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CONTENT

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FROM DATA GAPS TO DECISION SUPPORT: THE ROLE OF HYDROLOGICAL MONITORING AND EARTH OBSERVATION IN CENTRAL ASIA

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ABSTRACT. *Water resource management in Central Asia is increasingly challenged by climate change, glacier retreat, population growth, and rising socio-economic demands. While regional discourse has largely focused on transboundary governance and institutional coordination, a critical underlying constraint remains the limited availability, consistency, and integration of hydrological data. The decline of hydrological monitoring networks and fragmentation of data systems have significantly reduced the reliability of observations, constraining forecasting accuracy and water allocation processes. This commentary argues that interoperable hydrological monitoring and data-sharing systems are not only technical requirements but foundational preconditions for credible water allocation, forecasting, climate adaptation, and trust-building in transboundary basins. Persistent data gaps, particularly in high-altitude, groundwater, and precipitation monitoring, continue to limit effective planning and decision-making (Liu & Li, 2025).*

This policy commentary argues that strengthening hydrological monitoring systems – through the restoration of in-situ observation networks and their integration with Earth Observation (EO), machine learning, and digital technologies – represents a foundational requirement for effective water governance in Central Asia. The paper highlights how interoperable monitoring and data-sharing systems can improve transparency, reduce uncertainty in water availability assessments, support more credible forecasting and allocation decisions, and ultimately strengthen cooperation across transboundary river basins. Advances in satellite-based observations, data analytics, and modelling tools provide new opportunities to enhance monitoring capacity, improve transparency, and support evidence-based water management. Bridging the gap between data collection and policy implementation is essential for reducing uncertainty, strengthening transboundary water governance, and advancing climate resilience. An

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integrated approach will be critical for enabling sustainable and cooperative water management across Central Asia.

KEYWORDS: *Central Asia, transboundary water governance, hydromet networks, earth observation, data sharing, decision support systems, climate resilience, cryosphere monitoring.*

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia is widely recognized as one of the most climate-vulnerable regions globally, characterized by arid and semi-arid climates, high dependence on transboundary water resources, and increasing climate variability. Major river systems such as the Amu Darya and Syr Darya are critical for sustaining agriculture, hydropower generation, and broader socio-economic development across multiple countries. However, these systems are under growing pressure due to glacier retreat, shifting precipitation patterns, and rising water demand, all of which are intensifying competition over limited water resources.

The region's hydrological regime is particularly sensitive to climatic variability, largely due to its reliance on glacier-fed rivers and snowmelt processes originating in high mountain catchments. Recent studies have highlighted substantial changes in the Central Asian water cycle, driven by both climate change and anthropogenic influences (Unger-Shayesteh et al., 2013). At the same time, water scarcity is further exacerbated by the transboundary nature of key river basins and the continued reliance on aging infrastructure inherited from the Soviet period (Karthe et al., 2015).

Despite the existence of regional cooperation frameworks and institutions, water management in Central Asia continues to face persistent structural challenges. While much of the regional discourse has focused on governance, allocation mechanisms, and institutional coordination, a critical but often underemphasized constraint is the declining capacity of hydrological monitoring systems. The reduction of observation networks, combined with outdated technologies and fragmented data management practices, has significantly limited the availability of reliable, consistent, and comparable hydrological data.

While climate change, population growth, and competing water demands are widely recognized challenges across Central Asia, the ability to respond effectively to these pressures is increasingly constrained by a less visible but equally important bottleneck: fragmented hydrological information systems and limited data interoperability. In many parts of the region, monitoring networks have deteriorated, data-sharing arrangements remain inconsistent, and institutional responsibilities are distributed across multiple agencies and jurisdictions. As a result, uncertainty surrounding water availability, seasonal forecasting, and resource allocation continues to undermine evidence-based decision-making and transboundary cooperation.

Although previous studies have extensively examined climate change impacts, glacier retreat, water scarcity, and regional water governance, comparatively less attention has been given to the role of hydrological monitoring systems and data governance as enabling foundations for effective water management. This paper argues that strengthening monitoring networks, improving data interoperability, and integrating emerging Earth Observation technologies into operational decision-making frameworks represent critical prerequisites for enhancing water security, climate resilience, and regional cooperation in Central Asia.

Inadequate data sharing and weak integration of monitoring systems further undermine regional forecasting, planning, and decision-making processes (Abdullaev & Rakhmatullaev, 2014). This disconnect between data generation and its effective use in policy and operational contexts represents a fundamental barrier to sustainable water governance. Addressing this gap is essential for improving water allocation, enhancing transparency, and strengthening cooperation in transboundary river basins. Drawing upon recent scientific literature, institutional reports, and regional experiences, this commentary examines the role of hydrological monitoring and interoperable data systems in strengthening water governance, climate resilience, and transboundary cooperation in Central Asia.

METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

This paper is presented as a policy commentary informed by a structured review of scientific literature, regional policy documents, institutional reports, and recent developments in hydrological monitoring and Earth Observation applications relevant to Central Asia. The objective is not to conduct a systematic review or meta-analysis, but rather to synthesize current knowledge and identify practical pathways for strengthening hydrological information systems to support climate resilience and transboundary water governance.

The evidence base was compiled from peer-reviewed journal articles, reports published by international organizations and development partners (including the World Bank, Asian Development Bank, FAO, UNESCO, WMO, and regional water institutions), and publicly available documentation related to hydrological monitoring, climate change impacts, water governance, and digital technologies in Central Asia. Particular attention was given to publications produced during the last decade, while selected foundational studies were included where necessary to provide historical and institutional context.

The review focused on four thematic areas: (1) hydrological monitoring networks and data availability; (2) transboundary water governance and regional cooperation mechanisms; (3) Earth Observation, digital technologies, and decision-support systems; and (4) policy and institutional pathways for improving water management under increasing climate variability and change. Rather than evaluating individual technologies or governance frameworks in isolation, the paper adopts an integrated perspective that examines how improved monitoring systems, interoperable data infrastructures, and institutional cooperation can collectively support more informed decision-making, forecasting, water allocation, and climate adaptation across the major transboundary river basins of Central Asia.

KEY CHALLENGES

Central Asia's water management challenges are shaped by a combination of data limitations, climate-driven hydrological change, and institutional constraints. These interrelated factors create a complex environment in which uncertainty remains high and decision-making capacity is constrained. Addressing these challenges requires a clear understanding of the underlying structural weaknesses in monitoring systems, environmental change, and governance frameworks.

Hydrological Data Gaps

Significant deficiencies in hydrological monitoring persist across Central Asia, particularly in critical observation domains that are essential for understanding and managing water resources (Table 1). These gaps are most pronounced in high-altitude regions, groundwater systems, and precipitation monitoring, all of which play a fundamental role in the regional hydrological cycle. Limited monitoring in mountainous areas constrains the understanding of snow accumulation, glacier mass balance, and meltwater dynamics, which are key drivers of river flow in the region (Schöne et al., 2013). Given that a substantial portion of Central Asia's water resources originates in these high-elevation zones, the lack of consistent and high-quality observations introduces significant uncertainty into hydrological assessments and forecasts. Groundwater systems, which are increasingly important for water supply and drought resilience, remain fragmented and poorly monitored, particularly in countries such as Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan (Schmidt et al., 2024). This limits the ability to assess groundwater availability, recharge processes, and long-term sustainability under changing climatic and anthropogenic pressures.

In addition, precipitation data—one of the most critical inputs for hydrological modelling—remains highly uncertain. Studies indicate that precipitation uncertainty can account for up to 50% of model variability, significantly affecting the reliability of hydrological simulations and forecasts (Malsy et al., 2015). This uncertainty is further exacerbated by sparse observation networks and complex terrain, which challenge accurate measurement and spatial interpolation. Land cover changes, including agricultural expansion, deforestation, and land degradation, further influence runoff generation, evapotranspiration, and water quality, adding another layer of complexity to hydrological processes (Wade et al., 2024). However, the integration of land surface dynamics into monitoring and modelling frameworks remains limited. Collectively, these data gaps reduce the reliability of hydrological models, constrain forecasting accuracy, and limit the effectiveness of water allocation and management strategies across the region.

Table 1. Changes in the number of hydrological gauging stations in Central Asia (1980s–present), showing a decline after the Soviet period and only partial recovery

Country	1980s (Soviet period)	Late 1990s	Current (latest)	Change vs 1980s
Kazakhstan	506	354	410	↓ ~19%
Kyrgyzstan	147	111	78	↓ ~47%
Tajikistan	139	85	96	↓ ~31%
Turkmenistan	38	23	33	↓ ~13%
Uzbekistan	155	119	133	↓ ~14%

Source: SIC ICWC Policy Brief No. 10 (2026).

Note: *Station numbers were compiled from national hydrometeorological services, regional reports, and published literature available at the time of writing (2024–2025). "Current/Latest" refers to the most recent publicly available information identified for each country. Direct comparison between countries should be interpreted with caution, as monitoring networks differ in spatial coverage, station type, operational status, reporting practices, and data accessibility.*

While the number of monitoring stations provides a useful indicator of network capacity, station counts alone do not fully reflect the quality or operational value of hydrological information systems. In many cases, monitoring challenges relate not only to the density of stations but also to issues of station functionality, maintenance, calibration, metadata quality, data continuity, and accessibility. Some stations may be inactive, operate intermittently, or lack standardized procedures for data management and sharing. As a result, assessments of monitoring capacity should consider both quantitative indicators (e.g., station numbers) and qualitative aspects related to data reliability, interoperability, and long-term operational sustainability.

Climate Change and Cryosphere Decline

Climate change is intensifying existing vulnerabilities in Central Asia's water systems, particularly through its impacts on the cryosphere. Glacier retreat is accelerating across Central Asia, with some studies projecting glacier volume losses exceeding 50–80% by the end of the 21st century under high-emission scenarios, particularly in parts of the Tien Shan and Pamir Mountain systems (Liu & Li, 2025). This has profound implications for river systems that depend on glacier and snowmelt contributions, especially during dry seasons. Declining snowfall further exacerbates these challenges by reducing the natural storage and gradual release of water from snowpack systems (Jouberton et al., 2025). As a result, the timing and magnitude of river flows are becoming increasingly variable and less predictable. These changes are expected to significantly alter:

- Seasonal flow regimes, with earlier peak flows and reduced late-season water availability;
- Overall water availability, particularly during critical agricultural periods;
- Long-term water security, as natural buffering systems decline.

The combination of cryosphere degradation and climatic variability increases uncertainty in water supply, placing additional pressure on already limited monitoring and management capacities.

Institutional and Transboundary Constraints

Hydrological challenges in Central Asia are closely intertwined with governance and institutional limitations. Effective water management in the region requires coordination across multiple countries, yet institutional fragmentation and weak collaboration mechanisms continue to hinder data exchange and integration (Cassara et al., 2019). Upstream–downstream dynamics further complicate cooperation, as countries often have competing priorities related to water use for hydropower, irrigation, and domestic supply (Ugli et al., 2025). These competing interests can limit the willingness to share data and adopt coordinated management approaches.

In addition, legal and regulatory frameworks governing water resources remain fragmented and inconsistently applied, reducing their effectiveness in supporting integrated basin management (Janusz-Pawletta, 2015). Institutional arrangements often lack the flexibility and capacity required to respond to rapidly changing environmental conditions. As a result, even where hydrological data exists, it is frequently underutilized or not fully integrated into policy and operational decision-making processes. This gap between data availability and its practical application represents a critical barrier to improving water governance and achieving sustainable, cooperative management of transboundary water resources.

Regional Water Governance and Monitoring Architecture

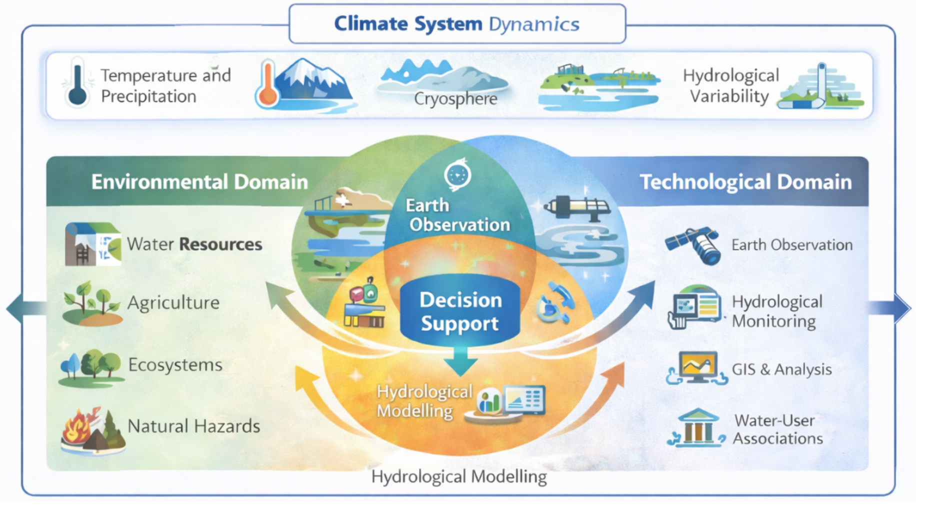
Effective hydrological monitoring and water governance in Central Asia depend on a complex institutional architecture comprising national hydrometeorological agencies, basin organizations, regional coordination bodies, and international development partners. National Hydromet agencies remain the primary providers of hydrological and meteorological observations, while regional coordination mechanisms such as the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC), its Scientific Information Centre (SIC ICWC), and the Basin Water Organizations (BWO) of the Amu Darya and Syr Darya support basin-scale planning, water allocation, and information exchange. At the regional level, the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) provides an important platform for cooperation and environmental initiatives. Despite these institutional arrangements, data sharing remains uneven, monitoring standards vary among countries, and interoperability challenges continue to constrain the effective use of hydrological information for decision-making.

TECHNOLOGICAL OPPORTUNITIES

While Central Asia faces significant challenges related to hydrological data gaps and institutional constraints, recent advances in Earth Observation (EO), machine learning, and digital technologies offer substantial opportunities to transform water monitoring and management systems. These technologies provide new pathways to enhance data availability, improve forecasting accuracy, and support evidence-based decision-making. Importantly, their greatest value lies not in replacing traditional monitoring systems, but in enabling, multi-source data frameworks that combine in-situ observations with advanced analytical tools.

Figure 1 summarizes the conceptual framework underpinning this paper. The framework illustrates how climate change, population growth, and increasing water demand place growing pressure on water resources across Central Asia. In response, integrated monitoring systems that combine conventional hydrological observations with Earth Observation, machine learning, IoT networks, and digital twin technologies can strengthen data availability and interoperability. These enhanced information systems support decision-support tools for forecasting, water allocation, drought management, and flood risk assessment, ultimately contributing to improved climate resilience, evidence-based water governance, and transboundary cooperation.

Figure 1. Conceptual framework illustrating how integrated hydrological monitoring systems, combining in-situ observations, Earth Observation, and emerging digital technologies, can support data-driven decision-making, climate resilience, and transboundary water governance in Central Asia.



Source: Developed by the authors

Earth Observation and Hydrological Monitoring

Advances in Earth Observation have significantly expanded the capacity to monitor hydrological processes across large and often inaccessible regions of Central Asia. Satellite-based systems provide consistent spatial coverage, enabling observation of remote mountainous areas where traditional monitoring networks are sparse or absent. In addition, EO technologies offer near real-time monitoring of water dynamics, as well as long-term datasets that are essential for climate and hydrological trend analysis. A range of satellite missions now support hydrological applications at multiple scales. For example, satellite altimetry missions such as ICESat-2 enable high-precision monitoring of water surface elevation, contributing to improved understanding of river, lake, and reservoir dynamics (Khorrami et al., 2021). Similarly, gravimetric missions such as GRACE and GRACE-FO provide valuable insights into regional-scale groundwater storage changes, capturing both natural variability and anthropogenic impacts (Gafurov et al., 2024).

In addition, optical and radar remote sensing techniques are widely used for surface water mapping, irrigation monitoring, and land-use assessment, providing critical information for water resource management and agricultural planning (Krutikov et al., 2004). These technologies are particularly valuable in transboundary contexts, where consistent and comparable data across national boundaries is essential. Despite these advantages, EO data alone is not sufficient. Its effective application depends on integration with ground-based observations, which provide calibration, validation, and local context. This highlights the importance of developing hybrid monitoring systems that leverage both in-situ and satellite-based data.

While Earth Observation provides unprecedented opportunities for large-scale and near-real-time monitoring, it should be viewed as complementary to, rather than a replacement for, in-situ monitoring networks. Ground-based observations remain essential for calibration, validation, uncertainty assessment, and long-term continuity of hydrological records. The operational use of EO-derived products also depends on national ownership, institutional capacity, standardized data protocols, and integration into existing decision-making processes. Challenges related to data interoperability, technical skills, maintenance of monitoring systems, and the translation of scientific products into operational services must be addressed to ensure sustained uptake by water agencies and basin organizations. Strengthening the link between satellite observations, national hydrometeorological services, and regional data-sharing platforms will therefore be critical for maximizing the value of Earth Observation in Central Asia.

Machine Learning and Data Integration

Machine learning (ML) techniques are increasingly being applied to address the complexity and uncertainty inherent in hydrological systems. By enabling the analysis of large and heterogeneous datasets, ML approaches can improve both data interpretation and predictive modelling. Recent studies demonstrate the potential of ML for high-resolution hydrological applications. For example, machine learning-based downscaling techniques have been used to generate fine-scale groundwater storage anomaly maps, significantly improving spatial resolution compared to traditional approaches (Yuan et al., 2025). Similarly, ML methods have enhanced the estimation of snow water equivalent (SWE) by integrating meteorological and remote sensing data, reducing uncertainty in snowpack assessments (Goodarzi et al., 2025). These approaches are particularly valuable in data-scarce environments such as Central Asia, where traditional monitoring networks are limited. By combining multiple data sources—such as EO, climate data, and in-situ measurements—ML techniques enable the development of data-driven hydrological models that can support forecasting, scenario analysis, and decision-making. However, the effective application of these tools requires not only technical capacity but also institutional readiness and access to high-quality input data, reinforcing the need for integrated monitoring systems.

Integrated Monitoring and Smart Irrigation Systems

The convergence of digital technologies, including the Internet of Things (IoT), automated monitoring systems, and digital twin modelling, is creating new opportunities for real-time, adaptive water management. These technologies facilitate the transition from static monitoring approaches to dynamic systems capable of responding to changing environmental and operational conditions. Automated hydrological monitoring stations, including multi-parameter observation networks in high mountain regions, are expanding the availability and continuity of critical hydrological data (Schöne et al., 2013). These systems enable more frequent and reliable measurements, supporting improved forecasting and early warning capabilities. In the agricultural sector, smart irrigation technologies are demonstrating significant potential to enhance water use efficiency. Pilot studies of automated and IoT-enabled irrigation systems in Central Asia have reported water-use efficiency improvements ranging from approximately 25% to 59%, depending on crop type, irrigation infrastructure, and local operating conditions

(Batykova et al., 2025). This is particularly important in Central Asia, where agriculture remains the dominant water user.

Digital twin approaches further extend these capabilities by enabling the simulation and optimization of water systems under different scenarios. For example, digital twin-based irrigation models allow for adaptive management of water resources, integrating real-time data with predictive modelling to support decision-making at farm and basin scales (Arifjanov et al., 2025). Together, these technologies provide a foundation for transitioning toward integrated, water management systems. However, their successful implementation depends on overcoming existing institutional and technical barriers, including data sharing limitations, capacity constraints, and the need for coordinated regional frameworks.

Operational Challenges and Limitations

Despite the considerable potential of Earth Observation, machine learning, IoT networks, and digital twin technologies, their successful implementation in Central Asia faces several practical and institutional challenges. Many advanced monitoring systems require sustained investment in infrastructure, technical expertise, maintenance, and long-term operational support. In some regions, limitations in data availability, monitoring network density, and historical records constrain the development and validation of predictive models. Earth Observation products often require calibration and validation using ground-based measurements, while machine learning approaches depend on the availability of reliable training datasets. Similarly, IoT-based monitoring systems may face challenges related to equipment maintenance, communication infrastructure, power supply, and long-term sustainability, particularly in remote environments. Digital twins, although promising, require substantial data integration, computational resources, and institutional coordination to support operational decision-making.

Additional challenges include data interoperability, inconsistent metadata standards, fragmented data governance arrangements, and varying levels of technical capacity among institutions. Addressing these constraints will be essential to ensure that emerging technologies can be effectively integrated into national monitoring systems and regional water management frameworks. Consequently, technological innovation should be accompanied by investments in institutional capacity, governance mechanisms, data standards, and long-term operational support.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Addressing hydrological data gaps and leveraging emerging technologies has direct and far-reaching implications for water governance in Central Asia. Improved monitoring systems not only enhance scientific understanding but also strengthen decision-making processes, operational management, and regional cooperation mechanisms. By transforming how data is collected, shared, and applied, Central Asian countries can move toward more proactive, transparent, and adaptive water management frameworks.

Improved hydrological monitoring systems have direct implications for a range of operational and strategic water management decisions across Central Asia. Reliable observations of streamflow, reservoir storage, precipitation, snowpack, glacier conditions, and groundwater levels support seasonal water allocation planning between upstream and downstream users, optimize reservoir operations, and strengthen drought early warning systems. Enhanced monitoring can also improve flood forecasting, irrigation scheduling, groundwater management, and climate adaptation planning. By reducing uncertainty in water availability assessments and providing a shared evidence base for decision-making, monitoring systems can support more transparent and informed management of transboundary water resources.

Better Data for Better Decisions

Reliable and integrated hydrological data is fundamental to effective decision-making across multiple scales, from local water management to national planning and regional coordination. Improved monitoring systems—particularly those combining in-situ observations with Earth Observation and digital tools—enable more accurate and timely assessments of water availability and variability. Enhanced data availability directly supports seasonal forecasting, which plays a critical role in planning agricultural production, hydropower operations, and water allocation strategies. Climate-informed forecasting approaches have demonstrated the ability to improve anticipatory decision-making, reducing uncertainty and increasing system resilience (Gerlitz et al., 2020).

In the agricultural sector, where water demand is highest, improved data and monitoring systems can significantly enhance efficiency and productivity. Studies conducted in irrigated agricultural systems in Central Asia have reported crop yield improvements of approximately 15–30% where improved water management and irrigation practices were implemented, although outcomes vary according to crop type, climate conditions, and management approaches (Amirbekuly et al., 2024). This is particularly important in Central Asia, where irrigation accounts for the majority of water use. Improved monitoring also strengthens flood forecasting and hazard response systems, enabling earlier detection of extreme events and more effective risk mitigation. Remote sensing and advanced monitoring technologies have been successfully applied to enhance flood detection and response capabilities, reducing the impacts of hydrological hazards (Arkhipkin & Sagatdinova, 2017). Overall, improved hydrological data systems support a transition from reactive to proactive water management, enabling decision-makers to anticipate risks, optimize resource allocation, and respond more effectively to changing conditions.

Transboundary Governance Benefits

In a region where water resources are inherently transboundary, the availability of reliable, shared, and transparent data is essential for effective cooperation. Hydrological data is not only a technical resource but also a strategic asset for building trust and facilitating dialogue among countries. Strengthened data-sharing mechanisms can enhance the effectiveness of regional institutions such as the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), which rely on coordinated data inputs to support basin-scale planning and decision-making (Prniyazova et al., 2025). By improving the quality and accessibility of hydrological information, countries can develop a shared understanding of water availability and variability, reducing uncertainty in negotiations and planning processes.

Harmonized monitoring systems and standardized data protocols further contribute to transparency and comparability, which are critical for building confidence among stakeholders. Previous research highlights that improved data management and sharing practices can significantly enhance integrated water resources management across the region (Abdullaev & Rakhmatullaev, 2014). In this context, hydrological monitoring systems play a dual role: as a technical foundation for water management, and as a mechanism for strengthening regional cooperation and water diplomacy. By enabling more transparent and evidence-based decision-making, improved data systems can help mitigate conflicts, align national interests, and support more sustainable and cooperative management of shared water resources.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Addressing the complex and interconnected challenges of water management in Central Asia requires a coordinated set of policy actions that integrate technological innovation, institutional reform, and regional cooperation. The following recommendations outline priority areas for strengthening hydrological monitoring systems and enhancing decision-making across the region.

Expand Hybrid Monitoring Systems

A critical priority is the development of integrated or hybrid monitoring systems that combine multiple data sources, including ground-based hydrological stations, Earth Observation (EO), unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), and machine learning-based analytical tools. Such systems can significantly enhance spatial and temporal data coverage, particularly in remote and data-scarce regions. By integrating these technologies, countries can improve the accuracy and reliability of hydrological assessments, enabling more robust modelling and forecasting capabilities. Hybrid approaches also facilitate cross-validation between data sources, reducing uncertainty and strengthening confidence in decision-making processes (Ouyang et al., 2023).

Establish Regional Data-Sharing Protocols and Standards

Effective transboundary water management depends on the availability of shared, standardized, and transparent data systems. Establishing regional data-sharing protocols is essential to ensure consistency in data collection, processing, and dissemination across countries. This includes the adoption of harmonized monitoring standards aligned with international best practices, as well as the development of digital platforms for real-time data exchange. Strengthening legal and institutional frameworks for data sharing can further support cooperation and improve the effectiveness of water resources management at the basin scale (Ziganshina, 2022).

Mainstream Cryosphere-Informed Planning

Given the central role of glaciers and snowmelt in the region's hydrology, it is essential to incorporate cryosphere dynamics into national and regional water management strategies. This includes integrating glacier retreat projections, snowpack variability, and long-term climate trends into planning and policy development. Mainstreaming cryosphere-informed approaches can improve the resilience of water systems by enabling more accurate projections of future water availability and supporting the design of adaptive management strategies. Such approaches are particularly important for addressing long-term water security under changing climatic conditions (Liu & Li, 2025).

Strengthen Technical and Institutional Capacity

The successful implementation of advanced monitoring systems and data-driven approaches requires sustained investment in technical capacity and institutional development. This includes training professionals in hydrology, geospatial analysis, data science, and digital technologies, as well as strengthening institutional frameworks for data management and coordination. Capacity-building initiatives should also focus on enhancing the ability of institutions to integrate scientific data into policy and operational decision-making, ensuring that monitoring systems translate into practical outcomes. Investment in education, training programs, and digital skills development will be critical for supporting long-term sustainability (Amanzholova et al., 2024).

