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

ALBERTO FRIGERIO^{1*} , LAURA IMANGALIYEVA² 

¹Professor, PhD, Almaty Management University, Kazakhstan

²Bachelor's student, Almaty Management University, Kazakhstan

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

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

INTRODUCTION

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

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

*Correspondence to: Alberto Frigerio, email: f.alberto@almu.edu.kz



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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

LITERATURE REVIEW

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

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

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

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

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

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

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

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

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

RESEARCH METHODS

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

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

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

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

Table 1. Thematic Categorization

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

Source: compiled by the authors

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Source: compiled by the authors

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

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

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



Source: compiled by the authors

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

The repetition of words such as “country” (9 times) and “relation” (8 times) suggests a more extensive conversation on the general condition of relationships and the need for mutual collaboration between Italy and Kazakhstan. Similarly, the regular reference to “opportunity” (9 times) implies a future-oriented viewpoint, acknowledging potential prospects for cooperation and growth between the two countries. It implies an underlying ideological framework focused on progress, innovation, and cooperation.

However, it is the recurrent use of terminology like “creative industry” (6 times) and “middle corridor” (6 times) that deserves special attention. The focus on the creative industry suggests a particular area of focus and collaboration that goes beyond conventional diplomatic and economic relationships. There is already a plan to open a shared Cultural Center for Creative Industry in Kazakhstan (Kazinform, 2024). Additionally, the reference to a “middle corridor” involves strategically focusing on industry and transportation infrastructure sectors, but also on the cultural factor in a broad conception, thus revealing a holistic approach that connects with the above-mentioned Italian concept of “diplomazia del fare”.

Figure 2 draws the main links to the words “Kazakhstan”, “Italy”, “visit”, “country”, “opportunity”, and “relation” by using Voyan Tools. These linguistic associations provide additional insights into the nuanced dynamics and considerations underlying Italy-Kazakhstan relations.

Figure 2. Word links of the key concepts expressed by the Italian Ambassador Marco Alberti during his interview for The Astana Times



Source: compiled by the authors

The association with the words “strategic”, “long term”, and “years”, for instance, suggests a deliberate and calculated approach to bilateral relations between Kazakhstan and Italy, emphasizing long-term planning and mutual benefits beyond immediate opportunities or challenges. This seems reinforced by the associations with the words “coming” and “relaunch”, which suggest a recognition of opportunities to revitalize or renew aspects of the Italy-Kazakhstan relationship through a proactive approach, as well by the repeated word “president”, which highlights the impact of President Tokayev's visit on shaping the discourse and direction of the bilateral relations.

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

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

DISCUSSION

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

CONCLUSION

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

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

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

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

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

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

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

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REGIONAL DIPLOMACY AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION: EXAMINING UZBEKISTAN-TALIBAN RELATIONS IN THE POST-2021 AFGHAN GEOPOLITICAL LANDSCAPE

ABDUL WASI POPALZAY* 

PhD scholar, Department of South and Central Asian Studies,
School of International Studies, Central University of Punjab, India

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ABSTRACT. *Uzbekistan's diplomatic and economic engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan in the post-2021 geopolitical landscape highlights a strategic recalibration in Central Asia's regional approach. This study examines the evolution of Uzbekistan-Taliban relations, focusing on economic cooperation, security concerns, and diplomatic engagement while contextualizing the broader regional implications. Uzbekistan has pursued a pragmatic policy of economic interdependence through trade agreements, infrastructure projects such as the Trans-Afghan Railway, and energy cooperation, to ensure stability and prevent spillover threats. This paper explores how Uzbekistan's approach aligns with regional security concerns and the varied responses of Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—toward the Taliban regime. The study analyzes Uzbekistan's geopolitical and economic foundations by employing Realism, Pragmatism in International Relations, Regional Security Complex Theory, and Economic Interdependence Theory. Methodologically, the research relies on qualitative analysis, incorporating official statements, economic data, policy reports, and expert assessments. The findings indicate that while economic cooperation may serve as a stabilizing factor, security risks, ideological divergences, and geopolitical uncertainties continue to shape regional dynamics. The study concludes with policy recommendations for fostering a balanced, pragmatic, and secure regional approach to Afghanistan.*

KEYWORDS: *Uzbekistan-Taliban relations, Central Asian geopolitics, economic cooperation, regional security, Afghanistan, diplomatic engagement.*

INTRODUCTION

Uzbekistan's engagement with the Taliban following the latter's takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021 represents a pragmatic approach aimed at ensuring regional stability, enhancing economic cooperation, and preventing security spillover. Given Afghanistan's strategic location as a gateway between Central and South Asia, Uzbekistan's foreign policy has prioritized maintaining diplomatic channels with the Taliban to mitigate extremist threats and foster economic connectivity (Khalid, 2023a). Unlike other regional actors adopting a more cautious stance, Tashkent has focused on counterterrorism cooperation, urging the Taliban to prevent militant groups such as the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the remnants of

*Correspondence to: Abdul Wasi Popalzay, email: abdul.wasi.popalzay@gmail.com



the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU) from using Afghan territory for cross-border operations (International Crisis Group [ICG], 2023). This engagement reflects Uzbekistan's broader geopolitical strategy of ensuring its southern border's security while positioning itself as a key mediator in regional diplomacy.

Economically, Uzbekistan's approach is driven by the potential benefits of trade expansion and connectivity projects. Bilateral trade between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan reached \$1.2 billion in 2022, demonstrating the growing economic interdependence between the two countries (World Bank, 2023). One of the most ambitious projects is the Trans-Afghan Railway, which aims to connect Uzbekistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan, potentially increasing regional trade by \$5 billion annually upon completion (Asian Development Bank [ADB], 2023). Uzbekistan has also invested in Afghanistan's energy and infrastructure sectors, including power transmission lines and road networks, as part of its broader objective of enhancing regional economic integration (Eurasianet, 2023c). These initiatives align with Tashkent's efforts to reduce reliance on external factors such as Russia and China while fostering deeper economic linkages within Central Asia (Khalid, 2023d).

Diplomatically, Uzbekistan has actively positioned itself as a regional mediator by hosting forums such as the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan in 2023, which emphasized regional cooperation and Afghanistan's integration into the broader international system (United Nations [UN], 2023). This diplomatic engagement extends to multilateral platforms such as the C5+1 Dialogue, where Uzbekistan has sought to build consensus on Afghanistan-related security and economic issues while maintaining balanced relations with global powers, including the United States and China (U.S. State Department, 2023). Despite these efforts, Uzbekistan's approach has faced criticism, particularly regarding concerns that engaging with the Taliban risks legitimizing an unrecognized regime that has been widely condemned for human rights violations, particularly against women and minority groups (Human Rights Watch, 2023). However, Uzbek officials have maintained that engagement does not equate to formal recognition but reflects a pragmatic necessity to address security concerns and economic realities (Abdullaev, 2022).

Another challenge Uzbekistan faces is the potential risk of economic overdependence on Afghanistan, given the Taliban's governance challenges and Afghanistan's fragile economic structure (Rashid, 2023a). Critics argue that instability in Afghanistan could undermine long-term investments and regional projects. However, Uzbekistan has mitigated these risks by diversifying its economic partnerships and securing international financial support for its infrastructure initiatives, such as the Trans-Afghan Railway, which is backed by multilateral institutions (ADB, 2023). Ultimately, Uzbekistan's engagement with the Taliban reflects a strategic balance between security imperatives, economic ambitions, and regional leadership aspirations. Uzbekistan has reinforced its diplomatic influence in Central Asia while advancing long-term connectivity and trade goals by positioning itself as a key stakeholder in Afghanistan's future. As the geopolitical landscape evolves, Uzbekistan's pragmatic approach will be crucial in shaping Afghanistan's regional integration and fostering broader economic and security cooperation in Central Asia.

METHODS

This research adopts a qualitative research design with a multi-method approach, incorporating content analysis, case study methodology, and comparative analysis to examine Uzbekistan-Taliban relations in the post-2021 geopolitical landscape. A qualitative approach is best suited for this study as it allows for an in-depth exploration of Uzbekistan's diplomatic, economic, and security engagements with the Taliban-led Afghanistan. Content analysis is employed to systematically examine policy documents, government statements, official reports, academic literature, and media sources, including those from the Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, UNODC, World Bank, Crisis Group, and Human Rights Watch. This method enables the identification of key themes and patterns in Uzbekistan's engagement with Afghanistan, such as trade, security cooperation, and regional integration. Additionally, a case study methodology is utilized to analyze specific initiatives, including the Trans-Afghan Railway, the Termez Border Trade Zone, and Uzbekistan's counterterrorism coordination with the Taliban. These case studies provide a focused examination of Uzbekistan's strategic policies and their practical implications. Furthermore, a comparative analysis is conducted to evaluate Uzbekistan's policy approach in contrast with those of Pakistan, Iran, and other Central Asian states, offering a broader geopolitical perspective on regional diplomacy. This methodological framework ensures reliability and validity by cross-verifying data from multiple sources, thus minimizing bias and enhancing objectivity. However, certain limitations exist, such as restricted access to primary Taliban sources, necessitating reliance on secondary data, and the evolving nature of Afghanistan's political landscape, which may impact the long-term applicability of findings. Despite these challenges, this methodology provides a systematic, evidence-based, and academically rigorous analysis of Uzbekistan-Taliban relations, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of regional diplomacy and economic cooperation in post-2021 Afghanistan.

UZBEKISTAN'S DIPLOMATIC ENGAGEMENT WITH THE TALIBAN

Foreign Policy Shifts Since the Taliban's Return

The return of the Taliban to power in August 2021 marked a significant shift in Afghanistan's geopolitical landscape, prompting regional actors to reassess their diplomatic strategies. Among these states, Uzbekistan has demonstrated a pragmatic approach, balancing security concerns with economic opportunities while maintaining regional stability. Initially, Uzbekistan adopted a cautious stance, focusing on border security and avoiding premature recognition of the Taliban regime. However, as the political reality in Afghanistan became entrenched, Uzbekistan transitioned to active diplomatic engagement, fostering dialogue on trade, infrastructure development, and counterterrorism. This shift underscores Uzbekistan's broader foreign policy strategy, which prioritizes regional cooperation, economic integration, and strategic autonomy amidst the competing interests of global powers (Abdullaev, 2022; Khalid, 2023d; ICG, 2023).

Concerns over security, extremism, and border stability shaped Uzbekistan's initial response to the Taliban's return. Given Afghanistan's history as a sanctuary for militant groups, Uzbekistan feared the resurgence of transnational terrorism, including

threats from the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and other extremist factions. The government immediately fortified its 144-kilometer border with Afghanistan by deploying additional security forces and enhancing surveillance infrastructure (Eurasianet, 2023f). At the diplomatic level, Uzbekistan refrained from recognizing the Taliban as Afghanistan's legitimate government, aligning itself with the broader international community's cautious stance. Nevertheless, it avoided confrontation with the new regime, maintaining communication channels to ensure stability along the shared border. Additionally, Tashkent provided humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, delivering over 2,000 tons of essential supplies, including food, medicine, and construction materials, signaling a humanitarian rather than a political engagement with the Taliban (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023).

By early 2022, Uzbekistan recalibrated its policy, shifting from a guarded approach to active diplomatic engagement with the Taliban. This transition was influenced by multiple factors, including the recognition that Afghanistan's economic collapse could destabilize the region and exacerbate security threats. Economic imperatives also played a role, as Uzbekistan sought to preserve and expand trade ties with Afghanistan, which had grown significantly in recent years. In 2022, bilateral trade reached \$1.2 billion, up from \$800 million in 2021, highlighting Afghanistan's importance as an economic partner (World Bank, 2023). One of the most notable diplomatic initiatives was Uzbekistan's hosting of the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan in July 2023. The conference brought together regional and international stakeholders to discuss Afghanistan's economic reconstruction, counterterrorism efforts, and humanitarian needs. Uzbekistan positioned itself as a key mediator, advocating for pragmatic engagement with the Taliban while urging the regime to adopt more inclusive governance policies and respect international obligations (UN News, 2023).

Additionally, Uzbekistan has been a driving force behind the Trans-Afghan Railway Project, a strategic infrastructure initiative to connect Central Asia with South Asia via Afghanistan. This project, supported by international financial institutions such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), is expected to enhance regional trade and economic connectivity, providing Afghanistan with a crucial link to global markets (ADB, 2023). By spearheading such initiatives, Uzbekistan has demonstrated its commitment to fostering economic stability in Afghanistan to promote broader regional security.

Uzbekistan's diplomatic transition from caution to proactive engagement reflects a pragmatic assessment of regional dynamics. While security concerns remain paramount, Uzbekistan has recognized that isolating Afghanistan under Taliban rule could have adverse consequences, including economic instability, refugee crises, and the expansion of extremist networks. Instead, its approach aligns with broader Central Asian efforts to stabilize Afghanistan through economic integration rather than political confrontation (Khalid, 2023d). This strategy also highlights Uzbekistan's increasing diplomatic autonomy. Unlike in previous decades, when Tashkent largely followed Moscow's lead in regional affairs, it has now adopted a more independent foreign policy, balancing relations with major global powers while prioritizing regional security and economic cooperation. Uzbekistan's position has also gained tacit support from neighboring Central Asian states, which share similar concerns regarding Afghanistan's stability and its implications for the broader region (ICG, 2023).

Despite its strategic logic, Uzbekistan's engagement with the Taliban is not without controversy. Critics argue that by engaging with the Taliban, Uzbekistan risks legitimizing an unrecognized regime that has been widely condemned for its human rights violations, particularly regarding women's rights and political repression (Human Rights Watch, 2023). This concern is amplified by the fact that the Taliban has not demonstrated significant progress in addressing international demands for political inclusivity and human rights protections. Moreover, some analysts warn that closer ties with the Taliban could embolden extremist groups in the region. While Uzbekistan has strengthened its border security, the long-term risks associated with a Taliban-controlled Afghanistan remain uncertain, particularly regarding the potential resurgence of extremist networks that could destabilize Central Asia (Rashid, 2023a). Another challenge is economic dependence. By investing heavily in trade and infrastructure projects with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan may expose itself to economic vulnerabilities if the Taliban government fails to ensure long-term stability. The Trans-Afghan Railway, for example, relies on the assumption that Afghanistan will remain a viable transit corridor. However, continued internal instability or shifts in Taliban policy could threaten the project's success (ADB, 2023). In response to these concerns, Uzbek policymakers emphasize that engagement with the Taliban is not an endorsement of their governance model but a pragmatic necessity. The alternative—complete diplomatic isolation—would likely exacerbate Afghanistan's instability and increase regional security risks. By maintaining dialogue and economic cooperation, Uzbekistan seeks to influence the Taliban's policies while safeguarding its own national interests (Abdullaev, 2022).

Additionally, Uzbekistan's engagement strategy is not unilateral but coordinated with other regional and international actors. By working closely with China, Russia, the European Union, and multilateral organizations, Uzbekistan ensures its initiatives align with broader efforts to promote Afghan stability (Khalid, 2023d). This multilateral approach mitigates the risks of over-dependence and enhances the sustainability of economic and security-related cooperation. Therefore, Uzbekistan's diplomatic approach to the Taliban has evolved significantly since 2021, transitioning from initial caution to active engagement. This shift reflects a strategic calculation aimed at promoting regional stability through economic cooperation and pragmatic diplomacy. While concerns remain regarding the Taliban's governance, security threats, and financial uncertainties, Uzbekistan's engagement is framed as a necessary response to the geopolitical realities of post-2021 Afghanistan. By balancing security measures with economic initiatives, Uzbekistan has positioned itself as a key regional actor, shaping Afghanistan's integration into Central Asia while safeguarding its national interests.

Bilateral Meetings and Diplomatic Dialogues

Uzbekistan's diplomatic engagement with the Taliban has evolved significantly since the group's return to power in Afghanistan in August 2021. Initially, Uzbekistan took a cautious approach, prioritizing the security of its 144-kilometer border to prevent potential instability, terrorism, and drug trafficking from spilling over. This strategy stemmed from concerns about regional security and a desire to maintain internal stability (Abdullaev, 2022). As the situation in Afghanistan stabilized, Uzbekistan

transitioned to a more proactive diplomatic stance. Recognizing the Taliban as the de facto authority, Uzbek officials participated in high-level meetings to discuss mutual interests such as trade, transit, and border security. This pragmatic approach sought to promote regional stability and economic integration, aligning with Uzbekistan's wider foreign policy objectives (Khalid, 2023d). A notable example of this engagement occurred with the visit of Uzbek Prime Minister Abdulla Aripov to Kabul in August 2024. This visit represented the highest-level meeting between an Afghan leader and a foreign official since the Taliban's return to power. During this meeting, both nations signed 35 memorandums of understanding, valued at \$2.5 billion, covering trade and investment deals. These agreements encompassed various sectors, including infrastructure development, energy projects, and agricultural cooperation, highlighting a shared commitment to economic collaboration (VOA News, 2024).

In addition to economic agreements, Uzbekistan has played a pivotal role in facilitating regional dialogues. For instance, Tashkent hosted an international conference on Afghanistan in July 2022, bringing together representatives from nearly 30 countries, including the United States and the European Union. This platform allowed the international community to engage directly with the Taliban, discussing avenues for peace and regional cooperation (SIPRI, 2022). Despite these positive developments, challenges persist. One significant concern is the construction of the Qosh Tepa Canal by the Taliban, which aims to divert water from the Amu Darya River. Uzbekistan has expressed apprehension regarding the potential impact of this project on its water security and agricultural productivity. In response, both nations have engaged in diplomatic discussions to address these concerns, emphasizing the importance of collaborative water resource management (Eurasianet, 2023b).

Critics argue that Uzbekistan's engagement with the Taliban may inadvertently legitimize a regime with a contentious human rights record, potentially undermining international efforts to promote human rights and democratic governance in Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2023). However, proponents contend that isolating the Taliban could exacerbate regional instability. Engaging with Afghanistan's current leadership is viewed as a pragmatic approach to ensure security, foster economic development, and address shared challenges (ICG, 2023). Consequently, Uzbekistan's diplomatic engagement with the Taliban reflects a strategic balance between safeguarding national interests and promoting regional stability. Through high-level meetings and bilateral agreements, Uzbekistan aims to enhance economic cooperation and address security concerns. While challenges remain, this approach underscores Uzbekistan's commitment to constructive dialogue and regional integration.

Uzbekistan's Balancing Act in International Diplomacy

Uzbekistan has strategically positioned itself as a key regional player by balancing its diplomatic relations with major global powers – Russia, China, the United States, and the European Union—while simultaneously engaging with the Taliban government in Afghanistan without granting formal recognition (Abdullaev, 2022). This pragmatic approach allows Uzbekistan to safeguard its economic and security interests while aligning with international diplomatic norms. Trade between Uzbekistan and Afghanistan reached \$1.2 billion in 2022, highlighting economic interdependence

despite political uncertainties (World Bank, 2023). Additionally, Uzbekistan has provided Afghanistan with over 2,000 tons of humanitarian aid since the Taliban's takeover, reinforcing its commitment to regional stability (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Infrastructure projects such as the Trans-Afghan Railway, backed by \$500 million in international funding from entities like the Asian Development Bank (ADB), underscore Uzbekistan's efforts to integrate Afghanistan into broader regional trade networks (ADB, 2023). The Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan, held in July 2023, demonstrated Uzbekistan's diplomatic leadership by convening representatives from Russia, China, the U.S., the EU, and the Taliban to discuss economic and security cooperation (United Nations News, 2023).

While some analysts argue that engagement with the Taliban could strain Uzbekistan's relations with the West, mainly due to concerns over human rights violations in Afghanistan (Human Rights Watch, 2023), others contend that Uzbekistan's participation in multilateral platforms such as the C5+1 dialogue with the U.S. helps mitigate these risks by ensuring diplomatic diversification (U.S. State Department, 2023). President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has emphasized that Uzbekistan's policy toward Afghanistan is guided by pragmatism, economic cooperation, and regional security (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). However, the unpredictability of the Taliban's governance poses a challenge to long-term stability, raising questions about the sustainability of Uzbekistan's investments and diplomatic engagement (ICG, 2023). Nevertheless, Uzbekistan's balancing act—engaging major powers while maintaining constructive yet cautious ties with the Taliban—demonstrates its evolving role as a regional stabilizer in Central Asia (Eurasianet, 2023c). This diplomatic strategy enhances Uzbekistan's geopolitical standing, but it requires continuous recalibration to adapt to shifting regional and global dynamics (Khalid, 2023d).

ECONOMIC COOPERATION BETWEEN UZBEKISTAN AND AFGHANISTAN:

Key Trade and Infrastructure Projects

Since the Taliban's takeover of Afghanistan in 2021, Uzbekistan has adopted a pragmatic approach to economic engagement, resulting in significant growth in bilateral trade. Trade volume between the two countries increased from \$800 million in 2021 to \$1.2 billion in 2022, highlighting the success of economic agreements and Uzbekistan's commitment to regional trade expansion (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Uzbekistan's primary exports to Afghanistan include electricity, construction materials, and agricultural products, which are essential for Afghanistan's reconstruction and economic stability. On the other hand, Uzbekistan imports textiles and minerals from Afghanistan, reinforcing mutual economic interdependence (Eurasianet, 2023a). Infrastructure development, particularly in trade and transit, plays a critical role in ensuring the efficiency of these economic exchanges. Uzbekistan has allocated \$500 million to key projects such as the Trans-Afghan Railway and the modernization of the Termez border crossing, aiming to enhance connectivity and trade efficiency (ADB, 2023).

Afghanistan holds strategic importance in Uzbekistan's regional trade policy, serving as a transit hub for trade with South Asia, particularly with Pakistan and India. By improving infrastructure and economic ties with Afghanistan, Uzbekistan aims to gain

access to South Asian markets, diversifying its trade routes beyond Central Asia (World Bank, 2023). The development of the Trans-Afghan Railway, a \$5 billion initiative, is a cornerstone of this strategy. Once completed, the railway is expected to increase regional trade by \$5 billion annually, transforming Uzbekistan into a key player in Eurasian connectivity (ADB, 2023). The Termez border crossing, another significant project, has been expanded into a central logistics hub. This border facility facilitates commercial trade and humanitarian assistance to Afghanistan, reflecting Uzbekistan's balanced approach to economic cooperation and regional stability (Eurasianet, 2023c). Furthermore, Uzbekistan remains a key electricity supplier to Afghanistan, exporting 1.5 billion kWh in 2022, which has been crucial in addressing Afghanistan's energy shortages and sustaining essential services (World Bank, 2023).

Experts and policymakers highlight the potential benefits of Uzbekistan's economic initiatives. President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has described the Trans-Afghan Railway as transformative, emphasizing its role in making Central Asia a hub for international trade (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). Similarly, the Asian Development Bank has underscored the railway's significance as a landmark regional integration initiative, projecting long-term economic benefits for all participating nations (ADB, 2023). Analysts such as Navbahor Imamova argue that Uzbekistan's investment in Afghanistan's infrastructure is a strategic move to secure regional stability and economic growth, reinforcing its position as a leading economic power in Central Asia (Eurasianet, 2023c).

Despite the promising economic outlook, several challenges continue to persist. Security risks remain a major concern, as Afghanistan's ongoing instability could jeopardize infrastructure projects like the Trans-Afghan Railway, impacting their long-term economic viability (Rashid, 2023). Additionally, some scholars argue that Uzbekistan's deepening economic ties with Afghanistan could lead to economic dependence, rendering its trade policy vulnerable to shifts in Afghanistan's political and security landscape (ICG, 2023). The impact of international sanctions on the Taliban government also complicates trade relations, as restrictions on financial transactions and foreign investment could hinder economic cooperation (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Uzbekistan has taken proactive steps to mitigate these risks. By collaborating with international financial institutions, including the Asian Development Bank, Uzbekistan aims to ensure the security and sustainability of its infrastructure projects (ADB, 2023). Moreover, its trade strategy remains diversified, with strong partnerships across Central Asia, Russia, and China, reducing the risks of overreliance on Afghanistan (Khalid, 2023). Unlike other regional actors, Uzbekistan's engagement with Afghanistan is pragmatic and focused on economic benefits, rather than political alliances, allowing it to navigate complex geopolitical dynamics without direct involvement in Afghanistan's governance issues (Abdullaev, 2022). Subsequently, Uzbekistan's economic cooperation with Afghanistan underscores its strategic commitment to regional trade and connectivity. By investing in key infrastructure projects, such as the Trans-Afghan Railway and the Termez border crossing, Uzbekistan is positioning itself as a central player in regional trade networks. While concerns about security, economic dependence, and sanctions persist, Uzbekistan's risk mitigation strategies and diversified trade partnerships demonstrate a calculated approach to economic

expansion. As regional integration deepens, Uzbekistan's pragmatic engagement with Afghanistan could serve as a model for balancing economic development with geopolitical stability.

Major Infrastructure and Connectivity Initiatives

Uzbekistan has strategically advanced its economic collaboration with Afghanistan through significant infrastructure and connectivity projects, aiming to enhance regional trade and stability. A pivotal initiative in this endeavor is the Termez–Mazar-i-Sharif–Kabul–Peshawar Railway Project, which seeks to establish a direct rail link connecting Uzbekistan to Pakistan via Afghanistan. This approximately 600-kilometer railway is projected to commence construction in 2025, with an estimated cost of \$4.8 billion. Upon completion, it is anticipated to reduce cargo delivery times between Uzbekistan and Pakistan by about five days, thereby facilitating more efficient trade routes across Central and South Asia (AKIpress News Agency, 2025; Wikipedia, 2023). In addition to rail connectivity, Uzbekistan has been a crucial energy partner for Afghanistan, supplying substantial electricity to address the country's energy deficits. In December 2024, Afghanistan's state-run power company, Da Afghanistan Breshna Sherkat (DABS), extended its electricity import agreement with Uzbekistan until the end of 2025, ensuring a stable energy supply to meet Afghanistan's growing domestic demand (Amu TV, 2024). This energy cooperation not only aids in meeting Afghanistan's immediate power needs but also strengthens bilateral relations and fosters economic interdependence.

Furthermore, both nations have engaged in negotiating multiple agreements to enhance road and transport connectivity. Notably, the development of the Termez border crossing into a central significant logistics hub has facilitated the movement of goods and humanitarian aid. This initiative integrates Afghanistan deeply into regional economic networks and promotes stability through increased trade (CAREC Program, 2023). These collaborative efforts underscore Uzbekistan's commitment to regional integration and economic development, positioning both countries to benefit from improved infrastructure and strengthened economic ties.

Challenges in Economic Cooperation

Uzbekistan's economic collaboration with Afghanistan is confronted by substantial financial and logistical obstacles, notably in executing large-scale infrastructure endeavors like the Trans-Afghan Railway. This project, estimated at \$5 billion, has encountered funding deficits and security concerns, particularly within Afghanistan's challenging terrains (ADB, 2023; Daryo.uz, 2023). The governance practices of the Taliban further exacerbate these challenges. Their limited administrative proficiency and opaque governance structures have eroded investor confidence, with over 65% of regional enterprises expressing reluctance to engage economically under the current regime (Eurasianet, 2023c). Additionally, international sanctions and the absence of formal recognition of the Taliban have severely impeded Afghanistan's financial operations, including the freezing of approximately \$9 billion in central bank assets, thereby obstructing trade and investment flows (Council on Foreign Relations, 2023). Despite these adversities, Uzbekistan remains steadfast in its commitment to regional economic integration, actively seeking collaborative solutions with neighboring nations

and international entities to surmount these impediments and foster regional stability and growth.

