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In this Issue

Modern strategic rivalry among countries of the world is associated with a number of factors: territorial disputes and competition for global dominance through regional leadership in various spheres. In addition, many countries perceive as a threat the mutual strengthening of their presence in regions that they consider to be their zones of influence. One of the significant trends of our time is the process of macro-regionalization and consolidation of regions into larger macro-regions based on the strengthening of trade, economic and logistical interconnectedness, interdependence of security issues, and the activation of humanitarian contacts. At the same time, there is an increase in the importance of military-political issues in the context of increased great-power competition and the intensification of international conflicts.

In the last decade, political and economic processes in the Middle East, South Caucasus, Central Asia, South Asia, Asia-Pacific and other regions have become increasingly competitively interconnected. This is manifested in both the strengthening of economic interaction and in the growth of military and political risks and threats. The interweaving and, in some cases, even the clash of strategic interests of great, regional, as well as medium and small countries in the emerging macro-regions, gives their study a special analytical and research value.

In the articles of this volume, the authors define the features of the emerging macro-region and the type of relations between states in the cooperation-rivalry format, which presupposes the participation in structuring the world order of a larger number of participants, represented not only by great powers, but also by regional and middle powers, and also takes into account the nature of the relations between them.

In '*Risks and Opportunities for Central Asian Countries in the Context of New Geopolitics*', Fatima Kukeyeva analyzes, first of all, the ever-increasing importance that Central Asia plays in modern international relations. She draws attention to the fact that Central Asia is a point of intersection of interests of the largest global actors Russia, the USA, China, the EU, and, at the same time, a field of contact, interpenetration and clash of values of the largest world civilizations: Christianity, Confucianism and Islam. According to the author, Central Asia is not only a key region, the establishment of control over which allows managing the global transit of hydrocarbons and other types of strategic raw materials for the largest developing economies, primarily China, and, as a result, influencing their economic growth, aggregate power and expansion directions. In this sense, Central Asia is a crossroads of civilizations, control over which, as was believed for centuries, allows domination over the world. The region retains this exceptional geopolitical significance especially in the conditions of wars, confrontation and global confrontation. In studying the risks and opportunities for the Central Asian countries, the author draws attention to the fact that the resolution of specific regional problems is the basis for uniting various ethnocultural and regional-territorial units, consolidating their special interests on the ground. The subregional specificity of the Central Asian geospace has increasingly become apparent as a consequence of this process. Each state in the region quite naturally claims self-sufficiency and an independent role in political and economic processes, which is manifested in the claim to conduct independent domestic and

international policies. Such independence conflicts with the national interests of regional security. The developments in the context of overcoming such contradictions and determining ways to combine regional security interests with the national interests of each state emphasize the relevance and novelty of this article.

In '*The Transformational Engagement of Central Asia with the European Union: opportunities and prospects*', Kuralay Baizakova analyzes the effectiveness of the model of regional security that has developed in Central Asia in the context of European integration and a globalizing world, ensuring social and political stability in the region, as well as the impact of rapprochement with the EU on the formation of national interests of the Central Asian countries in terms of their security. The solution to this goal can allow us to come closer to developing solutions aimed at optimizing and adjusting the model of cooperation between the EU and Central Asia. All this determined the formulation of the following main tasks: to consider the place of integration projects within the framework of national interests in the modern political process and their conceptual foundations in the context of the current situation in the region. Having analyzed the issues of interaction between Central Asia and the EU in regional security and their impact on the formulation of national interests of the states of the region, the author determines the nature of the changes that have occurred in the Central Asian geopolitical space, thereby revealing their impact on ensuring the national interests of countries in matters of comprehensive security. The author proceeds from the fact that unresolved tensions in relations between Central Asian states regarding borders, resources and security, combined with deep political and social divisions within the states themselves and geopolitical competition, all this confirms the opinion that Central Asia is a striking example of interregionalism.

In her article '*Between Patronage and Donorship: Global Gateway and its Vis-à-vis in Eurasia*', Oxana Karnaukhova analyzes the main directions of the EU Global Gateway, arguing for the EU's desire to consolidate its role in the international arena: in global trade, in the area of development assistance, in promoting regional integration, democracy, and security. According to the author, the EU consistently demonstrates interest in implementing interregional policy, thereby confirming the ramified system of interregional relations. Using various cases, the author argues that the EU does not always successfully implement its interregional strategy, and each of the existing and emerging areas has its own characteristics. In addition to the EU, other regional associations strive to build interregional relations, thus forming an extensive network of regional partners, among which the EU is the most active. Against this background of the EU-Russia confrontation, the main task for the EU is to develop a system of measures aimed at maintaining leadership positions in the conditions of the transformation of the world order. At the same time, the EU's activity through the Global Gateway strategy as the ability to influence international relations and ensure the implementation of its interests regardless of other players is not an immanent characteristic of the EU, which distinguishes it from the great powers and further complicates the task of maintaining its position.

In the article '*Glocal Soft Power as an Instrument of China's Strategic Influence in the South Caucasus: A New Model of Integration and Geopolitical Consequences*', Paylak Yengoyan and Zhanna Grigoryan discuss the main political issues of China's

soft power strategy in the South Caucasus, which is applied by four countries, plays a key role in shaping international perceptions and strengthening cooperation in many areas. China's modern soft power refers to a country's ability to influence others through attraction and persuasion rather than coercion or force. In this context, China's soft power involves using cultural, educational, and intellectual assets to enhance a country's global status and influence. The authors' comparative analysis provides an in-depth look at the various soft power strategies employed by China in relation to Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. By analyzing the similarities and differences in their approaches to educational diplomacy, cultural exchange programs, language promotion, and academic cooperation, one can gain insight into the effectiveness and impact of their soft power initiatives. For obvious reasons, studying China's soft power in various spheres has broader implications for international relations and diplomacy in the South Caucasus. Understanding how China uses its educational resources and institutions to enhance its global image and influence in the South Caucasus can shed light on the dynamics of contemporary international politics and international cooperation. The authors argue that within the framework of the modern foreign policy strategy, China strives to develop a soft power strategy in the post-Soviet space, adapting it to national characteristics and priorities. The implementation of the ambitious goal of creating a powerful cultural state requires significant financial investments, structural changes in the sphere of cultural industries and the concentration of administrative and managerial resources. It is noteworthy that the Chinese approach to soft power is characterized by a two-pronged approach: in addition to projecting influence outward, considerable attention is paid to the need for internal countermeasures to the dimension. In this regard, the key tasks are to strengthen the cultural self-awareness of the Chinese people, to form a sense of pride in national culture, and to create a competitive cultural product.

In '*The Nexus between International Humanitarian Law and Peacebuilding in Africa: A Comprehensive Assessment of Preventive Mechanisms*', Abraham Ename Minko examines the growing role of international humanitarian law and the accumulated peacebuilding experience in ensuring comprehensive security in African countries. According to the author, the activation of regional providers of peacekeeping assistance in Africa continued to strengthen and gradually became a reality that the UN and leading countries should take into account when planning humanitarian activities. In examining the international legal dimensions of UN peacekeeping activities, the author focuses on the priorities of African countries and the African Union in modern humanitarian and peacekeeping activities. Particular attention is paid to the conditions when the power vacuum in various African countries persisted and even intensified. The author provides a comparative analysis of how the UN adapts to the specifics of the humanitarian and peacekeeping environment on the African continent in the context of the emerging security regime complex there. The author attempts to identify the challenges that hinder effective UN humanitarian and peacekeeping activities in Africa and how developing cooperation with African regional organizations can help overcome them. To achieve the stated goal, the author set the following objectives in the article: 1) study the evolution of theoretical and practical approaches to UN peacekeeping in Africa; 2) identify factors of international humanitarian law that

complicate UN peacekeeping activities on the continent; 3) assess the changes that the UN makes to its peacekeeping practices in order to adapt to the challenges that its missions face in Africa; 4) analyze the experience of UN interaction with African regional organizations in the field of peacekeeping; 5) clarify the significance of cooperation between the UN and other organizations with African regional organizations in terms of its adaptation to the specifics of the peacekeeping environment in Africa.

The author comes to the conclusion that the UN, through international humanitarian law, is trying to adapt to the specifics of the peacekeeping environment on the African continent by changing its approaches to peacekeeping and strengthening cooperation with African regional organizations. In this sense, if the first method of adaptation has largely exhausted itself, the second has significant potential.

In '*New cybersecurity challenges: digital transformation and the political implications of their implementation*', Anna Sisoyan conducts a comparative analysis of the competitiveness of states and the evolution of international digital competitiveness. The author analyzes new challenges to cybersecurity, pointing out that modern cybersecurity depends on the ability of the economy to innovate. Within the framework of the stages of competitiveness development, modern states go through several corresponding stages, including: 1) competition based on production factors (underdeveloped countries); 2) competition based on investments (developing countries); 3) competition based on innovations (developed countries); 4) competition based on welfare (leading states).

The undertaken study allowed the author to identify a number of key factors that determine the leading position of countries in terms of cybersecurity and international digital competitiveness, and to propose a conceptual approach to assessing the indicator in question considering them. The author uses the results obtained to systematize the specifics of the development of cybersecurity in countries at the present stage in the context of international interaction. In addition, an important objective of this article was to develop practical recommendations for strengthening the digital competitiveness of Armenia based on the achieved conceptual developments. The undertaken study allowed the author to identify a number of key factors that determine the leading position of countries in terms of cybersecurity and international digital competitiveness, and to propose a conceptual approach to assessing the indicator in question taking them into account. The results obtained by the author are used to systematize the specifics of the development of cybersecurity of countries at the present stage in the context of international interaction. In addition, an important task of this article was to develop practical recommendations for strengthening the digital competitiveness of Armenia based on the achieved conceptual developments. Accordingly, the scientific hypothesis put forward in accordance with the purpose of the study that the mechanisms for the formation of international digital competitiveness of leading countries are determined by the complex interaction of various factors was confirmed, and their experience is applicable to identifying the features of assessing the digital competitiveness of Armenia at the present stage.

In '*Dynamics of Russian-Turkish relations after the Second Karabakh War: new priorities of national interests and strategies of struggle in the South Caucasus*',

Gevorg Harutyunyan, Marut Vardazaryan and Svetlana Jilavyan analyze the significant intensification of political, economic, cultural and trade relations between Russia and Türkiye, which has been taking an increasingly prominent place among Russian business partners since 2020. Türkiye has always attached exceptional importance to foreign economic relations, which have borne the main burden in ensuring the development of its economy. In this regard, it seems very relevant to trace the development of bilateral political, trade, economic and cultural relations and analyze their role in establishing new priorities of national interests and the strategy of struggle in the post-war South Caucasus. The authors, using the case of the Second Karabakh War of 2020, conclude that much has changed in Turkish-Russian relations in recent years, and the current trends in their development require political analysis. Considering the importance of historical events and elements that directly or indirectly influenced the course and results of the Second Karabakh War, the article studied not only the historical causes of the war, but also their cause-and-effect relationships that directly influenced the dynamics of the war. The scientific novelty of this article is that, given the multi-layered nature of the Second Karabakh War, it is important to study them for the concept and analysis. Within the framework of this article, an attempt was made to study the Second Karabakh War, starting from its genesis, the reasons for the outbreak of the war, its structural elements, the course and the entire negotiation process, which allows us to understand the reasons why war remains the only way to resolve conflicts. According to the authors, since 2020, relations between Russia and Türkiye have been complex, multi-level and are not limited to regional issues.

In her work '*Transforming governance in Armenia: from Soviet legacy to strategic reform*' Marina Margaryan analyzes the main trends in the transformation and democratization of public administration, which are an integral part of the current stage of development of public administration in Armenia. The article notes that the transformation of governance in Armenia is fundamentally changing the processes of interaction between the state and citizens and civil society, as well as reducing bureaucratic procedures, simplifying the receipt of public services, increasing openness and transparency. According to the author, digital technologies play an important role in collecting and analyzing data for making management decisions, ensuring information security, as well as the introduction of predictive analytics mechanisms, technologically integrated within the framework of creating management decision support systems, allows improving the processes of monitoring and evaluating activities aimed at achieving strategic goals and objectives of state development. However, the use of digital technologies in public administration is characterized by a number of challenges associated with the need to ensure cybersecurity and personal data protection, as well as the need to take into account the interests of all population groups and ensure equal access to public services for all citizens. Based on the results of the analysis, the author has developed a set of recommendations for the effective and democratic transformation of public administration in Armenia, differentiated within the framework of a number of key aspects of digital development.

In '*The Crisis of Small Towns in Armenia: Territorial Peculiarities and Transformations of the Regional Settlement System*', Artur Mkrtchyan and Vahan Yengidunyan analyze the change in the socio-demographic situation, the organization

of interaction between state, regional and local government bodies, the transformation of economic relations, which necessitate the study of Armenian cities in general, including small ones. The relevance of the study is primarily due to the fact that small towns are an important element of the urban framework of settlement in all Armenian regions, which close the network of rural settlement. According to the authors, small towns and district centers are the core in solving many problems of social and economic development of rural areas, their dispersion allows for the management of a vast territory, solving social and economic development problems in the entire region. The authors note that in the conditions of the formation of market relations, the shortcomings of small towns, inherent to them as a type of settlement, have become even more acute. The monofunctional structure of the economy, the orientation of city-forming enterprises in the past to regional sales markets determined the great dependence of small towns on fluctuations in the leading production. The reduction or complete absence of state support has also led to a drop in production volumes, social tension has increased (an increase in unemployment, the indicators of which are dozens of times higher than those of large cities; a decrease in the standard of living of the population). Of particular concern is the exacerbation of demographic problems: a decrease in natural growth is accompanied by a migration outflow, and small towns have ceased to be centers of attraction for the population from their immediate surroundings. Not having sufficient internal potential, small towns are currently losing support from rural areas; the proportion of people over working age is growing. Settlements remote from the district center are losing population in migration exchange with large cities of the region. These problems require a sociological study of the development features of small towns in Armenia.

Editorial Board

RISKS AND OPPORTUNITIES FOR CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES IN THE CONTEXT OF NEW GEOPOLITICS

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Abstract

The article analyzes the main risks and opportunities for the Central Asian countries in the context of new geopolitical transformations. In this sense, the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia in the period from 2022 to 2024 is undergoing significant changes that affect regional stability and global interaction. The article examines Central Asia in terms of strategic importance and vulnerability to external pressure, influenced by various global initiatives and changing power dynamics. The countries of the region face a number of risks, such as economic instability, dependence on external energy resources, as well as geopolitical rivalry between major powers, in particular Russia and China. In the context of new geopolitics, it is critical for the Central Asian countries to maintain independence and sovereignty, ensure economic development and strengthen political legitimacy. Despite these challenges, cooperation with international actors and participation in various integration structures can contribute to achieving national interests and minimizing risks. Therefore, the article analyzes the key vectors of the foreign policy of the Central Asian countries, paying special attention to the Russian and Chinese vectors, and considers the opportunities and risks that these countries face in the new geopolitical reality.

