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# CONTENT

№24 (1) | SPRING 2026



## ORIGINAL ARTICLES

Patterns of Traditionalization of Society in Uzbekistan:  
Conflicting and Concurring Discourses on the Old and the New  
**AZIZ ELMURADOV & ANDREAS VASILACHE**  
4

Formation of Anti-Corruption Culture in Kazakhstan:  
The Influence of Media  
**ADILET BAKTYBAY, MOLDIR AKMADI  
& DAUREN NESSIPKALIYEV**  
27

Executive Power and Political Corruption in Central Asian  
Turkic States: A Comparative Analysis  
**BATUHAN SARP TUMER & AHMET FURKAN CIHANGIROGLU**  
42

Performance of Public Councils in Kyrgyzstan  
**GULNUR MAKULBAYEVA, ZHULDYZ DAVLETBAYEVA,  
MERGEN DYUSSENOV & LIRA RAISSOVA**  
58

## REVIEW ARTICLES

The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and the Collective Security  
Treaty Organization: A Comparative Analysis  
**ARA HEMN MAHMOOD**  
73

At the Crossroads of Climate Challenges: The Potential of Green Energy  
as the Foundation for Sustainable Development in Tajikistan  
**MARUF KHAMIDOV**  
82



# PATTERNS OF TRADITIONALIZATION OF SOCIETY IN UZBEKISTAN: CONFLICTING AND CONCURRING DISCOURSES ON THE OLD AND THE NEW

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**ABSTRACT.** *Traditionalization of society has become a major trend in Uzbekistan over recent years. Bearing on a set of discursive strategies pertaining to social struggle over legitimization as well as mechanisms of grappling with impacts of globalization, the resurgence of traditionalization clearly presents one of the most significant paradigms underlying societal change in Uzbekistan. In this article, we set out to explore this shift and its structural characteristic traits. After a brief introduction that includes some empirical, conceptual, and methodological considerations, we will, first, work out a compact analytical framework in which we maintain that tradition and its manifestations hinge on the realm of the social and are, in fact, more fluid and dynamic than commonly assumed. Second, considering the inseparable link between tradition and patriarchy, we will show how patrimonial as well as patriarchal structures reinforce and legitimize the discourse of tradition. Based on these critical considerations, we will, third, discuss the traditionalist resurgence in Uzbekistan and shed light on its implications.*

**KEYWORDS:** *traditionalization, tradition, state and society, subject, power and security, Uzbekistan, Central Asia.*

## INTRODUCTION: EMPIRICAL, CONCEPTUAL, AND METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Traditionalization of society has become a major trend in Uzbekistan over recent years. While this trend is particularly remarkable in light of the coming to power of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016, it cannot be conceived as a necessary or inevitable outcome of his policies. Indeed, policies of recent years under Mirziyoyev have contributed to a significant opening up of the public discursive space in a broader sense, also including traditionalist views and attitudes. That notwithstanding, the traditionalist turn is a remarkable development worthy of thorough investigation in its own right. At the most basic level, collective predispositions towards traditionalization rest with the commonplace and ordinary sites of daily life, value, and belief systems. It has its roots in familiar reiterations, repertoires, and replications that go beyond day-to-day politics and wield enormous symbolic power over processes of social transformation across all walks of life. At the macro level, growing affinity towards traditionalism may

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be conceived as a part and parcel of broader global forces at play in which recourse to traditional values, norms, practices, beliefs, attitudes, and a relatively high degree of religiosity seem to garner an increasing support across tradition-oriented parts of societies. This often takes place in reaction to what is perceived to be challenges and risks posed by cultural globalization (cf. Vasilache, 2025). Therefore, the resurgence of traditionalization bears simultaneously on strategies of local struggles over social legitimization as well as on mechanisms, in the broader sense, of grappling with the wide-ranging impacts of globalization.

The traditionalist turn is a relatively new trend in which appeal to tradition has become a vibrant part of the public imagination and an important point of reference for social change for all kinds of actors across the entire politico-cultural spectrum. This broad variety of actors includes, *inter alia*, national elites, diverse conservative segments in society, religious leaders, various disseminators of Muslim beliefs and ways of life, civil society networks and activists (see e.g., Peyrouse & Nasritdinov, 2021; Saini, 2024), and a new and nascent intelligentsia. Focusing on the traditionalist turn, in this article, we aim to make the following threefold contribution. Firstly, we work out a brief analytical framework in which we hold that since tradition hinges on the realm of the social and entails no self-evident or clear-cut meaning, tradition and its manifestations in societal discourses are in fact more fluid and dynamic than commonly assumed. Tradition is, in fact, inseparable from the present, and in being so, change is a defining underlying element of any traditionalist discourse. Therefore, however counterintuitive, traditionalist discourses invariably entail elements of creation and invention. Secondly, on the basis of these critical considerations about the notion of tradition and the resulting heuristic framework of traditionalization, we will discuss the link between tradition and patriarchy, and we will show how patrimonial as well as patriarchal structures reinforce and legitimize the discourse of tradition. Thereby, we will, thirdly, focus on Uzbekistan as an illustrative example and try to uncover the main character traits of the traditionalist resurgence in the country.

While a fair amount of discussion has focused on what tradition means in the current Central Asian context (cf. e.g., Beyer & Finke, 2019; Beyer & Kojobekova, 2019; Cleuziou, 2019; Müller, 2019; Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2021), little attention has been paid to exploring traditionalization in Uzbekistan. At the same time, Uzbek society is the largest in post-Soviet Central Asia with a considerable impact in the region and on neighboring societal discourses. That said, we are interested in conceptions of traditionalization in Uzbekistan, understood as processes and discourses that reveal social struggles over ideas of commonly acceptable and legitimate social order and reflect upon ideas and ideologies of proper subjectivity and society, thereby ultimately molding ideas of power. When discursive invocations of the traditional increasingly serve as a collective frame of reference in diagnosing and addressing social problems across different layers of social strata, how then do such narrative appeals relate to the ways in which power is claimed, wielded, or contested? Our starting point is that the concept of tradition is inseparable from the idea and experience of power, both as discursively constructed and as a commonly claimed set of rules.

By combining theoretical insights with empirical investigation, our purpose is not semantic, that is, outlining the various ways in which the concept of tradition is used, or should be used. Our purpose is also not to merely discuss the process of traditionalization as such, but to attempt to shed light on the broader background conditions that underlie its emergence. The approach we adopt originates from an interest in addressing a significant lacuna in research on traditionalization in Uzbekistan (see also Elmuradov, 2024), namely, providing insights into ways the discourse of tradition interacts with patrimonialism, on the one hand and with nation-state building efforts undertaken by national elites, on the other hand. In doing so, we aim to provide a contribution towards understanding some of the important politico-sociological undercurrents at play.

That said, the article is structured in the following way. We will start by engaging in theoretical considerations on the invention of tradition and inquiring into the intimate relationship of tradition with the present. We will expand the theoretical discussion of this link with the Foucauldian concept of discursive power as creative production. Then we will show that there is another inseparable link, namely between tradition and patriarchy, and that this link is underlined by a complex system of beliefs that permeates virtually all aspects of social life. Thus, we also intend to cast light on patrimonialism, but also patriarchal thinking within society,<sup>1</sup> and how they influence the politics of traditionalist resurgence. Finally, based on these twofold theoretical considerations, we will take a look at patterns of traditionalization in Uzbekistan. While this will deliberately not be an empirical analysis, Uzbekistan is both a relevant and illuminative case for the interplay of traditionalization with government policies, on the one hand and social dynamics, on the other hand, as well as for both the parallelism and ambivalence of traditionalization and de-traditionalization patterns.

## TRADITION AND THE PRESENT

Tradition and the present stand in a complex relationship to one another. It is important to note from the outset that the concept of “tradition” by no means entails a self-evident or clear-cut meaning. It cannot be claimed that tradition is a pre-social phenomenon. Quite on the contrary, tradition hinges on the very realm of the social, its manifestations are, in fact, more fluid and dynamic than often assumed in public debates. Tradition is not only in need of constant representation in discourses, but also invariably entails the active creation of something new. It requires elements of creation not only because “traditions which appear or claim to be old are often quite recent in origin” (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 1) but also because, very importantly, tradition is inseparable from the present, and in being so, it is the present and its discursive power that is and should be a defining element in any attempt to properly address the phenomenon of tradition.

Thus, since tradition is inseparable from the present, it cannot be understood merely by looking back in time, but mainly by focusing on the present. This seemingly obvious claim entails significant analytical implications and important consequences and reveals something fundamental about the complicated relationship between tradition and the present. In spite of the fact that tradition is an inherently ambivalent phenomenon in

<sup>1</sup> While being fully aware as well as taking into account that patrimonialism and patriarchy are closely interrelated to one another (see Thomas, 2011; Ugur-Cinar, 2017), we will understand patrimonialism here in Weber’s sense (see the section on patrimonial discourses below; see also Sell, 2017) as an institutionalized pattern of legitimacy-production of organizations, while we will speak of patriarchal patterns, rationalities etc. when highlighting the societal as well as individual level.

the sense that it reflects a constant struggle over meaning, traditionalist resurgence is often presented as an attempt to uphold and keep alive an invariably centuries-old and uninterruptedly continuing set of practices, beliefs, and customs. Proponents and advocates of traditionalist discourses invoke and depict tradition as a societal resource of authenticity, eternalness, and even sacredness (see e.g., Vasilache, 2025). Tradition in this sense is invoked in temporal opposition between “the old times” and “the present” in which the former is supposed to imply the presence of tradition and thus validity and legitimacy, and the latter, the lack of it.

Tradition, according to Giddens, is a “necessarily active and interpretative concept” and “the integrity of tradition derives not from the simple fact of persistence over time but from the continuous reinterpretation that is carried out to identify the strands which bind present to past” (Giddens, 1994, p. 64). As he states, “[t]he past is not preserved but continuously reconstructed on the basis of the present” (Giddens, 1994, p. 63). Traditions may be reconstructions that are partially “individual or private”, but “at a more fundamental level they are always social” (Giddens, 1994, p. 63). There can be no purely private tradition as there can be no purely private language. Moreover, for Giddens, tradition even transcends the present since established practices are claimed to be used as a way to organize the future. In this sense, tradition is — necessarily — also a normative concept. It represents not only what “is” done in a society but also what “should be” done (Giddens, 1994, p. 65). According to Giddens, tradition is “bound up with collective memory”, involves a “formulaic notion of truth” and thus “offers a sense of ontological security to those who adhere to it” (Giddens, 1994, p. 65). In so far as tradition is not a fixed object of history, but a part of a process of identity formation, it consequently entails ontological and epistemological implications that bear important discursive significance. In this sense, and in a somewhat critical reading, one can concur that performing traditional practices entails their modification and new interpretation (cf. Anttonen, 2005, p. 35). Thus, Anttonen observes that “as processes of change, appropriation, and interpretation, and as authoritative relationships created between the present and the past, traditions appear as rhetorical constructions that denote an active and political process of creating historical meaning” (Anttonen, 2005, p. 35).

Indeed, tradition, at least in the sense we use here, is not an object of history to merely hand down from generation to generation in the manner of inherited property. Traditions permanently change, are transformed, and need to be adapted, as it were, in the course of ongoing societal renegotiations. And like any other dimension of societal transformation, the process of traditionalization entails elements of invention and creation. In order to account for the role of traditions in changing societies, the historian Eric Hobsbawm has coined the notion of the “invention of tradition” (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 2). The notion is used by Hobsbawm in a broad sense that includes traditions that are actually established only recently, but also those that are constantly (re-)constructed by different actors, as well as those that are “emerging within a brief and dateable period” (Hobsbawm, 1983). According to Hobsbawm, it is “the contrast between the constant change and innovation of the modern world and the attempt to structure parts of social life within it as unchanging and invariant, that makes invention of tradition so interesting” (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 2). He puts forward that the invention of traditions “occurs more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or destroys

the social patterns for which old traditions had been designed, producing new ones to which they were not applicable” (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 4). Nevertheless, “one must be beware of making assumptions that older forms of community and authority structures, and traditions associated with them, were unadaptable and became rapidly inviable” (Hobsbawm, 1983, p. 5). While we don’t attempt in this paper to enter into the discussion of older forms of community and authority structures and their (in-)viability in modern contexts, we are mindful of the fact that traditionalist imagination appeals to symbolic communities and authority structures within which individuals are envisioned to be made into, and to operate as, subjects. Thus, the appeal to tradition always entails particular ideas and ideals of, as well as attempts to, subjectivization.

At the same time, however, it is important to put the notion of “invention” into perspective. While it highlights the constructed and creative, i.e., the new character of tradition, it should not be misunderstood to denote the completely new construction of something from scratch. The invention of tradition is not, and cannot be, just arbitrary, accidental, or a purposeful innovation without any foundation. In contrast to the colloquial use of the word “invention” — for instance, in “the invention of the steam engine” or “the invention of the lithium battery”, in our context, the term should not be understood to imply the coming up of something completely new and unheard of before. Much rather, the invention of tradition can be understood as the creation of a patchwork, consisting of (refurbished) existing elements as well as new aspects. This understanding considers, on the one hand, the constructivist dimension of the new in the creation of tradition. On the other hand, it takes seriously that not each and every practice can be justified and, more importantly, rendered plausible to the addressees as a supposed tradition in just any context and at any time. Thus, traditions cannot be invented just out of the blue.

In this respect, the Foucauldian undertaking of writing the genealogy of power (see also Vasilache, 2023), as well as of discourses and power, understood as a critical endeavor (see Hook, 2005), can be helpful. Looking at the production of tradition, we see that the claim of continuity plays an important role in traditionalist narratives and, thus, can be seen to be highly important for the establishment of tradition. Foucault’s concept of genealogy — which “should not be confused with genesis and filiation” (Foucault, 2009, p. 117) — allows describing the very creative production of the discursive claim of the historicity and continuity of discourses. Following Foucault, genealogy functions as a “de-centering” (Foucault, 2009, p. 118) of the question of evolution into making and, thus, rejects the idea of historical necessity (cf. Foucault, 2009, pp.118, 276). In particular, Foucault’s history of the prison demonstrates that the genealogy of discourses and power works as a constant (and perpetual) process that, indeed, includes the reference and reuse of existing elements, practices, and rules of knowledge and of knowledge production (see Foucault, 1975, chs. III, IV). At the same time, such reference is highly innovative and inventive since it is selective regarding the elements that are reactivated — or made obsolete by not reactivating them (see Foucault, 1975, chs. III, IV; 2009, p. 117). Moreover, the continual reference and reactivation of elements, practices, and rules of knowledge production is far from a sheer repetition of the past, but a continual innovation, reformulation, updating, and change to meet current functional needs (see Foucault, 1975, chs. III, IV; 2009, p. 117).

Finally, and surely not least, Foucault's insight into the inseparable connection between power and knowledge reveals that the genealogy of discourses is intrinsically power-related — while rejecting a simplistic and, following Foucault, circular idea of institutional power as command and submission (cf. Foucault, 2009, pp.117, 119, 354). In sum, Foucault's concept shows both the selective reactivation and obsolescence of antecedent elements, practices, and rules of knowledge as well as their incessant modification and change, taking place in an inextricable network of knowledge and power. Thus, the conceptual framework of the genealogy of discourses allows a power-sensitive perspective on tradition and tradition-making that describes how the new creation of supposedly unaltered tradition takes place, is made plausible in and for the respective context, and, thus, is embedded in the present of the given place, space, and context.

In addition, Foucault's concept of discursive power is particularly fruitful for better understanding the construction of tradition because he sees power not as a unidirectional force and rejects the idea of an instrumental construction and use of discourses and knowledge through power, but regards power as working on the discursive level itself (see e.g. Foucault, 1975; 1980):

By de-institutionalizing and de-functionalizing relations of power we can grasp their genealogy, i.e., the way they are formed, connect up with each other, develop, multiply, and are transformed on the basis of something other than themselves, on the basis of processes that are something other than relations of power. (Foucault, 2009, p. 119)

This, however, does not only urge to take power seriously in the discursive construction of tradition, but also — an aspect that is quite regularly missed in studies working with Foucault's concept of discursive power — to put the impact of power into perspective and, in fact, also acknowledge its limits. Structurally similar to the point just mentioned that the notion of “invention” must not be understood to imply that basically everything is possible and that just “anything goes”, the Foucauldian concept of the power/knowledge nexus (Foucault, 1980) does not only imply the inevitability of power, but also that power is one important, but not the only epistemic element in the production of knowledge. Aspects of power are necessary, but not sufficient in order to understand how a particular discursive construction of tradition is made plausible and becomes viable — or when this is not the case. This perspective takes account of the observation that attempts of tradition-construction can fail — even when formulated in (supposedly) powerful discursive contexts.

Having said this, the discursive reference to the past in order to construct traditions of a novel type under new circumstances and sometimes for quite novel purposes is something we may call a paradox of traditionalization. The paradox of traditionalization consists in the fact that it is in the name of stability and continuity of tradition that social actors, in fact, call for reform and change. We may witness this especially when social actors draw on tradition to narrate a story of a common past to unite a heterogeneous population under one flag. In doing so, ideas and practices of the past undergo a modern refurbishment (cf. Anttonen, 2005). Actually, traditionalist narratives are flexible in that they are adapted to new circumstances. As a result, the tradition constructed in traditionalist discourses is — and this is its paradoxical structure — to a considerable degree original and new, and can be considered to be *regressive innovation*.

In a similar way, traditionalization can be understood as an interactive and productive process of collective sense-making by which elements of culture or society are modified or adapted to fit into a more traditional framework. The theoretical framework of traditionalization involves examining how cultural practices, beliefs, values, and norms are reinterpreted in light of changing social conditions. Several factors can contribute to the process of traditionalization: globalization, modernization, cultural encounters, social movements, etc. Whereas an increased global interconnectedness can lead to the blending of cultures, societies may in response seek to preserve or reclaim an idea of traditional identity as a way to resist supposed cultural homogenization. Equally importantly, as societies change and seek to open themselves to the world, modernize and adopt new ideas and technologies (as in the case of Uzbekistan), there may be a simultaneous resurgence of interest in traditional practices. This interest can be driven, among others, by a desire to maintain a sense of stable collective identity in the face of rapid change or as a form of cultural nostalgia. All in all, the process of traditionalization involves a complex interplay between continuity and change, as societies negotiate their cultural identity in the context of broader social and cultural transformations. In this continuum of constant negotiation, discursive elements are particularly fluid and prone to change. What appears at first sight to be a reference to uninterruptedly continuing and authentic traditions, at second and closer sight turns out as something that is in fact held together under the dictum of the present, i.e., social changes, shifting socio-cultural, generational, ideational, and power constellations resulting from present challenges. As we shall point out using different illustrative examples from Uzbekistan, the process of societal traditionalization can be seen as a complex interplay between historical legacies, globalization and modernization processes, government policies, and social dynamics.

Thus, since “tradition is not an object of fixed history but a part of a process of identity formation,” we should regard tradition as “an interpretative concept, not a descriptive one” (Beyer & Finke, 2019, p. 314). In other words, “tradition reflects the tensions between continuity and change, or predictability and flexibility” (Beyer & Finke, 2019, p. 314). Understood in such a way, one is better positioned to rethink and re-examine ostensibly familiar terrains in light of persisting social struggles. This allows taking a new look at the often volatile and unstable ground upon which the purportedly everlasting and monumental edifice of tradition is believed to reign. It also allows to cross-examine different discursive dimensions and facets of tradition, to grasp the subtle nuances and shades of its meaning, and to understand how meanings are attached to a particular depiction and representation of tradition rather than merely drawn from. By the same token, we hold that such a notion of tradition is more conducive to the analysis of social struggles over meaning, over ideas of legitimate social order, and ultimately over relations of power in a given society.

However, the discursive practice of constructing tradition entails not only elements of adaptation and reconstruction under new circumstances. Although these processes are very important, they need to be accompanied also by the articulation and enunciation of existing differences and distinctions that are registered and marked. In such processes, inequalities are reconfirmed and reinforced in accordance with established power positions. Thus, the traditional is expressed not least on the grounds

of social hierarchies. As Beyer and Finke put it, “[o]n a political level, many cases of retraditionalization can be interpreted as paths by which powerful local and national actors try to redefine social order in their own interests and impose a corresponding set of rules of the game on everyone around” (Beyer & Finke, 2019, p. 314). Thus, after having argued that and how the discourse of tradition is inherently linked to the present, and that this linkage has fundamental implications, we will now take a look at another structurally important link, namely the link between tradition, patrimonialism, and patriarchy, constructed as a primary social structure of power.

### TRADITION AND PATRIMONIAL SOCIAL DISCOURSES

There is an inseparable link between tradition and patrimonial social discourses, underlined by a complex system of culturally embedded beliefs, symbols, norms, and values that penetrate virtually all aspects of social life. This intimate nexus fosters a legitimizing role for the continuous reinforcement of patrimonial social structures (Erdmann & Engel, 2006). Patrimonial social discourses and structures are not necessarily based on, and surely not limited to, patrimonial narratives, but are constituted as an all-encompassing perspective — or even world view — permeating basically all social relations and ordering society.

Patrimonial social discourses can be understood as culturally embedded narratives, representations, and systems of meaning that normalize and legitimize power asymmetries in societies by framing patriarchal dominance, gender roles, and hierarchies as natural, inevitable, and/or socially desirable. Patrimonial social discourses predominantly and fundamentally circulate through language. They are, however, also reflected in the functioning of social institutions and everyday practices since they shape how people understand power and authority, social roles, and identities. Like any discourse, patrimonial social discourses operate through representation and articulation, be it through representation and articulation in policy, media, religion, education, law, etc. Although they do not necessarily require a perpetual explicit articulation, they are nevertheless perpetually articulated in implicit agreements, thus, are highly conventionalized and reproduced unconsciously.

Furthermore, patrimonialism can be seen as a characteristic trait of particular political regimes — and indeed plays a crucial role in the political systems in Central Asia (see for an overview Izquierdo-Brichs & Serra-Massansalvador, 2021). At the same time, patrimonialism has a thick cultural subtext, including beliefs and imaginaries of traditional rules of succession and power that play an important role as narratives that legitimize structures in both politics and society (see, for a study of the Russian case, Elmuradov, 2023). Since this seems to be the case in re-traditionalization processes in Uzbekistan, we will take a particular look at the function of patrimonial imaginations and narratives for the justification and fostering of patrimonial structures in Uzbek politics and society. In addition to the structure and impact of political patrimonialism in Uzbekistan (see Ruiz-Ramas & Morales Hernández, 2021), there are multiple dimensions to patrimonial social structures, of which we will treat three dimensions in order to understand the inner workings of patrimonialism and cast light on the link between patrimonialism and tradition-making.

First and foremost, patrimonialism, as any other set of social conventions, functions best when it is not widely contested, but operates as a quasi-natural and self-evident force. Hence, patrimonialism comprises tacit cultural, cognitive, and affective templates, implicit understandings, and intuitive notions of the constitution of social order. Embodied in collective scripts, narratives, and stories told time and again as well as normalized through socializing institutions and everyday practices, patrimonialism provides a profound and overarching background of both individual behavior and social interaction. It is this structuring background against the backdrop of which people come to conceive and make sense of basic concepts in everyday social situations and relations, but also of human affairs of a complex nature, beliefs of earthly and heavenly significance, matters of power, authority, and social legitimacy. Such a background shapes the very thinkability and intelligibility of institutions, ideas, policies, etc. Thus, patrimonialism works as an unspoken, almost “natural” force. Even when it manifests itself in spoken words, its verbal expressions may come across as nothing short of obvious and unquestionable truth. This is reflected, for instance, in everyday wisdoms and ready-made reality-constituting scripts that circulate and have particular proverbial currency in a given society. For example, as it directly relates to our case, there is a saying in Uzbekistan that goes, quite revealing, that if “father approves, thus God approves” (*“Ota rozi, xudo rozi”*). Just like any other power matrix in a society, patrimonialism seems to operate best when it unfolds fluently, irresistibly, and almost effortlessly in everyday language as an unquestioned and unquestionable rationality.