Scale Smart Irrigation and Digital Water Management Technologies

Agriculture remains the largest consumer of water in Central Asia, making it a key sector for improving water use efficiency. Scaling up the adoption of smart irrigation technologies, including systems based on remote sensing, digital modelling, and real-time monitoring, can significantly reduce water losses and improve productivity. Digital and EO-based irrigation management systems enable more precise water allocation, optimizing usage based on crop needs, soil conditions, and climatic factors. These approaches not only enhance water efficiency but also contribute to increased agricultural productivity and sustainability (Droogers & Bastiaanssen, 2002).

A Phased Implementation Pathway for Central Asia

While the recommendations outlined above are interconnected, their implementation requires a phased and coordinated approach involving national agencies, regional organizations, and development partners. Table 2 presents a proposed implementation pathway that prioritizes actions across short-, medium-, and long-term time horizons to strengthen hydrological monitoring, data sharing, and decision-support systems in Central Asia.

Table 2. Suggested Implementation Roadmap

Timeframe	Priority Action	Lead Institutions	Initial Steps	Expected Outcome
Short-term (1–3 years)	Inventory and rehabilitate hydrometeorological stations; assess data gaps and station functionality	National Hydromets, Ministries of Water Resources, WMO partners	Audit network functionality	Improved availability and reliability of monitoring data
Short-term (1–3 years)	Develop common metadata standards and data-sharing protocols	ICWC, SIC ICWC, Hydromets	Develop protocols	Improved interoperability and data exchange
Medium-term (3–5 years)	Establish shared regional hydrological databases and EO platforms	IFAS, ICWC, Basin Organizations, Development Partners	Pilot projects	Enhanced access to harmonized regional information
Medium-term (3–5 years)	Expand capacity building and operational EO integration within agencies	National agencies, Universities, Development Partners	Pilot projects	Increased technical capability and operational adoption

Long-term (5–10 years)	Develop regional decision-support systems for water allocation, drought monitoring, and flood forecasting	ICWC, BWOs, IFAS, National Water Authorities	Operational forecasting	Improved evidence-based decision-making
Long-term (5–10 years)	Institutionalize integrated forecasting and climate adaptation frameworks	Regional governments and basin organizations	Mainstream monitoring	Enhanced climate resilience and transboundary cooperation

Source: Developed by the authors

CONCLUSION

Water challenges in Central Asia are shaped by the convergence of climate change impacts, persistent hydrological data gaps, and institutional fragmentation, all of which collectively constrain effective water management and regional cooperation. While considerable attention has been given to governance reforms and transboundary agreements, this study highlights that a critical underlying bottleneck lies in the declining capacity and limited integration of hydrological monitoring systems. The reduction and fragmentation of observation networks, particularly in high-altitude and data-scarce regions, have significantly weakened the reliability of hydrological data, thereby limiting forecasting accuracy and evidence-based decision-making. At the same time, rapid environmental changes especially glacier retreat and declining snowpack are increasing uncertainty in water availability and intensifying pressure on already constrained systems.

The central argument of this paper is that strengthening hydrological monitoring and data-sharing systems is not merely a technical challenge but a governance priority for Central Asia. Reliable and interoperable monitoring networks provide the foundation for more credible forecasting, water allocation, climate adaptation, and transboundary cooperation. While Earth Observation, machine learning, IoT networks, and digital twin technologies offer significant opportunities to strengthen hydrological information systems, their effectiveness ultimately depends on how they are integrated into existing institutional and operational frameworks.

The long-term value of hydrological data systems lies not simply in generating information, but in ensuring that information is routinely used to support decisions. This requires sustained investment in monitoring infrastructure, clear institutional mandates, common data standards, adequate technical capacity, and well-defined decision-support processes. Strengthening these governance foundations will be essential for translating technological advances into improved water security, climate resilience, and regional cooperation across Central Asia.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

BJ: conceptualization, methodology, investigation, data analysis, visualization, writing – original draft preparation, writing – review and editing, supervision, and project administration; BP: conceptualization, technical review, validation – review and editing, and contribution to interpretation of results; VS: literature review, data compilation, analysis support, writing – review and editing, and manuscript revision; MK: scientific review, supervision, writing – review and editing, and overall project guidance.

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A STUDY ON THE SOCIAL CAPITAL PARADOX IN KAZAKHSTAN: FROM EVERYDAY DISTRUST TO CRISIS MOBILIZATION

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ABSTRACT. *This paper examines the paradoxical nature of social capital structure in Kazakhstan, in which, despite low rates of generalized trust and minimal civil engagement in day-to-day activities, a high rate of informal co-operation is perceived during crisis periods. The aim of the study is to determine the factors that define the low level of social capital under normal conditions and to identify the mechanism of its activation during a crisis. A sequential mixed-method design is used, combining data from the World Values Survey (Kazakhstan, 2018, N = 1200), a national post-flood survey in 2024 (N = 8000), and an expert survey (N=54) in 2025. Quantitative results indicate consistently low levels of interpersonal trust and formal civic participation under normal conditions, whereas crises trigger a markedly higher level of collective mobilization, as evidenced by the 2024 flood response data. Qualitative data demonstrate that cultural norms of mutual aid serve as a key mechanism for crisis mobilization, while institutional mistrust and the weakness of formal structures hinder the development of sustainable civic participation under normal circumstances. The findings contribute to the discussion on crisis management, informal institutions, and the role of cultural norms in fostering collective resilience.*

KEYWORDS: *asar (traditional collective labour), kotel (rotating savings), Kazakhstan, civic participation, social capital, solidarity, institutional trust, interpersonal trust.*

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, similar to most other states, Kazakhstan has been facing an increasing series of crises with an immeasurable impact on the economic stability, social cohesion, and environmental security. Researchers begin to describe the following decade as a «polycrisis», which is a combination of disruptions that are interrelated and complementary (Lawrence et al., 2024). It is in this context that the issue of enhancing the resilience of society has become one of the priorities of the policy. The improvement of so-called social capital, including networks, norms, and trust, that enable the coordination and cooperation, is one of the avenues through which collective response to crisis can be improved (Putnam, 1994; Fukuyama, 2000). Social capital helps in reducing the impact of shocks as well as promoting adaptive governance by allowing people to be more effective in working together under the conditions of uncertainty. This study views social capital primarily as a set of networks, norms, and trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation (Putnam, 1994).

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Nonetheless, existing research consistently documents low levels of social capital in Kazakhstan, especially in terms of interpersonal trust, civic participation, and voluntary participation. Simultaneously, recent events have shown a seeming contradiction, that in times of crisis, including the massive floods in 2024, citizens demonstrated a wide-scale informal coordination and support to one another. This contradiction suggests that social capital dynamics in Kazakhstan may be much more context-specific than the current literature has supposed.

This paper discusses this paradox by looking at the ways and reasons as to why social capital in Kazakhstan is constrained in normal life but intensifies during crisis conditions. In this respect, the research pursues two main aims: the first being to determine which factors lead to the low level of social capital in usual conditions, and the second is to discuss the mechanisms that trigger cohesion and collaboration during crisis times. Based on these aims, the research proposes two hypotheses (1) under normal conditions, generalized trust and formal civic participation as core dimensions of social capital in Kazakhstan remain low due to institutional mistrust and weakness of formal civic structures; and (2) in times of crisis latent social capital is activated through cultural norms of mutual assistance and informal networks, leading to a significant increase in collective action despite persistently low level of institutional trust.

Unlike existing studies that examine social capital in Kazakhstan either through institutional trust or cultural practices separately, this article is the first to empirically document the paradox of the coexistence of low everyday trust and high crisis mobilization based on nationally representative data. Using a sequential mixed-method that integrates quantitative and qualitative data, the study extends social capital theory to post-Soviet contexts, demonstrating that latent social capital can exist in conditions of institutional weakness and be activated through cultural mechanisms in crisis situations.

THE "SOCIAL CAPITAL" CONCEPT

The term "social capital" has emerged relatively recently in the lexicon of social science researchers. Pierre Bourdieu, in his article «Forms of capital» (1986), along with economic and cultural forms of capital, defined social capital. According to Bourdieu, social capital is a network of social connections and relations, which the individual can use to gain benefits and advantages. James Coleman (1988) considered social capital as a resource embedded in the structure of social relationships based on mutual obligations and expectations, shared norms of behavior, and the availability of information channels for transmitting important information.

In contrast to Bourdieu and Coleman, who discussed social capital through the prism of personal benefit, subsequent theorists developed the notion of that concept to collectively perceived resource. Robert Putnam (1994) defines social capital as those characteristics of social organization (networks, norms, and trust) that enhance coordination and cooperation in the common good. Putnam also presents an argument that the idea of social capital can be related to physical and human capital, but instead of investing in equipment or education, he has referred to social connections, making collective action more productive. Similarly, Fukuyama (2000) describes social capital as a collection of unwritten rules and values that can be used to ensure collaboration between people.

Although there is no universally agreed definition of social capital, all scholars agree that it is a multidimensional concept that takes both structural and cognitive aspects of social life. The literature focuses on the classifications according to the levels and components of social capital. Specifically, researchers identify the sources and forms of social capital in micro, meso, and macro dimensions (Membiela-Pollan & Pena-López, 2017).

At the micro level, social capital is individual characteristics and social relationships that determine the ability for co-operation and trust. They are personal traits, age, family set-up, socioeconomic status, education, job role, and even consumption patterns (Claridge, 2020). The meso level captures the institutional and community-based environments where social life is practiced, which include civil society organizations, schools, local infrastructures, ethnic and social diversity, and mobility and spatial planning (Bolibar, 2016). On the macro level, there are more institutional influences, such as the quality of governance, the level of generalized trust, and civic identity (Membiela-Pollan & Pena-López, 2017). This multilevel view can be used to better explain the interaction between personal behavior, community life, and institutional structures to create or limit social capital.

Irrespective of such conceptual and structural differences, the literature converges on several key components, which render collective action feasible and hold social cohesion. These factors are trust, reciprocity, social networks, and shared norms and values, which lead to collaboration in cross-communities. Trust is one of the initial elements of social capital in all these dimensions. As Rothstein (2000) argues, trust enables cooperation and sustained social engagement. It helps reinforce the ties that bind communities together and contributes to the stability and cohesion of the broader social system (Sandefur & Laumann, 2000).

There are two types of trust. First, generalized trust or trustworthiness, which is a characteristic of people associated with their honesty, cooperativeness, and compliance with norms (Ahn, 2002). And secondly, institutional trust, which depends on the transparency, efficiency, and fairness of the work of public institutions (Rothstein & Stolle, 2003).

When people trust each other and government institutions, they are more likely to band together to solve public problems such as security, health care, and education (Pierce et al., 2002). In countries with high trust, people are more involved in volunteering and environmental initiatives, for example, Sweden and Denmark (Sønderskov, 2008). However, if one level of trust is undermined, for example, due to government corruption, this reduces the overall level of collective action (Ahn, 2002). In summary, bonding is characterized by strong ties within a homogeneous group; bridging reflects horizontal connections between diverse social groups; and linking describes vertical relations between individuals and institutions with varying levels of power and resources.

A further key element of social capital is shared norms and values. Scholarly literature distinguishes various types of norms that exist within society and their influence on social capital. Social norms are often defined as the rules that govern the behavior of individuals in society (Coleman, 1990). Moral norms are based on shared values such as fairness, honesty, and reciprocity (Popper, 2013). Values, in turn, are fundamental beliefs that shape behavior and social practices (Wallis et al, 2004). Consequently, values and norms are viewed as public goods, bringing positive externalities such as mutual trust, improved coordination of collective actions, and reduced transaction costs (den Butter & Mosch, 2004). Together, these elements – trust, norms, reciprocity, and networks form the core of social capital and enable cooperation within communities. Yet, social capital appears in different forms, depending on the type and strength of social relationships.

Despite some variations, most scholars agree that social capital takes three main forms: bonding, bridging, and linking (Panday et al., 2021; Sharifzadegan et al., 2016). Bonding social capital is based on trust and reciprocity within close networks, such as family and friends, and helps individuals come to everyday challenges by providing emotional and practical support (Putnam, 1994). Bridging social capital connects diverse social groups and is particularly important in communities, especially in developing countries, as it facilitates access to resources and services across overlapping networks (Nooteboom, 2007; Killerby & Wallis, 2002). Linking social capital involves relationships between individuals or groups, those in positions of institutional power enabling access to resources, influence, and decision-making through ties with government agencies or political institutions (Hackeret al., 2012).

Research shows that in times of crisis, it is bonding social capital that is activated first, enabling immediate mutual assistance within close networks, while bridging social capital determines the scale and sustainability of the collective response to emergencies (Aldrich, 2012). Overall, these contributions suggest that the social capital comprises a system of social ties, shared norms, and trust that facilitate cooperation and collective action. Its core components – trust, commonly held values, and social networks promote social cohesion, enhance community resilience, and facilitate access to both material and non-material resources.

SOME EXAMPLES OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN CRISIS SITUATIONS

Social capital promotes interaction and cooperation between people and enables effective collective action (Fafchamps, 2004). As Fukuyama (2000) stresses, social capital and civil society are closely related to each other because the civil society organizations also lead to the formation and replication of social norms and values. The robust civil society can also help balance the weak state institutions by offering additional infrastructure to help solve problems in society since people are involved.

Social capital should be discussed not in isolation but also in the context of state effectiveness. This is what can be characterized by scholars as the association of social capital, which is vertical relationships between citizens and authority structures. However, when built on the basis of trust and reciprocity, these ties contribute to the capacity of governance as state resources are added to local knowledge and civic participation (Szreter, 2004; Evans, 1996). Such complementary relationships prove to be especially instrumental in the context of a crisis, when both the centralized coordination and grassroots efforts are necessary.

A notable example is an earthquake in Nepal that struck the country in 2015, resulting in the deaths of over 8,000 individuals and the injuries of over 22,000 people (BBC, 2015). Panday (2021) presents the way every type of social capital was manifested among Nepalese citizens. Neighborhood capital came up, whereby its people worked together to clean up the debris, rebuild houses, eat, and provide other basic commodities. The concept of bridging capital also manifested itself in the form of sharing resources among villages, like water distribution to the regions where its resources are limited. The connection of capital was made in active interaction with non-governmental organizations that supplied tents, medicines, and other help. The better the social network and external connections of the village, the more support it could get as compared to the weakly connected communities.

The same trend was witnessed in the 2022 eastern Ghana floods that hit many residential communities and government facilities and claimed the lives of around 2,000 (BBC, 2015). Abunyewah et al. (2023) cite that those with established social contacts were warned even earlier by a verbal message or messaging services, and therefore were able to prepare and evacuate. The community-based efforts were community building of protective dams and the organization of disaster response with the local non-governmental organizations. These measures were not only realized in response to urgent needs but also in reinforcement of the adaptive capacity and resilience of the communities.

Social capital in disaster preparedness has been additionally reported in Colca Valley, southern Peru, where seismic and volcanic activities occur because of Nazca Plate subduction (Zeballos-Velarde et al., 2023; Velarde, 2020). In this part of the world, societies employ communal decision-making and traditional systems of governance to administer the natural resources and disaster management. These practices of the ancestors have been part of the official mitigation measures by local non-governmental organizations and government agencies, thus contributing to community-based adaptation and resilience.

Quantitative research also confirms that trust is a key factor in transmitting the influence of social capital on community resilience in crisis situations (Liu et al., 2022). All in all, these instances indicate that social capital, though various forms exist, bonding, bridging, and linking, are important factors in ensuring cooperation, resource allocation, and community resilience during matters of crisis.

EXISTING RESEARCH OF SOCIAL CAPITAL IN KAZAKHSTAN

Studies of social capital in Kazakhstan are limited, but the those that have been conducted reveal several significant dimensions. Some focus on the effects of social capital on local government and how it can influence the functioning of public councils. These articles focus on the mediating role of social capital in local governance, civic engagement, and community-wide problem-solving. Even though the public councils are supposed to be autonomous legally, most of the members rely on government grants, thus limiting their autonomy. Still, councils have solved such issues as environmental protection, transportation, corruption, and delivery of public services with the help of established standards of cooperation (Makulbayeva & Sharipova, 2024; Knox & Janenova, 2018).

Other research highlights cultural practices as informal institutions, especially during times of crisis. Conventional institutions like “kotel” (rotating savings) and “asar” (collective labor) offer mutual aid, supplement social cohesion, and offset the ineffective formal institutions, even in the event of financial or environmental crisis (Darmenova & Koo, 2021). These customs develop traditions of collectivism, mutuality, and citizenship in societies.

Moreover, Kazakhstan has a hybrid structure of social capital, which is relatively trusting of the central government, low generalized trust among citizens, low independent civic action, and instrumental use of social networks to ensure the stability of the regime instead of democratization (Niyazbekov, 2016; Abdikerova, 2017). Even mechanisms such as regional media or civic participation initiatives often operate under state influence, which restricts the development of a fully independent civic society. The post-Soviet context plays a key role in the formation of a hybrid structure. Research in post-Soviet states shows that the Soviet legacy systematically suppressed horizontal trust, fostering citizens' persistent dependence on states structures while simultaneously weakening independent civic institutions (Howard, 2003; Mishler & Rose, 2001).

Finally, newer norms of social capital are emerging among younger generations. Digital communities and online networks facilitate cooperation around shared interests or social causes, reflecting adaptation of social behavior to technological change (Karipbayev et al, 2014). This coexistence of traditional and modern forms of social capital illustrates the evolving nature of collective action and social cohesion in Kazakhstan.

In the broader Central Asian context, research also documents similar patterns: low institutional trust is combined with informal solidarity, especially in crisis situations. At the same time, civil society in the region remains structurally weak and dependent on the state, which limits the transformation of informal solidarity into sustainable practices (Saini, 2024).

Toktomushev (2023) also points to the problems of social capital in Central Asia that despite the efforts of the international community to develop civil society, the region retains one of the most restrictive environments for associative life.

However, existing research remains fragmented. Most studies focus either on specific element of social capital, its condition within individual regions, or its role in particular public institutions. As a result, Kazakhstan still lacks comprehensive, nationwide research that would generalize the overall state of social capital across the country and rely on systematically collected quantitative data.

METHODS

This paper uses a sequential mixed-method design, combining secondary quantitative data with primary qualitative evidence to investigate the paradox of social capital in Kazakhstan: its relative underdevelopment in ordinary situations and its fast development during periods of crisis. A key methodological issue is the challenge of studying social capital in Kazakhstan due to its multidimensional and context-related nature. Current national surveys record only certain aspects of trust, civic engagement, or mobilization based on crises, and no survey provides a comprehensive picture of both the formal and informal aspects of social capital. This is why a mixed-methods approach is particularly appropriate, as it allows for the integration of quantitative and qualitative indicators, thereby addressing gaps in data availability and the uneven distribution of existing sources.

The research has a descriptive chronological style. The initial step is the secondary analysis of two massive national studies of the same size to determine the baseline levels of trust and civic engagement and tendencies in the mobilization triggered by crises. The next qualitative stage, which includes the online survey of experts and in-depth interviews, is used to explain how shifts in civic behavior can be explained by the mechanisms and what cultural, institutional, and behavioral forces may drive such changes.

In order to measure the generalized trust and civic participation, the research utilizes the seventh wave of the World Values Survey (WVS) carried out in Kazakhstan in 2018. The sample consists of 1,200 adults who were chosen by the multistage stratified sampling in all the regions and in the largest cities (Astana, Almaty, and Shymkent). Both face-to-face and interviews were carried out using the language people speak, and language representativeness was ensured by offering it in both Kazakh and Russian.

The report is based on twelve typical WVS measures of social capital. Generalized interpersonal trust is assessed with the help of item Q57, which is (Generally speaking, would you say that most people can be trusted?). Civic behavior is measured in terms of Q94-105 on whether an individual is a member of a religious, professional, cultural, environmental, or political group. These indicators are equivalent to internationally accepted models of evaluating social capital (Grootaert & Van Bastelaer, 2001).

The second source is a nationwide survey of the Institute of Public Policy in the wake of the massive floods of April 2024 (BBC,2024). The sample contains 8,000 people aged 18 and above who are selected based on regional and demographic quota sampling techniques. The key behavioral measure that is used in the current research is titled "Have you personally given any help to flood victims?" Such a variable is a reactive or crisis-based social capital, i.e., informal mobilization that takes place within the frameworks of non-institutionalized forms. The scale and distribution of the public engagement were evaluated with the use of descriptive statistics. Such results are contrasted with low-trust and low-civic participation scores obtained on the World Values Survey.

In order to make the data of the 2018 WVS and the 2024 flood survey comparative, demographic subgroups were harmonized, and robustness tests were done to consider variations in sampling methods and survey tools.

A quantitative study was conducted in February 2025 in the form of an online expert survey to validate the findings. The respondents were sampled using purposive and snowball sampling depending on their professional engagement in civic participation, community mobilization, crisis response, or study on trust and solidarity in Kazakhstan. The last sample consisted of 54 scholars in the fields of academic, non-governmental, governmental, and think tanks.

The questionnaire was divided into closed-ended and open-ended questions that focused on the reasons to help others, the importance of cultural practices (e.g., asar), and the understanding of trust and solidarity in crisis situations. Qualitative content analysis with inductively generated thematic codes was used to conduct an analysis of responses.

To triangulate insights, three in-depth interviews were conducted in March 2025 with researchers specializing in trust, collective action, and cultural practices. Interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and followed a semi-structured guide covering cultural foundations of mutual aid, historical memory, and the role of informal networks under weak institutional conditions.

Thematic analysis was carried out through open coding, followed by the consolidation of codes into broader categories such as institutional mistrust, cultural traditions, and crisis-driven mobilization. Attention was given to recurring motifs, internal consistency, and cross-case variation.

The study was conducted in accordance with ethical standards for academic research. All participants in the expert survey and in-depth interviews provided informed consent, and all personal data was anonymized during processing. The reliability of the qualitative data was ensured by triangulation of three sources – quantitative survey, an expert survey, and in-depth interviews, as well as inter-coder checking of the thematic analysis.

THE RESULTS OF THE SURVEY

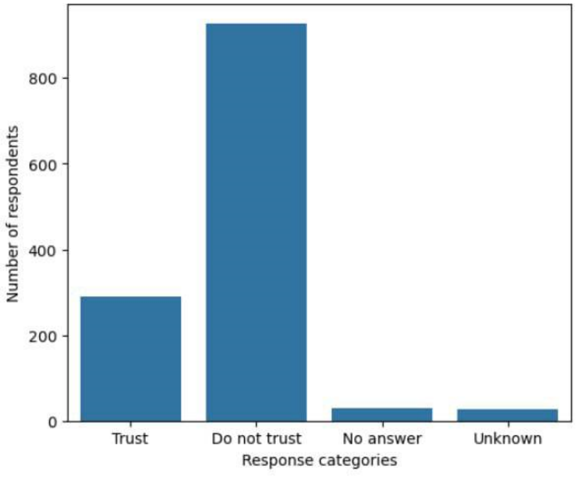
The empirical findings of the study are presented, and an integrated analysis of social capital in Kazakhstan under normal conditions and during crisis situations is provided. The results combine quantitative evidence from the World Values Survey (2018) and the National Flood Survey (2024), as well as qualitative insights from an expert survey and in-depth interviews conducted in 2025. All quantitative datasets were processed and analyzed using the Python programming language, employing descriptive statistics and comparative techniques appropriate for the study's sequential mixed-methods design.

The first objective of the study, to identify the factors of low social capital under normal conditions, is examined through WVS data (figures 1-2), while the second objective, to examine the mechanisms of crisis mobilization, is analyzed based on 2024 flood data and expert survey (figures 3-6).

Quantitative Findings

Figure 1 indicates that only a few respondents have noted that most people can be trusted, although over 900 out of the 1200 respondents have noted that they do not trust anybody. The small percentages of no answer and unknown responses indicate that distrust is a stable social attitude and not a measurement error. These findings are strong support for the first hypothesis of this paper, which validates that the baseline level of interpersonal trust is low when there is no crisis. This indicator is significantly lower than the global average according to the same WVS wave, indicating not a temporary decline in trust, but a structurally entrenched deficit of social capital in Kazakhstani society.

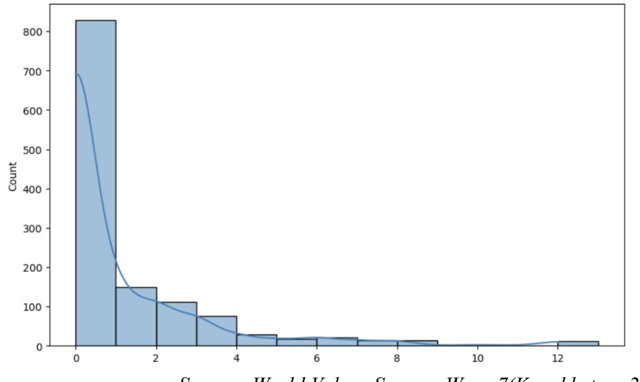
Figure 1. Distribution of responses about interpersonal trust



Source: World Values Survey, Wave 7(Kazakhstan, 2018), N=1200

Figure 2 demonstrates the civic engagement in twelve categories of public organizations. It is highly skewed to the right: over 800 of the respondents said that they had never been in any organization, and only an extremely small number said that they were members of two or more associations. The participation reduces drastically following one or two memberships, which implies disjointed involvement and narrow use of formal civil society. These results, together with the low amount of interpersonal trust, also support the first hypothesis of this current study. This picture suggests that formal civil society in Kazakhstan remains a peripheral phenomenon for most citizens, rather than an integrated element of everyday life, which is consistent with previous research findings on the hybrid nature of social capital in the country.