Keywords: *Central Asia, Russia, China, new geopolitics, EAEU, CSTO, Belt and Road Initiative, SCO, opportunities, risks.*

Introduction

The geopolitical landscape around Central Asia in the period from 2022 to 2024 is characterized by significant events and challenges that affect regional stability and global interactions. In Central Asia, characterized by changing power dynamics, efforts at regional cooperation, and the influence of major global initiatives such as the BRI. The strategic importance of the region and interactions with various international actors continue to shape its trajectory on the global stage. The strategic importance of Central

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Asia is further underscored by its vulnerability to geopolitical instability due to its proximity to various influential regions and countries.

Thus, the period from 2022 to 2024 in Central Asia is marked by significant geopolitical changes driven by historical interactions, regional connectivity initiatives, and geopolitical strategies. Understanding the region's genetic legacy, historical interactions, and contemporary geopolitical dynamics is essential for a comprehensive analysis of the evolution of the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia.

To answer the question about the risks and opportunities of Central Asian countries' cooperation with external actors, it is necessary to establish their core national interests in relations with international actors.

The core national interest of Central Asian countries is to maintain independence and sovereignty, which includes ensuring security, economic development, and political legitimacy.

However, the Central Asian states face a number of structural risks, such as being landlocked, which is an obstacle to expanding trade opportunities, resource dependence, water issues, and the resurgence of the Great Game/New Great Game.

In order to achieve their national interests and overcome risks, the Central Asian countries, in particular Kazakhstan, strive to develop relations and cooperation with various countries, international organizations and integration structures. In order to identify changes in the foreign policy strategy of the Central Asian countries in the context of new geopolitics, it is necessary to analyze the main vectors from the standpoint of the theory of new geopolitics and the New Great Game.

The main part

The Russian vector is certainly a priority for the foreign policy of the Central Asian countries, which is due to a number of geopolitical, historical, economic and cultural factors.

However, in the context of the new geopolitics, the Russian vector of the Central Asian countries should be analyzed through the prism of the risks of bilateral/multilateral cooperation. "Shared risks" determine the rational choice, geopolitical interest and dependence/interdependence of partner states, allies. Common risks are both economic and political in nature, and are also directly related to security issues.

The indicators of these risks are the factors of Moscow's pressure on the Central Asian countries. This pressure is formed by a combination of geopolitical rivalry, economic cooperation initiatives, energy dynamics and environmental issues. These factors contribute to the development of the landscape of alliance relations and power dynamics in the region, influencing Moscow's interaction with the Central Asian countries.

The risk-sharing effects between Central Asian countries and Russia from 2022 to 2024 can be analyzed as follows:

Sanctions and restrictions: In 2022, sanctions were imposed on Russia, which resulted in the cessation of financial, trade, economic and business ties with a number of countries, potentially straining relations with the Central Asian countries (Hudson

2022). The anti-Russian sanctions caused by the Russian military actions in Ukraine have a risk-sharing effect for the Central Asian countries.

The impact of sanctions against Russia on the Central Asian economies is a complex issue that involves various economic and geopolitical dynamics. These sanctions have led to trade diversion, with products from the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC) region replacing Russian products and trade with Russia being redirected through Central Asia and the Caucasus to circumvent the sanctions (Pomfret 2023). The economic recession in Russia, worsened by Western sanctions and low oil prices, has made Russia a less attractive market for Central Asian exports. In addition, sanctions have prompted Russia to change its strategic approach, moving towards selective economic and political alliances with non-Western countries, in particular China (McCarthy, Puffer and Satinsky 2019). Thus, sanctions against Russia have had far-reaching consequences for the economies of Central Asian countries. These consequences include trade diversion, shifts in economic policy, and changes in strategic alliances.

Sanctions against Russia have a significant impact on the energy dynamics in Central Asia, creating several key risks for the countries of the region. For example, sanctions against Russia could lead to energy shortages or higher prices for Russian energy, which would increase the dependence of Central Asian countries on alternative suppliers, such as China and other countries (Solingen 2025). This creates the risk of economic instability and complicates long-term energy agreements.

Sanctions against Russia, imposed in response to its actions in Ukraine and other international conflicts, have had significant economic consequences. In particular, in 2022, following the imposition of large-scale sanctions, oil and gas exports from Russia to Europe fell significantly. The introduction of large-scale sanctions against the Russian Federation in 2022, caused by its military actions in Ukraine, had a significant impact on Russia's oil and gas exports to Europe. These sanctions, initiated by the EU, the United States and other countries, were aimed at weakening Russia's economic base and limiting its ability to finance military operations. Sanctions against Russia began to be introduced in 2014, but with the outbreak of a full-scale war in Ukraine in February 2022, they became more stringent and comprehensive. The main measures included: 1) a ban on imports of Russian oil and gas to the EU; 2) restrictions on financial transactions with Russian state and private companies; 3) freezing of assets associated with Russian oligarchs and state institutions (IEA 2022). In 2022, the situation on world energy markets caused by the reduction in oil and gas exports from Russia led to a shortage of these resources and a sharp increase in prices. This phenomenon has had a significant impact not only on the global economy, but also on Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, which are important players in the hydrocarbon market. According to the International Energy Agency (IEA), the reduction in Russian oil and gas supplies to Europe has led to a significant deficit in world markets. In March 2022, for example, the price of Brent crude oil reached more than \$130 per barrel, which was the highest in recent years. This sharp rise in energy prices has affected economic processes in various countries, including Central Asia (IEA 2022). Kazakhstan, with its significant oil and gas reserves, found itself in a favorable position position against the backdrop of rising prices. The increase in export

revenues allowed the government to significantly increase budget revenues, as well as invest in the development of energy infrastructure, including the modernization of oil and gas fields and the construction of new pipelines. In addition, Kazakhstan began to actively seek new markets for exports, including countries in Asia and Europe, which helped strengthen its position on the international arena (Gelmanova et al. 2023).

Turkmenistan, with significant reserves of natural gas, also benefited from the situation on world markets. The country is actively developing export routes, including the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) project, which allows for the diversification of export flows. Additional opportunities for Turkmenistan were created by the increase in gas demand in China, to which the country already supplies significant volumes of gas (Sultonov 2022). Thus, the shortage of energy resources on world markets and the sharp rise in prices in 2022 had a significant impact on Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. These countries were able to take advantage of the current situation to strengthen their positions on the international energy market, increase export revenues and develop infrastructure. For example, in 2022, Kazakhstan, which traditionally exported some of its oil through Russian infrastructure, was faced with the need to find alternative routes for its exports. This led to talks with China to expand supplies through a new pipeline and increase trade volumes. According to the IEA, in 2022, Kazakh oil supplies to China increased by 17%, illustrating the growing dependence on the Chinese market (IEA 2023).

Changes in global energy prices caused by sanctions have also had an impact on the Central Asian economy. For example, in 2022, the cost of gas on world markets increased by 30% compared to the previous year, which affected prices within the region and complicated long-term energy agreements. This created financial risks and uncertainty for countries dependent on energy export revenues. According to the World Bank, in 2023, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan faced a deficit in energy export revenues amid price instability and changing conditions in international markets (World Bank 2023).

Sanctions and related changes in Russia's transport policy may affect traditional energy transit routes. This may cause supply disruptions and increased transit costs, which will negatively affect the economies of Central Asian countries that rely on exporting their resources through Russian territory. In 2022, following the introduction of sanctions against Russia, Kazakhstan faced serious disruptions in the transit of its oil through Russian territory. One of the main routes transporting Kazakh oil to Europe via Russia was partially blocked or restricted due to new trade restrictions and logistical issues. This caused significant delays and increased transit costs. For example, according to the Bureau of National statistics of Agency for Strategic planning and reforms of the RK, transit costs for oil exports increased by 18% in 2022 compared to the previous year¹. In response to disruptions in traditional routes, Turkmenistan was forced to seek alternative routes for exporting its gas. In particular, the country increased its dependence on the Chinese market by increasing gas supplies through a new pipeline. As a result, Turkmen gas exports to China increased by 22% in 2022

¹ Bureau of National statistics of Agency for Strategic planning and reforms of the RK. 2025. Industry statistics: Energy Statistics. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/business-statistics/stat-energy/>.

compared to 2021 (China National Petroleum Corporation 2023). However, this also resulted in additional costs for the construction and maintenance of new routes.

The changes in transit routes have had an economic impact on Uzbekistan, which also relies on transporting its energy through Russia. In 2023, Uzbekistan faced an increase in transit tariffs for its gas exports, which reduced its export revenues by 12%². This has had a negative impact on the country's economy, increasing its dependence on less profitable alternative routes.

Political and economic instability caused by sanctions against Russia may reduce the attractiveness of the region for foreign investment in the energy sector. This will make it difficult to implement new energy projects and upgrade existing infrastructure needed for sustainable development. Sanctions against Russia and the effects of economic instability have led to a decrease in foreign investment in Central Asia. In 2022, total foreign direct investment (FDI) in Central Asian countries fell by 12% compared to 2021. This decline is partly due to increased risk and uncertainty related to sanctions and economic pressures on the region. For example, Kazakhstan, one of the largest recipients of foreign investment in Central Asia, saw a 15% decline in foreign investment in the energy sector in 2022³. This decline is due to increased political and economic risks, which make it difficult to attract new investment in infrastructure modernization projects and greenfield development. An example of the difficulties in implementing new projects is the delay in the construction of a new pipeline that was supposed to connect Kazakhstan to China for the transportation of oil. Due to market instability and uncertainty caused by sanctions, the project faced delays and increased costs. The expected cost of the project increased by 20%, due to rising prices for construction materials and additional risks (Zinovyev and Troitskiy 2016).

Under sanctions, Central Asian countries may face the need to accelerate the diversification of their energy sources and routes. This will require significant effort and resources, which may be difficult to achieve in the context of economic instability.

The sanctions, coupled with Russia's retaliatory measures, have created challenges for the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) integration process, especially in the context of external pressure from entities such as the European Union and China (Liefert 2023).

The economic and financial interconnectedness of EAEU member states with Russia has increased the likelihood of secondary sanctions affecting the entire EAEU due to their ties to Russia. If secondary sanctions are imposed on Central Asian countries, such countries may face restrictions on international transactions and access to financial markets. For example, in 2023, Central Asian countries such as Kazakhstan have already begun to approach their interactions with Russia cautiously to avoid the possible consequences of secondary sanctions. This could affect the inflow of foreign investment and complicate trade relations. According to the World Bank, the potential introduction of secondary sanctions could reduce foreign trade by 8-15% in Central

² Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics. 2025. Foreign economic activity. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://stat.uz/en/official-statistics/merchandise-trade>.

³ UNCTAD. 2023. World Investment Report. 2023. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://unctad.org/publication/world-investment-report-2023>.

Asian countries⁴. These examples highlight how sanctions against Russia could impact energy dynamics in Central Asia, creating risks of economic instability and challenging long-term energy policy planning. This has a negative impact on the economies of Central Asian countries that rely on exporting their resources through Russian territory (Cameron 2020).

Overall, sanctions against Russia have created a complex and unstable economic environment in Central Asia, requiring countries in the region to seek new strategies and partners to ensure their energy and economic security. For the EAEU member states, Moscow's actions violate the core principles of the alliance, such as mutually beneficial cooperation, equal rights, and protection of the national interests of all members.

The conflict has disrupted global supply chains, affecting trade and economic stability. Russia's restrictions on exports, including fertilizers and crops, have implications for agricultural sectors in Central Asia (Boungou and Yatié 2022). Financial markets have experienced volatility, with fluctuations in stock market returns impacting investment decisions in the region (Hu 2024). Energy markets have also been affected, as sanctions have impacted Russian energy exports and led to market disruptions (Sylos Labini and Caravani 2025). The implications extend to climate action, food supply chains, and energy security, affecting the economic and environmental landscapes of Central Asian countries.

These risks highlight the need for Central Asian countries to overcome the challenges posed by the conflict between Russia and Ukraine, adapt to changing economic conditions, and build resilience in the face of geopolitical uncertainty.

The EAEU plays a significant role in the economy of Kazakhstan, solving several key tasks that contribute to the country's economic development: access to an expanded market for goods and services. Thus, in 2021, the volume of Kazakhstan's trade with other EAEU member countries amounted to about \$19 billion, which is a significant share of the country's foreign trade⁵.

The EAEU promotes industrial cooperation between member countries, which allows Kazakhstan to develop its production capacities and increase the competitiveness of its products in international markets. Joint projects in industries such as mechanical engineering, metallurgy and chemical industry contribute to technological development and the creation of new jobs (Abramov et al. 2023). Participation in the EAEU increases the investment attractiveness of Kazakhstan by creating a single economic space, simplifying trade and investment procedures, and protecting the rights of investors. Foreign direct investment in Kazakhstan increased by 10% in 2021, partly due to improved conditions for doing business within the EAEU (OECD 2023). The EAEU helps reduce trade and administrative barriers, which simplifies the process of moving goods, services and labor. Unification of standards

⁴ World Bank Group. 2023. World Bank in Central Asia. Accessed March 16, 2025.

<https://www.worldbank.org/en/region/eca/brief/central-asia>.

⁵ Bureau of National statistics of Agency for Strategic planning and reforms of the RK. 2024. Statistics of foreign, mutual trade and commodity markets: Foreign trade turnover of the Republic of Kazakhstan (January–December 2024). Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://stat.gov.kz/en/industries/economy/foreign-market/publications/315588/>.

and certification also facilitates the export of Kazakhstani products to the union market. Kazakhstani manufacturers are able to freely export their products to other EAEU countries without additional customs barriers (Malikbayeva and Gabdullin 2023).

In 2022, more and more experts call the EAEU a ‘toxic organization’ for Kazakhstan. This is due to anti-Russian sanctions, as a result of the outbreak of hostilities in Ukraine on February 24, 2022. Thus, the economies of the Central Asian countries and the Russian Federation within the EAEU are poorly integrated and in many cases remain at the level of relations between ‘small and large economies’.

The Central Asian countries play a key role in the context of the Greater Eurasian Partnership (GEP), proposed by Russia in 2015. The BEP aims to bring together various regional initiatives and organizations such as the EAEU, the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (Solingen 2025).

Within the BEP, capital and resources moving between China and Central Asia are expected to promote economic integration and the formation of a regional market. Cooperation between the EAEU and the BRI is expanding to include other regional powers and groups, which is important for the economic development and stability of Central Asia.

Situated at the strategic crossroads of Europe and Asia, the Central Asian countries have great potential for trade, investment, and economic growth, underlining their importance within the BEP and international politics.

Current discussions on the BEP focus more on security concerns rather than common interests. In the context of the BEP, Central Asia is seen as an important security zone where Russia continues to play a role as a protector against external threats. The concept of ‘Central Eurasia’ emphasizes the importance of the region within the GEP and the need to create a common political understanding between China and Russia. However, there are also risks in implementing the GEP objectives with the participation of Central Asia. The category of political risks should include extremist groups and radical ideologies, the Afghan factor, political unrest and uncertainty in Iran, and the impact of the war in Ukraine.