Secondly, and equally important, one of the main principles upon which social order and legitimacy in a patrimonial society is based is the idea of male paternal authority. The idea of male paternal authority orders society along the lines of gender inequality. This normative idea owes its origins, according to Weber, to the authority of the father, at multiple complex levels. Tradition constitutes a crucial element of patrimonialism. Weber describes patrimonial domination as “primarily traditional, even though it is exercised by virtue of the ruler’s personal autonomy” (Weber, 1978, p. 232). By traditional authority, Weber means authority based “on an established belief in the sanctity of immemorial traditions and the legitimacy of those exercising authority under them” (Weber, 1978, p. 215). Based on ideal typical distinctions, Weber’s definition of patrimonialism was later adopted and popularized by Shmuel Eisenstadt as neopatrimonialism. His approach aims at analyzing contemporary societies in which patrimonialism still operates, but does so under more complex systems and therefore needs to be rethought accordingly (Eisenstadt, 1973). According to Schatzberg, patrimonialism is based on acceptance at a collective un- or subconscious level (see also Lacan, 2017) of the idea of male paternal authority. In patrimonial social contexts, there is a “tacit normative idea that government stands in the same relationship to its citizens as a father does to his children”, also mirrored in metaphors, such as “presidential father” (Schatzberg, 1993, p. 455). As Ugur-Cinar argues,

by providing shortcuts in the minds of citizens, politicians can rely on culturally embedded roles and obligations about family members. As fathers and husbands, state authorities are to be esteemed as natural sources of authority. At times as children and at times as wives, citizens are expected to follow the lead of the all-knowing leader who will bring happiness and fortune to the rest. (Ugur-Cinar, 2017, p. 328)

Under patrimonialism, formal rules may exist, but they are not always adhered to as the patrimonial ideology penetrates the legal-rational system and interferes with its logics and functions. For instance, it has been well observed with respect to power transition in neopatrimonial political systems of Central Asia that “transitions at the top of the power hierarchy represent a caesura” which “can be accompanied by disintegration of the political system or even of the state’s unity”, and that “because regularized procedures for the transfer of power are usually lacking, even when an autocrat dies of natural causes, his passing leads to an exceptional, transitional situation that is often highly precarious. Struggles over power and policy directions may erupt, as well as those over key positions and the country’s future political orientation” (Vasilache, 2017, p. 25). Having said this, the paternal-like hierarchical power structures in which Central Asian leaders are embedded are, in parts, also reflected in the various flattering titles they have adopted. For instance, the former president of Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov, was informally referred to as *Doda* (“papa”). And whereas his Kazakh counterpart Nursultan Nazarbayev has been known in his country as *Yelbasy* (“leader of the nation”), the Tajik president Emomali Rahmon has chosen to be referred to by the lengthy and time-consuming title of *The Founder of Peace and National Unity, Leader of the Nation, President of the Republic of Tajikistan, His Excellency Emomali Rahmon*. However, none among the Central Asian leaders surpasses the former Turkmen President Saparmyrat Nyýazow, who named himself *Türkmenbaşy* (“head of all Turkmen”), and his successor Gurbanguly Berdimukhamedov, who adopted the title *Arkadag* (“protector”), or his son, the current president of Turkmenistan, Serdar Berdimukhamedov, who allows himself to be called *Türkenistanyň Watan goragçysy* (“defender of the motherland of Turkmenistan”). Their autocratic leadership style, unparalleled in the region, closely resembles what Max Weber has called sultanic.

Thirdly, patrimonial social discourses are often underlined by an ambiguous and rather poor distinction between the private and the public realms. This ambiguity allows social meanings, perceptions, responsibilities, and power relations to shift fluidly between the private and the public spheres, often serving to naturalize established power hierarchies, for example — as we discuss in more detail in our following focus on Uzbekistan — by framing certain kinds of private relations as matters of public significance or by treating political issues rather as private matters. Instead of treating the private and the public as distinct domains, patrimonial discourses reproduce and reconstitute these categories through articulatory practices that mix and blend them with certain, in fact loose and fluid, in contrast to stable and fixed, understandings of supposedly traditional identities, norms, and values. However, the boundary between the private and the public spheres is always ambiguous because its construction is historically contingent and variable (see on the private-public boundary also Vasilache, 2012). Thus, the ambiguity itself is not a flaw but a productive site of hegemonic struggles, where competing discourses seek to fix the meaning of the boundary in order to legitimize certain forms of authority over others. In contexts where the traditionalization of society has emerged as a rather new pattern, patrimonial discourses may often strategically blur the line between the private and public realms by enabling a diverse range of actors — state institutions, religious authorities, or community leaders — to participate in and shape public discourses under the guise of protecting tradition. This blurring of the distinction between the private and the public has manifest economic implications, too. As a result, “power lies not so much

in formal control over institutions of the state, [...] as it does in the ability to provide (or block) access to business opportunities or posts in government” (Lewis, 2012, p. 116). However, the ambiguous (in-)distinction between the private and the public realms is not restricted to the domain of informal power rules and patron-client relations (cf. Ilkhamov, 2007), but encompasses the broader public discursive realm. In Uzbekistan, as we shall see in the following section, the current processes of revitalization of practices that are understood as traditional and patrimonial take place against the background of societal transformations and innovations.

### **THE NARRATIVE POWER OF TRADITION: THE CASE OF UZBEKISTAN**

In Uzbekistan, the process of societal traditionalization can be seen as a complex interplay between historical legacies, globalization and modernization processes, government policies, as well as social and societal dynamics. In the following, we will focus on the interplay of traditionalization with government policies, on the one hand, and social as well as societal dynamics, on the other hand. Following independence, Uzbekistan underwent a period of transition characterized by efforts of the state to assert a collective national identity and, for this purpose, revive cultural traditions (Bell, 1999; Adams, 2010; Rasanayagam, 2014). The government has played a central role in shaping the course of societal transformation through its policies on culture, education, and religion. While efforts to preserve and promote traditionalized customs and values were made throughout the post-Soviet period, they coexisted with the pressures of modernization and globalization and shaped state-society relations. There have been efforts to promote state-supported traditional Uzbek customs and values through state-sponsored events, festivals, and educational programs. At the same time, the government has also maintained tight control over religious expression and cultural practices, particularly those perceived as challenging state authority.

Moreover, in Uzbek society, like in every society, there were and still are diverse social dynamics at play, including generational differences and changing socialization patterns. These dynamics influence the ways in which traditional practices are reinterpreted, with younger generations often engaging with tradition in new ways, while older generations uphold more conventional practices. In addition, all the social dynamics take place against the backdrop of globalization and modernization. While the forces of globalization and modernization have brought about economic development and technological advancements in Uzbekistan, they have also led to cultural changes and challenges to customary norms and values perceived as traditional. Therefore, we will discuss how social dynamics shape the trajectory of societal transformation by contributing to the ongoing evolution and redefinition of tradition.

#### ***Government policies***

Since the initiation of the reform and opening up policy in 2016, Uzbekistan has undergone significant societal transformation, facilitated primarily by the endeavor of the reform-minded government to transform political, economic, social and cultural spheres, while, at the same time, sticking to “the simultaneous pursuit of stability and transformation” (Schuck & Vasilache, 2021, p. 114) characteristic for most Central Asian countries since their independence (see also Elmuradov et al., 2025).

With the traditionalist resurgence of the last few years and the considerable rise of religious practice, the state has begun to feel a need for more strict control of conservative and religious elements in society. In particular, religion has taken on a new ambivalent role in new attempts of cultural nation-building under Mirziyoyev. While the state explicitly embraces Islam as a national heritage and moral guideline, it also seeks to tighten government control of religious education and practice. Secular and religious elites share a broad view that Islam should play an important role in national identity. At the same time, they are apparently concerned about uncontrolled conservative trends in society and fear outcomes that they perceive as undesirable. This becomes visible, for instance, in the fact that the state has significantly increased its role in the field of religious education with the aim of taking the rising religious interest out of the shadows of private and informal circles. Islamic research centers and institutes have been established to advance a state-sponsored, supposedly civic version of Islam and, thus, to disseminate government-approved interpretations of Islam. The state policy is based on a broader strategy to react to the growing religious sentiments in society, and does so in ways in which “the state reserves the right to determine what is taught in the name of Islam and who is entitled to do so” (Schmitz, 2023, p. 6).

The religious policy under Mirziyoyev basically continues the policies of his predecessor. This is particularly evident in legislation. There are new legislative decrees and laws that seek to regulate the changing public and religious constellations in Uzbekistan. For example, a decree by the Cabinet of Ministers on normative standards for school uniforms in the country stipulates that in view of “different nationalities and religious denominations, and due to the secular character of secondary education, school uniforms with elements that reflect belonging to different religions, denominations, as well as subcultures (hijab, kippah, cross, etc.) are not allowed” (The Cabinet of Ministers, 2018, ch. 3, no. 7, all translations are our own). At the same time, a recent law “On Liberty of Conscience and Religious Organizations” lifts the ban prohibiting persons (not registered as a cleric) from appearing in public spaces in religious clothing. However, this newly enacted law limits religious education to officially approved religious institutions and state-authorized instructors (cf. Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2021). As we can see, the state authorities seek to maintain what could be called a relatively flexible hands-on approach in defining and dealing with the changing role of religion in society.

That said, the wearing of beards among young men and certain sorts of headscarves among women has risen in popularity and has also become a subject of concern for authorities (see Hashimova, 2019; Saida & Dzardanova, 2024). There have been frequent reports in recent years of police singling out men with long beards in Uzbekistan, a campaign presented by officials as an effort to combat radical Islam in Central Asia’s most populous nation of 32 million inhabitants with deep Islamic roots (see Hashimova, 2019). Secular elites tend to consider beards as a sign of religious radicalism. Men with long facial hair are treated with prejudice by secular elites. Thus, an explicit display of perceived religious piety that deviates from the secular-leaning, state-sanctioned version of faith is discouraged. In a similar vein, the growing trend of wearing headscarves among women is viewed with prejudice by both state authorities and secular-leaning national elites. While state institutions, public offices, and universities still retain the right to enforce a dress code, some educational institutions, especially schools, have

loosened the constraints. During the ruling of the first president, Islam Karimov, it was prohibited to wear religious clothing in all educational institutions. However, schoolgirls were recently permitted to wear headscarves, but as an exception. The reform-minded Mirziyoyev government explained this shift in policy approach by the large numbers of petitions from parents. As the Minister of Public Education, Sherzod Shermatov, stated:

Taking national traditions into account, we will allow girls to come to schools in a white or light national headscarf. Do not think that tomorrow everyone should come to school like this. If a pupil walks freely, do not force her to wear a headscarf. The goal is to educate our girls, dear parents. We are a secular state. Education and religion are separate from one another. (Kun.uz, 2021)

It seems that there is a tacit concern among secular political elites in Uzbekistan about a potential fragmentation of society between the extreme religious and secular ends of the social spectrum. According to Davletova, “past repressive policies against religious groups and believers, and the poor quality of secular education, have fostered a return to traditionalism and even radical interpretations of Islam” (Davletova, 2019). However, Davletova also rightly points out that the issue of religious radicalization in Uzbekistan is often exaggerated. She notes that despite all odds, “Uzbek Islamic traditionalists are hardly keen on giving up their secular freedoms” and that, in fact, for the most part, “they are more eager to introduce some Islamic values into everyday life, especially retreating to more conservative social roles for women” (Davletova, 2019). According to Davletova, “[e]fforts to tame religiosity and traditionalism with repression will not work”. Instead, “the government should demonstrate its devotion to its proclaimed policy of openness and transparency” (Davletova, 2019; see also, with a focus on EU-supported civil society programs against religious extremism in Kyrgyzstan, Pierobon, 2021). In the long run, “[m]ore room for secular discussion, and a stronger secular education system, should balance the voices of religious groups in public discourse” (Davletova, 2019).

At the same time, secular political elites tend to promote the broader public image and perception of Uzbek national identity at home and abroad through reimagining and representing the role of religion and traditional values in a way that could be called an objectification and musealization of religion and traditional values. By objectification or musealization of traditional values, we refer to a process in which elements of collective national identity, history, religion, and traditions become objects of symbolic representation and preservation rather than living practices. This entails a materialistic and performative perspective on traditional values and religious legacy. Values are celebrated in festivals at home and abroad, presented for tourism, and performatively recreated mainly as symbols, exhibits, or heritage artifacts. While on the one hand, this interplay can be seen as a cumulative result of complex processes of modernization and globalization, on the other hand, it is closely intertwined with concurrent processes of urbanization, commercialization of culture, and generational value shifts.

The peculiar predisposition of secular elites towards a materialistic perspective on tradition and religion, as well as their objectification, ultimately makes traditions and religion suitable as historical objects for exhibition in museums, as is mirrored, for instance, in the establishment of the highly representative museum project “The Centre of Islamic Civilisation” in Tashkent. Of course, state-sponsored, secular and even musealized representations of tradition, religion, and national heritage have their

justification in terms of cultural policy, and, in fact, as such do not necessarily conflict with individual practices, piety, and belief. However, the state-sponsored, quite intense objectivization and musealization of religion and tradition has little to do with the actual practices of believers and advocates of conservative values. While the ordinary followers of faith can practice their religion quite freely, it can be safely assumed that most of the practitioners are aware that the state closely monitors the religious situation in the country, and that this is undoubtedly aimed at a disciplinary effect. At the same time, one of the reasons for the comparatively free religious practice is the liberalization of the media landscape under Mirziyoyev:

The official commitment to freedom of opinion and speech has given rise to a lively blogging scene. Like in the democratic West, anyone who wishes may express themselves on the internet. Consequently, religious experts are also active online, offering information and instruction. They include influential actors who undermine the state's efforts to create a more 'secular' Islam by insisting on the distinction between state laws and divine commandment and, in the case of contradictions, declaring the latter to take precedence. Among ordinary believers, whose need for proper knowledge about Islam is enormous, the online preachers enjoy an authority with which the secularized teachings of state institutions cannot compete. (Schmitz, 2023, p. 6)

Another remarkable observation regarding the dynamics of state-society relations in the context of traditionalization is that in recent years, the state has introduced significant restrictions and limits on weddings, family events, and other private ceremonial gatherings. These restrictions target events that are defined as involving excessive spending, extravagance, and wastefulness — and, thus, are declared not to align with national values and traditions. For example, the state has imposed strict regulations on large-scale weddings by introducing, among other restrictions (see Kun.uz, 2025), a limit on wedding size (max. guest numbers around 200-250) and by setting a time frame (events must end by 11 pm). Certain rituals and supposedly “imported” or “hybrid” practices that are seen as excessively extravagant and costly, and not as part of national tradition, are discouraged. In fact, weddings and family ceremonies in Uzbekistan can be very expensive. Sometimes, families who cannot afford it give in to social pressure and hold large, lavish celebrations. The social pressure is embedded in strong expectations to be a generous host, quite often not taking into account the family's income situation. Thus, social judgment is attached to the quality of hospitality, based on, and reinforced through, family and community narratives. The new rules and regulations are part of a long-term government initiative aimed at promoting a change and a cultural shift in how celebrations are viewed and conducted (cf. Shukhratova, 2025) — while at the same time declaring these new ideals to be part of traditional values and practices.

Under President Mirziyoyev's leadership, Uzbekistan has also witnessed several shifts in various other aspects, including a changing role of women. The government has implemented various initiatives aimed at promoting gender equality and women's empowerment. These initiatives include legal reforms to protect women's rights, increasing access to education (cf. Kun.uz, 2022) and healthcare for women, as well as promoting women's participation in the workforce and in decision-making roles. The government has implemented policies to support women entrepreneurs, providing access to funding, training, and resources to start and grow businesses (see Kun.uz, 2019a). This shift acknowledges women's contributions to the economy and encourages

their active participation in the workforce. Legal reforms have been enacted to address gender-based discrimination and violence against women. This includes amendments to existing laws in order to strengthen protection for women's rights, such as measures to combat domestic violence and ensure equal treatment under the law (see Kun.uz, 2019b). Uzbekistan's engagement with international organizations and initiatives focused on gender equality has also influenced domestic policies and practices (see World Bank, 2024). Collaboration with international partners has provided opportunities for knowledge exchange and capacity-building in advancing women's rights and gender equality. All in all, while traditional gender norms may still influence societal attitudes and practices, there has at the same time been a noticeable shift towards greater gender equality and the empowerment of women. These processes, however, run parallel to, and are entangled with, social and societal dynamics of traditionalization.

### ***Social and Societal Dynamics***

Social and societal factors play a crucial role in the process of traditionalization. Social norms, conventions, institutions, values, as well as changing beliefs and socialization patterns based on generational differences, shape the trajectory of transformation of and within society by contributing to the ongoing evolution and redefinition of tradition. These factors also influence the acceptance or contestation of new interpretations and practices within the cultural framework of a society. When new interpretations and practices emerge, they may be initially contested, but also may gain widespread acceptance and adherence over time and even become normalized and integrated into the social fabric, as supposedly traditional practices. In Uzbekistan, societal transformation is underlined by a broader shift in the discursive landscape of society. This shift is characterized, on the one hand, by a marked secularization of significant but still minoritarian segments of society, and on the other hand, by a traditionalization of larger sections of society. Against the background of this big picture, widespread recourse to conservative moral values, beliefs, and norms, as well as a relatively high degree of religiosity seem to have gained new momentum. In social media platforms, conservative moods and trends have achieved increased prominence. At the same time, in state-run public media and institutions, the state tacitly seeks to convey the impression of a secular moderator. There is still only a little public space to engage in discussions of secular and traditional transformations, with or without the state taking on the mantle of the mediator, who, in fact, supervises and controls the discourse. The Habermasian idea of "the unforced force of the better argument" (Habermas, 1996, p. 306, see also p. 541) and the democratic form of deliberation guided by his concept of "communicative rationality" (Habermas, 1996, p. 4, see also pp. 5, 9, 396) do not seem to function properly, although there are initial signs of a newly emerging generation of public intellectuals and civil society activists who seek to engage in discussions. The nascent public domain is just beginning to evolve and is still quite far from the ideal of communicative rationality in open public communication.

Thus, in Uzbek society, we can observe a coexistence of traditional and modern socialization models and value systems (see Elmuradov, 2021). In this sense, secularization and traditionalization may be conceived as concurrent trends that operate concomitantly, without necessarily clashing with each other. Nonetheless, the

traditionalist turn that we seek to investigate in this section is a relatively new and upward trend. When we speak of a traditionalist turn, we should note that the concept of tradition in Uzbekistan is predominantly invoked in two, quite polarized, ways: either as a certain drawback that needs to be overcome, especially in contrast to modernity, or as a unique cultural quality to be embraced and thus inevitably supported, often in alignment with nationalism and moral conservatism. This distinction outlines the general mode of thinking about tradition in Uzbekistan, where diverse actors aspire, by referring to supposedly “age-old national traditions”, to redefine an idea of proper social order in their own interests. Using particular discursive repertoires and strategies, various traditionalist and non-traditionalist segments of society participate in discursively shaping societal self-representation.

It is important to note that in Uzbekistan, traditionalization does not predominantly work as an attempted return to the past, but as a discursive reorganization of modern social life around culturally sanctioned traditions without abandoning patriarchal frameworks. Rather than resisting modernity, Uzbek society demonstrates what can be called a selective modernization with cultural re-traditionalization. In this blend, modernity is adapted, transformed, and aligned with depictions, ideals, and practices of society that are framed and seen as “culturally acceptable” or “nationally appropriate”. Thereby, the past is mobilized to legitimize contemporary social norms and authority structures, while moral-religious revivalism is aligned with national and cultural tradition rather than political activism. In particular, it can be observed that discursive references to traditional vocabulary have grown in popularity in everyday and colloquial language in recent times. It has become popular to refer to proverbial expressions of the traditional lexicon, such as, for example, when a boy is born, “qori bōlsin” (“let the newborn be a reciter of the holy book of Islam”) or, when a daughter is born, “solihā bōlsin” (“let the newborn be pious and virtuous”), or to refer to a birthday as “shukrona kuni” (“the day of gratitude”) instead of “tug’ ilgan kuni” (“birthday”). Of course, these expressions in themselves cannot necessarily be seen as reflecting an intensified religious interest or piety by those who use them. Many sayings, terms, and phrases in day-to-day use, across different languages and cultures, are in fact often used simply habitually, without any intention of the speakers to actualize their maybe deep-going religious, historical, or cultural roots. However, the just-mentioned examples indeed are more than just habitual sayings without further impact, firstly given that their widespread use is a rather recent and new phenomenon in an upward trend of traditionalization, and secondly, because their use is explicitly negotiated within discourses of traditionalization and societal change. One remarkable case example is the discourse on the proper use of “qori” (“reciter of Koran”).<sup>2</sup> A local religious cleric was reported to have said in a public preach that “not everyone should or can become a qori”,<sup>3</sup> highlighting that not every individual should aspire to become a professional Islamic reciter, but that there are many other professions that Muslims can and should be pursuing. In response to his remarks, another senior local religious leader quickly put forward that each Muslim should, in spirit, wish for himself and for others to be proficient readers and reciters of

<sup>2</sup>“Qori” is a person who recites the holy scripts with the proper rules of recitation using the different linguistic, lexical, phonetic, morphological, and syntactical forms permitted in reciting the Koran.

<sup>3</sup> Shukrulloh Domla replies to Abdulatif Domla, see <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6TC05NaxtE>, last accessed on 04.02.2026.

faith, regardless of their profession.<sup>4</sup> He pointed out that the knowledge of, and ability to, relate to the holy scriptures is something that goes beyond worldly matters such as professions. In such discursive disputes and battles of words in social media, we can witness that the meanings in the discourse of tradition are fluid and dynamic, and that this is the case even within confined circles.

Having said this, patrimonial traditionalism in everyday language can be seen as a paradigmatic example of how power draws through subjectivation processes and shapes subjectivation practices. Popular wisdoms like the Uzbek saying that “one is not supposed to get on the roof of the house where the father is” (“Ota turgan uy ustiga chiqilmas”) can be seen to demonstrate a threefold impact of power in discursive mechanisms of subjectivation. Firstly, and quite obviously, the content of the saying itself reproduces gendered power relations and is aimed at positioning the subjects in a given hierarchical setting. Secondly, the self-evidencing everydayness of such sayings suggests the timeless and necessary character of the given order, in which the subject is expected to be included, and that makes it necessary for the subject to shape her or himself in order to fit. Thirdly, and related to the second aspect, not only the given order is presented as self-understood, but the entire process of subjectivation into that order is masked as an unquestionable procedure – it should not even be perceived as a social convention, but rather as a meaning in itself, as a quasi-natural condition and fact that is simply valid in a primordial sense, without the need for approval.

Some other remarkable instances in the discourse of tradition relate to the changing role of women in Uzbek society. The long-standing patriarchal structures in Uzbek society are mirrored in quite clearly defined gender roles and expectations, through which women were relegated basically to domestic duties with limited access to education and employment opportunities. However, while patriarchal gender roles are still both persisting and strong, in recent decades, there has been a gradual shift in societal attitudes towards the role of women in society. Increasingly, women are recognized for their contributions beyond the domestic sphere. This shift in cultural attitudes reflects broader social and societal changes and evolving notions of gender equality.

Until quite recently, young women in Uzbekistan were often informally banned from travelling abroad without the permission of their male guardians — typically their fathers or brothers, or when married, their husbands. Such informal mobility restrictions and practices of gender inequality are now on the retreat, but also some legal discriminatory norms such as, for example, the legal prohibition of women from driving heavy vehicles, have recently been lifted (see *The Times of Central Asia*, 2024). At the same time, traditionalizing gender roles and expectations towards women still persist. These are first and foremost reflected in the common societal expectation that the choice of a marriage partner is predominantly made by parents and that women’s roles are closely tied to rules of sexual behavior, tightly controlled by the family and community.<sup>5</sup> In a critical reading, the symbolic expectations in society can be seen to normalize and naturalize existing social conventions and give rise, as it were, to

<sup>4</sup>Abdulatif Domla on the claim by Shukrulloh Domla: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?app=desktop&v=M3B9k5ynQdE>, last accessed on 04.02.2026.

<sup>5</sup>Similar phenomena and examples can be traced also in other Central Asian societies. See e.g. Beyer & Kojobekova, 2019; Cleuziou, 2019; Zhussipbek & Nagayeva, 2021.

attitudes of silencing through an (obviously arrogant) presumption of “knowing better”, as Bell Hooks insightfully observes elsewhere: “no need to hear your voice, when I can talk about you better than you can speak about yourself. No need to hear your voice” (Hooks 1990, p. 343).

