 2023, Tau-Ken Samruk (TKS) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) signed a Memorandum of Understanding at the Astana Mining and Metallurgy Congress (EEAS, 2023).

The European Union has frequently stated its willingness to improve ties in the energy sector in the years since the start of the military conflict in Ukraine during different events such as the 20th meeting of the Kazakhstan-EU Cooperation Council, the second EU-Central Asia Economic Forum or the EU-Central Asia: 10th High-Level Political and Security Dialogue (EEAS, 2022, 2023).

At the beginning of 2024, President Tokayev visited Italy, where he called for investments in critical raw materials, renewable energy, and the oil and gas industries. In the same year, KazMunayGas and Italian company Eni signed an agreement on constructing the first hybrid power station consisting of solar and wind plants in Zhanaozen city needed for KMG's local facilities (Satubaldina, 2024).

DEMOCRATIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT

2018-2021. The pre-conflict period of relations between the EU and Kazakhstan can be described by Joint Communication with the European Parliament and the Council: The EU and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership. The strategy suggests the main priority: to develop Central Asian resilience towards internal and external challenges (EEAS & European Commission, 2019).

The issue of human rights violations was one of the EU's concerns before the military conflict. For instance, the Subcommittee on Justice and Home Affairs and the Human Rights Dialogue took place in 2019 (EEAS, 2019). Moreover, the OSCE/ODIHR Election Observation Mission mentioned serious violations during the 2019 presidential elections in Kazakhstan (EEAS, 2019).

Initiatives to overcome post-pandemic crises in 2020 included the Central Asia COVID-19 Crisis Response Solidarity Programme (EEAS, 2020), whereas the Asia-Europe Meeting emphasized the significance of international traffic and critical transportation infrastructure (EEAS, 2020).

The year 2021 was marked by many initiatives on democratization in Central Asia. For instance, a reoccurring Human Rights Dialogue and Subcommittee on Justice and Home Affairs were held (EEAS, 2021). Furthermore, Kazakhstan has taken its first steps to abolish the death penalty by ratifying the Second Optional Protocol to the International

Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (EEAS, 2021). The EU also supported education initiatives by funding various projects, including the 24-month initiative “School of Public Action - Western Kazakhstan” (EEAS, 2021).

2022-2024. The EU has been actively involved with its strategic partners, including Kazakhstan, since the start of the military conflict. For instance, sanction evasion by Russia was discussed during a visit by a delegation of the Foreign Affairs Committee of the EU (EEAS, 2023). In the same year, the annual High-Level Political and Security Dialogue between the EU and the Central Asian states was held in Astana to strengthen cooperation with the region (EEAS, 2023).

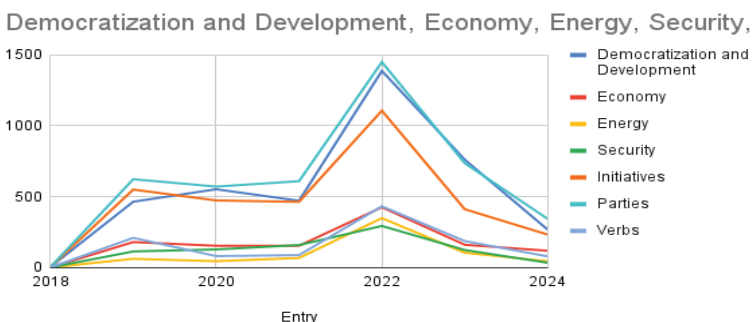
Another important aspect is human rights improvement ambition. In 2022, the EU and Kazakhstan had the 14th Human Rights Dialogue, where the need for a complete, transparent investigation of the “Bloody January” was stressed (EEAS, 2022). The 20th Subcommittee on Justice and Home Affairs meeting presented the results of their initiatives towards combating money laundering, corruption and human trafficking (EEAS, 2022).