REGIONAL AND GLOBAL IMPLICATIONS OF UZBEKISTAN-TALIBAN RELATIONS

Central Asia's Response to Taliban Rule

In the wake of the Taliban's resurgence in Afghanistan, Central Asian nations have adopted varied strategies in response to Uzbekistan's proactive engagement with the new regime. Kazakhstan, for instance, has aligned with Uzbekistan's approach by removing the Taliban from its list of terrorist organizations, signaling a shift toward normalization of relations (Avdaliani, 2024). This move reflects a broader regional trend of cautious engagement, as Kazakhstan seeks to balance security concerns with economic interests. Similarly, Kyrgyzstan has maintained trade relations with Afghanistan, aiming to reintegrate the country into the regional economy while carefully navigating the complexities of Taliban governance (Caspian Policy Center, 2023). In contrast, Tajikistan has expressed apprehension toward the Taliban, primarily due to concerns over ethnic minorities and border security. The Tajik government has bolstered its military presence along the Afghan border and conducted joint military exercises with Russia and Uzbekistan, underscoring its cautious stance (Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2021). On the other hand, Turkmenistan has adopted a neutral position, focusing on energy exports and infrastructure projects like the TAPI pipeline, while avoiding direct political engagement with the Taliban (Eurasianet, 2023g). These differing strategies highlight the complex geopolitical landscape of Central Asia, where each nation calibrates its policies based on national interests, security concerns, and economic objectives.

Uzbekistan's Role in International Mediation

Uzbekistan has emerged as a key diplomatic player in international mediation, particularly in its efforts to stabilize Afghanistan. Given its geographical proximity and historical ties, Uzbekistan has pursued a pragmatic foreign policy prioritizing peace-building, regional dialogue, and economic integration. The country has hosted peace talks, facilitated negotiations among Afghan stakeholders, and maintained open channels of communication with the Taliban and other political actors. Additionally, Uzbekistan has collaborated with international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) to mobilize humanitarian aid and regional security initiatives. However, despite its proactive diplomatic engagement, Uzbekistan faces challenges such as limited leverage over the Taliban, resource constraints, and geopolitical complexities. Understanding Uzbekistan's mediation efforts requires an analysis of its initiatives, strategic objectives, and broader regional and international implications.

Uzbekistan's mediation efforts are exemplified by its role in hosting international peace talks and promoting regional diplomatic engagements. One of the most significant initiatives was the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan, held in July 2023, which brought together representatives from over 20 countries and international organizations to discuss Afghanistan's political future, security cooperation, and economic reconstruction (UN News, 2023). This conference reinforced Uzbekistan's commitment to fostering dialogue and advocating for an inclusive Afghan government.

In addition to high-level diplomatic summits, Uzbekistan has engaged directly with the Taliban leadership, urging them to uphold international norms, particularly concerning human rights and governance inclusivity (ICG, 2023). Unlike many countries that have adopted a cautious approach, Uzbekistan has maintained consistent diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, reflecting its pragmatic strategy to ensure regional stability.

Beyond political mediation, Uzbekistan has promoted economic integration as a tool for stability. A notable example is the Trans-Afghan Railway Project, which aims to connect Uzbekistan with Pakistan via Afghanistan. This railway is envisioned as a critical infrastructure project that would not only enhance trade and regional connectivity but also contribute to Afghanistan's economic recovery, reducing incentives for instability and conflict (ADB, 2023). By integrating Afghanistan into regional economic frameworks, Uzbekistan seeks to promote stability through development rather than through purely political interventions.

Uzbekistan has strengthened its mediation efforts through strategic partnerships with international organizations. The United Nations (UN) has been a crucial partner in Uzbekistan's diplomatic initiatives, especially in humanitarian aid and political negotiations. In 2023, Uzbekistan collaborated with the UN to deliver over 2,000 tons of humanitarian aid to Afghanistan, addressing the country's worsening economic and humanitarian crisis (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). The UN has consistently acknowledged Uzbekistan's constructive role in regional diplomacy, particularly emphasizing non-military solutions to Afghanistan's challenges (UN News, 2023). As a member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), Uzbekistan has been actively involved in regional security dialogues regarding Afghanistan. The SCO-Afghanistan Contact Group, in which Uzbekistan plays a leading role, has facilitated multilateral discussions on counterterrorism, border security, and economic cooperation (Khalid, 2023c). These engagements reflect Uzbekistan's broader foreign policy goal of ensuring that Afghanistan does not become a source of extremism or instability that could threaten Central Asian states. Similarly, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) has collaborated with Uzbekistan to address Afghanistan's humanitarian and economic crises. In November 2023, Uzbek and OIC representatives held consultations focused on mobilizing financial assistance and advocating for Afghan women's rights (Ariana News, 2023). This highlights Uzbekistan's growing role as a regional mediator that aligns its efforts with international humanitarian and diplomatic frameworks.

Uzbekistan's diplomatic strategy reflects a pragmatic and balanced approach to Afghanistan. Unlike Western states that have primarily disengaged from Afghanistan following the Taliban's return to power, Uzbekistan has maintained diplomatic channels while emphasizing regional cooperation. This approach serves multiple strategic objectives: first, it helps Uzbekistan prevent security threats such as terrorism and drug trafficking from spilling into its borders; second, it strengthens Uzbekistan's economic position by ensuring continued trade and connectivity; and third, it enhances Uzbekistan's diplomatic influence within Central Asia (Eurasianet, 2023c). However, despite these advantages, Uzbekistan's mediation efforts face several limitations.

One major challenge is the Taliban's reluctance to adhere to international norms. While Uzbekistan has called for an inclusive government and the protection of human rights, the Taliban has shown little willingness to accommodate these demands (Rashid, 2023). This raises concerns about the effectiveness of Uzbekistan's diplomatic efforts in shaping Afghanistan's internal governance. Additionally, resource constraints pose another challenge. Unlike larger global powers, Uzbekistan does not have the financial or military resources to enforce its mediation efforts, making its influence largely dependent on diplomatic persuasion rather than economic or military pressure (ICG, 2023). Finally, geopolitical divisions among international actors further complicate Uzbekistan's mediation role. While some states advocate for diplomatic engagement with the Taliban, others remain cautious, leading to a fragmented international approach that undermines cohesive efforts for Afghan stabilization (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Despite skepticism regarding Uzbekistan's influence in Afghan affairs, several factors reinforce the significance of its mediation efforts. First, Uzbekistan's pragmatic diplomacy ensures that Afghanistan remains connected to regional and international networks. Even if its engagement does not lead to immediate political reforms, it prevents Afghanistan from becoming diplomatically isolated, which could exacerbate its economic and security challenges (Abdullaev, 2022). Second, Uzbekistan's mediation is not unilateral but is backed by major international organizations such as the UN, SCO, and OIC. This multilateral support strengthens Uzbekistan's diplomatic position and enhances its credibility as a neutral mediator (Khalid, 2023d). Lastly, regional cooperation boosts collective stability. While Uzbekistan's individual efforts may have limitations, its collaboration with other Central Asian states, as well as international actors, contributes to a broader framework for Afghan stability (ICG, 2023). Hence, Uzbekistan's role in international mediation, particularly in Afghanistan, highlights its commitment to regional stability, economic integration, and diplomatic engagement. Through high-level peace conferences, direct diplomatic negotiations with the Taliban, and strategic collaboration with international organizations, Uzbekistan has positioned itself as a key player in shaping Afghanistan's future. However, the effectiveness of its efforts depends on various factors, including the Taliban's willingness to cooperate, the availability of financial and diplomatic resources, and the broader international consensus on engaging with Afghanistan. While challenges remain, Uzbekistan's mediation approach—anchored in pragmatic diplomacy, regional cooperation, and economic stabilization—represents an important contribution to regional peace efforts. Moving forward, sustained diplomatic engagement, coupled with international support, will be crucial in determining the success of Uzbekistan's mediation initiatives.

Security Concerns and Counterterrorism Cooperation

Uzbekistan faces significant security challenges from transnational militant groups, notably the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU). The IMU, formed initially to establish an Islamic state in Uzbekistan, has evolved over time. In 2015, the IMU pledged allegiance to ISKP, thereby intensifying the threat landscape in Central Asia (GNET, 2023). ISKP has since expanded its operations, employing extensive online propaganda to recruit members and incite unrest across the region (Stimson Center, 2022). Uzbekistan has implemented comprehensive

border security measures and engaged in counterterrorism collaborations in response to these threats. The nation has fortified its borders, particularly along the Afghan frontier, to prevent the infiltration of militants and curb illegal activities. This includes modernizing border infrastructure and enhancing surveillance capabilities (Eurasianet, 2023f). Additionally, Uzbekistan actively participates in regional security frameworks such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and its Regional Anti-Terrorist Structure (RATS), headquartered in Tashkent. These platforms facilitate coordinated efforts among member states to combat terrorism, separatism, and extremism (SCO RATS, n.d.).

Collaboration with international partners further bolsters Uzbekistan's counterterrorism initiatives. The United States, for instance, has engaged in security cooperation with Uzbekistan, focusing on counterterrorism and border security to enhance regional stability (U.S. Department of State, 2023). Moreover, Uzbekistan's involvement in the United Nations Counter-Terrorism Committee underscores its commitment to global security efforts (U.S. Department of State, 2019). Despite these proactive measures, challenges persist. The dynamic nature of transnational militant groups necessitates continuous adaptation of strategies and sustained international cooperation. Uzbekistan's multifaceted approach, encompassing robust border security, regional alliances, and global partnerships, reflects its dedication to countering the pervasive threats posed by ISKP, IMU, and similar organizations.

CHALLENGES AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

Obstacles in Sustaining Diplomatic and Economic Relations

Uzbekistan's diplomatic and economic relations with Afghanistan face significant obstacles due to Afghanistan's persistent political instability, the Taliban's governance limitations, and policy unpredictability. One of the key challenges is Afghanistan's governance fragmentation, where divisions within the Taliban leadership and the absence of a structured, inclusive administration have led to inconsistent policymaking, hindering long-term cooperation (Khalid, 2023b). The economic downturn following the Taliban's return to power has further strained relations, with Afghanistan's GDP contracting by 20% in 2022, leading to a decline in trade between the two countries by 15% in early 2023 (World Bank, 2023; Eurasianet, 2023c). This economic instability, compounded by over 28 million Afghans requiring humanitarian aid, severely limits Afghanistan's ability to engage in sustainable economic partnerships (United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs [UNOCHA], 2023). Security concerns further exacerbate these challenges, as transnational militant groups like the Islamic State-Khorasan Province (ISKP) pose direct threats to Uzbekistan's border security and infrastructure projects (ICG, 2023). The Trans-Afghan Railway project, a critical initiative for regional connectivity, has suffered repeated delays due to security threats and the Taliban's failure to ensure safe operational conditions (ADB, 2023).

The Taliban's lack of administrative capacity and policy coherence creates additional hurdles for long-term engagement. Unlike previous Afghan governments that had technocrats managing various state functions, the Taliban's governance model remains characterized by opaque decision-making, insufficient institutional expertise, and the absence of a legal and financial framework necessary for stable international trade

and investment (Rashid, 2023). Their restrictive policies, particularly concerning women's rights, education bans, and civil liberties, have resulted in widespread international condemnation, economic isolation, and the suspension of crucial development aid (Human Rights Watch, 2023; UN News, 2023). These factors directly impact Uzbekistan's diplomatic calculus, as excessive engagement with the Taliban risks straining relations with global financial institutions and Western allies (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). The Taliban's inconsistent foreign policy stance further complicates engagement, as they simultaneously seek international recognition while resisting calls for governance reforms. This approach has deterred regional actors from committing to long-term economic collaboration (ICG, 2023).

Despite these challenges, some analysts argue that sustained economic engagement with Afghanistan could lead to a more pragmatic approach to Taliban governance (Rashid, 2023). Proponents emphasize that Uzbekistan's ongoing trade and infrastructure investments could promote policy predictability (ICG, 2023). Additionally, China's growing Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) investments in Afghanistan provide an alternative regional model, focusing on resource extraction rather than comprehensive economic development (Eurasianet, 2023e). However, critics contend that such optimism overlooks structural deficiencies in the Taliban's governance, the deteriorating security environment, and the ongoing absence of global financial integration (World Bank, 2023). Furthermore, the assertion that regional engagement alone can stabilize Afghanistan fails to account for the Taliban's resistance to institutional reforms, which remains a significant barrier to international cooperation (Human Rights Watch, 2023). In summary, Uzbekistan's engagement with Afghanistan is constrained by political instability, economic fragility, security concerns, and human rights violations under the Taliban's rule. While some believe economic collaboration could foster more predictable governance, the Taliban's inconsistent policies and structural weaknesses render sustained engagement a high-risk endeavor. Given these challenges, Uzbekistan must adopt a pragmatic, and cautious approach, balancing economic interests with geopolitical realities and regional security (Uzbek Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2023). As Afghanistan's trajectory remains uncertain, Uzbekistan's policy direction will likely depend on how effectively the Taliban can address governance shortcomings and mitigate security risks in the coming years.

The Future of Uzbekistan's Engagement with the Taliban

Economic imperatives, regional security concerns, and broader geopolitical considerations shape Uzbekistan's engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan. Since the Taliban's takeover in August 2021, Uzbekistan has adopted a pragmatic approach, focusing on economic cooperation, trade, and regional connectivity projects while carefully navigating the absence of formal international recognition of the Taliban regime (ICG, 2023). This engagement will evolve based on several factors, including economic opportunities, regional alignments, and shifting international dynamics.

Uzbekistan has positioned itself as a key regional economic partner for Afghanistan, emphasizing trade and infrastructure development. Bilateral trade between the two countries reached approximately \$866 million in 2023, highlighting the growing economic interdependence (Interfax, 2024). The most significant project in this

partnership is the Trans-Afghan Railway, for which Uzbekistan has allocated \$500 million. This railway aims to connect Uzbekistan with South Asian markets via Afghanistan, enhancing regional connectivity and trade efficiency (Tashkent Times, 2024). Additionally, Uzbekistan continues to supply electricity to Afghanistan, mitigating its energy crisis and reinforcing economic ties (Uzbek Ministry of Energy, 2023). However, continued economic engagement is not without challenges. The lack of formal international recognition of the Taliban government complicates Uzbekistan's ability to attract international funding for joint projects (IntelliNews, 2024). Furthermore, concerns regarding security, governance, and human rights violations under the Taliban could create reputational risks for Uzbekistan's economic ventures (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

The evolving geopolitical landscape in Central Asia will influence Uzbekistan's future engagement with Afghanistan. Uzbekistan's economic interests align with broader regional connectivity initiatives, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This may lead to increased trilateral cooperation involving China, Afghanistan, and Uzbekistan (The Diplomat, 2024). Additionally, Russia's growing involvement in Afghanistan, including diplomatic engagements with the Taliban, could prompt Uzbekistan to recalibrate its policies to align with Russian interests while maintaining its independent foreign policy stance (Eurasianet, 2023d). Moreover, neighboring countries like Iran and Pakistan are also deepening their ties with the Taliban, affecting Uzbekistan's regional calculations. The presence of the Tehrik-i-Taliban Pakistan (TTP) in Afghanistan and its implications for Pakistan's security further complicate regional dynamics, potentially impacting Uzbekistan's security cooperation with Afghanistan (ICG, 2023). A scenario where Uzbekistan coordinates with regional actors on counterterrorism efforts while maintaining economic engagement with the Taliban remains a plausible policy direction.

Uzbekistan's long-term engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan will depend on balancing economic pragmatism with diplomatic caution. The country's foreign policy strategy revolves around regional stability and economic growth while adhering to international diplomatic norms (Khalid, 2023d). A critical factor shaping Uzbekistan's policy is the international community's stance on Taliban recognition. While Uzbekistan continues to engage with Afghanistan on practical economic matters, it has not officially recognized the Taliban government. If major global powers, such as China or Russia, formally recognize the Taliban, Uzbekistan may find itself adjusting its diplomatic approach accordingly (UN News, 2023). Conversely, if international pressure on the Taliban regarding human rights and governance intensifies, Uzbekistan may adopt a more cautious approach, limiting its engagement to non-political economic initiatives (Human Rights Watch, 2023).

Uzbekistan views Afghanistan as a gateway to South Asian markets, making economic engagement a strategic priority. Despite security concerns, the benefits of trade and infrastructure projects incentivize continued collaboration. However, Uzbekistan must navigate financial risks associated with limited international investment due to the Taliban's unrecognized status (World Bank, 2023). Security considerations also influence Uzbekistan's engagement with Afghanistan. The presence of extremist groups in Afghanistan, such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP), poses a

potential threat to regional stability (ICG, 2023). While Uzbekistan seeks cooperation with the Taliban on counterterrorism, the Taliban's ability to effectively control such groups remains uncertain. Security partnerships with Russia and China may influence Uzbekistan's approach, shaping future cooperation with Afghanistan (Rashid, 2023).

The absence of formal recognition for the Taliban government by the international community limits Afghanistan's ability to engage in global trade and finance. This uncertainty affects Uzbekistan's long-term economic planning, as deeper engagement with an unrecognized regime could strain its diplomatic relations with Western powers (Human Rights Watch, 2023). The recognition debate remains a key determinant of Uzbekistan's engagement strategy. If international recognition continues to be elusive, Uzbekistan may limit its engagement to essential economic and humanitarian activities while refraining from deeper diplomatic ties (ICG, 2023). For that reason, Uzbekistan's future engagement with the Taliban-led Afghanistan will likely follow a pragmatic approach, balancing economic cooperation with security and diplomatic considerations. Continued economic engagement, particularly through trade and infrastructure projects, is expected to remain a priority. However, the lack of international recognition for the Taliban, security risks, and regional geopolitical shifts present challenges that Uzbekistan must carefully navigate. Future policy shifts will depend on evolving regional dynamics, the stance of major global powers on Taliban recognition, and Uzbekistan's broader economic and security interests.

CONCLUSION

A combination of diplomatic engagement, economic interests, and regional security concerns has shaped Uzbekistan's approach toward the Taliban-ruled Afghanistan. Since the Taliban's takeover in 2021, Tashkent has pursued a pragmatic policy focused on non-interference, trade expansion, and regional mediation. It has positioned itself as a key intermediary, facilitating dialogue between the Taliban and the international community, as seen in the Tashkent Conference on Afghanistan (July 2023), which gathered over 20 international stakeholders to discuss economic development, counterterrorism cooperation, and humanitarian aid. Economically, Uzbekistan has strengthened its trade and infrastructure projects with Afghanistan, with bilateral trade reaching \$2.5 billion in 2022 and major projects like the Trans-Afghan Railway enhancing regional connectivity. However, security concerns remain substantial, particularly with the resurgence of terrorist threats from groups such as the Islamic State Khorasan Province (ISKP) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU), with 15 reported terrorist incidents linked to these groups in 2022. Despite economic cooperation, Uzbekistan has expressed concerns over the Taliban's governance, particularly in areas of counterterrorism, border security, and human rights, especially regarding the 28 million Afghans in need of humanitarian assistance, including women facing severe restrictions under Taliban rule.

Given these realities, Uzbekistan should adopt a conditional engagement strategy, ensuring that diplomatic and economic cooperation is contingent on the Taliban's commitments to regional security and financial stability. In particular, security guarantees from the Taliban regarding terrorist networks should be a prerequisite for continued trade and investment. To avoid excessive reliance on Afghanistan's

unstable economy, Uzbekistan must diversify its economic partnerships, strengthening trade links with South and Central Asian states and integrating into broader regional infrastructure initiatives, such as China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). Additionally, border security measures should be enhanced through intelligence-sharing mechanisms and strengthened cooperation with regional organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) to counter terrorism and cross-border smuggling. In the realm of multilateral diplomacy, Uzbekistan should leverage its membership in organizations such as the United Nations (UN), Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), and SCO to foster a collective approach toward Afghanistan's stability. A Central Asian-led initiative involving Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan could help formulate a regional security framework to address cross-border threats and counterterrorism challenges. Furthermore, Uzbekistan must advocate for Taliban compliance with international norms, using diplomatic and economic leverage to encourage improvements in governance, counterterrorism policies, and human rights protections. Development aid and trade incentives should be offered on the condition that the Taliban demonstrates progress in these areas.

The broader geopolitical implications of Afghanistan's evolving political order indicate that regional stability is a shared responsibility. The security situation in Afghanistan directly affects border security, counterterrorism policies, and regional economic cooperation in Central Asia. A coordinated regional security framework would ensure a more effective response to emerging threats. Additionally, economic connectivity remains a strategic imperative, as projects such as the Trans-Afghan Railway and energy corridors could provide significant economic benefits, provided that political stability is maintained. Given the involvement of global powers such as the United States, China, Russia, and the European Union, Uzbekistan's ability to navigate geopolitical rivalries while securing its national and regional interests will be crucial. Ultimately, Uzbekistan's success in managing its Afghanistan policy will depend on its ability to balance engagement with caution, ensuring that economic cooperation does not come at the cost of security risks. As the geopolitical landscape evolves, a unified Central Asian approach focusing on regional stability, economic integration, and multilateral cooperation will be essential in mitigating challenges and harnessing opportunities in Afghanistan's uncertain future.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

AWP: conceptualization of the research idea, theoretical framework, design and implementation of the methodology, formal analysis of data (including official

statements, economic data, policy reports, and expert assessments), investigation through data collection and interpretation, preparation and writing of the original draft, and critical review and editing of the manuscript, project administration, coordination of the research activity.

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DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION OF THE TOURISM INDUSTRY AND ITS IMPACT ON EXPORT POTENTIAL: EVIDENCE FROM KAZAKHSTAN

LAYLO TASHPULATOVA¹ , FOTIMA SUYUNOVA^{2*} 

¹ Candidate of Economic Sciences, Associate Professor, University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Uzbekistan

² PhD student, University of World Economy and Diplomacy, Uzbekistan

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ABSTRACT. *Digital tourism in Kazakhstan is a rapidly developing field that is actively incorporating modern technologies to enhance the tourism experience and improve management. This article analyzes the evolution of the tourism industry in Kazakhstan within the context of digital transformation. Various research methods, including content and comparative analysis, were employed to assess the impact of digitalization on the tourism and hospitality sectors. Additionally, a SWOT analysis has been conducted to identify the main tasks for enhancing the tourism sector. This research outlines a concept for developing the tourism and hospitality industry, which consists of four key elements: government policy, digital banking, digital promotion, and digitalization in the hotel business.*

KEYWORDS: *digital technologies, tourism, artificial intelligence, digital banking.*

INTRODUCTION

Tourism is a crucial sector of the economy, significantly influencing regional development and job creation. Kazakhstan boasts diverse natural landscapes and a rich cultural heritage, offering unique tourist attractions. The tourism sector has substantial growth potential in the country, but realizing this potential requires addressing current trends and challenges related to global digitalization.

Digital transformation is altering traditional business practices and customer interactions across all industries, including tourism. Modern tourists are increasingly demanding, favoring digital solutions that offer convenience, speed, and a personalized experience. Therefore, the integration of digital technologies into Kazakhstan's tourism industry is becoming essential for enhancing its competitiveness both domestically and internationally.

The concept of digital tourism includes the integration of innovative technologies, the improvement of digital infrastructure, the use of data and artificial intelligence for analysis and forecasting, as well as the creation of new digital services and products for tourists. An important aspect is also the training of personnel capable of working effectively in the digital economy and implementing modern solutions in the tourism business.

*Correspondence to: Fotima Suyunova, email: suyunova@uwed.uz

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The introduction of digital technologies into the tourism industry in Kazakhstan will open up new opportunities to attract tourists, improve the quality of services provided, and increase customer satisfaction. At the same time, it will require serious investments, changes in management approaches, and the willingness of all industry participants to adapt to new conditions.

To date, Kazakhstan has made notable strides in digital tourism. Projects have been launched to establish user-friendly booking and payment platforms, mobile travel planning applications have been developed, and systems for feedback and recommendation have been introduced.

Numerous studies have examined the impact of digital technologies on tourism. For instance, an empirical study by Bănescu et al. (2021) found a positive association between digitalization in the tourism industry and individual well-being, as well as the availability of secure Internet servers. Natocheeva et al. (2020) identified digital technologies as a key driver for the growth of the tourism sector. Buhalis and Law (2008) explored the relationship between economic growth, technology penetration, employment rates, and costs in the tourism industry. However, Shilibekova et al. (2024) studied the current stage of digital tourism in Kazakhstan and identified the challenges that hinder the sector's development. The main purpose of this article is to analyze the current state of digital tourism in Kazakhstan, identify key achievements and challenges, and explore future prospects in light of global trends. To accomplish this, the following tasks have been outlined: 1. Analyze the theoretical aspects of the relationship between digital tourism and export; 2. Identify the ecosystem of digital tourism; 3. Determine the driving factors for digital tourism in Kazakhstan.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Digital tourism and economic growth

Digital technologies have significantly transformed the way businesses operate. According to Samira (2011), web technologies are an integral part of the digital economy and have a vital impact on the tourism industry (Hojeghan & Esfangareh, 2011). Additionally, the development of digital finance fosters international tourism (Lee et al., 2025). An advanced digital infrastructure enhances the tourism industry and contributes to economic growth. Research by Castro et al. (2020), Kumar et al. (2019), and Farhadi et al. (2012) demonstrate a strong relationship between information and communication technology (ICT), tourism, and economic growth. Their findings indicate that, over the long term, the expansion of ICT positively affects the total number of travelers (Alao-Owunna et al., 2023).

Moreover, the advancement of digitalization has an indirect positive impact on employment, innovation, and education, all of which contribute to the sustainable development of the tourism sector (Wu et al., 2024; Tang, 2024). Key factors for sustainable tourism, identified by Xu et al. (2024), include the development of fintech, digital infrastructure, and foreign direct investments. The research suggests that digitalization is a significant factor among these elements. Furthermore, digital tools such as mobile applications, booking platforms, and e-commerce play a vital role in

promoting sustainable development and are essential to the decarbonization process. (Wu et al., 2024)

The study results show that digital platforms drive digital convergence, aiding in achieving sustainable development. Polukhina et al. (2025), and Rhena and Kraugusteeliana (2024) emphasize that the development of digital infrastructure enhances tourism competitiveness on a global scale, while research by Meta Ayu indicates that well-developed ICT infrastructure promotes economic growth (Kurniawati, 2022). In other words, an increase in the number of Internet users and mobile phone subscriptions positively correlates with the sustainable development of the economy. Mambetova et al. (2021) highlight that digital platforms are becoming primary distribution channels and catalysts for innovative development. In addition, digital financial inclusion is a key factor that positively impacts tourism development (Luo et al., 2024). Based on the literature review of digitalization's impact on the tourism industry, the development of ICT infrastructure has a positive effect on both the tourism sector and sustainable development. In other words, a higher ICT penetration rate correlates with increased tourism income.

Digital tourism ecosystem

The digital tourism ecosystem refers to the complex of digital tools used in the tourism and hospitality industry. These tools include online booking platforms, mobile applications for travel planning, and virtual tours of historical sites, among others. (Baggio, 2022). Another perspective on the digital tourism ecosystem is that it serves as a technological infrastructure designed to support the network between enterprises and clients (Baggio & Del Chiappa, 2014).

Research by Almeida-Santana et al. (2020) demonstrates that using online booking platforms such as Expedia and Booking.com positively correlates with the use of sharing economy platforms for obtaining information about travel tours. Additionally, the digital ecosystem provides opportunities for expanding markets to export services, and the automation of business processes can help reduce costs for travel agencies (Yekimov et al., 2021).

Popova's research highlights that the digital ecosystem, characterized by innovative organizational and business models, positively impacts sustainable tourism development (Popova et al., 2023). Moreover, Norman argues that new technology players like Airbnb introduce innovative services for tourists (Schaffer et al., 2021). Shrestha et al. (2021) have examined the practical aspects of the digital tourism business ecosystem model, stating that digital technologies enhance service quality and, in turn, boost intellectual competitiveness (Pencarelli, 2020).

However, the digital tourism ecosystem also entails several risks. Popova et al. (2023) classified these risks into seven groups: strategic, organizational, technological, social, cultural, economic, and ecological. Despite these risks, the digital tourism ecosystem offers numerous benefits. According to Khatami et al. (2024) research, the level of digitalization, including cloud infrastructure and tourist-based apps, enhances tourism effectiveness and sustainability. Kuo et al. (2019) identified mobile apps as the primary tool for choosing travel destinations. Based on the collected research, the main components of the digital tourism ecosystem include big data, the Internet of Things,

mobile applications, and more. Furthermore, the digital tourism ecosystem enhances the efficiency and competitiveness of the tourism and hospitality sector.