In view of social inequalities based on gender, the concept of *uyat* (“shame”) still plays a particularly important role (see for the culture of *uyat* in conceptual terms Thibault & Caron, 2022a; Caron, 2022). The culture of *uyat* subjects women in particular to a code of rules that is unwritten, and can therefore be applied in a flexible and expansive manner, but that is also deeply rooted in society. The rules of shame not only function as instruments of external social control, but also as an internalized normative authority. As Levitanus (2022, pp. 188-119, 131-134, 140) shows with a focus on queer individual self-perception, both the external pressure and the internalization of the rules and norms of *uyat* have a huge impact, often leading to tragic consequences, including suicide.

Following Foucault, it can be argued that *uyat* contributes to the constitution and (self-) governance of subjects as both an external and internal dispositif. In this sense, Thibault and Caron identify a “culture of shame in Central Asia” (2022b), in which the standards and ideals of *uyat* have a significant influence on the constitution of gender subjectivities. The norms established and perceived in the context of *uyat* do not refer exclusively to women. Rather, rules of *uyat* are part of a broader set of gender norms and of the generalised heteronormative gender order of society (see e.g. Thibault & Caron, 2022a, pp. 3-5; Levitanus, 2022, pp. 120, 139). However, due to its patriarchal foundation and its sexualizing impact, the regime of *uyat* addresses women, girls, and queer persons in a prioritized and particularly intense manner (see Thibault & Caron, 2022b; Thibault, 2022; Levitanus, 2022). For instance, as Thibault (2022) has shown with regard to male heterosexual sex-work in Kazakhstan, the discourse about this phenomenon is fueled not least by a general taboo surrounding sexual behavior that deviates from marital norms — in particular because this phenomenon seems to undermine traditional heterosexual gender relations, in which women are assigned the role of sexually shy, reserved, and ultimately passive actors.

The unwritten, yet omnipresent, rules of *uyat* contribute to the establishment of particular social taboos (see Levitanus, 2022, p. 120), and thus to the production of “a veil of silence” (Levitanus, 2022, p. 120, see also pp. 125-128, 139). Certain phenomena are constituted as such shameful deviations that it seems necessary to make them disappear by framing them as something unspeakable. In this context, the ideas and norms of *uyat* do not only serve as a mere standard of behavior. Rather, within the ideals of *uyat*, some phenomena appear so scandalous and intolerable that even the knowledge of their existence is considered inappropriate — and, thus, even their suppression must be concealed, made invisible, and kept secret. At the same time, however, *uyat* also depends on the revelation and public exposure of perceived misbehavior and its scandalization. As Levitanus highlights, “it is not the challenge or the violation of the norm itself that is critical here, but the visibility and the public perception of the violation that is then required to be followed by punishment” (2022, p. 120). Thus, *uyat* establishes a tension between, and a simultaneity of, secrecy and unspeakable taboo, on the one hand and public exposure and visibility, on the other hand.

Thus, as already mentioned above, the public discourse in Uzbek society is still quite far from the Habermasian framework of open public deliberation. However, it is also worth noting that the newly emerging civil society plays an essential role in the discursive and societal dynamics of transformation. In the light of rapid developments in Uzbek society, a new generation of urban intellectuals, journalists, public commentators, and civil society activists has emerged who lead animated discussions about, among others, the role of women, religion, and tradition in the context of state and society relations. Loosely self-identifying as ideological successors of Jadids, Muslim modernist reformers in the early 20th century, Neo-Jadids belong to the newly emerging community of intellectuals and civil society activists who, despite significant ideological differences, advocate social and cultural change in the collective national consciousness based on open and free public debates. Nonetheless, the nascent public domain is just beginning to evolve and is still quite far from the ideal of communicative rationality in open debate.

## CONCLUSION

In this article, we sought to inquire into the rise of traditionalization as a new societal trend in Uzbekistan in recent years by looking at collective strategies of discursive legitimization, as well as consider both the wider implications of the traditionalist resurgence and its counter-movements.

In conceptual terms, we argued that tradition is inseparable from the present in the sense that change is a defining element of any traditionalist discourse, and that tradition and its manifestations are in fact more fluid and dynamic than commonly assumed. Focusing on Uzbekistan as a case, it could be shown that there is an inseparable link between tradition and patrimonial as well as patriarchal social relations underlined by a complex system of beliefs, symbols, norms, and values that penetrate virtually all aspects of social life, including politics. Patrimonial and patriarchal social structures play a significant role by underlying and reinforcing discourses of power. Comprising tacit cultural, cognitive, and affective templates, implicit understandings, and intuitive notions that are embodied in collective scripts, master narratives, and conventions, patriarchal social structures provide a relevant overarching discursive background in Uzbek society. At the same time, however, since the initiation of the reform and opening up policy in 2016, the societal discourses in Uzbekistan have undergone significant transformations in non-traditional directions, too. This is facilitated by leaning towards secularization and by engagement in active discussions about issues pertaining to social change and reform in — yet rather marginal — segments of civil society.

Thus, Uzbekistan's ongoing societal transformation is characterized by a broader dual shift in the country's discursive landscape: on the one hand, a marked secularization of notable, yet smaller segments of the population, especially reflected in the discourse of political and cultural elites and the newly emerging generation of urban intellectuals and civil society actors, and on the other hand, an increasing traditionalization across larger sections of society. Although this ongoing social transformation reveals a complex reconfiguration of the discursive field, no stark societal division or polarization can be observed across broader strata of social groups in the country.

The missing polarization or societal division is not self-evident. One possible — and surely not the sole — reason for this might be that when social groups share a long, common historical experience — such as Soviet-era state-building, strong national identity projects, and shared cultural repertoires — they may retain a sense of unity that reduces sharp contrasts and visible divisions. People may incorporate both secular and traditional elements into their everyday lives, producing overlapping rather than contrasting positions. Furthermore, the Uzbek government promotes integrating narratives (national unity, modernization, plus “traditional values”, etc.) through education, media, and public rituals. This also produces a relatively uniform discursive field in which differences exist, but do not harden into stark contrasts and visible social divides. All in all, both secularizing and traditionalizing trends evolve without direct confrontation, with discrepancies remaining limited. At the same time, however, while providing tacit cultural, cognitive, and affective templates, patriarchal social structures serve as an implicit and profound overarching background and play a very significant role in shaping and reinforcing the shifting discourse. Against the background of this picture, the challenge of framing and interrelating tradition and modernity represents one of the most significant discourses underlying societal change in Uzbekistan.

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The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

AE: conceptualization, theoretical and methodological approach, writing – original draft, writing – review & editing; AV: co-conceptualization, theoretical and methodological approach, co-writing – original draft, writing – review & editing.

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# FORMATION OF ANTI-CORRUPTION CULTURE IN KAZAKHSTAN: THE INFLUENCE OF MEDIA

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**ABSTRACT.** *In recent years, Kazakhstan has undergone an active institutional transformation of the anti-corruption system, and the media is one of the important aspects in the formation of this culture.*

*The purpose of the research is to analyze the influence of media on the formation of anti-corruption culture in Kazakhstan, where attention is paid to the consumption model, trust in sources of information, and how people interact with corruption-related content.*

*The analysis is based on a population survey, covering all regions of Kazakhstan (N = 2685). Data was collected through a combination of face-to-face and online interviews. The survey assessed the frequency of consumption of media content, trust in public, independent, and digital media, views on media coverage of corruption, evaluative interaction with media, and anti-corruption policies. Descriptive statistics and correlation analysis were used to test the proposed theories. The results show that media content related to corruption is weakly and inconsistently linked to anti-corruption policies, indicating the limited influence of passive media consumption. The reliability of media sources has only a partial, context-dependent relationship with the perception of objectivity and effectiveness of the media. However, active interaction with media content through critical evaluation, checking information, and awareness of media influence is the strongest predictor of media effectiveness in shaping an anti-corruption culture.*

*The results show that media influence manifests itself through reflexive and interpretative processes, rather than through simple familiarization or blind reliance on specific sources. The practical significance of the study is that anti-corruption reforms in Kazakhstan are focused on legal and institutional measures, and less attention is paid to the social and cultural impact of media on public opinion and ethical norms. This study fills in the gap, as well as examining how media use and audience engagement relate to perceptions of corruption and how effectively media promote anti-corruption values.*

**KEYWORDS:** *anti-corruption culture, mass media, media trust, media engagement, Kazakhstan.*

## INTRODUCTION

Corruption is a serious problem affecting governance, public confidence, and socio-economic development in many countries, including Kazakhstan. Despite ongoing

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reforms and national anti-corruption strategies, the success of these efforts depends not only on legal and administrative measures but also on cultivating a stable anti-corruption culture in society and shaping public perception. In this context, the media play an essential role in shaping public opinion, values, and attitudes toward corruption (Rifai et al., 2021). The media are not just tools for disseminating information; they also actively shape social reality through agenda-setting, framing, and narrative construction (Bandura, 2009). By selecting, highlighting, and providing context for corruption-related content, the media influence how people perceive the causes, consequences, and moral acceptability of corrupt actions. The regular exposure to media narratives can either foster a culture of tolerance toward corruption or lead to cynicism when corruption is portrayed as inevitable or systemic (Bandura, 2009). Such a problem is especially acute in Kazakhstan, where the media landscape is rapidly changing, and besides traditional television and print media, digital platforms, social networks, and messengers have become the primary sources of information for the population. Changes significantly affect how anti-corruption messages are disseminated and understood. International studies show that digital media can increase civic engagement and awareness, but they can also heighten disinformation risks and erode trust in institutions (Mo, 2013; Amannah & Adeyeye, 2018). However, there is little empirical data on how exactly these processes operate in the Kazakh context. Studies of anti-corruption policy in Kazakhstan mainly consider the legal framework, the effectiveness of institutions and measures to ensure compliance with legislation, while the sociocultural aspect, which is mainly how the media form anti-corruption values, receives less attention (Burakanova et al., 2025; Keegan, 2024). This result creates a gap in research, as the success of formal anti-corruption strategies is closely linked to public perception and confidence in the media and daily judgments about acceptable behavior. Studying the influence of the media on the development of anti-corruption culture in Kazakhstan is timely and important, as it will contribute to sociology and media research by examining the relationship between different types of media use and levels of trust and attitude towards corruption. In practice, the results obtained can inform the development of media strategies, public communication policies, and educational programs to increase social intolerance of corruption and promote ethical standards in Kazakh society.

*The research aims* to investigate the influence of mass media on the formation of anti-corruption culture in Kazakhstan. It will examine in detail how people use the media, their trust in sources of information, and how these factors are related to their views on corruption and personal values.

*The object of the research* is the population of Kazakhstan aged 18 to 65 years and older, living in all regions of the country, and who participated in a sociological survey.

*The subject of research* is the process of influence of the media on anti-corruption culture in the country, also considering the frequency of consumption of media, the main types of media used, the credibility of information in the media, and how these aspects influence their views on corruption and understanding of its extent in Kazakhstan.

During the study, the following hypotheses were put forward:

H1. The higher degree of impact of news content media is related to the higher level of anti-corruption relations among the population of Kazakhstan.

H2. The credibility of information about corruption disseminated through the media significantly reinforces the link between media impact and the formation of an anti-corruption culture.

H3. Regular consumption of digital media is associated with a higher level of critical awareness of corruption and a stronger anti-corruption attitude than the prevailing use of traditional media.

## THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Within the framework of this study, an integrative theoretical model is applied where the theory of the agenda and influence of media, with the theory of social attribution are considered, which explains how media contribute to the creation of an anti-corruption culture. According to the model, anti-corruption beliefs through media content are formed on the basis of such processes as evaluation, interpretation, and verification of information. Moreover, the credibility of the source is not seen as the main reason for the formation of an anti-corruption culture, but as a factor influencing how information is interpreted. The combination of theories within this model helps to define the scope of media impact on public perception of corruption. The model is based on the following theories, namely the theory of day shaping (Vargo, 2018; Nasser, 2020), shaping theory (Oliver et al., 2019; Berti, 2019), and the study of anti-corruption culture using perception and learning theory (Chumachenko et al., 2021; Lee et al., 2025). A higher-order theory is observed, according to which the media pay attention to public opinion regarding the system's social problems. Many studies show that coverage often increases perceived severity and sensitivity to the problem (Camaj, 2019). Accordingly, radiation exposure during this measurement limits consumption of network media across various channels, including television, news sites, social networks, and instant messengers. Similar indicators are effectively used in political communication studies to assess political education and media views (Vargo, 2018; Berti, 2019). The media also pay attention not only to what people think but also to how they interpret information. Moral, legal, and systemic frameworks influence citizens' tolerance of corrupt practices and their accountability (Lee et al., 2025). Moreover, people internalize norms and behaviors by observing role models in the media, and multiple-exposure stories that focus on punishment, social condemnation, or civic duty help them internalize anti-corruption norms (Nasser, 2020). Accordingly, they play a role in establishing an anti-corruption culture, measured by additional indicators, including intolerance of corruption, moral rejection of corrupt behavior, perceived social harm, and a sense of personal civic responsibility. Trust also influences the quality of the most important link between access to information and attitudes toward people. Media are significantly stronger when audiences perceive their information sources as trustworthy (Tsfati et al., 2020). Therefore, trust in the media is measured using Likert scale indicators that provide confidence in state, independent and digital media, in line with the instruments used in comparative trust studies.

*The significance of the research* lies in its elucidation of efforts to combat corruption by examining the impact of media on public attitudes and values, and in its emphasis, from a predominantly legal and institutional perspective, on how media influence these views, thereby filling a significant gap in existing research. The study provides clear

evidence of a link between media use, trust in sources of information, and attitudes towards corruption based on national survey data. The results can help shape media strategies, public communication policies, and media literacy programs aimed at strengthening social counter-corruption and promoting civic responsibility. Ultimately, these efforts will contribute to a sustainable anti-corruption culture.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Researchers emphasize the importance of the information environment in shaping norms, values, and citizens' expectations regarding honesty and accountability (Junisbai et al., 2015; Frolova et al., 2017). Media systems act as key intermediaries between anti-corruption institutions and society. They affect how corruption is perceived, discussed, normalized, or challenged. The main theory for understanding the influence of media on public attitudes is agenda-setting theory, which suggests that the media do not tell people what to think, but rather what to think about. More recent studies have extended this idea to include second-level agenda shaping and intermedia agenda shaping, which are particularly relevant in modern mixed media environments (Camaj, 2019; Vargo, 2018). In the context of corruption, agenda-setting theory suggests that media attention to corruption scandals, transparency initiatives, and ethical norms increases the perceived importance of citizens' issues of integrity, contributing to the development of an anti-corruption culture. However, the digital shift in media space has complicated traditional ideas about agenda shaping. Naser (2020) and Vargo (2018) argue that in fragmented and convergent media environments, agenda formation is no longer carried out exclusively by traditional news publications. Social media platforms, blogs, and online activists are now part of the agenda-forming process, changing the ways to spread and enhance corruption stories. The shift is particularly important for post-Soviet and transition societies, where trust in traditional media can vary, and digital platforms provide alternative ways to discuss corruption issues (Junisbai et al., 2015; Bokayev et al., 2023).

In addition to shaping the agenda, research on media influence provides a deeper understanding of how the multiple impacts of corruption-related content affect citizens' attitudes and behavior. Oliver et al. (2020) show that media influence is exercised through emotional and regulatory mechanisms. Lee et al. (2025) show that awareness of anti-corruption policies, formed through communication and access to information, significantly increases ethical motivation among public servants. Their results emphasize the importance of learning effects and internalization of evaluation. Anti-corruption reforms tend to work best when accompanied by clear and consistent communication strategies. This understanding is critical for analyzing how media narratives can support formal anti-corruption policies and facilitate the transformation of legal norms into meaningful social values. At the same time, scientists warn that media influence does not always bring benefits. Tsfati et al. (2020) provide a critical overview of how mainstream media can inadvertently spread misinformation and fake news, even when trying to correct them, and this issue is significant for anti-corruption communication, where sensational coverage, untested claims, or politically motivated narratives can undermine public trust and breed cynicism instead of honesty. In such cases, media coverage can reinforce the idea that corruption is widespread and inevitable, weakening the foundations of an anti-corruption culture.

Research on Kazakhstan shows that the influence of mass media on the formation of anti-corruption culture is related to the unique post-Soviet political, institutional, and social context of the country. Here, corruption is often seen as a widespread and common problem, not just an individual offence (Junisbai et al., 2015; Sheryzdanova et al., 2020). Research shows that Kazakh media play an important role in shaping public opinion, highlighting corruption, transparency, and accountability as national issues, particularly during periods of political reform, digital transformation, and public-sector renewal (Bokayev et al., 2023; Khamitov et al., 2023). At the same time, the literature indicates that the effectiveness of media influence depends more on public opinion-forming strategies, credibility, and audience trust than on the number of anti-corruption messages. Coverage that focuses solely on statements or campaigns can lead to increased public cynicism and a growing belief in the inevitability of corruption. Research on digital governance and e-government efforts in Kazakhstan shows that the media plays a crucial role in transforming official anti-corruption policies and technological changes into clear stories, and in turn, helps to build public understanding and acceptance of the values of honesty among citizens (Amannah & Adeyeye, 2018; Bokayev et al., 2023). It is also stressed that the influence of both traditional and digital media is inconsistent due to differences in media literacy, selective perception, and persistent skepticism towards political messages. Factors limit the adoption of anti-corruption norms in everyday behavior (Sheryzdanova et al., 2020; Nurkey et al., 2021). Overall, studies on Kazakhstan agree that the media contribute to the formation of an anti-corruption culture primarily through agenda-setting, normalization of ethical standards, and symbolic support for state reforms. However, their influence depends on the congruence between media messages, institutional actions, and citizens' everyday experiences.

## RESEARCH METHODS

In this study, a sociological survey was conducted to examine the media's influence on the development of anti-corruption culture in Kazakhstan. Data collection was conducted from March to September 2025, enabling regional coverage and a representative sample of diverse social groups. Before the main field work began in February 2025, a pilot study was conducted in several major cities where the pilot sample included 94 respondents and was aimed at checking the clarity, reliability, and consistency of the questionnaire. The pilot study also assessed the appropriateness of the scales chosen, and it was only after the pilot study that minor changes were made to the wording in order to improve paragraph clarity and consistency. Data from the pilot study were excluded from the final analytical sample. The study covers the country's population aged 18 to 65 and above, living in all regions. The initial core survey collected responses from 2,987 participants, but after data cleansing, which included deletion of incomplete questionnaires, conflicting responses, and quality check cases, the final analysis included 2,685 valid questionnaires. The survey was conducted partly face-to-face in large cities, and in more remote locations. An online survey was conducted through the Qualtrics program with a licensed version. Distribution was carried out with the assistance of social and state institutions. The study used a quota sampling strategy in which quotas were established according to key socio-demographic characteristics, including sex, age groups, and region of residence. The socio-demographic composition of the final sample reflects the diversity of the adult population by sex, age, education, region of residence,

employment status, ethnicity, and self-reported household income. A detailed overview of the socio-demographic characteristics of respondents is presented in Table 1.

**Table 1.** Socio-Demographic Characteristics of the Respondents (N = 2,685)

Characteristics	Category	N	%
<b>Gender</b>	Male	966	36.0
	Female	1,719	64.0
<b>Age group</b>	18–24	754	28.1
	25–34	782	29.1
	35–44	540	20.1
	45–54	367	13.7
	55–64	179	6.7
	65 and older	63	2.3
<b>Marital status</b>	Single (never married)	1,049	39.1
	Married	1,394	51.9
	Divorced	155	5.8
	Widowed	70	2.6
<b>Education level</b>	Primary / General secondary	285	10.6
	Secondary vocational (college)	553	20.6
	Higher education (Bachelor's degree)	1,580	58.8
	Postgraduate (Master's / PhD)	226	8.4
	No formal education	41	1.5
<b>Ethnicity</b>	Kazakh	2,281	85.0
	Russian	112	4.2
	Uzbek	134	5.0
	Other	158	5.8
<b>Employment status</b>	Employed in public sector	628	23.4
	Employed in private sector	339	12.6
	Entrepreneur	209	7.8
	Self-employed	170	6.3
	Student	805	30.0
	Homemaker	185	6.9
	Pensioner	60	2.2
	Unemployed	115	4.3
	Other	174	6.5
<b>Self-assessed household income</b>	Not enough for basic food	129	4.8
	Enough for food, difficulties buying clothes	253	9.4
	Enough for daily expenses, difficult major purchases	743	27.7
	Enough for necessities, not for car or housing	822	30.6
	Enough for all needs, including expensive purchases	513	19.1
	Difficult to answer	225	8.4

*Source: compiled by the authors based on the survey*

The survey included several thematic clusters measuring media content consumption, media credibility, perceived media influence, anti-corruption attitudes, and media critical analysis skills. Most variables reflecting the ratio were measured using 5 Likert scales, and media consumption frequency was measured on a scale from «never» to «daily». The credibility of sources was assessed on a five-point scale from complete mistrust to complete confidence. The culture of fighting corruption has been defined by a composite index that includes many indicators, such as normative intolerance for corruption, moral rejection of corrupt practices, perceived harm to society caused by corruption, and personal civic responsibility. Composite indices were created by averaging standardized item scores. Data analysis was performed using licensed SPSS version 27 and included descriptive statistics and correlation analysis to test the

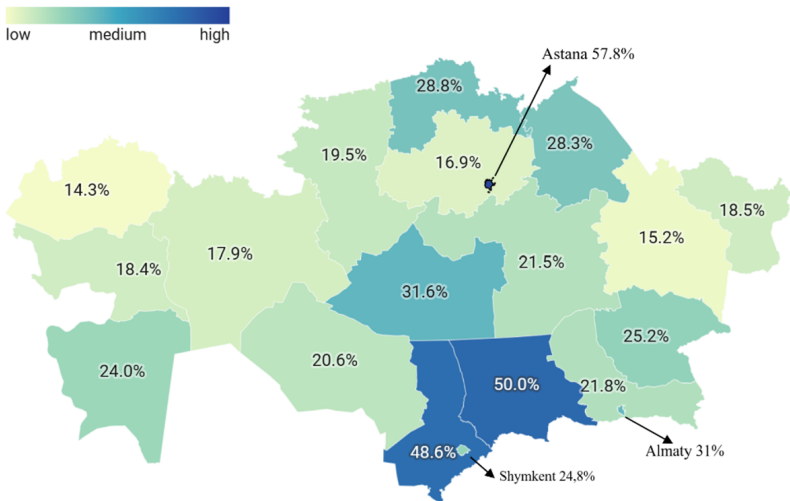
proposed research hypotheses. The internal consistency of the multicomponent scales was assessed using the alpha Cronbach coefficient, with values above 0.70.

*Methodological limitations.* This study has a number of limitations, where the data does not prove the direct causal links of media influence on the development of anti-corruption culture, as the relationships may be bilateral. People who have strong anti-corruption beliefs will also be highly likely to subject information to analysis and fact-checking, rather than just being influenced by the media. Moreover, the study focuses on social attribution, where the influence of social desirability and differences in the interpretation of information may affect perception. Therefore, it is important to further address this issue through longitudinal approaches. However, the empirical evidence provides valuable insights into how different forms of media engagement relate to perceptions of media effectiveness and anti-corruption culture. The results should be considered as a basis for future research using causal methods, such as panel surveys or experimental studies, to further explore the mechanisms underlying the influence of media on anti-corruption activities.

**RESULTS**

The results of the study showed that public opinions on how media form anti-corruption culture are significant, and given the diversity of geography, socio-economic factors, and institutions in Kazakhstan, it is advisable to consider these views from a regional perspective. In this context, the links between the region and the opinion on the effectiveness of the influence of media on the development of anti-corruption culture were considered (see fig. 1).