Overall, the EU aims to tackle various issues concurrently and an example is a comprehensive partnership program with 72 concrete actions, with water management, climate and energy matters leading the list (Satubaldina, 2024). In May 2022, the JAILYM Project was introduced to change non-climate-friendly practices on pastures (EEAS, 2022). During the 18th EU-Central Asia Ministerial Meeting, the performance of the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA) and the counter-terrorism project Law Enforcement in Central Asia (LEICA) was evaluated and discussed (EEAS, 2022).

CONTENT ANALYSIS

There are 7 categories identified in the content analysis: Democratization and Development, Economy, Energy, Security, Initiatives, Parties, and Verbs. The total count of terms in each category from 2018 to 2024 is shown in Figure 1.

Figure 1 *Number of terms in categories used from 2018 to 2024 (Authors' calculation)*



The lowest numbers were in 2018 since press materials became available starting at the end of that year. In 2019, the Democratization and Development, Parties, and Initiatives categories experienced a sharp increase since the first contains a large number of terms in general (36) and the second and third categories contain general terms that were used in each press material. From 2019 to 2021, the Energy and Economy categories plateaued, while others experienced slight fluctuations, illustrating the general stability of relations between Kazakhstan and the European Union. It is observed that the busiest year is 2022, as it has the highest frequency of specific terms appearing in each category. There has been a military conflict in Ukraine that year, which may explain the increased activity between the two parties. In 2023, there is a sharp fall in the frequency of words, but the activity is still higher than before 2022. The fact that 2024 is only halfway through the year explains why there has been a decline in activity in each category as of today.

The following 7 tables illustrate the top 5 most frequent words in each category through the three timeframes - 2018-2021, 2022 and 2023-2024. The year 2022 is considered separately since it marks the highest number of words in each category, which represents the high engagement of the EU with Kazakhstan.

Table 1 *Top 5 Most Frequent Terms in Democratization and Development*

Categories	2018-2021 Count	Categories	2022 Count	Categories	2023-2024 Count
Democratization and Development	1490	Democratization and Development	1388	Democratization and Development	1031
human*	168	development	150	rights	87
rights	167	sustain*	126	human*	85
development	158	disaster	103	child*	84
sustain*	129	constitut*	91	educat*	84
environment*	83	human*	78	sustain*	66

It can be observed that terms containing “human*” are the most frequently appearing in 2018–2021, indicating that humanitarian aid and human rights were often discussed in EU–Kazakhstan relations. However, its importance decreased in 2022, implying that the EU’s focus shifted to broader development-related projects. “Rights” and “human*” resurfaced in 2023-2024, suggesting that these topics regained their relevance, but on the other hand, they have decreased by half as compared to the pre-conflict period.

Table 2 *Top 5 Most Frequent Terms in Economy*

Categories	2018-2021 Count	Categories	2022 Count	Categories	2023-2024 Count
Economy	485	Economy	425	Economy	278
econom*	206	econom*	116	econom*	71
trade	117	trade	121	invest*	65
invest*	97	invest*	113	trade	60
transport*	33	transport*	38	transport*	46
market*	24	market*	22	sanction*	22

The top 5 terms in these years are the same: econom*, trade, invest*, transport*, and market*. Notably, words comprising “econom*” are the most frequently referenced throughout the years, including 2023–2024. Nonetheless, it experienced a significant drop in 2022, which accounts for almost half of the loss. The last period has similar patterns to previous years except for the last term, “sanction*,” surfacing and signifying that attention is paid to sanction-related themes in these years.