METHODOLOGY

Given the complexity of digital tourism and its impact on export potential, a variety of research methods were employed. An interdisciplinary approach enables a comprehensive study of the factors influencing the development of digital tourism.

Content analysis was utilized to assess government programs dedicated to developing digital tourism. The authors collected and systematized texts from official documents, laws, strategies, development programs, and other materials related to digital tourism. Analyzing the regulatory framework allows for the identification of key areas necessary for the development of digital tourism.

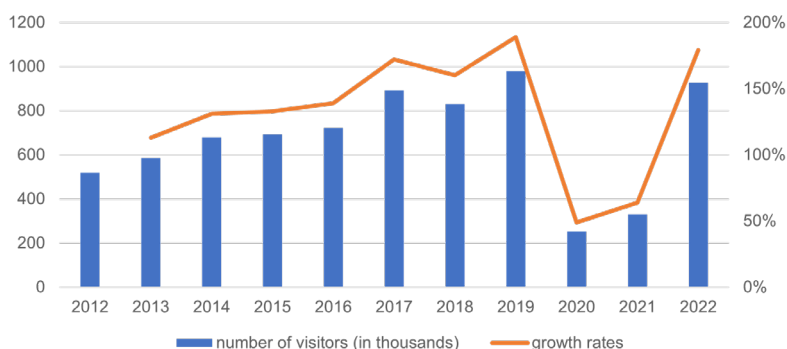
To define the concept of digital tourism, the authors used comparative and trend analyses. These methods provide opportunities to study and monitor global and local trends in tourism and digital technologies, including the analysis of current technological innovations and the digitalization of the banking system, as well as the application of digital tools in the hotel business.

A SWOT analysis was conducted to identify the strengths and weaknesses of developing digital tourism in Kazakhstan. This method highlights the challenges that impede the growth of the tourism sector.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Kazakhstan, rich in historical and natural heritage, is becoming an increasingly attractive destination for tourists from around the globe. The country boasts significant tourism potential, and in recent years, there has been a noticeable increase in tourist activities as the government actively develops this sector of the economy. Kazakhstan offers a wealth of natural and recreational resources, as well as numerous cultural and historical monuments. Additionally, its convenient geographical location further supports tourism development.

Figure 1. The number of foreign tourists in Kazakhstan from 2012-2022 (thousand people)

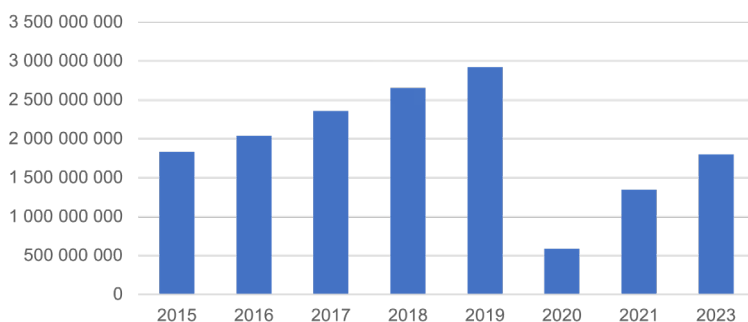


*Source: Development of the tourism industry in the Republic of Kazakhstan
(World Economic Forum, 2024)*

In 2022, the number of tourists visiting Kazakhstan increased by 10%, (Sultanbekova, 2023) totaling 8.5 million. By 2025, the goal is to raise this number to 10 million. The country has established a range of tourist types, including cultural, educational, ecological, health, religious, and business tourism.

It is important to highlight that from 2012 to 2022, Kazakhstan saw a moderate increase in the number of foreign arrivals. However, during the COVID-19 pandemic, specifically between 2020 and 2021, the tourism industry experienced a sharp decline due to border closures and quarantine measures. Nevertheless, growth resumed in 2022 (Statistical Committee of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2023). As of 2023, citizens from 83 countries can enter Kazakhstan visa-free, while residents of 109 countries are eligible to apply for electronic visas (eVisa Kazakhstan, n.d.). Additionally, special investor visas are available to support further development of the industry.

Figure 2. International tourism receipts in U.S. dollars for Kazakhstan from 2015 to 2023



Source: World Bank Open data (World Bank, n.d.)

As illustrated in Figure 2, international tourism receipts for Kazakhstan steadily increased from 2015 to 2019. However, the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting border closures and quarantine measures significantly impacted tourism income, leading to a sharp decline. Fortunately, government initiatives aimed at promoting the tourism industry have contributed positively to the recovery. International tourism expenditures have begun to rise, approaching pre-pandemic levels. Importantly, the digital transformation of the tourism sector has positively affected tourism export volumes and improved Kazakhstan's trade balance. According to Statista (Statista, 2025), Kazakhstan's trade surplus reached approximately 17.88 billion U.S. dollars in 2023.

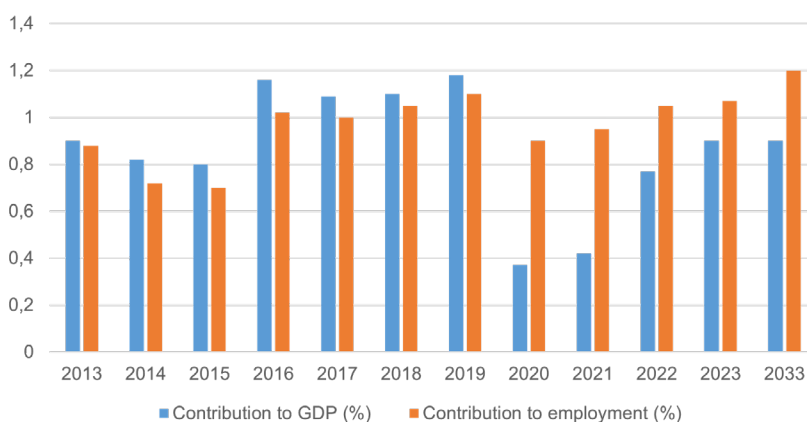
In the Global Travel and Tourism Development Index, Kazakhstan is ranked in the middle. In 2021, the country held the 66th position and improved to 52nd by 2024 (World Economic Forum, 2024). These rankings reflect the country's commitment to enhancing its tourism and hospitality sector. Kazakhstan ranks second among countries on the Balkan Peninsula and in Eastern Europe and demonstrates high ICT readiness across all three categories of the sub-index regarding "Conditions for the Development of Travel and Tourism" (including prioritization of tourism, openness to tourism, and price competitiveness).

In 2020, Lonely Planet recognized Kazakhstan as the best in the "Best Tourist Accommodation" category. That same year, the country was listed among the top five travel choices for British travelers, and the New York Times praised Kazakhstan for its exceptional tourism public relations campaign (*Ob utverzhdenii Kontseptsii razvitiya turistskoy otrasli Respubliki Kazakhstan na 2023–2029 gody, 2023*).

In 2021, The Guardian awarded Kazakhstan the title of "Best Places to Visit", and Le Figaro included it in its "Recommended to Visit in 2021" list. The video "Imagine Travelstan" won recognition at the 14th ART&TUR International Tourism Film Festival (*Ob utverzhdenii Kontseptsii razvitiya turistskoy otrasli Respubliki Kazakhstan na 2023–2029 gody, 2023*).

In 2022, The Telegraph identified Almaty as the top destination for budget holidays, and Kazakhstan was also highlighted by the reputable Conde Nast Traveler. In February 2023, the country received the award for "Best Trending Destination for Travelers from India" according to Travel Scapes (*Ob utverzhdenii Kontseptsii razvitiya turistskoy otrasli Respubliki Kazakhstan na 2023–2029 gody, 2023*).

Figure 3. Direct contribution of the tourism industry to the country's economy



Source: *Travel and Tourism Economic Impact 2023*
(European Investment Report, 2023)

The tourism industry plays an important role in the development of Kazakhstan's economy. Since 2016, the tourism and hospitality sector has contributed to the country's GDP. However, in 2019-2020, the industry faced substantial losses due to the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the closure of borders, the implementation of quarantine measures, and the shutdown of tourist attractions. This led to a decrease in the number of foreign tourists visiting Kazakhstan.

It is noteworthy that government initiatives aimed at restoring the tourism sector to pre-pandemic levels have shown positive results. Since 2020, there has been a moderate increase in employment within the tourism industry, although the number of jobs has sharply declined during the pandemic.

The advancement of digital technologies and their integration into the tourism sector have become crucial for the industry's recovery. Online services, virtual tours, and other innovative solutions have emerged as key drivers of development in this field.

State Program for the Development of Digital Tourism

Government policies for advancing digital tourism typically include strategic actions and initiatives designed to harness technology to develop the tourism sector. The following table shows the main regulatory acts related to the development of this industry.

Table 1. Regulatory documents on the development of the tourism industry in Kazakhstan

Title of the document	Content
The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated June 13, 2001 "On tourism activities in the Republic of Kazakhstan"	A fundamental document regulating tourism activities and defining the economic, legal, and social foundations of the tourism industry.
Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated March 28, 2023 "On approval of the Concept of Development of the tourism industry of the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2023-2029"	One of the priorities is to create a favorable climate, improve the quality of service, and develop digitalization. One of the main tasks is to expand the list of countries using the e-visa system, further introduce the e-Qonaq information system and mobile applications, introduce online booking, and increase the online presence of tourist facilities (hotels, museums, national parks, etc.).
Order of the Minister of Culture and Sports of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated March 2, 2017 "On approval of the Regulations of the State institution Committee of the Tourism Industry of the Ministry of Tourism and Sports of the Republic of Kazakhstan"	The main tasks, rights, duties, status, and powers of the Committee of the Tourism and Sports Industry of Kazakhstan are defined.
Order of the Minister of Culture and Sports of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated December 15, 2021, "On the Approval of the Rules for Subsidizing Tour Operators' Expenses in the Field of Incoming Tourism for Each Foreign Tourist"	Tour operators are eligible for subsidies to offset expenses related to organizing inbound tourism. These subsidies are allocated for each foreign tourist attracted and serviced by a tour operator. This mechanism aims to stimulate and support companies involved in inbound tourism to increase the flow of foreign visitors to Kazakhstan.
Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated November 23, 2023 "On accession to the Agreement between the Governments of the Member States of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization on the Development of cooperation in the field of tourism"	The parties contribute to the organization of cooperation in promoting the travel brands of the states by holding international conferences, forums, seminars, and exhibitions, as well as publications in the media and on the Internet.

Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan dated December 29, 2021 "On approval of the Development Plan of the National Company Kazakh Tourism Joint Stock Company for 2022-2031"	<p>The main tasks for the digitalization of the tourism industry have been identified:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. e-Qonaq information system, national tourism portal Kazakhstan.travel (MICE, Marketplace, Photobank modules). 2. Digitalization of sacred places is provided (creation of a mobile application). 3. The Tourstat Information System Plans to integrate mobile operator data from the e-Qonaq (eHotel) information system and exchange information with passenger carriers. 4. The "Tourism online" information system serves as a single platform where stakeholders in the tourism market can connect. 5. The "View Project" information system is designed for online monitoring and interaction with local authorities (akimats) in implementing infrastructure and innovative projects in tourist destinations across Kazakhstan.
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Source: compiled by the authors

In 2017, Kazakhstan adopted the state program «Digital Kazakhstan 2018-2022» (Ob utverzhenii Gosudarstvennoj programmy "Cifrovoj Kazahstan", 2017), the main objective of which is to accelerate the country's economic growth. The main focuses of this strategy include:

- Digitalization of Economic Sectors: transforming various sectors of the economy, including services, financial technologies, agriculture, mining, and oil. This aims to enhance productivity through the integration of digital technologies.
- Transition to a Digital State: delivering public services to citizens via a unified online platform.
- Implementation of the Digital Silk Road: ensuring the population has access to high-quality, continuous 4G mobile coverage, and facilitating companies' access to global data transmission networks.
- Human Capital Development: improving the digital literacy of the population.
- Creation of an Innovation Ecosystem: supporting the establishment of innovation platforms.

In 2024, the Government of Kazakhstan adopted the "Concept of Artificial Intelligence Development for 2024-2029" (Ob utverzhenii Kontseptsii razvitiya iskusstvennogo intellekta na 2024–2029 gody, 2024). The purpose of this strategy is to foster and regulate legal aspects related to artificial intelligence. The key areas of this concept include:

- Data;
- Infrastructure;
- Human Capital;
- Research and Development Activities;
- Regulation of Legal Relations in the Field of Artificial Intelligence;
- Acceleration Programs.

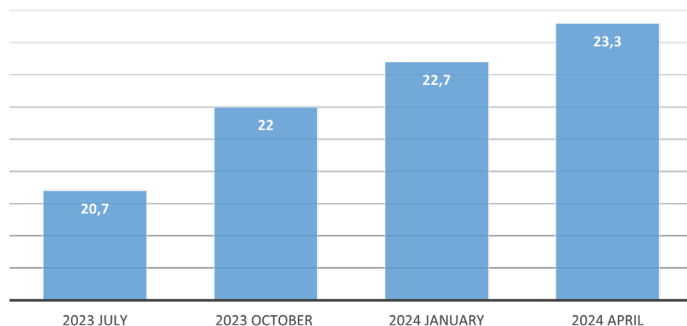
Kazakhstan is actively working on the digitalization of its tourism industry. Digital technologies and platforms provide solutions to traditional challenges in destination management while enhancing competitiveness. According to a report from the World Travel and Tourism Council, Kazakhstan is performing well on the "ICT Readiness" indicator, scoring 5.42 in 2024, nearly 50% higher than in 2019 (World Economic Forum, 2024). Notably, Kazakhstan ranks second among countries in the Balkans and Eastern Europe, just behind Georgia, indicating strong progress in developing digital tourism.

Digitalization of the Banking Sector in Kazakhstan

The digitalization of Kazakhstan's banking sector is progressing rapidly and significantly impacts the country's financial system. This process involves the introduction of new technologies, improving user experience, and expanding access to financial services through digital channels. The digital transformation in banking also benefits the tourism industry by providing travelers and travel companies with convenient and effective financial solutions.

A major advantage of digital banking is the rise of contactless and mobile payments. For tourists, this means greater convenience when paying for services. Contactless payments using smartphones and NFC-enabled cards are becoming standard in Kazakhstan, simplifying the payment process and enhancing safety for foreign tourists, especially in a pandemic where contactless methods are preferred.

Figure 4. The number of users of online banking services (million units)



Source: DKnews.kz, 2024

Mobile banking in Kazakhstan has become a key component of the country's financial system. According to data from the first half of 2023, the number of active users of online banking services surpassed 22 million. The most popular mobile applications in Kazakhstan include Kaspi.kz and Halyk Bank. Kaspi Bank is a leader in the country's digitalization efforts, offering a wide range of services through its Kaspi.kz platform. These services include mobile banking, online payments, e-commerce, and lending, as well as support for QR payments and non-cash transactions. Halyk Bank, one of the largest banks in Kazakhstan, provides a digital platform called Homebank. This platform allows customers to perform various online banking operations, such as making transfers, paying utility bills, and purchasing tickets. Homebank also offers services for small and medium-sized businesses.

The main advantages of digital banking for tourists are:

1. Convenient access to finances
2. Fast and secure payments
3. International card support
4. Currency conversion
5. 24/7 customer support
6. Online registration of insurance policies.

Kazakhstan is home to several international payment systems that facilitate financial transactions for both local residents and foreign tourists. The primary systems include Visa, Mastercard, American Express, PayPal, and Japan Credit Bureau.

Visa is one of the largest and most widely accepted international payment systems in the world, and it is extensively used in Kazakhstan. Visa cards are accepted in over 200 countries and regions, making them a convenient payment method for tourists, as they are available in all retail outlets. Visa cards can also be linked to mobile wallets like Apple Pay and Google Pay, allowing users to make purchases using their smartphones (Visa, n.d.).

Mastercard is another major international payment system that is actively used in Kazakhstan for both local and international transactions. Mastercard cards are widely accepted in hotels, restaurants, shops, and car rental services, providing convenience for tourists.

American Express focuses primarily on the premium segment and is often used for business and travel purposes. While it is accepted at large hotels, restaurants, and some upscale stores, it is not as widely used as Visa or Mastercard. American Express Gold Card holders enjoy 24/7 access to a concierge service that assists with visa processing, hotel reservations, and ticket purchases (Investopedia, n.d.).

PayPal is an international electronic payment system used for online purchases, money transfers, and service payments. In Kazakhstan, PayPal can be used for international purchases and fund transfers, supporting over 25 currencies, which makes it convenient for conducting transactions abroad. PayPal can also be used for contactless payments via mobile wallets such as Apple Pay and Google Pay, which is particularly helpful when traveling (PayPal, n.d.).

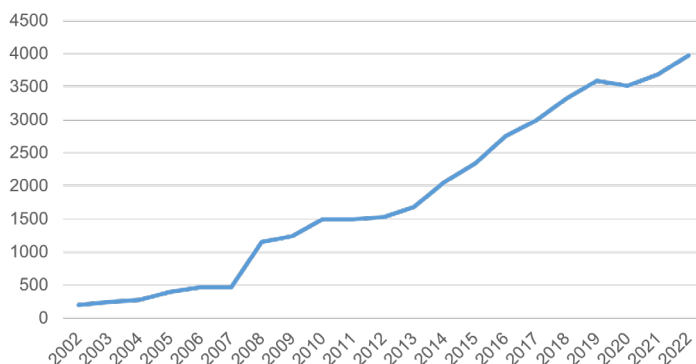
Japan Credit Bureau (JCB) is a Japanese payment system that is gaining popularity in Kazakhstan, especially among tourists from Japan. JCB cards are widely accepted in Asian countries such as South Korea, China, Taiwan, and Singapore. They support contactless payment technology, making the payment process faster and more secure (JCB, 2017).

Digitalization of Hotels in Kazakhstan

The digitalization of hotels in Kazakhstan is part of a broader trend of integrating technology in the hospitality industry, aimed at improving service quality, optimizing processes, and improving customer experiences. In recent years, the country has begun attracting international hotel chains due to increased interest as a tourist and business

destination. High-quality hotels are emerging in major cities such as Almaty, Astana, and Shymkent.

Figure 5. Number of hotels in Kazakhstan 2002-2022



Source: UNWTO Tourism Statistics

Currently, Kazakhstan hosts 26 international brands from 10 different hotel chains, including Marriott International, InterContinental, Hilton Hotels & Resorts, Accor, Wyndham Hotels & Resorts, Best Western Hotels & Resorts, Fabulous Abu Dhabi, Dedeman, Golden Tulip Hospitality Group, and Reikartz Hotel Group. According to the Statistical Committee of Kazakhstan, as of 2022, the country had 26 five-star hotels, 57 four-star hotels, and 42 three-star hotels. It is noteworthy that most of the five-star and four-star hotels are located in Astana and Almaty (Looking for Booking, n.d.).

A key aspect of the digitalization of the hotel industry in Kazakhstan is the adoption of property management systems (PMS). These software solutions automate the processes of booking, guest accounting, financial management, and other operational activities. By utilizing PMS, hotels can effectively manage room availability, monitor pricing, and analyze data to make informed decisions. Examples of such systems include Opera, Protel, and RoomRaccoon.

One innovative digital solution in the hospitality sector is the digital lock service for hotels. Porte is a Software as a Service (SaaS) solution that replaces traditional magnetic room keys with digital ones, allowing guests to unlock their rooms using their smartphones. This service operates through mobile and web applications and provides additional conveniences for hotel guests (Digital Business Kazakhstan, 2023).

Online booking platforms such as Booking.com and Airbnb, are also crucial for digitalization in hotels. These platforms assist in expanding their audience and simplifying the booking process for customers.

In Kazakhstan, the Alfred product for AI-powered hotels has been introduced. This application addresses guests' inquiries and supports 20 languages, helping to overcome communication barriers. Additionally, using chatbots to interact with guests and handle requests enhances customer service and reduces staff workload (Digital Business Kazakhstan, 2024).

Digital marketing plays a vital role in the growth of the hotel industry. Hotels are increasingly leveraging social media, content marketing, search engine optimization, and other strategies to promote their services, attract customers, and strengthen their brand presence. Effective digital marketing enables hotels to boost their visibility and competitiveness in the market.

Table 2. SWOT analysis of developing digital tourism in Kazakhstan

<p>Strengths:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Kazakhstan has a sufficient number of unique natural and cultural attractions that can be effectively presented through digital platforms, which provide an opportunity to attract more tourists (Kazakhstan National Statistics Committee, 2023). 2. Developing digital infrastructure enables travel companies to offer travel services through digital platforms and the adoption of digital payment systems supports the development of digital tourism (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2024). 3. Government support has focused on developing national programs to enhance digital tourism, including the implementation of the E-visa accounting system, E-Qonaq. 	<p>Weaknesses:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Less developing digital infrastructure and digital literacy in rural areas limit the potential of digital tourism (KzVesti, 2024). 2. Kazakhstan lacks a full-fledged ecosystem of digital services that would connect tourists with local operators, providing comprehensive services for booking, route planning, and recommendations. 3. The lack of tourist awareness regarding digital services limits demand for these products (Shilibekova et al., 2024).
<p>Opportunities:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Kazakhstan can become an important player in the international digital tourism market among Central Asian countries by offering unique travel products through online platforms aimed at foreign tourists (World Economic Forum, 2024). 2. Cooperation with international platforms allows Kazakhstan to promote its travel services on the global market. 3. The integration of artificial intelligence into the tourism sector allows for personalized recommendations for travelers. 	<p>Threats:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Threats connected with data security may reduce trust in Kazakhstan's digital tourism platforms. 2. Neighboring countries with more established digital tourism infrastructures may attract potential tourists, posing a competitive threat to Kazakhstan. Staying competitive requires continuous innovation and investment in digital technologies.

Source: compiled by the authors

Key Factors in the Development of the Tourism Industry in the Era of Digitalization

The tourism industry has seen significant development due to several key factors in the age of digitalization:

1. **E-Visa Applications:** the introduction of e-visa applications for tourists from over 100 countries has streamlined the visa application process making it easier for travelers and attracting more visitors.
2. **Social Media and Online Advertising:** promoting tourism destinations through social media and web portals allows for broader outreach, informing potential tourists around the globe about available attractions and experiences.
3. **Diversified Payment Systems:** various payment options have made it more convenient for international travelers to plan their trips without financial hurdles.

Kazakhstan's tourism sector has been significantly transformed by the integration of ICT. This has enhanced operational efficiency, customer engagement, and international competitiveness. The introduction of the e-Qonaq system in 2021 highlights Kazakhstan's commitment to digitalizing tourism operations. This platform automates tourist registration, consolidates accommodation data, and facilitates migration control, thus streamlining administrative processes and improving service delivery.

Digital tools have reshaped how customers interact with the tourism industry. Online booking systems and mobile applications enable tourists to conveniently plan and reserve services. These platforms provide comprehensive information on attractions, accommodations, and services, often featuring itinerary planning, ticket booking, and navigation assistance, which enhances the overall travel experience.

The adoption of digital marketing has broadened Kazakhstan's reach to a global audience. By utilizing social media platforms, search engine optimization (SEO), and online advertising, tourism businesses can engage with potential tourists worldwide, effectively promoting Kazakhstan as a diverse travel destination.

The use of data analytics tools allows stakeholders to analyze tourist behavior, preferences, and trends. This data-driven approach supports informed decision-making regarding marketing strategies, service enhancements, and infrastructure development, aligning offerings with tourist expectations and fostering sustainable growth.

Despite these advancements, challenges remain. Studies have identified a digital divide within the tourism sector, characterized by varying levels of ICT adoption across different industry segments. Some businesses struggle with a lack of ICT-savvy staff, and there tends to be a predominant focus on web presence over website performance. Consumers have expressed concerns about the shortage of tourism professionals with digital skills, indicating the need for enhanced digital literacy and training within the industry. The implementation of electronic tools in Kazakhstan's tourism industry has positively influenced tourism trends by enhancing operational efficiency, improving customer experiences, and increasing international engagement. Addressing current challenges related to digital skills and infrastructure will further strengthen the sector's growth and competitiveness.

Table 3. Travel and Tourism Development Index 2024 in Central Asia

Country (Rank)		Kazakhstan (52)	Uzbekistan (78)	Tajikistan (99)	Kyrgyz Republic (102)	Turkmenistan
Enabling Environment	Business Environment	3,93	4,06	3,60	3,45	N/A
	Safety and Security	5,69	6,17	6,08	5,65	N/A
	Health and Hygiene	5,98	5,00	4,71	5,01	N/A
	Human Resources and Labour Market	4,46	4,35	3,69	4,12	N/A
	ICT Readiness	4,46	4,35	3,69	4,12	N/A

T&T Policy and Enabling Conditions	Prioritization of T&T	4,31	3,30	3,21	3,51	N/A
	Openness to T&T	3,15	3,38	2,65	3,13	N/A
	Price Competitiveness	6,14	5,49	5,90	5,87	N/A
Infrastructure and Services	Air Transport Infrastructure	3,19	3,05	2,38	2,53	N/A
	Ground and Port Infrastructure	2,82	3,44	2,94	2,22	N/A
	Tourist Services and Infrastructure	3,14	1,45	1,63	1,26	N/A
T&T Resources	Natural Resources	3,64	2,49	2,37	2,03	N/A
	Cultural Resources	2,07	1,85	1,46	1,71	N/A
	Non-Leisure Resources	2,22	1,43	1,14	1,20	N/A
T&T Sustainability	Environmental Sustainability	3,95	3,08	3,93	3,43	N/A
	T&T Socioeconomic Impact	5,50	4,80	4,66	3,84	N/A
	T&T Demand Sustainability	3,55	4,13	4,46	4,12	N/A

Source: World Economic Forum, 2024

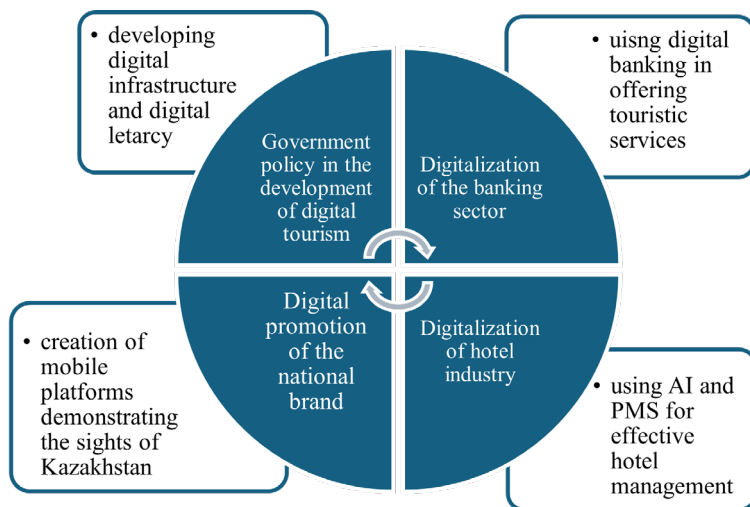
According to the Travel and Tourism Development Index, Kazakhstan scored 5,69, placing it second among Balkan and Eastern European countries. This result underscores the effectiveness of the government's strategy aimed at developing the tourism industry. Moreover, the ICT Readiness in Tourism and Travel Development Index measures how prepared a country is to leverage ICT to promote and enhance its tourism industry. Kazakhstan has demonstrated high results in this area, confirming that the digital transformation of its tourism sector positively impacts its export potential. Moreover, among Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan took the leading position in tourism development.

DISCUSSION

Electronic tools, such as digital booking systems, mobile applications, and virtual tours, have the potential to enhance the tourism experience within Kazakhstan. The development of e-tourism tools could simplify the process of booking accommodations, finding local attractions, and obtaining information, making tourism more accessible to local travelers. For example, digital platforms could provide tourists with real-time data on transport, weather conditions, and tourist hotspots, which could improve the quality and efficiency of domestic travel. As a result, Kazakhstan's tourism sector showed steady growth, with a significant increase in domestic and foreign visitors. In the first nine months of 2024, the number of domestic tourists rose by 562,000 to

six million, while income from accommodation facilities grew by 27%, reaching 224 billion tenge (US\$439.1 million) (Nakispekova, 2024).