**Figure 1.** Regional differences in the assessment of the influence of media on the formation of anti-corruption culture in Kazakhstan, %



Source: compiled by the authors using <https://www.datawrapper.de/>

The analysis shows significant regional differences in public opinion, where the criteria of chi-square Pearson ( $\chi^2 = 342.385$ ;  $df = 57$ ;  $p < 0.001$ ) show a strong relationship,

but a slight linear dependence ( $p = 0.839$ ) indicates the absence of a simple linear trend in different regions. This highlights the complex and diverse nature of regional representations. The highest percentage of positive ratings, including answers «very effective» and «quite effective», is observed in Astana (57.8%), Zhambyl region (50.0%), and Turkestan region (48.6%). Considering Astana as the capital, one can infer that this trend may be attributable to the presence of national institutions and media there. The high level of positive assessments in the Turkestan and Zhambyl regions is explained by their possible common cultural and communication context, as in the southern regions of Kazakhstan. In the regions, the media often focus on collective values, moral norms, and social responsibility. Rhetoric can better resonate with the local audience and increase the perceived impact of media reports on corruption. In addition, a closer link between regional media and their audiences, as well as an emphasis on local information, can foster greater trust in media narratives. However, most regions tend to negative ratings, with East Kazakhstan, Karaganda, Abai, and Akmola having a total share of negative responses, «quite inefficient» and «completely inefficient», which is over 70%, indicating a low level of public confidence in the ability of the media to influence anti-corruption culture. The result may reflect a gap between media reports and people's everyday experiences, as well as a perception of anti-corruption reporting as formal or superficial, with no significant impact. Almaty (31%) and Shymkent (24.8%) are in the middle, but with a high level of media consumption and access to various sources of information, positive assessments are moderate. This indicates that the city's audience is more critical and may have higher demands on journalistic investigations, transparency, and the media's role as a watchdog.

The identified regional differences show that public perception of the role of media in promoting anti-corruption culture varies across the country, but regional differences alone are not sufficient to fully explain the differences in the public's assessment of media effectiveness. Additional analysis examined various socio-demographic aspects, which made it possible to clarify whether these views are related to individual characteristics (see Table 2). Further analysis of the social and demographic factors was conducted.

**Table 2.** Socio-demographic differences in perceived effectiveness of mass media in shaping anti-corruption culture in Kazakhstan (N = 2,685)

Socio-demographic variable	$\chi^2$ (df)	p-value	Spearman's $\rho$	p-value	Interpretation
Gender	5.324 (3)	0.150	0.024	0.215	No statistically significant association
Age group	53.626 (15)	< 0.001	-0.062	0.001	Significant but weak negative association
Education level	13.770 (12)	0.316	0.044	0.022	Weak but statistically significant association
Ethnicity	30.059 (27)	0.312	-0.031	0.109	No statistically significant association

*Source: compiled by the authors based on the survey*

The results show that socio-demographic factors have some influence, but not all, as for example gender does not demonstrate a significant relationship with views on media effectiveness. This indicates that men and women generally share similar views

about the impact of the media on anti-corruption culture. Similarly, ethnicity does not have a significant relationship with perceived media effectiveness, which also indicates that there is sufficient consistency in the assessments of media influence among ethnic groups, despite Kazakhstan’s multicultural composition. In contrast to the above two aspects, age shows a weak but significant relationship with media effectiveness perception ( $\chi^2 = 53.626, p < 0.001$ ); the negative correlation means that young respondents tend to assess more positively the role of the media in shaping anti-corruption culture than senior groups (Rifai et al., 2021; Thu et al., 2023). The pattern may reflect generational differences in media habits, digital activity, and expectations of media functions. Young people who are more likely to use digital and social networks may find media content more relevant and influential in shaping ethical standards. On the contrary, older respondents may be more skeptical due to longer experience of interaction with institutional communication (Thu et al., 2023). The level of education also shows a weak but significant connection, although the general criterion of chi-square did not reach the standard level of significance ( $\chi^2 = 13.770, p = 0.316$ ), the result may all point to a small trend towards that people with a higher level of education give more critical assessments of the influence of the media (Charron & Annoni 2021).

Links between the frequency of receipt of information on corruption from various media sources and important indicators of anti-corruption attitudes are shown below (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Correlations between media exposure, cognitive media engagement, and perceived effectiveness of mass media in shaping anti-corruption culture in Kazakhstan (N = 2,685)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
How often do you receive information about corruption from the following sources? <b>Television</b>	1,000													
How often do you receive information about corruption from the following sources? <b>Online news portals</b>	-.187**	1,000												
How often do you receive information about corruption from the following sources? <b>Social media</b>	.000		1,000											
How often do you receive information about corruption from the following sources? <b>Newspapers / Print media</b>	-.538**	.290**	.000	1,000										
The media objectively covers cases of corruption.	.072**	-.050**	-.114**	.133**	1,000									
The media contribute to intolerance toward corruption.	-.008	.020	.008	-.014	-.011	1,000								
The media often distorts information about corruption.	.002	.003	-.002	.016	.059**	-.022	1,000							
Coverage of corruption in the media is perfunctory.	.905	.874	.915	.413	.002	.247		1,000						
The media pay attention to the consequences of corruption for society.	-.002	.037	.010	.001	.021	-.022	.100**	.008	1,000					
Has media coverage influenced your personal attitude toward corruption?	.922	.054	.604	.954	.279	.250	.000			1,000				
I critically evaluate anti-corruption materials in the media.	.017	.000	-.013	.014	-.009	.011	.048*	.068**	.000		1,000			
	.370	.982	.503	.453	.648	.571	.012	.000				1,000		
	.000	.003	-.003	-.004	-.018	-.036	-.003	.019	.039*	.000			1,000	
	.987	.878	.877	.833	.360	.060	.866	.328	.045					1,000
	-.025	-.012	.026	-.016	-.007	-.047*	-.022	.016	.008	.492**				
	.193	.523	.184	.396	.721	.016	.254	.406	.678	.000				

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
I verify information about corruption from several sources.	-.042*	-.014	.035	-.012	-.007	-.030	.003	.022	.004	.391**	.479**	1,000		
The media can manipulate public opinion on corruption.	-.017	-.016	.007	-.008	-.033	-.001	-.035	-.013	.001	.329**	.508**	.375**	1,000	
How effectively are the media in Kazakhstan in shaping an anti-corruption culture in society?	-.069**	-.001	.061**	-.060**	-.040*	-.041*	.005	.034	.010	.346**	.595**	.389**	.447**	1,000

\*\* The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

\* The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

Source: compiled by the authors based on the survey

The results show that the frequency of receiving information about corruption from various media sources, such as television, online news, social networks, and print media, tends to have little or no relation to anti-corruption sentiments. This pattern assumes that mere exposure to corruption information does not increase anti-corruption beliefs or alter personal attitudes. The results emphasize that media influence does not depend solely on the amount of information consumed and reveal limits to the passive influence of media. On the other hand, the analysis reveals strong and significant interrelationships among variables reflecting evaluative interactions with media content. Respondents who expressed criticism of anti-corruption materials in the media were much more likely to check information on corruption using different sources ( $\rho = 0.479, p < 0.001$ ); also, critical assessment was related to the belief that media can shape public opinion about corruption ( $\rho = 0.508, p < 0.001$ ), which suggests that a higher level of media literacy goes hand in hand with a better understanding of both the positive and potentially manipulative aspects of media narratives. It is important to note that the extent to which respondents consider the media effective in fostering an anti-corruption culture is closely related to signs of reflexive interaction with the media, rather than to the frequency of their exposure to it. Perceived media effectiveness has a strong positive correlation with critical evaluation of media content ( $\rho = 0.595, p < 0.001$ ), verification of information from multiple sources ( $\rho = 0.389, p < 0.001$ ), and recognition of the ability of media to influence public opinion ( $\rho = 0.447, p < 0.001$ ). Communication shows that respondents who actively analyze, question, and understand media reports are more likely to see the media as a significant player in promoting anti-corruption norms.

Further, the following analysis presented in Table 4 clarifies the role of credibility to various sources of information and its relationship with the perception, involvement, and perceived effectiveness of media in shaping anti-corruption culture in Kazakhstan.

**Table 4.** Trust in media, cognitive engagement, and perceived effectiveness of mass media in shaping anti-corruption culture in Kazakhstan (N = 2,685)

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
How much do you trust information about corruption spread by <b>state media</b> ?	1,000													
How much do you trust information about corruption spread by <b>independent media</b> ?	.026	1,000												
How much do you trust information about corruption spread by <b>social media</b> ?	-.313**	.074**	1,000											

	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14
How much do you trust information about corruption spread by <b>bloggers and influencers</b> ?	1,000													
The media objectively covers cases of corruption.	-.271**	.200**	.817**	1,000										
The media contribute to intolerance toward corruption.	.000	.000	.000											
The media often distorts information about corruption.	-.019	.061**	-.092**	.033	1,000									
Coverage of corruption in the media is perfunctory.	.320	.002	.000	.090										
The media pay attention to the consequences of corruption for society.	-.030	.019	-.054**	.005	-.011	1,000								
Has media coverage influenced your personal attitude toward corruption?	.117	.337	.005	.802	.567									
I critically evaluate anti-corruption materials in the media.	-.019	.024	-.007	.008	.059**	-.022	1,000							
I verify information about corruption from several sources.	.326	.212	.699	.690	.002	.247								
The media can manipulate public opinion on corruption.	-.012	.011	.017	.018	.021	-.022	.100**	1,000						
How effectively are the media in Kazakhstan in shaping an anti-corruption culture in society?	.521	.567	.383	.355	.279	.250	.000							
	-.015	-.009	.004	.013	-.009	.011	.048*	.068**	1,000					
	.425	.636	.838	.496	.648	.571	.012	.000						
	-.003	-.010	.010	-.001	-.018	-.036	-.003	.019	.039*	1,000				
	.890	.591	.599	.942	.360	.060	.866	.328	.045					
	-.015	.010	.026	.027	-.007	-.047*	-.022	.016	.008	.492**	1,000			
	.423	.615	.181	.163	.721	.016	.254	.406	.678	.000				
	-.021	.007	.023	.023	-.007	-.030	.003	.022	.004	.391**	.479**	1,000		
	.288	.713	.235	.241	.715	.126	.895	.245	.851	.000	.000			
	.009	.004	.033	.019	-.033	-.001	-.035	-.013	.001	.329**	.508**	.375**	1,000	
	.655	.824	.088	.337	.092	.971	.068	.502	.939	.000	.000	.000		
	-.039*	.008	.011	.012	-.040*	-.041*	.005	.034	.010	.346**	.595**	.389**	.447**	1,000
	.045	.661	.567	.531	.038	.034	.806	.081	.610	.000	.000	.000	.000	

\*\* The correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (two-tailed).

\* The correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (two-tailed).

Source: compiled by the authors based on the survey

The credibility of media sources is only weakly correlated with assessments of content. The credibility of independent media is weak, but significantly related to the perception that the media objectively cover corruption cases ( $\rho = 0.061$ ,  $p = 0.002$ ). On the other hand, higher trust in social networks is associated with lower acceptance of the idea that media objectively cover corruption ( $\rho = 0.092$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and lower support for media that promote intolerance of corruption ( $\rho = 0.054$ ,  $p = 0.005$ ). The findings show that trust in alternative media does not necessarily translate into greater confidence in journalistic standards or anti-corruption reporting. The perception of media coverage demonstrates a significant internal coherence, where agreement that media distort information about corruption is positively correlated with opinion on the formalistic nature of coverage ( $\rho = 0.100$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and, to a lesser extent, with the recognition that the media take into account the social consequences of corruption ( $\rho = 0.048$ ,  $p = 0.012$ ). This combination points to a subtle public opinion, in which critical evaluation of media performance coexists with recognition of selective information value. Most importantly, the analysis highlights a strong link between evaluative interaction with media and perceived media influence on anti-corruption culture, where valuing the impact of media information on personal views on corruption strongly correlates with critical evaluation of anti-corruption materials ( $\rho = 0.492$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), verification of information from multiple sources ( $\rho = 0.391$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ) and perception that the media can manipulate public opinion ( $\rho = 0.329$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ). In addition, the perceived effectiveness of the media in forming an anti-corruption culture demonstrates a powerful link with critical evaluation of media content ( $\rho = 0.595$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), behavior regarding information verification ( $\rho = 0.389$ ,  $p < 0.001$ ), and recognition of manipulative potential ( $\rho = 0.447$ ,

$p < 0.001$ ). There is little or no direct correlation between the credibility of media sources and the perceived overall effectiveness of the media. Trust in public media is poorly and negatively correlated with perceived efficiency ( $\rho = 0.039$ ,  $p = 0.045$ ). In contrast, trust in independent media, social networks, and blogs does not show statistically significant links, where the results show that trust alone cannot explain the perception of media effectiveness, and instead, the key factor is how the audience processes, critically evaluates, and contextualizes media content.

## DISCUSSION

The results contribute to the growing volume of studies on the influence of media on anti-corruption culture, providing empirical data from Kazakhstan, a post-Soviet context characterized by institutional reforms, the transformation of the media, and the continuing public skepticism about governance. The results show a simplified interpretation of the theory of agenda formation, which equates wider media coverage with stronger anti-corruption policies. While classical studies of agenda formation suggest that frequent exposure increases the relevance of the problem (Vargo, 2018; Camaj, 2019), this study shows that the frequency of exposure alone is not sufficient to form an anti-corruption culture. The conclusion is consistent with more recent studies emphasizing the formation of a second-level agenda and audience activity in a fragmented media environment (Naser, 2020). In the Kazakh context, the multiple impacts of corruption-related information do not necessarily lead to moral intolerance or behavior change, which supports the argument that passive consumption can lead to normalization or fatigue rather than mobilization (Bandura, 2009; Tsfati et al., 2020). The study develops prospects for the formation of frays and social learning, emphasizing the central role of evaluative interaction with the media. People who are critical of media content, cross-check information from multiple sources, and recognize the manipulative potential of the media are more likely to perceive the media as effective in building an anti-corruption culture. The pattern is consistent with a theory of social perception that emphasizes learning through interpretation, reflection, and judgment rather than mere observation (Bandura, 2009). Similar mechanisms have been identified in studies of political communication and ethical learning, in which the internalization of norms depends on evaluation processing rather than on exposure intensity (Lee et al., 2025; Oliver et al., 2019). The results also clarify the role of media credibility, partially supporting the H2 hypothesis. While previous studies have emphasized trust as a necessary condition for media influence (Tsfati et al., 2020; Beldibekova et al., 2024), this study demonstrates that trust itself has limited explanatory power in shaping perceptions of media effectiveness. The credibility of independent media is weakly associated with perceptions of objectivity. In contrast, the credibility of social networks is inversely proportional to the confidence in journalistic standards and anti-corruption coverage, which are consistent with international data, showing that trust in alternative or digital media does not necessarily correspond to higher quality of information or ethical coverage (Mo, 2013; Tsfati et al., 2020). In Kazakhstan, trust appears to function as a contextual filter rather than as a direct determinant of anti-corruption sentiment.

Also, the fragmentation between institutional and non-institutional media reflects wider changes in post-Soviet and hybrid media systems. Strong trust in social networks and influencers, along with mistrust of state media, aligns with earlier conclusions about selective information perception and parallel information spheres in Central Asia (Junisbai et al., 2015; Bokayev et al., 2023). However, this study develops this literature by showing that none of these areas alone guarantees a stronger anti-corruption position. Instead, people who interact in both environments those who check information and keep a critical distance are more likely to see the media's role in promoting accountability. The regional differences noted in the study provide additional context for these mechanisms. Higher perceived media effectiveness in the southern regions and the capital indicates that local cultural norms, proximity to institutions and communication styles can increase confidence in media narratives, which confirms interpretations of media influence taking into account regional differences, as seen in studies of transition societies, where media credibility is shaped by everyday experience and institutional appearances, not just national communications (Sheryzdanova et al., 2020; Khamitov et al., 2023). The results also confirm the hypothesis that H3 is stronger than H1 and H2. Regular use of digital media does not in itself strengthen the anti-corruption relationship. However, it is associated with a higher level of critical perception and reflective assessment and is consistent with research that highlights media literacy as a crucial factor in democratic and ethical outcomes in digital societies (Amannah & Adeyeye, 2018; Charron & Annoni 2021). The example of Kazakhstan shows that digital media can serve as a resource for civic education or a space for skepticism and alienation, depending on users' interpretive abilities.

## CONCLUSION

The results indicate that the study has achieved its goal and that trust and involvement interact, shaping perceptions of media effectiveness and anti-corruption attitudes in Kazakh society. The hypotheses put forward have received varying degrees of confirmation. H1, which assumes that a higher degree of influence of media content related to corruption will lead to stronger anti-corruption attitudes, has been supported only partially, as the analysis shows, that the frequency of media consumption has little or no relation to anti-corruption attitudes and perceived media effectiveness, and this suggests that the simple impact of corruption-related information, does not automatically create an aversion to corruption or lead to significant changes in personal attitudes. Further H2, which argued that media credibility would significantly strengthen the link between media impact and anti-corruption culture, was also only partially confirmed. Although the credibility of independent media is, to some extent, consistent with perceptions of objective coverage, the credibility of public and digital media shows a weak or inconsistent association with anti-corruption sentiments and perceived media effectiveness. The results show that while trust is important, it is neither a direct nor a sufficient factor in the media's influence on anti-corruption culture. Instead, trust interacts with other factors, especially with evaluative and interpretive engagement. However, the H3 hypothesis has been thoroughly supported, so regular use of digital media is closely related to a higher level of critical appraisal, verification of information, and awareness of the role of media in shaping public opinion. Furthermore, reflective practices demonstrate the strongest and most consistent link with perceived media

effectiveness in promoting an anti-corruption culture, confirming that anti-corruption attitudes are more likely to be formed among those who actively interpret, evaluate, and contextualize media content than among those who consume it. In general, the study concludes that the influence of mass media on anti-corruption culture in Kazakhstan occurs mainly through evaluation mechanisms, rather than through the volume of media consumption or unconditional trust in specific sources. Media can have a significant impact on anti-corruption culture when audiences are critical of information, review content across various channels, and understand both regulatory and strategic elements of the media. The results complement a broader body of studies on the impact of media on combating corruption, showing that effective anti-corruption communication relies not only on institutional reporting and media coverage, but also on improving media literacy and promoting thoughtful citizenship. From a practical point of view, the results show that policies aimed at enhancing an anti-corruption culture should focus on educational and communication strategies that improve critical interaction with the media, and rely only on increased dissemination of information or formal media campaigns..

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

AB: development of the research concept, formulation of the theoretical framework, review and analysis of the scientific literature, organization and implementation of the empirical study, data collection and processing, and drafting of the main manuscript; MA: methodological support of the study, statistical analysis, interpretation of the results, and scientific editing of the manuscript; DN: contribution to the theoretical framework, review and analysis of the scientific literature, conduct of the pilot study, refinement of research instruments, verification and validation of analytical results, and participation in formulating the conclusions.

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# EXECUTIVE POWER AND POLITICAL CORRUPTION IN CENTRAL ASIAN TURKIC STATES: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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**ABSTRACT.** *This study examines the link between political corruption and unchecked executive power in the Turkic states of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan in Central Asia. Using Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data from 1991 to 2021 and combining historical analysis with a linear regression model, the study shows that 40.7% of the variation in political corruption levels can be explained by the concentration of authority, as determined by judicial and legislative restrictions as well as media censorship. The results show that the main causes of systemic corruption are the deterioration of legislative checks and the repression of media freedom ( $\beta = -.638$ ), even though economic development (GDP per capita) is statistically insignificant ( $\beta = .112$ ). The analysis demonstrates that absolute power in the region actively requires the establishment of corrupt patronage networks in order to preserve regime stability, rather than just offering the chance for illegal gain. Because the political system is based on the mechanics of graft, the study comes to the conclusion that anti-corruption initiatives in the region will be futile unless functional checks and balances are restored, particularly in the areas of media independence and judicial oversight.*

**KEYWORDS:** *corruption, model, democracy, authoritarianism, autocracy.*

## INTRODUCTION

Power, a tool of absolute control, has been a source of struggle for many centuries. The research question of this paper, whether power corrupts or what is the relationship between unchecked and unbalanced power and corruption, is an age-old debate that has been discussed in many forms throughout history. Plato, for example, argued that only the rule of the philosopher-king could prevent corruption and ensure justice in his ideal state (Kotsori, 2018). In contrast, Machiavelli claimed that a prince must be willing to use any means necessary, including deception and violence, to maintain his power and secure his interests (Dietz, 1986). In modern times, scholars have examined how power and corruption affect various aspects of political life, such as democracy, development, human rights, and international relations. This debate is particularly relevant when considering the Central Asian Turkic States, a region of powerful governments and political corruption.

This study examines the connection between executive power and political corruption in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan using a country-year panel dataset (N=124) covering the years 1991 to 2021. We developed an empirical design

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using a linear regression model based on Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) data to assess the impact of particular institutional variables on political corruption indices, including media censorship, judicial constraints, and legislative constraints. The analysis controls for GDP per capita to account for the established literature identifying economic development as a significant covariate of perceived corruption. The model determines whether systemic graft in the region is a result of economic scarcity or a necessary component of its unique political architecture by adjusting for national wealth. Furthermore, the paper examines the historical context of these states to gain a better understanding of the long-term effects of power consolidation since the fall of the Soviet Union.

This study will attempt to analyze the effects of power on political corruption in the Central Asian Turkic States by explaining first what power is, what type of governments can be regarded as “too powerful”, why we need checks and balances, what political corruption is, and how those two are connected. Later, it will briefly explain the current governmental as well as corruption-related situation in the states in question. Finally, it will analyze the data on them through a unique-statistical model via linear regression and discuss its findings. In order to analyze the relationship between power and corruption in Central Asian Turkic states, this paper utilizes a variety of sources, including NGO reports, academic journals, and datasets. These sources provide a comprehensive overview of the current trends in corruption within these countries. Additionally, this paper looks at the historical context of Central Asian Turkic states to gain a better understanding of the long-term effects of power on corruption since the fall of the Soviet Union and the emergence of independent nation-states in the region, which had led to a power struggle between these newly formed countries.

The Central Asian Turkic States are a region of powerful governments and political corruption. These countries share a common cultural and linguistic heritage, but have diverged in their political trajectories since gaining their independence from the Soviet Union in 1991. They have adopted different types of political systems, ranging from authoritarianism to democracy, with varying degrees of legitimacy and stability. They have also faced different challenges and opportunities in terms of economic development, human rights, and regional security. These countries offer a rich and diverse context for exploring the relationship between power and corruption in post-Soviet states.

This paper hypothesizes that there is a very important impact of uncontrolled power on political corruption due to various reasons, and the closer the level of power gets to absolute, the more likely that corruption increases. It shows that the more powerful a government is, the more likely it is to engage in corrupt practices that undermine its legitimacy and performance. The paper also suggests that power does not necessarily corrupt by itself, but rather it depends on how it is used and controlled by those who wield it. Looking at the relationship between corruption and power with a unique approach, that is, through the example of the Turkic States in Central Asia, this study is believed to be of significant importance in filling a gap in the field and at the same time answering why too much governmental power is pernicious for democracies.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Power*

Power can be defined as the ability to control resources and outcomes (Magee & Galinsky, 2008). From an inter-personal point of view, power emphasizes a certain amount of influence one possesses over other(s) (Dahl, 1957; Goldhamer & Shils, 1939). Accordingly, political power can be described as the control of a person, or a group of people, over the execution of state affairs (resources), sometimes a constitutional right to dictate the duties and reward or punish the doings of others, and make the final decisions (Binder, 2002).

In the political context, absolute, or unlimited power, refers to the fact that the power holder, be it a single person or a group, exercises control over the political system or the governance of a country with an omnipotent level of authority and no checks and balances. Often quoted in the literature as “authoritarian” or “autocratic” governments, the ruling entity makes the final decisions without any oversight mechanism (Glasius, 2018).

Absolute or unlimited power has been exercised by various rulers and regimes throughout history and across the world. For instance, ancient Rome was ruled by emperors who claimed divine authority and had absolute control over the military, the law, and the administration of the empire (DeLorme et al., 2005). Nazi Germany was dominated by Adolf Hitler, who established a totalitarian dictatorship that suppressed any opposition and pursued a genocidal agenda (Wintrobe, 1990). North Korea is governed by Kim Jong-un, who inherited a dynastic system that grants him supreme power over the party, the army, and the people (Lee et al., 2013).

Absolute power is maintained through three primary pillars: legitimation, repression, and co-optation. Ideological narratives such as nationalist creeds and charismatic leadership that manufacture public consent are used to achieve legitimacy. In order to stifle dissent, the state uses coercive surveillance and its monopoly on violence to silence dissent. Finally, co-optation depends on networks of patronage in which the allocation of state resources and privileges produces a loyal elite class that depends on the regime to accumulate wealth and power. Because potential opposition is neutralized and oversight mechanisms are rendered ineffective, this institutional configuration guarantees that executive power remains unchecked.