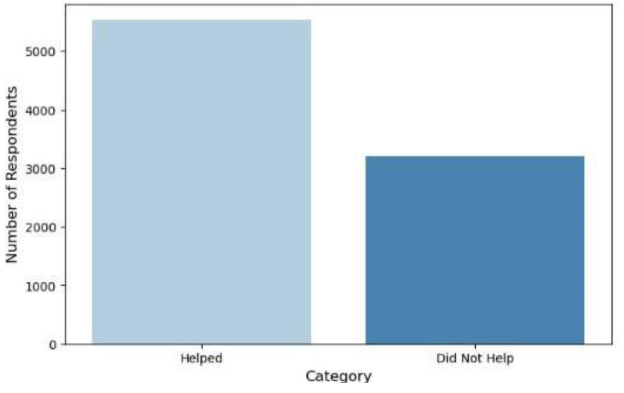
Figure 2. Distribution of responses on participation in public organizations (WVS 2018)



Source: World Values Survey, Wave 7(Kazakhstan, 2018), N=1200

Unlike weak everyday civic engagement, a survey carried out nationwide in 2024 on the floods in the country has shown significant growth of collective action in crisis situations. Figure 3 indicates that over 5,500 of the 8000 respondents assisted the victims of floods. Informal or direct aid was reported by about two-thirds of adults, an abrupt break with the general trends among the data of the World Values Survey. This mobilization surge provides strong empirical support for the second hypothesis of this paper, which shows that social capital is markedly elevated in crisis conditions. The sevenfold gap between the level of everyday civic participation and the level of crisis mobilization cannot be explained by institutional factors; it indicates that the crisis acts as an independent activator of latent social capital that exists in Kazakhstani society in a latent form.

Figure 3. Distribution of civic involvement in flood relief in 2024



Source: Unpublished dataset from Institute for Public Policy, (Kazakhstan, 2024), N=8000

Qualitative Findings

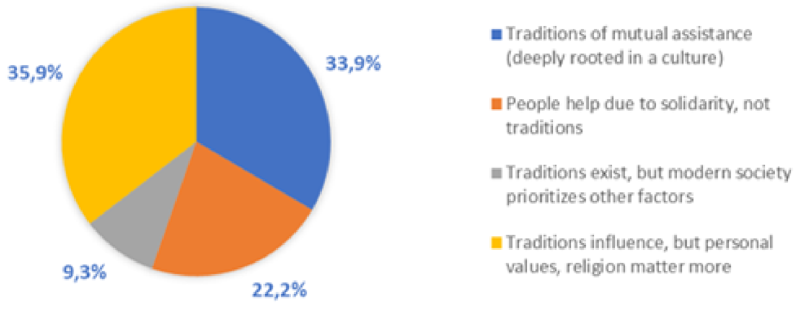
Expert assessments made in 2025 reveal several key motivations underlying public involvement during crises (Figure 4). The most frequently cited driver is the influence of national traditions of mutual assistance (59,3%). Other prominent factors include a sense of solidarity and collective responsibility (51,9%), empathy and compassion (46,3%), direct volunteering experience (28,9%), and prior experience with crises (25,9%). These findings suggest that emergencies activate established cultural norms as well as emotional and experiential motivations, generating rapid and widespread collective action. It is noteworthy that material incentives and government initiatives were not mentioned among the key motivations, indicating that crisis mobilization in Kazakhstan is primarily cultural and moral, rather than institutional.

Figure 4. Motivations for helping in crises

Source: Experts' survey conducted by the author (Kazakhstan, 2025), N=54.

Building on these results, Figure 5 illustrates expert perceptions of the role of Kazakh traditions such as asar in shaping collective responses to crises. Approximately, one-third (33,3%) of experts indicated that traditional practices of mutual assistance are deeply embedded in Kazakhstani society and serve as a primary mechanism for mobilizing collective action during emergencies. An additional 35,9% emphasized that although traditions matter, personal values and religious beliefs now play an increasingly important role. Meanwhile, 22,2% believed that contemporary forms of solidarity operate independently from traditional norms. These findings reveal a diverse set of perspectives on how cultural practices influence crisis-driven social capital, suggesting a hybrid model in which historical norms coexist with evolving moral and civic frameworks. This diversity of experts' positions suggests that cultural foundations of crisis solidarity in Kazakhstan are transforming – traditional practices of mutual assistance are gradually being reinterpreted through the prism of modern values, without losing their mobilizing function.

Figure 5. Perceived role of Kazakh traditions in crisis response



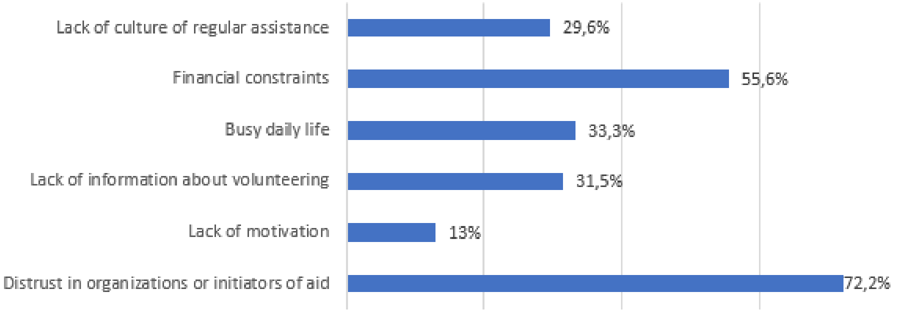
Source: Experts' survey conducted by the author, (Kazakhstan, 2025), N=54.

The final qualitative graph (Figure 6) identifies barriers preventing participation in charitable and volunteer initiatives in everyday life. The most common barrier, reported by 72,2% of experts, is mistrust of organizations and initiators of aid. Additional barriers include financial limitations (55,6%), lack of time (33,3%), insufficient information about volunteering opportunities (31,5%), and the absence of a habitual culture of regular assistance (29,6%). These findings complement the quantitative results by demonstrating that low trust and limited engagement in public organizations impede the development of stable and institutionalized forms of social capital in non-crisis conditions.

The prevalence of institutional distrust as a key barrier confirms that the low level of civic participation in Kazakhstan is not due to a lack of willingness to help, but to the weakness of formal structures in which citizens could entrust their efforts, which is consistent with Rothstein and Stolle's (2008) institutional theory of trust.

It is also noteworthy that the root causes for the non-participation sometimes rely on the organizations themselves. If a specific NGO was proven to be inefficient or ineffective in past situations –daily or in specific crises—, that makes it more unattractive for people to be engaged in activities under their leadership or management.

Figure 6. Barriers to charitable and volunteer activities



Source: Experts' survey conducted by the author (Kazakhstan, 2025), N=54.

DISCUSSION

The results of the research demonstrate a very specific paradox of the situation in the social capital of Kazakhstan: a low amount of generalized trust and formal civic engagement under normal circumstances is accompanied by a markedly high willingness to engage in mutual assistance in the case of an emergency. The term "paradox" is used here in an analytical sense, denoting a persistent contradiction between a low level of formal participation and high levels of informal mobilization – a contradiction captured by the quantitative data from WVS and flood survey and by the qualitative data from expert survey and interviews. In the expert survey, the mechanisms underlying this duality are enlightened, and it becomes easier to explain why the informal solidarity increases dramatically during crisis situations, despite the continuing low level of trust.

National traditions and cultural norms (59.3%), solidarity and collectivism (51.9%), and empathy and compassion (46.3%) were deemed by the experts as the most important motivational factors in crises, causing people to assist. These evaluations support the quantitative results of the 2024 flood survey, where almost two out of three people indicated that they had assisted in some way. The overlapping of quantitative and qualitative data suggests that quantitative and qualitative incentives, i.e., culture and ethical interests, instead of the formal civic infrastructure or organizational affiliation, are the essential antecedents of collective mobilization in Kazakhstan. Meanwhile, scholars warned that traditional norms can be undermined in cities, diverge between generations, or that they can serve as a strategic tool of the political elite. Based on this, cultural explanation must be seen as important and not conclusive.

The connection between cultural norms and crisis conditions is further highlighted in the interview material. One of the researchers noted that the concepts of empathy and the culture of mutual assistance are also inseparable parts of the cultural code and are accentuated especially in crisis situations. Another specialist singled out two factors contributing to collective mobilization: a deeply rooted culture of collective help, which is the first stimulus to mobilization, and the role of historical or communal memory, which provides the opportunity to organize more quickly in the event of disasters. These experiences are aligned with the previous literature that highlights the importance of practices such as asar as an example of cognitive social capital, shared moral systems, and collective interpretations to organize cooperation in nomadic communities in the past (Darmenova & Koo, 2021; Jia et al., 2020). Nevertheless, as Jia and others suggest, cognition social capital by itself does not often ensure coordinated or persistent collective action: where there are no supportive institutional settings, cooperation is likely to be spontaneous, unorganized, and short-lived. This dynamic aids in clarifying how effective community mobilization is only likely to be created during emergencies and not in normal civic life. The mahallas in Uzbekistan also represent institutionalized areas where social solidarity is exercised. In certain instances, they make avenues through which individual willingness to participate can be converted to involvement in community work which cut across individual interests (Dadabaev et al., 2017).

This asymmetry is caused in part by continuous distrust in charitable and civil society organizations. The professional evaluation of barriers to daily civic participation (Figure 6) showed that the most relevant challenge is mistrust in organizations and factors that activate help (72.2%), which is also similar to the results of the World Values Survey that revealed low respondent turnout in state organizations. Interview data provide further nuance. One of the interviewees cited the present-day mistrust to be due to the persistent psychological impacts of Soviet-era repression, saying that a totalitarian history all affects the extent of trust amongst individuals; people never ceased to anticipate that they could be deceived or outlawed. This is the conceptualization of Alexander (2004) of cultural trauma, which is the shared pain absorbed either in the social memory or in the silence of the people. Also, as in the case of Ukraine by Yurchuk (2012), it seems that horizontal trust and civic cohesion are weakened by the lack of a unified national experience of the historical trauma in Kazakhstan.

In other interviews, differences between formal reforms and practice were emphasized, where other interviewees noted that the concept of a listening state is good, but the mechanisms fail to work since the institution is mostly symbolic. Such an evaluation echoes the theory of ceremonial conformity noted by Meyer and Rowan (1977) wherein organizations assume participatory forms with the main purpose of gaining legitimacy, and not necessarily improving substantive performance. When this occurs, the citizen factors of influence by the public are often a mere form of a facade and as opposed to a genuine method of influence, thus contributing to the cynicism of the people.

Another aspect of mistrust deals with the views of uneven and discriminatory application of rules. As one of the experts noted, a lot of initiatives are put forward as part of legislation; however, there are situations when a person can evade responsibility. Such an observation is very much in line with the institutional theory of generalized trust as developed by Rothstein and Stolle (2008), which holds that trust is not only influenced by cultural leanings but also by the daily experiences of the citizens with institutional fairness and impartiality. It is the case that when the legal structures remain largely nominal and enforcement is seen to be arbitrary, the opportunity of people depending on personal networks as opposed to formal systems is more probable, and thus the continuation of disjointed ways of civic relationships.

These results taken collectively reflect a structural paradox of the social capital of Kazakhstan. On the one hand, there are powerful informal underpinnings of the cultural practices, interpersonal norms, and thick social networks that allow mobilization to be fast in the event of an emergency. On the other hand, there are vulnerable formal institutions and deep mistrust that do not allow the informal strengths to transform into formal, institutionalized civic participation. This disequilibrium is the Kazakhstani paradox located in this paper. It will be important to enhance the formal aspect of social capital by establishing credible and participatory institutions to meet the normative expectations of the citizens, so as to be able to turn episodic solidarity into enduring civic capacity. The introduction of the elements of the informal culture into the democratic system with greater formality can prove a promising way for future research and policy making.

This paper has a number of weaknesses that must be considered when concluding. A significant limitation is related to the use of various sources of data that have different sample sizes and different methodological designs. The social capital indicators (trust and membership in the public organization) are calculated using the World Values Survey that took place in Kazakhstan in 2018 and included 1,200 participants representing the whole population. Through comparison, the results of the survey carried out by the Institute of Public Policy on flood-related assistance included data on the survey of a significantly larger sample of 8,000 respondents, and their findings have not been made publicly available.

It is important to acknowledge the conceptual limitations of this comparative analysis. In this article, interpersonal trust and organizational membership (WVS) are used as indicators of social capital under normal conditions, while informal assistance during the floods is used as an indicator of crisis mobilization. These indicators reflect different dimensions of social capital, cognitive and behavioral, and are not directly comparable. However, their joint consideration is justified by the sequential mix methods research design, which does not involve direct comparison but rather complements quantitative and qualitative data to identify contextual differences in the manifestation of social capital.

The collection of data, information, and time also makes it hard to directly compare the two. The World Values Survey is integrated into the standardized international research program, and the Institute for Public Policy survey was created to focus precisely on the measurement of interest in disaster response in a national setting. This methodological variation could affect the comparability of the results. Another issue is that the information on the World Values Survey was collected in 2018, and the survey that was conducted in connection with the floods represents the attitude of the population in 2024. The fact that the public opinion might change in many ways may influence the interpretation of the results, e.g., a possible rise in trust over the course of time. The research addresses the issue of whether similar questions on trust and participation are presented in further studies and, where feasible, to provide a longitudinal comparison to determine whether change has occurred. The next weakness is that the survey of experts is indirectly assessing the behavior and motivation of the citizens and not a direct account of the general population. Even though this methodology provides good analytical value, the expert interpretations can result in the element of subjectivity. Such information, however, can still be useful in determining the overall trends, especially when it comes to crisis scenarios. Lastly, the differences in sample size, scope, and question formulation limit the level of generalization of the findings to various aspects of social capital and crisis-related aid. In future studies, the harmonized datasets using similar methodologies should be emphasized to create a more in-depth insight into these dynamics.

CONCLUSION

This study demonstrated that the paradoxical structure of social capital in Kazakhstan – the coexistence of low everyday trust and high crisis mobilization is not a random phenomenon but a reflection of the country's broader cultural, historical, and institutional context. Based on a sequential mixed-method design of a combination of national survey data, expert evaluations, and in-depth interviews, the analysis showed that such duality is not an accident but a part of the larger cultural, historical, and institutional context of Kazakhstan.

The quantitative data proved continuously low rates of interpersonal trust and official civic participation in ordinary environments, whereas the qualitative data gave evidence that criteria of cultural traditions, interpersonal rules, and mutual moral expectations play a central role in the establishment of cooperation under crisis conditions. Practices like asar are reservoirs of cognitive social capital, through which communities can respond to emergencies by self-organizing. Nevertheless, those norms are still poorly institutionalized, generating collective action that is strong but sporadic and mostly limited to times of external threat.

At the same time, the research pointed to weaknesses to the formal institutions. The experts' opinion indicated that a lack of trust in charitable and civic organizations, unequal enforcement of rules, and the quality of participatory processes are among the obstacles to long-term civic participation. The historical legacies, such as the unresolved collective trauma and the deep-rooted distrust of the state apparatus, support these dynamics and still influence the perception regarding equity and the credibility of institutions.

Put collectively, the results indicate that there is a long-standing mismatch between strong informal bases of social capital and the weak institutional aspect of Kazakhstan. To overcome this imbalance, it will be necessary not only to increase the credibility and effectiveness of formal institutions but also to identify and mobilize culturally inbuilt norms of mutual assistance as a possibility of civic development. Further studies are needed to determine ways in which informal social practices can be incorporated into the institutional structure, and thus transform episodic solidarity into sustained civic capacity. In practical terms, the study's findings highlight the feasibility of integrating traditional mutual aid into formal crisis management mechanisms at the local government level, as well as the need to develop programs to enhance institutional trust through transparency and accountability of government structures to citizens.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

One of the authors (A.T.) is affiliated with the Institute for Public Policy, which provided the unpublished national flood survey dataset used in this study. Access to the data was granted through an official permission form from the institute's management. The authors declare that this affiliation did not influence the design, analysis, or interpretation of the findings.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

AT: conceptualization, data curation, formal analysis, investigation, methodology, writing – original draft; AAM: data curation, writing – review and editing.

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TAX TRANSPARENCY AS AN ANTI-CORRUPTION MECHANISM: THE CASE OF UZBEKISTAN

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines the interaction between anti-corruption law and tax law by analyzing tax transparency mechanisms within Uzbekistan's recent legal and institutional reforms. The study adopts a theoretical and policy-oriented legal analysis rather than an empirical approach, focusing on newly developing legal frameworks and institutional structures. It argues that tax transparency mechanisms can function as effective anti-corruption instruments only when supported by coherent legal rules, procedural consistency, and sufficient institutional capacity. The analysis evaluates reforms in four key areas: asset declaration, beneficial ownership transparency, whistleblower protection, and information exchange. The findings demonstrate that despite important recent reforms, significant legal and institutional deficiencies remain. Asset declaration lacks comprehensive legislative regulation and practical implementation; beneficial ownership transparency remains limited in scope; whistleblower protection is narrowly focused; and information exchange mechanisms face both domestic and international shortcomings. The article concludes that legal reform alone is insufficient to ensure effective anti-corruption outcomes. Sustainable progress requires stronger institutional capacity and gradual, proportionate implementation that balances transparency objectives with the protection of individual rights, particularly privacy.*

KEYWORDS: *Central Asia, Uzbekistan, corruption, transparency, tax.*

INTRODUCTION

Transparency is an important concept in contemporary anti-corruption debates and literature. Empirical research has frequently found a correlation between transparency mechanisms and lower corruption risks, although this relationship depends on other conditions such as democratic institutions (Kaufmann & Bellver, 2005, p. 8; Kolstad & Wiig, 2009, pp. 521–522; Lindstedt & Naurin, 2010, p. 323).

As for the relationship between taxation and corruption, it has been examined in economic and public finance literature, especially regarding tax revenue performance (Ghura, 1998, p.14; Hwang, 2002, p.161; Sen Gupta, 2007, p.22). These studies consistently demonstrate that corruption has a negative impact on tax revenue. From a rule-of-law perspective, however, the effects and consequences of this relationship extend beyond revenue collection. Tax as a fiscal obligation constitutes a fundamental financial resource for democratic societies (Yaltı, 2006, p.1). Consequently, systemic corruption may undermine democracy i) directly -by distorting the public decision-making process— and ii) indirectly -by weakening the fiscal capacity of the state.

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Thus, corruption reduces tax revenues and undermines the public resources which may be used for combating corruption. It can be described as a cycle.

Based on these theoretical debates, Uzbekistan becomes a particular case within the post-Soviet legal transformation in Central Asia, where institutional development has often proceeded through gradual and uneven processes (Lewis, 2016, pp. 9–11). According to the recent corruption perceptions index, Central Asian countries continue to face significant corruption-related challenges (Transparency International, 2025). In response to these challenges, Uzbekistan has initiated, particularly since 2017, a comprehensive reform process aimed at strengthening anti-corruption policy[1] and modernizing tax administration[2]. Within this framework, tax transparency mechanisms have gained importance as regulatory instruments. Among these mechanisms, the following ones are particularly noteworthy: asset declaration, beneficial ownership, whistleblowing, and exchange of information.

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH QUESTION

Uzbekistan has addressed corruption challenges (Transparency International, 2025) by undertaking a series of legal and institutional reforms since the early 2020s. According to the latest evaluation, these reforms received an "Outstanding" score (83.6/100) (OECD, 2024, p. 13). Focusing on this development, this article analyses the design of tax transparency mechanisms within the anti-corruption framework. The central research question is whether, and to what extent, Uzbekistan's evolving legal structure for tax transparency aligns with anti-corruption objectives.

To provide a more comprehensive assessment, the study also addresses the following complementary questions:

i) Are there normative or legal gaps in Uzbekistan's anti-corruption reforms in the context of tax transparency?

ii) To what extent are the legal reforms implemented in practice, and what gaps remain between law and enforcement?

The analysis concentrates on four key areas: asset declaration, beneficial ownership, whistleblower protection, and exchange of information. These topics were chosen because they illustrate the intersection between taxation, transparency, and corruption. This article seeks to demonstrate that the current tax transparency reforms in Uzbekistan, although promising, require systemic legal integration to effectively function as anti-corruption tools. Given the recent and evolving nature of these reforms, the study does not evaluate empirical performance indicators. Instead, it focuses on assessing the normative design and structural capacity of the regulatory framework to function as an effective anti-corruption tool. In this context, this article uses a normative approach and

[1] In recent years, there has been a significant number of anti-corruption laws and regulations, including the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 03.01.2017, No. ZRU-419, "On Combating Corruption"; and the Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 29.06.2020, No. UP-6013, "On Additional Measures to Improve the Anti-Corruption System in the Republic of Uzbekistan".

[2] Presidential Resolution No. PQ-4389, 10.07.2019, titled "On Additional Measures to Improve Tax Administration,"; the Order of the Tax Committee No. 302, 25.09.2024, "On the Development and Pilot Implementation of the 'Tax Administration' Information System"; Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan "On measures to effectively organize the implementation of priority tasks identified for further improvement of the anti-corruption system, 21.04.2025 R.No DP-71.

doctrinal legal methodology. The lack of empirical data also stems from the relatively recent emergence of policies in this area. However, over time, developments in this field are likely to become clearer and more substantiated through case law, as well as through comparative country analyses and statistical evaluations in related domains.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Definition of Corruption

Corruption is a complex concept, and its boundaries remain subject to ongoing academic debates. Despite the conceptual plurality, the most widely accepted definition is as follows: "the abuse of entrusted power for private gain (or personal profit)" (Senturia, 1931, p. 448; Pope, 2000, p. 2; Rose-Ackerman & Palifka, 2016, pp. 8–9; Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2020, p. 435). From a public-office-centered definition (Nye, 1967, p.419), corruption consists of behaviors that deviate from the formal duties of a "public role" for obtaining private gains. This definition restricts the term to the misuse of "public authority", thus framing it as primarily a public sector problem (Pozsgai-Alvarez, 2020, p.435). However, this limited focus has been criticized. As the distinction between the public and private sectors has become increasingly blurred, some scholars have emphasized corruption within the private sector (Tanzi, 1998, p.8; Cuervo-Cazurra, 2014, p.324; Lewis, 2016, p.8).

On the other hand, from a public-interest–centered approach, corruption is conceptualized not only as individual criminal behavior, but as a structural distortion of institutional decision-making processes (political corruption or corruption of democracy). Beyond traditional definitions, it is defined as "a violation of the norm of equal inclusion of all affected by a collectivity" (Warren, 2004, p.333). Similarly, it conceptualizes a situation in which someone in a position of trust violates the rules to benefit themselves or others unfairly, thereby harming those who should be protected by the rules (Philp, 2015, p.22). Some scholars go even further, recommending that corruption should not be treated as a static category. According to this alternative approach, corruption should instead be understood as an ongoing systemic problem that manifests differently across societies (Garrido et al., 2024, p.303). Therefore, it manifests and is perceived differently in every society and socio-legal system. An empirical study on Uzbekistan has also reached this conclusion (Urinboyev & Svensson, 2024, p.121): it emphasizes that in this country, where social norms, kinship ties, and informal rules ("living law") are more influential than official laws; so traditional and Western-centric definitions of corruption are insufficient to grasp this social functioning and the local/cultural meanings of corruption.

In this study, the term "corruption" is used in a conceptual rather than a purely definitional sense. From a normative perspective, it takes a wide interpretation that goes beyond legal definitions and includes being excluded from democratic decision-making procedures. At the same time, however, it adopts a dogmatic approach, remaining focused on the formal legal framework that governs corruption in Uzbekistan. It acknowledges that domestic law continues to play a key role in establishing a conceptual definition.

Legal Definition of Corruption in Uzbekistan

The legal definition of corruption in Uzbekistan constitutes an important component of the analytical framework in this article. Article 3 of the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Combating Corruption[3] defines corruption "as the illegal use by a person of an official or duty position for the purpose of obtaining tangible or intangible benefits for personal interests or for the interests of others, as well as the unlawful provision of such benefits". This definition broadly aligns with the traditional understanding of corruption as the abuse of entrusted power for private gain and clearly reflects a public-office–centered approach. Article 3 further defines corruption offense as "an act possessing signs of corruption, for the fulfilment of which the legislation provides for liability".

As can be seen, Article 3 primarily targets individual acts of abuse. By focusing on illegal use by persons holding official or duty positions, the law adopts a relatively narrow subject-based framing of corruption, limiting its scope to individual acts. This reduces its capacity to address systemic or institutionalized forms of corruption, such as preferential regulatory regimes or the influence of lobbying. However, a broader understanding of corruption could encompass practices affecting democratic decision-making processes. This would extend the analysis beyond individual misconduct to systemic forms of influence. In addition to focusing on individual corrupt acts rather than systemic corruption, this individual focus is also narrowly limited to public officials. The law explicitly confines corruption to acts committed by persons in official positions, thereby excluding private-sector actors from its scope. Furthermore, the scope of "public official" is unclear because there is no clear definition of it in the legislation (Gogidze, 2024, p.16).

The definition's scope is broadened by the inclusion of both tangible and intangible benefits. Theoretically, this extends the scope of the law to gains such as influence, authority, prestige, or compliance obtained through coercion or manipulation. However, the definition also preserves the centrality of public office and personal "benefit". Under this approach, corruption only occurs when a specific individual or public official gains a benefit. However, harm to public interests or democratic processes alone does not qualify as corruption. This individualistic approach excludes "mediated corruption", which emphasizes that corruption can exist even when the benefit is indirect or institutional rather than personal, provided that official conduct distorts democratic decision-making (Thompson, 1993, p.369). Consequently, while the Uzbek legal definition in Article 3 is based on personal gain, it limits the scope for identifying systemic or process-based forms of corruption.

In this sense, it should be noted that Article 3 provides a functional definition for criminal law purposes. However, it remains insufficient from the perspective of public administration and governance. Given that the Uzbek statute is explicitly framed as a comprehensive law on combating corruption (Urinboyev & Svensson, 2024, pp.63–65; Ferreira, 2024, p.4), and is not limited to criminal sanctions, a broader, governance-oriented conceptualization would be a more appropriate starting point for effective anti-corruption policy.

Transparency and Tax Transparency

Transparency is also a complex concept that changes and evolves depending on the field in which it is used (Ball, 2009, pp.293–296). It is defined in the social sciences using two

[3] Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated 03.01.2017 No. ZRU-419 "On Combating Corruption" (Uzbek. Korrupsiyaga qarshi kurashish to'g'risida).

distinct methods: normative and descriptive. The normative definition treats transparency as a principle, while the descriptive definitions treat it as an institutional relationship (Meijer, 2009, p.258). In early governance literature, the terms "transparency" and "openness" were often used as synonyms, primarily referring to the availability and disclosure of information (Florini, 2002, p.5). However, later research has suggested that transparency involves more than openness. It also requires relational and functional elements, such as visibility and inferability (Michener & Bersch, 2013, p.240).