Figure 6. The Concept of Digital Tourism Development



Source: compiled by the authors

For international visitors, the availability of digital tools such as online visa applications, mobile payment systems, and travel apps could streamline entry and navigation in Kazakhstan. This could lead to an increase in the number of international tourists, as these tools lower the barriers to travel. Kazakhstan's digital infrastructure could also serve as a competitive advantage in attracting foreign tourists, who increasingly rely on e-services when traveling abroad. The development of e-tourism platforms that cater to international users in multiple languages could make the country more appealing as a travel destination.

One of the primary objectives of the government's push for e-tourism is to enhance the accessibility and convenience of tourism services through digital infrastructure, including platforms for booking, information dissemination, and e-payment systems. Despite these goals, there may be significant gaps in digital infrastructure, especially in remote or rural areas of Kazakhstan. While major cities like Almaty and Astana may have the technological infrastructure to support e-tourism tools (such as online booking platforms or virtual tour services), rural areas might still lack reliable internet connectivity or advanced digital services. These infrastructure disparities create a two-tier system where only urban tourists or high-end international visitors benefit from these technologies, leaving out local tourists or those visiting more remote locations.

A key goal of the digitalization initiative is to empower local tourism businesses (hotels, tour operators, and cultural sites) to engage with tourists using digital tools, thereby improving the overall tourist experience. This can be achieved through training in digital marketing, e-booking systems, and other online platforms. Despite

the availability of digital tools and platforms, many small to medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) within the tourism sector in Kazakhstan struggle to use these tools effectively. A lack of training in digital literacy among local business owners and their staff means that many do not take full advantage of the technologies available to them.

The broader goal of digitalization is to make tourism more accessible and inclusive, allowing a wider range of people to participate in the tourism economy, whether through access to digital tools, easier payment systems, or more efficient information access. While digital tools can improve accessibility, Kazakhstan's diverse socio-economic landscape means that there are significant gaps in who can benefit from these tools. For instance, digital tools may be less accessible to lower-income populations or older generations who might be less familiar with technology.

Based on the SWOT analysis, one of the main tasks for enhancing digital tourism is the development of digital infrastructure. This includes providing ICT not only in urban areas but also in rural regions, as well as increasing digital literacy among tourists and tour operators. Another important aspect is the creation of a digital tourism ecosystem for both tourists and tour companies, which entails developing a single platform that integrates all travel services, including online ticket sales and reservations.

In the realm of digital tourism, promoting the national brand is crucial. Kazakhstan is actively developing its digital promotion strategies that utilize modern technologies to enhance its international standing. This involves leveraging digital platforms, social media, and online advertising to create a positive image of Kazakhstan, showcase its cultural and economic accomplishments, and attract both investment and tourists.

The National Tourism Portal, Kazakhstan.travel, plays a key role in promoting the nation's tourism potential. The portal provides users with information on tourist destinations, cultural attractions, events, and services, along with valuable resources for trip planning. It helps strengthen Kazakhstan's image as an appealing tourist destination and provides a convenient way for travelers to explore the country's unique offerings.

As part of the Visit Kazakhstan campaign, videos and promotional materials highlighting the country's natural and cultural heritage, as well as unique tourist offerings, have been shared across social media and video hosting platforms.

Addressing the challenges and opportunities related to the digital transformation of the tourism industry in Kazakhstan and its impact on the country's export potential requires a multifaceted approach. A thorough analysis can be structured around key themes such as infrastructure development and global competitiveness.

Infrastructure Development and Technological Advancements

The digital transformation of the tourism industry in Kazakhstan presents a unique opportunity to enhance the country's global competitiveness. The development of digital platforms, such as online booking systems, virtual tours, and mobile apps, is crucial for modernizing the tourism sector. However, the challenge lies in ensuring that these platforms are accessible and efficient, especially in rural or remote areas,

which could benefit from the tourism boom. The integration of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Big Data can allow for more personalized travel experiences and better customer service, which can attract international tourists and expand Kazakhstan's tourism appeal. Moreover, blockchain technology could enhance trust and security in transactions, boosting Kazakhstan's position as a safe and reliable destination for international travelers. It is important to notice that, limited internet infrastructure in certain regions and the digital divide between urban and rural areas can impede the effective deployment of digital services. There is a need for widespread high-speed internet and the development of digital infrastructure to support e-commerce, digital marketing, and the tourism ecosystem in general.

Global Competitiveness and Export Potential

Kazakhstan's digital transformation can also influence its export potential. By embracing digital tools and strategies, Kazakhstan could become a competitive player in the global tourism market. This would involve attracting both international tourists and foreign investment in the tourism industry, potentially contributing to increased revenue and economic growth. Digital marketing campaigns targeted at international audiences can create awareness about Kazakhstan's unique cultural and natural attractions, driving tourism. By leveraging social media, travel bloggers, influencers, and virtual tours, Kazakhstan could appeal to a wide audience globally. Kazakhstan's unique geographic and cultural position could be marketed digitally to target niche markets such as eco-tourism, adventure tourism, and cultural tourism, creating a distinct brand identity that resonates with global tourists. However, Kazakhstan faces strong competition from other well-established tourism destinations in Europe and Asia. Developing a unique value proposition and digital presence that resonates with international travelers is a major challenge. Moreover, International tourism trends, such as the growing preference for personalized travel experiences and seamless digital interactions, may require significant investments in the adaptation of digital services, making it a capital-intensive process for local businesses.

CONCLUSION

To summarize, it is important to note that the government is actively promoting digitalization within the tourism sector. The digital transformation of tourism in Kazakhstan represents a critical step toward modernizing the industry, significantly enhancing the country's export potential. The introduction of digital technologies in tourism, such as online booking, mobile applications, virtual tours, and the use of big data, has improved the accessibility and appeal of travel services for both foreign and local customers. These advancements contribute to the growth of international tourism, boost the country's competitiveness in the global tourism market, and improve Kazakhstan's image.

However, despite these positive trends, the digital transformation also encounters certain challenges. Insufficient digital literacy among local tour operators, high costs associated with implementing new technologies, and the need to overcome cultural and linguistic barriers may limit the speed and scale of these digital solutions in the industry. Therefore, to effectively develop and increase export potential, it is crucial

to continue investing in education, improve digital infrastructure, and engage with international partners.

In summary, digital transformation in Kazakhstan's tourism sector opens up new avenues for growth and export potential. However, it will require an integrated approach and coordinated efforts among government agencies, private companies, and educational institutions to address existing challenges and fully realize the industry's potential.

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AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

FS: conceptualization, methodology, writing – original draft, data curation, formal analysis. LT: project supervision, final manuscript revision.

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INTEGRATION OF ESG PRINCIPLES INTO THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY OF KAZAKHSTAN

LAZAT SPANKULOVA¹ , ASSEL ABEN² , NURBAKHYT NURMUKHAMETOV³ , SAULE ZEINOLLA^{4*} 

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¹ Doctor of Economics, Professor, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan

² PhD in economics, Chief Expert, KazIIS under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kazakhstan

³ Cand. Sc. (Econ.), Acting Professor, Economics Department, NAO S.Seifullin Kazakh Agrotechnical University, Kazakhstan

⁴ PhD in economics, project manager, Kazakh-German University, Kazakhstan

ABSTRACT. *Kazakhstan is actively integrating Environmental, Social, and Governance (ESG) principles into its national sustainable development strategy. The implementation of ESG policies is considered a key driver of sustainable economic growth, enhancing investment attractiveness and improving the quality of life for the population. The purpose of the study is to identify key factors that contribute to the successful integration of ESG principles into the sustainable development strategy of Kazakhstan, as well as to identify the main barriers and opportunities on the path to carbon neutrality by 2060. The study highlights positive trends in Kazakhstan's ESG policy, particularly in the transition to a green economy, supported by renewable energy investments and low-carbon policies, strengthened corporate governance standards and increased ESG reporting transparency, the role of state-led policies and international collaboration in driving ESG initiatives. This study employs a qualitative research approach, incorporating a literature review, case study analysis, and comparative assessment of ESG policies in Kazakhstan. It analyzes government regulations, corporate ESG reports, and international benchmarks to evaluate the country's progress. A SWOT analysis is conducted to identify key strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats in ESG implementation. The findings are based on data from global institutions (World Bank, OECD, UNDP), national policies, and corporate sustainability reports to provide a comprehensive evaluation.*

KEYWORDS: sustainable development, green economy, ESG principles, public policy, low-carbon development, green energy.

INTRODUCTION

At the present stage, sustainable development is becoming a priority for all countries, and Kazakhstan is no exception. The implementation of ESG principles (environmental, social, and governance) is considered a key factor in sustainable economic growth, increasing investment attractiveness, and improving the quality of life of the population. Experts note that the global trend toward sustainable development has led to a significant increase in interest from businesses, governments, and society in the ESG agenda (Elkington, 1998).

*Correspondence to: Saule Zeinolla, email: zeinollasaule@gmail.com

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The ESG concept is closely linked to the theory of sustainable development, which advocates for a balanced approach to economic growth, social well-being, and environmental preservation. The core principle of sustainable development, as articulated in the Brundtland Report (1987) "Our Common Future" emphasizes meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. ESG principles serve as a practical implementation of this approach, focusing on three fundamental dimensions:

- Environmental sustainability (E - Environmental): Minimizing the negative impact of businesses and governments on the environment and ensuring the rational use of natural resources.
- Social sustainability (S - Social): Promoting social justice, human capital development, and the protection of employee and community rights.
- Governance sustainability (G - Governance): Establishing transparent institutions, combating corruption, and safeguarding stakeholder interests.

ESG approaches can reduce risks, increase transparency, and improve the reputation of companies, which is especially important in the context of growing environmental awareness and public demand for responsible business. In recent years, Kazakhstan has been actively taking steps to integrate ESG principles into the national sustainable development strategy. According to the World Bank report (World Bank, 2021), Kazakhstan is actively implementing ESG principles both at the state level and in the corporate sector. Rey Bakbergen (2023) notes that the implementation of ESG initiatives in Kazakhstan is accompanied by the integration of best international practices, which contributes to sustainable economic growth and increased transparency of corporate governance. However, the country has many challenges to overcome, including a lack of institutional support and limited resources for the implementation of ESG strategies. The process of implementing ESG principles faces a number of challenges, such as limited financial resources, lack of modern technologies, and shortage of qualified personnel, especially in energy-intensive sectors. In modern conditions, it is important to switch to the principles of sustainability, taking into account the specific conditions of the country. The Russian experience offers valuable insights into achieving carbon neutrality, particularly for Russia as an exporter, which needs to identify industrial goods and services to replace its energy resources (Kudrin, 2021). It is worth noting that such challenges are also relevant to the conditions of Kazakhstan, and perhaps this is why the first important initiatives are noted in the energy sector and country policies play the role of a vector for the development of this direction. This article presents an analysis of the current ESG policy of Kazakhstan, considers the achievements and challenges in its implementation, and offers recommendations for improving the effectiveness of the implementation of ESG initiatives at the state and corporate levels. The purpose of the study is to identify key factors that contribute to the successful integration of ESG principles into the sustainable development strategy of Kazakhstan, as well as to identify the main barriers and opportunities on the path to carbon neutrality by 2060.

The integration of ESG principles into Kazakhstan's sustainable development strategy is important based on the following:

- The ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) concept is an approach to assessing the activities of companies and governments with an emphasis on sustainable and responsible development. ESG principles assess the impact on the environment, compliance with social obligations, and the quality of corporate governance, which has become an important criterion for investors and international organizations. (Who Cares Wins, 2004).
- Environmental factors include resource and carbon management, and measures to preserve biodiversity and prevent pollution. In the context of global climate change, ESG factors help businesses minimize their environmental footprint (Johnson et al., 2020).
- Social factors relate to labor standards, respect for human rights, inclusion, and support for local communities. Research shows that companies implementing social ESG principles have higher employee loyalty and maintain a positive image (Johnson et al., 2020).
- Governance factors cover corporate structure, transparency, and anti-corruption. Companies with a high level of governance have better financial results and lower operational risks (Johnson et al., 2020).

This approach allows you to focus on the main pillars of the sustainability of society, and plan the necessary initiatives and projects, both at the level of individuals, households, companies, as well as entire industries and countries. Moreover, as global experience shows, the choice of priorities and a deep understanding of ESG principles allow you to move toward sustainable development more effectively

LITERATURE REVIEW

Integration of ESG principles (environmental, social, and governance factors) is becoming an important component of sustainable development. This helps improve corporate reputation, reduce environmental risks, and increase investment attractiveness. Kazakhstan is actively implementing ESG standards, which are consistent with global trends and support the transition to a low-carbon economy.

ESG principles cover three key areas: environmental factors (emission reduction, sustainable resource management), social aspects (support for local communities, respect for workers' rights), and governance mechanisms (transparency, anti-corruption). Aldowaish et al. (2022) emphasize that ESG affects business models through changes in approaches to value creation, processes, and interactions with stakeholders. However, the main problem is the lack of unified standards, which makes it difficult to assess the effectiveness of ESG.

There are other interpretations of the ESG concept in the scientific literature, for example, in the article by Zh. R. Babaeva, K. K. Semenov, and A. S. Semenova, the ESG (Environmental, Social, Governance) concept is considered as an approach that integrates environmental, social, and governance aspects into the strategy of organizations to achieve sustainable development. The authors note that the ESG concept is not universal and is interpreted differently depending on the cultural, economic, and institutional context. In Russian realities, ESG is perceived as a way to

increase investment attractiveness and minimize risks for business, as well as a tool for achieving sustainable development goals (Babaeva et al., 2024).

Kazakhstan has demonstrated significant success in promoting ESG through the implementation of renewable energy projects, the development of an environmental code, and the introduction of ESG information disclosure standards (OECD, 2021). For example, the construction of 100 MW solar power plants in the Zhambyl region was a significant step in reducing the carbon footprint (LSM.KZ, 2019). Also, an important milestone was the adoption of the concept of transition to a “green economy” in 2013 (World Bank, 2021).

However, it is worth paying attention to the challenges, as the following stand out among the challenges of ESG integration in Kazakhstan (Optimism.kz, 2024):

- Environmental challenges: Kazakhstan, as a major oil and gas producer, has a special responsibility in the fight against climate change and reducing its carbon footprint. The transition to green energy requires significant investment, which creates difficulties for government agencies and businesses.
- Social aspects: Social programs of large corporations in Kazakhstan are often aimed at supporting local communities, improving working conditions, and ensuring gender equality. However, compared to global standards, the country has significant work to do in this area.
- Governance and transparency: Transparency of company activities and accountability to shareholders are becoming central issues for many enterprises in Kazakhstan. Although corporate governance standards are improving, there remain problems with ensuring full transparency and availability of data on company activities.

As experts note, there are factors that influence how effectively companies are ready to adopt the sustainability agenda in their activities. The authors highlight key aspects such as economic efficiency, environmental sustainability, waste management, corporate social responsibility, gender issues, and governance structure. Particular attention is paid to the impact of ESG disclaimers, the COVID-19 pandemic, religious factors, board composition and size, national interests, and technological innovations on business sustainability. The study emphasizes that the integration of ESG practices helps to increase innovative potential, create value, and improve the financial performance of companies. Thus, social and environmental responsibility are considered as interdependent elements that contribute to sustainable business development (Ahmad et al., 2023). ESG principles allow companies to minimize risks, attract investment, and improve their reputation (Elkington, 1998). Dong (2023) notes that ESG promotes innovation and increases employee satisfaction.

In recent years, there has been a significant increase in interest in integrating ESG (environmental, social, governance) principles into corporate sustainability strategies. Research highlights the importance of ESG factors in increasing the transparency, sustainability, and competitiveness of companies.

Lokuwaduge and Heenetigala (2017) focus on ESG disclosures among metals and mining companies listed on the Australian Securities Exchange. The authors find that despite the growth of ESG reporting, there is significant variability in the metrics used,

making it difficult to compare ESG performance across companies. They highlight the need for standardization of reporting and proactive stakeholder engagement to improve the quality of ESG data. Monteiro et al. (2023) conducted a global analysis of business commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the post-pandemic period. Using the HJ-biplot method, they find significant differences in the level of SDG commitment across regions and countries.

Within the framework of sustainable development, Kazakhstan actively works with international organizations, including the World Bank, which allows attracting the necessary knowledge and financing (World Bank, 2021). Kazakhstan has made significant strides in its ESG agenda, but there are still unresolved issues that require a comprehensive approach. Effective integration of ESG principles will strengthen the country's sustainable development, increase its competitiveness in the international arena, and ensure the achievement of carbon neutrality goals by 2060.

The study shows that companies from countries with collectivistic cultures and strong legal systems demonstrate higher SDG commitment, highlighting the influence of the institutional context on ESG practices. Saha et al. (2024) examine the relationship between SDG-oriented practices and corporate financial performance, as well as the role of public governance in this context. An analysis of company data from different industries and countries shows that environmental SDGs have a positive impact on financial performance, while social SDGs can have a negative impact. However, effective public governance mitigates the negative impact of social SDGs, highlighting the importance of institutional support for the successful integration of ESG principles. These studies highlight the need for standardization of ESG reporting, active stakeholder engagement, and consideration of the institutional context when developing and implementing ESG strategies. They also demonstrate that effective public administration and cultural characteristics of countries play a key role in the successful integration of ESG principles into corporate practices.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article uses a qualitative research method, including a systematic analysis of scientific literature and regulatory documents to examine the integration of ESG principles into sustainable development in Kazakhstan. The analysis is based on data from international and regional sources, including scientific publications and regulatory documents.

The study is based on scientific works such as the work of Lokuwaduge and Heenetigala (2017) and focuses on the lack of standardization of ESG reporting among companies in the metallurgical industry, which is an obstacle to comparing the effectiveness of ESG initiatives (Lokuwaduge & Heenetigala, 2017). Given that the mining industry is still key in the industry and economy of Kazakhstan, it is important to focus on approaches that define possible mechanisms for implementing ESG principles based on uniform standards and transparency. First of all, we are talking about the lack of standardization of reporting, since different companies use incomparable formats and indicators, which complicates the analysis of ESG effectiveness. An equally important aspect is the influence of regulatory authorities and their ability to motivate companies

to create transparent reporting. Another key factor in the development of the industry is stakeholder engagement, as transparent ESG reporting allows for better consideration of the interests of investors, employees, and society.

The analysis by Monteiro et al. (2023) showed that the level of commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) depends on the social and institutional context. This approach demonstrates how regional characteristics affect the success of ESG programs (Monteiro et al., 2023). The authors' findings are valuable in that they determine the effectiveness of a centralized approach in promoting the concept of sustainability. This made it possible to analyze current policies and government initiatives from the standpoint of the effectiveness of integrating the ESG agenda into all areas of the national economy.

The findings by Saha et al. (2024) complement the methodological framework, emphasizing the importance of effective public administration to mitigate the negative impact of social initiatives and enhance their positive effect. In the context of Kazakhstan, this means the need to strengthen the role of government institutions in regulating and supporting ESG initiatives through the development of mechanisms for subsidizing and stimulating social programs.

The research methodology includes data collection using a systematic search through Scopus and JSTOR. The thematic analysis allowed us to identify key topics such as the influence of institutional factors, ESG standardization, and the role of public policy. The study also takes into account the role of government regulation, including strategic documents of Kazakhstan, such as the Concept for the Transition to a Green Economy (Kazakh Ministry of Ecology, 2013). These data are integrated with international standards, such as the Paris Agreement (UNFCCC, 2016).

The methodology provides a comprehensive approach that allows us to study the interaction of ESG principles at the level of the state, business, and society, as well as to assess their impact through case analysis and the use of SWOT analysis.

Case analysis will allow us to study practical examples of the implementation of ESG initiatives in various sectors of the economy of Kazakhstan, and identify successful strategies and possible barriers. This will help transfer best practices to the national level and adapt them to local realities. SWOT analysis, in turn, will provide a structured approach to assessing the strengths and weaknesses of the current ESG agenda, as well as identifying opportunities and threats to sustainable development. Using these methods will create a deeper understanding of how ESG principles influence the national economy and shape its competitiveness in the global environment.

RESEARCH RESULTS

By framing ESG integration within theories of transitional economies, institutional change, and sustainable development, Kazakhstan's ESG strategy gains stronger conceptual grounding. This approach helps explain policy challenges, regulatory dynamics, and corporate adaptation processes, reinforcing ESG as a structural component of Kazakhstan's economic and institutional evolution toward sustainability and global integration.

Kazakhstan, as a post-Soviet transition economy, faces challenges related to market liberalization, institutional development, and economic diversification. ESG adoption aligns with:

Path Dependency Theory (North, 1990): Institutional inertia and legacy structures influence ESG policy implementation. Kazakhstan's historical reliance on extractive industries slows the transition to sustainable practices, requiring strong policy interventions.

Modernization Theory (Rostow, 1960): Kazakhstan's shift from a resource-dependent model to a diversified, knowledge-based economy mirrors the stages of economic modernization, where ESG adoption plays a role in enhancing investment attractiveness and global competitiveness.

Institutional theories explain how regulatory environments, governance structures, and corporate norms evolve to integrate sustainability principles:

New Institutional Economics (Williamson, 2000): ESG adoption reflects the co-evolution of formal (laws, policies) and informal (corporate culture, investor expectations) institutions. The introduction of ESG reporting standards in Kazakhstan highlights the institutionalization of sustainability norms.

Regulatory Capture Theory (Stigler, 1971): The effectiveness of ESG policies depends on government independence from industrial lobbying. Strong regulatory frameworks and anti-corruption measures are crucial to prevent ESG from becoming a symbolic rather than substantive policy.

The Brundtland Report (WCED, 1987) provides the foundation for sustainable development, emphasizing the need for long-term economic, environmental, and social balance.

Triple Bottom Line (Elkington, 1998): ESG implementation in Kazakhstan must balance economic growth, environmental responsibility, and social well-being to ensure sustainable progress.

Ecological Modernization Theory (Mol & Spaargaren, 2000): Kazakhstan's green economy transition and renewable energy policies demonstrate a shift toward market-driven environmental governance, where economic and environmental goals are mutually reinforcing.

How these approaches are implemented in practice?

Kazakhstan began to actively develop the ESG concept in the early 2010s in response to global challenges in the field of sustainable development and in connection with commitments made in the international arena. The first important steps were taken with the adoption of the Environmental Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan in 2007 and the Law on Renewable Energy Sources in 2009, which laid the foundation for green growth policy (OECD, 2021).

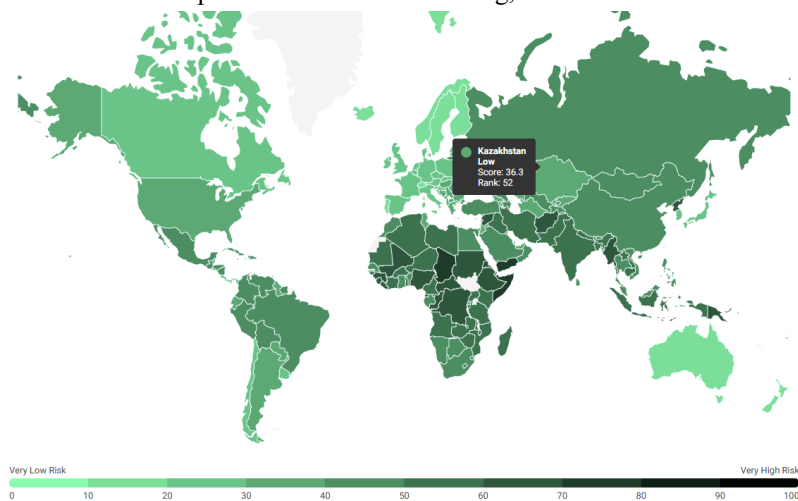
In 2013, the "Concept of the Transition of the Republic of Kazakhstan to a Green Economy" was adopted, which formed the course for sustainable development and the implementation of ESG standards. According to World Bank experts, this concept has become an important milestone in the economic development of Kazakhstan, allowing the country to become a regional leader in environmental reforms (World Bank, 2021).

In 2016, Kazakhstan signed the Paris Agreement and committed to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, which also stimulated the implementation of ESG principles (UNFCCC, 2016).

In recent years, Kazakhstan has strengthened the requirements for ESG information disclosure for companies, which underlines the government's commitment to achieving carbon neutrality by 2060 (Kazakh Ministry of Ecology, 2022).

The state's position in the field of ESG (Environmental, Social and Governance) plays a decisive role in achieving sustainable development, since it is state initiatives, regulations and support that form the basis for the successful implementation of ESG principles in a wide range of activities. The state sets the strategic direction for business and society, creating conditions for the introduction of environmentally friendly technologies, socially responsible business conduct and transparent management. Through the development of the regulatory framework, the provision of financial incentives and support for sustainable projects, the state creates a culture of responsibility that is aimed at long-term social and environmental well-being. The proactive position of the state allows stimulating investments in the "green" economy, attracting international partners interested in sustainable development, and creating a favorable environment for innovation. As a result, not only the quality of life of the population improves and natural resources are preserved, but also the country's competitiveness in the global arena is strengthened, opening up new opportunities for economic growth. Kazakhstan is actively involved in the sustainable development agenda and stands out among the countries of the Central Asian region due to its comprehensive approach to ESG initiatives and significant steps aimed at improving environmental and social indicators. Kazakhstan's 52nd place among 183 countries in the world with an index of 36.6 points in the ESGI (Environmental, Social and Governance Index) rating for 2023 is the result of systematic work on the implementation of ESG principles in the public and corporate governance system (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Kazakhstan's position in the ESGI ranking, 2023



Source: ESG Index 2023, <https://risk-indexes.com/esg-index/>

The promotion of ESG principles in Kazakhstan began relatively recently. However, since the early 2010s, the first strategic and regulatory acts aimed at sustainable development have been developed at the state level. The beginning was laid in September 2000, when Kazakhstan, at the Millennium Summit of the heads of state of the UN member states, along with 189 countries of the world, signed the Millennium Declaration and committed to achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015 (UN, 2000). In order to ensure the timely achievement of the MDGs, the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan integrated them into the medium-term development program until 2010, as well as into the development programs of key ministries and agencies. It was from this period that the organizational and legal basis for the transition to "green growth" was laid through the adoption of a number of legislative documents, including the Environmental Code (2007), the Law on Support for the Use of Renewable Energy Sources (2009), and the Concept of Transition to a "Green Economy" (2013).




The issue of preserving the environment and protecting against the harmful effects of fossil fuels used in the energy sector focused attention and raised the issue of the need to introduce renewable energy sources. At that time, renewable sources produced less than 1% of the electricity consumed in the country (Sospanova, 2019).

The norms of primary legislation in the field of renewable energy were implemented with the adoption of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Support for the Use of Renewable Energy Sources" (2009), subsequently, significant amendments and additions were made to it (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Renewable Energy Sources", 2009). This law defined the legal basis for the development of renewable energy, providing state subsidies and benefits for companies engaged in the production of energy from renewable sources. The adoption of this law was an important step in creating conditions for a sustainable energy sector that meets ESG goals.

Following the chosen environmentally friendly course, Kazakhstan's policy was focused on building a green economy, which became a key element in the state's long-term strategy for ensuring sustainable economic growth. The adoption of the "Concept of the Transition of the Republic of Kazakhstan to a Green Economy" in 2013 laid the foundation for the national sustainable development strategy and became the starting point for promoting ESG initiatives at the state level (Concept of Transition to a "Green Economy", 2013). The concept defined the main areas and tasks, including increasing energy efficiency, developing renewable energy sources, and improving water and waste management (Table 1).