Absolute or unlimited power has significant and negative consequences or effects on the political system and society at large. One of these consequences or effects is corruption, which is defined as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain. Corruption can take various forms, such as bribery, nepotism, fraud, embezzlement, extortion, or favoritism (Vargas-Hernández, 2009). Corruption can undermine the legitimacy and performance of the political system by eroding trust, accountability, transparency, and efficiency (Vargas-Hernández, 2009, pp. 111-117). Corruption can also harm society by increasing inequality, poverty, injustice, and violence. Finally, it can also pose a threat to regional and global security by fueling conflict, instability, and extremism.

An authoritarian government is a type of political government in which the power holder has very limited control over its actions. In such countries, civil rights are commonly suppressed, free media and opposition are very weak, and certain key state institutions, such as the military, police, judiciary, and such, are controlled by the executive (Sinpeng, 2020). State propaganda, censorship, and limits to freedom

of speech are very common to authoritarian governments (Alyukov, 2022). The Constitution usually does not project any control measure over the power holder, or can be disregarded (Harkness, 2019). Authoritarian governments also defy the rule of law in their countries (Kelemen, 2019). The form of authoritarianism in different countries might differ, and it is hard to define a straightforward pattern. In some cases, the control can be achieved via manipulation and/or propaganda, whereas in others it might come as a natural product of direct violence.

An autocratic government, on the other hand, has no control mechanism over itself. There are no checks and balances in such countries, and the grip of the executive on other institutions is tighter (Li, 2009). Therefore, it can be stated that even though an autocratic and an authoritarian government have quite a lot in common in aspects such as the concentration of power (De Hoogh et al., 2015), lacking or constrained political freedom (Bader & Faust, 2014), control over institutions (Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007), censorship (Geddes & Zaller, 1989), propaganda (Carter & Carter, 2021), lack of accountability (Gilli & Li, 2014) and weak rule of law (Carothers, 2007); autocratic governments divert from authoritarian ones in ways that i) they usually lack complete rules and institutions, ii) the level of repression of the government over the governed is a lot much higher, iii) they tend to impose stricter controls over their economies, and, iv) in most cases they have strong personal figures as opposed to bigger groups/political parties.

It is not by coincidence that we pay particular attention to “checks and balances”. As a way to limit one of the estates from becoming too powerful, such mechanisms can be regarded as the safety valves of countries. Thanks to the check-and-balance systems, countries maintain the balance of power within their political systems (Holcombe, 2018). Often regarded as one of the key pillars of proper democracies, checks and balances help ensure good governance, individual rights, and freedoms.

Checks and balances are mechanisms that limit or regulate the exercise of power by different actors or institutions in a political system (La Porta et al., 2004). They aim at preventing the concentration of power by dividing and therefore limiting it. Checks and balances can take various forms, depending on the type and structure of the political system. For instance, in a presidential system, such as the United States, checks and balances are achieved by the separation of powers among the executive, legislative, and judicial branches of government, each with its own functions and responsibilities (Holcombe, 2018). In a parliamentary system, such as the United Kingdom, checks and balances are achieved by the balance of power between the government and the opposition, as well as the role of the monarch as the head of state (Van der Vyver, 1993). In a federal system, such as Germany, checks and balances are achieved by the division of power between the central and regional governments, as well as the role of the constitutional court as the guardian of the constitution (Carnevale, 2018). Thanks to the limited power, governments remain accountable to their people (Padovano et al., 2003). Also, they enforce state actors to cooperate and increase their effectiveness and efficiency. It is, however, important to note that they serve the aforementioned purposes only when they are in place effectively. If they are not respected or do not bring any added value, they cannot guarantee a perfectly functioning democracy.

The corruption of power as a concept refers to the phenomenon that when a person or a group gains power, they tend to abuse or misuse it. Some studies have demonstrated that people in power positions may show signs of unethical or immoral behavior (See Kipnis, 1972; Keltner, 2016). They are more likely to lie, cheat, steal, and engage in various types of misconduct. People in positions of power tend to be self-centered and not open to feedback.

Power can corrupt not only individuals but also groups (Frank et al., 2015). Similar to individuals, when a group of people holds power, they might start acting in their own interests. A sense of exclusivity can lead such groups to believe they are above the law and that their actions will not have consequences (Mungiu, 2006). This disregard for feedback may result in a lack of accountability, ultimately preventing corrective actions. Additionally, an inflated group self-concept can cause indifference to the interests of others, and attempts by outsiders to be heard may be met with oppression (Ashokkumar et al., 2019). One famous study, known as the “Robber’s Cave Experiment,” conducted by Muzafer Sherif in 1954, showed that when two groups compete for a prize (power position), they develop negative stereotypes and prejudices against each other, leading to increased hostility and aggression (Lovaglia, 2003). The study also found that when those two groups start working for the same goal (such as fixing a water supply problem), inter-group conflict and hostility decrease. When the final prize is near-absolute power, these negative dynamics are likely to intensify.

### ***Political Corruption***

Political corruption refers to the unethical actions and/or exercise of (ab)use of political power for personal gain and interests (Amundsen, 1999). Though the list is not exhaustive, the unethical actions can be regarded as: i.) Bribery: the act of offering, giving, or receiving something of value in exchange for political help, ii.) Embezzlement: misappropriating or stealing public property or funds, iii.) Nepotism: giving jobs or opportunities to friends or family members regardless of their qualifications, iv.) Cronyism: giving jobs or opportunities to trusted colleagues or political allies, v.) Money laundering: disguising the illegitimacy of possession of money, vi.) Extortion: obtaining something through force, and vii.) Influence peddling: using one’s position to influence the decisions of others (Philp, 1997).

Political corruption can occur or manifest itself in different ways, depending on the context or country. For instance, it can involve electoral fraud, which is the manipulation or falsification of votes or results in an election (Lodge, 1998). This can undermine the legitimacy and representation of the government and the people. An example of electoral fraud is the 2007 presidential election in Kenya, which was marred by widespread irregularities and violence (Klopp & Kamungi, 2007). It can also involve patronage networks, which are the exchange of favors or resources between politicians and their supporters (Ilkhamov, 2007). This can distort the allocation and distribution of public goods and services and create loyalty and dependence among the beneficiaries, such as in the example of Mexico, which has been used by different political parties to secure votes and support from various social groups (Baez-Camargo & Ledeneva, 2017). Political corruption can also involve state capture, that is, the influence or control of private interests over the policies or decisions of the state (Pešić, 2007). This can subvert

the public interest and benefit a few elites or groups at the expense of the majority. The Russian oligarchic system can be given as an example of state capture, which has enabled a few wealthy businessmen to dominate the economy and politics of the country (see Yakovlev & Zhuravskaya, 2009). Finally, it can also involve rent-seeking, which can be explained as the extraction or appropriation of public resources or benefits by private actors without providing any value or service in return (Lambsdorff, 2002). This can reduce the efficiency and productivity of the economy and society and create waste and inequality, as happened in Brazil, for instance, which involved a massive scheme of bribes and kickbacks between politicians, state-owned companies, and contractors (Silva, 1999).

Political corruption can be enabled or facilitated by various sources or factors that affect the incentives and opportunities of actors or institutions in a political system. Some of these sources or factors are institutional, such as weak governance, low transparency, high discretion, or low accountability. Some are economic, like low development, high inequality, high poverty, or low competition. Some are social, such as low trust, low civic engagement, low education, or low media freedom.

Political corruption is pernicious for societies for many reasons. First and foremost, they might have a negative impact on the functioning of the government (Villoria et al., 2013). A country in which decisions are made to benefit only a select few cannot provide welfare for all citizens (Lambsdorff, 2001). Also, when state funds and property are diverted to those in power, the delivery of public services is impeded (Kayode et al., 2013). Public trust in institutions declines, and both elected and appointed officials lack accountability (Morris & Klesner, 2010). Since democracy is often seen as the will of the people, political corruption undermines democratic principles and threatens democracy itself (See Kubbe & Engelbert, 2018). Additionally, mismanagement of public resources and an uneven playing field due to nepotism and cronyism hinder economic development (Rotimi et al., 2013). A corrupt government also possess a direct threat to human rights and leads to the erosion of the rule of law (Pearson, 2001).

Political corruption can be prevented or combated by various solutions or strategies that aim at changing the incentives and opportunities of actors or institutions in a political system. Some of these solutions or strategies are legal, such as anti-corruption laws, regulations, codes, or sanctions. Others are institutional. Examples include independent watchdogs, auditors, courts, or commissions. Others are civil society-based, such as non-governmental organizations (NGOs), media outlets, social movements, or whistleblowers.

### ***Central Asian Turkic States***

Central Asia holds significant geopolitical and economic importance due to its abundant energy resources and strategic location situated between the West, China, and Russia. The region is home to vast reserves of hydrocarbon resources as well as raw materials, which gives the region “critical importance” for the global energy market (Vasić et al., 2023). Moreover, the region has always been a center for trade and cultural exchange due to its location, most notably during the premodern times as the Silk Road passed through the region, connecting China to the Middle East and to Europe (Frankopan, 2017).

In the modern era, Central Asia's prevalence has been reinforced by China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). (Rolland, 2017) Through railways, highways, and investments into the energy sector, China sought to integrate the region into its broader network as a key transit hub for global trade. Moreover, Geopolitical competition over influence in the region remains intense as Russia, the EU, and the United States also seek to strengthen their economic and political ties in the region (Stronski & Ng, 2018). The region is rich in hydrocarbons, especially with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan playing key roles in oil and gas exports (Cooley, 2012).

Although China has rapidly expanded its economic influence in Central Asia through the Belt and Road Initiative, Russia is operating in the region by advancing regional institutions like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), both of which serve as platforms to sustain influence and counterbalance China's economic dominance (Stronski & Ng, 2018). At the same time, Russian energy firms continue to hold important stakes in the region's hydrocarbons, particularly in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, though these ties are increasingly tested by Chinese offers of capital and infrastructure. Still, Russia has a unique social and demographic leverage—millions of Central Asian citizens work in Russia, and the money they send home is essential to the economies of countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (Ryazantsev, 2016). In this sense, Russia's influence is both institutional and economic; it can be understood as a result of enduring networks of power remnant of the USSR, as well as geopolitical and economic necessity of today.

The region's growing strategic value has also drawn sustained interest from Western powers, most notably the United States and the European Union, especially since the war in Afghanistan in 2001. An important feature in Western involvement in the region is that it's based on security concerns. The West also offers an alternative model of political governance and economic model to that offered by Russia and China (Stronski & Sokolsky, 2020).

In order to test the hypothesis of this paper, we conduct a comparative analysis on Central Asian Turkic States: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, which all share several similarities. One of the similarities is the Turkic language and culture. They also all share a Soviet heritage in terms of their political and economic systems. This legacy dictated that they have centrally-planned economies, state-controlled media, and a lack of political and civil liberties. On the positive side, they all have relatively well-educated people as well as well-developed infrastructure. Another similarity is their agriculture-based economies. Though Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have more developed industries, in all four countries, agriculture is a significant part of the economy. What is more, even though the levels differ, all of those countries have authoritarian governments. The geographical characteristics of the Central Asian Turkic States are another similarity. The deserts in the region account for the harsh conditions and lack of water, whereas the mountainous terrain limits accessibility. These geographical characteristics have shaped the way of life of the people living in this region and also affect the economic development of these countries. Historical and cultural heritage can also be regarded as another similarity. They have been part of different empires (Persian, Mongol, Timurid, Russian), and that heritage translated into diversity in populations. Finally, they share similar challenges. Their dependency on natural resources makes their undiversified

economies vulnerable and uncompetitive. They face security challenges such as terrorism, extremism, or separatism.

Kazakhstan is the largest of the Central Asian Turkic States, located in north-central Asia. The majority of the population is Kazakh, and there is a significant presence of Russian and other minorities in the country. The political corruption level in Kazakhstan can be regarded as moderate to high. It is ranked 102nd out of 180 countries by Transparency International's Corruption Perception Index (CPI) in 2021 (Kazakhstan). Reports state widespread corruption in the country and suggest that it is due to the concentration of power in the hands of the few. Lack of transparency and accountability in the country also contributes to the high level of corruption (See Satpayev, 2014).

Kyrgyzstan is a mountainous country located in Central Asia, which shares its borders with China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. Ranked 144th in the CPI in the same year (Kyrgyzstan), Kyrgyzstan can also be regarded as a corrupt country. Ineffective legislation and weak institutions are often regarded as some of the reasons why Kyrgyzstan's government, public, and business sectors are reported as corrupt. Despite governmental efforts, the problem in the country remains persistent (See Cokgezen, 2004).

Turkmenistan is a country located in Central Asia of Turkmen people with minorities of Uzbeks and Russians. It is one of the most corrupt countries in the world, ranked 169th out of 180 in CPI in 2021 (Turkmenistan). The highly authoritarian government controls most aspects of the economy and society, and there is a lack of transparency and accountability. The government also has a history of repressing political opposition and suppressing free speech. This lack of political openness and democratic institutions allows for corrupt practices to flourish. High levels of human rights violations are also an often-cited fact in the country (See Bohr, 2008).

Uzbekistan, the most populous of them all, is also located in Central Asia. The CPI of 2021 places the country in 140th place (Uzbekistan). Similar problems mentioned for the other three states are also common in Uzbekistan, such as reports of widespread corruption in the government, in state institutions, as well as in the public sector, and the government is authoritarian and non-transparent (See Yevgeniya & Nugmanovna, 2021).

### ***Regime Consolidation in Central Asia***

It's worth briefly considering the process of transition from SSRs to capitalist sovereign states in order to contextualize the persistence of systemic corruption in the region. In the aftermath of the disintegration of the USSR, the Central Asian states mostly built their new political order on the foundations of the pre-existing Soviet administrative structures. Unsurprisingly, this resulted not in democratic transformation but in the entrenchment of informal networks, cult of personality formations, and finally systemic corruption. As such, the disintegration of the USSR didn't result in a clean break from the past but a reconfiguration of existing structures under the guise of sovereignty and reform.

Though not applicable to all the aforementioned cases to the same extent, single commodity dependence has also been a factor that eased regime consolidation for the old nomenclature to control the economy and thus pave the way to consolidate power.

This dynamic is commonly identified as part of the so-called “resource curse”. When a country relies heavily on a narrow base of commodities and its export revenue, the state gains the capacity to centralize the revenue flows easily. This, in turn, increases the government’s ability to throttle dissent as the economy is centralized under government control (Loung & Weinthal, 2010).

In Kazakhstan, the former First Secretary of the Kazakh SSR, Nursultan Nazarbayev, quickly moved to leverage his former position to consolidate power in the country. While he carried out reforms toward market liberalization, the privatization of state assets, especially in oil and gas, resulted in these assets being accumulated into the hands of oligarchs loyal to Nazarbayev (Luong & Jones, 2002). Thus, the presidential apparatus was placed in the center through which the economic opportunity flowed, entrenching patron-client relations across both public and private sectors.

In Uzbekistan, Islam Karimov followed a similar path but with a stronger emphasis on coercive control; the power was consolidated by the systemic dismantling of civil society, the securitization of politics, and state monopoly over key sectors such as the cotton industry. Similar to Kazakhstan, the rent-seeking elite form an alliance with the government apparatus based on control over economic resources and political power (Kandiyoti, 2007).

Turkmenistan is an extreme case in comparison to the previous two cases. Here, Saparmurat Niyazov created a cult of personality; he declared himself “Turkmenbashi”, which means the “Leader of the Turkmens”. His cult of personality was institutionalized into every domain of governance, including education and national memory (Horak, 2005). Niyazov governed through decree, bypassing all formal channels of accountability. The natural gas sector, which remains Turkmenistan’s main source of state revenue, was managed through non-transparent structures as the revenues were under direct control of the president and beyond legislative oversight (Bohr, 2004). His rule also witnessed grandiose projects such as marble municipal buildings, statues, and palaces. Turkmenistan institutionalized corruption by obscuring it by making sure state decisions, administrative appointments, and public tender processes took place without independent oversight. The judiciary lacked independence, and the civil servants were frequently rotated in order to prevent the accumulation of power (Kuru, 2014). Thus, corruption not only existed in the elite circles but trickled down to local levels where bribes were required to receive access to education, health care, employment, and so on.

Kyrgyzstan represents the outlier in the region. They experimented with political plurality in the 1990s, initially promoted liberal reforms, but the economic opportunity still revolved around President Askar Akayev’s close circle and associates. Corruption was a major factor in the 2005 Tulip Revolution in the country (Radnitz, 2010).

### *Data Analysis*

In order to investigate the relationship between power and political corruption, we will build a statistical model using the Varieties of Democracy (V-Dem) database, which provides comprehensive data that includes information on various aspects of democracy, such as political rights, civil liberties, and corruption. We will first begin with a descriptive analysis of the data and move on to use regression analysis to examine the correlation and

causal relationship between power and political corruption in the Central Asian Turkic states between the timeframe 1991-2021.

We selected the V-Dem dataset for the purposes of this research, as it provides comprehensive and detailed data that helps researchers measure and compare the level of democracy between different countries. The V-Dem dataset offers 470 indicators, 82 mid-level indices, and 5 high-level indices that encompass various factors that signal the level of democracy in a country, such as electoral processes, civil liberties, checks and balances (Coppedge et al., 2021). While the complete V-Dem dataset examines political regimes in 202 countries from 1789 to the present, this analysis will extract and employ the country-year data for the post-independence era (1991-2021) for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. The data is composed of expert-coded estimates of complex latent factors such as institutional oversight and censorship effort. By employing the V-Dem dataset's disaggregated metrics, we can assess horizontal accountability (judicial and legislative constraints) and diagonal accountability (media freedom), which are essential for identifying institutional power imbalances in the region.

The methodology of V-Dem involves aggregating expert judgments to estimate complex and often unobservable factors related to democracy. The expert assessments help evaluate the data in order to produce valid and reliable estimates (Marquardt, 2025). However, the aforementioned reliance on expert evaluations introduces potential limitations and biases, as experts may exhibit varying levels of reliability and subjective biases. Factors such as personal perspectives, cultural backgrounds, or political contexts can influence their assessments, thereby reducing the value of the data. To mitigate these issues, the V-Dem methodology also incorporates evaluating inter-coder reliability and employing statistical models to account for individual coder tendencies (Coppedge et al., 2020, p. 54).

Nevertheless, the V-Dem dataset offers a useful tool for this study's objectives. Most prominently, it offers standardized cross-national indicators on authoritarian governance and corruption, which offer a systemic framework for comparative analysis. Considering the scarcity of reliable data in Central Asia's political system, this is a critical necessity. Despite the aforementioned epistemic biases that exist within expert-coded metrics (Coppedge et al., 2021), V-Dem's granular indices (e.g., "Corruption Index," "Power Distributed by Socioeconomic Status") align with this research's focus on institutionalized power imbalances, thus helping us make empirically grounded comparisons across Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan.

For the analysis, our independent variables are "Judicial constraints on the executive index", "Legislative constraints on the executive index", "Government censorship effort — Media", and "Government social media censorship in practice". The dependent variable is the Political Corruption Index scores. The independent variables are chosen to show the control of the power-holder (executive) over the other traditional estates of democracy. Though the first two are on a scale from 0 to 1, where 1 is the highest level of control, the third and fourth independent variables are scored between 0 to 4, where 4 is almost no control over media and social media, respectively. The model is also controlled for the GDP per capita in order to eliminate the impact of economic problems on corruption. The results of the analysis can be found in the tables below.

**Table 1.** Linear Regression Results: Determinants of Political Corruption (1991–2021)

Variable	Coefficient	Standard Error	t-value	p-value
Judicial constraints on the executive	-0.742***	0.188	-3.95	0.000
Legislative constraints on the executive	1.099***	0.276	3.98	0.000
Government censorship effort — Media	-1.333***	0.241	-5.53	0.000
Government social media censorship (practice)	-0.614**	0.249	-2.47	0.015
GDP per capita (log)	0.083	0.052	1.59	0.112
Constant	2.417***	0.511	4.73	0.000

*Source: compiled by the authors using the V-Dem dataset*

**Table 2.** Model statistics

Statistic	Value
Observations	124
R <sup>2</sup>	0.407
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.381
F-statistic	15.92***
Model p-value	0.000

Notes: Standard errors are reported in the table.

\*\*\*  $p < 0.01$ , \*\*  $p < 0.05$ , \*  $p < 0.10$ .

Higher values of the Political Corruption Index indicate higher levels of corruption.

*Source: compiled by the authors using the V-Dem dataset*

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The analysis suggests that the independent variables “Judicial constraints on the executive index”, “Legislative constraints on the executive index”, “Government censorship effort — Media”, and “Government social media censorship in practice” have a strong and significant effect on the Political Corruption Index scores. The R square change of the model after controlling for the independent variable is .407, which indicates that the independent variables account for 40.7% of the variation in the Political Corruption Index scores. This suggests that these variables have a significant influence on the levels of political corruption in the selected countries. It is important to note that the significance level of this regression analysis was .000, which indicates that the results are highly statistically significant and the effects of the independent variables can be considered reliable.

When the coefficients are analyzed, it is visible that all of the selected variables contribute to the model at a significant level, when the impact of government censorship efforts on media as well as legislative constraints on the executive index are the highest, -1.333 and 1.099, respectively. The control variable, GDP per capita, seems to have no significance in the model (.112). The correlation table proves that the highest correlation between political corruption and the independent variables is with the government censorship efforts on the media.

Overall, this regression analysis suggests that the independent variables “Judicial constraints on the executive index”, “Legislative constraints on the executive index”, “Government censorship effort — Media”, and “Government social media censorship

in practice” are important contributors to the Political Corruption Index scores. It is important for governments to consider these variables when developing policies and strategies to reduce political corruption in their countries.

## CONCLUSION

This paper has provided a comparative analysis of the relationship between power and corruption in Central Asian Turkic states. Inspired by the famous words “Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely,” attributed to John Edward Acton, it aimed at testing if the hypothesis of absolute, or uncontrolled power, leads to political corruption via building a causal link through statistical modelling. It first outlined what power is and how it can be regarded in a political sense, how it can be pernicious if uncontrolled, and which forms it might take in governments. It then explained what political corruption is and how it is related to the fusion of power in the hands of the few. In order to prove its point, a group of states, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, sharing significant similarities, was analyzed. To further probe its point, a regression analysis was conducted as a sanity check.

The results have shown that power does indeed have an effect on corruption and that authoritarian regimes are particularly prone to abuse their power. When a government wants to collect power via controlling the legislature, judiciary, media, and now social media, the power it possesses turns into a pernicious one, affecting all aspects of political as well as social life. Power and corruption have profound and pervasive effects on various aspects of political and social life in Central Asian Turkic states. For instance, they affect the quality and integrity of elections, which are often marred by fraud, manipulation, or intimidation, the delivery and access of public services, such as health, education, or infrastructure, which are often plagued by inefficiency, inequality, or bribery, the protection and promotion of civil rights, such as freedom of expression, association, or religion, and the level and distribution of economic development, such as growth, poverty, or trade, which are often distorted or hindered by rent-seeking, cronyism, or nepotism. It should be noted that corruption has many causal effects, and uncontrolled power has multiple consequences, and this paper is only concerned about the effect of power on political corruption.

The findings indicate that the concentration of executive authority is strongly associated with higher levels of political corruption in the Central Asian Turkic states. In particular, weaker judicial and legislative constraints and increased media control emerge as statistically significant predictors of corruption, while economic development does not show a significant effect in the model. These results suggest that institutional accountability mechanisms play a central role in shaping corruption outcomes in the region. The evidence, therefore, underscores the importance of effective checks and balances in mitigating systemic corruption and highlights the institutional dimension of governance as a key explanatory factor.

This paper has some limitations or challenges that should be recognized and addressed in future research. One of these limitations or challenges is the availability, quality, or reliability of data on power and corruption in Central Asian Turkic states. Data on these variables are often scarce, outdated, or inconsistent across different sources or

indicators. This poses a problem for measuring and comparing power and corruption across countries or over time. Another limitation or challenge is the measurement issues or alternative explanations that may affect the validity or generalizability of the results. For instance, power and corruption are complex and multidimensional phenomena that may not be adequately captured by a single variable or index. Moreover, power and corruption may not have a linear or causal relationship, but rather a reciprocal or contingent one. Furthermore, power and corruption may be influenced by other factors or variables that are not controlled for in the regression analysis.