Therefore, transparency is conceptualized from a relational perspective within an institutional relationship, taking into account the other party's point of view. In this approach, transparency is defined as the principal's ability to observe the agent's behavior and its consequences, thereby reducing the information asymmetries in structures of delegated authority (Prat, 2005, p.862; Meijer, 2009, p.258; Turina, 2016, p.383). On the other hand, according to those who adopt the normative definition, transparency is often considered as a principle together with accountability (Schedler, 1999, p.20; Mudacumura, 2014, p.37; Armstrong, 2005, pp.1–2). However, accountability is a process involving other elements, such as democratic development, social welfare, and psychological factors (Fox, 2007, p.668; Grimmelikhuijsen, 2012, p.66).

In this respect, taxation is a particularly sensitive field. Tax transparency, as a technical term, means accessibility to knowledge and information (Hey, 2019, p.4; Turina, 2016, p.383). With a normative approach, it is conceptualized as a structural principle of tax governance that contributes to institutional legitimacy and long-term regulatory sustainability (Gribnau & Jallai, 2018, p.354). Transparency in the tax system allows the public to monitor government activities, particularly holding incompetent or corrupt officials accountable for their actions (Blank, 2017, p.458). However, transparency is not an absolute value. As tax administrations operate within a framework that traditionally protects taxpayer privacy (Hambre, 2017, p. 163; Drywa, 2022, p. 40; Slemrod, 2025, p. 205), transparency measures must be reconciled with competing rule-of-law principles, including legal certainty, proportionality, foreseeability, and the protection of fundamental rights. Institutional reform in tax administration, therefore, requires a balance between transparency and taxpayers' rights (such as the right to privacy).

In this study, transparency is used to reduce "information asymmetry". Therefore, transparency tools are expressed in their descriptive form as making the information of one party in a relationship available to the other party. In this context, any reduction in information asymmetry within the tax relationship (between the state, taxpayers, and society) falls within the scope of the concept of tax transparency (Hey, 2019, p.5).

KEY MECHANISMS AND THEIR IMPLEMENTATION IN UZBEKISTAN

Tax transparency requires tax administrations to be open, predictable, and accountable (Blank, 2017, p.458). Beyond its general governance dimension, tax transparency also plays an important role in anti-corruption frameworks. In practice, tax transparency serves three interrelated anti-corruption functions. Firstly, it acts as an internal safeguard to reduce corruption within the tax administration itself. Secondly, it enables tax authorities to act as institutional gatekeepers, facilitating cooperation with other state bodies to detect and prevent corruption. Thirdly, it strengthens democratic accountability by making tax-related decision-making processes more visible and open to scrutiny. In the context of Uzbekistan's reforms, these dynamics become apparent through specific legal instruments: asset declaration, beneficial ownership, whistleblowing, and enhancement of information exchange.

Asset Declaration

Asset declaration systems are widely recognized as a key mechanism in preventing and combating corruption (OECD, 2011, p.12; Dominguez, 2024, p.5). The expected effect of these systems is to reduce corruption, facilitating the identification of illicit money by public officials and by limiting conflicts of interest (Burdescu et al., 2009, p.1; Kotlyar & Pop, 2021, p.1). This system requires public officials to disclose their assets and interests. Therefore, it establishes a framework for identifying, assessing, and mitigating the corruption "risks" -so it employs as a preventive mechanism (Burdescu et al., 2009, p.2). At the same time, this system employs a detective mechanism (Kotlyar & Pop, 2021, p.1). They are essentially designed to monitor public officials who have become significantly wealthier than expected and cannot explain the source of their funds. So, they serve the tools for identifying hidden illicit assets which are derived from corruption (Burdescu et al., 2009, p.12; Dominguez, 2024, p.5; Kotlyar & Pop, 2021, p.1).

Asset declaration can be considered in two interconnected stages: i) the declaration phase and ii) the public disclosure phase. Each phase contributes differently to prevention and detection (Demmke et al., 2008, p.67; Burdescu et al., 2009, p.10). In the declaration phase, public officials should report their assets and interests to the public authorities, so it enables scrutiny to identify potential conflicts of interest or unexplained wealth (Kotlyar & Pop, 2021, p.4). Its effectiveness relies on verification, cross-checking, and appropriate sanctions. Without these conditions, the declaration risks being purely symbolic (Kotlyar & Pop, 2021, p.9). Administrative costs for implementing and maintaining such systems remain a major institutional challenge (Messick, 2009, p. 7).

Public disclosure extends monitoring beyond state institutions to society (Burdescu et al., 2009, pp.8-9). It generates accountability pressures and enhances anti-corruption efforts (Burdescu et al., 2009, p.8). Empirical findings show that the public availability of asset declarations correlates most strongly with higher government quality and lower levels of corruption (Djankov et al., 2010, p.24). However, this effect is conditional on the presence of democratic governance; in non-democratic contexts, disclosure alone does not produce similar outcomes (Djankov et al., 2010, p.10), indicating that transparency and democracy are complementary to each other. Since the effects appear gradually, such rules may strengthen transparency over time and, in turn, democratic accountability (Gokcekus & Mukherjee, 2006, p.326). It is theoretically plausible that such rules gradually strengthen transparency and, through it, democratic accountability. However, the tension between disclosure and privacy must be addressed. Asset declarations and disclosure include personal data. Excessive publication can expose individuals to security risks or disproportionate intrusion into private life. Disclosure regimes should therefore follow principles of necessity and proportionality, defining what information is made public and under what safeguards (Messick, 2009, p.8).

In Uzbekistan, a presidential decree issued in 2021[4] mandated asset declaration (income and property) for civil servants, heads of state-owned enterprises, and their spouses and minor children. By the end of 2025, Uzbekistan had yet to implement a functioning system for asset and income declarations, leaving institutional gaps frequently noted in local literature, which calls for enactment and enforcement of such a law (OECD, 2024, p.31; Makhmudovich & Rakhimov, 2025, p.46). In 2024, Uzbekistan enacted the Law on Conflict of Interest[5] to curb corruption in public service. The law mandates that officials disclose personal interests that may influence their duties (Article 6). However, the effectiveness of this law ultimately depends on how well it functions as a mechanism for declaring assets and interests. By the end of 2025, the implementation of asset and interest declaration mechanisms still had not been established. In other words, although a presidential decree on AID and the Law on Conflict of Interest show partial intention to regulate the matter, the area remains deficient in terms of both a comprehensive legal framework and institutional capacity.

Beneficial Ownership

A key objective of anti-corruption legislation, particularly anti-money laundering legislation, and tax law is to identify the beneficial owners of companies, trusts, and other assets (Seer, 2015, p.86). Beneficial ownership registers may facilitate the detection of tax evasion and corruption proceeds concealed through shell companies and offshore accounts (United Nations, 2025, p.18). By reducing the gap between formal legal title and effective control, such registers aim to limit opportunities for concealment of illicit assets, in line with international standards (FATF, 2023, p.22), which require that "adequate, accurate, and up-to-date" information on the beneficial owners of legal persons be maintained.

Uzbekistan's economic structure is characterized by a significant presence of state-owned enterprises (Izvorski et al., 2021, p.174; Popov, 2023, p.304; OECD, 2023a, p.22). Recently, large state-owned enterprises have formally adopted corporate governance standards and anti-corruption compliance mechanisms, including rules on gifts and hospitality, conflict-of-interest policies, and due diligence requirements (OECD, 2024, p.85). These reforms signal an institutional commitment to integrity. However, the practical effectiveness of such compliance programs depends on reliable access to beneficial ownership information. Without knowing the ultimate beneficial owners, it is impossible to accurately identify risks, monitor potential conflicts of interest or enforce anti-corruption measures — particularly in state-owned enterprises with complex ownership structures.

In practice, cases from Uzbekistan have demonstrated how opaque ownership structures can undermine anti-corruption and governance efforts. Several high-profile cases from Uzbekistan illustrate how opaque ownership structures can undermine anti-corruption efforts. In the Gulnara Karimova case, investigative findings revealed that she operated through a network of shell companies — including Gibraltar-based Takilant Limited and Hong Kong-based Expoline Limited — formally registered under

[4] Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan dated July 6, 2021 No. UP-6257. (www.lex.uz)

[5] Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan, dated 06/05/2024 No. LRU-931 On conflict of interests (Uzbek. Manfaatlar to'qnashuvi to'g'risida)

nominee shareholders, while retaining effective beneficial ownership (Lasslett et al., 2017, p.38). Similarly, reporting by the Organised Crime and Corruption Reporting Project concerning Achilbay Ramatov, Uzbekistan's first deputy prime minister, alleged that state railway contracts were channelled to entities connected to offshore structures, with effective control exercised through proxy arrangements (Gogidze, 2024, p.8). These cases demonstrate that without transparent beneficial ownership registration, conflicts of interest and corruption risks cannot be effectively identified or prevented. These examples highlight that without transparent beneficial ownership registration and disclosure, it is insufficient to prevent conflicts of interest and corruption risks.

This deficiency has been partially addressed in the legal framework relating to public procurement. The 2021 Law on Public Procurement[6] requires bidders to disclose information concerning their beneficial owners. Public procurement data are recorded in an integrated register together with information on bidders' identities and their beneficial owners, and this information is made available to the public free of charge via the internet (IMF, 2025, p.18). This obligation, however, remains confined to the procurement context and does not form part of a comprehensive beneficial ownership framework. Furthermore, empirical evidence indicates that these disclosure requirements are often disregarded in practice, even within the limited scope of the Public Procurement Law (Gogidze, 2024, p.16).

The absence of clearly reported thresholds for foreign entities directly or indirectly controlled by taxpayers (Umarbekovich, 2025, p.141) constrains the capacity of the tax administration to identify complex ownership structures and cross-border profit retention schemes. Furthermore, transparency mechanisms limited to record-keeping, without effective verification procedures and proportionate enforcement measures (United Nations, 2025, p.18) risk becoming only formal compliance instruments rather than substantive tools of transparency. Consequently, Uzbekistan faces a structural legal gap concerning the systematic identification of the beneficial ownership registration and disclosure. Addressing this deficiency requires, first, the introduction of clear statutory provisions establishing reporting obligations, defining control thresholds, and regulating access to beneficial ownership information within tax legislation (substantive law reform). This reform should clarify who can access the data—only competent authorities or also the public—while balancing transparency with data protection and confidentiality. Second, effective implementation requires procedural reform in the form of a specialized unit within the tax administration (procedural law reform). Currently, however, it does not appear that the Uzbek tax administration maintains a dedicated department responsible for monitoring international corporate ownership arrangements (Umarbekovich, 2025, p.140). For substantive legal reform to be effective, institutional reform would need to proceed in parallel. Another part of this issue is the public disclosure of ownership structures. While it allows for public oversight, it can also raise significant privacy concerns (Cindori, 2023, p.113; Knobel, 2020, p.43). However, it is important to note that the privacy of politicians and top government officials -generally known as politically exposed persons (United Nations, 2024, p. 13; FATF, 2013, p.3) is subject to significantly fewer restrictions in terms of public interest. Therefore, the protection of their personal data is more limited (Yaltı, 2006, p.175).

[6] Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan, dated April 22, 2021, No. ZRU-684.

Protection of Whistleblowers

The protection of whistleblowers constitutes a significant component of contemporary transparency regimes (Brown et al., 2014, p.30). Within the field of taxation, whistleblowing performs a structurally distinct function due to the dual character of tax administration: it combines extensive authority for gathering information with strict tax confidentiality obligations. Drawing on the established distinction in whistleblowing theory between internal and external disclosure (Jubb, 1999, p.84; Near & Miceli, 1985, p.10), whistleblowing in the tax context may likewise be examined along two dimensions: institutional (internal) and public-interest (external) disclosure.

From a tax governance perspective, institutional (or internal) whistleblowing refers to individuals within the tax administration who disclose unlawful or arbitrary practices carried out by tax authorities. Such practices may include preferential tax treatment, unauthorized exemptions, selective enforcement in transfer pricing audits, or the misuse of discretionary powers. In this context, whistleblowing functions as a mechanism of administrative accountability by exposing abuses of public authority, as public access to information through leaks enables society to monitor governmental activities and to hold officials—particularly those perceived as "incompetent and corrupt"—accountable for their actions (Fenster, 2005, p.889). External or public-interest disclosure -what is meant here is the voice outside of the tax administration- involves reporting to bodies outside the tax administration, such as prosecutors, the media, or civil society. This may include the revelation of large-scale tax evasion schemes or aggressive tax planning strategies. In such cases, whistleblowing aims to expose systemic distortions within the tax system that undermine equality and tax justice. Both types of disclosures are grounded in freedom of expression (Kapucu & Kocatepe, 2022, p.1451) and the strengthening of democracy (Høedt-Rasmussen & Voorhoof, 2018, pp.3–6).

In Uzbekistan, whistleblower protection has been incorporated primarily within the framework of anti-corruption legislation (Gogidze, 2024, p.15; Wineburgh, 2024, p.8). Article 28 of the Law on Combating Corruption provides guarantees for individuals who report corruption-related crimes, and subsequent regulatory measures have introduced digital reporting mechanisms, including the e-anticor.uz platform. These developments represent important steps toward institutionalizing reporting channels and encouraging disclosures. A system for rewarding individuals who report corruption offenses or contribute to the fight against corruption with financial grants or certificates of appreciation has been implemented (as a good practice) and is actively used in practice -i.e., 30 people were rewarded in 2023 (OECD, 2024, p.67).

Nevertheless, the existing framework reveals structural limitations. First, the legislation does not provide a clear legal definition of "whistleblower". While such silence may allow interpretative flexibility, it also creates uncertainty regarding the scope of protection and the conditions under which legal safeguards apply. Second, it appears that protection is limited to the reporting of criminal offences. However, governance scholars conceptualize corruption not only as criminal conduct, but also as forms of abuse of power that may not reach criminal liability (Teachout, 2008, p. 376; Armstrong, 2005, p.7). In the context of tax administration, certain practices, such as selective enforcement, informal preferential treatment, or discretionary decisions that raise ethical concerns, may not constitute criminal offences, but can be regarded as corrupt practices since they undermine democratic decision-making procedures. Therefore, limiting protection to disclosures of criminal offences may result in the exclusion of crucial information for tax justice and institutional accountability.

Another issue that has arisen from the limitation of whistleblower protection to criminal offences is the question of the criminal liability of legal entities. Under the current criminal legislation of Uzbekistan, the criminal liability of legal entities is not expressly regulated (Otajonov, 2023, p.27). According to Article 27, part three, legal entities are held liable for corruption offenses in accordance with the procedure established by law. This is described as a semi-criminal liability, being an administrative liability (Otajonov, 2023, p.28; Karimova & Nigmadjanov, 2024, p.69). However, it is accepted that this approach is insufficient in determining the liability of legal entities, especially for anti-corruption goals (Karimova & Nigmadjanov, 2024, pp.69–70). This legislative gap creates uncertainty as to how the authorities will legally classify and assess corruption reports involving legal entities, and whether such disclosures will fall within the scope of whistleblower protection mechanisms.

Moreover, there is still no specialized agency or unit responsible for a system to protect whistleblowers (OECD, 2024, p.11). Therefore, Uzbekistan's whistleblower regime represents partial integration of whistleblowing transparency norms within anti-corruption legislation. Reporting channels exist, yet the scope of protection remains relatively narrow and primarily "crime" oriented. The coherence between tax transparency and anti-corruption objectives could be strengthened by extending protection to include the good-faith disclosure of significant administrative misconduct.

Inter-institutional Coordination: Exchange of Information

In contemporary discourse, tax transparency is closely linked to the framework of information exchange (Oberson, 2015, p.1; Turina, 2016, p.394). In Uzbekistan's reform trajectory, information exchange mechanisms have developed simultaneously at the domestic and international levels. While domestic coordination addresses internal administrative coherence, international exchange responds to cross-border financial risks. These two dimensions, while distinct, are structurally interconnected and shape the overall transparency architecture. Exchange of information operates as a technical instrument of administrative cooperation (OECD, 2020, p.174). This provides public institutions with the ability to collect and process scattered data in a coordinated manner and constitutes a structural element of institutional coordination in anti-corruption policy (Jenkins, 2019, pp.2–3). Corruption risks may remain undetected where administrative competencies are fragmented. This is particularly the case if data collected under separate legal mandates cannot be connected and evaluated together.

In Uzbekistan, the State Tax Committee holds extensive data concerning income, assets, and economic activity, while the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) is primarily responsible for investigating bribery, abuse of office, and related offences. In principle, coordinated data-sharing mechanisms between these bodies could enhance the detectability of corruption. This is because they could link financial information with investigative authority. Recent reforms have introduced certain institutional arrangements aimed at strengthening coordination. Article 8 of the Law on Combating Corruption provides for the establishment of Interdepartmental Commissions tasked with monitoring anti-corruption activities and facilitating cooperation among public institutions (Mustafoev, 2024, p.42; Norboev, 2020, pp.133–136). However, the legal basis and operational scope of this cooperation are still not clearly defined. The legislation does not clearly specify whether such cooperation involves the systematic exchange of information, shared databases, or joint analytical procedures. Indeed, a lack of communication and weak cooperation between public institutions in Uzbekistan has been highlighted by academic assessments (Khudaykulov, 2024, p.156). In 2022,[7] another step was taken with the introduction of an electronic interaction framework. This was designed to make it easier for investigative bodies to coordinate their efforts. A system known as "Electronic Enquiry and Pretrial Investigation" is employed in corruption investigations, enabling investigators to access the online databases of the Tax Committee, the Central Bank, and commercial banks (OECD, 2024, p.176). Through this system, investigators can access information directly and quickly from the Tax Committee's database (OECD, 2024, p.176). Although this system provides criminal investigative bodies with access to tax, customs, and banking data, its scope is limited in procedural and institutional terms. It appears to function primarily as a one-way access mechanism for tax data. Access is only granted to criminal investigative bodies. There does not exist a reciprocal exchange mechanism. Consequently, the tax administration itself does not possess symmetrical access to information held by other institutions under this framework.

Although Uzbekistan has taken steps toward inter-institutional coordination, especially during pre-trial investigations, it still lacks a fully integrated transparency system for anti-corruption governance. From a normative perspective, strengthening inter-agency coordination would require clearer legal delineation of competences and information-sharing obligations (Jenkins, 2019, p.12). There are alternative instruments, such as Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs) (World Bank, 2020, p.272), which are formal but generally non-binding inter-agency agreements designed to regulate coordination and the exchange of information without creating statutory obligations. This model could provide procedural clarity regarding the scope, format, and limits of data exchange. However, in a legal system characterized by formal hierarchies and strong reliance on legislative authorization, legislatively mandated joint task forces may provide a legal basis and greater institutional clarity than flexible administrative agreements (MoUs). A pertinent example is Kenya's Multi-Agency Team (MAT), which brings together the Kenya Revenue Authority, the Ethics and Anti-Corruption Commission, and other law enforcement agencies. This structure has enabled real-time information sharing and, between 2005 and 2016, facilitated the recovery of approximately KSh 9.8 billion in assets (World Bank, 2020, pp. 272–273).

Uzbekistan should transition from informal cooperation to a structured inter-agency framework by enacting legislation that clearly defines the jurisdictional boundaries and mandatory data-sharing obligations of each institution. Rather than relying on non-binding Memoranda of Understanding (MoUs), the government should establish a legislatively mandated Joint Task Force with the legal authority to lead multi-agency investigations. This transition involves transforming the existing Interdepartmental Commission into an

[7] Presidential Decree Of The Republic of Uzbekistan of January 28, 2022, No. PP-105.

operational hub equipped with "read-only" direct access to relevant institutional datasets. Furthermore, a statutory mechanism should be implemented to mandate the automatic, real-time transmission of financial and administrative data between agencies, replacing ad-hoc requests with a standardized, legally enforceable digital protocol.

Article 7 of the Law on Combating Corruption is another cause of structural inconsistency. This is because it lists the state bodies directly involved in anti-corruption activities, but does not explicitly include the State Tax Committee. The final paragraph of the article includes that "other government agencies also carry out anti-corruption activities in accordance with the law," thereby implicitly including the State Tax Committee. This implicit inclusion relegates the State Tax Committee's role in combating corruption to a secondary position within the inter-institutional hierarchy and creates legal and institutional ambiguity. Therefore, adopting a clearer and more explicit legal provision in this regard would be a further step toward strengthening institutional cooperation. So it should be amended Article 7 of the Law on Combating Corruption to explicitly include the State Tax Committee among the bodies involved in anti-corruption activities.

Globalization is accelerating and capital movements are becoming more cross-border. Today, financial crimes like tax evasion, bribery, embezzlement and money laundering are often linked (Kemsley et al., 2022, p.589; Spreutels & Grijseels, 2000, p.3; Mutascu, 2025, p.1; Besley & McLaren, 1993, p.119). Criminal proceeds are channeled through financial systems in different countries and concealed through complex corporate structures. Consequently, cooperation between states has become essential. As a result, mechanisms such as mutual administrative assistance in tax matters and information exchange have become increasingly coordinated (Seer, 2015, p.57) and are now considered crucial components of tax transparency (Marino, 2015, pp.6–7). Exchange of information operates through different methods such as on-request, automatic, and spontaneous information exchange methods. Its legal basis is formed by double taxation conventions (Oberson, 2015, p.17), tax information exchange agreements (Oberson, 2015, p.69), and mutual administrative assistance in tax matters (Oberson, 2015, p.82).

Uzbekistan has signed several bilateral agreements which provide spontaneous exchange of tax information. In addition, Uzbekistan has the necessary domestic legal basis to exchange information spontaneously (OECD, 2025, p.395). Although legal instruments have been introduced, there is still an absence of an operational framework for their implementation (OECD, 2025, p.393). Personnel shortages and inadequate technological infrastructure are among the technical barriers to information exchange (Öner, 2010, p.237). Therefore, it is not enough for Uzbekistan to establish the legal basis; it needs to support this with technical developments. It requires increasing the institutional capacity, such as training personnel and establishing technological infrastructure for information exchange. On the other hand, Uzbekistan has not joined any agreement which provides the automatic exchange of information and Common Reporting Standards (CRSs). However, for developing countries like Uzbekistan, automatic information exchange is an important tool in preventing corruption and tax evasion (Knobel & Meinzer, 2014, p.1). The absence of participation in such agreements significantly restricts the tax administration's capacity to receive financial data from foreign jurisdictions. Consequently, Uzbek tax administration is unable to regularly or automatically check its residents' offshore financial assets, which makes it difficult to detect corruption and tax evasion (Umarbekovich, 2025, p.141).

In summary, while Uzbekistan has a legal framework that supports spontaneous and on-request information exchange, there is still a lack of implementation. Additionally, there are still legal and technical barriers to the automatic exchange of information. Apart from the exchange of information on tax matters, the exchange of information in the fight against corruption is largely based on cooperation within the framework of criminal law. The fundamental global document in this area is the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC),[8] which imposes obligations on state parties regarding mutual legal assistance, information sharing, and the recovery of proceeds of crime (Article 48 of UNCAC). Uzbekistan became a party to the UNCAC in 2008, albeit with a reservation excluding the application of Article 66(2) concerning dispute settlement through arbitration and the International Court of Justice. Furthermore, the OECD Anti-Bribery Convention[9] regulates international cooperation. Article 9 of the Convention provides for mutual legal assistance between state parties. Uzbekistan is not yet a party to this convention. Exchange of information in tax matters and mutual legal assistance in corruption are complementary mechanisms - used as the "wider use of treaty-exchanged information" (OECD, 2023b, p.6). Financial data obtained for tax purposes can constitute evidence in detecting crimes such as bribery or embezzlement; similarly, asset movements revealed in corruption investigations may indicate tax evasion.

CONCLUSION

This article has explored the interaction between anti-corruption law and tax law by analyzing tax transparency as a structural regulatory mechanism within Uzbekistan's reform framework. The analysis demonstrates that tax transparency mechanisms operate as an anti-corruption instrument. However, its effectiveness depends on the coherence between substantive law, procedural law, and institutional capacity. This article has examined legal and institutional developments across four principal areas: asset declaration, beneficial ownership, whistleblower protection, and exchange of information.

1- Asset declaration: Asset declaration is an important system for both anti-corruption and tax purposes. Although a presidential decree was issued in 2021 and the Anti-Corruption Agency (ACA) has undertaken preparatory work, there is still no comprehensive law regulating the system in Uzbekistan. For this reason, asset declaration has not yet been implemented. This constitutes one of the most significant areas where both legal and institutional shortcomings persist. The declaration of assets by individuals in key public positions, and by their close relatives, is a vital tool in the fight against corruption. At the same time, this system could help the tax authorities to identify tax evasion. Therefore, it is necessary to have a clear legal framework and effective institutional implementation capacity. A system that allows coordinated access for both the ACA and the State Tax Committee should be implemented.

[8] United Nations, Treaty Series, vol. 2349, p. 41; Doc. A/58/422, New York, 31 October 2003.

[9] OECD, Convention on Combating Bribery of Foreign Public Officials in International Business Transactions, OECD/LEGAL/0293.

2- Beneficial ownership: This issue is closely connected to asset declaration. It is particularly important in a situation where individuals who have important public positions may also be connected to companies that are a large part of Uzbekistan's economy. Identifying the ultimate beneficial owners of such companies is essential in combatting corruption. In Uzbekistan, the existing legal framework concerning beneficial ownership is largely limited to participation in public procurement procedures. Even during this process, it is clear that there are challenges in terms of institutional capacity. Beyond this, there is no comprehensive beneficial ownership register accessible to relevant authorities, including the tax administration. This constitutes a significant structural deficiency in combatting corruption.

3- Whistleblower protection: In this field, a legal framework has been established to protect individuals who report corruption-related crimes in Uzbekistan. A special online portal is now available for the submission of reports, and whistleblowers are granted financial rewards. In this respect, institutional capacity has been aligned with the legal framework. Nevertheless, the system still requires further development. In particular, the existing rules offer narrow protection. This is because they only apply to the disclosure of criminal offences. However, this limitation may result in the exclusion of disclosure for acts of corruption that do not fall within a criminal definition (i.e., secret preferential tax regimes). This limitation may undermine the broader public interest objective of whistleblower protection. Furthermore, given that legal entities are not subject to criminal liability under Uzbek law, individuals reporting corruption carried out through corporate structures — especially where the responsible individuals are not fully identifiable — may not benefit from adequate protection.