Central Asian Countries and the CSTO

President Vladimir Putin has traditionally viewed Central Asia as the most stable region and has exerted significant influence over its leaders, using political pressure. Putin correctly considers Central Asia part of Russia's sphere of influence. Relations between Russia and all five former Soviet states of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—remained largely unchanged for the first two decades of his rule. Even despite instances of instability, such as the Tulip Revolution in Kyrgyzstan in 2005, which the Kremlin dismissed as a Western-backed ‘color revolution’, Russia’s influence persisted.

2022 was a year of significant upheaval for the CSTO, presenting new challenges and threats to the organization. At the beginning of 2022, the CSTO’s invitation to stabilize the situation in Kazakhstan significantly changed the security landscape in Central Asia. Moscow and Nur-Sultan largely considered the operation a success. However, this set a new precedent for Russian intervention in Central Asian affairs and

may prompt Central Asian leaders to reconsider their strategies for ensuring the security and territorial integrity of their states.

At the same time, Russia's control over the region is beginning to weaken due to the Kremlin's distraction with the protracted confrontation with Ukraine. Just thirteen months after Putin's intervention in Kazakhstan, which was considered the end of pro-Western color revolutions, Russia's influence has weakened considerably. Examples of this include Turkmenistan's shift from Russia to the China-Central Asia gas pipeline as its primary export route.

Anti-Russian sanctions are also impacting Russia's position, limiting the Russian state's capabilities due to the protracted hostilities. Central Asian countries did not support Russia when the West imposed sanctions. None of them recognized Russia's invasion of Ukraine. For example, banks in the region do not accept Russian MIR payment cards, and only Kazakhstan allows individuals to use them—and then only with permission from the United States. The self-proclaimed Donetsk and Luhansk People's Republics, as well as other Ukrainian territories annexed by Russia, have not been recognized as part of Russia by any Central Asian country⁶.

Civil society in Central Asian countries that are members of the CSTO is also taking an active stance. For example, Russia's military operation in Ukraine has raised doubts among the academic and civil society in Kazakhstan about the expediency of the country's membership in the CSTO, which is seen as a tool that limits Kazakhstan's sovereignty. Civil society activists are calling for a referendum on membership in the CSTO⁷.

Kazakhstan has clearly expressed its attitude towards Russia's special military operation against Ukraine. At the beginning of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Kazakhstan's political leadership stated that Kazakhstan supports the territorial integrity of countries and will not support the recognition of the Luhansk and Donetsk People's Republics.

These statements reflect Kazakhstan's desire for an independent security policy that is acceptable to Western partners and its citizens. Kazakhstan, as a sovereign state, is guided by its own military doctrine and national security strategy. In 2017, a military doctrine was adopted that provided for cooperation with the CSTO, SCO, and NATO's Partnership for Peace program. In 2022, amendments were made that expanded the powers of the troops, including actions in crisis situations. These changes may contradict the agreement on military cooperation with the Russian Federation, signed in 2020, which provides for military assistance, including the provision of troops. The

⁶ Haidar, Aida. 2022. "A Conversation with President Tokayev: Kazakh Leader Addresses Special Session at Qatar Economic Forum." *Astanatimes*, June 23, 2022. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://astanatimes.com/2022/06/a-conversation-with-president-tokayev-kazakh-leader-addresses-special-session-at-qatar-economic-forum/>

⁷ Otkjær, Albert. 2025. "Kazakhstan's Ambivalent Relationship With the CSTO." *Diplomat Media INC.*, April 08, 2025. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://thediplomat.com/2025/04/kazakhstans-ambivalent-relationship-with-the-csto/>.

State Duma of the Russian Federation ratified the agreement in 2021, and the Kazakh side shortly before the start of Russia's aggression against Ukraine⁸.

Neighboring Kyrgyzstan has turned to the CSTO for help three times: in 1999 during the Batken events, when armed Islamists invaded the country from Afghanistan and Tajikistan; in 2010 during the bloody interethnic conflict between Kyrgyz and Uzbeks in Osh and Batken; and in 2021 during a fierce armed conflict on the Tajik-Kyrgyz border. Each time, Kyrgyzstan was refused. Kyrgyz politicians and public figures are increasingly asking the question: does the country need the Collective Security Treaty Organization?

Tajikistani state structures, as a rule, advocate for the independent settlement of border issues with Kyrgyzstan without external interference. They emphasize the importance of fulfilling previously signed documents and believe that Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are able to independently control the situation. Tajik authorities likely prefer to resolve border disputes through political and diplomatic means, prioritizing bilateral negotiations and agreements (Arynov and Umirbekov 2025).

Calls for the use of the CSTO to resolve the border conflict between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan arose after incidents in April 2021 and an armed clash in September 2022. However, according to politicians and experts, such interference could create additional difficulties and threats for the countries involved and the CSTO itself. The situation requires the fulfillment of previously signed documents and is an internal matter for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which are able to independently control their borders (Toropygin and Lyubina 2024). Involving CSTO forces could attract the attention of third parties and complicate the conflict. The preferred approach is bilateral political and diplomatic settlement, which is in the interests of the security of both countries and the CSTO (Ambrosio 2023).

Russia's Soft Power in Central Asia: A Complex Dynamic

Russia's soft power in Central Asia is multifaceted, encompassing cultural, political, and economic dimensions that shape the dynamics and relationships within the region. Leveraging its historical ties, strategic partnerships, and participation in regional security structures, Russia continues to exert influence and maintain a significant presence in Central Asia.

Recently, there has been a surge in anti-Russian sentiment in some Central Asian countries, linked to negative trends within these nations. The primary factors driving this include:

Growing nationalism and patriotism: These sentiments, sometimes directed against external influence, including Russia, have fueled anti-Russian attitudes among certain segments of the population in neighboring Central Asian countries.

Russia's neo-imperialist ambitions: These perceptions contribute to the rise of anti-Russian sentiments. Domestic and external political processes: Anti-Russian

⁸ Castillo, Nicholas. 2023. "Renewed Tajikistan-Kyrgyzstan Tension Pressures the CSTO." *CPC*, September 27, 2023. Accessed March 16, 2025. <https://www.caspianpolicy.org/research/security/renewed-tajikistan-kyrgyzstan-tension-pressures-the-csto>.

sentiments can be part of a broader reaction to internal and external political developments in the region.

These negative trends in Central Asia, such as nationalism and neo-imperialism, have led to an increase in anti-Russian sentiment due to a combination of internal and external factors. Internal factors include historical memory of colonial rule under the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union, while external factors involve Russia's strengthening authoritarianism and its impact on Central Asian countries, as well as negative statements by Russian officials regarding the history and borders of regional states.

Internal factors, such as historical memory, play a significant role. Negative experiences under colonial rule and Russia's rejection of democratic values in favor of authoritarianism have fueled concerns in Central Asian countries about Moscow's potential influence on their domestic politics. For example, Kazakhstan's recent parliamentary elections, while demonstrating a renewal of the legislative body, featured limited representation of independent candidates and the absence of opposition groups. Similar trends can be observed in Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, where leaders have consolidated their power.

The current trend suggests that a weakened Russia will continue to support leaders in Central Asia who are loyal to Moscow. In Kazakhstan, issues of historical memory and ideology, such as language policy, hinder the strengthening of bilateral relations. Statements by Russian officials and media personalities regarding historical territories and independent language policies have provoked negative reactions from the Kazakh public.

Russian media often portray two negative trends regarding Kazakhstan: nationalism and neo-imperialism. The first is linked to the alleged oppression of Russians in Kazakhstan, while the second, emerging after 2014 in connection with events in Ukraine, suggests that Kazakhstan is 'moving away from Russia'. However, this latter narrative is not officially supported. Conversely, Kazakh media often present a negative image of Russia as the successor to the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. This trend can be seen as an 'anti-colonial discourse with a tinge of Russophobia'.

This, in turn, not only strengthens Russophobic sentiments but also weakens relations at the level of civil societies. In Kazakhstan, national-patriotic ideology is gaining popularity. Therefore, issues of historical memory and the interpretation of historical events will not only be the subject of heated academic discussions but also a tool for populists.

Thus, the anti-Russian sanctions imposed in response to Russia's military actions in Ukraine have had a divided impact on Kazakhstan. Moscow's actions violate the fundamental principles of the alliance, such as mutually beneficial cooperation, equal rights, and the protection of the national interests of all members.

Tajikistan

The initial sanctions against Russia, including the disconnection of Russian banks from SWIFT, caused delays in money transfers, a collapse of the ruble, and a sharp rise in prices for basic goods. Although the ruble exchange rate and remittance issues eventually stabilized, inflation continued to rise, exacerbating anti-Russian sentiments

in Tajikistan. Tajik political analyst Nuruddin Khudoerov notes that the war in Ukraine had indirect political consequences for Tajikistan. Economic difficulties caused by sanctions strengthened negative attitudes towards Russia. While trade between Tajikistan and Russia increased, which may indicate indirect assistance to Tajikistan in circumventing sanctions or expanding Russian markets, it also contributed to growing anti-Russian sentiments.

Additionally, there has been increased pressure on civil society and journalists in Tajikistan, which can also be seen as a political consequence of the war. Tajikistan seeks to maintain neutrality, having not supported the UN resolution against Russia and not condemning the war in Ukraine. However, the closure of Mir payment cards and problems with the mobilization of Tajik citizens for the war in Ukraine have only exacerbated anti-Russian sentiments and discontent.

Thus, anti-Russian sentiments in Tajikistan are largely due to economic difficulties caused by sanctions and internal political changes, underlining growing discontent and hostility towards Russian influence.

Uzbekistan

According to political analyst Temur Umarov, the war in Ukraine has had a significant impact on Uzbekistan, leading to a growth of anti-Russian sentiments in the country. Uzbekistan has faced the need to find a political balance between Russia and the West. Tashkent has tried to avoid directly supporting the aggressor, while not wanting to completely abandon partnership with Russia, given the importance of economic and other ties. The internal economic impact of the conflict has manifested in high inflation and negative consequences for the foreign exchange market and banking sector. The strengthening of anti-Russian sentiments was also due to economic difficulties and rising prices, especially in the real estate market due to migration from Russia.

Umarov believes that Uzbekistan will continue to strive for a balance between the West and Russia, avoiding sanctions and adapting to current challenges. Anti-Russian sentiments are expected to persist and influence the country's domestic politics and economy.

Kyrgyzstan

Political analyst Medet Tulgenov believes that the war in Ukraine has significantly affected Kyrgyzstan, violating international norms and negatively impacting the country's relations with Russia and other Central Asian states. The expert notes that the conflict has also worsened Kyrgyzstan's economic situation, especially in the areas of migrant remittances and housing prices due to the migration of Russians. The arrival of relocates can create new jobs, but the political situation is complicated by the need to balance between Russia and the West. Kyrgyzstan faces challenges related to potential secondary sanctions and the need to adapt to new economic conditions.

However, the main problem eroding relations between Central Asian countries and Russia is Russia's inability to become a model for the development of regional states. Despite defining Central Asia as Russia's post-Soviet space, Russia does not demonstrate an attractive development model for Central Asian countries in economic,

socio-political, or security terms, which may lead to the strengthening of other actors in the region. For example, the growing role of China in Central Asia may negatively impact bilateral relations in this format, weakening unifying factors.

The Chinese Vector

Since 2022, China has played an increasingly prominent role in Central Asia, driven by the changing geopolitical landscape and the weakening of Russia's influence in the region. Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the power vacuum created in Central Asia after the Cold War, China, Russia, the United States, and other external actors have actively sought to strengthen their presence in the region according to their own interests. These efforts to reshape the regional order can be seen as a new Great Game. Among these actors, China's actions in Central Asia have become increasingly noticeable. Since the launch of the ambitious Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013, China has rapidly developed economic cooperation and high-level interactions with Central Asian countries, attracting particular attention and underlining China's growing influence in the region (Xia, Liu, Xu and Yuan 2024; Mihir 2023).

Based on the foregoing, China's foreign policy direction for Central Asian countries should be considered in terms of the opportunities it presents for the states of the region (Nyshambayev et al. 2024). In the political sphere, relations between Central Asia and China offer opportunities to increase the influence of regional countries both in Eurasia and globally. Economic cooperation with China is an important direction that aligns with the interests of Central Asian countries (Dessein 2025). Of particular importance to them is participation in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which President Tokayev considers a new source of development for Kazakhstan (Serikkalieva 2023; Nyshambayev et al. 2024).

This has led to discussions about China's role and goals in the changing regional order. China, replacing Russia as a hegemon, is becoming a dominant force through regional competition. However, it should be acknowledged that China's interests in Central Asia are limited to regional stability and economic cooperation. China promotes regional stability and independent development through bilateral and multilateral methods. Despite China's growing influence in the region, the gap in influence and public goods confirms that China is not a dominant force in Central Asia (Nicharapova 2023; Liu 2025).

In terms of security, as a neighboring region, Central Asia is a strategic direction for China to strengthen stability and protect the interests of its sovereign state. For China, the stability of regimes and the security of Central Asian states contribute to the stability of China's border provinces. Additionally, Central Asia is the first stop for China's Belt and Road Initiative as it advances westward into Eurasia and a key node for connectivity with the rest of Eurasia (Belova, Egorycheva and Belov 2023; Bin et al. 2023). Therefore, the security of this region directly affects the efficiency and ability to transport goods and capital along the initiative to the rest of Eurasia and a wider region. As a major consumer of energy, Central Asia is also seen as a land-based alternative to existing sea routes through the Strait of Malacca and the South China Sea, which are actively involved by the United States. In this context, China has preliminarily ensured its border security by defining borders with neighboring

countries and has achieved constant management of non-traditional security threats such as terrorism and extremist organizations in the region through the multilateral mechanism of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization with Central Asian states to realize its long-term security interests in Central Asia (Özgür 2024).

From an economic standpoint, China's activities in Central Asia aim to realize the region's economic potential, expand the economic interests of both sides, and promote the process of regional market and economic integration through the development of bilateral economic ties. Central Asia has vast resource reserves and large potential markets due to its population (Yu 2022). However, the lack of transport infrastructure hinders the activation of existing economic opportunities. In this regard, China has strengthened regional connectivity through large-scale investments and the construction of roads, railways, pipelines, and other infrastructure in Central Asian countries as part of the BRI (Klycheva 2024).

Based on the increase in regional connectivity, China has not only expanded trade with Central Asia but has also established stable relations with the states of the region in the oil and gas sector, contributing to the modernization of their energy sectors through technology and direct investment. Moreover, within the framework of the BRI, the free and continuous movement of capital and labor between China and Central Asia will contribute to the formation of a regional market and economic integration, providing positive prospects for cooperation between China and Central Asia.