The cases presented in the table show that the transition to a green growth model requires a comprehensive approach that includes not only the introduction of renewable energy sources but also the complete transformation of traditional industries, which is achieved through innovative infrastructure projects and government support.

Table 1. Strategy for Kazakhstan's transition to a "green" economy model using case studies as an example

	Description of the stage	Year	Example
	Optimization of resource allocation and efficiency. Development of green infrastructure	2013-2020	A project to modernize water supply and sanitation systems in major cities such as Astana and Almaty. This project aims to reduce water losses and improve the quality of water resources, which is in line with the goals of a green economy and sustainable development. The project used innovative technologies to monitor leaks and optimize water use, which reduced losses by 20-30%. (World Bank, 2021).
	Rational use of natural resources, Large-scale implementation of new renewable energy sources and energy-saving technologies	2020-2030	A 100 MW solar power plant project in Zhambyl region. This project is a significant step toward achieving the country's goals of increasing the share of renewable energy sources and reducing carbon emissions (LSM.KZ, 2019).
	Complete transition to a green growth model. Transformation of traditional sectors of the economy into the development of new industries based on renewable energy sources	2030-2050	An example of a complete transition to a green growth model and the transformation of traditional industries into new industries based on renewable energy sources (RES) is the Danish project to create the world's first "energy island" infrastructure in the North Sea. This project aims to produce and store energy using offshore (marine) wind farms, which symbolizes a systemic shift from traditional energy resources to renewable sources and stimulates the development of new industries (Danish Energy Agency, 2021).
	Investment allocation: ">1% of GDP or 3-4 billion US dollars annually"		

Source: developed by the authors based on Green Economy: Realities and Prospects in Kazakhstan. Report of the World Bank Group, Samruk-Kazyna Fund, 2018

The cases presented in the table show that the transition to a green growth model requires a comprehensive approach that includes not only the introduction of renewable energy sources but also the complete transformation of traditional industries, which is achieved through innovative infrastructure projects and government support.

These examples - from solar power plant projects in Kazakhstan to a large-scale energy island initiative in Denmark - demonstrate that success in achieving sustainable development depends on targeted efforts, such as:

- *investing in renewable energy and innovation*: the use of the latest technologies and methods of producing clean energy (for example, solar and wind power plants) helps reduce emissions and optimize natural resources;

- *government support and attracting private capital*: government policy and partnerships with private investors are key factors in ensuring the financing and stability of projects;
- *creating new jobs and sustainable economic development*: the development of a green economy contributes to the creation of new jobs and the growth of a new industrial sector, which helps minimize the negative consequences for the economy of abandoning traditional hydrocarbon resources;
- *reducing the environmental burden*: measures aimed at improving the environment, such as the creation of hydrogen infrastructure and the introduction of energy-saving technologies, help achieve long-term climate goals and ensure environmental sustainability.

These cases show that green growth is not only an environmental but also an economic strategy that ensures sustainable development and competitiveness in the international arena and that consistent and effective steps are needed, which are already being taken in the realities of the Kazakhstani economy.

The period from 2014 to 2020 was the first stage of the concept implementation, during which the main focus was on the preparation of the regulatory and legal framework to support the green economy. The second stage of the green economy concept implementation, which covers the period from 2021 to 2030, focuses on the mass introduction of green technologies and the achievement of targets for the use of renewable energy sources.

In 2016, Kazakhstan ratified the Paris Agreement, committing to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Ratification of the Paris Agreement", 2016). This event had a significant impact on the country's ESG policy since the Paris Agreement obliges participants to implement measures to combat climate change. In this regard, Kazakhstan developed targets to reduce carbon emissions by 15% by 2030 compared to 1990 levels.

Even before the official signing of the Paris Agreement, in September 2015, Kazakhstan submitted its nationally determined contribution (NDC) under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. As part of the NDC, Kazakhstan committed to achieving the following goals:

- an unconditional reduction in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions by 15% by December 2030 compared to 1990 levels;
- a conditional reduction of GHG emissions by 25% by December 2030 compared to 1990 levels, subject to additional international investment, access to the low-carbon technology transfer mechanism, funds from the Green Climate Fund, and the flexible mechanism for countries with economies in transition.

In 2017, the state program "Digital Kazakhstan" (no longer in effect) was adopted, aimed at digitalization of various sectors of the economy, including energy and environmental monitoring, which contributed to increasing the efficiency of resource use and reducing the environmental burden.

The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Subsoil and Subsoil Use" (2017 edition) established stricter environmental requirements for subsoil users, obliging companies in the mining industry to introduce environmentally friendly technologies and carry out land reclamation. The law also includes requirements for disclosure of information on environmental impact and social responsibility, which contributed to the implementation of ESG standards in one of the most carbon-intensive sectors of the economy. In 2021, the updated Environmental Code was adopted, which introduced mandatory requirements for ESG information disclosure for companies listed on the Kazakhstan Stock Exchange (KASE). The new code strengthened the requirements for managing emissions, waste, as well as water and energy resources. The implementation of the code is aimed at increasing the environmental responsibility of companies, creating conditions for sustainable development, and adapting to international environmental standards. This document includes provisions for the disclosure of environmental information, monitoring greenhouse gas emissions, and ensuring environmental safety.

In December 2020, at the Climate Action Summit, the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan Kassym-Jomart Tokayev announced a new goal - to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. This ambitious commitment became part of a broader strategy for the transition to a green economy. This decision underscores the seriousness of the country's intentions in the fight against climate change. An important step in implementing the commitments made was the approval in February 2023 of the "Strategy for Achieving Carbon Neutrality of the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2060". According to this strategy, by 2060 the country plans to achieve zero GHG emissions, provided that 45% of GHG is absorbed from the land use, land use change, and forestry (LULUCF) sectors. In addition, the country will actively introduce low-carbon technologies, expand renewable energy facilities, and improve energy efficiency in all sectors of the economy.

Kazakhstan's aspiration to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060 reflects the main strategic goal of the country's ESG policy. Within this goal, attention is paid to three key areas:

1. Reducing carbon emissions, especially in the energy and industrial sectors.
2. Supporting renewable energy sources, including increasing their share to 30% by 2030.
3. Developing corporate social responsibility, which involves improving working conditions, supporting local communities, and increasing company transparency.

The choice of these priorities is due to environmental and economic factors. Kazakhstan is one of the most carbon-intensive economies in the region, and the integration of ESG standards, especially in strategic sectors such as energy and mining, is important both for increasing investment attractiveness and for protecting the environment.

Agenda 2030 is closely interconnected with the green development policy. Kazakhstan continues to work actively to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) by 2030.

President of the Republic of Kazakhstan K. Tokayev, taking part in the UN Summit on Sustainable Development Goals in 2023, noted in his speech that achieving the SDGs

is a national priority. Kazakhstan is open to cooperation with all member states in striving for a more just and sustainable world.

It should be noted that the Coordination Council for Sustainable Development Goals has been established under the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the tasks of which are to consider and develop proposals for the formation of a unified policy for the implementation of the SDGs. The heads of central government bodies, as well as representatives of the UN, the UN Development Program (UNDP), and the European Union (EU), take part in the discussions and work of the Coordination Council.

The existing system of state planning in Kazakhstan contributes to the effective implementation of tasks within the SDGs. Strategic and program documents are interconnected and interdependent, which allows for the effective integration of SDG objectives and indicators at the national and regional levels and the achievement of the goals.

Also, at the UN Sustainable Development Goals Summit, Kazakhstan initiated the creation of a Regional SDG Hub for Central Asia and Afghanistan. As a result, the Regional SDG Platform for Central Asian States was launched in the region within the framework of the UNDP program funded by the European Union. This is only a small part of the large-scale work carried out by our state in the field of Agenda 2030.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESEARCH RESULTS

Currently, the most advanced sectors in the context of implementing ESG policies are energy, mining, and the financial sector:

- the energy sector is actively developing renewable energy projects, especially wind and solar, in order to reduce dependence on hydrocarbon resources;
- the mining industry is implementing measures to manage water resources, reclaim land, and reduce emissions, which is necessary to minimize environmental damage;
- the financial sector supports ESG through KASE, having introduced disclosure standards, and is developing products for financing sustainable projects, including green bonds.

State support, international investments, and natural conditions contribute to the development of ESG programs in the energy sector. According to strategic documents, renewable energy sources (RES) are expected to become the dominant share of electricity production by 2050. Following this strategy, RES is rapidly expanding.

In 2024, three new RES facilities with a total capacity of 34.75 MW were commissioned, made possible through investments amounting to 13.7 billion tenge. By the end of 2024, the total electricity generation from RES facilities in Kazakhstan reached 7,581.33 million kWh, marking an 11.9% increase compared to 2023. The share of RES in Kazakhstan's energy structure grew from 5.92% to 6.43%. Table 2 presents data on the installed capacity and the number of RES facilities over recent years.

Table 2. Installed Capacity and Number of Renewable Energy Facilities in Kazakhstan (2022–2024)

Type of RES Facilities	Installed Capacity (MW)			Number of Facilities		
	End of 2022	End of 2023	End of 2024	End of 2022	End of 2023	End of 2024
Wind Power Plants (WPP)	948.00	1,394.60	1,520.05	46	57	59
Solar Power Plants (SPP)	1,148.00	1,202.60	1,222.61	44	45	46
Hydropower Plants (HPP)	260.00	269.61	287.68	37	39	40
Biomass Power Plants	1.77	1.77	1.77	3	3	3
Total	2,357.77	2,868.57	3,032.11	130	144	148

Source: KPMG study "Ambition to Triple Renewable Energy Capacity by 2030", KPMG Kazakhstan

Despite the progress in renewable energy development, Kazakhstan faces several barriers, including:

- Technical limitations such as insufficient energy storage capacity and a lack of maneuverable power to balance the electricity market.
- Economic and regulatory challenges, including the need to reform tariff policies to enhance the competitiveness of renewables compared to traditional fuels.
- Structural issues such as the lack of local equipment production, dependency on imports, a shortage of qualified specialists, and the absence of a system for recycling outdated renewable energy components. Addressing these challenges requires a comprehensive approach to ensure the sustainable development of the sector.

As Kazakhstan is heavily reliant on the export of mineral resources, compliance with ESG standards has become a mandatory requirement for international markets, pushing the mining sector to adopt sustainable practices. The Subsoil and Subsoil Use Law (2017) obliges companies to implement environmentally safe technologies, while the New Environmental Code (2021) mandates mining companies to disclose ESG-related information.

A notable example is KAZ Minerals, a major mining and processing group in Kazakhstan, which is actively working to reduce water consumption and promote water reuse. In 2023, the group's total water intake decreased by 1%, primarily due to a 24% reduction in water consumption at the Bozshakol mine, achieved by increasing the use of reclaimed water from the tailings storage facility after a pump station relocation in late 2022. Additionally, KAZ Minerals monitors greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and reports them following international standards. In recent years, the company has reduced CO₂-equivalent emissions intensity by transitioning to open-pit mining with modern extraction technologies, further aligning its operations with global ESG requirements (Kaz Minerals, n.d.).

However, other sectors such as agriculture, transport, construction, and tourism need additional support to achieve ESG goals. The development of sustainable agriculture, environmentally friendly transport solutions, energy-efficient construction, and eco-tourism remains an urgent task for the country.

Nowadays, despite being a key economic sector, agriculture in Kazakhstan heavily relies on traditional farming methods, leading to environmental degradation and inefficient resource use. The overuse of water and chemical fertilizers contributes to soil depletion and reduced agricultural productivity. Moreover, climate change-induced droughts pose a severe risk to food security, necessitating the adoption of climate-resilient agricultural technologies.

The construction industry is a major contributor to carbon emissions, primarily due to the use of traditional building materials such as concrete and bricks. The sector lacks comprehensive green building standards, and energy-efficient construction technologies are not widely adopted.

Kazakhstan's transportation sector is highly dependent on fossil fuels, contributing significantly to greenhouse gas emissions. The limited development of public transport infrastructure and electric vehicle (EV) charging stations further exacerbates the problem. The adoption of hydrogen-powered transport and biofuels remains in its infancy.

The tourism industry in Kazakhstan remains largely focused on traditional mass tourism, leading to environmental degradation and excessive resource consumption. There is a lack of infrastructure for sustainable tourism, such as eco-friendly accommodations and responsible travel routes. Additionally, there are no tax benefits or investment programs aimed at promoting the development of ecotourism.

In addition to financial constraints, institutional challenges hinder ESG implementation in Kazakhstan. One of the key limitations is the underdeveloped market for social bonds. Currently, only development institutions, both international and local—such as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB), and the Damu Entrepreneurship Development Fund—act as issuers of social bonds in the country.

As of October 2023, the total sustainable finance market in Kazakhstan amounted to 226.9 billion tenge, with:

- Green bonds account for 112.9 billion tenge (50%).
- Green loans totaling 37.3 billion tenge (16%).
- Social bonds make up 76.7 billion tenge (34%) (Astana International Financial Centre [AIFC], 2024).

However, the issuance of social bonds remains limited, primarily due to the lack of standardized criteria for defining social projects and target beneficiary groups. The absence of such standards increases risks associated with “social washing,” a phenomenon similar to greenwashing, where projects are labeled as socially responsible despite failing to meet genuine sustainability criteria.

To foster the growth of the social bond market and strengthen ESG integration, Kazakhstan must:

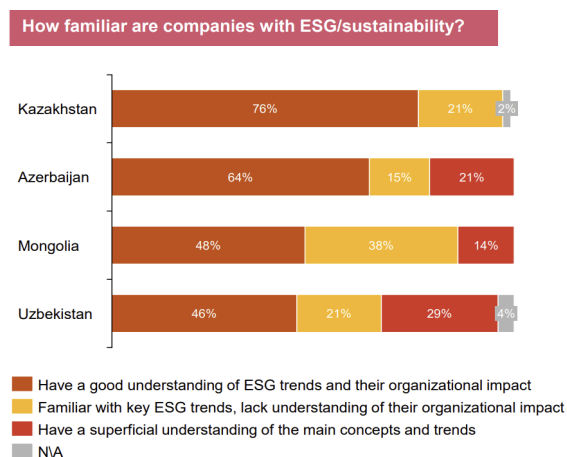
- Develop a regulatory framework defining eligible social projects and target groups.
- Establish clear impact assessment metrics to ensure transparency and accountability.
- Align national social bond standards with international guidelines, such as those set by the International Capital Market Association (ICMA).

Enhancing institutional infrastructure and regulatory oversight will be crucial in building investor confidence and expanding sustainable finance opportunities in Kazakhstan.

Kazakhstan demonstrates successful ESG cases in renewable energy and the mining industry, where international standards and investments play a crucial role in promoting sustainable practices. However, challenges in social finance, transportation, and other sectors highlight regulatory gaps, a lack of incentives, and low private-sector engagement. To ensure effective ESG development, additional support measures and standardization efforts are required.

In the corporate sector, Kazakhstani companies demonstrate a strong awareness of ESG concepts, largely driven by the government's proactive efforts in developing a sustainable development strategy over the past decade. Initiatives such as the 2060 Carbon Neutrality Strategy have played a key role in integrating sustainability into the national agenda, encouraging the widespread adoption of ESG principles across businesses and diverse industries (Figure 2.) (PwC Kazakhstan, n.d.).

Figure 2. The progress in the implementation and application of ESG practices by companies in different countries



Source: *ESG Awareness in Eurasia PwC Kazakhstan Edition*.
<https://www.pwc.com/kz/en/publications/esg/esg-awareness.html>

According to PwC Kazakhstan is making noticeable progress in the implementation and application of ESG practices by companies. According to the survey results, companies in Kazakhstan demonstrate a high degree of maturity in ESG integration, marked by

developed ESG strategies, active management involvement, and comprehensive non-financial reporting practices. However, there still exist barriers to meaningful ESG integration: lack of experience, budget constraints, and legal and regulatory challenges. To overcome them and promote ESG initiatives, companies need regulatory support, financial assistance, technical expertise, and competencies in ESG management systems.

Another critical barrier to ESG implementation in Kazakhstan is the low engagement of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs). There remains a significant gap between large corporations and SMEs in terms of adopting ESG initiatives. Many SMEs lack the necessary resources and expertise to effectively integrate sustainable practices into their operations. The primary reasons for this challenge include:

- Limited awareness of ESG benefits: many SMEs fail to recognize the potential advantages of ESG adoption, such as enhanced reputation, increased investor interest, and reduced operational risks. As a result, their motivation to implement sustainable practices remains low.
- Resource constraints and financial barriers: unlike large corporations, SMEs often lack the necessary financial and human resources to develop and implement ESG strategies. Furthermore, the absence of financial incentives, such as tax breaks and subsidies, makes ESG integration a costly and complex process for smaller businesses.

Thus, Kazakhstan's ESG policy can be assessed as comprehensive and ambitious, especially given the long-term goals of achieving carbon neutrality by 2060 and transitioning to a "green economy". However, there remain both positive and problematic aspects that require analysis in terms of strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Table 3).

Table 3. SWOT analysis of ESG policy in Kazakhstan

Strengths:	Weaknesses:
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Clear strategy and ambitious goals <p>Kazakhstan has set specific targets to reduce emissions and increase the share of renewable energy, demonstrating its commitment to sustainable development. These goals are consistent with the country's international commitments, such as the Paris Agreement.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of the legal framework <p>The adoption of the updated "Environmental Code" and other regulatory documents, including obligations to disclose ESG information, demonstrate a desire to create a legal infrastructure that stimulates the implementation of environmental and social standards.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support for renewable energy <p>The energy sector emphasizes the development of renewable energy sources, which helps reduce the country's carbon footprint. Legislative incentives and subsidies for "green"</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Insufficient control and monitoring <p>Despite the existence of a regulatory framework, control and monitoring mechanisms remain a weak link. The implementation of ESG standards is often not monitored at the proper level, which leads to formal compliance with standards without significant changes in business behavior.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Limited financial and technological resources <p>Kazakhstan faces a deficit of modern technologies and a lack of investment to fully transition to ESG practices, especially in traditional sectors such as mining and chemical industries.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Low awareness among businesses and the population <p>For many Kazakhstani companies, ESG principles remain more of a formality than a strategic necessity. Insufficient awareness</p>

<p>energy help attract investment in this sector.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - International cooperation <p>Kazakhstan actively participates in international initiatives and cooperates with international financial organizations, which strengthens the country's position on the global stage and allows it to attract experience and technology for sustainable development.</p>	<p>and understanding of ESG policies among the population also slows down progress in this direction.</p>
<p>Opportunities:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Investment attractiveness. <p>Strengthening ESG policies increases Kazakhstan's attractiveness to international investors who focus on sustainable development. Successful implementation of ESG standards will allow the country to attract "green" investments and improve its position in international rankings.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Development of innovative technologies and renewable energy <p>Transition to ESG practices can stimulate the development of innovative technologies and create new jobs in the field of sustainable development, which will support economic growth and technological progress.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Support for rural regions through sustainable agriculture <p>Introduction of sustainable agricultural practices can support the development of rural regions, reduce their dependence on traditional agricultural methods and improve their economic situation.</p>	<p>Threats:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Economic risks in a resource-dependent economy <p>Kazakhstan remains dependent on the hydrocarbon industry and the export of raw materials. The transition to ESG and reducing carbon emissions may cause economic difficulties in the short term, especially in industries sensitive to the costs of implementing new technologies.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Slow adoption in some key sectors <p>The mining and transport sectors, which have a significant environmental impact, need to modernize and implement ESG practices. Delays in adaptation may reduce the effectiveness of ESG strategies and lead to additional environmental risks.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - The impact of global economic fluctuations <p>Global economic changes, such as lower oil prices or rising inflation, may affect Kazakhstan's ability to implement ESG policies, as resources will be directed to address more pressing economic issues.</p>

Source: compiled by the authors

Analyzing various aspects of ESG integration in public policy, it should be noted that Kazakhstan has a number of advantages that contribute to the implementation of a more effective ESG policy and help strengthen the country's sustainable development:

1. *Rich resources for the development of renewable energy.* Kazakhstan holds substantial potential in renewable energy sources, such as solar and wind energy. Large territories with favorable climatic conditions for solar and wind power plants make it possible to develop large-scale projects in these areas. This gives Kazakhstan an advantage in reducing its dependence on hydrocarbons and creating a new, environmentally sustainable energy infrastructure.

2. *Geographical location and role in regional initiatives.* Kazakhstan occupies a strategic position at the intersection of transport routes between Europe and Asia, which creates opportunities for attracting investment in transport and logistics with an emphasis on sustainable development. Developing infrastructure for international transit corridors with an ESG focus can make Kazakhstan more attractive to international partners and investors.

3. *International commitments and support.* Kazakhstan actively participates in global sustainable development initiatives, such as the Paris Agreement, and cooperates with international financial institutions that provide both technical and financial support for ESG projects. This cooperation provides access to advanced technologies and green investments that can accelerate the transition to a sustainable economy.

4. *Government support and availability of ESG strategies.* Kazakhstan has demonstrated political commitment to ESG goals through the adoption of strategic documents such as the Green Economy Concept, the updated Environmental Code, and the strategy to achieve carbon neutrality by 2060. These regulations and programs create the foundation for the ESG agenda, encouraging public and private companies to implement sustainable practices.

5. *Development of an ESG-oriented financial sector.* Kazakhstan's financial sector, in particular the Kazakhstan Stock Exchange (KASE), is implementing ESG reporting standards, which increases the corporate transparency and responsibility of companies. This contributes to the growth of sustainable financial products, such as green bonds, which attract investors focused on ESG standards.

6. *Innovative potential and support for start-ups.* Kazakhstan is developing an innovative sector, especially in the field of technologies for monitoring and managing environmental risks. Support for start-ups and innovative companies in the fields of renewable energy, agriculture, and waste recycling creates new opportunities for integrating ESG solutions at all levels of the economy.

CONCLUSION

Studies indicate notable progress in sustainable development through the application of ESG principles and a transition to a green economy model. While Kazakhstan's ESG policy reflects positive trends and is aligned with long-term objectives, the country faces several barriers that must be addressed through an integrated strategy.

Implemented projects focusing on infrastructure modernization, the introduction of renewable energy sources, and the adoption of energy-efficient technologies have shown promise in significantly reducing emissions and optimizing resource use. These efforts have improved the environmental situation in the country and enhanced its international reputation.

However, to achieve full carbon neutrality, further research is necessary to evaluate the long-term effectiveness of these projects. Additionally, there is a need to implement ESG in less active sectors, such as agriculture and transportation.

To effectively implement ESG principles, it is crucial to develop educational and informational programs that raise awareness and enhance the competencies of employees. The findings of this study could also serve as a foundation for revising state policies aimed at promoting a green economy and fostering sustainable integration into the global market.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author(s) declare no conflict of interest that could compromise the objectivity or integrity of the publication. .

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

LS: conceptualization, methodology, software, supervision; AA: formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft; NN: visualization, funding acquisition, project administration; SZ: resources, data curation, writing – review & editing.

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EMPOWERING INCLUSIVE KNOWLEDGE SOCIETIES: INTEGRATING MEDIA LITERACY IN UNIVERSITY-LEVEL LANGUAGE EDUCATION IN THE USA AND KAZAKHSTAN

PERIZAT YELUBAYEVA^{1*} , LAUREN FLENNIKEN² ,
TODD OWEN³ , ZHANARGUL GABDULLINA⁴ 

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¹Scholarly fellow at the University of California San Diego, USA; Associate Professor, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan

²Adjunct Professor and Scientific Advisor, Leadership Academy for International Professionals, University of California San Diego, USA

³Instructor and Advisor, Leadership Academy for International Professionals, University of California San Diego, USA

⁴Doctoral student, Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan

ABSTRACT. *This research explores the integration of media literacy into university-level language education. It compares the perspectives of language educators in the USA and Kazakhstan, focusing on their potential to empower inclusive knowledge societies by fostering equitable access to critical thinking and media engagement skills. The study aims to uncover how educators perceive media literacy's importance, the extent of its integration, and the social and institutional challenges they face. Employing a comparative survey-based approach, data was collected from the USA and Kazakhstan language educators, addressing the significance of media literacy, integration practices, barriers, and benefits. The data offered a comparative analysis of the two educational contexts.*

Findings reveal significant differences between the countries. Educators in the USA report advanced integration of media literacy, supported by institutional frameworks, while their counterparts in Kazakhstan face challenges like resource limitations, insufficient training, and digital inequality. Despite these barriers, educators in both contexts recognize media literacy as a transformative tool for fostering critical thinking, social awareness, and active citizenship.

This comparative analysis illuminates the potential of media literacy to bridge digital divides, promote equitable education, and prepare students for active participation in sustainable, knowledge-sharing communities.

KEYWORDS: *educator perspectives, language learning, media literacy, social inclusion, sustainable education, comparative study.*

INTRODUCTION

In the era of rapid digital transformation, media platforms have become a pervasive force, influencing every aspect of life, including education, knowledge sharing,

*Correspondence to: Perizat Yelubayeva, email: perizatucsd@gmail.com

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communication, and information delivery. Today's labor market requires professionals to transform into leaders by thoughtfully and responsibly navigating media platforms. They are encouraged to utilize social media's potential for participation and creativity, showing how it can be used to express concerns, address needs, and support others (Masterman, 1989; Buckingham, 2007). This transformation has significantly altered the education landscape, particularly in language learning, and it underscores the importance of Media literacy as an essential competency for navigating this complex environment (Pegrum, 2019; Godwin-Jones, 2021; Gabdullina et al., 2024). Media literacy, which encompasses accessing, analyzing, evaluating, creating, and communicating media across various contexts and forms, equips learners with abilities to engage critically with the information and communication technologies that shape contemporary life (Hobbs, 2020). Its integration into language education is increasingly urgent as educational institutions strive to prepare students for future challenges (Yelubayeva et al., 2023), empowering learners within inclusive knowledge ecologies.

Inclusive knowledge ecologies are environments that recognize, value, and integrate diverse knowledge systems. These ecologies promote equity, diversity, and sustainability by ensuring language learners contribute to creating collective knowledge (UNESCO, 2018). Thus, media literacy has become essential to education in today's digitally connected world, especially in language learning. It helps language learners acquire the skills to critically engage with various media formats, promoting linguistic proficiency and critical thinking.

This research explores *how language educators in the USA and Kazakhstan perceive and incorporate media literacy into university-level language education and what challenges and practices are associated with this integration in each context*. By comparing their perspectives, the study seeks to identify differences, challenges, and opportunities for enhancing media literacy integration in different educational contexts.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Media Literacy (ML) has been defined in various ways. ML involves analyzing media representations, understanding how media influences culture and society, and developing the skills to critically engage with media content (Buckingham, 2007; Jolls & Wilson, 2014). For Buckingham (2007), ML is "the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, create, and act using all forms of communication" (p. 112). Jolls and Wilson (2014) expand this definition of literacy to include all forms of media, focusing on critical thinking and the ability to make informed decisions about media consumption and production. Potter (2022) refers to the skills, knowledge, and attitudes that allow individuals to critically analyze the daily messages aimed to announce, entertain, and sell to media consumers. In the context of our research, *ML is an ability to critically evaluate, analyze, and utilize media content relevant to their specific professional fields. It encompasses the skills to discern credible sources, understand media biases, and apply information effectively in professional contexts*.

The importance of media literacy in education has been growing, with scholars highlighting its role in fostering critical thinking, informed citizenship, and practical communication skills (Hobbs, 2020; Potter, 2022). Jolls and Wilson (2014) believe

incorporating media literacy into language education can boost students' interaction with real-life language usage and enhance their capacity to navigate and evaluate intricate media landscapes.