4- Exchange of information: It has been analyzed from two perspectives: coordination among domestic administrative authorities and cross-border information exchange.

a) At the domestic level, certain general legal provisions provide for coordination among administrative bodies. Steps have also been taken to allow criminal authorities access to tax data in the context of investigations. However, several structural shortcomings remain. First, the tax administration is not explicitly listed among the designated anti-corruption bodies in the relevant legislation. Second, while the investigative framework enables criminal authorities to access tax information, there is no corresponding explicit provision allowing the tax administration to access information held by anti-corruption institutions. Third, although Interdepartmental Commissions may function as joint task forces, there is a lack of a clear legal and institutional framework defining how coordination particularly between the tax administration and the ACA – is to operate in practice. Consequently, both legal clarification and enhanced institutional capacity remain necessary components of an effective anti-corruption strategy in this field.

b) At the international level, various legal mechanisms exist for both tax matters and corruption-related offences. Uzbekistan's bilateral tax treaties provide a legal basis for the spontaneous exchange of information, as they contain relevant provisions; however, there is limited data regarding practical implementation capacity. Uzbekistan is not a party to multilateral administrative cooperation instruments -such as OECD Multilateral Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters- which prevents the operation of automatic exchange of information mechanisms, including those based on the Common Reporting Standard that enable the automatic receipt of financial information from abroad. Accordingly, in the field of automatic exchange of information, both legal and institutional deficiencies exist. In addition to tax matters, the United Nations Convention against Corruption (UNCAC), to which Uzbekistan is a party, provides a legal framework for international cooperation in corruption-related offences.

Overall, several common conclusions can be emphasized:

First, combating corruption requires not only legal reform but also a broader socio-cultural transformation that reshapes the functioning of the legal system. The establishment of a complete and coherent legal framework is a necessary starting point, but it is not sufficient in itself. The effectiveness of such reforms also depends on time, consistent implementation, and the gradual internalization of anti-corruption norms. Second, sustainable transformation requires the development of institutional capacity alongside legal reform. This entails the creation of specialized units, the training of personnel to an advanced level of expertise, and significant public investment in administrative infrastructure. Without stronger institutions, legal reforms may remain symbolic. Finally, it must be recognized that all the mechanisms discussed—asset declaration, whistleblowing, information exchange, and beneficial ownership transparency—enhance transparency to the extent that they limit privacy, thereby creating potential tensions with the right to respect for private life. For this reason, both legal frameworks and their implementation should be designed in a gradual, proportionate, and fair manner. Gradual approaches may prioritize senior public officials or politically exposed persons in asset declaration and public beneficial ownership disclosure. Proportionality requires that information unrelated to corruption or tax matters not be shared with institutions lacking a legitimate interest. Fairness demands a careful balancing of public interest and private rights. Consequently, rules and practices relating to personal data protection must be considered and developed in conjunction with tax and anti-corruption frameworks, rather than treated as separate regulatory domains.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

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THE FAMILIARITY–ACTION GAP: TRUST, YOUTH CONTACT, AND THE LIMITS OF U.S. SOFT POWER IN TAJIKISTAN

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ABSTRACT. *This article examines how different mechanisms of U.S. soft power, particularly direct interpersonal contact and media exposure, shape Afghan and Tajik youths' perceptions, trust, and intended engagement with the United States and international organizations. Using the first pilot survey collected from Afghan and Tajik youth residing in Tajikistan, the study quantitatively maps the relationships among youths' perceptions, trust, and immediate and future actions. The findings indicate that trust is more strongly associated with intended future action than favorability alone, and that perception and trust are not significantly correlated. Direct interpersonal contact is more consistently linked to higher-commitment behavioral intentions than media exposure, which is more closely associated with familiarity and affective responses. These findings suggest the presence of a "Familiarity–Action Gap," in which positive perceptions do not necessarily translate into active engagement. The objectives of this study are: (1) to examine how direct contact and media exposure relate to youth perceptions and trust, and (2) to test associations between perceptions, trust, and intended future actions. The study highlights the importance of trust-building mechanisms in contested soft power environments and suggests that interpersonal contact may play a critical role in translating favorable perceptions into supportive, proactive future actions.*

KEYWORDS: *geopolitical influence, interpersonal contact theory, public diplomacy, public trust, soft power, Tajikistan, youth political attitudes.*

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia's role as a site of geopolitical importance and foreign influence is not new, but the form that influence takes has changed significantly in the past decade. For youths, foreign engagement is now more than a distant geopolitical issue: they encounter "soft power" influence in their everyday lives, from education programs to cultural exchanges to social media posts online. Today's youths are future decision-makers and voters and are undergoing a critical period of identity and belief formation (Zimmermann, 2024; Baizhumakyzy et al., 2025; Savolainen et al., 2021; Cantor et al., 2018). Yet, despite Central Asia's strategic importance and youth's unique role as a receiver of soft power exchanges, there is limited quantitative research examining how youths are willing to engage with the initiatives carried out by actors like China, Russia, and the U.S. This study contributes to soft power theory by bridging traditional theory with unique analysis on youths in Tajikistan and distinguishing familiarity from trust as separate mechanisms that influence future actions.

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The primary objective of this article is to delineate the factors, including approaches of U.S. soft power strategies (media outlets and exchange programs) and social cognition theories (trust and perception), and the extent to which they deepen influence. We evaluate this increased soft power on both favorability and action. The article will address the following research questions: 1) how different forms of engagement with the U.S. shape youths' perceptions and future engagement, and 2) what are the correlations between their perceptions, trust in the U.S., and future actions in relation to the U.S. and international organizations?

Contrary to existing research that treats positive sentiment as an "ends" rather than "means" of soft power and influence, this article contributes to the literature on soft power by distinguishing between familiarity, trust in the U.S., and behavioral engagement as analytically separate mechanisms. By introducing the concept of a "Familiarity-Action Gap," the article offers a framework for understanding why certain soft power efforts may generate positive impressions without correlating with sustained cooperation and potential efforts to change existing relationships.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Background of Soft Powers

Soft power, first defined by Nye, refers to a state's ability to exert power and shape global decision-making by influencing public opinion through cultural attraction, ideology, and international institutions, rather than through hard power, which is based on threats and military action (Nye, 1990). Soft power has been influential in shaping public opinion, which ultimately affects foreign countries' and international platforms' policies. Haneş & Andrei (2015) explain that, in future international relations, a nation's power will increasingly rely on its cultural power, a subset of soft power. Cultural power uses cultural assets, including language, art, and education, to foster mutual understanding, build long-term relationships between people from different countries, and shape public opinion. Because leaders hope to appease supporters, public opinion can largely drive a state's foreign policy outlook.

Today, the mechanisms through which soft power operates have become an increasingly important subject of study. Entering the 21st century, the general framework for soft power operates through a multi-stage process that links exposure to foreign initiatives with longer-term political outcomes. States deploy soft power resources, including cultural diplomacy and media outreach, to increase familiarity and positive perceptions among the public. These exposures, through the diffusion of norms and discourse, can gradually shape trust and legitimacy, which in turn may influence individuals' willingness to support cooperation with the foreign state. In this sense, soft power influence develops gradually through intermediate cognitive and social mechanisms that connect attraction with behavioral engagement (Popova et al., 2022; Murshed et al., 2025). Each mechanism not only changes the perceptions of leaders and elites, but also of ordinary people. Leaders inevitably change, and importantly, they adapt to their citizens' desires (Haneş & Andrei, 2015). Thus, examining the impact of soft power on individuals and lived experiences is crucial to understanding the future trajectory of a country's foreign policy influence.

Despite its prominence, however, scholars caution that soft power does not automatically translate into policy alignment or behavioral compliance. Attraction may generate favorable impressions without producing cooperation, and audiences may resist or compartmentalize foreign influence. Much of the current soft power literature vaguely defines the concepts of soft power and attraction to begin with, further complicating evaluations of its true impacts and highlighting the importance of examining how individuals actually respond to influence rather than assuming that attraction produces alignment (Brannagan & Giulianotti, 2018; Knight, 2022). This theoretical ambiguity has practical consequences: if the field does not distinguish between generating familiarity, building trust, and producing behavioral change, it cannot assess the authentic effectiveness of soft power strategy. Thus, this study aims to distinguish and draw relationships between these mechanisms and effectiveness of soft power strategies.

While soft power theory identifies trust as a critical intermediate mechanism between familiarity and behavioral engagement, it does not specify how trust is generated, leaving a significant gap between theoretical prescription and practical strategy. Existing frameworks largely assume that exposure to foreign culture and media gradually produces trust, without specifying the conditions under which this occurs (Rothman, 2011). This study addresses that gap by drawing on intergroup contact theory to examine which specific mechanisms, comparing direct interpersonal contact, parasocial media use, or news exposure, are more consistently associated with trust formation and behavioral engagement among youth in Tajikistan.

Soft Power Competition in Central Asia

Central Asia is an emerging front of soft power competition between the U.S., China, and Russia due to its geographical importance between powers like China, Russia, and Iran, bridging trade, diplomacy, and culture between the East and the West. Tajikistan is uniquely important to soft power discussions due to its geographical significance, sharing a border with China, specifically Xinjiang, and its proximity to Russia (Bawa & Ashish, 2023). Similarly, Tajikistan's historical significance as a former Soviet Republic has deepened its linguistic and cultural ties with Russia; for example, Tajikistan is one of the few Central Asian countries that officially uses Cyrillic, the same writing system as Russia's. For these reasons, China and Russia both have immense capability and interest in dominating soft power influence in Tajikistan. Moreover, Tajikistan has the fastest growing population in the Europe and Central Asia region, with 29 births per 1,000 people in 2016 and a disproportionately young population where roughly one of every three people is under 15 years of age (World Bank, 2022). In Tajikistan, this demographic trend increases the likelihood that current youth perceptions will shape how U.S. foreign influence develops over time.

Russia leverages its historical and geographical ties with Tajikistan, a post-Soviet state, by expanding educational initiatives to enhance its soft power. Although noting the limitations of identifying the direct causality of soft power on a country's actions, Hudson shows that the salience of soft power has increased public approval, specifically among Kazakh higher education students, for state-level Kazakh-Russia cooperation, and individuals are more likely to engage in behaviors that positively impact Russia (Hudson, 2022). Importantly, however, Hudson's study focuses on Kazakhstan and on state-level outcomes rather than on the mechanisms linking individual-level exposure to behavioral intention, a gap this study addresses directly.

China similarly has largely increased its presence and influence in Central Asia. A study by Bawa & Ashish (2023) examines how China is rapidly leveraging a range of measures to boost its soft power in Tajikistan, including the Belt and Road Initiative, education investments, military assistance, and training programs. These initiatives have gradually improved China’s favorability and recognition in Tajikistan and in Central Asia.

In addition to China and Russia's general rise in soft power, a study done by Rashidov et al. (2024) analyzes the higher-educational opportunities provided by China and Russia to increase their soft power in Tajikistan. Russia has implemented Russkiy Mir centers and the Russian Centers for Science and Culture, both of which are educational and cultural programs that hold various competitions and seminars for young people.

The U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, alongside the recent scaling back of programs associated with agencies such as USAID, has contributed to a growing sense among local populations that American engagement in Central Asia is receding and will continue to decline (Ziegler, 2024; Repnikova, 2025). At the same time, the expanding visibility of Chinese and Russian initiatives in the region presents an increasingly competitive environment for sustaining U.S. influence.

Individual-level Contact Theory

Coined by Allport, intergroup contact theory argues that positive and meaningful interpersonal interactions between people of different groups can reduce prejudice. Intergroup contact theory has two defined categories: Direct Personal Contact (face-to-face) and Parasocial (virtual) Contact (Allport, 1954). Since direct personal contact is more intimate, people tend to form more concrete attitudes toward one another. Findings based on national surveys by Yun et al and others show that ethnic relations from direct contact have a sizable significant influence on favorability, supporting the intergroup contact theory (Yun & Kim, 2008; Pettigrew & Tropp, 2006; Armstrong & Neuendorf, 1992; Schemer & Meltzer, 2020). Applied to soft power, contact theory suggests that direct person-to-person interactions, such as exchange programs, may build the individualized trust that media exposure alone cannot generate.

The parasocial contact hypothesis extends this framework to media, explaining that individuals can develop emotional bonds with people or figures on media platforms, creating an indirect form of intergroup contact. This provides an avenue for people to learn about groups they otherwise do not encounter in person (Abrams et al., 2018). While parasocial contact has been shown to influence attitudes, it operates through different psychological pathways than direct contact. This distinction between the depth of direct and parasocial contact is theoretically central to this study's investigation of the Familiarity-Action Gap.

Contact theory's positive impacts are greatest when the form of exchange focuses on achieving collaborative goals rather than explicit cultural comparison, reducing stigma and "us vs. them" narratives (O'Dowd, 2021). In some cases, a solely bicultural model of interaction produced negative evaluations of another group's culture following exchange

(Schäfer et al., 2025). These findings indicate that direct contact is not uniformly positive but rather depends on the method and consistency of interaction. Despite this variability, direct contact generally moves people away from simplistic cultural equations rooted in media, language, or government narratives (Risager, 2007), toward more local and nuanced perspectives (Menard–Warwick et al., 2013). Studies show that following exchange programs, participants tend to further engage with members of other cultures and act on issues common to both societies (Godwin-Jones, 2019), suggesting that the behavioral effects of direct contact can outlast the interaction itself.

Taken together, soft power theory and intergroup contact theory generate a specific and testable prediction: if trust is the mechanism that converts familiarity into action, and if direct interpersonal contact is the mechanism through which trust is built, then soft power strategies relying primarily on media exposure will systematically underperform those investing in direct contact programs. The "Familiarity-Action Gap" introduced in this study offers an empirical framework for evaluating this prediction in the context of Central Asian youth.

Existing soft power literature, especially in Central Asia, largely emphasizes U.S. actions such as state-led initiatives or economic treaties rather than how soft power is received and acted upon at the individual level (Torebekova & Baktiyarova, 2025; Kurmangali et al., 2025). Even when examining individual behavior, studies often prioritize investigating the breadth of exposure, such as the reach of U.S. media or cultural presence, over depth, particularly regarding future individual actions (Gauttam et al., 2024; Barrech & Khan, 2023). As a result, soft power is frequently assessed through surface-level measures of attitudes that reveal little about long-term behaviors (Zhai, 2025).

Moreover, few studies systematically compare different mechanisms of exposure, including contact, media, and news. Trust itself is often assumed to be an automatic outcome of favorable perception rather than an independent mechanism between attraction and action (Wrighton et al., 2022). Correspondingly, prior research frequently conflates interpersonal trust in Americans with trust in the United States as a political actor, leaving their relationship and independent impacts underexplored (Repnikova, 2025).

These gaps are especially pronounced in Central Asia, where historical legacies of skepticism toward U.S. foreign policy and competing Russian and Chinese influence complicate soft power dynamics, making the relationship between positive perception and future engagement more nuanced (Ziegler, 2024; Hudson, 2022; Bawa & Ashish, 2023). Youth perspectives are further underrepresented, even though young people are key indicators of long-term influence. This absence is especially notable in Tajikistan, where evidence at the individual level remains scarce (Ikromi, 2025; Rashidov et al., 2024).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses original survey-based methodology to collect primary data from Tajik and Afghan youth living in Tajikistan. The survey captured information on participants' socio-demographic characteristics, including their original country and age range. The survey consists of a comprehensive list of Likert-scale questions to measure perceptions of the U.S., levels of trust in the U.S., forms of exposure, and future engagement, and open-ended questions for elaboration, consistent with the study's inductive and exploratory orientation, with operationalized definitions shown in Table 1. Lower mean scores indicate stronger willingness or agreement, consistent with the survey's Likert-scale design in which lower values correspond to greater readiness to engage.

Table 1. Operationalization of Key Variables

Construct	Operationalization	Scale
Familiarity	Frequency of exposure to U.S. media (movies, music, influencers), news, and direct contact with Americans	1–5 frequency scale
Favorable Perception	Overall evaluation of the United States today; perceived change in opinion over the past year	1–5 agreement scale
Trust	Degree of trust in the United States as an institution or foreign policy actor	1–5 agreement scale
Interpersonal Trust	Degree of trust in Americans as individuals representing the United States	1–5 agreement scale
Behavioral Intention	Willingness to engage in specific future actions, ranging from lower-commitment (cultural participation, English learning) to higher-commitment (applying to U.S. programs, working with international organizations)	1–5 willingness scale

Source: Author's own elaboration.

The sampling method involved purposive sampling, where the researcher identified a group of Tajik and Afghan individuals (n=20) who were previously involved with forms of U.S. soft power programs. While the sample size is modest, small-N exploratory studies are common when examining hard-to-access populations, specifically introducing hypotheses and patterns in understudied contexts. The survey was sent to individuals and other youths through snowball sampling, primarily via social media and peer networks.

This approach was deemed appropriate given the specific focus on Tajiki and Afghan youths who have specifically been involved with foreign and U.S. programs to determine the efficacy of different forms of soft power, allowing for targeted data collection from individuals most relevant to the research. Because purposive and snowball sampling were employed, the sample is not representative of the broader Tajik or Afghan youth population. The results, therefore, identify patterns and associations that warrant further testing using larger samples.

Tajik and Afghan youths in Tajikistan represent an analytically relevant population due to shared linguistic, educational, and social environments shaped by migration and overlapping media spaces. Afghan youth residing in Tajikistan often participate in the same educational programs, consume similar media, and interact within shared social environments, making their perceptions shaped by comparable exposure pathways. Examining these populations together allows for analysis of youth experiences within a shared soft power environment. Furthermore, independently, by including refugee youth, this study analyzes how soft power operates in displacement contexts.

The survey was conducted through an online channel, Google Forms, and designed to include Dari, English, and Tajiki languages to ensure all participants accurately understood and answered questions. We used Pearson correlations and linear regression to identify and measure relationships, and Ordinary Least Squares (OLS) regression models examined associations between exposure measures (direct contact, media, and news), trust, sentiment, and reported behavioral intentions.

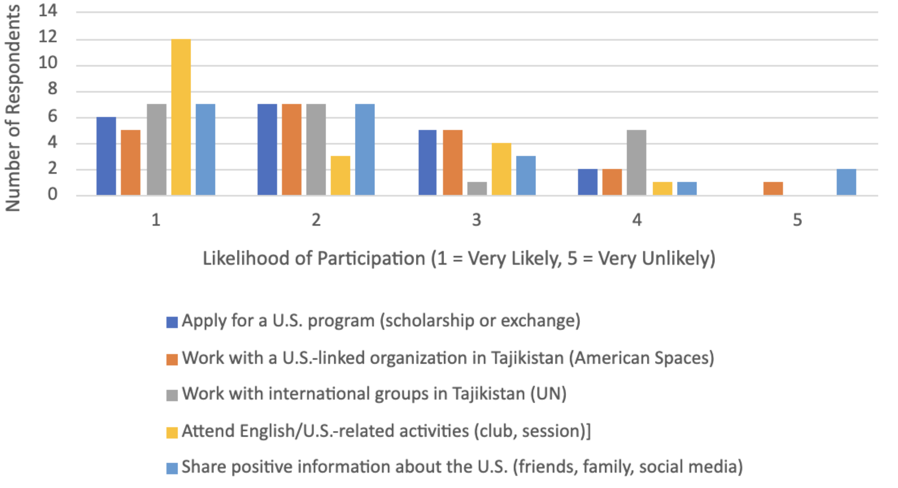
To protect the identity and safety of youths, all responses were anonymous and voluntary, and questions were designed to avoid sensitive or politically risky topics.

FINDINGS

Descriptive Results

Respondents expressed the greatest willingness for lower-commitment activities, including cultural participation and English-language learning (mean = 1.7). Willingness was lower for exchange programs (mean = 2.15) and for international or information-sharing actions (mean = 2.2), and lowest for institutionalized U.S.-linked programs (mean = 2.35), as summarized in Figure 1.

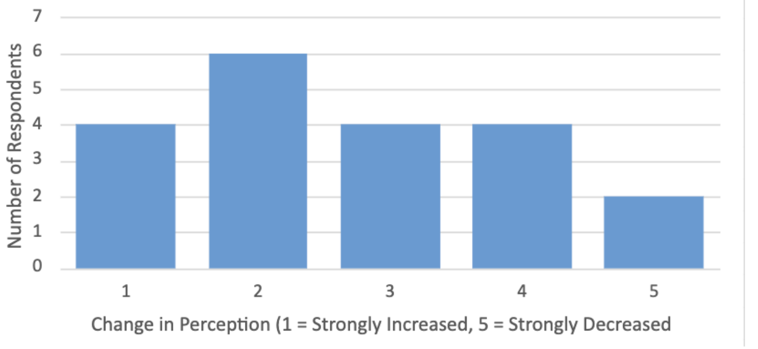
Figure 1. Future Intentions of Respondents



Source: Authors' figures based on survey data

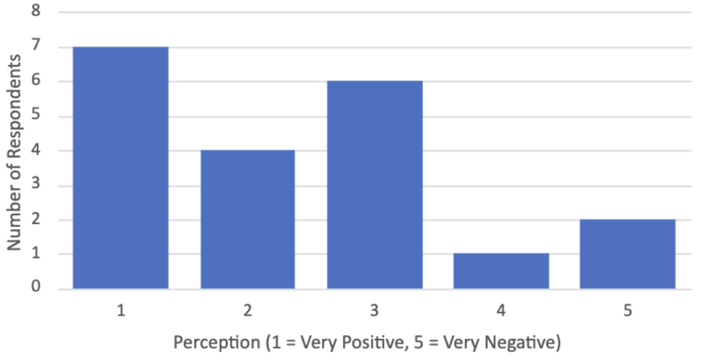
Overall perceptions of the United States remained generally positive, with modest improvement reported over the past year, though responses varied across individuals (Figure 2, Figure 3).

Figure 2. Shift in Perception of the United States Over the Past Year



Source: Authors' figures based on survey data

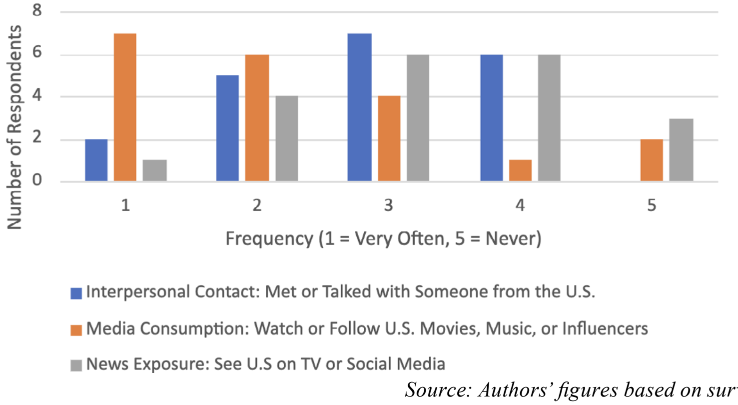
Figure 3. Perception of the United States Today



Source: Authors' figures based on survey data

U.S media consumption of U.S. cultural content, including movies, music, and influencers, leads as the primary mechanism of reported engagement, which indicates a left-skewed graph, followed by interpersonal contact, and lastly news exposure (Figure 4).

Figure 4. Frequency of Mechanisms of Engagement



Source: Authors' figures based on survey data

Table 2. Afghan and Tajik Youth Perceptions of the U.S. After Interpersonal Contact

Theme	Notable Quotes
Hospitality	"Meeting Americans helped me see the U.S. as a welcoming place… the conversations I had showed me that people are curious [and] respectful."
Media vs. Lived Experience	"Before meeting [Americans], I only knew the U.S. from movies and news… talking to real people showed me that Americans care about other cultures."
Humanization	"Meeting Americans helped me see the U.S. more clearly… it made the U.S. feel more real and human to me."
Educational Aspiration	"Ман бисёртар хоҳиш пайдо кардам…" (I developed a stronger desire to study and work in America.)
Admiration	"بسیار خوب بود... نشان داد که چقدر مهربان و کوشش‌مند هستند... تحصیل در امریکا بسیار خوب است. Meeting Americans showed me how kind and hardworking they are, and that studying in the U.S. is very good
Stereotype Reversal	"At first I thought Americans weren't as friendly as I thought they were, but after meeting them, they were much more kind than I [previously] thought."
Nuanced Perception	"I think most of [them] are … kind and open-minded people… but the U.S. … [and] everywhere in this world ha[s] its problems."
Neutrality	"Nothing special [about meeting them]."

Source: Author's own elabora

Correlational Data

No statistically reliable association was observed between general perceptions and trust in the U.S. ($r = 0.376$, $p = 0.103$). Trust in the U.S. has a strong and significant correlation with future action ($r = 0.615$, $p = 0.004$) while sentiment has a moderate and significant correlation with future action ($r = 0.510$, $p = 0.021$). Trust has a larger and more significant correlation with future actions than sentiment.

Regression results show direct contact with Americans is positively associated with willingness to apply for U.S. programs ($B = 0.41$, $p \approx 0.058$). U.S. media exposure is positively and significantly correlated with willingness to work with international organizations ($B = 0.49$, $p = 0.018$). News exposure has no significant association with all future action outcomes, with associations ranging from slightly negative to slightly positive ($B \approx -0.21$ to 0.046, $p > 0.3$).

Post-contact and Post-media Effects

After direct interactions with Americans, respondents most often described actions that involved personal effort or continued future actions, both of which are behavioral forms of engagement. Practicing English (mean = 1.7) and using U.S.-based applications (mean = 2.05) were the most common responses, and consuming U.S. media (mean = 2.2) and discussing the United States with family and friends (mean = 2.2) followed after. From our results, meeting Americans is highly correlated with future actions, especially those that are behavioral.

Following U.S. media consumption, respondents were more likely to report learning-oriented and affective responses, such as increased knowledge about American daily life, rather than behavioral engagement. Learning about American daily life (mean =

2.15) and feeling more positive about the United States (mean = 2.15) were the most common responses.

Media consumption is correlated with increased affective engagement, while direct contact is associated with behavioral engagement.

DISCUSSION

Although Afghan and Tajiki youths in Tajikistan generally retain positive perceptions of the United States, a clear gap emerges between perception and future action: youths express greater comfort engaging with the U.S. in passive roles and are more hesitant toward actions that require public affiliation (Figure 1, Figure 2, Figure 3). Many respondents indicated greater comfort engaging with international organizations, such as the United Nations, than with programs directly affiliated with the United States (Figure 1). This pattern suggests that youths' hesitation is not due to disengagement from foreign institutions overall, but by more of a specific uncertainty toward directly engaging with the U.S.