The BRI presents a significant opportunity for the development of Central Asian countries. While the history of relations between China and Central Asia began after these countries gained independence, China has rapidly developed these ties through multilateral institutions and bilateral methods. The BRI has further strengthened China's influence in Central Asia, enhancing partnerships with the region's states, many of which are members of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).

Although the BRI has its roots in ancient trade routes connecting Eurasia, since 2013 it has evolved into a large-scale geopolitical structure for promoting regional investment, cooperation, and integration. Central Asia, as China's first step westward, has become a key partner in the BRI, actively participating in this initiative. The BRI promotes connectivity and trade in the region, improving infrastructure such as railways, roads, pipelines, and transport hubs, into which China has actively invested. This is particularly important for Central Asia, which faces difficulties in maintaining and modernizing infrastructure without external assistance.

China's involvement in Central Asia began before the BRI, but the initiative brought additional financial support from policy banks and funds, focusing on the broader benefits of connecting transport networks rather than immediate profits from individual projects. This has led to increased transport efficiency, reduced costs, and increased bilateral trade between China and Central Asian countries, strengthening economic partnerships. Furthermore, the BRI contributes to the development and modernization of the economies of Central Asian countries, which have historically been tied to the Soviet industrial structure. China's investments in resources and industrial modernization in the region aim to enhance economic security and reduce dependence on trade routes through Southeast Asia, benefiting both sides (Bin et al. 2023).

China has expanded cooperation channels and ensured stable incomes for Central Asian countries through industrial projects and growing demand for resources. Initiatives such as agricultural processing projects and the creation of model zones have allowed Kazakh agricultural products to enter the Chinese market, contributing to the development of agriculture and the restructuring of the industrial sector.

Additionally, China supports the diversification and independent development of the energy sector in Central Asia, moving from the export of raw materials to their processing. For example, Chinese investments in power grids, hydroelectric power stations, and oil refineries in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have helped reduce their dependence on Kazakhstan and Russia, contributing to energy independence.

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stations, and oil refineries in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan have helped reduce their dependence on Kazakhstan and Russia, contributing to energy independence.

Risks of Bilateral Relations between China and Central Asian Countries

Despite the fact that the Chinese vector should be considered an opportunity for Central Asian countries, there are also problematic aspects in relations between China and the Central Asian region. Although China is actively promoting bilateral and multilateral cooperation and increasing its influence in Central Asia, several factors indicate that it is not yet becoming a dominant force in the region.

China's main influence is manifested in the economic sphere, while its role in other areas remains limited. The BRI has led to a rapid expansion of China's presence in the region, sparking discussions about the potential consequences of this influence. However, China's influence is often overestimated, based on trade and investment statistics, which do not always reflect the depth of its impact. Although the volume of trade and Chinese investments in the region is impressive, China's real influence goes beyond these indicators.

The brief history of interaction between China and Central Asian countries contributes to an ambivalent perception of China as an external great power, causing both admiration and apprehension. This is due to historical and cultural differences that limit Chinese influence in other key areas such as politics, culture, and security.

China's political influence in the region is limited, as Central Asian countries seek to preserve sovereignty and balance between various external actors, including Russia, the U.S., and the EU. Chinese cultural initiatives in the region also face limited success due to the deep-rooted cultural identity and historical ties of Central Asian countries, which are more oriented towards the post-Soviet space and the Islamic world.

In the security sphere, Central Asian countries prefer to maintain a multi-vector approach, cooperating with both China and other partners, which avoids excessive dependence on one force. This multi-vector approach is also manifested within the SCO, where regional countries seek to maintain a balance of interests, avoiding the dominance of one side.

Thus, despite the obvious economic benefits offered by cooperation with China, Central Asian countries face a number of challenges and risks associated with maintaining sovereignty, cultural identity, and a balance of power in the region. These factors limit China's ability to become a dominant force and emphasize the complexity and multi-layered nature of relations between Central Asia and China.

Conclusion and discussion

The importance of the relationship between China and Russia in Central Asia is undeniable, however, the primary importance lies in the interests of the countries of the region themselves. Central Asia faces both risks and opportunities associated with developing relations with the PRC and the Russian Federation. After the crisis in Ukraine, when the United States and Europe imposed sanctions on Russia, it pushed Russia to turn towards the East. At the same time, the U.S. strategy in the Indo-Pacific

region, aimed at changing the maritime situation around China, stimulated China to focus on Eurasia.

Despite the common interests of China and Russia in preventing the influence of Western powers on Eurasia, their strategic approaches in Central Asia do not always coincide. Russia and China seek to strengthen their presence in the region through economic cooperation and security, using such tools as the integration of the EAEU with the BRI and cooperation within the SCO. However, Central Asia is actively shaping the regional order, using its unique geographical and political advantages. The countries of the region can choose partners, maximizing their interests and supporting independent development. This makes them important players in regional politics, and not just objects of influence of great powers.

China's activity in Central Asia, including the BRI, is aimed at improving regional trade and developing infrastructure. However, despite China's significant economic influence, its role in other areas remains limited. It is important to note that, despite all of China's efforts, Russia leads the more institutionalized and effective organizations in the region, which confirms the multipolar nature of interaction in Central Asia.

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Conflict of Interests

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Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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THE TRANSFORMATIONAL ENGAGEMENT OF CENTRAL ASIA WITH THE EUROPEAN UNION: OPPORTUNITIES AND PROSPECTS

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Abstract

The article analyzes the specifics of interaction between the Central Asian countries and the EU, taking into account global changes that have caused a complete restructuring of the previously existing system of international relations. The article pays special attention to the experience of cooperation between the EU and the Central Asian states, with some of which new type agreements have already been signed or are in the process of being prepared, opening up broad opportunities for bilateral cooperation, which has certainly contributed to their political and economic development. The article notes that the EU's diplomatic representation in the region has increased, assistance has been expanded and cooperation mechanisms have been introduced. In this vein, a new stage of political liberalization and diversification of the economy with a focus on industrial and innovative development can be noted in Kazakhstan.

The article concludes that the EU can rightly position cooperation with Central Asia as a model, using developments for other regions and presenting the achieved results as evidence of the effectiveness of European diplomacy. The Central Asian countries, in turn, have significant potential for developing a partnership with the EU in the context of the interests of the entire region, which would meet its new needs and opportunities.

Keywords: *global power, Central Asian countries, geopolitical situation, strong partnership, democratization, pluralism, human rights, security agenda.*

Introduction

This article is devoted to the study of the stages of the evolutionary development of the EU policy and strategy towards the Central Asian region, their impact on Kazakhstan and the Central Asian states, the definition and disclosure of interaction mechanisms, the identification of trends, as well as promising areas of cooperation in the context of the changing balance of power in the global system of international relations, in general, and Central Asia itself, in particular. At each of these stages, the EU faced the

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need to achieve certain goals related to both the development of priority areas of cooperation and issues of a geopolitical nature. The EU policy towards the region is built through the implementation of relevant program documents and strategies that define the range of tasks achieved with the help of relevant mechanisms and tools. The main tools for the practical implementation of strategies are country and regional programs.

The purpose of this study is to examine the main directions and mechanisms of the EU policy towards the Central Asian states: identifying the factors of influence, characteristic features and peculiarities of its formation and evolution. The main direction of the work is the study of the coordinated EU policy towards Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries. Much attention is paid to the formation and practical application of the regional approach by the EU. This phenomenon is considered from the point of view of the mutual influence of the main factors - the implementation of a planned logical policy, intra-European processes, changes in the balance of power within the EU and the reaction to external factors (Rentschler et al. 2025; Yermekbayev, Delovarova and Kaliyeva 2024).

In accordance with the stated goal, it is proposed to solve a number of tasks: 1) to consider the ratio of national and supranational components in the EU foreign policy activities in the areas under consideration; 2) to analyze the main interests and instruments of the EU policy towards Central Asia; 3) to determine the main stages of the formation and development of pan-European policy in the regions under consideration; 4) to identify and study the dynamics of the process of diversification of the EU approaches to Central Asia; 5) the analysis of the modernization of the EU foreign policy in the area under consideration from initially global to differentiated reflects changes in the structure of the EU interests and the evolution of the role of the region under consideration in the system of pan-European priorities; 6) to determine the significance of the EU policy in the specified region for the foreign policy activities of Kazakhstan.

As turbulence and uncertainty in global politics increase, the global balance of power changes and, accordingly, the redistribution of spheres of influence, the importance of Central Asia in global political processes has rapidly increased. In the context of the formation of a polycentric model of the world order, the Central Asian region with its natural potential and strategic position at the crossroads between North and South, West and East determines the foreign policy activity of global and regional players seeking to expand their spheres of influence. In this context, contradictions are intensifying between the United States and China, between the countries of the collective West and Russia in Central Asia, which is a geopolitical phenomenon that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union in the center of Eurasia. The development of the situation in this strategically important region will largely determine the new alignment of forces on the world stage and the contours of the future world order.

The development of new trends in world politics, the complication of globalization processes, the long-term consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic and the obvious crisis of the world order model that Western countries built after the collapse of the USSR with the center in the U.S. have greatly updated the study of the geopolitical

positions of extra-regional actors in the Central Asian countries. Since the emergence of new independent states, under the pretext of democratic modernization of the countries of the region, the collective West has been trying to assert its leadership in Central Asia, realizing its own geopolitical and geo-economic interests. The crisis of the liberal model has become a catalyst for fierce competition that has unfolded between extra-regional actors in Central Asia. In the context of the formation of a new paradigm of the world political order and changes in the structure of global governance, the importance of the region in world politics has increased, in which the influence of the leading centers of power has increased. The geopolitical projects they promote are aimed at strengthening their positions in Central Asia and creating effective mechanisms for ensuring economic and political interests. The U.S., the EU, China, Türkiye, Iran and Japan are all claiming a special role in determining the development of Central Asia, demonstrating an increased level of political and diplomatic activity in the region.

Central Asia at the Crossroads of the EU's External Interests

Against the backdrop of the fundamental transformation of the previously existing balance of power observed in the modern system of international relations, Central Asia continues to be the focus of attention of leading global actors, who in one way or another strive not only to strengthen, but also to further advance their positions in the region. One of the largest economic and political players in Central Asia is the EU. For more than three decades, the Central Asian countries have been striving to pursue a multi-vector foreign policy aimed at building pragmatic relations with extra-regional actors. At the same time, the foreign policy of these states, which have significant resource potential and a significant geopolitical position, has a strong influence on the development of regional political processes. Over the years of independence, the Central Asian countries have become active participants in world political processes, diversifying their foreign policy ties. In the emerging new world political reality, the Central Asian countries are striving to form a model of relationships with the leading centers of power in world politics, in which they position themselves as equal partners. In this regard, the question becomes especially important: Will the Central Asian countries be able to become full-fledged actors in world politics, EU policy, or will they remain in regional geopolitical processes?

The confrontation between Russia and the EU has exacerbated the existing contradictions and negative trends that have developed over decades in Central Asia. China and Russia are increasingly influencing the regional agenda. Their active policies are causing concern in Western countries, especially in the United States. In such conditions, the conflict potential of the region is increasing, and the likelihood of a clash of geopolitical and geoeconomic interests of the leading states in world politics is growing. Despite the preferences of a number of countries, primarily belonging to the collective West, to implement their foreign policy ambitions in world politics with reliance on hard power, the relevance of soft power in Central Asia is still in demand by such extra-regional countries as Russia, China, Türkiye, Iran, and Japan. The mechanisms of soft power used have become one of the effective levers for achieving political and economic influence. Central Asia serves as an example of the use of a

wide range of soft power instruments by various geopolitical actors who achieve their strategic goals through ideological, linguistic, educational, and religious instruments. For Russia, Central Asia is a vital region, especially in terms of stability and security (Bahturidze and Li 2024). However, Russia's geopolitical competitors are interested in creating a belt of unfriendly, often hostile states along the perimeter of Russia's borders. In such a situation, it is extremely important for Russia to prevent destabilization in the region and maintain good-neighborly relations with the former Soviet republics (Krasnopolksy 2022).

Central Asia is a region where global and regional powers intersect. This phenomenon is rare in other parts of the world. Russia, China, the USA, the EU, India, Japan, Iran, and Türkiye are expanding their influence here, which has increased the region's significance. The region has become a vast arena for interaction between great powers and other countries.

This article examines the interaction of Central Asian countries with the EU, the consequences of the EU's involvement in the region, how the geopolitical situation is expected to evolve in the future, and what their interests and potential for cooperation are.

The perspective and necessity of developing relations with the EU for the Central Asian countries are determined by the role and position of this union in European and global politics, economics, and culture. These regions are united by a common interest in regional and international security, economics, social and cultural development, investment activities, large international projects, and attracting advanced technologies and knowledge to the country. For more than 30 years, their cooperation has gone through several stages. Starting from 1991, the EU transitioned to direct contacts with the republics in the areas of technical, financial, and humanitarian cooperation. The main documents that formed the basis of the relations between the EU and the Central Asian countries were the Partnership and Cooperation Agreements, which were signed in 1995-1996.

These Agreements established an institutional, political, and administrative framework for the countries of Central Asia and the EU to facilitate all forms of bilateral cooperation. They introduced a political dialogue, created an open trade and investment regime between the parties, and provided for cooperation in a wide range of areas: from transportation to education and from energy to combating illegal activities. In 2007, the EU elevated the level of its regional political approach by adopting the Partnership Strategy for Central Asia. It is important to note that the EU was one of the first major partners of the Central Asian countries to propose, alongside bilateral cooperation, collaboration at the regional level (EEAS 2019a, 2019b).

According to the President of Kazakhstan K.-J. Tokayev, over 30 years, relations between Central Asia and the EU have contributed to strengthening the sovereignty, independence and territorial integrity of the Central Asian states, and interregional dialogue has covered priority areas of cooperation¹.

¹ Official website of the President of the RK. 2022. "Kassym-Jomart Tokayev took part in the Meeting of Heads of State of Central Asia and the President of the European Council." October 27, 2022. Accessed March 6, 2025. <https://www.akorda.kz/en/kassym-jomart-tokayev-took-part-in-the-meeting-of-heads-of-state-of-central-asia-and-the-president-of-the-european-council-289842>.

Kazakhstan, continuing its fruitful cooperation with EU countries, was the first among the Central Asian countries to transition to the next level of collaboration. Specifically, negotiations for a new Enhanced agreement between the EU and Kazakhstan began in 2011. This Agreement was signed in 2015. The Agreement on Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the EU aims to further develop our relations (EUR-Lex 2016). This document outlines 29 areas of cooperation, including political dialogue (human rights, democratic development, rule of law, fundamental freedoms), cooperation in trade and industry, transport and logistics, among others (EUR-Lex 2016; European Commission 2025).