This study has some implications for the development of more transparent and accountable governments in this region, and it is important to understand the relationship between power and political corruption for several reasons. One reason is to inform us, citizens: it can help people be more informed and aware of how their public resources are being used. With this starting point, people may hold their leaders accountable for their actions and ask for higher transparency. Once the relationship between economic development and corruption is understood, people can help promote economic development. It is worth noting that understanding the relationship between power and political corruption is not only important for the citizens of a country but also for investors, business people, and any other parties that interact with the country in question. Additionally, understanding the relationship between power and political corruption can help people to identify and combat corruption in their own communities and organizations.

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### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors report no conflict of interest.

### AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

BST and AFC contributed equally to this work. BST: conceptualization, methodology design, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing, review and editing, and visualization; AFC: conceptualization, methodology design, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing, review and editing, and visualization. Both authors read and approved the final version of the manuscript.

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# PERFORMANCE OF PUBLIC COUNCILS IN KYRGYZSTAN

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**ABSTRACT.** *Public councils are advisory-consultative bodies embedded in the public administration system of Central Asian countries. The existing scholarly literature criticizes the operation of public councils as exhibiting limited effectiveness and tends to view them as symbolic. This study focuses on Kyrgyzstan's public councils, which functioned from 2014 to 2024, and examines the factors that influenced their performance. This research uses a qualitative case study research design, which includes data collected through focus groups, semi-structured interviews, and secondary data.*

*This inquiry applies the framework developed by Abelson et al. (2003), including four criteria: representation, procedural rules, information, and outcomes. These criteria are designed for the evaluation of public participation processes. During data collection, participants were asked questions related to these four criteria and factors that influence them. Findings show that to fulfill requirements on representation, fair procedural rules, access to information, and influence of public council members' voices on outcomes, three conditions should be met. First, the political will of the government and openness to public council inputs are the key factors. Selected line ministries of Kyrgyzstan were open to inputs of public councils and did not impose constraints on their operation. Second, the strength of civil society played an essential role. Independent media and active civil society representatives joined the public councils to bring changes to reforms. Third, social capital and horizontal relationships at the society level also contribute to public councils' performance. These findings demonstrate that, given plausible conditions and resources, public councils in Central Asia can demonstrate effective performance.*

**KEYWORDS:** *public councils, participatory governance, civil society, Central Asia, social capital.*

## INTRODUCTION

Post-Soviet countries have introduced different participatory mechanisms and institutions such as public chambers (Evans, 2010; Owen & Bindman, 2019), public councils (Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2024; Yuldoshev, 2021), open budget and open

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legislation (Knox & Janenova, 2018), as well as participatory budgeting (Kasymova, 2013). These consultative and participatory mechanisms aim to engage citizens and civil society in collaborative governance, enhance public administration, boost transparency of state decisions, strengthen policy legitimacy, and citizen trust in state authorities.

Although some studies put criticism on their operation in the Central Asian context (Kurmanov & Knox, 2024), other studies are more optimistic on their performance (Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2024), viewing them as an avenue for state-society dialogue and interaction. These academic debates indicate that participatory mechanisms in post-Soviet societies should not be treated as homogenous and constant, rather it should be noted that they are changing and demonstrating incremental progress. It is important to study their effectiveness as more participatory institutions are in place in Central Asian countries. For example, Kazakhstan introduced a law on public councils in 2016, which was further revised in 2022 by expanding it to quasi-state bodies. Uzbekistan introduced them in 2018 with further revision (Yuldoshev, 2021). Noteworthy, public administration of Central Asia is shifting toward citizen-centric governance, including various stakeholders such as civil society, citizens, academia, and experts. By studying their progress and enabling factors for their performance, our study provides practical implications for policymakers.

This study focuses on one participatory consultative body, i.e., public councils (PC) in Kyrgyzstan. In this country, public councils operated in 2014-2024 under line ministries, state committees, and administrative organizations (Law on public councils, 2014). The public council operation in Kyrgyzstan was officially seized in 2024 and replaced by an online legislation portal (Economis.kg, 2024). According to the Law, public councils are consultative-supervisory bodies under line ministries, state committees, and administrative organizations aimed to fulfill public oversight over state bodies' performance (Law on public councils, 2014). They fulfill their functions independent from state bodies and on behalf of wider society. Their responsibilities include the revision of draft legal acts, initiating discussions of socially significant issues, analysis of state programs and other means of interaction with civil society, provision of recommendations for their improvement, collection and aggregation of the public's proposals on social issues, and presentation to state bodies (Law on public councils, 2014).

This inquiry sets the following research question: Which factors contributed to the effectiveness of public councils in Kyrgyzstan? Kyrgyzstan is an interesting case because it was once defined as an "island of democracy" in Central Asia with an independent civil society (Jargalsaikhan, 2019) and rapidly growing grassroots organizations. It provides rich data and experience for peer-to-peer learning for other Central Asian countries. This study avoids claiming that all public councils under line ministries, state committees, and other administrative organizations of Kyrgyzstan were effective, but rather it explores factors that can have an impact on their effectiveness. This research draws on an online focus group (the number of participants: 15) conducted in 2024. Participants of the focusgroup are ex-public council members, civil society members who were aware of public council performance, and civil activists. In addition, follow-up interviews with selected ex-public council members (N=6) allowed gathering

overarching data. Findings of the focus group and interviews have been triangulated with secondary data drawn on Varieties of democracies, World Bank, legal documents, and other reports.

Findings suggest that the effectiveness of public councils is determined by factors such as a favorable political context and state support, strong and independent civil society, as well as social capital. Findings also suggest that public councils encountered challenges such as limited resources (e.g., human, financial), non-binding decisions, bureaucratization, and the existence of loyal members to the state. The study first presents a literature review, followed by methodology and findings. Finally, it reflects on the discussion and conclusion.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Engaging various stakeholders in policy-making enhances transparency, leads to better decision-making, improves social stability and regime legitimacy, and incorporates various opinions and expertise in the policy process (Pateman, 1970). In this regard, advisory bodies offer policy-relevant knowledge and advice. By referring to those recommendations, policy-makers improve the legitimacy of decision-making (Bressers et al., 2018; OECD, 2017).

In Western settings, advisory bodies are diverse in structure and operation, but they all share a similar aim to study problems and then offer recommendations to policymakers. In most cases, their decisions are non-binding, and policymakers have the discretion to either accept or reject councils' recommendations. The government institutionalizes the advisory bodies as councils, public research institutes, think tanks, and ad hoc commissions (Bressers et al., 2018). They are neither fully inside nor outside the government (Pollitt & Talbot, 2004; Halligan, 1995). Many policy advisory bodies are financed and staffed by the government; this is why there is a trade-off between advisory bodies' autonomy and state control (Bressers et al., 2018). The distinguishing feature of Western advisory bodies is that apart from civil servants and the general public, they predominantly include experts and representatives of academia. Advisory bodies may act as "legitimizers" that enable policymakers to adopt the pre-determined decisions under the guise of scientific justification; or they act as "knowledge brokers" providing policy alternatives to policymakers; or they may act as "policy entrepreneurs" by providing new policy solutions to challenging issues (Averchenkova et al., 2021).

Developing countries adopt participatory mechanisms and advisory councils for various reasons. Due to accelerated technological change and globalization, countries of the Global South are introducing different participatory institutions (Morgenbesser, 2020; Gandhi & Przeworski, 2007). Another reason is New Public Management (NMP)-style reforms; this is particularly true in China and Russia, where democratic institutions are legitimized by referring to global economic competitiveness. Developing countries introduced participatory mechanisms to increase the effectiveness of governance (Owen & Bindman, 2019; Owen, 2017; Owen, 2020), which serves to downsize the ineffective Soviet-era bureaucracy in Russia (Owen & Bindman, 2019).

Non-democratic regimes introduced consultative-advisory bodies to consult professionals, experts, and citizens in policy advice. However, such bodies' operations

and membership are controlled by the government and may exclude critical advice in some instances (Li & Dunlop, 2019). In China, advisory committees are presumably comprised of experts and professionals rather than general citizens. Thus, in the literature, they are called Expert Advisory committees of China (Li, 2021; Zheng et al., 2010). The Chinese government prefers “scientific-based decision-making” rather than “democratic decision-making” (Li, 2021; Zheng et al., 2010). In Malaysia and Singapore, they are named deliberation councils, which include private sector representatives apart from civil society and citizens. The key to the deliberation process in Southeast Asian advisory councils is the unanimity principle and the principle of non-attribution<sup>1</sup> (Campos & Gonzales, 1999; Lim, 1998).

Similarly, Russia also introduced a consultative-advisory body in 2005, namely, the public chambers. Soon after that, other post-Soviet states, such as Kazakhstan, Belarus, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, introduced similar consultative bodies. Russian public chambers aim to monitor the operations of executive agencies and engage in consultation regarding the legislative processes (Evans, 2010). As an extension of public chambers in regions, public councils were established in the Russian Federation from 2005 to 2014 (Orlova & Sokolova, 2017).

Russian consultative bodies intervene on behalf of citizens in particular issues, some of which are off-limits for open discussion, and some others encourage the public chamber to be more outspoken, so the effectiveness of this institution depends on the nature of social issues (Evans, 2010). Genuine debate is only permitted on issues that do not challenge Putin’s “power vertical” in Russia (Owen & Bindman, 2019). Moreover, its performance depends on the commission chairman’s resources, interests, energy, and organizational skills (Richter, 2009a). Additionally, consultative bodies’ performance depends on informal authority and on how chamber members interact with each other, local officials, and social organizations (Richter, 2009b).

Several consultative advisory bodies in Russia have demonstrated progress in fulfilling their functions. The Public Monitoring Commission (Russia) for prisons, which acts as a consultative body, oversees the conditions in places of detention and makes recommendations to the state authorities for improving those conditions. Despite the less committed colleagues loyal to the state, the social activist members of public monitoring commissions could contribute to small social changes (Owen, 2015). Similarly, the Public Chamber in the Novgorod region enhanced public participation, and local authorities “took their inputs very seriously” (Petro, 2001, p.234). It is hard to show considerable success, but the Murmansk regional Public Chamber resolved many minor social problems (Stuvøy, 2014). In a similar vein, Owen and Bindman (2019) suggest that despite the controlling nature of the state, the participatory mechanisms offered an opportunity for civic groups to influence policy outcomes (e.g., improvement of prison conditions, conservation of city architecture, liberalization of NGO law in 2009, etc.). In some circumstances, their inputs can shape the direction of reforms (Owen & Bindman, 2019). However, small in scope, PCs in Russia provide opportunities for critical voices to be heard and bring some changes (McCarthy et al., 2020). Tatarstan’s PCs investigated the deaths of detainees as a result of police

<sup>1</sup> It ensures that policy recommendations are not attributed to any group

torture, after that, it published a critical report on police practices, a success story by Tatarstan's PCs (McCarthy et al., 2020).

Other scholars point to the limited effectiveness of PCs in Russia. In the case of Saint-Petersburg's (Russia) PCs, Sungurov et al. (2020) conclude that they have a weak impact on policy-making processes due to a lack of feedback from authorities, a deficiency in resources, lack of openness of PCs, and incapability to influence the current agenda. Other limitations relate to ineffective and non-transparent selection processes (Richter, 2009a), biased accountability, and a lack of obligation either to the general citizenry or to the selected body. The most powerful and experienced civil society representatives are not included in the public chamber (Belokurova, 2010). In addition, the public chamber aims to recruit members who are peaceful and loyal to the state (Owen, 2015).

In the Central Asian context, public councils were introduced in Kazakhstan in 2016, Tajikistan in 1998, and Uzbekistan in 2018 (Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2024; Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2026; Yuldoshev, 2021). These consultative-advisory institutions operate under executive bodies, their decision is non-binding, and mainly consist of civil society representatives and civil servants, while PC members' participation is voluntary (Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2024; Yuldoshev, 2021; Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2026; Knox & Janenova, 2018). Some studies found limited effectiveness of PCs in Kazakhstan (Knox & Janenova, 2018), while other research reveals positive outcomes produced by public councils (Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2026; Makulbayeva et al., 2024). Furthermore, some studies examine public councils of Central Asian countries from comparative perspectives (Davletbayeva & Zagrebin, 2024). However, there is a dearth of research exploring the performance of Kyrgyz public councils. Given the plausible political conditions created in Kyrgyzstan before it turned to authoritarian rule in 2022, it is interesting to examine the Kyrgyz public councils and identify the key factors that contribute to their effectiveness.

## METHODOLOGY

This study uses a qualitative case study research design because case studies are crucial in examining phenomena that are socially embedded in the political and social environment (Yin, 2018; George & Bennett, 2005). Moreover, a case study is helpful in revealing causal mechanisms and approaching the research question through various data sources such as primary data, secondary data, and observations (Yin, 2017). The case study method is appropriate for this study, because public councils operate under executive bodies of Kyrgyzstan while incorporating different actors from a wide variety of sectors such as civil society, think tanks, quasi-government bodies, and civil service. Kyrgyzstan was selected as a unique country case because it was defined as a "highly defective democracy" by Bertelsmann Transformation Index (Knox & Janenova, 2018), before turning to the authoritarian trajectory in 2022. This indicates that the country provided supportive conditions for the operation of democratic institutions and participatory mechanisms before 2022.

This inquiry applies the framework developed by Abelson et al. (2003), that includes the following four criteria: representation, procedural rules, information, and outcomes. These criteria are designed for the evaluation of public participation processes,

including those at PCs. During interviews and focus groups, the participants were asked questions related to those four criteria. Focus group and interview questions included: 1. Legitimacy and fairness of the selection process. What factors influence it? 2. The degree of inputs into agenda-setting by public council members. What are the determining factors for that? 3. Access to information. 4. How did PCs make an impact on social problem resolution, and did their inputs influence final outcomes? What factors impact it? While applying Abelson et al.'s (2003) framework (representation, procedural rules, information, and outcomes), this study puts a primary focus on the factors that allow for meeting these four criteria, which in turn contribute to public council effectiveness.

The data collection was conducted by using primary data such as focus groups and interviews with (ex)public council members of Kyrgyzstan. The focus group is effective as it allows the researchers to observe norms and patterns through group dynamics during the focus group discussion (Morgan, 1997; Krueger, 2014). An online focus group with 15 participants was conducted in October 2024. Participants were ex-public council members and active civil society representatives who interacted frequently with public councils. The selection criteria included purposive and snowball sampling techniques (Patton, 2002). Focus group respondents (N=15) were asked four questions related to PC effectiveness and factors that determine its performance. In addition to focus groups, the authors also conducted a follow-up interview (N=6) with selected PC members. Interview and focus group questions, as well as the data collection program, have been discussed and approved by the Ethics Committee of the Academy of Public Administration under the President of Kazakhstan. All ethical requirements, such as the informed consent form and anonymity of respondents, have been assured during the data collection. Interviews and focus groups were carried out in Russian. The interviews lasted from 45 minutes to an hour, whereas the focus group lasted for about one hour. Although data saturation was reached during the focus group, the authors conducted an additional 6 interviews with the aim to clarify questions related to civil society capacity and horizontal networks.

In addition to focus group and interview data, this study also uses secondary data such as academic literature, policy documents, reports, legal documents, and datasets from the World Bank and Varieties of Democracy. Data triangulation helps to improve the quality of findings and improve academic rigor. Triangulation increases the credibility of research findings (Denzin, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2016).

The collected data have been transcribed and analyzed manually. The data have been coded, and three thematic topics (three factors that impact public council effectiveness) have emerged as an outcome. These are further discussed in the findings part of this article. To improve the analysis, the inter-coder technique has been employed. Finally, this study may have the following limitations. As it relies on qualitative data, its findings have analytical generalization rather than statistical generalization (Yin, 2017). Also, due to the timeframe of public council operation in Kyrgyzstan (2014-2024), some respondents may not have accurate data, their judgments and perceptions on public council effectiveness might be biased.

## FINDINGS

*The criteria for representation and procedural rules.* The Presidential Decree on the creation of Public Supervisory Councils in 2010 established the basis for public councils, which came into place by the law on Public councils of state bodies in 2014 (Law on public councils, 2014). Interestingly, members of the public supervisory councils designed the first draft of the law on public councils. Public councils carry out their activities on a voluntary basis, and their decision are non-binding.

PCs were formed by the commission consisting of 15 members, which in turn was formed by five representatives from state bodies and ten representatives from civil society. The most appealing part is that the election of ten representatives from civil society was conducted based on democratic principles. Voting to elect civil society members of the Commission proceeded through an anonymous ballot where each applicant admitted to the competition from civil society, with the voting rights, wrote 20 names for election to the Commission. Consequently, the most listed applicants entered the commission (Law on public councils, 2014). According to the Law on public councils of Kyrgyzstan, PCs were mainly from civil society, and only the commission that forms the public councils was represented 1/3 from state bodies.

Another distinguishing feature of public councils is collaboration with international agencies, including UNDP, horizontal partnership with media and other civil society organizations (Respondent #8, focus group). For example, UNDP had a close partnership with public councils with an aim to enhance their capacity (UNDP, 2014). The partnership with international agencies was permitted by the law. Article 5, point 4 states: public councils can involve in their work representatives of domestic and international expert and scientific organizations, as well as individual specialists (Law on public councils, 2014). Yet another distinguishing feature of representation at PCs was related to the inclusion of the youth. PCs allowed young people to enter their commissions and gain experience. The PC members encouraged the youth to join the public councils later on. In the beginning, many council members were of near retirement age, and they focused on attracting more local youth. Recently, young people have increasingly joined, and a lot of interesting work has been done (Respondent 4, focus group). Finally, to ensure a better gender representation, PCs are formed with no more than 70 percent of their members of one gender (Law on public councils, 2014). Diverse representation and inclusion of the youth, as well as engagements with international donors, contributed to PC effectiveness.

*Criteria for information.* According to focus group and semi-structured interview findings, public councils were transparent. Indeed, PCs had a common website separate from state bodies, [www.osgo.kg](http://www.osgo.kg), which is still active to date. It encompasses public councils' data related to annual reports, events, public discussions, meeting minutes, and other resources (Respondent #2, focus group). The website was free from state interference and was funded by civil society organizations. Public councils were open to the general public. PC meetings (*zasedaniya*) were open to the public and could be freely attended by citizens, representatives of civil society organizations, and the media (Law on public councils, 2014). Although state bodies were obliged to share information with PCs (except for secret data), focus group participants criticized the state bodies for their unwillingness to share the requested data on certain occasions (respondent #13, focus group).

*Criteria for outcomes.* According to focus group and interview findings, some public councils in Kyrgyzstan demonstrated good effectiveness, for example, the public council under the Healthcare Ministry of Kyrgyzstan. Their inputs contributed to reforms, determined the agenda, and resolved socially significant issues. For example, PC members initiated the introduction of the state social order in the agency of youth affairs. Public council members' recommendations related to openness and transparency of public procurement in state bodies have been approved. Also, the transparency of the state budget at the national level has been improved, and international indices confirm this progress. By the involvement of public council members under the Ministry of Healthcare of Kyrgyzstan, a corruption case related to the anti-tuberculosis drug Cycloserin (budget accounted for USD 300 000) has been disclosed, a criminal case was initiated against the employees of the National Center for Physiology of Kyrgyzstan (Respondent #5, focus group).

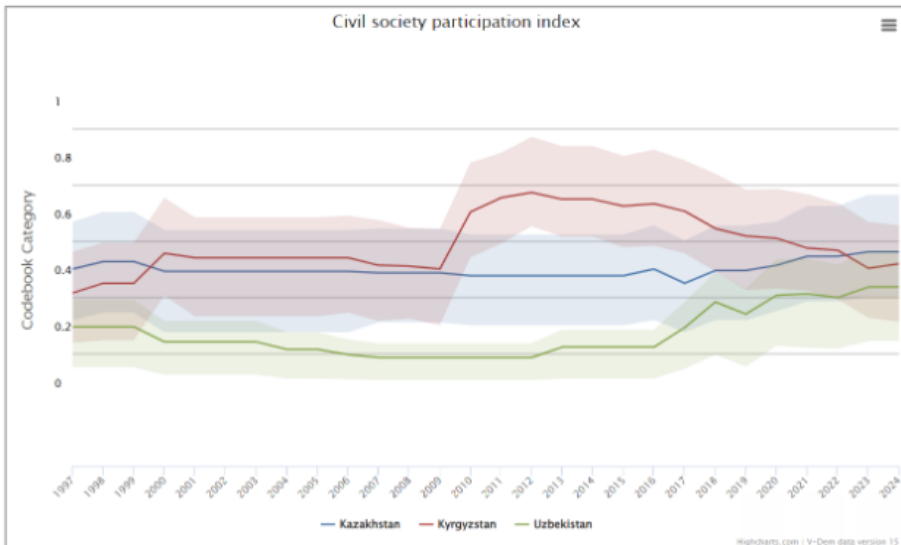
There were more results achieved by PCs. The proposal of the public council under the Minister of Finance was supported by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, and as a result, Kyrgyzstan joined the Open Government Partnership in 2017. (Respondent #11, focus group). This allowed the local civil society to have access to state information and promote other consultative channels in the country. Moreover, another outcome achieved was related to the budget of state bodies. During the pandemic, after reviewing the 2020 budget of the Kyrgyz Republic and substantiating their proposals, the public councils were able to reduce the expenditures of the Jogorku Kenesh (Kyrgyz Parliament), the Office of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic, the Office of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, and ministries and departments by 6,266.3 million soms (Respondent #11, focus group).

To ensure that these four criteria were upheld, public council effectiveness has been driven by a complex of factors such as political will and support on the part of the national government, availability of social capital (i.e., mutual trust and networking), and a comparatively strong civil society in this country. Not a single factor, but a combination of these factors, along with internal group dynamics and resources provided by international agencies, as well as the state, had a huge impact on PC effectiveness.

The first factor worth noting is the political support or will of the executive branch. Before 2022, the country had often been depicted as an “island of democracy in Central Asia” (Jargalsaikhan, 2019), in which various democratic reforms and institutions had been experimented. Some PCs enjoyed a conducive political environment (e.g., the Ministry of Healthcare, Ministry of Finance), senior state officials did not constrain the PC activities, and demonstrated openness and willingness to collaborate (Interview, respondent #3). The focus group participants noted that the state treated them as equal partners and granted certain discretion before the change of political course in 2022. This finding is well aligned with OECD's statement that participatory governance is most effective when there is support from political leaders (OECD, 2017; Bressers et al., 2018). For instance, Prime Minister Sooronboi Dzhheenbekov attended the annual meeting on “Evaluation of interaction between state bodies and public councils in 2016” and called state bodies for openness and collaboration with these consultative bodies (Cabarasia, 2016).

The second mostly-mentioned factor is related to the strength of civil society in Kyrgyzstan. The presence of a comparatively independent civil society with alternative sources of funding and international donors made a huge difference. Given the rapid improvements of information-communication technologies and increased access to the internet, public councils can easily challenge corruption cases and mismanagement of state resources (Respondent #10, focus group). There were independent media actors in the country. Traditionally, Kyrgyzstan allowed more space for civil society and its participation in political issues (Bayalieva-Jailobaeva, 2014) (Figure 1). As we can see on Figure 1, the civil society participation index is much higher in Kyrgyzstan compared to other Central Asian countries, particularly before 2022.