We refer to this pattern as the "Familiarity-Action Gap" where the effectiveness of soft power can plateau at familiarity and, without trust in a country, positive perceptions fail to convert into meaningful participation, especially proactive and snowball forms of engagement. This is explained by correlational analysis as trust shows a stronger association with intended future actions than favorability. Interestingly, trust shows insignificant correlation with positive sentiment, meaning trust is not a linear extension of positive sentiment. The results point to limits in soft power strategies that solely focus on familiarity without building trust.

Direct contact emerges as the most consistent driver of two types of behavioral engagement. One clear pattern that stood out was the increase in active behaviors such as practicing English and using U.S.-based platforms after meeting Americans. These behaviors are consistent with prior work in intergroup contact theory, which links interpersonal interaction to cooperative and prosocial actions toward another group (Levy & Dovidio, 2021). Beyond individual behavior, sharing experiences with friends and family was a common reported future action, which suggests a snowball effect where one person's experiences are spread to social circles around them. The snowball effect is well-documented in previous studies, where intergroup contact from exchange programs had positive, and in many cases, even greater ripple effects on indirect participants (Olberding & Olberding, 2010). Moreover, direct contact is also linked to increased interest in pursuing education and work opportunities, following interpersonal interaction with one participant describing:

"Ман бисёртар хоҳиш пайдо кардам ки ба Амрико раваму таҳсилу кору фоъолияти худро онҷо кунам"

(Translated from Tajik: "I have become increasingly interested in going to America to study and work there."; Tajik respondent, ages 19-22)

While not generalizable, such responses provide qualitative support for the quantitative finding that direct contact is associated with greater willingness to pursue formal forms of engagement.

Media exposure is more closely associated with changes in understanding than action. Respondents more often described learning about American daily life rather than changing how they engaged with the U.S. However, these changes appear to remain largely individual and were rarely linked to sharing information, as in social diffusion or proactive behavior. Interestingly, statistical analysis shows media consumption has no correlations with any actions other than a strong association with willingness to work with international organizations, suggesting that U.S. media content may, in fact, redirect or correlate with engagement toward multilateral actors.

Notably, our data indicated that news exposure has no significant relationship with future actions. Overall, the form of engagement appears to shape how soft power actually materially affects action.

Because trust in the U.S. and direct contact with Americans display similar patterns of engagement, especially proactive and supportive actions, we turn to the qualitative responses to examine how these two factors relate. In written responses, many respondents described how interpersonal encounters with Americans reshaped their judgments of Americans' intentions and character. Respondents frequently described Americans as more "respectful" and " friendly" than expected, and that talking with them felt "real and human." These descriptions reflect judgments about reliability and goodwill, which are key elements of trust. Several respondents noted that meeting Americans helped them "see the U.S. as a welcoming place," implying that individual-level contact can shape broader perceptions of the country (Table 2).

"Before meeting them, I only knew about the U.S from movies and news but talking to real people showed me that Americans care about other cultures, value hard work, and are often very kind and respectful." (Afghan respondent, ages 15-18)

The contrast between prior media exposure and interpersonal interaction illustrates how direct contact can correct previous stereotypes driven by the media. In Central Asia, perceptions of the U.S. are often shaped by Russian and Chinese media as well as skepticism toward U.S. foreign policy. Our findings indicate that direct contact offered youths a way to form nuanced or more impressions of the U.S. outside these traditional narratives. Interestingly, several respondents linked trust in Americans to more favorable views of the U.S. overall. This suggests that trust built through interpersonal contact may extend beyond individuals, shaping broader national perceptions and helping bridge the "Familiarity-Action Gap" we defined earlier.

These findings suggest that soft power effectiveness may depend less on broad image-building and more so on mechanisms that cultivate individual-level relational trust that extends to trust in the corresponding country. This aligns with and builds upon existing intergroup contact theory, which emphasizes the role of sustained interaction in reducing prejudice and fostering cooperative behavior across different groups. It also suggests that macro-level influence from countries or populations may depend on micro-level trust formation processes.

CONCLUSIONS

This study offers valuable insights into current viewpoints of Tajik and Afghan youths of foreign influence in a critical region of Central Asia. Findings indicate nuances of soft power development in contested soft power regions and emphasize the importance of considering individual-level intergroup contact in larger foreign policy objectives.

Although Tajik and Afghan youth generally view the United States favorably, these views do not always correspond with a willingness to take future action. The findings indicate that trust appears to be more strongly associated with behavioral intentions than favorable perception in this sample, suggesting it may play a role in translating soft power exposure into action. Within this exploratory sample, direct interpersonal contact shows a stronger association with trust and higher-commitment actions than media exposure, which is associated with general familiarity. U.S. media exposure may redirect engagement toward multilateral organizations rather than U.S.-branded institutions.

U.S. popular culture is widely accessible and familiar to respondents, much more so than direct contact and news, particularly through movies, music, and influencers on online platforms. However, this familiarity tends to remain impersonal, and without personal connection, even large amounts of media output in places like Central Asia will still place the U.S. behind.

This study has some limitations as the findings are limited by a modest sample size and self-reported data, which may introduce bias and reduce generalizability. Future research should employ larger samples to explore policy impacts and specific soft-power pathways in greater detail.

The findings of this study bring important implications for both international relations research in soft power and policy considerations. Within this sample, trust appears to be the unique factor that is not linked with positive perceptions derived from media exposure, but instead with direct contact that helps form more personal relationships. These personal relationships critically correlate with increased supportive future actions, creating a positive feedback loop of cooperation and active interest.

The study introduces trust in a country as a unique mechanism that bridges familiarity and future cooperative actions into the framework of previous soft power studies, necessitating greater research in the specific types of trust in unique geopolitical hotspots. Specific policy recommendations include greater emphasis on youth-to-youth foreign exchanges to increase intergroup contact as compared to traditional cultural influence branding on social media and international platforms.

This research contributes to a more nuanced understanding of Afghan and Tajik youths' perceptions of a rapidly changing and increasingly important geopolitical landscape, as well as of soft power and international relations theory. If these patterns hold in larger samples, interactions may be key to humanizing the U.S. beyond historical shadows that underlie previous U.S. foreign policy failures and disengagement from the region, potentially rebuilding a long-lost sense of trust.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are openly available in Zenodo at https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.19054853, reference number 10.5281/zenodo.19054853.

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CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

AUTHORS' CONTRIBUTIONS

RB: research preparation, conceptualization, literature review, methodology, formal analysis, and writing.

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SOVEREIGN CONNECTIVITY STATECRAFT: KAZAKHSTAN'S MIDDLE-POWER DIPLOMACY AND CENTRAL ASIAN AGENCY IN A FRAGMENTING EURASIA

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ABSTRACT. *This article develops the concept of sovereign connectivity statecraft to explain how Kazakhstan seeks to convert geography, multi-vector diplomacy, transport corridors, resource endowment, institutional credibility, and regional public-good provision into autonomous bargaining capacity in a fragmented Eurasian order. The study is a conceptual review supported by qualitative document analysis of peer-reviewed scholarship, Kazakhstani policy documents, institutional reports, and recent trade, corridor, and resource data. It argues that multi-vector diplomacy remains necessary but insufficient: it describes Kazakhstan's diversified external relations, whereas sovereign connectivity statecraft identifies the mechanism through which those relations are translated into usable routes, rules, partnerships, and regional services. The analysis specifies five mutually reinforcing pillars: sovereignty, balance, connectivity, institutional resilience, and regional public goods. Applied to the Middle Corridor, uranium and critical-mineral diplomacy, energy diversification, and regional consultation, the framework shows that Kazakhstan's agency grows only when connective assets are matched by logistical reliability, domestic upgrading, transparent governance, and respect for neighboring states' autonomy. The contribution is conceptual and empirical: it separates connectivity-based agency from hedging, geoeconomics, and ordinary multi-vectorism while grounding each pillar in traceable public indicators. The article concludes that Kazakhstan has acquired conditional platform-state functions, but these remain vulnerable to corridor bottlenecks, commodity concentration, implementation gaps, and geopolitical asymmetry.*

KEYWORDS: *Kazakhstan, Central Asia, multi-vector diplomacy, middle power, sovereign connectivity, Middle Corridor, geoeconomics, regional public goods.*

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia is usually read through other people's strategies. In that reading, the region becomes China's corridor, Russia's historical sphere, Europe's alternative supply route, an American strategic concern, or a resource frontier for global markets. Each framing identifies a genuine structural pressure. Each also risks turning Central Asian states into objects of great-power competition rather than authors of their own constraints and choices. Kazakhstan is a useful place to test the problem, because it combines exposure with capacity: geographically central, resource-rich, diplomatically busy, institutionally consequential within the region, and deeply affected by the fragmentation of the Eurasian political economy.

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I argue that Kazakhstan's contemporary foreign policy is best understood as an attempt to practice sovereign connectivity statecraft — a form of foreign policy in which a middle or secondary power deliberately converts diversified diplomacy, connective infrastructure, institutional reliability, and regional services into autonomous bargaining capacity, while refusing exclusive dependence on any single external actor. The term keeps the core insight of multi-vector diplomacy, that Kazakhstan cultivates several centers of power at once, and then moves past them. Multi-vector diplomacy describes how external relations are distributed. Sovereign connectivity statecraft describes how those relations are made to pay: routes are made reliable, institutional formats are kept alive, regulatory credibility is built, and national advantage is converted into services the region can use.

The claim is bounded on purpose. Kazakhstan is not a great power, and its foreign policy is not unconstrained. Its influence is conditional, issue-specific, and relational. What matters is that Kazakhstan's foreign-policy agency, defined here as autonomous bargaining capacity under asymmetric conditions, can still operate when it runs through identifiable institutions, corridors, value chains, and regional formats. This framing answers a recurring need in the Central Asia literature: to get past the binary of dependence or autonomy. Kazakhstan is exposed to Russia's security and infrastructural weight, China's economic and logistical footprint, Europe's appetite for supply-chain diversification, Türkiye's expanding Trans-Caspian engagement, and the distinct priorities of its Central Asian neighbors. Kazakhstan's agency, on this account, does not come from escaping those pressures. It comes from structuring them so that they widen rather than narrow the country's room for maneuver.

Three questions organize what follows. First, how does sovereign connectivity statecraft differ from multi-vector diplomacy, hedging, middle-power diplomacy, and geoeconomic statecraft? Second, which features of Kazakhstan's recent foreign policy suggest a shift from defensive balancing toward a more productive, connectivity-based strategy? Third, what constraints stop Kazakhstan's geography, corridors, and resources from translating into durable regional agency? I answer through a conceptual review and qualitative document analysis of academic literature, Kazakhstani policy texts, institutional reports, and economic evidence.

The contribution is threefold. Conceptually, the article specifies sovereign connectivity statecraft as a distinct analytical category with necessary components and observable indicators. Theoretically, it connects literatures usually kept apart — middle-power behavior, small-state agency, hedging, geoeconomics, infrastructure and connectivity politics, regionalism, and public goods. Empirically, it uses Kazakhstan to show how a Central Asian state can become a regional platform without lapsing into either a passive transit space or a coercive regional hegemon. The reading is cautiously positive. Kazakhstan has built meaningful platform-state functions; their credibility depends on implementation, on the quality of domestic institutions, on corridor reliability, and on whether leadership is framed as service to regional agency rather than hierarchy over neighbors. The remainder of the article defines the concept, sets out the method, reviews the relevant literature, presents five findings, synthesizes them into the five-pillar framework, and closes with constraints and policy implications.

CONCEPTUAL POSITIONING: DEFINING SOVEREIGN CONNECTIVITY STATECRAFT

Sovereign connectivity statecraft is defined here as the purposeful use of diversified external partnerships, connective infrastructure, regulatory credibility, and regional public-good provision by a middle or secondary power to widen autonomous policy space under conditions of geopolitical fragmentation. Five components are necessary, and the concept does not hold if any is missing. The state must face structural exposure to larger powers or external shocks. It must hold some connective asset — territory, transport routes, energy networks, digital infrastructure, convening power, strategic commodities. It must pursue diversified partnerships rather than exclusive alignment. It must embed connectivity in institutions, rules, or policy coordination, not lean on geography alone. And it must turn national advantage into services that others can use, so that the connection itself generates bargaining value and legitimacy.

So defined, the concept can be told apart from its neighbors. Multi-vector diplomacy concerns the management of relations with several major partners. Hedging concerns the mix of returns-maximizing and risk-contingency behavior under uncertainty. Middle-power diplomacy emphasizes status, niche competence, and coalition-building. Geoeconomic statecraft concerns the strategic use of economic instruments for political ends. Sovereign connectivity statecraft overlaps all four without collapsing into any of them. Its distinctive move is to explain how a state turns the infrastructure and governance of connection into an instrument of autonomy. The operative question is not only who Kazakhstan balances among, but how it makes its territory, institutions, corridors, resource partnerships, and regional formats useful enough that external actors must deal with it on negotiated terms.

The concept is not Kazakhstan-specific. In principle, it travels to other middle or secondary states whose geography, infrastructure, or institutional credibility lets them mediate flows between larger political-economic spaces. Kazakhstan is simply an unusually strong case: post-Soviet multi-vector diplomacy, land-linked geography, a hydrocarbon and uranium base, critical-mineral prospects, a Caspian position, and a Central Asian convening role pack the necessary components together more densely than most comparators. It therefore works both as a case illustration and as a theory-building site for a concept with wider comparative potential.

Empirically, the strategy can be spotted through observable indicators: diversification of external partnerships; investment in routes, ports, logistics, customs, and digital coordination; agreements that link resources to value-chain upgrading; domestic reforms that raise regulatory credibility; and regional initiatives that supply services to neighbors rather than merely extract advantage from them. None of these indicators proves success. They establish the presence of a strategy. Whether it works is a separate judgment — whether connectivity reduces vulnerability, expands bargaining capacity, generates domestic development spillovers, and avoids dependence on a single partner or corridor.

Table 1. Operationalization of Key Variables

Adjacent concept	Primary analytical focus	Limitations of this article	Added value of sovereign connectivity statecraft
Multi-vector diplomacy	Diversified relations with multiple external powers.	Identifies diplomatic distribution but does not explain how infrastructure, institutions, and regional services turn diversification into agency.	Shows how diversified relations become productive capacity through routes, rules, partnerships, and services.
Hedging	Risk-management under uncertainty through mixed alignment choices.	Often emphasizes avoidance of loss rather than proactive creation of strategic options.	Treats connectivity as a mechanism for expanding policy space, not only limiting exposure.
Middle-power diplomacy	Niche competence, coalition-building, institutional activism, and functional influence.	Can drift into status-claiming if not tied to specific mechanisms of influence.	Links the middle-power function to concrete connective assets and regional public goods.
Geoeconomic statecraft	Use of economic instruments for strategic and political objectives.	May foreground coercion, market leverage or sanctions over infrastructural mediation and regional service provision.	Explains how transport, value chains, and regulatory reliability can be used non-coercively to increase autonomy.
Platform state	A state that hosts and coordinates cross-border flows, markets or institutional interfaces.	Describes an empirical role but not the foreign-policy mechanism that produces it.	Treats platform status as one possible empirical expression of sovereign connectivity statecraft.

Source: author's elaboration.

Note. The table separates the proposed concept from neighboring literatures while acknowledging overlap, and isolates the analytical work the concept is meant to do.

METHODOLOGY: CONCEPTUAL REVIEW AND QUALITATIVE DOCUMENT ANALYSIS

This is a conceptual review supported by qualitative document analysis — not a systematic review, a statistical test, or an interview study. Its purpose is to refine an analytical framework and apply it to Kazakhstan's current foreign-policy position. It is conceptual in its primary contribution and review-based in its evidence: the framework is the argument, and Kazakhstan is the case through which it is built and then tested against current public data. The reasoning moves in both directions. Deductively, the starting categories came from the literature on middle powers, hedging, geoeconomics, regionalism, and connectivity politics. Inductively, those categories were revised against Kazakhstan-specific documents, corridor evidence, policy reports and economic indicators until the five-pillar framework settled as the most parsimonious synthesis. The framework, in other words, was neither imposed before reading the sources nor read off them naïvely; it emerged from the iteration between the two.

The cited corpus comprises thirty-four sources. They fall into five groups: peer-reviewed articles and academic books on Central Asian agency, multi-vector diplomacy, small-state and middle-power behavior, hedging, geoeconomics and regionalism; official Kazakhstani policy documents; institutional reports from bodies such as the World Bank, the OECD, CAREC, the Asian Development Bank, the European Commission and the

International Energy Agency; and current economic, trade, corridor and resource data from the World Bank, the Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan, the Observatory of Economic Complexity, the World Nuclear Association, World Integrated Trade Solution and publicly available transport reporting. The search combined targeted terms — Kazakhstan foreign policy, multi-vector diplomacy, Kazakhstan middle power, Central Asian agency, Middle Corridor, Trans-Caspian transport, Kazakhstan critical minerals, geoeconomics, hedging, omni-enmeshment, regional public goods, connectivity politics. Sources were located through publisher pages, Google Scholar, institutional repositories, official organization websites, and reference chaining from relevant studies.

The period of interest runs from 2020 to 2026, and two dates anchor it. The first, 2020, is doctrinal: it marks the adoption of Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Concept for 2020–2030, which reframes strategic autonomy as a development objective and supplies the policy baseline for the analysis. The second, 2022, is geopolitical: Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, the sanctions regime that followed, and the search for routes that bypass Russian territory together moved the Trans-Caspian corridor from a secondary option to a policy priority. A third driver, green-transition supply-chain concern, gathered force across the same window and pushed uranium and critical minerals up the agenda. Foundational works published before 2020 were kept where they supply theoretical baselines — on small-state agency, middle-power diplomacy, hedging, economic statecraft, geoeconomics, and earlier studies of Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy.

Inclusion followed four criteria. A source had to bear on at least one of Kazakhstan's foreign policy, Central Asian regional agency, middle-power or secondary-state behavior, transport and connectivity politics, geoeconomic statecraft, resource diplomacy, institutional resilience or regional public goods. It had to offer conceptual value, Kazakhstan-specific evidence, institutional data, or traceable policy documentation. Excluded were promotional commentary, unsigned claims without institutional authority, untraceable figures, and material that could not be tied to the research questions. Analysis ran in three stages: conceptual mapping of adjacent theories; coding of the Kazakhstan evidence against sovereignty, balance, connectivity, institutional resilience, and regional public goods; and synthesis into the framework. To keep the framework falsifiable rather than merely illustrative, each pillar is paired in the synthesis with current, publicly sourced quantitative referents (Table 4); these are descriptive secondary indicators, not primary data, and are reported as ranges where sources diverge. Where a claim rested on grey literature — a policy brief or a thesis — I treated it as indicative and sought peer-reviewed or institutional corroboration before allowing it to carry weight.

The method has several limitations. It draws on public sources and so cannot reconstruct closed diplomatic decision-making. Corridor data are uneven, because national authorities, reporting agencies, and institutional reports use different baselines and categories; figures are therefore read as orders of magnitude, not precise measurements. I mitigate these limits by triangulating across academic literature, official policy documents, and institutional evidence, and by treating the framework as an interpretation rather than proof of strategic success. As a review and document-based study, it involved no human participants and required no human-subjects ethical approval.

Table 2. Documentary corpus and analytical function

Source category	Selection logic	Analytical function	Main limitation
Academic theory	Middle-power, small-state agency, hedging, geoeconomics, regionalism, and connectivity literature.	Defines the conceptual gap and stops Kazakhstan – specific claims from becoming purely descriptive.	Theory may be drawn from other regions and needs careful adaptation.
Kazakhstan – specific scholarship	Research on multi-vector diplomacy, Central Asian integration, Kazakhstan as a middle power, and Middle Corridor politics.	Anchors the conceptual argument in the existing Kazakhstan literature.	Some recent sources are still emerging and not yet widely tested.
Official policy texts	Foreign Policy Concept 2020–2030 and related official framing of autonomy and development.	Ties scholarly interpretation to stated doctrine and policy priorities.	Declared objectives are not the same as implementation outcomes.
Institutional reports	World Bank, OECD, CAREC/ADB, European Commission, and IEA materials on corridors, raw materials, and development.	Supplies traceable evidence and cross-national benchmarks.	Reports can be policy-oriented and should be read alongside academic work.
Economic and corridor data	World Bank/WITS indicators and recent Trans-Caspian reporting.	Tests whether connectivity and capacity claims have observable support.	Data are uneven and should be read cautiously, not deterministically.

Source: author's elaboration.

Note. The corpus was built for conceptual synthesis and triangulation, not for exhaustive systematic review.

LITERATURE REVIEW: FROM GREAT-POWER COMPETITION TO CONNECTIVITY-BASED AGENCY

Two broad approaches have long shaped the study of Central Asia. One foregrounds great-power competition and external influence; the other foregrounds domestic institution-building, rent distribution, post-Soviet legacies, and regime dynamics. Both remain necessary, and both can understate the capacity of Central Asian states to set the terms of external engagement. Blank's account of a renewed "Great Game" captures the competitive backdrop vividly, yet like most external-power framings it tends to read the region as terrain rather than as a field of actors (Blank, 2012). Cooley shows the corrective: external powers must operate through local political rules, not above them (Cooley, 2012). Costa Buranelli makes a parallel point from the multilateral side, showing that Central Asian states signal preferences and status through international institutions (Costa Buranelli, 2014). Together these works fix the article's starting point — Kazakhstan's agency should be read through the interaction of constraint and strategy, not through structural determinism or celebratory autonomy.

Kazakhstan is most often associated with multi-vector diplomacy. Cummings (2003) traced the tension between Eurasian identity, state-building, and a multi-vector posture. Hanks (2009) read multi-vectorism as a pragmatic answer to geography and external pressure. Contessi (2015) sharpened the mechanics, describing diversification, issue-splitting, and co-alignment as the tools through which medium-sized states cut dependence. More recent work argues that the pattern has grown more geoeconomic and more institutionalized under President Kassym-Jomart Tokayev (Nyshanbayev et al., 2024), and that Central Asian integration can reinforce rather than dilute Kazakhstan's national interests (Zhunissov et al., 2025). Yuneman's analysis of Kazakhstan's voting on UN General Assembly resolutions shows the same diversification logic at work in formal multilateral signalling, where alignment is calibrated rather than fixed (Yuneman, 2023).

The middle-power literature specifies what kind of influence Kazakhstan can plausibly claim. Middle powers are not simply states of intermediate size; they are defined behaviorally and functionally by coalition-building, niche diplomacy, problem-solving, support for institutionalized cooperation, and the capacity to shape particular issue areas beyond what raw size would predict (Cooper et al., 1993; Kussainova et al., 2025). This is a useful brake on overstatement. Kazakhstan should not be analyzed as a great power. Its influence reads more credibly as functional, sectoral, and relational: mediation, logistics, energy security, resource supply, regional coordination, and institutional convening. Cornell situates that trajectory within a wider rise of Central Asian middle powers, though such accounts are best treated as framing arguments to be tested rather than settled findings (Cornell, 2024).

Small-state and secondary-state agency supply a second anchor. Keohane's classic treatment draws attention to the strategic dilemmas of actors with limited material power but not zero agency (Keohane, 1969). Hedging develops the insight, showing how weaker states blend engagement and insurance when the future is uncertain (Kuik, 2016). Goh's omni-enmeshment shows how secondary actors try to embed great powers in institutional and regional arrangements that blunt domination and stabilize expectations (Goh, 2008). All three speak directly to Kazakhstan, and all three leave the same residue: they explain diversified positioning and risk management more fully than they explain the productive governance of connection itself.

Geoeconomics narrows that residue but does not close it. Baldwin (1985) framed economic statecraft as the use of economic instruments for political ends. Luttwak (1990), and later Wigell and Vihma (2016), drew the line between geopolitical and geoeconomic logics, showing how commercial instruments, market access, and dependencies shape outcomes. Kazakhstan's corridors, hydrocarbons, uranium, critical minerals, and logistics are plainly geoeconomic assets. But sovereign connectivity statecraft is narrower than geoeconomics as a whole. It is not about economic power in general, and not primarily about coercion; it is about a middle power's ability to make itself a credible connector across fragmented political-economic spaces.

Regionalism, regional public goods, and connectivity politics complete the frame. Regions, on the constructivist reading, are not fixed geographical facts but political projects produced through institutions, flows, identities, and policy coordination (Söderbaum, 2016). Public-goods scholarship explains why leadership is more legitimate when it supplies benefits others can use than when it asserts hierarchy (Kaul et al., 1999). Connectivity research adds the warning that infrastructure is never merely technical — routes, ports, standards and interoperability generate cooperation and contestation in equal measure (Gaens et al., 2023). For Kazakhstan, this means the Middle Corridor and its value-chain agreements cannot be read as transport projects alone. They are political instruments whose strategic value turns on reliability, regulatory coordination, domestic upgrading, and regional legitimacy.

The literature, therefore, leaves a specific space. Multi-vector diplomacy explains diversification; hedging explains risk management; middle-power theory explains functional influence; geoeconomics explains the strategic use of economic instruments; and regionalism and public goods explain the legitimacy of cooperative leadership. None explains how a state converts connection itself into agency. Sovereign connectivity statecraft is the attempt to integrate these insights around that question and Kazakhstan is an apt case, because it increasingly seeks to govern, institutionalize, and profit from the very flows that expose it.

FINDINGS

Finding 1. Multi-vector diplomacy has become more geoeconomic and institutionally anchored

Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy began as a way to avoid exclusive dependence in a hard neighborhood. That core logic survives. What has changed is its register. The strategy is no longer only about keeping channels open to Russia, China, the European Union, the United States, Türkiye, and regional organizations; it now runs through economic corridors, value chains, institutionalized partnerships, and development goals. Balancing, in short, has become more productive less about avoiding overdependence, more about building platforms on which several external actors can engage Kazakhstan despite the tensions among them.

The Foreign Policy Concept for 2020–2030 matters here precisely because it ties foreign policy to concrete benefits for the state, business, and society (Akorda, 2020). That is not a rhetorical flourish. It signals that strategic autonomy is being framed as development capacity: multi-vector diplomacy remains the technique, but its payoff is measured in investment options, logistics access, market diversification, resource partnerships, and institutional credibility. The evidence supports a bounded claim and no more. Kazakhstan has not swapped balancing for connectivity. It is trying to make connectivity one of the principal instruments through which balancing produces autonomy.