The new phase of development of the geopolitical situation in the region and around it was characterized by a gradual change in the roles and levels of influence on Central Asia by major players (Council of the EU 2023). In this context, the need to update the EU strategy is due to important changed geopolitical realities. Firstly, the political ties of the Central Asian countries have changed, as they have become more self-sufficient and economically developed. Secondly, not only Russia and China, but also the United States, Japan, France, India and other countries are increasingly active in the Central Asian countries. Thirdly, the EU foreign policy priorities for Central Asia are being re-evaluated. In this context, a relatively stable Central Asia appears to be a suitable partner for demonstrating the effectiveness of European diplomatic and foreign policy.

In the current geopolitical situation, Central Asia is a new opportunity for a strong partnership for the EU, where the EU promotes a stronger and non-exclusive partnership in many areas. For the EU, democratization of political regimes in Central Asian countries is important, in addition to the traditional EU goals regarding the protection of human rights (European Commission 2025). Mutually beneficial cooperation is the guiding principle of the new EU Central Asian policy, which adheres to a non-exclusive approach to partnership. In other words, the EU political system is open to working together with its regional competitors to achieve its goals. The main priorities of the EU in Central Asia are the promotion of values and norms of behavior of European states in the region, support for democratic and market reforms, the dissemination of European culture, the fight against drug trafficking and organized crime, etc. The most attractive area of cooperation between the EU and Central Asia has been and remains energy, since, unlike the previously discussed periods, the EU directs its efforts more towards the economic and energy spheres, pushing issues of democratization, pluralism of opinions and human rights into the background (Toropygin and Lyubina 2024).

The economic security of the Central Asian states is determined by the state of various economic sectors, among which the food sector plays one of the key roles. The influence of the food sector on the economic security of Central Asia is broader, since, performing an integration function in the economy, integration mechanisms either help to mitigate threats caused by conflicts between elements of the economic system, or, on the contrary, exacerbate destructive processes in the national economy of Central Asia.

Anticipating a crisis in the global semiconductor market due to the ongoing escalation of China-Taiwan tensions, the EU has established a strategic partnership on rare metals with Kazakhstan. In November 2022, during the COP27 (UN Climate Change Conference) summit in Sharm El Sheikh, a Memorandum of Strategic

Partnership was signed between the EU and Kazakhstan in the field of creating a sustainable value chain for raw materials, battery production, and green hydrogen.

The partnership focuses on particularly important raw materials, such as rare and rare earth metals, as well as other industrial products that are important for the green and digital transformation of the economy. The Memorandum also highlights the potential for developing cooperation between the parties in the areas of investment, geological exploration of the subsoil, development of scientific research and modernization of the mining industry.

The EU needs several dozen types of rare metals, such as beryllium, tantalum and niobium. Kazakh companies currently produce most of them. As for the rest, Kazakhstan has deposits, but they are not yet developed, and a relative share has deposits, but their volumes are not yet known. European interest in rare metals extends to other Central Asian countries, which also have significant reserves (Muratova et al. 2023): graphite in Uzbekistan; tellurium, chromium and lithium in Kyrgyzstan; aluminum, manganese, lead and zinc in Tajikistan.

One of the promising areas for strengthening the energy dialogue between Kazakhstan and the EU is the development of cooperation in the field of nuclear energy and the related uranium industry (Nursultanova et al. 2024). This is particularly evidenced by the recent visit of French President E. Macron to Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Another significant issue in the relations between Europe and Central Asian countries is security and joint efforts to combat the threats of terrorism, Islamic fundamentalism, and radicalism. European countries themselves possess vast experience in addressing issues such as the fight against terrorism, extremism, separatism, and drug trafficking (Baizakova and Yergeshkyzy 2013; Moisé and Sorbello 2022).

Among the main factors contributing to the preservation and strengthening of the EU's interest in Central Asia, the following stand out: 1) the geostrategic position of the region, located at the crossroads of the geopolitical interests of world powers. A small geographical area already represents a highly concentrated multipolarity or a very dense concentration of a number of powers and major geopolitical players; 2) the high transit potential of Central Asia for trade flows between Europe and Asia; 3) the presence in Central Asia, especially in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, of significant energy and natural resource potential (especially hydrocarbons); 4) the immediate proximity of the Central Asian states to Afghanistan, which increases the risks of the spread of security threats and large-scale transit migration in the region, especially against the backdrop of the crisis that arose in the summer of 2021 in connection with the Taliban's coming to power. In this context, it should be noted that Kazakhstan has demonstrated to the world community a real readiness for international cooperation in various areas, including in the increasingly important area of facilitating border security.

Hybrid threats in Central Asia

The EU offers assistance to Central Asian countries in the fight against hybrid threats, including drug trafficking, which is taking new routes from Afghanistan to European

cities. In the EU Strategy for Central Asia, regional security issues include continued cooperation in combating the growth of drug trafficking from Afghanistan. Hybrid cyber attacks are also mentioned among the main emerging challenges. The EU is ready to share knowledge and information on both cyber security and the identification of hybrid threats. To assist in the fight against drugs and improve border management, the EU has developed two programmes: the Border Management Programme in Central Asia (BOMCA) and the Counter Drugs Programme in Central Asia (CADAP). BOMCA aims to strengthen security in the region, facilitate legitimate trade and transit, and reduce the illicit movement of goods and people. The CADAP aims to gradually adopt European and international practices in the field of counter-narcotics.

In general, during this period, the European Union tried not to view the Central Asian region through the prism of geopolitics, unlike other external actors Russia, the United States and China. After the repetition of the events in Central Asia in the summer of 2000, connected with the invasion of Islamic militants into Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, Europe began to watch the developments in the region with genuine concern. The EU became even more concerned about maintaining stability in Russia and Central Asia. In practical terms, some German politicians saw the transformation of the Caucasus-Central Asian region into a kind of belt of stability separating Europe from the unstable regions of the Islamic world.

At the same time, the need to continue implementing existing regional initiatives and cooperation platforms was noted, but with a differentiated approach. In particular, the EU expressed its readiness to abandon the practice of mandatory involvement of all states in the region in participation in a particular initiative and to proceed, first of all, from their interests and needs. It was assumed that such an approach could give greater impetus and effectiveness to EU programs and framework cooperation. In this regard, the European side demonstrated its intention to reassess the balance between regional and bilateral programs in favor of the latter. Another innovation that followed in the preparation of the document was the thesis on the need to strengthen the coordination of the EU's activities in the region. On the one hand, this concerns the EU itself, its structures and member states, whose coordinated actions could improve the effectiveness of the implementation of EU projects, dialogues and platforms, as well as promote their recognition. On the other hand, it was envisaged to expand efforts to promote dialogue with regional and international organizations (OSCE, Council of Europe, UN, etc.), as well as with neighbors of the Central Asian states and other countries operating in the region. It is important to understand that the adoption of these conclusions, as well as the restoration of the position of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia, was positioned as a manifestation of the EU's interest in further developing cooperation with the countries of the region.

In June 2017, the EU Council adopted updated conclusions on the Strategy, reaffirming that the core objectives and priority areas of the 2007 EU Strategy for Central Asia remain relevant. At the same time, the new conclusions placed emphasis on regional development assistance programmes for sustainable growth/employment and security/stability. According to the conclusions, in the context of the implementation of the Strategy, Brussels expressed its readiness to strengthen the dialogue with relevant regional and international organisations, in particular the OSCE,

the Council of Europe, the UN, as well as neighbouring and other states active in the region, in order to ensure synergies between EU policies and initiatives on issues such as security, connectivity, transport, energy and sustainable development, including opportunities linked to the Silk Road initiatives. In addition, the EU Council asked the EU High Representative and the European Commission to submit proposals for the development of a new EU Strategy for Central Asia by mid-2019, which should reflect a modern vision of cooperation between the two regions, taking into account current geopolitical realities, changing needs and new opportunities of the Central Asian states. Although this process was an internal EU assessment of its Central Asian Strategy, this time many other stakeholders were involved, ranging from the Central Asian states themselves to research centers and civil society, for which numerous conferences were held both in Brussels and in the countries of the region (Kurmanov 2024).

Firstly, Central Asia itself has changed. The states of the region have become more self-sufficient and economically developed. Two countries, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, were transferred to the category of middle-income countries according to the World Bank classification, which excluded them from bilateral EU aid programs. The change of power in Uzbekistan has significantly intensified and improved regional cooperation, opening up new opportunities for both the Central Asian countries themselves and non-regional players. Secondly, its immediate neighbors Russia and China have become much more active in the region. The creation of the Eurasian Economic Union and the promotion of the Belt and Road Initiative forced the EU to seek new formats of interaction within the framework of these projects. Thirdly, the situation in the EU (migration crisis, economic downturn, Brexit process, etc.) and on its borders (conflict in Ukraine, confrontation with Russia, strained relations with the Trump administration) required the EU to reconsider its foreign policy priorities. It is obvious that cooperation with the stable Central Asian region seems to be a sufficiently convincing example to demonstrate the viability of the foreign policy course of European diplomacy. Fourthly, on August 12, 2018, the presidents of the Central Asian states signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, which defines and regulates the rights and obligations of the parties with respect to the Caspian Sea, including its waters, seabed, subsoil, natural resources and airspace. This circumstance opens up additional opportunities for the EU to diversify routes for energy supplies to European markets bypassing Russia.

On 15 May 2019, after two years of work, the European Commission and the High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy presented to the Council of the EU a Joint Communication “The European Union and Central Asia: New Opportunities for a Stronger Partnership”, which de facto became the new EU Strategy for Central Asia. This Communication entered into force on 17 June 2019, following the adoption of the relevant conclusions of the EU Council. According to the developers of the Strategy, the mutual relations of the Central Asian states, as well as the level of their cooperation with the EU, have reached a qualitatively new level, especially in recent years. In this regard, the main message of the new EU programmatic document was to use the opportunities arising from this positive dynamics. The Communication reflects a modern vision of the interaction between the two regions, and also takes into account the current geopolitical realities, changing

needs and new opportunities of the countries of the Central Asian region. It should be noted that the core ideas of the previous EU policy document on Central Asia – connectivity, sustainable, inclusive and rules-based initiatives – remain unchanged

Transit diplomacy of the Central Asian region

An important area of intersection of interests of the EU and Central Asia is transport and infrastructure, i.e. transit diplomacy of the Central Asian region. The potential for cooperation in this area is truly significant. Firstly, for Europe, the Central Asian countries are valuable as markets for goods. Secondly, the transit potential of Central Asia is no less important for Europe, since it can potentially connect it with its largest trading partner, China, which is also very active in this area, especially within the framework of the BRI strategy.

The new transcontinental roads are also expected to give a new impetus to cooperation and strengthen ties, as the EU hopes to make greater use of the opportunities offered by the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route. This will not only reshape the Eurasian transport framework as a regional economic zone, but also as an alternative and sustainable route between Asia and Europe (Rentschler et al. 2025).

International transport corridors are, on the one hand, a phenomenon of the modern history of international relations. On the other hand, the development and expansion of International transport corridors is due to deep historical reasons associated with the expansion of interstate interaction, foreign trade, which began in the Ancient World. The development of International transport corridors occurs both in the context of globalization and increasing regionalization of international relations. At the present stage of transformation of international relations, further expansion of the network of International transport corridors will be determined not only by the national interests of individual states and the aspirations of individual regions, but also by the general direction of world politics set by the countries - leaders of the international system (Yermekbayev, Delovarova and Kaliyeva 2024).

At the Investors Forum for EU-Central Asia Transport Connectivity in January 2024², it was announced that the Trans-Caspian Transport Corridor project includes the rehabilitation and modernization of the rail and road networks, an increase in rolling stock, expansion of port capacity, improvement of border crossing points, and the creation of multimodal logistics centers and auxiliary hubs in all five Central Asian countries (Vinokurov 2023). For Kazakhstan, which is ready to play the role of a transit and transport bridge between the West and the East, it is important to achieve consistency between the EU strategy, Kazakhstan's Nurly Zhol program³ and China's BRI initiative.

² European Commission. 2024. "Investors Forum for EU-Central Asia Transport Connectivity." Accessed March 30, 2025. https://international-partnerships.ec.europa.eu/news-and-events/investors-forum-eu-central-asia-transport-connectivity_en.

³ Official Information Source of the Prime minister of the RK. 2021. "How Nurly Zhol program is changing Kazakhstan: Modern highways and new directions." October 27, 2021. Accessed March 30, 2025. <https://primeminister.kz/en/news/reviews/how-nurly-zhol-program-is-changing-kazakhstan-modern-highways-and-new-directions>.

Central Asia in a new geopolitical and geoeconomic influence

An important question remains: to what extent will the EU maintain its geopolitical and geo-economic influence in Kazakhstan and Central Asia in the context of China's growing influence and Russia's attempts to regain control over the region?

While the EU recognizes its own limitations in Central Asia, a more active European policy in the region will lead to significant geopolitical shifts and changes in the relationships between the main regional players such as the US, Russia and China.

The EU is conducting a series of consultations to, on the one hand, convey the priorities of its Strategy, and on the other, align them with the needs of the Central Asian countries themselves. It is important to listen to the opinions of the countries of the region to ensure the effective implementation of this Strategy. As part of the EU's cooperation with the Central Asian countries, an important interaction mechanism has been developed in the form of the EU-Central Asia Summit⁴, which brings together political leaders from the EU and Central Asian countries. Importantly, this format develops the institutionalization of relations between the Central Asian countries and the EU within the framework of existing high-level platforms. In this format, a wide range of issues were discussed, including the expansion of mutual trade and investment mechanisms, which gives a qualitative impetus to the social and economic development of all parties, the creation of favorable conditions for doing business, as well as the creation of a new platform for economic integration between the EU and Central Asia⁵. For the EU, it is important to transform Afghanistan into a safe and peaceful country with the participation of Central Asian countries, discussing issues of mutually beneficial and open water and energy cooperation in Central Asia. In particular, concerning the rational use and protection of water resources, adaptation to climate change, as well as the preservation of the environment and biodiversity in Central Asia. High-level cooperation between the EU and Central Asia demonstrates that the EU acts on two levels: developing bilateral cooperation with each of the Central Asian countries and promoting a multilateral format, which serves as additional confirmation of the renewed European interest in the region. These dialogue platforms represent a potentially additional area of cooperation with the EU, as it has extensive experience in the practice of regulation and collegial decision-making that can benefit the Central Asian region (Dewen 2025; Pepe 2024).

Kazakhstan and the Central Asian countries have entered a global era of turbulence, which is characterized by rapidly transforming international economic relations and a changing geopolitical landscape (Sullivan 2025). In particular, the Middle East conflict and the Ukrainian crisis, all these changes are often unpredictable, and therefore leading global players are faced with new challenges. At the current stage, the EU demonstrates a more specific understanding of its own national interests (EEAS 2025).

⁴ Official website of the Council of the EU and the European Council. 2025. "International Summit: First EU-Central Asia summit, 4 April 2025." Accessed April 5, 2025. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/meetings/international-summit/2025/04/04/>.