Various principal models exist in media literacy, each providing a distinctive perspective and approach. Buckingham (2007) emphasizes the significance of integrating media literacy into the classroom to enrich the learning experiences of children and young people. The scholar suggests that teaching media literacy involves more than just analyzing media texts; it should also involve actively engaging students in creating media. By involving students in media production activities, Buckingham aimed to enhance their critical thinking and problem-solving skills by understanding how media shapes public opinion, influences behavior, and reflects societal values. Buckingham provides practical methods for teaching media literacy, including critically analyzing media texts and comprehending media production processes. He emphasizes the significance of involving students in useful, contextualized learning experiences rather than relying solely on analytical approaches. Buckingham's assertion that "media literacy is not just about protecting oneself from harmful content; it is about gaining empowerment through informed understanding and active participation." This emphasizes the potential of media literacy to empower individuals to navigate the media landscape confidently and responsibly. Buckingham calls for a change in educational practices to integrate media literacy better, preparing students to navigate and influence the media landscape critically and creatively. Additionally, he emphasizes the crucial role of educators and the necessity for continuous support and training to teach media literacy effectively (Buckingham, 2007). However, educators encounter obstacles such as rapidly evolving media technologies, opposition from conventional educational institutions, and constrained resources.

Hobbs (2021) highlights the importance of integrating media literacy into educational curricula, arguing that it equips students with critical thinking skills necessary for navigating today's complex media landscape: the ability to deconstruct media messages, understand media construction, and recognize the impact of digital and social media, algorithmic bias and misinformation, and the role of big data. This approach aligns with Jenkins et al. (2009), who emphasized the need to integrate ML into school curricula at all levels and presented a practical framework for media literacy education, including key concepts such as authorship, format, audience, content, and purpose. This framework is helpful for educators looking to implement media literacy programs in their classrooms.

Yeh and Swinehart (2022) emphasize the importance of social media literacy for ELLs, making a compelling case for its integration into language education curricula. Additionally, they introduce a comprehensive framework for social media literacy, encompassing technical, cognitive, and sociocultural competencies. This approach provides a comprehension of ELLs' challenges, from navigating platform interfaces to critically evaluating content within its cultural context. These scholars' study suggests that educators should incorporate activities that develop technical skills, enhance cognitive evaluation abilities, and cultivate an understanding of sociocultural norms in online environments. These recommendations are crucial for preparing learners for

the digital age and directly affect language education. However, this study has some areas for improvement. Firstly, while diverse, the study's sample size of sixty-six participants is relatively small. The authors acknowledge this limitation, which affects the generalizability of the findings. Future research with more extensive and varied samples could provide more definitive insights. Secondly, the interaction with Reddit was limited to a single discussion thread. While this offers a snapshot of the participants' initial challenges and strategies, it needs to capture the development of their skills and perceptions over a more extended period. Longitudinal studies would be beneficial to understand how social media literacy develops over time. Thirdly, there needs to be a more in-depth cultural analysis. Although the article touches on sociocultural pragmatics, analyzing cultural norms and their impact on ELLs' interactions is somewhat superficial. A deeper exploration of specific cultural challenges and how learners navigate these would enrich the study. Lastly, relying on self-reported data through questionnaires may introduce bias, as participants might need to recall or assess their experiences accurately. Triangulating these findings with more objective measures, such as direct observation or interaction logs, could strengthen the validity of the results.

In the United States, media literacy is well-established in educational policies, emphasizing its integration across curricula, including language education (Jenkins, 2006; Hobbs, 2021). Several studies highlight the successful incorporation of media literacy in language programs, noting improvements in students' analytical abilities and language proficiency (Coşkun, 2021; Pennington et al., 2024; Westman, 2019).

Kazakhstan is currently in the early stages of integrating media literacy into education. While recent national efforts have highlighted the importance of media literacy, challenges such as inadequate teacher training, limited resources, and varying levels of institutional support persist (Gabdullina et al., 2024; Hajar et al., 2024; Yelubayeva et al., 2023b). The literature on Kazakhstan stresses the necessity for more structured approaches and resources to support media literacy education.

Despite these variabilities, both country's language instructors acknowledge the importance of media literacy in providing students with the essential skills for the digital age. This study adds to the existing literature by comparing how media literacy is integrated into language education based on educators' perspectives from the USA and Kazakhstan.

RESEARCH METHODS

Participants

The study used a survey-based approach, collecting responses from 11 USA and 110 Kazakh language educators. Participants from various universities in Kazakhstan were chosen to ensure a diverse representation of language education practices, while American tutors represent UCSD.

Data Collection

The study findings were presented in two stages to gather data. In the first stage, a questionnaire survey was conducted to collect general data from participants. The six-question survey explored integrating media literacy education into the language

learning curriculum for adult learners at the university level. The second stage employed interviews to capture insights from participants regarding their personal experiences, beliefs, and attitudes regarding ML in ESL classrooms.

A structured questionnaire was developed to assess educators' perspectives on media literacy integration. The survey included closed and open-ended questions, allowing for both quantitative analysis and qualitative insights. The critical sections of the questionnaire focused on:

- Participants rated the *importance of integrating media literacy into language education* on a Likert scale.
- Educators provide details on the extent and *methods of media literacy integration in their curricula*, including specific activities and resources.
- Respondents identified the main challenges they face in integrating media literacy, such as the need for *more resources, insufficient training, and institutional barriers*.
- *Perceived Benefits*: Educators shared their views on the benefits of media literacy for language learners, including improved critical thinking, language skills, and cultural awareness.

Data Analysis

The quantitative data compared the responses from educators in the USA and Kazakhstan using the formula below:

$$P = \left(\frac{F}{N} \right) \times 100$$

Where:

P = Percentage of participants who selected a specific response

F = Frequency of the particular response (the number of participants who chose that option)

N = Total number of respondents (the total number of participants who answered the question)

The qualitative data of the open-ended questions were coded and thematically analyzed to identify recurring themes and insights related to the challenges and benefits of media literacy integration.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

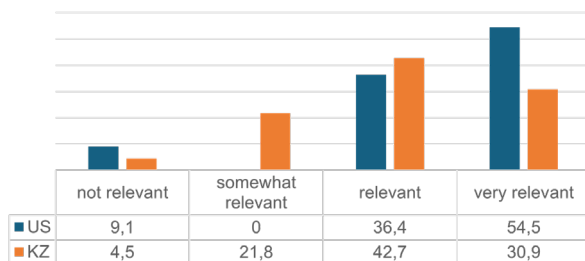
This section presents a comparative analysis of survey responses obtained from language educators in the United States and Kazakhstan, explicitly focusing on integrating media literacy into university-level language education. The study will examine three primary areas: the perceived relevance of media literacy, effective integration strategies, and the challenges associated with implementation.

Question 1 asked educators about the relevance of integrating media literacy into the language learning curriculum. The survey revealed that the responses across various questions indicate that U.S. educators consider media literacy highly relevant. 30.9% of Kazakhstani educators rated media literacy as "very relevant," while 63.6% rated it as "relevant." This shows a strong consensus on the importance of media literacy

in language education, with only a small percentage of educators viewing it as less relevant.

Both US and Kazakhstani educators recognize the importance of media literacy, though Kazakhstan's emphasis reflects a slightly more cautious yet growing appreciation of its relevance. The broader context in the U.S., where media literacy has been integrated for longer, contributes to the more ingrained perception of its critical role (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Relevance of Media Literacy Education for Adult Language Learners

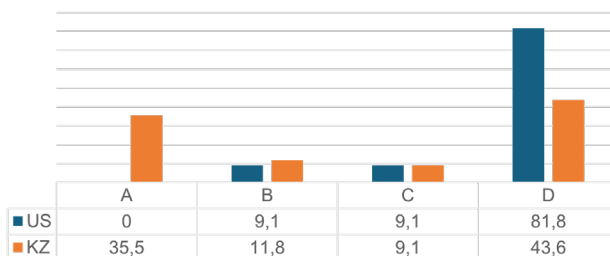


Source: compiled by the authors

Question 2 asked participants to define media literacy in the context of language learning among the following options:

- a) the ability to access, analyze, evaluate, and create media in various forms
- b) understanding how media influences opinions and behaviors
- c) the skills to critically engage with media content
- d) all of the above

Figure 2. Definition of media literacy in the context of language learning



Source: compiled by the authors

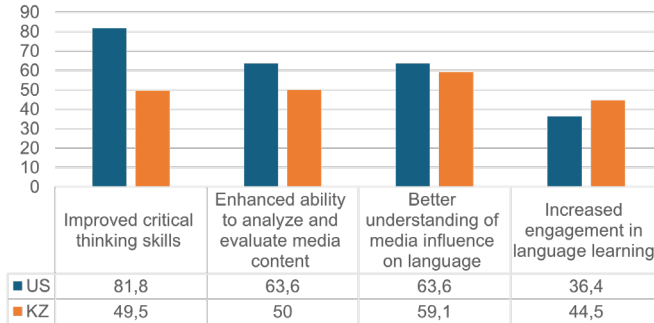
In response to **Question 3**, U.S. educators expect the following primary learning outcomes from integrating media literacy: 81.8% anticipate improved critical thinking skills, 63.6% expect enhanced ability to analyze and evaluate media content, another 63.6% foresee a better understanding of media influence on language and communication, and 36.4% anticipate increased engagement and motivation in language learning.

The survey data did not explicitly outline the expected learning outcomes reported by Kazakhstan educators. However, the high percentage of them recognizing the relevance

of media literacy implies similar expectations for enhancing critical thinking, media analysis, and language skills.

Both groups anticipate that media literacy will enhance critical thinking and media analysis. However, educators in the U.S. tend to prioritize its impact on increasing student engagement and understanding of media's influence on communication. This contrast stems from the extended history of integrating media literacy in the U.S., where educators have had more opportunities to observe these outcomes in action (Figure 3).

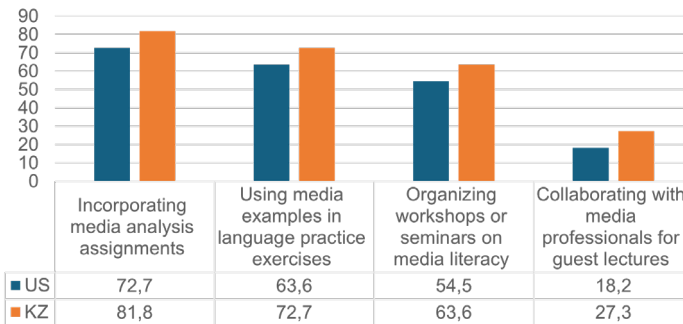
Figure 3. Expected Learning Outcomes from Integrating Media Literacy



Source: compiled by the authors

Question 4 requested the identification of effective strategies for integrating media literacy. Educators in both countries have pinpointed similar strategies for integrating media literacy into language curricula, although the emphasized specific methods vary (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Effective Strategies for Introducing Media Literacy



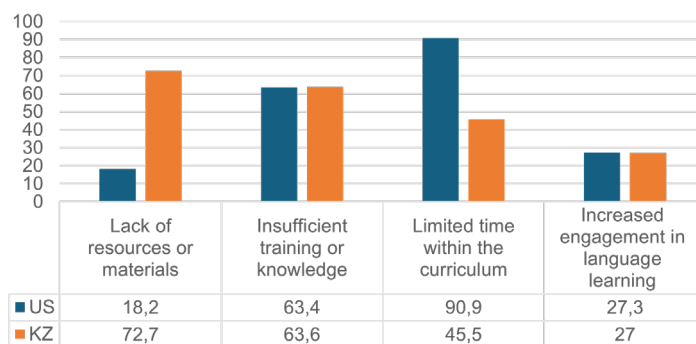
Source: compiled by the authors

U.S. educators frequently advocate the implementation of media analysis assignments (72.7%) and the integration of media examples in language practice exercises (63.6%) as their most commonly recommended strategies. Moreover, there is noteworthy backing for arranging workshops or seminars on media literacy (54.5%). These findings indicate a proclivity toward hands-on, pragmatic methodologies that enable students to interact with media content directly.

Kazakhstani educators have a strong preference for including media analysis assignments (81.8%) and using media examples in language practice exercises (72.7%), which closely aligns with the preferences of U.S. educators. However, a higher percentage of Kazakhstani educators (63.6%) consider workshops or seminars on media literacy as an effective strategy, indicating a greater perceived need for formalized, structured learning opportunities around media literacy. Additionally, more Kazakhstani educators (27.3%) favor collaborating with media professionals for guest lectures compared to their U.S. counterparts (18.2%), reflecting a potential need for external expertise in media literacy.

Question 5 asked about the challenges in integrating media literacy. The challenges identified by educators in both countries highlight distinct barriers based on their educational contexts.

Figure 5. Challenges in Integrating Media Literacy



Source: compiled by the authors

For educators in the U.S., the primary challenge cited is the limited time within the curriculum (90.9%), which indicates that existing curricular demands leave little room for additional content, such as media literacy. Insufficient training or knowledge (63.6%) is also a significant concern, suggesting that while media literacy is valued, educators feel unprepared to teach it effectively. A smaller proportion of educators mention a lack of resources or materials (18.2%) as a challenge, reflecting a relatively well-resourced educational environment.

In contrast, educators in Kazakhstan have identified a need for more resources or materials (72.7%) as the most pressing challenge. This underscores the need for greater access to media literacy resources. Insufficient training or knowledge (63.6%) is also a concern, highlighting the need for professional development in media literacy in both countries. Limited time within the curriculum (45.5%) is considered a challenge. Still, it is less of a barrier in Kazakhstan than in the U.S., possibly due to differences in curriculum structure or flexibility.

For the "other(s)" option in Question 5, participants considered including the following potential challenges that educators might face, which are not covered by the suggested options:

- resistance to change
- cultural sensitivity issues
- lack of administrative support
- overcrowded curriculum
- difficulty in assessing media literacy skills
- student digital literacy levels
- institutional policy constraints
- limited access to technology
- language barriers
- time-intensive preparation.

This analysis reveals commonalities and differences in how U.S. and Kazakhstani educators integrate media literacy into language education. Both groups recognize its importance and agree on effective strategies, but they face different challenges based on their specific educational contexts. U.S. educators are primarily constrained by time, while Kazakhstani educators are more concerned with resource availability and the need for structured support. These findings suggest that tailored approaches are necessary for each country's language instructors' needs, ensuring that media literacy can be effectively integrated into language curricula.

Next, we invited instructors to participate in an interview as part of this study. Sixteen Kazakh language instructors and two U.S. instructors agreed to join the interview. This interview aimed to gain deeper insights into their experiences and perspectives on integrating media literacy into language education at the university level. We (interviewers) were particularly interested in understanding the long-term impacts on language learning outcomes, exploring how media literacy can enhance students' ability to contribute to sustainable futures, and gathering practical examples from their teaching practice. Additionally, the interview focused on identifying effective strategies and support mechanisms to overcome challenges in implementing media literacy in the curriculum.

The interview **Question 1**: "How do you perceive the long-term impact of media literacy on language learning outcomes?" showed that specific instructors initially interpreted "media materials" to refer mainly to news. However, after explaining that media materials include various media products such as articles, social media posts, podcasts, videos, and other formats, the conversation progressed more smoothly and yielded more valuable insights.

After fully understanding the notion of "media materials", the instructors emphasized that they viewed media literacy as having a significant long-term impact on language learning outcomes. They pointed out that students skilled in media literacy develop more advanced language abilities and become critical thinkers navigating modern communication's complexities. This dual development of linguistic and analytical skills is crucial for students to excel in academic and real-world settings. A good example was Instructor 11's answer: *"Incorporating various media formats such as videos, audios, podcasts, and social media has a notable impact on language learning.... With exposure to diverse formats, students improve their language skills and become proficient in comprehending and producing language. This is essential in the digital age and enhances their ability to critically evaluate information, which is beneficial in all aspects of life."*

Similarly, Instructor 9 noted, *"I recognize that media literacy can affect students' communication skills. They learn to interpret and create content across different*

platforms, which helps them become more versatile communicators. This will benefit their careers in the long run, particularly where clear and effective communication is essential."

For **Question 2:** "Can integrating media literacy into language education enhance students' ability to contribute to sustainable futures? How?" the instructors agreed that integrating media literacy into language education significantly enhances students' ability to contribute to sustainable futures. They emphasized that media literacy equips students with the tools to critically engage with various media forms, making them more aware of global challenges such as climate change, social justice, and cultural diversity. This awareness empowers students to become active participants in creating solutions and advocating for sustainable practices, both locally and globally. For example, Instructor 1 claimed, *"When students practice assessing social media campaigns or environmental documentaries critically, they improve their language skills and become more informed citizens. They use their enhanced media literacy to advocate for sustainable practices and share accurate information within their communities, which is crucial for driving long-term change."*

Instructor 19 supported Instructor 1's position: *"When students engage with various media formats, like creating podcasts on climate change or analyzing viral videos on social justice, they develop a nuanced understanding of global issues. This knowledge fosters students' meaningful contributions to discussions about sustainability, both in academic settings and the broader community."*

For **Question 3:** "Can you share specific examples or experiences where integrating media literacy into your language teaching has empowered students to participate more actively in knowledge-sharing communities?" instructors shared that integrating media literacy empowers students in multiple ways. For example, Instructor 14 stated: *"I introduced a project where students analyzed news articles and social media posts on climate change. They had to present their findings and discuss the different narratives in these media formats. This exercise was incredibly impactful. It improved their language skills and motivated them to join online communities focused on environmental advocacy, where they actively participated and shared their insights."*

Instructor 9 stated, *"In one of my classes, I had students create video blogs (vlogs) on topics related to social justice. They shared these vlogs on the YouTube platform and engaged with viewers through comments. This experience empowered them to participate in broader discussions about these issues online and in class. They realized their voices could contribute to larger conversations, empowering them."*

For **Question 4:** "What strategies or support are essential to overcoming the challenges of integrating media literacy into the curriculum?" instructors identified several strategies and supports necessary for successful integration. They emphasized the importance of professional development opportunities covering all media materials. Additionally, they stressed the need for interdisciplinary collaboration between language and media studies departments to develop well-rounded curricula. Access to diverse media resources, flexibility in curriculum design, and ongoing dialogue with students to understand their interests were also highlighted as critical factors

for overcoming challenges. Instructor 17 explained this: *"Collaboration with other departments is essential to effectively integrate this broader range of media literacy into language education. For example, working with media studies, experts can help us design interdisciplinary courses covering language and media literacy. Additionally, having access to professional technology and media production tools, like video editing software, can greatly enhance the learning experience for students."*

The interview results reveal insightful perspectives on integrating media literacy into language education from U.S. and Kazakhstani language instructors, emphasizing the broader understanding of media materials. The interview results provided diverse viewpoints that align with the findings from the questionnaire, and together, they provide a comprehensive understanding of the research.

U.S. and Kazakhstani instructors have emphasized the significance of integrating media literacy into language education. They believe this integration significantly enhances students' ability to contribute to sustainable futures. According to them, media literacy equips students with the critical tools to navigate and engage with pollution, climate change, and social inequality. This empowers students to become informed and active participants in knowledge-sharing communities. The instructors have also highlighted specific examples where the integration of media literacy led to increased student engagement and active participation in broader discussions, both online and offline. They have shared successful projects, such as analyzing environmental news across different media formats and creating social justice-themed media content, which motivated students to contribute meaningfully to discussions on sustainability and social change.

Instructors in both countries have recognized the similar need to integrate media literacy into the curriculum. They have stressed the importance of professional development, interdisciplinary collaboration, and institutional support. This insight aligns with Kellner's mindset (2021), which states that providing educators with comprehensive training covering various media materials, access to diverse media resources, and flexible curricula to accommodate media literacy components is crucial.

CONCLUSION

This study underscores the critical importance of media literacy in language education to foster inclusive knowledge societies. Media literacy equips students with essential critical thinking and communication skills, enabling them to engage effectively with the complexities of the digital age and contribute actively to knowledge-sharing communities. The findings reveal a marked disparity in progress between the United States and Kazakhstan. While the United States demonstrates a more advanced integration of media literacy, supported by institutional frameworks and resources, Kazakhstan remains in the nascent stages of adoption, hindered by resource limitations and insufficient training. Despite these challenges, educators in both countries recognize media literacy's transformative potential for enhancing educational outcomes and fostering societal equity.

To empower inclusive knowledge societies through integrating media literacy in university-level language education in Kazakhstan, the following actions are recommended:

- 1) Develop and implement national-level comprehensive professional development programs to enhance educators' competencies in integrating media literacy into language instruction.
- 2) Design flexible and innovative curricula incorporating media literacy components aligned with national educational standards to promote critical thinking, digital literacy, and language proficiency.
- 3) Prioritize investments in educational technologies and resources to ensure equitable access to media literacy tools for educators and students, particularly in remote, underserved regions.
- 4) Establish interdisciplinary collaborative frameworks between language education and media studies experts to foster interdisciplinary approaches and enhance the effectiveness of media literacy integration.
- 5) Advocate for including media literacy as a strategic priority within national education policies, ensuring sustained administrative support and financial resources for its implementation.
- 6) Initiate awareness campaigns to emphasize the importance of media literacy among educators, policymakers, and the broader public, fostering a collective commitment to its integration.

Future research should focus on evaluating the impact of these interventions, exploring contextually and culturally appropriate teaching methodologies, and investigating the broader societal benefits of media literacy integration. By addressing these recommendations, Kazakhstan can accelerate progress in embedding media literacy into language education, equipping students with the skills to navigate an interconnected, digital world while contributing meaningfully to sustainable and inclusive knowledge societies.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

PY: conceptualization, methodology, validation, formal analysis, investigation, data curation, writing - original draft preparation, writing - review and editing, supervision, project administration, funding acquisition; LF: validation, formal analysis, data curation, writing - review and editing; TO: conceptualization, formal analysis, resources; ZG: software, validation, investigation, resources, visualization. All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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BIBLIOMETRIC ANALYSIS OF THEMATIC NETWORKS IN CENTRAL ASIAN INTEGRATION LITERATURE: TRENDS, CLUSTERS, AND EMERGING RESEARCH DIRECTIONS

GULBANU YELMAGAMBETOVA^{1*} , AIBOLAT DALELKHAN² , RAB NAWAZ LODHI³ 

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¹ PhD candidate of the L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Kazakhstan

² PhD, Acting Associate Professor at L.N. Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Kazakhstan

³ Associate Professor at the University of the Punjab, Pakistan

ABSTRACT. *In this article, the scientific literature on integration processes in Central Asia was studied using the method of bibliometric analysis from the point of view of thematic networks. The purpose of the study is to identify the main directions of works covering the problems of integration, to show trends in their development, and to establish new prospects for future research. In the course of the analysis, three main clusters of scientific literature were identified: economic integration, regional development, and water resources management. In addition, new research areas related to economic development, environmental issues, and transport and logistics infrastructure have been identified. The results of the study show the main challenges and new opportunities for cooperation in the region and emphasize the need for a comprehensive consideration of integration processes. This article can serve as a methodological basis for scientific papers devoted to the study of integration ties in Central Asia in the future.*

KEYWORDS: *Central Asia, integration, regional development, economic integration, bibliometric analysis, network analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

The countries of Central Asia are known for their abundant natural resources as well as their rich historical and cultural heritage. It is known that in ancient historical periods, such important trade routes as the Silk Road passed through the territory of Central Asia. Central Asia, located between China and India in the East, the European world in the West, the Volga, and Siberia in the North, Persia, and Arabia in the South, for almost two millennia, stood at the intersection of great trade routes, world civilizations and cultures. Since gaining independence, the five Central Asian nations have maintained close ties, although each has pursued its own development path. The increase in GDP, trade indicators, population growth, and sustainable economic growth make it necessary to assess the role and prospects of the territory in a new way. Over the past 20 years, the average annual economic growth rate of Central Asian countries has been 6.2%. In comparison, the growth rate of other developing countries stands at 5.3%, while the global average is 2.6% annually (Eurasian Development Bank, 2022). It is known that

*Correspondence to: Gulbanu Yelmagambetova, email: gulbanu.elmaganbetova.95@mail.ru



after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the countries of Central Asia, which embarked on their own path of development, took several steps toward mutual cooperation. Despite the historical proximity and cultural and linguistic similarities that unite the Central Asian countries, there has not yet been a functioning integration association. However, these nations are forming their own unique cooperation initiatives. Now the five countries are witnessing a new stage of convergence of positions on the main areas of cooperation. Bilateral ties are strengthened, and consultative meetings of the heads of state are held regularly. Considering the mistakes of previous integration initiatives, the new regional agenda is based on pragmatic approaches and focuses on concrete results. In the vast majority of research studies that have studied the integration process in the Central Asian region, along with disintegration factors, more attention is paid to the relationship of the countries of the region with third actors. In the previous studies, the impact of external forces, various levels of economic development, language and religion problems, infrastructure imperfection, and geopolitical situation were noted among the factors that negatively affect the integration processes in the region. Until now, there have not been comprehensive reviews specifically focused on the integration processes in Central Asia that assess the current state of research in this area. Consequently, to bridge this research gap, this study conducted a bibliometric analysis of research on the integration process in the Central Asian region to summarize the literature in this area and consider possible future directions. Indeed, the countries of Central Asia must strive for mutual cooperation and take various steps. It appears that cooperation among these countries will be a key trend in the region's development over the next decade. Therefore, an examination of the present state of research on the level of cooperation among the Central Asian countries can offer valuable insights into scientific advancements in this field. Specifically, this study sought to fulfill the following research objectives (ROs):

RO1: analyze the evolution of publication count in the research field of the integration process in Central Asia;

RO2: determine the productive countries and most cited publications;

RO3: analyze the dominant themes in the literature on the integration process in Central Asia;

RO4: identify the emerging trends in the integration process in Central Asia.

This bibliometric study differs from previous reviews of the literature on Central Asia, paying special attention to the level of mutual cooperation of Central Asian countries. The research paper examines the data of 101 articles collected in the Scopus database. The results contribute to an overview of research trends in this area as of December 2024. Thus, this study is important in determining the level of study, and development trends of integration processes in Central Asian countries and brings to light the directions of future research.

Following this introduction, the paper is structured as follows: Section 2 presents a survey of existing literature on Central Asian integration processes. Section 3 outlines the methodology and data used in the study. Section 4 showcases the findings from the bibliometric analysis, while Section 5 summarizes the key conclusions drawn from the research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Regional integration initiatives in Central Asia have encountered challenges due to weak institutions and conflicting national agendas. While organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Eurasian Economic Union are active in the region, they are often viewed as tools of external powers like China and Russia, rather than as genuine platforms for regional collaboration. Peyrouse (2012) noted that the absence of robust, regionally driven institutions has impeded integration efforts, with energy cooperation remaining a particularly contentious issue due to diverse national objectives.

According to other scholars, authoritarian regimes in Central Asian countries are not inclined to share power with regional organizations, fearing a weakening of their control over strategic economic resources. Since leaders worry that pooling sovereignty and diminishing the significance of borders to facilitate flows of goods and people might have a detrimental impact on their control of strategic economic resources, incentives for deep cooperation to create a regional area of free (or even less controlled) movement are out of the question (Buranelli, 2021).

Some researchers argue that unresolved issues such as territorial disputes, water allocation, cross-border peoples, energy, and transport also negatively affect relations between the Central Asian States. The issues of water resources and energy in Central Asia are significant, as the region relies on two rivers—the Amu Darya and the Syr Darya—for 90 percent of its water supply. However, conflicts arise between upstream countries (Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan), which have abundant water, and downstream countries (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan), which possess significant oil and gas resources (Lee et al., 2023).

Regionalism, which involves transferring part of sovereignty to supranational organizations, raises concerns among Central Asian States regarding the potential weakening of nationalism and national sovereignty. Currently, a major challenge facing regional integration organizations in Central Asia is the skepticism toward regionalism among the states and their populations. Additionally, a lack of intraregional powers capable of leading the integration process, along with varying views on regional identity, undermines collective identity and acts as a disintegrating factor (Cao, 2024).

Some authors believe that the integration of the countries of the region should be based on economic integration, solving mutually pressing problems. Political cooperation among the Central Asian Five will be possible only if it is strengthened by real economic integration, the formation of sustainable national economies, and the development of regional identity (Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023). The EU, an example of a successful regional association, shows that it is necessary to start establishing effective cooperation in several key areas. This cooperation, which began with the successful operation of such an agreement as the European Coal and Steel Association (in 1951), is also an example for other regions. Effective cross-country interaction in Central Asia can be carried out within the framework of solving the most pressing issues of water resources allocation, energy complex, transport transit, border issues, and labor migration. To begin with, it will be possible to achieve an effective solution

to key issues in these areas and talk about a gradual increase in regional cooperation (Kushkumbaev, 2022, 158p.).