Table 3 *Top 5 Most Frequent Terms in Energy*

Categories	2018-2021 Count	Categories	2022 Count	Categories	2023-2024 Count
Energy	172	Energy	348	Energy	149
energ*	62	energ*	147	energ*	65
green	62	green	86	green	23
renewable	11	renewable	40	raw	14
nuclear	9	raw	17	critical	12
critical	8	hydro*	16	renewable	12

In the Table 3, the terms “energ*” and “green” are consistently leading throughout the period, starting from 2018-2021; nevertheless, the usage of both terms was on the rise in 2022. The word “renewable” experienced the same changes, going up sharply from 11 to 40 in 2022 and then showing up on the list as being the least frequently used in the 2023-2024 period as compared to 2022. The word “raw” shows an increase in usage throughout the overall period. It became one of the least frequently used in 2022 and increased slightly in subsequent periods. The term “hydro*” entered the list as the last in 2022 and then experienced a decrease in the 2023-2024 period. The term “critical” is used less often in the 2018-2021 years, and the value of the mentioned cases increases only in the 2023-2024 period.

Table 4 *Top 5 Most Frequent Terms in Security*

Categories	2018-2021 Count	Categories	2022 Count	Categories	2023-2024 Count
Security	398	Security	293	Security	166
security	113	Afghan	88	Afghan	55
Afghan	98	security	67	security	50
peace*	64	peace*	28	peace*	33
traffic*	30	war	19	war	13
stabil*	28	traffic*	18	stabil*	12

The most frequently referenced words over the full selected period remain the same. The words “security” and “Afghan” are used most often throughout the whole period. The word “traffic*,” which refers to drug and human trafficking, was less frequently appearing in 2018-2021. It decreased in frequency almost twice in 2022 and disappeared from the list in 2023-2024, demonstrating that it became less important on the EU’s agenda. While the word “war” enters the list of most frequently used words in 2022 and remains stable in further periods. The word “stabil*,” which refers to stability, stable and stabilization, was the least frequently used in the list before 2022, but with the start of the military conflict in Ukraine, it left the list of words mentioned most often but returned in 2023-24, marking the least frequently mentioned word.

Table 5 *Top 5 Most Frequent Terms in Initiatives*

Categories	2018-2021 Count	Categories	2022 Count	Categories	2023-2024 Count
Initiatives	1488	Initiatives	1107	Initiatives	664
Cooperat*	377	Cooperat*	211	Cooperat*	130
Partner*	214	Project*	167	Partner*	88
Strateg*	107	Partner*	128	Meeting*	55
Action*	88	Program*	117	Dialogue*	45
Dialogue*	87	Strateg*	86	Forum*	45

Table 5 demonstrates different initiatives launched throughout the period. The term “cooperat*” remains constantly the most used word throughout the period. The word “partner*” was used 214 times during the first period; the usage is in decline in 2022. However, the indicator increased in the 2023-2024 period. The same trend is experienced by the word “dialogue*.” The value starts with 87 in 2018-2021 decreases and leaves the list in 2022, and goes up in the last period, reaching the value of 45. Despite the word “action*” being used 88 times in the first period, its frequency decreased in 2022 and further, no longer being included in the top.

Table 6 *Top 5 Most Frequent Terms in Parties*

Categories	2018-2021 Count	Categories	2022 Count	Categories	2023-2024 Count
Parties	1805	Parties	1450	Parties	1079
EU+Europe*	910	EU+Europe*	598	EU+Europe*	461
Central Asia*	603	Central Asia*	431	Kazakh*	310
Kazakh*	269	Kazakh*	359	Central Asia*	255
Russia*	18	Russia*	33	Ukrain*	27
Ukrain*	5	Ukrain*	29	Russia*	26

Table 5 demonstrates that the most popular reference is the EU itself as an actor conducting all of the activities. During 2018-2022, the reference to Central Asia was the most frequent among all other parties besides the EU, while in 2023-2024 Kazakhstan became the most frequently referenced party on the EU's agenda. It can also be noted that before the military conflict, references to Kazakhstan were almost 100 times lower than in 2022.

Russia and Ukraine were also mentioned, but less frequently throughout the whole period. However, if Ukraine was mentioned only 5 times before the military conflict, in 2022 it was mentioned almost six times more. In 2023-2024, this number decreased slightly. Whereas Russia was mentioned 18 times before the military conflict, in the year of the invasion, this number almost doubled.