⁵ Official website of the Council of the EU and the European Council. 2025. "Joint Declaration following the first European Union-Central Asia summit, 4 April 2025." Accessed April 5, 2025. <https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/press/press-releases/2025/04/04/joint-declaration-following-the-first-european-union-central-asia-summit/>.

That is, it intends to engage in those areas in the region that are of greatest interest to it: ensuring security, improving the investment climate and developing sustainable economic growth, as well as developing human capital and increasing the level of employment. Other areas of public administration, human rights, education and others will also be modernized, but to the extent necessary for the effective implementation of the main tasks of the EU Global Gateway strategy⁶.

Dynamically transforming geopolitical relationships between the leading players in the global energy market, where Russia and China are actively building up a mutually beneficial partnership aimed at deepening ties in the economic, political and energy spheres. The unstable nature of changing global energy markets and the redistribution of the world economy and international relations leave their mark on the cooperation between Russia and China. But the strategic partnership of the two countries is becoming one of the most important factors in the development of a modern cross-border logistics infrastructure for the transportation of energy resources, which in the future will undoubtedly influence the formation of the future architecture of the global energy market (Carls 2024). One of the most important geopolitical parameters for Russian-Chinese rapprochement is the escalation of global military and political conflicts, and the ongoing fading of the European economy and the steadily gaining strength and demonstrating high potential of the Chinese market are strategically important components in the reorientation of Russian interests not only in the Central Asian, but also in the Asia-Pacific region.

Since the adoption of the EU Strategy for Central Asia in 2019 (Perianes Bermúdez 2023), the region has been influenced by significant external factors, such as Russia's aggressive war against Ukraine since 2022, the transition to power in Afghanistan after the withdrawal of U.S. troops in 2021, as well as China's increasingly assertive foreign policy. Therefore, the EU, reviewing its strategy for Central Asia in the light of the geopolitical situation, on 17 January 2024, the European Parliament in its Resolution⁷ called on EU countries to actively engage with the countries of Central Asia and promote a strategic partnership with them. Given the isolation of Russia by Western European countries caused by the start of Russia's military operation in Ukraine since 24 February 2022 and the growing influence of China in the region, this Resolution noted the need to strengthen trade routes through Central Asia, bypassing Russia. In this context, EU institutions have actively rethought their projects towards Central Asia, more actively engaging the region as a democratic actor as an alternative to the established autocratic players.

When considering cooperation between the Central Asian countries and the EU, it is important to take into account the factors that may or may already influence the implementation of this EU Strategy, so in my opinion the following recommendations can be made:

⁶ European Commission. 2024. "Global Gateway." Accessed March 30, 2025.

https://commission.europa.eu/strategy-and-policy/priorities-2019-2024/stronger-europe-world/global-gateway_en.

⁷ European Parliament. 2024. "European Parliament resolution of 17 January 2024 on the EU strategy on Central Asia (2023/2106(INI))." Accessed March 30, 2025.

https://www.europarl.europa.eu/doceo/document/TA-9-2024-0027_EN.html.

- Cooperation should be developed on the basis of a multi-level and sectoral approach. In particular, the existing cooperation mechanisms in the formats of a working group and dialogues, which diversify relations at different levels between the EU and the Central Asian countries.
- The European experience of combining the efforts of the states of the region to ensure internal security can be used by the Central Asian countries, primarily in the formation of an organizational and legal framework for the operational interaction of law enforcement agencies.
- In order to intensify technological cooperation with European countries, the Central Asian countries could initiate a discussion of cooperation in the use of advanced European technologies in the field of transport communications, energy, environmental protection, healthcare, as well as in the development of small and medium-sized businesses.
- Cooperation in the field of cybersecurity will become an important aspect of interaction in the near future, so it is necessary to further expand cooperation in the field of information technology, cybersecurity and in the training of qualified personnel.
- Cooperation in the field of education has great potential; it is necessary to develop specific educational programs in the specialties that Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries need.
- Scientific cooperation of academic communities, despite significant achievements, is fragmentary; it is necessary to initiate long-term comprehensive research to develop medium-term forecasts.

In environmental matters, it has become necessary for the Central Asian countries to develop and implement programmes that will bring their national environmental legislation into line with the practices of European countries (Akram, Mohazzam and Ali 2024). A significant part of the main environmental problems in Central Asia are related to the distribution, use and protection of the quality of water resources. Environmental issues should be taken into account in the regional dialogue at all levels, including continuing discussions within the framework of the EU's Water Resilience Strategy⁸ and the EU's Water Initiative Plus project⁹.

In my opinion, the EU also needs to pay more attention to the social and economic situation of the population in the Central Asian countries, which is generally deteriorating, and try to take into account potential social unrest (Sharipova and Kudebayeva 2023).

This, in turn, requires the EU to move away from a policy of passive reaction to events and move to a policy of proactive action, continuing the following areas of cooperation:

- consultations with EU Council experts in the field of social and economic security;

⁸ European Commission. 2024. "Water resilience strategy." Accessed March 30, 2025. https://commission.europa.eu/topics/environment/water-resilience-strategy_en.

⁹ European Commission. 2025. "The European Union's Water Initiative Plus (EUWI+) project." Accessed March 30, 2025. <https://www.euwipluseast.eu/en/>.

- coordination of the actions of the Central Asian countries with Afghanistan, continuing and expanding joint programmes with the EU, such as BOMCA and CADAP;
- using the BOMCA model in other security areas in Central Asia;
- expanding cooperation in emergency response;
- strengthening cooperation with European countries in the area of human security.

These measures should be strategic in nature and not adapted each time to specific situations, since the implementation of all this largely depends not only on funding from the EU, but also on the readiness of the Central Asian countries to implement it.

Thus, the new stage of the geopolitical situation in and around the region is characterized by a gradual change in the roles and levels of influence of the EU on Central Asia aimed at resilience, which is of strategic importance for the Central Asian countries in terms of security and interconnectedness, as well as energy and resource diversification (EEAS 2025).

The EU, influencing the development of the transport corridor along which oil and gas will be transported to Europe, can act as a kind of arbitrator and guarantor of stability, both in relation to individual countries and the organization as a whole. The EU's regional approach has good potential for effective interaction, so the EU is trying to strengthen cooperation, identifying which programs work effectively and which do not, and why. Despite the low geopolitical influence of the EU in Central Asia, it is important for the countries of the region to view the EU as another alternative player and actively offer new formats of cooperation to their partner in the sphere of economy, foreign policy and security.

Conclusion and discussion

The EU continues to be one of the world's leading players and a benchmark for global stability and development. In this regard, strengthening its geopolitical position and influence on the Central Asian region through the intensification of economic, political and institutional interaction should be viewed in a positive light. As a successful model of regional integration, the EU can offer the Central Asian countries many proven mechanisms for their regional rapprochement. The EU's most important priority is to promote deepening regional cooperation, which fully correlates with the goals and objectives of the Central Asian states in this area. In this context, one cannot fail to note the EU's constant search for a balance between regional and bilateral interaction formats. With its impressive resource potential and unique geographical position for creating transport corridors to European markets, Central Asia remains important for Europe's energy supply. In addition, it is important to understand that the Central Asian states, which are members of the OSCE, are positioned in the EU as an integral part of the European space. This is confirmed by the readiness of the Central Asian countries to cooperate with the EU in bilateral, regional and global formats.

The EU's policy documents regarding the region were not always perfect. However, despite certain shortcomings in the development and implementation of joint projects, European policy towards the Central Asian states can be called consistent and structured. If the EU's first steps largely reflected interest in the region as a source of

energy resources, then in the context of confrontation between the West and Russia since 2022, the EU's desire to interact with the Central Asian countries as equal partners on mutually beneficial terms has been noticeable.

Approaches to EU cooperation with Central Asia are being transformed not only by the European side, but also by the countries of the region, which is confirmed in the national policy documents of the latter. In the course of preparing and implementing EU strategies in the region, each of them adapts the European vector of its foreign policy activities to modern reality. This allowed the European side to develop a practical approach to interaction with the countries of the region, focusing on long-term strategic planning.

In my opinion, it is important to focus on increasing the practical impact of the new EU Strategy for Central Asia, which will be greatly facilitated by the unification of efforts of the states in the region. In this sense, it is necessary to hold regular consultations between the parties on the status and prospects of regional programs to coordinate the measures taken and avoid duplication. The development of criteria for assessing the effectiveness of such programs within the framework of the document and their further use would allow identifying and correcting shortcomings already in the process of work.

It is advisable to expand in each Central Asian state think tanks on the issues of cooperation with the EU from among representatives of civil society, research circles and others, that is, independent experts.

The Central Asian states need to demonstrate openness to dialogue with the EU and its partners, actively using, among other things, the capabilities of the EU Special Representative for Central Asia. For Kazakhstan, in addition, it is important to focus on the implementation of the Agreement on Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation between Kazakhstan and the EU. The priority areas for cooperation, both bilaterally and regionally, are seen as: development of trade and investment, transport and logistics sector, export of agricultural and other types of products, digitalization, green economy, improvement of the education system, human rights and the rule of law.

Despite the growing importance and active development, International transport corridors have not yet become the object of special scientific understanding. The special importance of land transport communications for the Eurasian continent with the largest latitudinal extent explains the scientific and practical significance of special studies of the Eurasian International transport corridors. The experience of functioning of transport corridors allows us to consider them a special form of international cooperation, producing unique features and characteristics that require conceptualization. Advancement along the path of mastering a new phenomenon of international relations and political order, namely international transport corridors, is impossible without building the logic of research from the genesis, the reasons that determine the emergence of the Trans-Caspian international transport route, to the description of their mature state, that is, in the process of historical development. It is this logic that explains the demand for studying the Trans-Caspian international transport route in the context of political studies.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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BETWEEN PATRONAGE AND DONORSHIP: GLOBAL GATEWAY AND ITS VIS-A-VIE IN EURASIA

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Abstract

This article examines geoeconomic leadership as a narrative of the EU foreign policy towards different countries. The article analyses the European discourse of leadership, which is associated with sovereignty/autonomy as the management of interdependence. The ongoing debate has not yet reached a consensus on its exact objectives and scope. However, it describes systemic pressures and competing interests of the EU Member States as the main variables in the leadership narrative in the EU political system. The EU's Global Gateway strategy aims to improve ties with countries around the world by adopting a pragmatic approach to sectoral cooperation. The article criticizes the Global Gateway strategy as a new approach, but raises concerns about its viability in the Eurasian space. It is evident that the EU seeks to compete with China's Belt and Road Initiative and other influential players in both the regional and global arenas in order to regain its global position. However, the Global Gateway strategy appears to reflect the evolving discourse around EU sovereignty at the national level. The article provides a comprehensive overview of the Global Gateway strategy in a broader macro-regional context, with a particular focus on the challenges and inconsistencies between the immediate and long-term objectives of EU foreign policy.

Keywords: *Global Europe, neighbourhood, strategic autonomy, geoeconomic leadership, interdependence, donorship policy, economic security, Russia, China, interregionalism.*

Introduction

The EU is the most developed regional integration association, interacting both with individual states in various regions of the world and with other regional structures. The EU's external relations have expanded significantly in the post-bipolar period. The EU seeks to consolidate its role in the international arena: in global trade, in the field of development assistance, in promoting regional integration, democracy and security.

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The EU consistently demonstrates interest in implementing interregional policy, which is enshrined in the EU foreign policy doctrine and is also confirmed by an extensive system of interregional relations. At the same time, various cases demonstrate that the EU does not always successfully implement its interregional strategy, and each of the existing and emerging areas has its own characteristics. In addition to the EU, other regional associations strive to build interregional ties, thus forming an extensive network of regional partners, among which the EU is the most active.

The problems of regional, interregional and, more broadly, transregional cooperation are acquiring a special resonance today and are attracting the attention of an increasing number of both foreign and domestic researchers. Most studies of the phenomenon of interregionalism in world politics (as institutionalized to one degree or another relations between two regional integration associations) belong mainly to European researchers, who rely primarily on the experience of the EU. In this regard, the Eurocentric view on this issue prevails in the theory of new regionalism.

This study develops theoretical provisions regarding the understanding of the phenomenon of interregionalism and its role in the foreign policy of a large regional association such as the EU. Among the most significant results obtained in the article are the identified functions of interregionalism as a foreign policy instrument, the causes, features and problems of the EU interregional practices in the modern world, and a refined typology of interregional ties.

The relevance of the chosen topic of this article is determined by both the above-mentioned practical considerations and theoretical problems: despite the existence of a number of studies devoted to the phenomenon of interregionalism, the key factors that determine the success or failure of the implementation of interregional relations in modern world politics have not yet been identified.

Theoretical background

On 1 December 2021, the European Commission unveiled a novel geoeconomic leadership strategy, entitled the Global Gateway Initiative. This broad connectivity plan aims to amass funds amounting to €300 billion for the 2021-2027 period, underpinned by a project and investment implementation principle¹.

The Global Gateway initiative is an integral part of the ambitious Global Europe program, which concentrates all available resources and instruments. The EU seeks to strengthen its role in the international arena: in global trade, in the field of development assistance, in promoting regional integration, democracy and security (Marx and Westerwinter 2022). The EU consistently demonstrates interest in implementing interregional policy, which is enshrined in the EU foreign policy doctrine, and is also confirmed by an extensive system of interregional relations (Caraveo and Iacomino 2023). At the same time, various cases demonstrate that the EU does not always successfully implement its interregional strategy, and each of the existing and emerging areas has its own characteristics. In addition to the EU, other regional

¹ European Commission. 2021. "Global Gateway: up to €300 billion for the European Union's strategy to boost sustainable links around the world." December 1, 2021. Accessed January 21, 2025. https://ec.europa.eu/commission/presscorner/detail/en/ip_21_6433.

associations strive to build interregional ties, thus forming an extensive network of regional partners, among which the EU is the most active (Gstöhl and Larik 2023).

The concept of connectivity, a fundamental principle of the Gateway, was adopted from the 2018 “Connecting Europe and Asia – Building blocks for an EU Strategy”, which has gained considerable traction. The concepts of connectivity and neighbourhood have been around for some time. Since the 1990s, both concepts have been included as integral elements of regional and global leadership strategies by the EU and other actors. The structuring of the neighbourhood space began after the Second World War. Subsequent initiatives to develop relations with Japan and India have confirmed the effectiveness of prioritising logistics and infrastructure projects. These efforts appear to be two-way, attracting private investment and promoting greater synergies with ‘neighbours of the neighbours’ and distant regional alliances. However, in implementing the Gateway in the Eurasian macro-region, the EU faces competing projects. In addition to China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), the presence of the ambitious, though perhaps less active, Eurasian Economic Union creates an environment of competing geopolitical leadership regimes.