Other researchers, including Ateed and Özcan (2023), agree that the economy should play a significant role in regional integration in Central Asia. They reference Haas's theory of neo-functionalism, which suggests that the presence of a common need among countries in a region encourages cooperation in specific sectors. The Cantori and Spiegel Model illustrates how the economic strength of states, the patterns of foreign trade, and the nature of economic relations affect regional integration in a particular region (Cantori & Spiegel, 1969).

The Central Asian countries have not yet fully achieved economic integration, but the unifying forces outweigh the separating forces in the region's modern development. A key requirement for advancing integration in the region is developing a clear strategy for interstate cooperation that aligns with the interests of all Central Asian countries (Koichumanova, 2022). Another paper identifies the economic factor as a crucial element that has not yet been prioritized in regional and bilateral discussions. It suggests that a stronger emphasis on economic integration could facilitate closer ties and more effective cooperation among the countries (Delovarova et al., 2023).

The sources emphasize the role of Uzbek-Kazakh cooperation in stimulating regional cooperation, including in the energy sector (CAA Network, 2021). Experts of the Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan have identified regional institutional formats and initiatives that are expected to increase their influence on Kazakhstan's foreign policy in the next 10 years. The survey results highlight the region-wide Central Asian framework, which extends to relations with China, Turkey, Russia, the United States, and the EU. Thus, Central Asia, in the eyes of international experts, serves as a foundation for Kazakhstan's interaction with external actors (Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies, 2023). The Central Asian Barometer, an independent and non-profit institute for applied research and analytics, has analyzed the perspectives of the people in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan regarding regional integration. As a whole, these responses seem to illustrate that many ordinary people within Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan consider themselves to have shared identities, practices, and values that unite them with other Central Asian nations. This sense of unity is reflected in the optimistic outlook that the respondents have on the current state of Central Asian cooperation and integration, and their positive feelings toward the possible integration (Central Asia Barometer, 2022).

The analysis of the texts of documents and speeches of the heads of state demonstrates the commitment of the Central Asian countries to the development and strengthening of cooperation in the region. The word "cooperation" is one of the most frequently found in the analyzed texts, which indicates the desire of the countries of the region to interact and solve common problems. The authors consider this as a possible starting point for the development of deeper integration in the future (Mukasheva & Akhmedyanova, 2024).

In the vast majority of previous written works that have studied integration processes in the Central Asian region, the emphasis is on internal and external factors affecting

integration. In addition, the influence of external actors and the geopolitical landscape of the region have been extensively studied. A bibliometric analysis of existing research on this subject helps gauge the relevance of the topic, assess the productivity of current studies, and identify key areas of focus. Based on this review of previous literature, it appears that a focused study examining the state of research on integration processes in Central Asia has yet to be conducted. This study aims to fill that gap.

METHODOLOGY

This study employed a bibliometric analysis approach to investigate the integration process in Central Asia, following the five-step science mapping framework outlined by Zupic and Čater (2015). As shown in Figure 1, the process was adapted for this research in a manner comparable to Lodhi et al. (2024). The diagram illustrates the five stages (research design, data collection, analysis, visualization, and interpretation) along with the corresponding actions and techniques for each phase. Initially, following the method of Lodhi et al. (2024), we surveyed databases to confirm the uniqueness of our research topic before proceeding with the study. As a result, we found previous literature reviews on Central Asia and only one bibliometric review, however, focused on research publications on Central Asia (Wang et al., 2015). We discovered that no bibliometric analysis had previously addressed the integration processes in this region. As a result, we established four research goals outlined in the introduction.

Following this, the next stage was keyword selection. The final keywords were determined by establishing search terms that aligned with the study's scope and drew upon previous reviews. We, therefore, considered “regional integration”, “economic integration”, “political integration”, “social integration”, “regional cooperation”, and “interstate relations” combined with “Central Asia” or “Central Asian countries” as the primary keywords to search the Scopus database using Boolean Operators “OR” and “AND” in the “Article title, Abstract, Keywords” search field. The Scopus database was chosen for its compilation of content from esteemed academic sources and its superior quantity of papers on the research topic compared to other databases. Scopus offers extensive coverage of interdisciplinary journals and publications in emerging fields, as well as a more comprehensive inclusion of books and conference proceedings than alternative databases. Consequently, this research utilized Scopus as the primary source for bibliometric data. Following previous studies and considering the comparable publication coverage between Web of Science and Scopus, along with the presence of lower-quality works in Google Scholar (Harzing & Alakangas, 2016), the decision was made to exclusively use Scopus for this study.

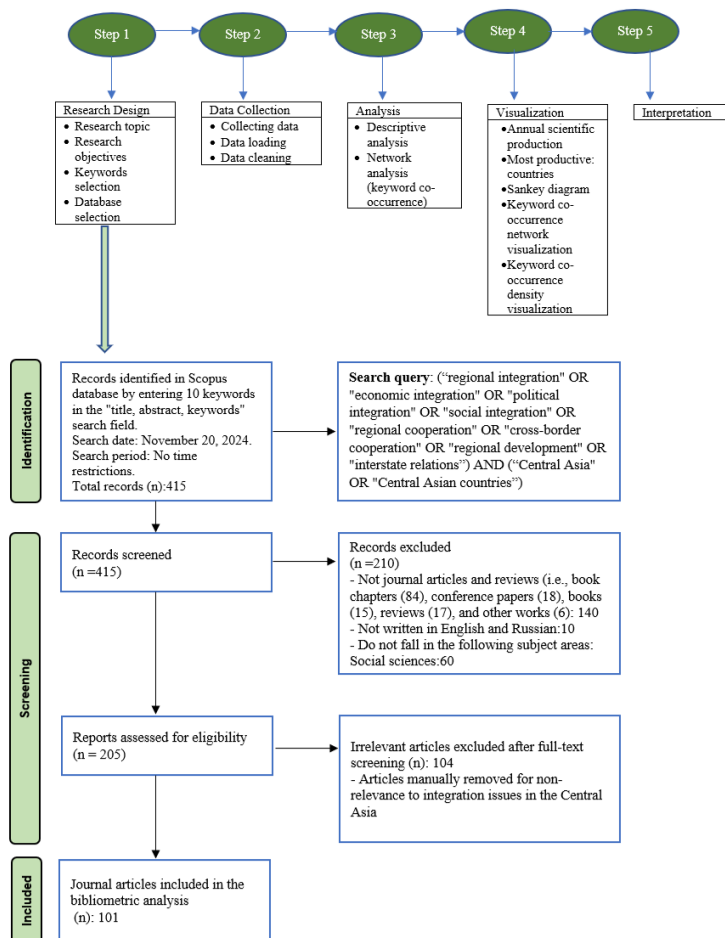
Data collection was the second phase of the process. On November 20, 2024, we gathered the necessary information without imposing any time restrictions. Our initial search of the database resulted in 415 documents related to our research topic for further evaluation. Firstly, the search was limited to the subject area “Social sciences,” so all the documents (60) that were not in the study field were excluded. Second, all materials other than journal articles were also removed, thus excluding a further 140 documents (including book chapters, conference papers, books, and reviews). Additionally, 10 articles that were not written in English or Russian were excluded, resulting in 205 articles meeting the study's inclusion criteria after evaluating their eligibility. During

the data loading and cleaning stage, we extracted a CSV file from the Scopus database containing all relevant data fields.

In the third phase of our process, which focused on data analysis, we utilized two software tools: RStudio's Biblioshiny package (Aria & Cuccurullo, 2017) and VOSviewer (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). The Biblioshiny package was used for descriptive analysis, while VOSviewer was employed for network analysis, specifically keyword co-occurrence analysis. These two software packages enabled us to conduct the two types of analysis planned for the bibliometric study (Donthu et al., 2021). Bibliometric analysis encompasses not only evaluative techniques for assessing productivity but also relational techniques that determine networks between research papers, journals, or authors (Echchakoui, 2020). Keyword co-occurrence analysis allows for the examination of topic relationships in research works by identifying frequently occurring keywords and grouping them into thematic clusters. This method helps in understanding the primary themes within a field and predicting future trends (Donthu et al., 2021).

For the fourth phase, which involved data visualization, we employed the Biblioshiny package in RStudio to generate visual representations of annual scientific production, the most productive nations, and the most frequently cited publications, and to create a Sankey diagram (e.g., Khan et al., 2023), as well as to conduct thematic analysis. To visualize the co-occurrence network of keywords, VOSviewer was utilized (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). This method involves creating a network of words that represent topics, which is then displayed on a map using network visualization techniques (Donthu et al., 2021). Additionally, we applied density visualization for keyword co-occurrence to identify areas with higher topic concentrations and their distribution within the network (Van Eck & Waltman, 2010). Both Biblioshiny and VOSviewer are effective tools for producing visual representations of literature, with graphs capable of highlighting hotspots, revealing new patterns, and illustrating complex networks within the scientific community (Gao et al., 2021). The final step, step five, involved describing and interpreting the findings (Zupic & Čater, 2015).

Research limitations – the analysis is based only on the Scopus database, so it may exclude relevant research papers indexed in other databases, like WoS or Google Scholar. Although Scopus provides high-quality data, future research should combine multiple databases to achieve comprehensive coverage of the field. In addition, this research focuses mainly on articles published in English and Russian, which may not take into account the significant contributions of sources written in another language.

Figure 1. Research methodology design

Source: compiled by the authors

RESULTS

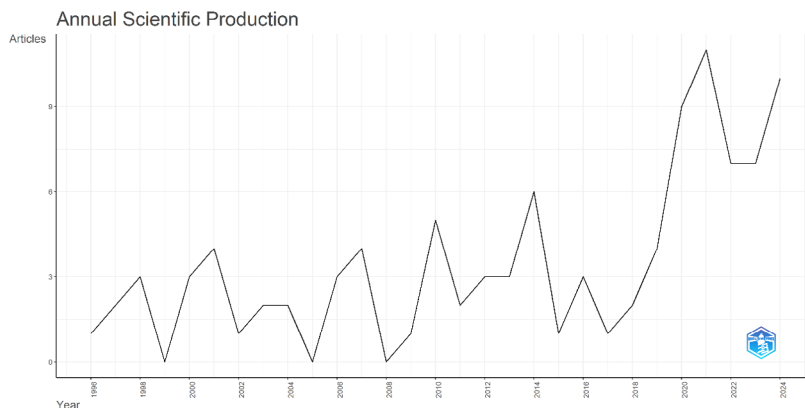
This segment presents findings on the development of academic literature regarding the integration process in Central Asia. It examines the most productive countries and the most cited publications in this field. Additionally, key themes are identified from the 101 selected articles through an analysis of keyword co-occurrence. A word cloud visualizes the most frequently used words, and a thematic map analysis is also provided for better understanding.

The Progression of Annual Scientific Production

The progression of the 101 chosen articles extracted from Scopus is illustrated in Figure 2. The linear pattern reveals that, over the 23 years from 1996 to 2019, the number of published research papers on the Central Asian integration process showed an unstable trend. To highlight the relevance of this research topic in recent years, it is important to note that the number of publications has increased significantly over the past five years.

Notably, 2021 emerged as the most productive year in terms of publication count. These observations suggest that the integration process of Central Asian nations has recently gained substantial attention among researchers.

Figure 2. Annual scientific production of research papers on the Central Asian integration process



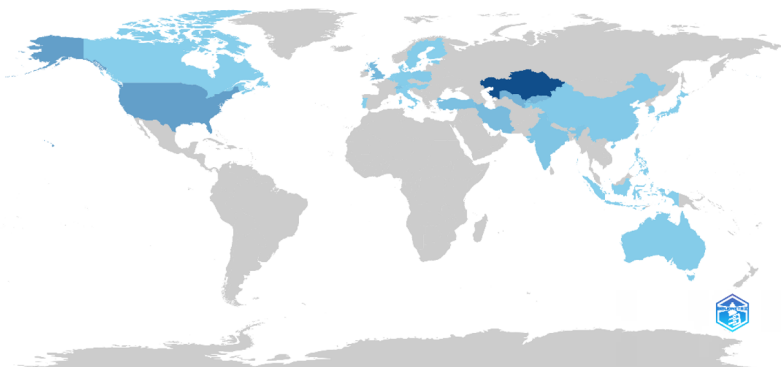
Source: compiled by the authors based on multiple sources from Scopus using Biblioshiny

Countries' Scientific Production

The map in Figure 3 illustrates the research output of various nations. Countries that produced the highest number of scientific publications are highlighted with bold coloration. Kazakhstan has contributed the most articles to the field (59 articles), followed by the USA (21 articles), Uzbekistan (13 articles), and Kyrgyzstan (11 articles). Additional details regarding these results can be found in Table 1.

Figure 3. Countries with the highest contributions to studies on Central Asian integration

Country Scientific Production



Source: compiled by the authors based on multiple sources from Scopus using Biblioshiny

From the information in Table 1, it is evident that researchers from both Central Asian and Western countries have contributed a significant number of research articles. This demonstrates the growing interest in integration processes within these nations.

Table 1. The number of articles per country

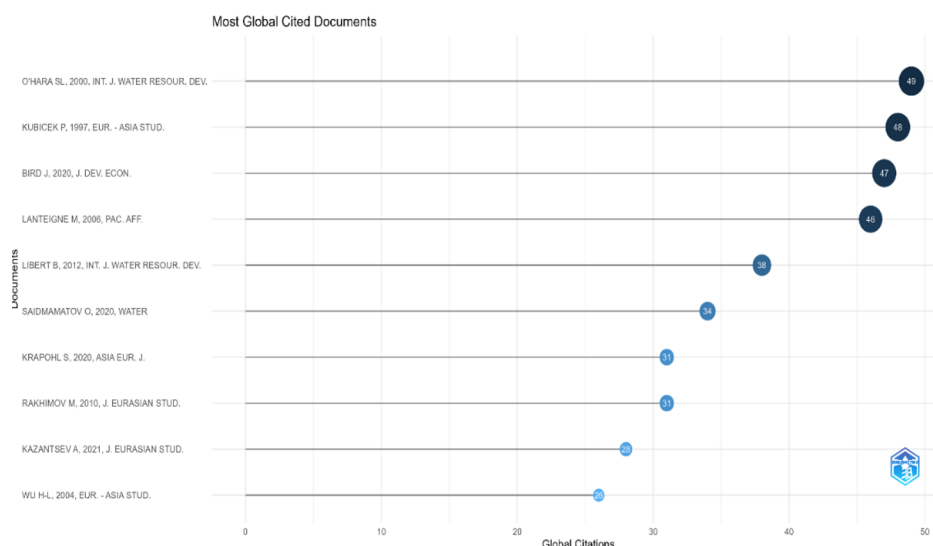
	Articles
KAZAKHSTAN	59
USA	21
UZBEKISTAN	13
KYRGYZSTAN	11
UK	10
IRAN	9
TURKEY	7
SWITZERLAND	6
INDIA	5

Source: compiled by the authors based on multiple sources from Scopus

The Most Frequently Cited Publications

Figure 4 provides information on the most cited works globally. Identifying the most frequently cited articles allows researchers to assess the significance of a topic within the academic community. The first article in the figure was cited 49 times, while the last one in the top ten was cited 26 times.

Figure 4. The most cited articles on the Central Asian integration process



Source: compiled by the authors based on multiple sources from Scopus using Biblioshiny

Table 2 below lists the most cited articles and the number of citations. According to the information in the table, cooperation between the countries of Central Asia in the field of economic and water issues is relevant among researchers. At the same time, research works on such topics as the dynamics, problems, prospects for the development of regional integration cooperation, and the influence of external actors are also relevant. In general, this means that many scientists study the region's integration efforts in detail.

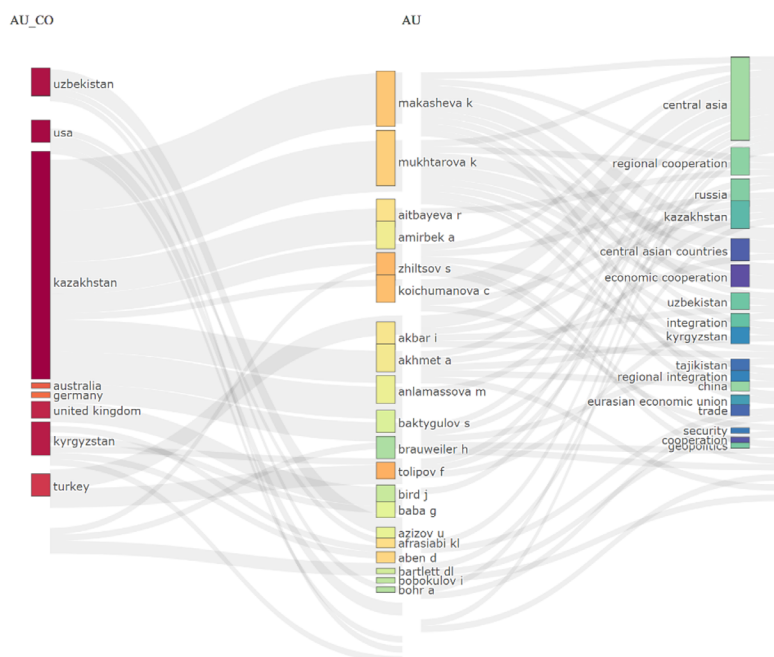
Table 2. The most cited articles

Title of the article	Total citations
Central Asia's water resources: Contemporary and future management issues	49
Regionalism, nationalism, and Realpolitik in Central Asia	48
The Belt and Road Initiative: Reshaping economic geography in Central Asia?	47
Challenges and opportunities for transboundary water cooperation in Central Asia: Findings from UNECE's regional assessment and project work	38
Water-Energy-Food nexus framework for promoting regional integration in Central Asia	34
The region that isn't: China, Russia, and the failure of regional integration in Central Asia	31
Internal and external dynamics of regional cooperation in Central Asia	31
Between Russia and China: Central Asia in Greater Eurasia	28
The prospects for regional economic integration between China and the five Central Asian countries	26

Source: compiled by the authors based on multiple sources from Scopus

Sankey Diagram

Valuable insights can be gained by examining the relationships between primary keywords (or topics), nations, and researchers. The Sankey diagram in Figure 5 illustrates the analysis of three fields within the literature related to the integration process in Central Asia. This diagram showcases the most significant connections between the countries of the authors' affiliations (on the left), the authors themselves (in the middle), and the keywords (on the right). The study highlights the most prominent keywords used by authors and key countries in the field of Central Asian integration. According to Figure 5, the most discussed topics in this research area include "Central Asia", "regional cooperation", "Kazakhstan", "Russia", "economic cooperation", "Central Asian countries", "Uzbekistan", "Kyrgyzstan", "integration", and "Tajikistan". The Sankey chart indicates that the majority of articles on this topic were authored by individuals from Kazakhstan, followed by those from Kyrgyzstan and the United States, which aligns with the findings presented in Figure 3 and Table 1.

Figure 5. Relationships among keywords, authors, and countries by three-field plot

Source: compiled by the authors

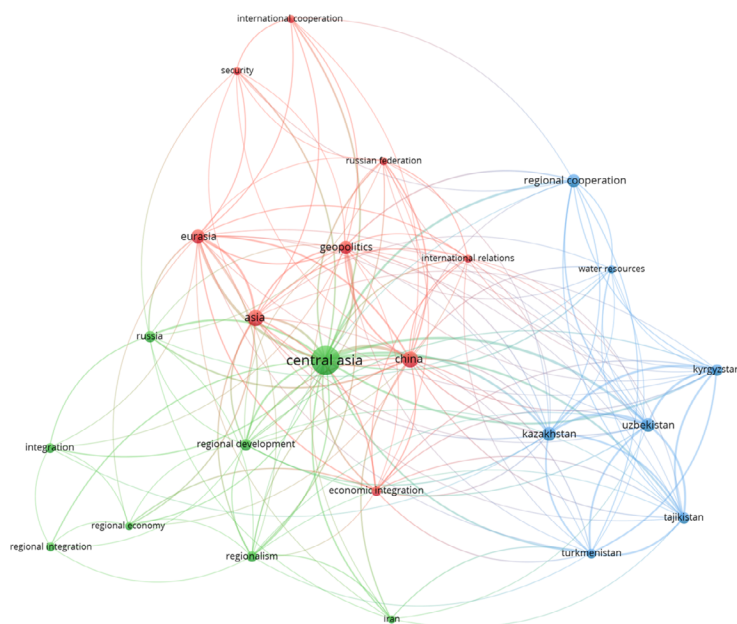
Keyword Co-Occurrence Analysis

The keyword co-occurrence network displayed in Figure 6 (generated using VOSviewer) illustrates the frequency with which specific keywords appeared in the 101 analyzed articles. This visualization technique enables easy identification of trending topics within a research field by examining the relationships between frequently used keywords. (Gao et al., 2021). To analyze keyword co-occurrence, we established a minimum threshold of five occurrences for each keyword. This resulted in a network of 24 keywords meeting the criteria, out of a total of 405 keywords in the database (including both author keywords and keywords plus). In the co-occurrence network, node size represents the frequency of keyword appearance in the articles. The network is composed of three keyword clusters, each denoted by a different color, representing groupings of related topics across the articles (Gao et al., 2021). This network visualization showcases prominent topics (represented by nodes) and their interconnections (depicted by lines) (Echchakoui, 2020). The strength of the relationship between two terms is indicated by their co-occurrence frequency; terms with higher co-occurrence indices are positioned closer together in the network, while those with lower indices are farther apart. An analysis of the three clusters shown in the network in Figure 6 follows.

Cluster 1 (Red): Central Asian economic integration. The initial significant cluster identified comprises 9 key terms, with "economic integration" at the forefront, followed by "geopolitics" and "international cooperation". Additional crucial terms encompass "international relations", "Eurasia", "China", "Russian Federation", and

"security". This cluster therefore represents investigations into the interplay between economic integration, international cooperation, and external players. It examines how the economic collaboration among Central Asian nations is linked to factors such as security concerns, geopolitical dynamics, and the impact of outside forces.

Figure 6. Visualization of keyword co-occurrence network



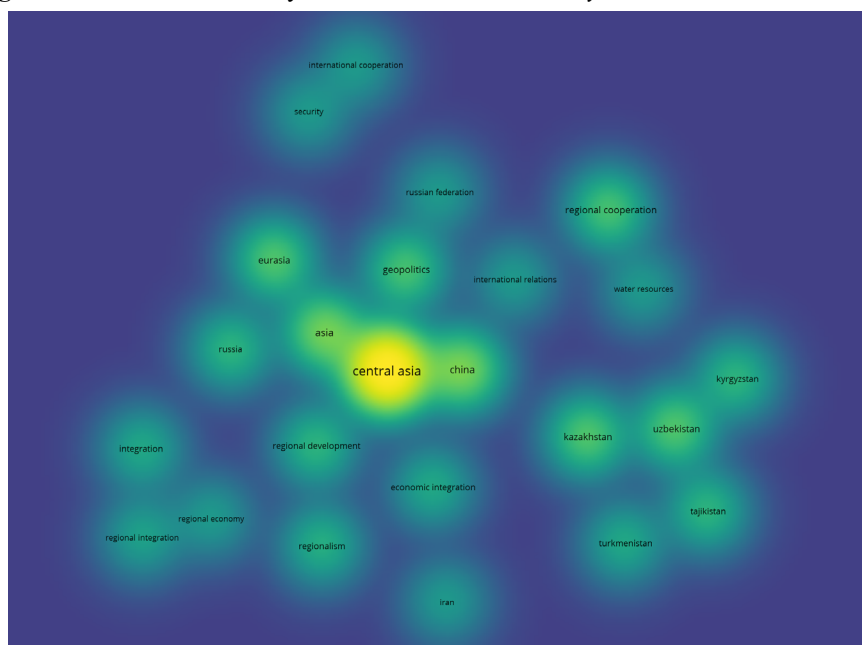
Source: compiled by the authors based on multiple sources from Scopus using VOSviewer

Cluster 2 (Green): Regional development in Central Asia. The second main group comprises 8 key terms, with "Central Asia" as the leading keyword, closely followed by "regional development," both showing the highest frequency of co-occurrence. This group also encompasses phrases such as "regional economy," "regionalism," "regional integration," "integration," "Russia," and "Iran." The composition of this cluster indicates that the research in this area primarily concentrates on the efforts toward regional development and integration within Central Asia. Terms such as "Russia," and "Iran" reflect the influence of external actors who impact the region.

Cluster 3 (Blue): Five Central Asian countries and regional cooperation on water resources. The third major grouping consists of 7 keywords which are led by the term "regional cooperation" followed by "water resources" and the names of Central Asian states. The names of all five Central Asian countries are one of the main pillars of the research topic. During the review of the general literature, the relevance of such topics as the effective use of water resources, and the solution of mutual problems was noted. Therefore, the topic of cooperation in the field of water sources is becoming a priority in this cluster.

A density visualization of the network comprising 24 keywords or topics is presented in Figure 7, which corresponds to the network shown in Figure 6. This visualization employs dark yellow coloration to emphasize the most concentrated areas within the network, allowing for quick identification of the primary topics in research on Central Asian integration. As depicted in Figure 6, the network's core area is the most crucial, encompassing subjects such as "Central Asia", "geopolitics", "China", "Eurasia", "regional cooperation", "regional development", and names of countries in the region. Conversely, areas of lighter yellow indicate topics that have received less attention in the literature, including "international cooperation" and "security", among others. The information presented in the figure suggests that among the main subjects addressed in the analyzed articles, the efforts for cooperation of Central Asian countries and their desire for regional development are particularly relevant.

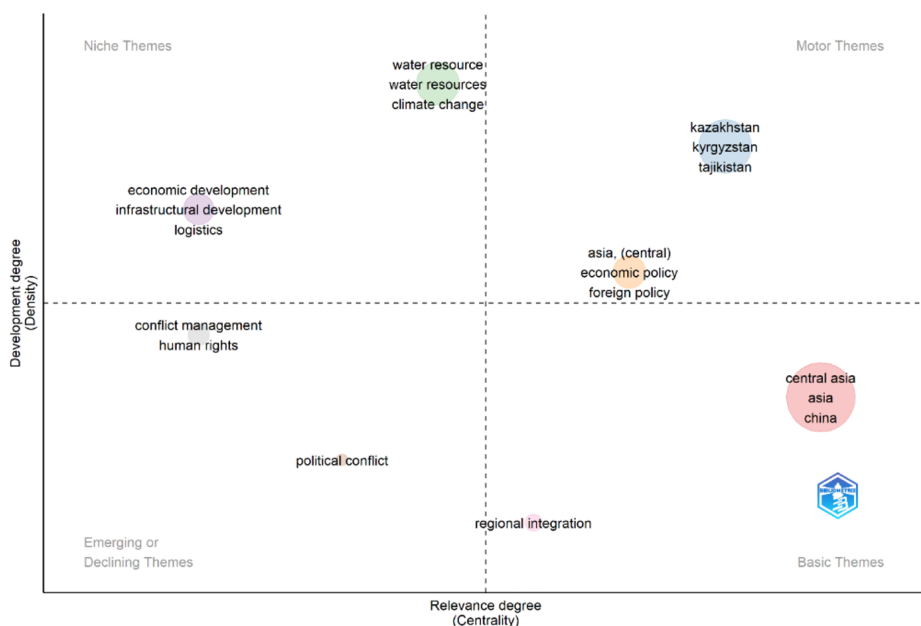
Figure 7. Visualization of keyword co-occurrence density



Source: compiled by the authors based on multiple sources from Scopus using VOSviewer

The Most Frequented Words: Wordcloud Analysis

Another type of analysis developed in the course of bibliometric analysis was devoted to content analysis. In 101 selected articles, the most targeted words and thematic map were identified using the Biblioshiny platform. Figure 8 shows the analysis of WordCloud created using the Biblioshiny platform. Words with more area in the image are the most frequently repeated. The size of each word in the analysis varies according to its repetition frequency. Among the most frequently repeated words are terms such as “Central Asia”, “Eurasia”, “regional development”, “economic integration”, “China”, and “regionalism”.