Table 7 *Top 5 Most Frequent Terms in Verbs*

Categories	2018-2021 Count	Categories	2022 Count	Categories	2023-2024 Count
Verbs	376	Verbs	432	Verbs	264
support	123	support	136	support	95
promote	108	develop	96	develop	37
develop	42	implement	61	enhance	37
enhance	33	enhance	50	promote	37
improve	30	improve	44	improve	21

The main trend observed from the table is that “support” is the main word that characterizes EU-Kazakhstan relations in the whole period. Before 2022, the verb “promote” was after support, but when the military conflict began, it was replaced by the word “develop”. Overall, the frequency of all of the verbs used was higher in 2022, marking the events that were conducted more actively between Kazakhstan and the EU this year as compared to the period between 2023 and 2024. The word “implement” entered the list only in 2022, symbolizing the active period.

CONTENT ANALYSIS FINDINGS

In contrast to the other studied periods, 2022 is considered the most active year. This suggests that the cooperation between Kazakhstan and the EU was more intense when the military conflict between Russia and Ukraine began.

From the Democratization and Development category, it can be seen that the persistent human rights agenda before the military conflict was replaced by the development narrative in 2022. This is explained by the fact that the development of joint initiatives that will address urgent and unexpected challenges has become the top priority for both parties to maintain regional stability and security. However, human rights issues returned to the agenda in 2023-2024, re-occupying the top spot, implying that the parties have adapted to the realities of the military conflict by developing resilience measures and can continue working on previous endeavors.

In the Economy category, there were no significant changes in the narrative throughout the period. However, in 2023-2024, mentions of sanctions became some of the most common words. This indicates that the conflict between Russia and Ukraine impacted the economic agenda of Kazakhstan, the EU and the entire world.

Regarding energy, references to the green economy and green energy were some of the most frequently mentioned terms from the very beginning until today. This can be explained by the fact that the EU set and is still working toward carbon neutrality, even prior to the start of the military conflict. It is noteworthy that the EU began to pay stronger attention to hydropower and renewable energy in general, which, with the outbreak of the military conflict, suggests that it shifted its focus to cooperation in the field of sustainable energy as it can reduce dependency on fossil fuels exported from Russia.

In the Security category, discussions about the military conflict have been ongoing since 2022, showing a strong focus on geopolitical changes by both the EU and Kazakhstan.

The Initiatives category has shown increased activity in 2022, indicating a growing interest from the EU in Kazakhstan, particularly with the start of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict.

As for the Parties category, in 2022, mentions of Kazakhstan increased compared to before the military conflict, when the EU talked more about Central Asia than Kazakhstan. Now, Kazakhstan is viewed as an independent player rather than just a part of the Central Asian region.

From the Verbs category, it can be noticed that the relationships mainly involved providing support over the years. Furthermore, before the military conflict, the EU sought to promote its values, but after the conflict started, it focused more on development efforts.

CONCLUSION

The aim of the present study was to investigate and comprehend the impact of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine on the cooperation between the EU and Kazakhstan. By analyzing and interpreting the data, several conclusions can be drawn, which illuminate the influence of the conflict on the relations between the mentioned parties.

The Kazakhstan-EU partnership has shown resilience and adaptability across democratization and development, economy and energy fields in light of the realities of the challenges posed by the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Both parties strive for economic prosperity by adhering to sustainable management of raw materials. The EU has shown interest in transforming an important sector of the economy, specifically energy. The cooperation between the two demonstrates mutual benefit, with Kazakhstan supplying raw materials to Europe and Europe providing support and investment in Kazakhstan's energy industry. In general, the energy partnership between the EU and Kazakhstan shows a shared commitment to sustainable development, energy security, and tackling global challenges in the shift to a low-carbon future. It was intensified with sanctions against Russia, which led to Europe's acceleration towards renewable energy sources. Moreover, establishing efficient trade routes in the face of geopolitical tensions is crucial for both parties. In the sphere of democratization and development, educational programs, diplomatic exchanges, human rights initiatives and other important projects contributing to the region's sustainability signify consolidated ties that extend beyond economic transactions. Relations between Kazakhstan and Europe significantly intensified after 2022, as illustrated by findings from the three main areas of cooperation.