**Figure 1.** Civil society participation index for Kyrgyzstan and other Central Asian countries

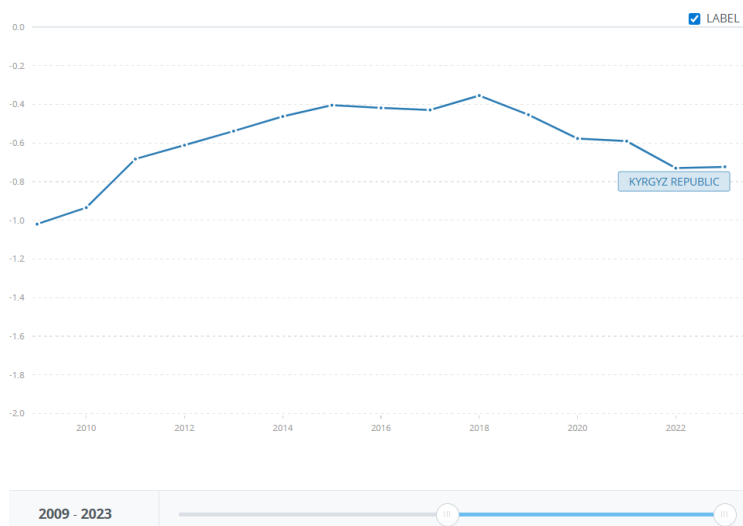


Source: *Varieties of democracies, 2024*

According to interviews and focus group findings, some public council members were very experienced with strong civic skills like monitoring state bodies, effective communication of popular needs, and strong horizontal networks. This finding is aligned with the data drawn from the World Bank, 2022 (Figure 2). Voice and accountability measures to what extent citizens and civil society can participate in state affairs and select their government, freedom of the press, media, and freedom of association. This index ranges from -2.5 (poor) to 2.5 (effective). Kyrgyzstan reached -0.4 in 2018 (Figure 2), declining afterwards. This is the most impressive achievement on voice and accountability in Central Asia. For example, Uzbekistan saw merely -1.8 in 2018, which was the highest result demonstrated by this country. This data is consistent with our argument that civil society in Kyrgyzstan enjoyed freedom of the press and media, freedom of association to a certain extent, and allowed a space to participate in

state affairs before 2022, meaning that public council members enjoyed this pleasant political context during the operation of public councils from 2014 to 2024.

**Figure 2.** Voice and accountability, Kyrgyzstan



Source: World Bank, 2022

The following factor that contributes to the effectiveness of the Kyrgyz public councils relates to social capital. Traditions of mutual assistance, interpersonal trust, and networking in horizontal associations are the core dimensions of social capital (Putnam et al., 1993). According to Putnam et al. (1993), horizontal networks, reciprocity, and interpersonal trust are important for civic skills and engagement with state officials. Interview findings suggest that public council members from the most effective public councils (like the public council of the Ministry of Healthcare in the Kyrgyz Republic) used their horizontal networks. It is insufficient to offer recommendations to state bodies, but rather it is required to pursue its resolution through approaching various institutions like the prosecutor's office, national government, courts, and social media (Interview, respondent #5). Members of effective public councils utilized their networks in the media and other horizontal associations in order to resolve social problems. That said, working within public councils was insufficient, but rather active engagement with various actors like courts, the prosecutor's office, and civil society organizations was crucial. According to the report by Bertelsmann Transformation Index (2024), although in general social capital is not high in Kyrgyzstan, civil society members have "social problem related" social capital, meaning that civil society can self-mobilize spontaneously around a common interest. In line with this, interview respondents argue that civil society representatives and public council members were in close connection and peer-to-peer partnership on the resolution of certain issues were the cornerstone of public council performance (Respondent # 7, focus group).

In sum, public council effectiveness depends on many factors, three major ones discussed in this research. Political support and openness of state bodies make the

public council inputs useful and impactful. The strength of civil society and social capital are the key drivers of public council performance.

## DISCUSSIONS

Literature on open government institutions and participatory bodies in Central Asia (Kurmanov & Knox, 2024; Janenova & Kurmanov, 2025) views consultative bodies as symbolic or ineffective, criticizing them for regime legitimization purposes. That body of literature sees consultative bodies as homogeneous, implying that all types of participatory bodies exhibit limited effectiveness. This literature does not differentiate across types, levels, and intensities of interaction with state bodies. In our study, we attempted to focus on a single case, the Kyrgyz public councils, and explored what factors might impact its effectiveness. Findings demonstrate that not all public councils are apathetic and ineffective, but rather selected public councils (e.g., public councils under the Healthcare Ministry) showed progress and had an impact on reforms. This finding is consistent with research on Russian public councils and public chambers (Owen & Bindman, 2019; McCarthy et al., 2020; Owen, 2015). Owen and Bindman (2019) claim that the consultative bodies in Russia offered an opportunity for civic groups to influence policy outcomes like the improvement of prison conditions. Although small in scope, public councils of Russia offer opportunities for critical voices to be heard and bring some changes (McCarthy et al., 2020). Tatarstan's PCs investigated the deaths of detainees as a result of police torture, after that, it published a critical report on police practices, a success story by Tatarstan's public councils (McCarthy et al., 2020). Likewise, Makulbayeva et al. (2024) present several cases related to public councils of Kazakhstan, which brought positive changes in cemetery maintenance in the Western part of Kazakhstan and water pipeline construction in Northern Kazakhstan. Similarly, Janenova and Knox (2018) provide a case related to public transportation in Astana city of Kazakhstan, that has been improved by the inputs of public council recommendations and public discussions.

Earlier studies that examine public council effectiveness in Central Asian countries identified several key factors, such as a deficiency of resources and the role of the state (Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2026; Knox & Janenova, 2018). In addition, this study examines the role of civil society capacity, social capital, and political will of the national government. This finding contributes to knowledge generation in a broader sense. It is a false assumption to treat such participatory bodies as ineffective without subjecting them to examination. States in developing countries also face challenges of ineffective government and limited budgets. By introducing such consultative bodies, they gather information, the state monitors social moods, and resolves socially significant problems. Additionally, such type of collaboration with citizens and civil society is not new for post-Soviet countries, because these countries practiced different types of councils and the Leninist notion of workers' control over the state and post-Stalinist *narodniy kontrol'* established foundations for state-society interaction (Owen, 2016). This implies that public councils see some continuation of citizen and civil society participation in state affairs from Soviet practices. By exploring their performance in-depth and identifying the driving factors, this study furthered the scholarly debate on participatory bodies in the Central Asian context and offered novel insights.

Similar to public councils in other Central Asian countries, Kyrgyz public councils' decisions were non-binding, advisory, and council members' participation was based on a voluntary basis. However, Kyrgyz PCs were distinguished by diverse representation. The democratic election procedure whereby applicants from civil society vote for Commission members is a novel approach that offered an opportunity to the most active civil society representatives to enter. Another feature worth noting is the gender parity and inclusion of the youth in public councils. Finally, the Kyrgyz government legally allowed the public councils to cooperate with foreign donors and experts, which also contributed to diverse stakeholder contributions to its effectiveness. These practices can be partially adopted by other Central Asian countries with an aim to enhance their effectiveness in their societies.

This study also provides practical implications for policymakers, particularly for those countries where public councils are functioning and undergoing reforms. Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan can learn from the successful public councils of Kyrgyzstan. By offering more space and training in civic skills, public council members can serve as partners of national governments, especially at sub-national levels. There is a high transaction cost for national governments to monitor the implementation of strategic programs and agendas on the ground.

## CONCLUSION

This study examines Kyrgyzstan's public councils, which functioned from 2014 to 2024, and reveals the factors that influenced their performance. This inquiry applies the framework developed by Abelson et al. (2003), including four criteria: representation, procedural rules, information, and outcomes. These criteria are designed for the evaluation of public participation processes. Findings show that to fulfill requirements on representation, fair procedural rules, access to information, and influence of public council members' voices on outcomes, three conditions should be met. The political will of the government and openness to public council inputs are the key factors. Selected line ministries of Kyrgyzstan were open to inputs of public councils and did not impose constraints on their operation, which in turn increased public council effectiveness. Also, the strength of civil society played an essential role. Independent media and active civil society representatives joined the public councils in Kyrgyzstan to bring changes to reforms. Finally, social capital and horizontal relationships at the society level also contribute to public councils' performance. These findings demonstrate that, given plausible conditions and resources, public councils in Central Asia can demonstrate effective performance. Public councils of Kyrgyzstan were distinguished by its inclusive representation of the youth and ensuring gender parity as well as by its close collaboration with international experts.

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## CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

GM: investigation and writing; ZD: theoretical framework and methodology; MD: writing, reviewing, and editing; LR: data collection and resources.

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# THE SHANGHAI COOPERATION ORGANIZATION AND THE COLLECTIVE SECURITY TREATY ORGANIZATION: A COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

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**ABSTRACT.** *This review article examines differences in the development of two major regional security organizations in Central Asia: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). Although both organizations emerged in their initial phase as the guarantor of the security of Central Asian states after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, currently they have evolved in a different manner, and they are growing with different priorities. By synthesizing the literature on the SCO and the CSTO, along with the preferences of their main patron states - using the comparative research method of most similar systems design (MSSD) - this review contributes to a broader understanding of why regional organizations evolve differently while operating in the same geopolitical space and sharing a similar background once they emerged.*

*This review highlights that China's focus on economic growth through a peaceful rise and its aim to preserve regional stability have contributed to how the SCO has evolved and adapted into a diplomatic multilateral arena, surpassing the status of a regional organization. In contrast, Russia's security strategy, aiming to use the CSTO to protect its sphere of influence and pursue economic integration through frameworks like the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), has limited the CSTO's development. The organization's limitations are evident in its varied response to regional crises.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Central Asia, China, Collective Security Treaty Organization, regional organization, regionalism, Russia, Shanghai Cooperation Organization.*

## INTRODUCTION

Classical regional studies emphasized the integration of European states that shared similar identities and political systems. The European Union was the champion of that model, in which like-minded liberal states integrated to enhance liberal trade after two devastating world wars. However, new regionalism studies propose a more flexible approach to regional cooperation, encompassing not only trade but also security and regime survival dimensions among different states. This model was developed after the Cold War, in the era of globalization (Chung, 2004, pp. 992-993).

In this sense, it could be suggested that new regional organizations established after the Cold War were merely designed in response to the changing structural dynamic. As

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Söderbaum and Sbragia (2010, p. 568) outlined, exogenous factors driving regionalism in post-90s are mainly related to the globalization waves that impelled actors of a particular region to form a united stance in approaching the new phenomenon of world order. However, there is a view that each region that is affected by globalization and the new world order has formed a pertinent kind of regional organization tailored to meet the uniqueness of its geopolitical setting (Buzan & Wæver, 2003, p.13).

Central Asia re-emerged as a distinct region following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. With independence, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan began forging their national and regional identities in a rapidly changing world (Weitz, 2018, p.1). Today, Central Asia is home to numerous regional and multilateral organizations (Cooley, 2012, p.150). However, this paper focuses mainly on two regional organizations that operate in the region: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO). The problem this study tries to address is that, while Central Asia is one region and both the SCO and the CSTO have emerged in the same context, they pursue different agendas.

Although the SCO and the CSTO have followed distinct institutional trajectories, their interaction has not been entirely absent (Weitz, 2018). Both organizations share overlapping agendas in countering terrorism and drug trafficking. Coordination has been formalized through memoranda of understanding between their secretariats, aimed at exchanging information and cooperation on security-related matters. Moreover, both organizations have conducted counter-terrorism exercises with similar design and objectives, particularly through the SCO's "Peace Mission" exercises and the CSTO's "Rubezh" and "Kanal" operations (Paramonov & Stolpovski, 2008, pp. 1-12).

Nevertheless, this cooperation has remained limited in depth and has not led to sustained institutional integration. The existence of parallel security mechanisms reflects functional overlap rather than genuine coordination. This limited interaction reflects the argument that, despite shared threat perceptions, the two organizations remain shaped by different strategic visions and pursue different agendas (Rauf & Saud, 2020, p. 43).

What is puzzling for this study is why, while situated in the exact region and both organizations in the first place made to enhance the security of Central Asian states, the SCO and the CSTO nowadays have evolved to pursue markedly different objectives and agendas. While the CSTO remained as a Russian tool to enhance its security agenda, the SCO is becoming an economic tool in the hands of the Chinese to promote their diplomacy in the broader region (Cooley, 2012, p.8; Kropatcheva, 2016, p. 1530).

This paper argues that different policies adopted by the two main patrons shaped the evolution of the CSTO and the SCO. It hypothesizes that the CSTO's persistence as a narrowly security-centered and relatively rigid organization reflects Russia's preference to confine collective security cooperation to enhance its regional hegemony doctrine in Central Asia, while pursuing economic integration through alternative institutional frameworks. Conversely, the SCO's evolution into a multilateral and adaptable organization is attributed to China's domestic priorities and its broader strategy of

“peaceful rise,” which encouraged the expansion of the organization’s agenda beyond security to include economic and diplomatic reflections.

In the first part of this study, the argument is grounded in the existing literature, which states that the main patrons of the two Central Asian organizations have driven the evolution of the SCO and the CSTO. After the methodology section, this paper, using a comparative design, examines how China’s domestic needs have driven the SCO’s development, thereby transforming it into a multilateral arena and enabling its expansion beyond Central Asia. In the third part, it discusses how Russian foreign policy has shaped the CSTO, making it a rigid organization with a narrow focus on security issues. Finally, it concludes that regional organizations mainly driven by a patron’s security and foreign policy tend to become institutionally rigid and militarily centered, whereas organizations that are shaped by the patron state’s domestic needs prove to be more flexible and expand beyond their demarcated scope.

## METHODOLOGY

This article reviews and critically assesses why the CSTO and the SCO pursue different policies and agendas. To this end, I use the comparative research method of most similar systems design (MSSD), drawing on Mill’s method of difference. This is due to the similarity of the context and focus of the SCO and CSTO, once they established to preserve the regional security of Central Asian states.

While the SCO and the CSTO emerged in a broadly similar geopolitical and historical context, they diverged along a critical dimension: the preference and policy orientation of their main patrons, namely Russia and China. The variation in the leading state’s priority is treated here as the key independent variable accounting for the organizations’ differing trajectories, functional scope, and their overall evolution.

For collecting data that can make the argument of this paper more plausible, I will mainly rely on secondary sources. This encompasses peer-reviewed academic literature and policy reports. Through this approach, I will be able to synthesize and critically assess the evaluation of existing scholarship in order to address the central analytical puzzle surrounding the differences in how the SCO-CSTO evolved. The review is guided by a thematic and comparative reading of the literature, with particular attention to institutional design, practical security cases, and the strategic roles of China and Russia.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### *Evolution of Regionalism in Central Asia*

To start answering the main research question, this paper reviews the literature about the factors that contributed to the evolution of regionalism in Central Asia. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, regionalism efforts in Central Asia were security-driven. Once the Soviets lost control over the region, each of those newly born republics wanted to prevent clashes on their borders and protect their nations from the rising terrorism (Palma de Seixas et al., 2014; Amrosio, 2008, p. 1332).

Several authors in the literature have indicated that the driving force behind both SCO and CSTO was security concerns related to the regime's own safety (Aris, 2009, p. 462; Beeson, 2005, pp. 980-982; de Haas, 2017).

Nevertheless, over the years following their establishment, the focus, purpose, and functions of the two Central Asian organizations gradually diverged. It has been noticed that one of the key reasons behind the SCO's expansion from a military focus toward a broader economic agenda is China's ambition to expand engagement with its western neighbors for securing its energy needs (Becquelin, 2004, pp. 364-365; Blank, 2012, pp. 14-15). Therefore, this reinforces the argument that China's domestic concerns drove the SCO to evolve into a multilateral arena for economic integration and diplomatic engagement, to maximize China's economic objectives.

More specifically, existing studies have attempted to explain the differences between the two Central Asian organizations by focusing on their main patrons. Namely, Russia in the case of the CSTO and China in the case of the SCO. It has been argued that it is the CSTO that enhances the Russian military influence in the region, and that Russia dominates the organization (Rauf & Saud, 2020, p. 32; de Haas, 2017, pp. 12–13). Contrary to those views, Cooley (2012, p. 68) summarizes that Russia has been unable to compel member states to follow its lead.

However, Weitz (2018, p. 16) argues that without Russian military support, most of the Central Asian states, particularly Armenia and Belarus, would be unable to defend themselves against external threats (Allison, 2008, p.p. 188-195). Therefore, it remains clear that Russia is the main patron and leader of the CSTO, a position that enables it to shape the design and the function of the security organization.

On the same note, it has been outlined that China is becoming the primary provider for the SCO, therefore allowing it to influence the agenda of the regional organization (de Haas, 2017, p. 2). Also, de Haas and Putten (2007, p. 34) argue that the SCO is becoming an institutional vehicle for China to promote its economic influence in Central Asia. Danilovich (2013, pp. 73-86) expands on the argument that China is the primary influencer of the SCO, utilizing the structure of the organization to maximize its power across the broader region.

However, the literature has not sufficiently examined how the approach of these patrons affects the design and functioning of the organizations themselves. This paper argues that it is the approach of the patron states that shapes the structure and institutional characteristics of regional organizations in Central Asia.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### *China's Vision and the SCO's Expansion*

China, which is the main patron and leader of the SCO, adopted a new approach to regionalism that promotes a multilateral view of the world (Clarke, 2010). This is to assert that China rejected universal liberal capitalism. Instead, Beijing proposed a new approach, the "Shanghai Spirit" to maximize its domestic interests and secure crucial routes of imports, which are mainly oil and natural gas, that are essential to sustain its economy (Cooley, 2012; Matveeva & Giustozzi, 2008, p. 9). Also, Xiang (2004) contends that through Eurasia, China can further advance its grand strategy of peaceful rise.

As a result, the new regionalism approach adopted by China is congruent with Karl Polanyi's (1945) thesis, which advocates for regional planning over universal capitalism.

Hereby, the SCO shaped by China's strategy of peaceful rise and its endeavors for integration toward Central and Eurasia is supported by Polanyi's idea of regional planning, thus making the SCO a viable tool to enhance China's broader objectives.

Nonetheless, the enlargement of the SCO to include India and Pakistan has further complicated its internal dynamics. While researchers address the liability of expanding the SCO due to the emergence of new conflicting interests (Muratbekova, 2019). I argue that this internal diversity partly explains why the SCO has evolved into a broad, multifunctional forum rather than a tightly integrated security alliance. The growing heterogeneity of membership has also limited the scope for structured cooperation with the CSTO, as the SCO increasingly functions as a flexible diplomatic platform rather than a coherent collective security bloc. I further argue that China's vision and its strategy of peaceful rise, combined with the "Shanghai Spirit," enabled the SCO to flourish and expand its scope beyond security to encompass economic and energy initiatives as well. Therefore, it becomes clear that China's domestic needs, which underpin its doctrine of peaceful rise, have shaped the SCO's evolution.

### ***Russia's Vision and the CSTO's Stagnation***

Contrary to the SCO's evolution, the CSTO failed to expand beyond its strict security scope, and this needs further explanation (Weitz, 2018). Russia has limited intention and economic rationality when dealing with the members of the CSTO. Therefore, it has constrained the scope of the organization to security and military dimensions (Rozaanov & Turarbekava, 2013, p. 136). I argue that the lack of economic perspective by Moscow has left the CSTO in a state of stagnation. Also, the challenges that initially justified the CSTO's creation have diminished. Consequently, the CSTO's objectives appear outdated. The limitation of Russia's approach to the CSTO, for instance, confining the organization to advance its hegemony doctrine in Central Asia, and the lack of regional cooperative spirit in Central Asia have undermined the progress of the military organization (Mayer, 2021).

This article does not overlook the lack of cooperative spirit as one of the reasons for not having deep political integration among the Central Asian states. While this paper emphasized the role of China and Russia as primary patrons, Central Asian states are not passive recipients of external influence. Kazakhstan, for instance, has simultaneously deepened security cooperation with Russia through the CSTO while pursuing economic diversification through engagement with China within the SCO framework (de Haas, 2017). Smaller states such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have leveraged membership in both organizations to increase support for their regimes. This selective engagement by Central Asian states further constrains the depth of institutional integration and contributes to the differences outlined between the SCO and the CSTO.

Therefore, I treat the lack of cooperative spirit among the Central Asian regimes as the control variable. While their reluctance to deepen ties with Russia helps explain the CSTO's limitations, their selective engagement, driven by economic interests, partially contributes to the "Shanghai Spirit" of the SCO. Treating the lack of cooperative spirit among the Central Asian States strengthens the argument that the key factor behind the divergent paths of the SCO and the CSTO lies in the preferences of their principal patrons.

It is worth mentioning that this analysis does not seek to undervalue the transformations that the CSTO has undergone. For instance, the organization evolved from a traditional inter-state defense pact into a body that is mainly concerned with regime security between 2003 and 2005, specifically during the color revolutions (Ambrosio, 2008, p. 1330). However, these transformations have been mostly confined to the security and military dimension, with limitations to incorporate an economic agenda. Even outside the CSTO's framework, Russia was unable to align the regional organization with the goals of regional planning and economic cooperation (Collins, 2009, p. 259).

Russia has primarily pursued its economic and integration objectives through substitutive institutional frameworks, most notably the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) (Tsygankov, 2018, p. 403). As a result, the CSTO has remained a security and defense pact similar to America's NATO rather than evolving into a multifunctional regional organization. This reflects Moscow's strategic choice to constrain security cooperation within the CSTO while advancing economic integration through parallel frameworks.

I argue that Russia's investment in establishing substitute institutions as arenas for economic cooperation deepens doubts about the CSTO's viability, thereby further underscoring Moscow's reluctance to expand the organization beyond its security mandate (Weitz, 2014, pp. 2-4). Hence, the CSTO's stagnation and its inability to undergo a real transformation from a narrowly security- and military-oriented organization to one with an expanded economic vision can be attributed to Russia's foreign policy goals, which have constrained the scope and flexibility of the CSTO.

Two recent cases illustrate both the operational capacity and political limitations of the CSTO. First, during the January 2022 unrest in Kazakhstan, the CSTO conducted its first-ever collective deployment at the request of the Kazakh government (Hedenskog & von Essen, 2022). The rapid deployment of the CSTO demonstrated that the organization is capable of coordinated action in support of regime stability.

By contrast, the CSTO's inaction during the 2023 escalation in Nagorno-Karabakh, despite Armenia's formal membership in the organization, exposed the political constraints and selective application of collective defense commitments (Atasuntsev, 2023). The absence of meaningful CSTO intervention highlighted the organization's limited credibility as a collective defense alliance and reinforced critiques regarding its constrained adaptability and uneven application of security guarantees.

The main argument of this article, that the primary patron's approach toward the two regional organizations (the SCO and the CSTO) has shaped their evolutions, is also backed by Hemmer and Katzenstein (2002, p. 600). When examining the absence of a NATO-like organization in Asia, Hemmer and Katzenstein contend that the US's vision of a collective identity for Europe was essential to the creation of NATO on that continent, whereas the lack of a parallel vision prevented the emergence of a similar structure in Asia. Thus, I reaffirm the main argument that the varying policies and approaches adopted by the two patrons (Russia and China) have shaped the evolution of the CSTO and the SCO.

Overall, the results indicate that differences between the SCO and the CSTO are closely correlated with the priorities of their main patrons. Taken together, the China's "peaceful rise", as reflected in the "Shanghai Spirit" of the SCO, and Russia's efforts to firmly align the CSTO with its foreign policy objective of blocking other powers from entering its sphere of influence, leads to a major finding that the intentions and preferences of major patron states ultimately shape the evolution of such organizations. This finding indicates that while the preference and agency of Central Asian regimes matter, they do not account for the divergent evolution of the SCO and the CSTO. Instead, the strategic preferences and policy orientations of the principal patrons, China in the case of the SCO and Russia in the case of the CSTO, emerge as the primary independent variable shaping the scope, adaptability, and the lack or existence of dynamic evolution of the two organizations.

## CONCLUSION

This study highlights that, despite being situated in the same region and emerging out of similar security and military concerns, the SCO and the CSTO have gone through different levels of evolution. Grounding on the broader literature that identifies China as the main patron of the SCO and Russia as the main patron of the CSTO, this article argues that the differing approaches and objectives of these two central patrons have been decisive in influencing the development of the two organizations.

To trace the differences in how both organizations evolved, this paper adopted the comparative research method of MSSD. Through this method, I made the argument plausible about the similarity of the context in which both organizations emerged, while designating the influence of their main patrons as the independent variable shaping their contrasting developments.

The outcome of this study is that the evolution and adaptability of a regional organization are dependent on the approaches and objectives of its main patron. If a country like China comes with a vision of promoting its domestic needs through peaceful rise, this approach is more welcomed by other member states, and the progress will follow. Meanwhile, if a country like Russia capitalizes on its foreign policy objective and adopts a dominant security-centered approach, the regional organization will stall in its limited security approach and undergo a modest structural expansion, as illustrated in the case of CSTO.

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The author declares no conflicts of interest and has no affiliations with any organization or entity with financial interests related to the subject matter discussed in this article.

## AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

AHM: conceptualization, literature review, methodology, formal analysis, writing and original draft preparation, review and editing.