Figure 9. Thematic map

Source: compiled by the authors based on multiple sources from Scopus using Biblioshiny

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study sought to identify the main thematic areas of scientific literature concerning integration issues in Central Asia and to trace their evolution through bibliometric analysis. The results demonstrate the dynamics of research development across various aspects of Central Asian integration, highlighting key scientific clusters, and emerging research areas. Several important trends were identified during the bibliometric analysis. Firstly, regional economic and trade relations, as well as regional development, are significant areas of research. Secondly, topics related to water management and cross-border environmental issues frequently arise among the topical clusters. This indicates that Central Asia's reliance on natural resources and their impact on integration processes are focal points for researchers. Thirdly, newly identified directions during the study, including economic development and enhancements in transport and logistics infrastructure, suggest that new opportunities and challenges are emerging within the framework of Central Asian integration. These areas are likely to become important research focuses in the future.

Overall, the variety of thematic networks in the literature examining integration processes highlights the complex nature of regional cooperation. Future research should also encompass the institutional structure, legal framework, and socio-cultural aspects of integration. It is essential to acknowledge that the integration process, aimed at addressing specific economic challenges while requiring a holistic approach, will

ultimately be beneficial. Such research could serve as a foundation for developing effective solutions to deepen cooperation in the region.

This analysis will enhance understanding of the current state of research on integration processes in Central Asia and identify priority areas for future investigation. It is crucial to effectively leverage new opportunities for regional integration to ensure sustainable development and economic growth in the region.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

GY: conceptualization and data curation, formal analysis and investigation, resources, visualization, writing – original draft; AD: project administration, resources, supervision; RL: methodology, software, validation, writing – review & editing.

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ASSESSING THE IMAGE OF THE REPUBLIC OF IRAQ IN KAZAKH MEDIA: RESULTS FROM THE CONTENT ANALYSIS

ZARINA MUKASHEVA^{1*} ,
JABER NAJM ABDULLAH AL-TEMIMI²

¹ PhD student of International Relations Department,
L.N.Gumilyov Eurasian National University, Kazakhstan

² PhD, Chargé d'Affaires of the Embassy of the Republic of Iraq in
Astana, Kazakhstan

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ABSTRACT. *Media has the power to shape a country's image and influence public perceptions. The Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Iraq established diplomatic relations in 1995, and since then, both countries have been working to improve their ties. This article examines the recent media representation of the Republic of Iraq in Kazakhstani media from 2017 to 2025.*

The purpose of this article is to analyze how the Republic of Iraq is perceived in Kazakh media and what kind of image is being created, using both quantitative and qualitative content analysis conducted manually.

The theoretical framework is grounded in the concept of image theory, providing a literature review on the perception of the Republic of Iraq abroad, and highlighting the background of bilateral relations. The findings, derived from an empirical content analysis of Kazakh news outlets, indicate that Kazakh media predominantly presents a negative image of Iraq.

KEYWORDS: *media image of Iraq, Kazakh media, Kazakh-Iraqi relations, content analysis.*

INTRODUCTION

Kazakhstan and Iraq established diplomatic relations at the level of non-resident embassies in 1995. Iraq opened a resident embassy in Kazakhstan in 2008, which marked a significant step in strengthening their relationship. The Middle East and Gulf countries are key partners for Kazakhstan (Ayupova et al., 2019). Both nations share a mutual interest in combating terrorism and enhancing regional stability. There is potential for economic cooperation despite logistical challenges, and collaboration also extends to scientific fields.

Moreover, Kazakhstan and Iraq work together in organizations such as the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and the Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia (CICA), as well as through bilateral engagements within the United Nations and its specialized agencies.

Theoretical and practical understanding of the media image of the country plays a crucial role in public perceptions. Situated between political elites and society, it serves as a key

*Correspondence to: Zarina Mukasheva, email: ztemirova@mail.ru



force in influencing how international actors are portrayed (Elgström and Chaban, 2012), and as a consequence affects foreign policy (Soroka and Wlezien 2008). The portrayal of Iraq in media varies significantly between Western and non-Western outlets. Western media often depict Iraq as unstable and a security threat, especially post-2003 invasion, while non-Western media highlight Iraq's cultural heritage and resilience amidst foreign intervention (Dawson, 2007; Hirsh, 2013). Western narratives focus on Iraq's role in global conflicts, while non-Western outlets stress the humanitarian costs and Iraq's identity beyond the conflict (Chomsky 2003). These differing portrayals impact public perception, policy, and the global understanding of Iraq's situation, with the Western view dominating mainstream media (Dawson, 2007).

This article fills a research gap by relying on an empirical study that applies both quantitative and qualitative content analysis, focusing on the tone of news articles from Kazinform.kz, a state-run media outlet in Kazakhstan, for the period from 2017 to 2025. We apply the research method of visibility and valence (Manheim and Albritton, 1983) which reflects the number of articles published on the topic per each year and their tone. We aim to answer the following research question: *How does Kazinform.kz, a Kazakh state-run media outlet, shape the image of the Republic of Iraq from 2017 to 2025, and to what extent does it align with Western stereotypes, potentially influencing mutual relations?* This question captures the central theme of the research by linking media content analysis with broader implications for diplomatic and economic ties. We also investigate the hypothesis that Kazakh media contributes to a negative image of the Republic of Iraq by following prevalent Western stereotypes. Furthermore, the article argues that negative media coverage acts as an obstacle to greater bilateral cooperation. Despite many years of diplomatic ties between Kazakhstan and Iraq, negative media portrayals may hinder deeper cooperation, especially in areas like trade, investment, and cultural exchange. If Iraq is persistently framed in a negative light, it may contribute to public skepticism or hesitation in strengthening bilateral ties. The main objective of this article is to analyze the results of content analysis of the collected data, uncover the perspective and orientation of news about the Republic of Iraq in the Kazakhstani media, and explore the image that the media creates of Iraq in Kazakhstan.

We found that articles covering Iraq in Kazakhstani media were predominantly negative. Most of these news pieces focused on negative events, particularly the country's challenges with terrorism at the time, while many significant positive events were overlooked by the media.

The structure of the article is as follows: it begins with a theoretical foundation that explains the concepts of country image and media image, followed by a literature review of Iraq's image abroad, and a brief background on Iraq-Kazakhstan ties. The next section details the methodological approach of the study, while the final sections discuss the findings from a content analysis conducted on various media outlets in Kazakhstan.

Theoretical explanation of the terms “country image” and “mass media image” and its influence on the foreign policy

Research in the field of country imageology is primarily interdisciplinary. Although various approaches can be categorized based on their objectives and methodologies,

these distinctions tend to be broad. Some studies concentrate on theoretical aspects of image formation (Perelygina, 2002; Kubryakova, 2008; Popova and Zaripov, 2017, etc.), while others explore the topic from historical and cultural perspectives (Kalyuzhnaya, 2006; Rozhkov & Kismereshkin, 2008, etc.). Research on country image is also conducted within political psychology (Shestopal, 2002; Zaburdaeva, 2012; Derkach and Perelygina, 2006, etc.), as well as from the viewpoints of economics, management, and marketing (Pochepcov, 2006; Strel'cov & Sil'nickij, 2008, etc.). Sociological studies on country image are of practical relevance, especially in examining the social factors that influence its formation.

Image theory, initially developed within American academia to analyze perceptions during the Cold War, focused mainly on the U.S. view of the Soviet Union as an adversary (Silverstein, 1989). This “enemy image” was shaped by deep suspicion and served as a cognitive shortcut for decision-makers in international relations. Such biased perceptions often influenced state actions more than objective facts. Beyond the Cold War, image theory remains relevant in understanding how states perceive each other and the role of these perceptions in shaping foreign policy. The theory emphasizes that subjective interpretations, rather than objective realities, often drive state behavior (Herrmann, 1995).

In historical contexts like the Cold War, image theory explained how adversarial narratives were formed and maintained. Today, it remains a useful tool for analyzing both longstanding rivalries and emerging global issues, providing insight into the role of perception in international relations.

Following the Cold War, the “enemy image” became less central, and new frameworks emerged to address changing global dynamics. Image theory adapted to analyze post-Cold War challenges, such as counterterrorism and national security policies, demonstrating its ongoing relevance in a complex geopolitical landscape. By evolving with contemporary issues, image theory continues to offer valuable insights into the relationship between perception and action in modern international relations (Herrmann, 1995).

According to some scholars, a country's image can be defined as “a collection of all descriptive, inferential, and informational beliefs about a specific country” (Martin & Eroglu, 1993: 193) or as “the sum of people's beliefs, ideas, and impressions about a given country” (Haider & Rein, 1993: 141).

In recent years, there has been growing attention to the role of mass media in shaping a country's image. Contemporary research often defines media image as “the set of emotional and rational views based on information received from the media” or as “a particular portrayal of reality presented to the mass audience by the media industry” (Galinskaya, 2013: 91-94). We adopt a more specific interpretation of this concept, considering media images as “fragments of reality described in professional journalists' texts, reflecting their worldview, values, political preferences, and psychological characteristics” (Galinskaya, 2013: 91).

In today's society, mass media texts, when presented in a specific manner, have become one of the primary sources of stereotypes. As Olshanskij (2001) notes, certain patterns

hold significant weight in how audiences assess social and political processes, playing both positive and negative roles. Lippman (2004) argues that images in the media influence how people perceive reality, contributing to the development of stereotypes that are difficult to dispel. He asserts that, whether accurate or not, these images shape our imagination and lead to persistent stereotypes, particularly political patterns, which are often beyond the empirical experience of the audience and therefore tend to be more enduring.

Furthermore, media plays a crucial role in shaping public attitudes and, in turn, influencing foreign policy outcomes (Baum & Potter 2008). Media serves as a crucial intermediary between political elites and the public, shaping perceptions through framing, agenda-setting, and priming. By emphasizing certain narratives and omitting others, the media can construct a country's image in ways that influence public opinion. This, in turn, affects foreign policy decisions, as democratic leaders are often responsive to public sentiment. In non-democratic or hybrid regimes, media still plays a role in legitimizing or contesting state-driven foreign policy narratives, reinforcing strategic interests through selective coverage (Baum & Potter 2008). As a consequence, negative sentiments in media coverage may hinder opportunities for deeper cooperation and create obstacles to fostering relations based on mutual trust among political elites and business circles (Lippmann 2017; Sorokka & Wlezien 2008; Baum & Potter 2008).

LITERATURE REVIEW ON THE IMAGE OF THE REPUBLIC OF IRAQ ABROAD

The media portrayal of Iraq has been shaped by geopolitical, cultural, and ideological factors, resulting in starkly different representations between Western and non-Western media outlets. These portrayals not only influence public opinion but also shape foreign policy decisions. However, while numerous studies have examined media narratives about Iraq, there remains a gap in critically assessing how these narratives contribute to broader discourses on international relations, media framing, and political communication. This study seeks to address these gaps by engaging with theories of media representation, agenda-setting, and discourse analysis.

The portrayal of Iraq in Western media has largely centered on themes of conflict, threat, and instability, particularly following the Gulf War (1991), the 2003 U.S.-led invasion, and the rise of ISIS in 2014. Scholars such as Chomsky (2003) argue that Iraq was framed as a security threat, particularly through narratives surrounding weapons of mass destruction and terrorism, which played a critical role in justifying military intervention. Dawson (2007) and Lynch (2007) further highlight how the media contributed to a climate of fear by consistently emphasizing instability and violence, reinforcing public support for interventionist policies.

However, this security-focused framing has been criticized for its reductionist approach, as it often overlooks Iraq's economic potential, cultural heritage, and the lived experiences of its citizens (Zinczenko, 2014; Kaldor, 2007). Said (1978) argues that Western media representations of the Middle East—including Iraq—have been shaped by Orientalist perspectives, which depict the region as backward, chaotic, and in need of Western intervention. This aligns with agenda-setting theory, which suggests that media coverage not only reflects but actively shapes public perceptions and policy priorities (McCombs and Shaw, 1972).

In contrast, non-Western media outlets, particularly those in the Arab world, have framed Iraq's struggles within a broader geopolitical context. Rather than portraying Iraq as a failed state, these outlets emphasize the socio-political consequences of foreign intervention, the resilience of the Iraqi people, and the historical and cultural significance of the nation (Hirsh, 2013; Fawaz, 2003). Gerges (2016) notes that Arab media coverage often highlights Iraq's role in regional power struggles, presenting alternative narratives that challenge the dominant Western discourse. This aligns with research on counter-framing, which suggests that non-Western narratives actively resist and reframe dominant Western perspectives (Entman, 2007).

To fully understand the contrasting portrayals of Iraq, it is essential to situate the discussion within key theoretical frameworks. Agenda-setting theory (McCombs & Shaw, 1972) helps explain how media coverage prioritizes certain narratives over others, shaping public perception and policy debates. Similarly, framing theory (Entman, 1993) illustrates how media outlets construct meaning through a selective emphasis on particular themes and perspectives. Western media, for instance, have framed Iraq predominantly through a lens of security and crisis, while non-Western media have framed it in terms of resistance, resilience, and foreign intervention.

Additionally, discourse analysis provides insights into how language, imagery, and rhetoric influence perceptions of Iraq. Foucault's (1972) concept of discourse highlights how power relations are embedded in media narratives, shaping the way audiences interpret global events. The securitization theory (Buzan et al., 1998) further supports this by demonstrating how media discourses transform political issues into existential threats, justifying extraordinary measures such as military intervention. These frameworks provide a critical lens through which to evaluate existing media portrayals and highlight the implications of such representations for international relations.

While previous studies have extensively analyzed Western media's depiction of Iraq, there is a lack of research that systematically compares these representations with those in non-Western media. This study fills the gap by critically engaging with both Western and non-Western media narratives, applying a structured theoretical framework to assess their broader implications.

Moreover, while research has explored the political consequences of media portrayals (e.g., support for military intervention), less attention has been given to how these portrayals shape cultural perceptions and Kazakh or Central Asian discourses on Iraq. By incorporating perspectives from political communication and international relations, this study aims to provide a more comprehensive understanding of how Iraq is framed in Kazakh media and the implications of these narratives for local policymaking and public opinion.

Media representations of Iraq in both Western and non-Western outlets are deeply influenced by ideological, political, and cultural factors. While Western media have predominantly focused on conflict and security threats, non-Western media have presented alternative narratives that emphasize Iraq's cultural heritage, resilience, and the impact of foreign intervention. By engaging critically with theories of media framing, discourse analysis, and agenda-setting, this study enhances our understanding

of how Kazakh media portrayals shape local perceptions, which in turn influence policy decisions. This research bridges existing gaps and contributes to ongoing debates in media studies, political communication, and international relations.

BILATERAL RELATIONS OF THE REPUBLIC OF IRAQ AND THE REPUBLIC OF KAZAKHSTAN

Since the establishment of official diplomatic relations in 1995, Kazakhstan and Iraq have worked to strengthen their cooperation. The two countries have maintained an ongoing diplomatic dialogue, exchanged political views on numerous issues, and sought to deepen their bilateral engagement.

Kazakhstan's involvement with Iraq aligns with its broader policy in the Middle East, which prioritizes stability, economic cooperation, and energy security. Both countries share common interests in combating terrorism and promoting regional stability. Although economic cooperation between Kazakhstan and Iraq remains modest, it shows signs of potential growth, particularly given the mutual willingness to expand ties.

The historical and cultural connections between the peoples of Kazakhstan and Iraq—and more broadly, between the peoples of Central Asia and Iraq—date back centuries. Many individuals from the region studied in Baghdad during the Abbasid era, which lasted from the 8th to the 13th century. During this period, Baghdad served as the capital of a vast empire extending from Europe in the west to the borders of China in the east. Prominent leaders of the Abbasid state, including Qutayba ibn Muslim al-Bahili from Iraq, were instrumental in the Islamic expansion into Central Asia. Furthermore, numerous philosophers, scholars, and students from Central Asia resided and studied in Baghdad, including the renowned philosopher and scientist Abu Nasr Al-Farabi (Anarbayev et al., 2016).

Moreover, Iraq is geographically one of the closest Arab countries to Kazakhstan. These historical and geographic factors have contributed to long-standing ties and cultural affinities between the two nations.

Furthermore, both countries continue cooperation within the framework of the United Nations Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), and Conference on Interaction and Confidence Building Measures in Asia (CICA). Iraq's cooperative approach toward Central Asia aligns with Kazakhstan's interest in expanding its presence in Middle Eastern markets, particularly through projects that align with its 2050 development strategy, which seeks to diversify Kazakhstan's economic ties (Hirsh, 2013).

The bilateral relationship between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Iraq is characterized by both opportunities and challenges. While political relations are stable and continue to grow, economic cooperation remains constrained by logistical barriers that hinder trade. Although cultural exchanges are limited, they serve as an important channel for strengthening ties between the two nations.

Furthermore, the success of this bilateral relationship depends on the ability of both countries to overcome internal and external challenges and to capitalize on their shared interests in regional stability and development. Despite certain obstacles to expanding bilateral relations—particularly in the economic sphere—several key positive factors

support their development. Chief among these is the mutual desire to strengthen cooperation, along with the presence of numerous opportunities and resources that facilitate closer engagement.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH AND LIMITATIONS

This study employs both quantitative and qualitative content analysis to examine media portrayals of Iraq in news articles from 2017 to 2025. The dataset was collected manually, using the keyword “Iraq” to retrieve relevant articles in Russian, as it is a widely used language in local news consumption (Ibrayeva, 2019). The selection of articles, coding, and tone classification were conducted by a single author without the use of data analysis software. The findings are presented in tables to illustrate the proportion, frequency, and sentiment of the articles analyzed each year.

To assess visibility and valence, the study examines the frequency of articles published annually (visibility) and their sentiment (valence). The sentiment was categorized manually as positive, negative, or neutral based on the tone of the headlines. Since only one researcher conducted the classification, no intercoder reliability test was performed. The subjective nature of tone identification is recognized as a limitation of this study.

While this methodology allows for a systematic examination of media representation, several limitations should be noted:

1. Subjectivity in categorization – the classification of articles based on their tone was conducted manually by a single author, introducing the potential for bias in interpreting sentiments. Different researchers might categorize specific headlines differently.
2. Absence of intercoder reliability testing – as only one researcher performed the sorting and analysis, no reliability test was conducted to evaluate consistency across multiple coders, limiting the study’s reproducibility.
3. Selection bias in data collection – the study focuses exclusively on articles published by Kazinform.kz, a state-run media outlet, which may not represent the full spectrum of perspectives within Kazakh media or the broader regional coverage.
4. Lack of automated data processing – since all data collection, sorting, and analysis were done manually without computational tools, the study may have limitations in terms of scalability and objectivity compared to automated sentiment analysis methods.

Despite these limitations, the study provides valuable insights into media portrayals of Iraq over time. Future research could benefit from expanding the dataset to include multiple media sources and employing automated sentiment analysis for increased reliability.

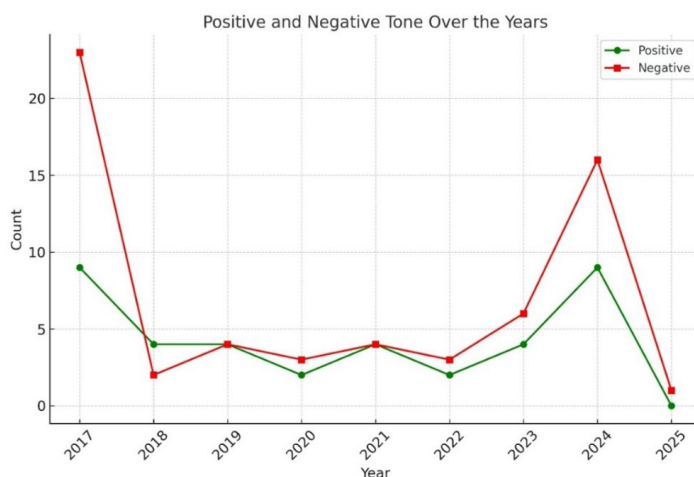
MAIN FINDINGS

The data presented in the table reveals the portrayal of Iraq in Kazakh media from 2017 to 2025, focusing on the balance between positive and negative tones. Over this period, the total number of positive portrayals amounted to 38, while negative portrayals were significantly higher, totaling 62, which means 100 news pieces were collected during the media content analysis. This disparity indicates a prevailing tendency in Kazakh media toward presenting Iraq in a more critical light, with a clear dominance of negative coverage.

Table 1. Positive and negative valence in Kazakh media coverage. Authors' elaboration

Tone/ Year	2025	2024	2023	2022	2021	2020	2019	2018	2017	Total
+	0	9	4	2	4	2	4	4	9	38
-	1	16	6	3	4	3	4	2	23	62
Total	1	25	10	5	8	5	8	6	32	100

Source: compiled by the authors

Graph 1. The portrayal of Iraq in Kazakh media from 2017 to 2025

Source: authors' elaboration

In the year-by-year breakdown, the portrayal of Iraq remained largely negative throughout the period, with only a few years showing slight deviations from this trend. In 2024, the number of negative depictions was more than double the number of positive ones, highlighting a strong inclination toward critical reporting. In 2023, the gap between positive and negative tones was somewhat narrower, but negative portrayals still outweighed positive ones. In contrast, 2022 showed a relatively balanced tone, with a marginal difference between positive and negative coverage. However, the year 2021 marked an exception with an equal number of positive and negative portrayals, indicating a shift toward a more neutral approach during that period.

In 2020, negative portrayals of Iraq outnumbered positive ones, continuing a dominant trend. In 2019, the media exhibited a balance between positive and negative portrayals, yet the overall tone remained cautious. The year 2018 showed a slightly more positive perspective, but it still did not outweigh the negative aspects. Lastly, 2017 recorded the highest number of negative portrayals, reflecting a general focus on Iraq's security challenges and political instability.

Although there was some positive coverage related to diplomatic relations, humanitarian efforts, or reconstruction initiatives in Iraq, the overall trend highlights the complex

and often critical portrayal of Iraq in Kazakhstani media. This portrayal is influenced by various factors that shape media focus and narratives.

DISCUSSION OF THE RESULTS

The tendency to depict Iraq negatively in Kazakhstani media can be linked to ongoing security issues within the country. The period leading up to 2017 was marked by a major war against the terrorist organization ISIS, which carried out deadly attacks until it was defeated and expelled from most Iraqi territories that year.

As discussed in the theoretical section, media framing plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions of foreign states, often reinforcing existing stereotypes and geopolitical narratives (McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Entman, 1993). The concept of media-driven agenda-setting suggests that the repeated emphasis on Iraq's security problems and political instability contributes to a perception of Iraq as a fragile or conflict-ridden state, limiting alternative perspectives on the country's development and diplomatic efforts.

This pattern of framing aligns with Western media portrayals of Iraq, which have historically concentrated on themes of war, terrorism, and instability, often neglecting aspects such as Iraq's economic recovery, cultural heritage, or diplomatic engagements (Chomsky, 2003; Lynch, 2007). The presence of similar framing in Kazakhstani media answers the research question about the extent to which international narratives shape local media coverage. Since Iraq has often been a focal point of global media attention, typically in a negative context due to conflict and instability, Kazakhstani media reshape these narratives for their domestic audience.

However, this study also identified occasional instances of positive coverage, particularly in relation to diplomatic relations, humanitarian aid, and economic cooperation. This suggests that while security concerns dominate the portrayal, there is also recognition of Iraq's efforts in reconstruction and its role in international partnerships. This aligns with research highlighting the role of selective framing in shaping public perceptions, where certain aspects of a country's image are emphasized while others remain underrepresented (Gerges, 2016; Entman, 2007).

As media plays a crucial role in shaping public perceptions, the predominantly negative portrayal of Iraq may contribute to a cautious approach toward Kazakhstan's engagement with the country. This negative perception may discourage deeper economic and political ties, as businesses and policymakers could view engagement with Iraq as a high-risk endeavor.

However, the existence of some positive portrayals – especially in the context of diplomatic and humanitarian cooperation—suggests opportunities for fostering stronger bilateral relations. Kazakhstan has previously shown interest in supporting stabilization efforts in Iraq, including through humanitarian aid and diplomatic initiatives. If media narratives begin to incorporate more coverage of Iraq's economic recovery and regional partnerships, this could help cultivate a more nuanced and balanced perception of the country, encouraging greater engagement between Kazakhstan and Iraq.

From a policy perspective, Kazakhstan's foreign policy strategy emphasizes regional cooperation, multilateral diplomacy, and economic diversification. A more diversified media portrayal of Iraq could facilitate initiatives aimed at expanding trade, investment, and cultural exchanges between the two nations. Additionally, increased government or diplomatic communication efforts that highlight positive aspects of Iraq's development could help counterbalance the prevailing negative framing in media narratives.

A significant challenge is the absence of permanent Kazakhstani media offices or other dedicated sources for gathering information in Iraq. This lack of direct access hinders the accuracy and balance of news coverage. Many media outlets rely on second-hand reports from other sources, often available online, leading to repeated narratives that may lack objectivity. Notably, there was no indication that any Kazakhstani media outlet traveled to Iraq during the study period to independently investigate developments on the ground, particularly the many positive transformations occurring in the country.

In response, the Embassy of the Republic of Iraq in Kazakhstan actively works to clarify key facts and highlight Iraq's significant progress. This includes the country's economic potential, strong international relations, and political and economic growth. Additionally, Iraq has made strides in fostering a democratic environment, ensuring freedom of the press and expression, and achieving major advancements in women's rights.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to ongoing discussions about the role of media in shaping international perceptions and influencing foreign policy decision-making. As Baum and Potter (2008) argue, media coverage acts as a crucial intermediary between political elites and the public, affecting both public sentiment and foreign policy choices.

The research successfully achieved its primary objective of analyzing the portrayal of Iraq in Kazakh state-run media from 2017 to 2025. By employing a combination of quantitative and qualitative content analysis, the study identified a consistent trend of predominantly negative coverage, reinforcing the hypothesis that Iraq is depicted more critically than positively. These findings highlight the impact of security considerations on media narratives and the broader role of mass media in shaping public perceptions of foreign nations.

By providing an empirical assessment of how Iraq is represented in Kazakhstan – an area largely unexplored in academic discourse – this study fills a significant research gap. The application of the visibility and valence framework allowed for a systematic evaluation of both the frequency and tone of coverage, offering valuable insights into the dynamics of international media representation.

Moreover, the research confirms its main hypothesis: Kazakh media shapes a negative image of the Republic of Iraq, largely reflecting Western stereotypes. Additionally, the findings suggest that negative media coverage acts as a barrier to deeper cooperation, especially in areas like trade, investment, and cultural exchange.

While the study highlights the predominance of negative portrayals, it also notes occasional positive depictions, which could create opportunities for enhanced

engagement and cooperation between Kazakhstan and Iraq. These findings hold implications not only for bilateral relations but also for understanding the broader mechanisms through which media influences foreign policy perceptions.

Future research could expand on this work by conducting comparative analyses across other Central Asian media outlets or exploring how these portrayals affect public opinion and policymaking. A deeper investigation into the factors shaping media narratives would further contribute to the discourse on international image-building and the media's influence in global affairs.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

none

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

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

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These deadlines ensure that your work can be considered for the issue that best fits your submission timing and allows for ample time for the peer review and publication process. We encourage authors to submit their manuscripts well in advance of these deadlines to facilitate a smooth review process.

SUBMISSION TYPES AND GUIDELINES:

Empirical or Theoretical Study Paper (ETS) based on research by one or more authors.

Abstract (maximum of 300 words). This should provide a brief summary of the context, rationale, aims, methods, results (if applicable), and contribution and implications of your research.

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Literature Review that should critically survey relevant literature,
Methodology that should include the data collection and data analysis methods,

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Conclusion that focuses on the potential implications of the research.

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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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