Finding 2. Kazakhstan's middle-power role is strongest when defined functionally

Kazakhstan's middle-power credentials are most persuasive as functions, not status. The useful question is not whether Kazakhstan occupies a rung on some abstract hierarchy, but whether it performs middle-power functions in particular issue areas. The literature and the evidence point to several: diplomatic convening, a nuclear non-proliferation legacy, regional consultation, energy and uranium supply, critical-mineral partnerships, transport-corridor participation, and engagement with international institutions. These let Kazakhstan exercise influence that is sectoral rather than general, relational rather than coercive, and grounded in credibility rather than material dominance.

This functional reading also clarifies how national interest sits with Central Asian cooperation. Kazakhstan's sovereignty is not necessarily diluted by regional integration; it can be reinforced when Central Asia becomes more coordinated, more investable, and less exposed to external fragmentation. The careful formulation is this: Kazakhstan's external role gains credibility when its national advantages are converted into regional services — transport coordination, water-energy dialogue, food-security cooperation, education networks, trade facilitation, diplomatic consultation. Framed this way, Kazakhstan's leadership becomes an empirical proposition to be tested against the services it actually supplies, not a virtue to be assumed.

Finding 3. The Middle Corridor creates opportunity, but not automatic transformation

The Middle Corridor anchors Kazakhstan's connectivity narrative. It underwrites the shift from a landlocked self-image toward a land-linked role connecting China, Central Asia, the Caspian, the South Caucasus, Türkiye, and Europe — and the recent numbers are striking. Total cargo on the Trans-Caspian corridor rose by roughly 62 percent in 2024 to about 4.5 million tonnes, up from well under one million tonnes before 2022; reported figures for that year range from about 4.1 to 4.5 million tonnes across operators, and the spread is worth noting in its own right, since it illustrates the data unevenness flagged in the method (OECD, 2025; Birbayeva, 2026). Container traffic, still modest in absolute terms — around 77,000 TEU in 2025 against a 300,000 target for 2029 — has grown fastest, and a recent assessment reaches a broadly similar reading of the corridor's strategic potential (Assylkhanov, 2025). The World Bank projects that, with the right investment and reform, annual transit could approach 11 million tonnes by 2030 (World Bank, 2023), while the OECD treats the route as strategically important on the condition that its effectiveness rests on policy reform, coordination, and logistics efficiency rather than on track and tonnage alone (OECD, 2025).

Balance is needed here. Even at its 2024 peak, corridor throughput stayed far below the capacity of the northern, Russia-transiting route, so for now the Middle Corridor complements rather than replaces the established Eurasian options (OECD, 2025). It still lacks the capacity, cost structure, predictability, and institutional integration to substitute for all of them, and it contends with Caspian bottlenecks including declining sea levels that bear directly on port and ferry reliability alongside weather disruption, customs delays, tariff-harmonization problems, infrastructure gaps, and coordination across several sovereign jurisdictions. Independent corridor-performance monitoring along the CAREC network documents exactly this friction: persistent border-crossing delays and uneven transit speeds that no single government can fix alone (CAREC, 2025). None of this voids the corridor's strategic value; it qualifies it. The route strengthens Kazakhstan's agency only if it becomes reliable enough to attract sustained commercial use and deep enough to generate domestic value beyond transit fees.

"Corridor deepening" names that condition. It refers to the build-out around the route — logistics services, port capacity, rail interoperability, customs digitalization, documentation standards, industrial zones, value-added processing, and regional information-sharing. Without it, Kazakhstan risks becoming a passage for other actors' trade. With it, the Middle Corridor can do real work as an instrument of sovereign connectivity statecraft: a route that widens Kazakhstan's bargaining capacity while feeding regional economic resilience.

Finding 4. Resource diplomacy is shifting toward value-chain governance

Kazakhstan's resource base stays central to its international position — hydrocarbons, uranium, metals, grain, and critical raw materials. But the terms of resource diplomacy are moving. Energy transition, supply-chain security, and Europe's search for alternative suppliers have raised the salience of uranium, critical minerals, battery inputs, and renewable-hydrogen prospects. The EU–Kazakhstan strategic partnership on sustainable raw materials, batteries, and renewable hydrogen is the clearest marker of how resource diplomacy now intersects with green-transition geopolitics and value-chain formation (European Commission, 2022; International Energy Agency, 2025). The scale here is real, not rhetorical: Kazakhstan has been the world's largest uranium producer since 2009 and supplies roughly 43 percent of global primary output, with the state operator Kazatomprom alone accounting for about a fifth of world production in 2024 (World Nuclear Association, 2026). Radioactive chemicals now sit among the country's top-three export categories, and Kazakhstan ranks as the world's leading exporter of them (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025).

The strategic question is not export volume. It is whether partnerships build processing capacity, technology transfer, environmental and social governance, skilled employment, and domestic industrial upgrading. Two recent episodes show this working as policy rather than theory. In 2024, Kazakhstan's uranium output ran roughly a fifth below permitted levels, held back by a shortage of sulphuric acid and by construction delays at new deposits — a blunt reminder that an extractive position is only as strong as the inputs and infrastructure behind it (World Nuclear Association, 2026). At the same time, the rules now governing foreign expansion in the sector permit it only where the national company holds a controlling stake or where partners transfer conversion and enrichment technology — value-chain governance written directly into statecraft (World Nuclear Association, 2026). Kazakhstan gains autonomy as it moves from raw-material supplier toward trusted, regulated, and increasingly value-adding partner; it loses it if global demand for secure inputs simply reproduces an extractive pattern in which value is captured elsewhere. Sovereign connectivity statecraft, therefore, requires resource diplomacy to be wired to domestic regulation, contract transparency, human-capital development, and infrastructure investment, or the resource endowment hardens into a ceiling rather than a lever.

Finding 5. Domestic institutional credibility is an external asset

The review supports a last finding that is easy to state and hard to deliver: domestic institutional quality is part of Kazakhstan's foreign-policy credibility, not separate from it. Geography and resources attract attention. Durable partnerships, though, depend on predictable rules, administrative capacity, dispute resolution, transparency, and public trust. For a state whose whole strategy rests on persuading multiple external actors that it can serve as a reliable platform, this is not a side issue.

The macroeconomic picture shows the regional weight that makes the strategy plausible and the exposure that qualifies it. World Bank figures put 2024 GDP at about US$288.4 billion, growth at 5.0 percent, and GDP per capita at US$14,154.6 (World Bank, 2026). National statistics report 2024 goods exports of roughly US$81.6 billion, imports of US$59.8 billion, and total goods trade near US$141.4 billion (Bureau of National Statistics, 2025; World Integrated Trade Solution, 2026). By Central Asian standards, these are large numbers. They are also concentrated ones: crude petroleum alone accounts for close to half of goods exports, with gold, radioactive chemicals, and copper making up much of the remainder (Observatory of Economic Complexity, 2025). That concentration is the empirical face of the commodity-dependence risk and the reason the leverage runs both ways. Domestic modernization strengthens foreign policy on three fronts: it attracts higher-quality investment, it raises the developmental spillovers of corridors and resources, and it makes regional leadership credible because it rests on problem-solving capacity rather than size.

SYNTHESIS: FIVE PILLARS OF SOVEREIGN CONNECTIVITY STATECRAFT

The framework earns its keep when each pillar does distinct causal work. Sovereignty is the normative boundary — it defines what external partnerships must not compromise. Balance is the diplomatic technique — it diversifies relations and forecloses exclusive alignment. Connectivity is the material and regulatory instrument — it turns geography, infrastructure, and interoperability into usable capacity. Institutional resilience is the credibility condition — it decides whether partners trust Kazakhstan's commitments and whether connectivity yields domestic upgrading. Regional public goods are the legitimacy mechanism — they convert national advantage into benefits for neighbors and so soften the perception that leadership is hierarchical.

Interdependent, yes; interchangeable, no. Sovereignty without balance slides toward isolation. Balance without connectivity stays symbolic. Connectivity without institutional resilience becomes vulnerable infrastructure. Institutional resilience without regional public goods can strengthen the state while failing to legitimize regional leadership. And regional public goods without sovereignty and balance expose Kazakhstan to commitments it cannot sustain. The framework thus explains both the opportunity and the fragility of Kazakhstan's position, the two are produced by the same structure.

Table 3. Five-pillar framework with analytical function and indicators

Pillar	Distinct analytical function	Empirical indicators in Kazakhstan	Main limitation or risk
Sovereignty	Sets the normative boundary of external engagement and preserves autonomous decision-making.	Foreign Policy Concept 2020–2030: insistence on diversified external relations and independent policy space.	Autonomy can be constrained by asymmetric dependence on routes, markets, or security relationships.
Balance	Operates as a diplomatic technique for reducing overdependence and keeping room to maneuver.	Relations with Russia, China, the EU, the United States, Türkiye, regional organizations, and Central Asian neighbors.	Balancing becomes costlier as geopolitical polarization deepens.
Connectivity	Provides the material and regulatory instrument that turns geography into usable capacity.	Middle Corridor, Trans-Caspian transport, rail and port logistics, customs digitalization, energy routes, and value chains.	Infrastructure can create exposure if reliability, coordination, and domestic value capture stay weak.

Institutional resilience	Creates the credibility condition for long-term partnerships and domestic spillovers.	Administrative capacity, regulatory predictability, governance reform, dispute resolution, and implementation quality.	Institutional gaps undercut the credibility of corridor and investment ambitions.
Regional public goods	Supplies the legitimacy mechanism for non-coercive regional leadership.	Transport coordination, water-energy dialogue, food security, education links, disaster preparedness, and diplomatic consultation.	Leadership may read as hierarchy unless grounded in consultation and reciprocal benefit.

Source: author's elaboration.

Note. The five pillars are analytically distinct but mutually reinforcing. It is their interaction, rather than any single pillar, that constitutes sovereign connectivity statecraft.

Table 4. Operationalizing the five pillars: current empirical referents (2022–2026)

Pillar	Current empirical referent	Source
Sovereignty	The Foreign Policy Concept 2020–2030 frames autonomy as a development goal; in the October 2024 referendum, about 70 percent backed new nuclear power, with the first plant slated to use Russian (Rosatom) reactors — autonomy exercised within, not outside, supplier asymmetry.	Akorda (2020); World Nuclear Association (2026)
Balance	Exports spread across Italy, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, and the Netherlands; imports led by China and Russia — diversified outward, yet still neighbor-weighted on the import side.	Observatory of Economic Complexity (2025)
Connectivity	Trans-Caspian cargo about 4.5 million tonnes in 2024 (+62% year on year), up from under one million pre-2022; roughly 77,000 TEU in 2025 against a 300,000 target for 2029; potential near 11 million tonnes by 2030 — yet still well below Northern Corridor capacity.	OECD (2025); World Bank (2023); Birbayeva (2026)
Institutional resilience	GDP about US$288.4 billion and 5.0% growth in 2024; goods trade near US$141.4 billion; but crude petroleum is close to half of exports, and 2024 uranium output ran about 20% below permitted levels on input and construction constraints.	World Bank (2026); Bureau of National Statistics (2025); Observatory of Economic Complexity (2025); World Nuclear Association (2026)
Regional public goods	Intra-Central-Asian trade nearly quadrupled between 2010 and 2023 (about US$2.7bn to US$10.8bn); Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan freight rose around 16% in 2024–2025, with new cross-border rail capacity under construction.	OECD (2025)

Source: compiled by the author from the cited databases and institutional reports.

Note. The table pairs the qualitative indicators of Table 3 with current, traceable quantitative referents. Figures are descriptive secondary data drawn from public sources; where operators report different totals — notably for corridor volumes — a range is given rather than a single point estimate.

DISCUSSION: PLATFORM-STATE FUNCTIONS AS AN EMPIRICAL EXPRESSION

Platform-state analysis does not rival sovereign connectivity statecraft; it describes one way the strategy shows up in the world. A platform state facilitates cross-border flows through political, economic, infrastructural, and regulatory networks. Kazakhstan can be said to develop platform-state functions when it hosts or coordinates transport corridors, diplomatic forums, energy flows, resource partnerships, and regional policy interfaces. Platform status is therefore an outcome to be assessed, not a title to be claimed.

On this reading, sovereign connectivity statecraft is the strategy, and platform-state function is one observable result. The functions are visible in the way external actors increasingly treat Kazakhstan as a regional interface for Central Asia and the wider Eurasian space. They can blunt dependence by diversifying engagement, raise bargaining capacity by making Kazakhstan necessary to regional projects, and tie domestic development to strategic relevance. They also generate exposure. A platform is valuable because many actors use it; it is vulnerable for the same reason.

The real risk is asymmetry, not engagement. Kazakhstan must manage Russia's historical and infrastructural role, China's trade and investment footprint, Europe's interest in secure commodities and routes, Türkiye's Trans-Caspian and Turkic engagement, and the independent priorities of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Credibility will turn on contractual fairness, balanced infrastructure ownership, transparent customs, debt sustainability, environmental standards, digital interoperability, and technology upgrading. Coordination, not domination, is the more plausible basis for Kazakhstan's regional influence and, given the asymmetries it sits among, very likely the only sustainable one.

CONSTRAINTS AND RISKS

The five-pillar framework also identifies the principal failure points of sovereign connectivity statecraft. Each pillar has a corresponding vulnerability, so five constraints deserve particular attention. The first is commodity dependence: oil, minerals, uranium and grain give Kazakhstan leverage, but they reproduce vulnerability if exports stay weakly processed, fiscally concentrated or hostage to price cycles. The second is corridor overstatement: the Middle Corridor has genuine potential, yet it is still bounded by capacity, cost, Caspian maritime limits, customs procedures, tariff coordination and multi-state implementation. The third is geopolitical pressure: balancing grows harder, and sometimes untenable, as relations among Russia, China, the European Union and the United States deteriorate.

The fourth risk is institutional credibility. Partners will judge Kazakhstan less by its strategic declarations than by regulatory consistency, dispute settlement, procurement transparency, customs efficiency, and the plain ability to implement. The fifth is regional sensitivity. Kazakhstan's regional role has to read as service and consultation, not hierarchy; the collective agency of Central Asian states is strengthened when Kazakhstan complements its neighbors' priorities and weakened the moment it appears to speak for the region without their buy-in. None of these risks defeats the concept of sovereign connectivity statecraft. They mark out the conditions under which Kazakhstan's connectivity-based agency succeeds or fails.

Table 5. Constraints, analytical risk, and mitigation priorities

Constraint	Analytical risk	Mitigation priority
Commodity dependence	Resource strength becomes vulnerability if value is captured mainly through unprocessed exports or volatile price cycles.	Tie resource diplomacy to processing capacity, skills, ESG standards, technology transfer, and fiscal diversification.
Corridor overstatement	Middle Corridor growth is constrained by Caspian capacity, customs delays, tariffs, weather, and multi-state coordination failures.	Prioritize reliability, digitalization, port capacity, rail interoperability, and harmonized procedures over symbolic announcements.
Geopolitical pressure	Polarization among major powers raises the cost of balance and narrows the room for maneuver.	Keep partnerships issue-specific, avoid exclusive alignment, and diversify routes and institutions.
Institutional credibility	Foreign-policy ambition is undercut by implementation gaps, regulatory uncertainty or weak dispute settlement.	Treat governance reform, transparency, and administrative competence as strategic infrastructure.
Regional sensitivity	Kazakhstan's leadership is read as a hierarchy by neighboring states.	Frame leadership as consultation and public-good provision, with neighbors as co-authors rather than recipients.

Source: author's elaboration.

Note. The table identifies conditions that may weaken or strengthen the proposed strategy, not deterministic outcomes.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Five policy implications follow from the framework, with each pillar generating at least one. First, because sovereignty sets the normative boundary and balance supplies the diplomatic technique, multi-vector diplomacy is best defined as principled strategic autonomy rather than mechanical equidistance: the goal is not equal distance from every actor but enough room to turn external partnerships into national and regional development. Second, because connectivity is the material and regulatory instrument, Middle Corridor policy fits sovereign connectivity statecraft only when it puts reliability before symbolism — port capacity, rail interoperability, customs digitalization, common documentation and tariff coordination matter far more for Kazakhstan's bargaining capacity than declaratory corridor politics.

Third, because resource diplomacy must support institutional resilience, critical-mineral and energy-transition partnerships do most for domestic upgrading when they carry processing, scientific cooperation, ESG standards, workforce development, and technology transfer, rather than locking in purely extractive arrangements. Fourth, because institutional resilience is the credibility condition, domestic institutional modernization should be treated as a foreign-policy asset in its own right: stable regulation, anti-corruption measures, judicial confidence, competent administration, and transparent procurement are conditions of external credibility, not merely internal housekeeping. Fifth, because regional public goods are the legitimacy mechanism, Kazakhstan can deepen water-energy coordination, food security, education networks, disaster preparedness, transport harmonization, and diplomatic consultation. Kazakhstan's connectivity-based agency is most defensible when it enlarges the collective agency of Central Asian states rather than standing in for it.

CONCLUSION

Kazakhstan's foreign policy is hard to read through alignment choices alone, and that difficulty is the point of this article. Sovereign connectivity statecraft offers a way to read it instead through the governance of connection — the work of making routes reliable, institutions credible, and national advantage useful to others. What the Kazakhstan case adds to the concept is a demonstration that the same structure produces both the opportunity and the fragility: the assets that make Kazakhstan a platform are the assets that expose it.

The five findings converge on this reading. Multi-vector diplomacy has become more geoeconomic and institutionally anchored; the middle-power role is strongest when defined by function rather than status; the Middle Corridor opens opportunity without guaranteeing transformation; resource diplomacy is migrating from export volume toward value-chain governance; and domestic institutional quality operates as an external asset. Taken together, they show that the Middle Corridor, critical raw materials, energy diversification, and platform-state functions can raise Kazakhstan's bargaining capacity, but only against corridor reliability, domestic upgrading, institutional credibility, and regional consultation. Where those conditions hold, conditional influence consolidates into agency; where they fail, the same connective assets become liabilities.

Three recommendations follow. For policy, Kazakhstan should prioritize corridor reliability over symbolic throughput, tie resource partnerships to processing and technology transfer rather than raw extraction, and frame regional leadership as public-good provision rather than primacy. For research, the framework invites comparative application to other middle powers, and, in the Kazakhstan case, systematic measurement of the indicators set out in Table 4 against subsequent years of corridor, trade, and resource data. For the wider study of the collective agency of Central Asian states, the lesson is to resist both caricatures: Kazakhstan is neither a pawn of great-power competition nor an unbound regional leader, and theories that need it to be one or the other will keep missing what it is actually doing. The open question — one this review can frame but not settle — is empirical: whether implementation, over the next decade, turns the platform Kazakhstan has built into durable weight, or exposes how much of it still rests on routes and rents it does not fully control.

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CONNECTIVITY GOVERNANCE AND PRAGMATIC SOFT POWER IN CENTRAL ASIA: KAZAKHSTAN, TÜRKIYE, AND COMPARATIVE LESSONS FOR LATIN AMERICA

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ABSTRACT. *This review article examines how soft power operates in Central Asia when cultural attraction is combined with institutions, regional agency, and operational forms of connectivity. Responding to debates on conceptual overstretch, the article distinguishes soft power from public diplomacy, geoeconomics, infrastructure diplomacy, and a more specific category proposed here: connectivity governance. Connectivity governance is defined as the set of institutional, regulatory, and reputational practices that make cross-border corridors credible, predictable, and politically useful. The argument is not that transport infrastructure is itself soft power, but that reliable corridor governance can produce reputational effects when partner societies, firms, and governments experience cooperation as useful. Methodologically, the article uses a qualitative comparative case study combining document analysis, critical scholarly literature, and selected empirical indicators drawn from foreign policy concepts, Organization of Turkic States materials, TURKSOY, World Bank and Asian Development Bank reports, and ECLAC studies on Latin American integration. The findings are fivefold. First, Kazakhstan's soft power is anchored in multi-vector diplomacy, regional convening, and reputational moderation, but it remains vulnerable to credibility gaps produced by domestic governance and logistical bottlenecks. Second, Türkiye's role in Central Asia combines cultural affinity with institutionalized cooperation, yet it must be read critically through debates on Pan-Turkism, neo-Ottomanism, asymmetrical influence, and the AKP-era transformation of Turkish foreign policy. Third, the Middle Corridor illustrates a hybrid zone where reputation, logistical reliability, and institutional coordination intersect. Fourth, Central Asian agency is diverse: Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan complicate any generalization based only on Kazakhstan. Fifth, Latin America can draw selective rather than mechanical lessons: cultural diplomacy becomes more consequential when linked to trade facilitation, education, corridor governance, and non-polarized regional cooperation.*

KEYWORDS: *soft power, connectivity governance, Kazakhstan, Türkiye, Central Asia, Middle Corridor, pragmatic diplomacy, Latin America.*

INTRODUCTION

Central Asia is frequently interpreted through the language of renewed great-power competition. Russia, China, the European Union, the United States, Türkiye, Iran, the Gulf states, and international financial institutions all seek influence in the region. Yet a

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perspective centered only on external rivalry risks reproducing an old analytical problem: it treats Central Asian states as objects of geopolitical design rather than as actors able to define agendas, manage partnerships, and convert geographic constraint into diplomatic opportunity. This article begins from a different premise. Central Asian states, and Kazakhstan in particular, are not merely exposed to external strategies; they also produce diplomatic meaning, reputational capital, and institutional initiatives within a fragmented international order (Acharya, 2014; Cooley, 2012; Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2015).

The central claim is that soft power in Central Asia cannot be reduced to culture, national image, or public branding. In a landlocked and corridor-dependent environment, attraction becomes politically meaningful only when it is connected to institutional credibility, educational exchange, predictable logistics, customs coordination, development cooperation, and the capacity to convene partners without forcing them into exclusive alignments. This does not mean that infrastructure automatically becomes soft power. Rather, operational reliability can generate reputational effects when external partners experience cooperation as useful, low-risk, and institutionally predictable (Nye, 2004, 2011; World Bank, 2023).

The cases of Kazakhstan and Türkiye illuminate two different but interrelated mechanisms. Kazakhstan represents a Central Asian case of multi-vector diplomacy, reputational moderation, and regional convening. Its soft power is less dependent on mass cultural export than on the image of responsible statehood, diplomatic balance, and usefulness as a Eurasian connector. Türkiye, by contrast, represents an external but culturally connected actor whose projection in Central Asia combines historical-linguistic affinity, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS), TURKSOY, educational institutions, development cooperation, business networks, and transport diplomacy. Their interaction reveals both the promise and the limits of pragmatic soft power: cultural proximity may open doors, but credibility depends on institutions and implementation.

The research question is: how do Kazakhstan and Türkiye mobilize soft power and pragmatic diplomacy in Central Asia, and what selective lessons can Latin America draw from these practices? The article answers by developing the concept of connectivity governance as a meso-level analytical category located between soft power and geoeconomic statecraft. Connectivity governance refers to the institutional, regulatory, and reputational practices that make transport, educational, and economic corridors credible across borders. It is not a synonym for soft power; it is the mechanism through which symbolic capital can be tested against practical cooperation.

The comparison with Latin America requires justification because the two regions differ sharply in geography, colonial histories, state capacity, intraregional trade, and security environments. The comparison is therefore not a model-transfer exercise. It is a functional analogy between two regions where cultural proximity and integration discourse have often been stronger than implementation capacity. Latin America has a long history of regionalist projects, but ECLAC and regional scholarship have repeatedly identified persistent problems in trade facilitation, infrastructure coordination, and institutional fragmentation (De la Mora, 2023; Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], 2024). Central Asia does not offer a perfect model. It offers a useful contrast for thinking about how small and middle powers can link diplomacy, connectivity, and institutional pragmatism.

The contribution of the article is fourfold. First, it clarifies the conceptual boundaries between soft power, public diplomacy, geoeconomics, and connectivity governance. Second, it introduces a more critical reading of Türkiye's role by engaging debates on Pan-Turkism, neo-Ottomanism, political identity, and asymmetrical influence. Third, it broadens the empirical scope beyond Kazakhstan by discussing Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan as distinct diplomatic actors. Fourth, it strengthens the Latin American comparison by grounding it in regionalism literature and by limiting the lessons to selective, operational, and institution-building mechanisms.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SOFT POWER, GEOECONOMICS, AND CONNECTIVITY GOVERNANCE

The conceptual starting point remains Joseph Nye's definition of soft power as the ability to shape preferences through attraction rather than coercion or payment. Its main sources are culture, political values, and foreign policies when they are perceived as legitimate by others (Nye, 2004, 2011). This relational emphasis is consistent with Van Ham's (2010) account of social power as influence grounded in legitimacy, identity, and social interaction. The distinction is essential because it prevents a common analytical error: not every instrument that produces influence should be called soft power. Roads, ports, customs systems, and rail links do not attract in the same way as culture, values, or diplomacy. Treating all non-military influence as soft power risks conceptual overstretch.

Public diplomacy is more precise as an instrument category. Cull (2008) identifies listening, advocacy, cultural diplomacy, exchange diplomacy, and international broadcasting as core practices. Melissen (2005) similarly emphasizes relationship-building with foreign publics, universities, civil society, and transnational networks. Public diplomacy can generate soft-power effects, but it is not identical with soft power. A scholarship program, a cultural festival, or an international broadcasting strategy is an instrument; attraction is a possible outcome.

Geoeconomics and economic statecraft designate a different logic. Blackwill and Harris (2016) define geoeconomics as the use of economic instruments to produce strategic outcomes. Infrastructure diplomacy, trade routes, energy corridors, and investment instruments belong partly to this field because they involve material capabilities, market access, and strategic leverage. These instruments may produce reputational benefits, but they can also generate dependency, debt, environmental costs, or asymmetric influence. For that reason, they should not be romanticized as soft power simply because they are non-military.

Connectivity governance is proposed here as a narrower and more analytically useful category. It refers to the practices that make cross-border connectivity credible: customs coordination, digital procedures, logistics reliability, corridor-level standards, port and rail interoperability, educational training for corridor management, and institutional mechanisms able to solve bottlenecks. Connectivity governance is not itself soft power; rather, it is a bridge through which infrastructural cooperation can produce reputational effects. A corridor becomes attractive not because it exists, but because it works predictably and is perceived as useful by partner states, firms, and publics.