In analysing the European project in the context of geostrategic hyper-competition, the paper proceeds from two main assumptions. Firstly, the global system consists of long-standing, divergent and even radically different political regimes, as well as regimes in a state of formation. The Eurasian macro-region is utilised as a site for analysing the competition of global and regional forces. Secondly, Global Gateway could be analysed in the context of the transition of leadership regimes from geopolitical to geo-economic. In this case the strategic autonomy of the EU necessitates the transformation of its conceptual framework and the rethinking of the system of interaction with partners and neighbours. Thus, the Global Gateway project represents an attempt to conceptually restructure the neighbourhood space in which the EU is confronted with the competing geo-economic leadership projects of other powers, namely China and Russia.

The paper argues that the content of EU-Russia-China competing projects in the Eurasian macroregion is found in the realisation of different models of geopolitical leadership. The concept of global leadership is common for actors and decisive for their mutual perception, however, the perception of this construct and its decision-making practice seems to be specific to each participant. The concept of leadership in the research field of international relations is analysed within the framework of two main methodological programmes: hegemonic stability theory (Wiener 1995; Ndzendze and Marwala 2023; Badalić 2024), which identifies leadership with the provision of public goods, and transactional theory, which emphasises the role of mutual benefits and advantages in the exercise of leadership (Tago 2025; Jansen and van Schijndel. 2025; Northouse 1997).

It is important to note that the present study does not seek to reject the possibility of commonality of interests and goals of the leading country and its followers. Rather, it employs the concept of leadership rent, which is predicated on the idea that a selected group of geopolitical leaders determines the nature and pace of global development and functions as natural ‘centres of gravitation’ for regional countries (Vadell and Caria 2025; Jansen and van Schijndel 2025). Two major behavioral patterns are chosen by

geopolitical leaders - donorship and patronage, frequently employed in the establishment and maintenance of centripetal impulse. These establish personalised relationships of dominance and dependence, often drawing on cultural and historical ties (Beeson and Crawford 2023).

Patronage-clientship is often considered as a special form of unequal exchange between two actors, characterized by inequalities of power and status, perceived or real. It is a private relationship governed by the principle of reciprocity and includes strategies for the protection and promotion of clients' interests, the use of which is conditioned by the set of incentives and disincentives offered to them (García-Marzá and Calvo 2024; Piattoni 2001; Sotiropoulos 2023).

Patronage, defined as the practice of providing support and assistance to another entity, particularly a state, entails a deep and pervasive integration into the behaviour of states, influencing the manner in which these states represent their interests (Amoah 2025). The concept of donorship entails the realisation of leadership rent through the establishment of robust economic relationships of interdependence (Barkin 2023).

According to R. O. Keohane, and J. S. Nye, "dependence means a state of being determined or significantly affected by external forces. Interdependence, most simply defined, means mutual dependence. Interdependence in world politics refers to situations characterized by reciprocal effects among countries or among actors in different countries." (Keohane and Nye 2012, 7).

As suggested by S. Destradi (2008), there are two main models of leadership implementation. On the one hand, in the normative persuasion model, the hegemon or leader engages in a process of ideological persuasion in which legitimacy emerges through the transfer of norms and values from the dominant elite to the peripheral or regional elite. The endogenous learning model, on the other hand, is based on the development of identical norms and values in different states as a result of chance or common responses to structural conditions. The second, the imitation model, focuses on followers adopting the norms and policies of the dominant state in an attempt to emulate its success, but without the leader attempting to influence their normative orientations or policies (Garzon 2024; Nayar 2007).

The EU is practicing a specific approach to geopolitical leadership and relations with its counterparts. It positions itself as a benevolent actor that provides material benefits and public goods (including concepts such as equality, economic and social progress, the rule of law, democracy, and human rights) to neighbouring or cooperative countries through specific instruments of economic aid and trade.

Global Gateway in the History of the Contesting Neighbourhood Policies in Eurasia

Space modelling constitutes an integral element of any global leadership strategy. In this context, Eurasia represents a unique space in which different models and practices of strategy implementation compete. The concept of structuring space is not a novel one; following the Second World War, global leadership assumed the arrangement of adjacent and distant territories on ideological grounds (NATO and the Warsaw Treaty Organisation; European Communities and the Council for Mutual Economic Assistance).

The formation of the EU's geopolitical leadership model has undergone several phases. Firstly, since 1989, the European Union has adopted a strategy that differentiates relations with neighbouring countries. The PHARE (Poland and Hungary: Assistance for Restructuring their Economies) programme was established as a pre-accession instrument, while TACIS (Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States) did not imply EU membership. Following the dissolution of the USSR, there was a substantial shift in the semantics of the concepts of Europe and the EU, and a natural zone of shared neighbourhood was formed, with both the EU and Russia claiming influence. During the period of enlargement in the early 2000s, the EU not only redrew the geographical boundaries of Europe, but also had a significant influence in determining the political and economic future of the states included in the 'ring of friends' within the Southern and Eastern Partnership. In doing so, the EU played a pivotal role in shaping the geopolitical landscape, determining which states would be considered part of the European zone and, by extension, the rules and institutions that define that zone: namely, peace, stability, and prosperity.

Secondly, the evolution of the conditionality concept in the 1990s has had a substantial impact on the interconnection between financial assistance and the fulfilment of specific political and economic criteria, to the extent that the alleged normative power of Europe has become a prevalent expression. The EU's influential integration project is regarded as the most effective explanatory model, functioning as a patronage instrument. Its rationalised civilising mechanisms of leadership rent are employed to transfer to the periphery, and the capacity for independent decision-making and the exclusive responsibility of third countries for security is frequently called into question. Similar models of representation, decision-making and implementation of specific measures in dealing with peripheral actors vis-à-vis global actors serve to pragmatise the patron-client approach (Bull and Watson 1985; Fawn 2020; Krois 2020).

Thirdly, until the mid-2000s, the European Union demonstrated a limited level of engagement with the so-called 'neighbourhood-of-neighbourhood' countries, prioritising its involvement with directly adjacent states. Since 2011, the EU has been experiencing a crisis in its foreign policy strategy. The Neighbourhood Instrument, which had existed since 2004 and structured relations with the countries on the southern and eastern flanks, did not initially envisage the possibility for the latter to gain membership in the EU. Concurrently, negotiations with Ukraine, Moldova and Georgia concerning their association with the EU have posed challenges to the rigid principles of engagement previously employed with those deemed to be under the pre-accession mechanism or unfit to join the exclusive cohort of European Union members.

The proclamation of China's BRI in 2013, as well as Russia's gradual turn to the East, the strengthening of this tandem in the Eurasian space, and the acceleration of the dynamics of Eurasian economic integration, have made it necessary for the EU to conceptually calibrate its own leadership model and foreign policy strategy.

Pillars of the EU Leadership

The EU mode of leadership is a contemporary manifestation of strategic sovereignty/autonomy, representing a derivative form of leadership since 2017. This complex interdependence is characterised by a commitment to policy, as defined by R. O. Keohane and J. S. Nye (2012). The realisation of leadership rent policy is contingent on the establishment and maintenance of a certain degree of interdependence. In economic literature, interdependence is typically characterised as a symmetrical relationship, with benefits accruing to both parties involved (Hillebrandt and Novak 2016). However, since the 1990s, the geo-economic landscape has complicated the interdependence relationship, placing recipient countries in a situation of strategy choice: export promotion or import substitution. As K. Barbieri (1996) asserts, leadership rents are more favourable to the donor than to the recipient, and stronger positive effects of foreign direct investment are evident in countries pursuing export rather than import policies. Moreover, an unfavourable partner under the influence of confounding factors – continuity, political regime and allied commitments – incurs net losses (Barbieri 1996; Aydin 2023).

As the Global Gateway progresses, the EU's transition to a new world order and worldview, one that is inherently economic but imbued with geopolitical ambitions, becomes increasingly evident. The prevailing narrative of the EU's adaptation to global turmoil presents a dichotomy between interdependence on the one hand, and strategic autonomy and European sovereignty on the other. This narrative has been a source of lively debate and much political discussion since 2017. However, a conventional view has generally established itself in the EU that a policy of increasing interdependence requires abandoning a clear distinction between economy and security.

The EU's Strategic Agenda (2021-2029) establishes a framework that connects the modernisation of internal cohesion with the EU's capacity to respond to geopolitical shocks. This, in turn, determines the EU's global ambitions and strategies. Traditionally, the EU has been regarded as a weak foreign policy player, but a strong economic actor. The established order of multilateralism, a system founded on principles established among other entities by the EU, is now being contested. The process of constructing European strategic autonomy, characterised by an enhancement of internal resilience, is eroding long-standing liberal norms and necessitates an elevated degree of congruence between the EU's domestic and foreign policies. The task at hand is of considerable complexity, as it pertains to the fundamental logic of European integration and the probabilistic model of enlargement. In this context, a pivotal aspect of formulating an effective response to this challenge lies in the calibration of relations with neighbouring countries, necessitating the reformatting of strategic decisions within a shifting geographical framework. This process is evident through the incorporation of the Global Gateway project within the overarching programme 'Neighbourhood, Development and International Cooperation Instrument - Global Europe'².

² EEAS. 2022. "The new 'NDICI - Global Europe' (2021-2027)." March 17, 2022. Accessed January 21, 2025. https://www.eeas.europa.eu/eeas/new-%E2%80%98ndici-global-europe%E2%80%99-2021-2027_en.

Global Europe is key to support the Global Gateway, our value-based connectivity approach, which will also be implemented through Team Europe Initiatives, putting together the leverage and know-how of EU institutions and EU Member States. It is posited that a rudimentary repackaging strategy could be employed to imbue the development programme with internal coherence and strategic direction, thereby exerting a notable external influence by virtue of the EU's actions. Furthermore, this initiative is predicated on the novel European instrument NDICI-Global Europe, which has already precipitated a substantial shift in the objectives of European cooperation policy.

In the context of Eurasia, the ability to exercise political and geo-economic leadership by EU entails not only the navigation of competitive dynamics with analogous initiatives such as the BRI and the Eurasian Economic Union, but also the fostering of internal European unity, the balancing of supranational and national powers, and the mitigation of the risk of fragmentation. Interventionism, as a necessary step in the implementation of the leadership rent strategy, raises questions about the extent to which member states are still willing to cooperate through the EU institutions, or, conversely, about the extent of their resistance (Giuli and Oberthür 2023).

The problem with the instrumentalisation of interdependence, a process in which states use global exchange networks to gain strategic advantage, is that it encourages them to abandon institutionalised cooperation and seek ways to reduce their vulnerability to economic absorption (Baldwin 1980).

It is important to acknowledge the influence of a paradigm shift in the global order on the shift towards greater internationalism, from a geopolitical to a geo-economic understanding of leadership. The EU's move away from neoliberal free market ideology predates the global financial crisis, although the beginning of this shift can be traced back to the early 1990s, owing to the aftermath of the financial crisis and the lessons learnt by China and South East Asian countries. The subsequent crises of the 2010s prompted a re-evaluation of economic security and its associated strategic autonomy, a shift that was further accelerated by the global financial crisis as governments worldwide sought to rescue strategic industries and financial instruments. The rise of U.S. hitech companies and Chinese industry underscored the evolving nature of the global economy. In response, the EU has embarked on a comprehensive re-evaluation of its economic policy instruments and the politicisation of economic sovereignty, signifying a deepening interventionist approach.

Growing competition and instability on the world stage have increased the importance of the relationship between economic, security and foreign policy. The EU insists that political-strategic considerations have become more prominent in its external economic policy. From a formal perspective, Global Gateway demonstrates that the EU has begun to shape a different kind of governance, in which economic policy serves broader strategic goals alongside commercial objectives related to specific regional policies. While the emergence of a more strategically oriented EU economic policy is a significant change, it should be noted that the EU is still characterised by a donor stance, i.e. seeking to bring about political change through economic instruments. Apart from this obvious observation, several important features of EU leadership should be noted. Firstly, the EU's leadership strategy continues to

exhibit characteristics of short-term and defensive mercantilism (Kovács 2024; Kirchner 2024). Secondly, the EU's emphasis on economic security remains to be aligned with other priorities on the union's foreign policy agenda. The attainment of viable geo-economic leadership necessitates a more precise delineation of the nature and extent to which European interests should be promoted within the macro-region. Thirdly, as part of the modernisation of the original Global Gateway project; the EU is moving away from a market priority in its foreign policy strategy towards a security policy. However, there is a risk that it will become overly enthusiastic in its geopolitical approach, adopting a defensive stance and competing with other players' geostrategic leadership projects.

In this context, concerns pertaining to security assume an increasingly predominant role in shaping Europe's geo-economic leadership. In accordance with the Global Gateway, several new EU strategies and documents have been proposed, pledging an economic policy aimed at safeguarding European sovereignty. This signifies the politicisation of economic strategy. At the beginning of 2021, the European Commission placed open strategic autonomy at the centre of its trade policy review. The concept was defined as the EU's ability to make its own choices and shape the world around it through cohesion and interaction, reflecting its strategic interests and values (Trade Policy Review 2021). The concepts of open strategic autonomy and European sovereignty are not entirely overlapping, yet they exhibit significant commonalities. Both emphasise the necessity to reduce economic vulnerability and to protect EU interests; however, they also underscore the importance of multilateral cooperation and collaboration.

In June 2023, the commission unveiled a landmark economic security strategy, thereby crystallising these concepts³. In 2024, the EU has reinforced its commitment to advance its geo-economic leadership. This assertion is evidenced by Mario Draghi's European Competitiveness Report in September 2024, which advocates for a genuine EU external economic policy that is consistent with security interests⁴. The paradigm that was previously conducive to the generation of prosperity was designed for a world of geopolitical stability, in which national security considerations played a minor role in economic decisions. However, deteriorating geopolitical conditions require a fundamentally different approach to Europe's industrial policy and a genuine foreign economic policy – or, as it is termed in the present day, statecraft (European Commission 2024). The interweaving of geopolitics and geo-economics is evident in the European Commission's recently unveiled policy principles for the 2024-2029 period, which underscore the utilisation of economic instruments to attain strategic objectives, the incorporation of economic and political interests, and the adept management of strategic vulnerabilities of interdependence (Brøgger 2024; Reykers and Rieker 2024).

³ European Commission. 2023. "Joint Communication to the European Parliament, the European Council and the Council on "European economic security strategy"." Brussels, June 20, 2023. Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?uri=celex:52023JC0020>.

⁴ European Commission. 2025. "A new plan for Europe's sustainable prosperity and competitiveness." Accessed January 21, 2025. https://commission.europa.eu/priorities-2024-2029/competitiveness_en.

The consistent adoption of EU strategic documents demonstrates a revised and calibrated position between economic efficiency and geopolitical sustainability. In this regard, French President Emmanuel Macron continues to advocate for greater strategic coherence in pan-European policy, since the EU's economic policy is subject to a rationale that goes beyond purely economic logic⁵. The European economic security strategy emphasizes that economic decisions merge with national security concerns (Braun 2024; Gänzle, Wunderlich and Hofelich 2024).