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# AT THE CROSSROADS OF CLIMATE CHALLENGES: THE POTENTIAL OF GREEN ENERGY AS THE FOUNDATION FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT IN TAJIKISTAN

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**ABSTRACT.** *This article examines the dual challenge facing Tajikistan: significant climate vulnerability and substantial renewable energy potential. Climate change, evidenced by accelerating glacial melt and hydrological instability, poses direct threats to the country's socio-economic stability. Simultaneously, Tajikistan possesses vast untapped hydropower, solar, and wind resources that could serve as the foundation for a sustainable development pathway. Based on an analysis of national policy documents, scientific literature, and international reports, this study identifies critical financial, technological, and institutional barriers to the green energy transition. It proposes strategic directions, including regional energy integration, climate-resilient agricultural modernization, and enhanced international investment mobilization. The article argues that a structured transition to renewable energy represents not only an essential climate adaptation strategy but also a unique opportunity for long-term energy security and economic transformation. Realizing this potential requires coherent policy implementation, human capital development, and strengthened international cooperation. Success would position Tajikistan as a regional leader in sustainable development while mitigating the impacts of global warming.*

**KEYWORDS:** *Tajikistan, climate change, green energy, hydropower, glaciers, energy security, sustainable development, Central Asia.*

## INTRODUCTION

Tajikistan, a mountainous country in Central Asia, is acutely vulnerable to climate change due to its reliance on glacial meltwater and agrarian economy (IPCC, 2022). Over 90% of its territory consists of high mountain ecosystems, which are experiencing accelerated glacial retreat, altered hydrological cycles, and increased frequency of extreme weather events (IEA, 2022). Since ancient times, this country has served as a crucial hydrological "bank" and reservoir for the entire vast region. The glaciers of the Pamirs and Tien Shan, often described as rivers frozen in time, have served for centuries as strategic water reserves, gradually supplying water to millions of people and supporting thousands of hectares of irrigated land. In recent decades, however, these essential resources have faced a critical threat as their very foundations are rapidly melting.

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The country faces an existential challenge with multiple dimensions. Accelerated glacial retreat signals a critical turning point in the region's water balance. Glaciological and hydrological research in the Pamir and Tien Shan mountains reveals a dual effect of climate change: an initial increase in river runoff due to accelerated glacial melt—accompanied by heightened risks of floods and mudflows—followed by a projected long-term decline in water availability as glacial reserves are progressively depleted (Jouberton et al., 2025; Kumar, 2025; Hou et al., 2025). This dynamic directly threatens national food security, given the economy's strong dependence on agriculture. The increasing frequency of extreme weather events, including severe droughts and intense rainfall, disrupts agricultural cycles, erodes soil fertility, and creates socio-economic uncertainty, particularly in border regions where water distribution has historically required careful management.

Despite these challenges, Tajikistan possesses significant renewable energy potential, especially in hydropower, solar, and wind energy (Akhrova et al., 2016; IEA, 2022). The country's energy transition is framed within national policy documents and international climate commitments, reflecting growing recognition of green energy as a pathway to sustainable development (Strategy for the Development of a Green Economy, 2022). The same natural features that create environmental vulnerability—powerful mountain rivers, intense high-altitude solar radiation, and persistent winds—also provide opportunities for sustainable solutions. Tajikistan ranks second within the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) in hydropower potential, with an estimated 527 billion kWh available annually, yet only 4-5% is currently utilized (Akhrova et al., 2016). Additionally, the country receives high solar insolation, with up to 300 sunny days per year, while mountainous areas offer promising conditions for wind energy development (IEA, 2022).

Tajikistan thus stands at a critical juncture. One trajectory involves increasing dependence on climatic variability, energy shortages, and environmental degradation. Alternatively, with sustained political commitment, strategic planning, and international cooperation, the country could transform its vulnerabilities into strengths. In this scenario, water resources would underpin clean energy development, while solar energy would contribute to both agriculture and the national power grid. Decisions made in the coming years will shape not only Tajikistan's future but also establish a development paradigm for Central Asia's mountain regions, emphasizing renewable energy and sustainable growth.

This study aims to conduct an interdisciplinary analysis of climate risks and renewable energy potential in Tajikistan, using a policy-oriented analytical framework. The central hypothesis is that a structured green energy transition can serve simultaneously as a climate adaptation strategy and a driver of sustainable economic transformation.

To achieve this objective, the study addresses four interrelated tasks:

1. Systematize climate risks and their socio-economic impacts in Tajikistan;
2. Assess renewable energy potential and existing policy frameworks;
3. Identify systemic barriers to green energy deployment;

#### 4. Propose integrated policy recommendations for national and regional implementation.

The structure of this article includes a methodology section that outlines the research approach, a literature review that synthesizes existing scholarship, a results section presenting findings on climate vulnerability, energy potential, policy gaps, and barriers, a discussion analyzing strategic implications, and a conclusion offering policy recommendations.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative research design grounded in policy analysis and energy transition theory (Geels, 2014), combined with a climate vulnerability framework (IPCC, 2022). The methodological approach integrates four components. First, document analysis was conducted on key national strategies: the State Environmental Program for 2023-2028, the Strategy for the Development of a Green Economy for 2023–2037, and the National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy until 2030. These documents were examined to identify official goals, priorities, and implementation mechanisms. Second, a systematic literature review was undertaken of peer-reviewed articles and monographs published between 2007 and 2025 addressing climate change, hydropower, renewable energy potential, and sustainable development in Central Asia. The reviewed corpus includes works by Tajik, Russian, and international scholars, ensuring diverse scientific perspectives. Third, comparative policy analysis was employed, focusing on energy transition pathways in mountainous developing regions with similar geographic and economic characteristics. Fourth, international reports from the IPCC (2022), IEA (2022), World Bank (2024), and official publications of the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC, 2025) were critically reviewed to contextualize findings within global climate governance frameworks and regional cooperation initiatives. Data were analyzed using thematic coding and comparative synthesis, with attention to policy coherence, implementation gaps, and regional implications. The main methods for data processing and interpretation were comparative analysis and systematization, enabling identification of patterns, contradictions, and structural relationships. Critical evaluation was applied throughout, particularly when examining diverse perspectives on large infrastructure projects such as the Rogun HPP. This approach ensures analytical depth and balance.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing research on climate and energy in Tajikistan falls into three broad categories: climate impact studies, energy potential assessments, and policy and adaptation literature.

Climate impact studies focus on glacial retreat and hydrological changes. The IPCC (2022) provides comprehensive analysis of climate change impacts on mountain ecosystems globally, while Akizhanov (2024) examines the water-agriculture-energy nexus specifically in Central Asia, documenting accelerated glacier melt and projected long-term water scarcity. These studies confirm that Tajikistan's glaciers are melting at twice the rate observed in the twentieth century, creating short-term flood risks followed by chronic water deficits.

Energy potential assessments highlight the country's significant renewable resources. Akhrorova et al. (2016) provide foundational analysis of hydropower potential, estimating 527 billion kWh annually, with current utilization below 5%. The IEA (2022) offers a comprehensive energy sector review, detailing infrastructure constraints and opportunities for solar and wind development. Kazeeva and Kozreva (2023) examine hydropower prospects, emphasizing the strategic importance of the Rogun HPP for energy independence.

Policy and adaptation literature examines green economy frameworks and transboundary cooperation. The World Bank (2024) provides a detailed analysis of Tajikistan's green economy potential and recent climate and development reports, offering policy recommendations and implementation pathways. Kholnazarov and Khushvakhtzoda (2020, 2023, 2025) analyze energy security threats and sustainable development strategies from a national perspective. Sharipov (2023) examines investment attraction mechanisms for hydropower development.

International studies contextualize Tajikistan's challenges within regional frameworks. Karimov et al. (2013) assess potential regional benefits of the Rogun HPP for downstream countries. Menga (2015) analyzes the political dimensions of dam construction and nation-building. Kuchumova and Sablina (2024) examine renewable energy policies across Central Asian states. Madimarova (2025) explores the Rogun HPP's role in shaping Tajikistan's green energy diplomacy. Tsikanova et al. (2025) analyze hydropower as a strategic resource for national security.

Despite this substantial literature, a critical gap remains. Most studies examine climate risks and energy potential separately, without sufficient integration of implementation barriers and practical mechanisms for overcoming them. There is limited research linking climate vulnerability analysis with energy policy evaluation, particularly regarding implementation challenges, financing mechanisms, and regional cooperation opportunities. This study addresses that gap by connecting policy design with practical barriers and actionable recommendations, drawing on recent World Bank (2024) country climate and development reports that provide updated policy guidance.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The analysis yields several substantive findings revealing the complex interplay of threats and opportunities facing Tajikistan in the context of global climate change.

### *Climate Vulnerability*

Tajikistan faces accelerated glacial loss affecting river flow regimes, increasing flood risks in the short term and water scarcity in the long term (IPCC, 2022). The key identified risk is systemic destabilization of water balance caused by the rapid degradation of Pamir and Tien Shan glaciers. Observed melting rates have doubled, creating contradictory temporal dynamics. In the short term, increased runoff provokes more frequent and destructive floods and mudflows, threatening settlements and infrastructure. In the long term, the country faces a sustained reduction in water resources, challenging agriculture, energy production, and domestic water supply for millions of people (Jouberton et al., 2025; Kumar, 2025; Hou et al., 2025). This situation is exacerbated by general hydrological regime disorganization, manifested

in increased frequency of extreme droughts and heavy rainfall, as well as reduced snow-fed river flow. For Tajikistan's agrarian economy, where a significant portion of the population depends on agriculture, such changes undermine food security, reduce soil fertility, and increase socio-economic vulnerability across entire regions (National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy, 2019).

**Table 1.** Climate Risks and Energy Implications in Tajikistan

Climate Risk	Impact on the Energy Sector	Policy Response (National Documents)
<b>Glacial melt</b>	Reduced hydropower potential long-term; seasonal flow variability	National Climate Strategy (2030) – emphasis on diversification
<b>Extreme floods</b>	Infrastructure damage to power facilities	State Green Economy Program – resilience planning
<b>Droughts</b>	Reduced agricultural productivity, energy demand spikes	Integrated water-energy planning

*Source: compiled by the author based on synthesis of National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy (2019), Strategy for the Development of a Green Economy (2022), IPCC (2022), State Environmental Program (2023), and Jouberton et al. (2025)*

### **Renewable Energy Potential**

Simultaneously, the study provides a detailed assessment of strategic energy potential embedded in the country's natural assets. The energy response to climate challenges lies in the large-scale development of renewable energy sources.

**Table 2.** Potential and Current Status of Key Renewable Energy Resources in Tajikistan

Resource	Potential / Current Status	Key Characteristic
<b>Hydropower</b>	<b>527 billion kWh</b> annual potential; 4–5% utilized	Core of the current energy system; massive untapped reserve for base load and regulation.
<b>Solar</b>	<b>High insolation</b> (up to 300 sunny days/year)	Minimal installed capacity; strong potential for distributed and utility-scale generation.
<b>Wind</b>	<b>Promising in high-altitude zones</b>	Limited exploration; suitable for complementing solar and hydro in specific regions.

*Source: compiled by the author based on Akhrorova et al. (2016), IEA (2021), and Kazeeva & Kozreva (2023)*

Hydropower, traditionally forming the basis of the electricity sector, demonstrates a colossal development reserve. With a total potential of approximately 527 billion kWh per year, no more than 4-5% has been utilized (Akhrorova et al., 2016). The Rogun HPP represents a key project capable of transforming the energy landscape. Its completion promises enhanced energy independence through baseload power provision, resolution of winter energy deficits, and seasonal flow regulation capacity, particularly important under changing climate conditions (Karimov et al., 2013; Madimarova, 2025). However, project implementation remains subject to complex international consultations, highlighting geopolitical dimensions of energy development (Menga, 2015).

A crucial finding is the need to diversify the energy balance to reduce risks associated with hydrological dependence. The research confirms exceptional conditions for solar energy development, with among the highest insolation levels in the region (IEA, 2022).

Although initial solar power plants have been commissioned, this sector remains nascent and requires targeted investment and technological support. Wind energy potential, while less studied, is recognized as promising for specific high-altitude areas with stable air currents (IEA, 2022). Significant investments in the country's energy sector are already materializing through regional cooperation programs. According to data from the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program (CAREC), by the end of 2024, Tajikistan had attracted \$3.6 billion in investments across 56 projects, of which about \$1.20 billion was directed specifically to the energy sector (CAREC, 2025). This financial inflow underscores the growing international interest in Tajikistan's energy infrastructure and its potential role in regional electricity trade. Developing these resources would enable a more flexible, distributed energy system resilient to local climate anomalies.

### ***Policy Analysis and Implementation Gaps***

Critical assessment of Tajikistan's primary policy frameworks reveals a notable ambition-implementation gap between declared strategic objectives and practical realization mechanisms.

The Strategy for the Development of a Green Economy for 2023–2037 represents the cornerstone policy document, outlining a comprehensive vision for sustainable development (Strategy for the Development of a Green Economy, 2022). It establishes quantitative targets for increasing the renewable energy share and improving energy efficiency. However, the program operates primarily at the level of strategic goals, lacking granular implementation roadmaps, detailed sectoral action plans, and clear budgetary allocations. This absence creates ambiguity regarding responsible agencies, timelines, and funding sources, potentially leading to bureaucratic inertia and hindering coordinated execution.

Similarly, the National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy until 2030 prioritizes climate adaptation appropriately given the country's high vulnerability (National Climate Change Adaptation Strategy, 2019). It provides a valuable framework for addressing risks in water management, agriculture, and disaster preparedness. Nevertheless, the strategy exhibits structural imbalance by significantly underfunding and providing insufficient detail for the mitigation pillar, particularly renewable energy deployment projects. This approach treats adaptation and mitigation as separate tracks rather than synergistic components of a unified green transition, potentially missing co-benefits opportunities. For instance, distributed solar generation can simultaneously enhance energy security (an adaptation goal) and reduce emissions (a mitigation goal).

These policy documents collectively identify correct systemic challenges, financial constraints, infrastructural deficits, and institutional weaknesses as bottlenecks on the path to green transition (Green Economy Strategy, 2022). Yet analysis indicates that policies themselves often lack the operational depth, financial backing, and inter-ministerial coordination mechanisms necessary to effectively dismantle these barriers. There is a pronounced need for secondary legislation, regulatory frameworks for green investments, and strengthened monitoring and evaluation systems to translate high-level political commitments into tangible project pipelines and measurable outcomes. This gap between policy design and implementation capacity emerges as a fundamental barrier in its own right, constraining the pace and scale of Tajikistan's sustainable transformation.

### *Systemic Barriers to Green Transition*

In addition to identifying potential, the study reveals a complex set of interconnected systemic barriers forming a "development trap" that slows and complicates the green transition process. Financial constraints represent arguably the most significant challenge. High capital intensity of large hydrotechnical structures and substantial upfront investments required for new technologies conflict with the state budget's limited capacity (Azimov, 2007). Despite growing global green finance markets, Tajikistan's access to instruments such as green bonds, Green Climate Fund resources, or concessional loans from international financial institutions remains constrained by the need to develop bankable project proposals and strengthen institutional capacity for their management. The World Bank (2024) estimates that achieving Tajikistan's climate commitments will require significant mobilization of private and international finance.

Infrastructure barriers manifest in high degradation of existing power grid complexes, leading to significant energy transmission losses and reduced supply reliability (IEA, 2022). This infrastructure state not only increases operational costs but also complicates the integration of new, especially small and distributed, renewable energy generating facilities into the unified grid. A technological gap exists between potential generation capabilities and the system's actual capacity to accept and distribute this energy.

Institutional weaknesses include insufficient interagency coordination between ministries of energy, economy, environmental protection, and agriculture, as well as gaps in policy implementation, monitoring, and evaluation systems (World Bank, 2024). The chronic issue of seasonal energy deficit, particularly in winter, persists. Its solution requires a systemic approach, including small hydropower development, energy storage, solar generation for local needs, and widespread energy efficiency improvements.

Geopolitical risks arise from the transboundary nature of key water resources (Menga, 2015). Any large hydropower project in upstream rivers, primarily the Rogun HPP construction, becomes subject to complex consultations with neighboring states, adding foreign policy uncertainty and potentially slowing decision-making. The water-energy nexus in Central Asia requires careful diplomatic management to ensure regional cooperation rather than tension (Akizhanov, 2024).

**Table 3.** Systemic Barriers to the Green Transition in Tajikistan

Barrier Category	Specific Manifestations / Characteristics	Consequences / Impact
<b>Financial</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- High upfront costs (capital intensity).</li> <li>- Limited access to international climate finance (green bonds, Green Climate Fund).</li> <li>- Difficulties in preparing bankable project proposals.</li> </ul>	Slows the implementation of renewable energy source (RES) projects, creates a dependence on the limited state budget, and hampers the ability to attract large-scale private and international investments.
<b>Infrastructural</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Physical and moral obsolescence of existing power grids.</li> <li>- High transmission and distribution losses.</li> <li>- Grid unpreparedness for integrating variable generation (solar, wind).</li> </ul>	Decreases the reliability of energy supply, increases operational costs, and creates a technological gap between generation potential and distribution capabilities.

<b>Institutional</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Weak coordination between key ministries (energy, economy, environment, and agriculture).</li> <li>- Gaps in monitoring, reporting, and evaluation (M&amp;E) systems for policy implementation.</li> <li>- Insufficient capacity for managing complex projects.</li> </ul>	Leads to policy inconsistency, low effectiveness in strategy implementation, and complicates the attraction and utilization of funding due to weak administration.
<b>Geopolitical</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>- Transboundary nature of key water resources.</li> <li>- Water-energy tensions with neighboring states.</li> <li>- Foreign policy uncertainty surrounding large hydropower projects (e.g., Rogun HPP).</li> </ul>	Slows down decision-making processes, necessitates complex multilateral consultations, creates additional risks for investors, and can lead to regional tensions.
<b>Overall Effect</b>		Creates a "development trap" – an interconnected complex of barriers that slows down and complicates the green transition process, hindering the realization of the country's strategic potential.

*Source: compiled by the author based on analysis of policy documents, Azimov (2007), IEA (2022) and World Bank (2024)*

**DISCUSSION OF RESULTS**

The findings illuminate several key dilemmas and strategic interconnections underlying Tajikistan's energy future. The most paradoxical conclusion is water's dual role, simultaneously serving as the primary vector of climate threat and the central energy asset. Accelerated glacier melt, leading to long-term water scarcity, directly threatens hydropower—the foundation of the current energy system (IPCC, 2022; Akizhanov, 2024). This paradox creates a situation where the primary adaptation tool (hydropower) depends on the same resource that constitutes the source of vulnerability (IEA, 2022). Consequently, a strategy overly reliant on large-scale hydropower, while economically justified in the short term, exacerbates long-term systemic risks by linking energy security to a climate-vulnerable resource (Kholnazarov & Khushvaktzoda, 2020; Sharipov, 2023).

In this context, diversifying the energy balance through solar and wind power becomes not merely a technological advancement but an imperative for enhancing resilience. These sources, with complementary generation profiles (higher solar activity in summer when water scarcity may occur), can mitigate seasonal fluctuations and create a more flexible, distributed system less susceptible to climatic shocks (IEA, 2022). Moreover, developing non-hydro renewable energy sources can serve as a positive signal within transboundary dialogue, reducing perceived threats of upstream hydropower projects and fostering cooperation in shared energy security (Karimov et al., 2013; World Bank, 2024).

The second fundamental problem is the systemic gap between policy design and implementation (Geels, 2014). The existence of ambitious strategic documents, such as the Strategy for the Development of a Green Economy, represents a significant achievement (Strategy for the Development of a Green Economy, 2022). However, as practice and international reports indicate, established targets for renewable energy share

and energy efficiency are not supported by adequate regulatory mechanisms, financial instruments, and institutional capacity (World Bank, 2024; IEA, 2022). The absence of transparent grid-connection rules for renewable energy facilities, approved green energy tariffs, and streamlined investor procedures creates uncertainty and deters private capital (IEA, 2022). This situation underscores the need to shift from strategy development to creating practical "rules of the game" that translate political declarations into investment projects meeting international standards (Geels, 2014).

The third aspect concerns Tajikistan's regional positioning. Implementation of the CASA-1000 project marks an important shift from national autarky toward regional interdependence (Kuchumova & Sablina, 2024). This infrastructure lays the physical groundwork for transforming the country from a winter electricity importer to a net exporter. The strategic goal of establishing itself as a Central Asian regional energy hub appears ambitious yet achievable in the long term (Tsikanova et al., 2025; Khushvakhtzoda & Kholnazarov, 2025). However, realization depends not only on Rogun HPP completion (Madimarova, 2025) but also on parallel, profound modernization of internal grids to minimize losses and integrate heterogeneous generation sources (IEA, 2022). Success on this path would allow Tajikistan not only to ensure its own energy security but also to contribute decisively to regional decarbonization by supplying clean energy to neighboring countries, thereby enhancing its political and economic weight in alignment with sustainable development goals (IPCC, 2022; World Bank, 2024).

Finally, the green transformation must be comprehensive and interconnected, overcoming technological and managerial insularity of the energy sector and integrating it with other economic sectors. Implementing climate-smart technologies in agriculture, such as drip irrigation with solar pumps, directly links energy transition goals with water conservation and food security (State Environmental Program, 2023). Developing eco-tourism based on preserving unique Pamir landscapes creates economic value from nature conservation, directly engaging local communities (State Environmental Program, 2023). The synergy between energy, agriculture, and environmental management, as reflected in the green economy concept (World Bank, 2024), can transform climate challenges from threat sources into drivers of innovative and inclusive development.

## CONCLUSION

This research demonstrates that Tajikistan stands at a decisive crossroads, where climate threats not only coexist with energy opportunities but create a unique imperative for systemic change. The climate crisis, manifested in accelerated glacier melt, hydrological regime destabilization, and increased extreme weather frequency, directly undermines national security and economic stability foundations. However, this very vulnerability highlights the strategic value of colossal, yet underutilized, renewable energy potential. The green energy transition thus emerges not as one possible development scenario, but as a historical necessity and key adaptation mechanism capable of transforming the nature of climate risks.

The success of this transformation depends on the consistent implementation of interconnected measures identified in the analysis. First, deep consolidation and operationalization of state policy is required. Bridging the gap between ambitious goals

outlined in national strategies and implementation mechanisms necessitates developing detailed sectoral roadmaps, clear budgetary allocations, and effective interagency coordination and monitoring systems. Policies in climate, energy, water resources, and agriculture must be integrated into a unified sustainable development logic (World Bank, 2024; Kuchumova & Sablina, 2024). Second, mobilizing substantial financial resources is critically important. Overcoming renewable energy project capital intensity requires active and strategic engagement with global green finance markets. Tajikistan needs to build institutional capacity to prepare investment projects meeting international standards (bankable projects) and purposefully attract funds through mechanisms such as the Green Climate Fund, sovereign green bond issuance, and partnerships with international financial institutions (Azimov, 2007; Barfiyev & Kholnazarov, 2022; World Bank, 2024). Third, strengthening regional energy cooperation is a key success factor. Implementation and expansion of interstate electricity transmission projects (such as CASA-1000) will not only enable surplus clean energy export but also stabilize national grids, creating foundations for a common Central Asian energy market. This process must be accompanied by active dialogue on water-energy issues to mitigate transboundary tensions (Akizhanov, 2024). Fourth, investments in physical and human infrastructure form the transition foundation. Modernizing worn-out distribution networks and developing smart grids are essential to minimize losses and efficiently integrate variable generation from solar and wind power plants. Concurrently, profound reform of technical education systems and establishment of centers of excellence are needed to train a new generation of engineers, technicians, and managers capable of implementing and maintaining future technologies.

Tajikistan's energy transition toward a green economy represents a comprehensive strategic path extending far beyond the environmental agenda. It is a path toward genuine energy security, overcoming seasonal deficits and dependence on fossil fuels. It is a driver of economic resilience, creating new industries, jobs, and export opportunities. And ultimately, it is a chance to strengthen regional leadership, positioning the country as a clean energy hub and sustainable development model for Central Asia's entire mountainous belt. The consistency of actions taken today will determine whether Tajikistan can transform its climate vulnerabilities into sources of long-term prosperity and strategic influence.

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The author declares no conflict of interest.

## **AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS**

MK: conceptualization, methodology, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft, visualization, project administration.

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