This distinction matters for Central Asia. The Middle Corridor, the OTS, educational exchanges, and public diplomacy do not operate at the same conceptual level. The OTS and TURKSOY are institutional-cultural platforms. Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy is a foreign policy orientation and reputational strategy. The Middle Corridor is an infrastructure and trade-facilitation project. Connectivity governance is the set of institutional practices that can make the corridor reliable. Soft power is the possible reputational outcome when these practices are perceived as legitimate, useful, and non-coercive.

The framework also requires a critical dimension. Soft power can be weakened by credibility gaps between external narratives and domestic governance, by elite-level symbolism that does not reach societies, or by identity projects perceived as hierarchical. This is especially relevant for Türkiye's role in Central Asia. The language of Turkic solidarity can enable cooperation, but it can also raise concerns about Pan-Turkism, neo-Ottomanism, political Islam, or asymmetrical influence if it appears to subordinate Central Asian agency to Ankara's geopolitical ambitions (Öniş, 2011; Taşpınar, 2008; Yavuz, 1998). A rigorous analysis must therefore treat soft power as contested, not as automatically benign.

Table 1. Conceptual distinctions used in the article

Concept	Core meaning	Main instruments	Risk if conflated
Soft power	Attraction and legitimacy that shape preferences	Culture, values, legitimate policies	Calling every non-military tool soft power
Public diplomacy	Communication and relationship-building with foreign publics	Exchange, broadcasting, cultural diplomacy, listening	Treating instruments as outcomes
Geoeconomics	Use of economic instruments for strategic goals	Trade, sanctions, investment, infrastructure finance	Ignoring coercion, dependency or strategic leverage
Infrastructure diplomacy	Diplomatic use of material connectivity projects	Corridors, ports, railways, energy routes	Equating physical projects with attraction
Connectivity governance	Institutional practices that make corridors predictable and credible	Customs coordination, digitalization, standards, training, dispute resolution	Assuming credibility without operational evidence

Source: Author's elaboration based on Nye (2004, 2011), Cull (2008), Blackwill and Harris (2016), Van Ham (2010), and World Bank (2023).

RESEARCH DESIGN, SOURCES, AND LIMITATIONS

The article uses a qualitative comparative case-study design. The comparison is not symmetrical in a strict sense: Kazakhstan is a Central Asian state, while Türkiye is an external regional actor with cultural and institutional links to Central Asia. The comparison is analytical rather than statistical. It asks how different actors transform symbolic resources into institutional credibility and practical cooperation (George & Bennett, 2005).

The empirical strategy combines document analysis, critical literature review, and triangulation through independent policy reports. Official documents are necessary because soft power and public diplomacy are often articulated through state concepts, institutional statements and cooperation platforms. However, official sources are not treated as neutral evidence of effectiveness. They are read as strategic narratives and compared with academic literature, independent reports, and observable implementation indicators such as corridor bottlenecks, institutional density, and regional differentiation.

The material includes five groups of sources. First, official foreign policy documents, especially Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Concept for 2020-2030 and statements by the foreign ministries of Kazakhstan and Türkiye. Second, institutional materials from the OTS and TURKSOY. Third, reports from the World Bank, Asian Development Bank and ECLAC on corridors, trade facilitation and regional integration. Fourth, scholarly literature on soft power, public diplomacy, geoeconomics, middle powers, post-hegemonic regionalism, and Central Asian agency. Fifth, critical literature on Turkish foreign policy, including debates on neo-Ottomanism, Pan-Turkism, and the AKP-era transformation of Ankara's regional role.

The period of analysis is 2020-2026. This timeframe captures Kazakhstan's current foreign policy concept, the post-2022 intensification of Eurasian connectivity debates, the growing diplomatic visibility of the Middle Corridor, and the consolidation of OTS-centered cooperation. It also captures Latin America's renewed concern with supply-chain reconfiguration, trade facilitation, and regional recovery (ECLAC, 2024).

The article does not claim to measure public perceptions directly. It does not include surveys, interviews, or social-media sentiment analysis. This is a limitation. Instead, the article evaluates whether the conditions for soft-power credibility are present: institutional continuity, policy coherence, operational reliability, regional agency, and reputational vulnerability. Claims about effectiveness are therefore framed cautiously. The article assesses the plausibility and limits of reputational effects, not definitive causal impact.

The comparison with Latin America follows a most-different-systems logic. The regions differ in geography and history, but both face the problem of converting regional identity and diplomatic discourse into operational cooperation. The purpose is selective learning: to identify mechanisms that might be adapted, such as corridor governance, issue-based regionalism, educational networks, and non-polarized diplomacy. The analysis explicitly rejects mechanical policy transfer.

Table 2. Operational framework and evidence strategy

Dimension	Indicators	Sources	Analytical purpose
Narrative-cultural	Identity narratives, moderation, cultural diplomacy, and educational exchange	Foreign policy concepts, OTS/TURKSOY materials, public diplomacy literature	Identifies symbolic resources and reputational claims
Institutional-regional	Councils, forums, OTS mechanisms, regional convening, and development agencies	MFA statements, institutional websites, academic literature	Shows how attraction is institutionalized
Connectivity-economic	Corridor reliability, customs coordination, digitalization, multimodal logistics	World Bank, ADB, ECLAC, and policy reports	Tests whether symbolic capital is supported by operational capacity

Critical balance	Domestic constraints, asymmetry, identity politics, and external perceptions	Critical Turkish and Central Asian studies literature	Prevents state narratives from being reproduced uncritically
Comparative lesson	Transferability, limits, Latin American cases, and regionalism literature	ECLAC; De la Mora (2023); Riggirozzi and Tussie (2012)	Builds selective rather than mechanical lessons

Source: Author's elaboration based on George and Bennett (2005), Nye (2004, 2011), and the evidence categories listed in the table.

FINDINGS

The findings are organized in five parts. The first examines Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy as reputational soft power and identifies its constraints. The second analyzes Türkiye's projection in Central Asia while engaging critical debates on identity, ideology, and asymmetry. The third develops the Middle Corridor as a case of hybrid connectivity governance rather than pure soft power. The fourth broadens the regional scope by comparing other Central Asian states. The fifth explains what Latin America can learn from these dynamics and what it cannot transfer.

Kazakhstan: Multi-Vector Diplomacy as Reputational Soft Power

Kazakhstan's soft power is not primarily based on a globally dominant language, entertainment industry, or ideological model. Its strongest resource is reputational: the image of a predictable, moderate, and multi-vector actor able to engage several power centers without presenting cooperation as exclusive alignment. Kazakhstan's Foreign Policy Concept for 2020-2030 frames the international system as marked by geopolitical competition, erosion of trust, and risks for medium and small states. In that context, pragmatism, regional leadership, and constructive engagement become part of Kazakhstan's diplomatic identity (Akorda, 2020).

This reputational strategy is shaped by geography. Kazakhstan is landlocked, resource-rich, and located between major Eurasian actors. A confrontational foreign policy would increase vulnerability; a passive one would reduce agency. Multi-vector diplomacy, therefore, performs two functions. Strategically, it reduces dependency on any single partner. Symbolically, it communicates reliability to external audiences. It tells investors, governments, and international organizations that Kazakhstan can be a platform for dialogue, logistics, education, and regional initiatives (Kasteyeva, 2018; Kukeyeva, 2025; Nyshanbayev et al., 2025).

Kazakhstan's public diplomacy instruments reinforce this narrative. The Foreign Policy Concept mentions education, science, culture, sport, youth policy, digital diplomacy, and the promotion of Kazakh historical and cultural heritage. These are not decorative supplements. They show that reputation is treated as part of foreign policy implementation. Forums such as the Congress of Leaders of World and Traditional Religions, the Astana International Forum, and other convening platforms support an image of moderation and dialogue. This is soft power through institutional hosting rather than mass cultural export.

However, Kazakhstan's reputational soft power should not be idealized. It remains vulnerable to domestic and operational credibility gaps. Domestic instability, restrictions on political pluralism, inequality, corruption perceptions, or weak accountability can reduce the legitimacy of external narratives. Logistical bottlenecks can also undermine the image of Kazakhstan as a connector. A state may brand itself as a hub, but partners judge connectivity through border delays, cost predictability, regulatory coherence, and service reliability. This is why Kazakhstan's soft power depends not only on communication but also on governance performance (World Bank, 2023).

The argument is therefore more cautious than a purely promotional account. Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy can produce soft-power effects because it offers predictability and usefulness in a fragmented Eurasian environment. Yet those effects are conditional. They depend on whether diplomatic moderation is matched by institutional credibility and by the ability to transform transit geography into services, skills, and regional public goods.

Türkiye and the OTS: Cultural Affinity, Institutional Projection and Critical Debates

Türkiye's position in Central Asia rests on a different combination of resources. Historical, linguistic, and cultural affinities with Turkic-speaking societies provide an initial reservoir of symbolic proximity. Yet affinity alone does not produce durable influence. It becomes politically relevant through institutions, educational exchanges, business networks, development cooperation, and diplomatic mechanisms. Türkiye's recognition of Kazakhstan after independence, the development of bilateral strategic partnership mechanisms, and Ankara's role in Turkic multilateralism all demonstrate how cultural proximity has been institutionalized (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026, n.d.-a).

The OTS is the most visible platform in this process. Its cooperation areas include politics, economy, customs, transport, education, media, youth, sport, diaspora, ICT, energy, health, migration, agriculture, and cooperation with international organizations. TURKSOY adds a cultural layer by promoting heritage, arts, and people-to-people ties among Turkic societies. These institutions show that Türkiye's soft power does not operate only through identity narratives; it also works through recurring mechanisms that organize meetings, projects, mobility, and sectoral cooperation (Organization of Turkic States, n.d.; TURKSOY, n.d.).

Türkiye's regional role also requires critical scrutiny. The language of Turkic solidarity can be interpreted in more than one way. From Ankara's perspective, it can be a framework for cultural diplomacy, economic cooperation, and post-Soviet reconnection. From the perspective of Central Asian elites, it may also raise questions about asymmetry, agenda-setting, political symbolism, and the risk that cultural affinity becomes a hierarchy. Critical literature on Turkish foreign policy has shown that the AKP period expanded the role of civilizational discourse, neo-Ottoman references, religious-cultural networks, and activism beyond the older Kemalist foreign-policy style (Öniş, 2011; Taşpınar, 2008; Yavuz, 1998).

Pan-Turkism is particularly important because it can function both as a cultural vocabulary and as a geopolitical suspicion. In some contexts, Turkic identity provides a useful postcolonial resource for societies seeking to diversify beyond Russian imperial legacies. In other contexts, the same language may be perceived as ideological overreach if it implies political tutelage or an Ankara-centered regional imagination. The OTS therefore has a dual character: it can support Central Asian agency by multiplying institutional options, but it can also generate concern if symbolic unity is not balanced by equality, sovereignty, and concrete benefits.

Türkiye's most sustainable influence is likely to be pragmatic rather than civilizational. Scholarships, technical training, trade facilitation, disaster cooperation, business links, defense-industrial cooperation, logistics, and digital capacity can generate more durable credibility than identity claims alone. The point is not that identity should disappear. Rather, cultural affinity must remain a bridge rather than a hierarchy. In Central Asia, Ankara's credibility depends on whether it recognizes local agency and avoids framing cooperation as a one-directional extension of Turkish leadership (Alaranta & Silvan, 2022; Darbinyan, 2023).

The Middle Corridor: A Hybrid Zone of Reputation and Operational Governance

The Middle Corridor, or Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, is the clearest case for testing the article's conceptual argument. It links Chinese and European markets through Central Asia and the South Caucasus, involving Kazakhstan, the Caspian Sea, Azerbaijan, Georgia, and Türkiye. The Asian Development Bank describes the corridor as a multilateral and multimodal transport system combining rail, ports, ferry services, and European routes. The World Bank argues that the corridor could triple freight volumes by 2030 and halve travel time compared with 2021 if the right investments and policy reforms are implemented (Kenderdine & Bucsky, 2021; World Bank, 2023).

The corridor is not soft power in itself. It is a material and regulatory project. Its relevance for soft power appears only when operational performance creates trust. For Kazakhstan, the corridor supports the image of a Eurasian connector. For Türkiye, it reinforces the narrative of a bridge between Asia and Europe. For Azerbaijan and Georgia, it increases geopolitical and economic relevance. These reputational effects depend on whether the corridor can reduce uncertainty for external partners. A delayed, expensive, or administratively fragmented corridor will not generate attraction, even if it is promoted through attractive diplomatic language.

World Bank analysis identifies bottlenecks in border crossings, digitalization, vessel availability, port productivity, multimodal integration, and investment prioritization. These issues show why connectivity governance is analytically necessary. Cultural diplomacy can create goodwill, and strategic narratives can attract attention, but logistics reliability is what turns attention into trust. Customs reform, digital tracking, predictable tariffs, port efficiency, and corridor-level service standards become reputational variables, not merely technical issues (World Bank, 2023).

The 2026 joint statement of the foreign ministers of Türkiye and Kazakhstan recognized the importance of the Trans-Caspian East-West Middle Corridor as a sustainable and reliable route connecting Central Asian countries to foreign markets through Türkiye. It also connected this agenda to bilateral, trilateral, and multilateral mechanisms, including cooperation with Azerbaijan and the OTS. This illustrates the hybrid character of the corridor: it is simultaneously a diplomatic narrative, economic infrastructure, and institutional coordination (Republic of Türkiye Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2026).

The Middle Corridor is therefore better understood as a site where hard infrastructure, geoeconomic interests, and soft-power credibility intersect. Connectivity governance captures this intersection. The corridor may produce soft-power benefits only if partners perceive it as reliable, inclusive, and institutionally predictable.

Central Asian Agency Beyond Kazakhstan

Regional agency beyond Kazakhstan is essential to the analysis. Although Kazakhstan remains the main Central Asian case, the title and argument require attention to regional diversity. Central Asia is not a single diplomatic unit. Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan operate under different geographic, economic, political, and security constraints. These differences complicate any generalization about soft power or pragmatic diplomacy.

Uzbekistan has become especially important since the post-2016 foreign-policy opening under Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Tashkent has emphasized regional cooperation, border settlement, trade facilitation, transport links, and diversified external partnerships. Its activism challenges older assumptions that Kazakhstan alone performs regional convening. Uzbekistan's diplomacy shows that Central Asian agency is increasingly competitive and plural: states seek cooperation, but also status, leadership, and economic centrality (Cooley, 2012; Laruelle & Peyrouse, 2015).

Kyrgyzstan represents a different configuration. Its foreign policy has often combined openness to external donors, labor migration dependencies, domestic political volatility, and balancing among Russia, China, Türkiye, and Western partners. The Kyrgyz state should therefore not be measured only by large infrastructure projects or convening capacity. It also appears in the ability to manage aid, migration, educational ties, and security dependencies under conditions of limited state capacity.

Turkmenistan complicates the regional picture through its doctrine of permanent neutrality. Its foreign policy cannot be folded into a general Central Asian pattern of active multivectorism. Neutrality creates both autonomy and isolation. It limits participation in some multilateral projects while allowing selective engagement in energy and transport. For the soft-power argument, Turkmenistan shows that reputational strategy can be built around distance and sovereignty rather than visibility and activism.

Tajikistan's priorities are shaped by border security, water-energy concerns, relations with Afghanistan, labor migration, and dependency on external security and economic partners. Its diplomatic agency is therefore more constrained by security vulnerability than Kazakhstan's or Uzbekistan's. This does not mean Tajikistan is passive; rather, its room for maneuver is organized around risk management, border stabilization, and selective external support.

These variations matter for Türkiye and the OTS. Turkic identity is more directly relevant for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan than for Tajikistan, whose Persianate identity and security concerns produce different diplomatic priorities. The OTS can therefore support regional cooperation, but it cannot stand in for Central Asia as a whole. Any analytically balanced account must distinguish Turkic multilateralism from Central Asian regionalism.

Table 3. Regional differentiation in Central Asian agency

State	Main diplomatic logic	Soft-power/connectivity relevance	Complication for generalization
Kazakhstan	Multi-vector moderation and convening	Reputation as a connector, regional forum host, Middle Corridor actor	Credibility depends on governance and logistics performance
Uzbekistan	Post-2016 regional activism and diversified partnerships	Growing role in trade, transport, and regional cooperation	Challenges to Kazakhstan-centered readings of Central Asia
Kyrgyzstan	Balancing under domestic volatility and capacity limits	Education, migration networks, donor engagement	Agency is constrained and often issue-specific
Turkmenistan	Permanent neutrality and selective engagement	Energy and transport diplomacy under sovereignty-first logic	Less integrated into multilateral activism
Tajikistan	Security, water-energy, and Afghanistan-facing concerns	Selective partnerships and risk-management diplomacy	Not part of Turkic identity politics; distinct regional position

Source: Author's elaboration based on Cooley (2012), Laruelle and Peyrouse (2015), and the comparative country analysis presented in this article.

Latin America: Comparative Justification and Selective Lessons

Latin America provides a most-different regional comparison for examining a common problem: how can regions with strong cultural narratives and repeated integration discourse convert those resources into operational cooperation? Latin America has multiple integration projects, including MERCOSUR, the Pacific Alliance, CELAC, SICA, CARICOM, and several infrastructure initiatives. Yet regional scholarship has emphasized fragmentation, ideological cycles, institutional overlap, and implementation gaps (De la Mora, 2023; Riggirozzi & Tussie, 2012).

The first lesson is that cultural affinity is insufficient. Latin America has linguistic, historical and cultural commonalities far stronger than those of many other regions, but shared identity has not consistently generated low-cost trade, interoperable customs systems or resilient supply chains. Central Asian and Turkish cases suggest that identity becomes useful only when it is linked to institutions and operational mechanisms. For Latin America, this means connecting cultural diplomacy to trade facilitation, logistics training, academic mobility and regulatory coordination.

The second lesson is non-polarized diplomacy. Kazakhstan's multi-vectorism and Central Asian hedging strategies show that small and middle states can pursue multiple partnerships without converting every external relationship into ideological alignment. Latin America often interprets relations with the United States, China, the European Union, Türkiye, India or Russia through polarized domestic narratives. A pragmatic approach would not eliminate political differences, but it would prioritize infrastructure, technology, education, development finance and regional supply chains over bloc language (ECLAC, 2024).

The third lesson concerns corridors. The Middle Corridor debate shows that competitiveness depends on border procedures, digital systems, multimodal coordination, and governance standards. Latin America's bioceanic corridors, ports, land border crossings, and logistics platforms face analogous operational challenges. The relevant lesson is not to copy Eurasian routes, but to treat customs simplification and corridor management as diplomatic issues rather than only technical matters (ECLAC, 2023; World Bank, 2023).

The fourth lesson is institutional modesty. Latin America does not need another grand regional narrative if it is not accompanied by implementable mechanisms. Selective, issue-based cooperation may be more durable than ideologically ambitious but fragile institutions. Practical initiatives in digital customs, logistics education, border-crossing modernization, regional tourism circuits, shared infrastructure standards, and development-bank coordination could generate credibility without requiring full political convergence.

The limits of transferability are equally important. Central Asia and Latin America differ in maritime access, regional market size, colonial history, security threats, state capacity, and relations with external powers. The article, therefore, proposes selective learning, not policy imitation. Central Asia offers a comparative mirror because it shows how corridor-dependent states try to convert vulnerability into diplomatic utility. Latin America's challenge is different but related: converting cultural and regional discourse into operational credibility.

Table 4. Selective lessons for Latin America

Central Asian/ Turkish practice	Underlying mechanism	Possible Latin American adaptation	Expected benefit
Multi-vector diplomacy	Avoid exclusive dependence on one power center	Diversify partnerships without bloc rhetoric	Greater bargaining capacity and diplomatic autonomy
OTS-style sectoral cooperation	Move from identity to functional mechanisms	Issue-based cooperation in logistics, digital trade, tourism and education	Less politicized regionalism
Middle Corridor governance	Combine infrastructure with customs, standards and digitalization	Strengthen bioceanic corridors and border-crossing management	Lower trade costs and more resilient supply chains
Education and exchange diplomacy	Build long-term networks of trust	Joint degrees and scholarships in logistics, energy and digital governance	Human capital for integration
Development cooperation	Turn reputation into practical assistance	Use regional banks and national agencies for technical cooperation	More visible and useful international presence

Source: Author's elaboration based on ECLAC (2023, 2024), World Bank (2023), De la Mora (2023), and Riggirozzi and Tussie (2012).

DISCUSSION

Soft power in Central Asia should not be understood as a simple expansion of cultural attraction into every domain of cooperation. Instead, it is better analyzed as a reputational outcome that may emerge when cultural resources, institutional continuity, and practical usefulness converge. This distinction prevents conceptual overstretch while preserving the article's original insight: in Eurasia, attraction and infrastructure are increasingly connected, but they are not identical.

Kazakhstan's case shows that reputational moderation can function as soft power for a landlocked middle state. The ability to convene forums, maintain multiple partnerships, and present itself as a predictable connector gives Kazakhstan diplomatic visibility. Yet this visibility remains conditional. Domestic credibility, rights perceptions, institutional accountability, and logistical performance all shape whether external audiences perceive Kazakhstan's role as legitimate and useful. Soft power is therefore not a stable asset; it is a relationship that can be weakened by contradictions between narrative and practice.

Türkiye's case demonstrates the double edge of cultural affinity. Shared Turkic identity can support educational exchange, cultural diplomacy, and multilateral institution-building. At the same time, it can generate suspicion if it is associated with neo-Ottoman ambition, Pan-Turkic hierarchy, or excessive ideological projection. The OTS is therefore best understood as a contested institutional field. It enables cooperation, but its long-term legitimacy will depend on whether Central Asian states experience it as a platform for equal partnership rather than as an instrument of Turkish leadership.

The Middle Corridor is the most important empirical site because it reveals where soft power meets operational governance. The corridor's diplomatic value depends on a credibility chain: strategic narrative attracts attention; institutional coordination reduces risk; logistics reliability produces trust; trust can become reputational capital. If any link fails, the corridor remains a geopolitical slogan rather than a source of durable influence. This logic is relevant beyond Central Asia because many regions now compete to present themselves as reliable connectors in a fragmented global economy.

The Latin American comparison strengthens the article because it prevents the Central Asian case from being treated as exceptional. Latin America has long possessed cultural proximity and integration discourse, but it often lacks the operational mechanisms needed to translate them into regional credibility. The Central Asian lesson is not that weaker institutional histories can be overcome easily. It is that practical, issue-based, and non-polarized cooperation may be more effective than maximalist regionalism. This is a modest but analytically useful comparative insight.

The article also contributes to debates on middle powers and the Global South. It shows that small and middle states do not only react to great-power competition; they can use coalition-building, convening, and niche diplomacy to create platforms that larger powers find useful (Cooper et al., 1993; Jordaan, 2003). However, this agency is uneven and constrained. Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan do not possess the same resources or priorities. Central Asian agency is real, but it is plural. Recognizing this diversity is necessary for avoiding both great-power determinism and uncritical celebration of regional autonomy (Acharya, 2014).

Policy Implications

First, Kazakhstan and Türkiye should deepen cooperation in applied education. Programs should move beyond language and culture to include logistics, customs administration, data governance, green energy, water diplomacy, disaster management, artificial intelligence, and regional development. This would connect symbolic affinity to the practical skills required by Central Asian economies.

Second, Central Asian states should strengthen corridor institutions rather than relying on infrastructure announcements alone. Interoperable digital systems, transparent tariff rules, customs simplification, port productivity, vessel availability, and corridor-level service standards should be treated as diplomatic priorities because they shape external trust.

Third, Türkiye should frame its Central Asian policy around equal partnership and mutual benefit. Cultural affinity should remain a resource, but not the organizing hierarchy. Ankara's credibility will be stronger if it emphasizes technology transfer, education, trade facilitation, disaster cooperation, tourism, energy, and development projects while respecting the sovereignty and diversity of Central Asian states.

Fourth, Kazakhstan should continue to invest in public diplomacy as a regional problem-solver, but it should connect this image to measurable outcomes. Think-tank networks, academic forums, digital diplomacy, and cultural projects should be paired with practical cooperation in logistics, development assistance, and regional public goods.

Fifth, Latin American governments and regional organizations should study Central Asian practices selectively. The most relevant lessons concern corridor governance, multivector diplomacy, issue-based regionalism, and educational networks. The objective should be to reduce politicization and increase implementation capacity, not to import Eurasian institutional models.

CONCLUSION

This article has argued that soft power in Central Asia is best understood as a relational and conditional resource. Kazakhstan and Türkiye show that attraction does not emerge only from cultural narratives or national image-building. It depends on credibility, institutions, useful cooperation, and the capacity to manage connectivity in ways that external partners experience as predictable and legitimate.

The conceptual framework distinguishes soft power from public diplomacy, geoeconomics, and infrastructure diplomacy. It proposes connectivity governance as a specific mechanism through which material cooperation can produce reputational effects. This helps avoid conceptual overstretch. Infrastructure is not soft power by itself; it becomes relevant for soft power only when operational reliability creates trust.

Kazakhstan's multi-vector diplomacy illustrates reputational soft power based on moderation, convening, and pragmatic engagement. Türkiye's role illustrates the institutionalization of cultural affinity through the OTS, TURKSOY, education, development cooperation, and economic diplomacy. Yet both cases require critical balance. Kazakhstan's external image can be weakened by domestic and logistical credibility gaps, while Türkiye's cultural diplomacy can be contested if it appears linked to Pan-Turkic hierarchy, neo-Ottoman ambition, or asymmetrical influence.

The article has also shown that Central Asia cannot be reduced to Kazakhstan. Uzbekistan's regional activism, Kyrgyzstan's constrained balancing, Turkmenistan's neutrality, and Tajikistan's security-centered diplomacy reveal a plural regional agency.

This diversity matters because the OTS and Central Asian regionalism are overlapping but not identical fields.

For Latin America, the main lesson is selective and operational. Regional identity, cultural proximity, and integration discourse become more consequential when they are tied to trade facilitation, corridor governance, educational exchange, and non-polarized diplomacy. Central Asia does not provide a model to copy. It provides a comparative case that helps clarify how small and middle powers can transform constraint into diplomatic opportunity when reputation, institutions, and implementation are aligned.

ETHICAL STATEMENT

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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