In the analysis of content, there were noticeable changes in the discourse between Kazakhstan and the EU, especially in 2022. Human rights were a major focus for the EU before 2022, but after the start of the military conflict, development became the Union's top priority. Sanctions were frequently mentioned in 2023-2024 when discussing the economy, highlighting the EU's concern about geopolitics. Moreover, there has been an increased focus on green energy, particularly in 2022, due to energy disruptions. In 2022, the agenda started to frequently mention the word "war," and activity between the two parties was notably higher compared to other years. Kazakhstan was referenced more often in 2022, whereas previously, Central Asia as a whole was mentioned most frequently. Overall, relationships were mainly built on supportive actions throughout the entire period.

These results from the two parts of the study can be explained through the prism of Kenneth Waltz's structural realism since the EU as well as Kazakhstan pursue the goal of resisting geopolitical challenges. According to him, state behavior is driven by the anarchic nature of the international system and the pursuit of security (1979). Kazakhstan follows a multi-vector policy to balance relations with major powers, maintaining a neutral status to ensure geopolitical stability and economic resilience (Gnedina, 2015). By employing soft-balancing methods, Kazakhstan engages multiple

actors to diversify opportunities, whereas the EU, dependent on fossil fuels and seeking sustainable energy, imports both raw materials for renewable and nonrenewable energy sources from Kazakhstan.

Connecting the findings from both parts of the study, it is evident that the Russo-Ukrainian conflict has intensified Kazakhstan-EU cooperation. The intense interaction in various sectors demonstrates the adaptability of relations to address the current geopolitical situation. The emphasis on sustainable energy, development initiatives, and security concerns highlights a strategic move aimed at enhancing regional stability. In the face of the circumstances, the EU began to increase cooperation with Kazakhstan in the energy sector while easing its control over democratization.

This research has contributed to the existing literature on Kazakhstani-European relations, offering insights into the strategic importance of Kazakhstan for the EU as an institution. Moreover, it enriches existing knowledge of broader topics such as geopolitics and crisis management. Further research could be done on specific aspects of Kazakhstan-EU cooperation highlighted in this study. For example, the effects of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine on trade, energy and the implementation of joint projects promoting sustainability and human rights. As for the recommendations, additional investments in the renewable energy sector and enhancing diplomatic connections to foster stability and prosperity in the region are potential steps for mutual benefit.

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- **Original Research Articles:** Manuscripts should not exceed 12,000 words, including references. They should provide a comprehensive analysis or empirical study relevant to the scope of the journal.

- **Review Articles:** Submissions should offer a critical examination of existing literature, contributing to the body of knowledge with a fresh perspective. Review articles should be more than 5,000 words but less than 12,000 words, including references.

We should expect to find:

Introduction that should provide a context for the research,
Literature Review that should critically survey relevant literature,
Methodology that should include the data collection and data analysis methods,
Findings that should report on the relevant findings
Discussion that discusses the findings in light of previous research
Conclusion that focuses on the potential implications of the research.

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In-text citations and Reference. These should follow APA7 format. Maximum of 40 references

Your paper will be considered based on the following criteria where applicable: appropriateness of topic, justification and significance, purpose and aim, depth of understanding, critical evaluation, coherent discussion of ideas, methods of data collection and analysis, ethics, presentation of findings and logical inference, relationship between concepts and practice, relationship to previous research, overall claims and argument, potential impact, and coherence, cohesion and language.

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EDITION

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PRINTING ADDRESS

98, Auelbekov St., Kokshetau, 020000, Kazakhstan

Starkov S.A. ST



Kazakhstan Institute
for Strategic Studies
under the President of
the Republic of Kazakhstan

**JOURNAL OF
CENTRAL ASIAN
STUDIES**

№ 3 (95)
2024