It is evident that the emergence of a novel geostrategic leadership paradigm within the EU is contingent upon a series of contradictory logics. On the one hand, the Global Gateway initiative was conceived with the objective of actualising the EU's aspirations concerning geopolitical global leadership, a process that entails interventionist actions by the hegemony. However, the concrete measures undertaken also reflect more limited commercial objectives. This duality in the EU's approach to geo-economic leadership is further evidenced by the emergence of European mercantilism in select policy initiatives (Rehm and Howarth 2025). A similar selectivity is evident in Resilient EU 2030, which refers to like-minded countries. However, the criteria for this group of countries remain undefined, thereby suggesting a reversion to the narratives of the 2000s that delineated the circle of friends of the EU and the geography of the Neighbourhood Programme. As part of the Global Europe strategy, the EU has entered into new trade and investment agreements with regimes in Africa, Central Asia and Latin America that can hardly be defined as like-minded in terms of geopolitical ideology. However, it is a commitment to European ideals that underpins the conditionality of any agreements entered into.

The foreign policy logic of the EU's Global Gateway initiative is also questionable. The European Commission has acknowledged that the project is oriented towards the EU's economic interests rather than foreign policy strategies (Buzogány, Parks and Torney 2025). Alongside the security logic dictating export restrictions with unfriendly regimes, there is also a clear commercial interest of the member states of the European community. In the EU's model of relations within a leadership strategy, as posited by O. Westerwinter (2022), the normative persuasion is evident. This model involves the leader assuming the role of transmitting norms and values, thereby undermining the legitimisation of security narratives of interdependence.

Between China's BRI and Russia's Eurasian Ambitions

The adoption of the NDICI - Global Europe Instrument and the Global Investment Initiative Gateway signal a rethinking of Europe's approach to China in the context of systemic rivalry between the U.S. and China, and to Russia in the context of competition for the neighbourhood.

The EU's position on China is characterised by a delicate balancing act, aimed at accommodating the divergent national interests of its member states. However, the EU's geo-economic leadership is predicated on a more nuanced and consolidated

⁵ Embassy of France in Washington, D.C. 2023. "Netherlands - Speech by M. Emmanuel Macron, President of the Republic, at the Nexus Institute (The Hague, 11/04/2023)." Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://franceintheus.org/spip.php?article11269>.

assessment of Europe's strategic posture vis-à-vis China. Notwithstanding the fact that Global Gateway was established as a competing project, the serious interdependence between the EU and Beijing necessitates a clear focus on economic security in strategic sectors and the achievement of reciprocity in trade and economic relations between the EU and China. It is evident that the EU's excessive interdependence on China is already causing trepidation within the European establishment, as the European project appears to be more a response to Beijing's interventionist agenda than a reflection of its own priorities. In addition to competition in the real economy and financial and infrastructure programmes, the EU is confronted with a fierce competition of narratives against the backdrop of China's and Russia's patronage proposals. The EU's emerging economic security agenda makes scant reference to the priorities and challenges of the normative order of many countries in the Eurasian macro-region. The expansion of the BRICS group in January 2024 to include the five largest countries in the Middle East and Africa, as well as other countries that have expressed interest in joining, also exacerbates the challenge of the EU's engagement with middle powers.

Moreover, the EU's global infrastructure programme represents a significant challenge to the EU's capacity to establish new partnerships founded on mutual interests rather than on leadership rents. The ongoing discourse concerning the reform of development banks, particularly the question of ensuring adequate funding to meet the rapidly escalating credit needs, constitutes a further salient aspect of cooperative Europe's geo-economic leadership.

Conversely, Russia has utilised the rhetoric of the historical ties to the political fabric of the targeted regions, whether in the former Soviet Union, with the EU or in post-colonial Africa. This has necessitated the implementation of a pragmatic selection of friendly states. Furthermore, political loyalty, the similarity of the regime to that of Russia, and the exploitation of common historical memory and modernist patterns of state sovereignty facilitate the implementation of a political patronage agenda. There has been an ongoing process of stating and revising the economic, political, and social objectives of the alternative regional and cross-regional integrations, which means that any project patronized by Russia is not the ultimate goal of the inter-regional collaboration. Rather, the aim is to deliver security to the public and impose structures that legitimise and maintain the current political status quo. Russia's approach to evolving its political and economic structure is multifaceted. On the one hand, the country has sought to align itself with the borrowing mechanisms of the EU through various financial and economic integration processes. On the other hand, it has also demonstrated a marked divergence from the EU's liberal democratic principles, pursuing policies that are designed to bolster the political fortunes of the current leadership. Ultimately, any integration process under Russia's auspices is characterised by a prioritisation of economic imperatives over immediate political gains.

A fundamental dimension of Russian geopolitical leadership is the primordialist understanding of sovereignty as a principle according to which a state does not recognize any authority higher than its own over its territory or people. Russia directly refers to paragraph 1 of Article 2 of the United Nations Charter, the Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations, and other international legal mechanisms.

The fundamental principle of public international law affirms the equality of all states, obliging them to adhere to the obligations they have established, while granting them the right to exercise full internal sovereignty. This principle also provides for the right of states to exercise their own political, social, economic and cultural systems of governance without external interference. Therefore, non-interference by other states in the internal affairs of any state, as well as non-violation of its territorial integrity and political independence, are of paramount importance.

The second pillar of Russian leadership is predicated on the notion that the economy comes first. Consequently, energy trade relations in Russia are frequently perceived as a matter of symmetric or asymmetric interdependence, with importers reliant on energy supplies and exporters dependent on the revenues generated by trade. This, in turn, engenders possibilities for natural links between unbalanced trade relations and political coercion. In this context, the willingness of an actor, in this case Russia, to control or cut off supplies to gas-dependent countries or trading partners can be seen as a means of exerting political influence. If the EU establishes political clientele by economic means, then Russia uses nothing but economic ideological patronage.

Thirdly, in the context of leadership criteria, Russia considers security to be the factor that exerts the greatest influence on the thinking and actions of other nations. The primary distinction between the collective West, particularly the EU, and Russia with regard to the conceptualisation of security lies in their divergent emphasis on values and national interests. The former places significant emphasis on long-term values within a liberal logic framework, whereas the latter prioritises short-term national interests within a realistic logic framework. Given its own difficulties with separatist regions, Russia has always believed that sovereignty, territorial integrity and non-interference should take precedence over all other norms under all circumstances.

The neighbourhood has always been regarded by Russia as its protective belt from the outside. Since then, the mere intrusion of a foreign power into Russia's neighbourhood has been perceived as a threat to Russia itself, thus explaining the Russian obsession with maintaining control over these territories by preventing their westernisation. The contradiction lies in Russia's constant promotion of the right to protect the rights and interests of Russian citizens and compatriots abroad, a concept which has been strengthened from one iteration to another. The defence of the Russian language on the global stage is presented as a means of justifying the realisation of Russian geostrategic interests in the 'near abroad', regardless of the cost. This rhetoric was employed in 2014 in relation to Crimea. In the context of its interactions with Russia, the EU's consolidated regulatory authority, characterised by its formal adherence to the principles of conditionality at the level of member states' bilateral strategies, encounters the practice of a policy of pragmatism.

M. Leonard and N. Popescu identified "five distinct policy approaches to Russia shared by old and new members alike: 'Trojan Horses' (Cyprus and Greece) who often defend Russian interests in the EU system, and are willing to veto common EU positions; 'Strategic Partners' (France, Germany, Italy and Spain) who enjoy a 'special relationship' with Russia which occasionally undermines common EU policies; 'Friendly Pragmatists' (Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Finland, Hungary, Luxembourg,

Malta, Portugal, Slovakia and Slovenia) who maintain a close relationship with Russia and tend to put their business interests above political goals; ‘Frosty Pragmatists’ (Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Ireland, Latvia, the Netherlands, Romania, Sweden and the United Kingdom) who also focus on business interests but are less afraid than others to speak out against Russian behaviour on human rights or other issues; and ‘New Cold Warriors’ (Lithuania and Poland) who have an overtly hostile relationship with Moscow and are willing to use the veto to block EU negotiations with Russia.” (Leonard and Popescu 2007, 2).

This classification serves to highlight the absence of a consolidated EU position on these matters. For instance, Russia frequently employs its strategic partnerships with influential actors to advance its interests. These strategic partners often have a special relationship with Russia. In contrast, countries that are friendly and cold pragmatists have a stable economic relationship with Russia and prioritise national interests over common political goals. Finally, new Cold War warriors are countries that are perceived as hostile towards Russia and are often willing to block EU-Russia negotiations.

Since 2014, when formulating their foreign policy strategies, both actors have been under no obligation to seek a solution to the aforementioned problem of Russia’s inclusion in the balance of power of the EU and European institutions. It is improbable that Moscow will seek to dominate Europe or join the European concert of democratic states. The ongoing consolidation of Russian-Chinese relations, coupled with Russia’s gradual strategic reorientation towards the East, effectively negates the necessity for Moscow to confront the so-called ‘European problem’. The EU’s strategic accommodation is complemented by periodic diplomatic interventions; however, these efforts have largely failed due to Moscow’s reluctance to modify its foreign policy and domestic political system. Rather than seeking to reset its relations with either the EU or the U.S., Russia is seeking to diminish American influence in key regions of strategic interest, including the Balkans, the Middle East, and sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, Russia has expressed contentment with the present level of practical cooperation with Europe. Paradoxically, there has been a deterioration in political relations despite the continued purchase of Russian gas by the EU.

Interregionalism as a balancing instrument and normative power of the EU

When typologizing the EU interregional relations in different regions, we can highlight their individual features in the context of the EU foreign policy: the use of interregionalism as a balancing instrument, the use of normative power to transfer institutional experience and broadcast political interests, asymmetry and the influence of non-state actors. In the framework of this work, it is also supposed to identify the connection between the above features and the functions of interregionalism (Söderbaum, StÅlgren and Van Langenhove 2005).

Firstly, interregionalism is an important balancing instrument. In this case, one of the main functions of interregionalism is manifested. The EU seeks to compete with world powers for influence in the regions of the world, primarily with the United States and China. In addition, it can be said that the special interest of the EU in conducting active interregionalism is a kind of claim to the status of a global leader. Balancing can

have different variations and manifest itself not only in its classical understanding of the balance of power to ensure security, since the balance of power can be associated with institutional balancing (Meissner 2017). On the one hand, it attaches importance to a significant increase in the number of international institutions with a decrease in the effectiveness of military power as a means of influence in the international arena. On the other hand, he agrees with the realist argument about the use of institutions by states or groups of states as a means of increasing their power. In my opinion, interregional and transregional relations generate pragmatic and flexible links, institutionalizing relations between regions. An example of this kind of balancing is the EU's desire to enter into major agreements in various regions to maintain balance in competition with other influential players, including in response to other major projects by competitors (Plank 2023).

Secondly, the peculiarity of the EU foreign policy is the use of normative power as the main instrument for promoting political interests and institutional experience in other regions. Normative power explains that the formation of the EU foreign policy course is built by promoting norms, based on cooperation and dialogue, and normative power is part of the EU identity (Santander 2025). The mechanisms of normative power are non-military forms of influence and include informational, procedural and open dissemination of norms. The EU, through these mechanisms, is considered to be able to set global normative standards, which is an important aspect of its power and influence in the modern world. The extensive set of normative principles of the EU is set out in the Lisbon Treaty of 2009, but at present the EU has a value system that includes not only the norms of freedom, democracy, human rights and the rule of law, but also social rights, sustainable development and the prevention of climate change. In my opinion, through the practice of interregionalism using normative power, the EU advances its liberal international agenda, disseminates European identity and contributes to strengthening the role of the EU and increasing its competitiveness. The main objectives of the EU regional policy are the dissemination of democratic values and institutions, which are set out in the concepts of European identity, good governance, the rule of law and the EU rules.

Conclusion and discussion

The implementation of the Global Gateway initiative demonstrates that the formation and implementation of the EU's geo-economic leadership strategy in Eurasia, and in particular in the so-called Eastern Partnership region, is faced with a number of contradictions. In addition to the presence of competing national interests within the EU, there are difficulties at the external level in ensuring the compatibility of donor policies with commitments to comply with the rules of global multilateralism. The success of the EU's geopolitical leadership programme, therefore, is contingent upon the EU's capacity to achieve strategic autonomy within a complex interdependent global context.

A further characteristic of the European model of geo-economic leadership is its focus on security, primarily economic security. Evidently, this approach is principally aimed at shielding Europe from geostrategic challenges posed by China and Russia and mitigating its dependence on critical supplies. The balancing of different models of

leadership depends, amongst other things, on the development of the strategic context and the behaviour of other major powers, including their reactions to EU initiatives. Nevertheless, the defensive nature of the EU's geostrategy appears to be at odds with the neoliberal inclination towards maintaining international cooperation and shaping the norms that underpin it.

It is evident that the absence of equilibrium between the geo-economic and geopolitical dimensions of the leadership strategy is pivotal for the further legitimisation of the EU's global role. The EU's transition from the normative persuasion model, where leadership is achieved through the transfer of norms and values from the centre to the periphery, to the endogenous learning model, based on the development of identical norms and values in different regions as a result of common responses to structural changes, has not yet been accomplished. After five years of Global Gateway implementation, the EU is still learning how to strategically manage interdependence.

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Conflict of Interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects

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GLOCAL SOFT POWER AS AN INSTRUMENT OF CHINA'S STRATEGIC INFLUENCE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS: A NEW MODEL OF INTEGRATION AND GEOPOLITICAL CONSEQUENCES

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Abstract

The article analyzes the global and regional importance of the South Caucasus region for China from an economic point of view, primarily as a market for its goods, as an area for investment. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia are part of China's global bridge to Türkiye and the countries of the EU, which are the most important partners and necessary for China's rapidly developing economy. In addition, the countries of the South Caucasus have both resource potential and a favorable geographical position with access to the Caspian and Black seas, so China actively interacts with Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia. The article examines the issues of China's soft power, which has begun to conduct active public diplomacy for strategic influence on the foreign policy of the South Caucasus and with the states bordering this region. The main focus is on the implementation of China not only humanitarian projects, but also its economic projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative. As a result, significant successes of China are highlighted and characterized, which, thanks to the voluntary participation of these countries interested in new investments, in creating an atmosphere of mutual trust and mutually beneficial cooperation. It is emphasized that, given the current geopolitical and regional realities, the countries of the South Caucasus have the opportunity to become a regional part of Chinese global projects.

Keywords: *glocal soft power, strategic influence, foreign policy strategy, geopolitics, geoeconomics, China, Türkiye, South Caucasus, Belt and Road Initiative.*

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Introduction

The relevance of the research article is caused by the Chinese global foreign policy strategy the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), which, if implemented, can become one of the leading geopolitical instruments of the new world order. The countries of Central Asia and the South Caucasus are actively involved in the implementation of the project. It is the BRI in close connection with the contacts that China has managed to establish with the post-Soviet countries that is the key direction and basis of China's foreign policy in the post-Soviet space.

It is well known that the effectiveness of soft power policy depends, first of all, on the extent to which certain aspects of public life of a specific subject of the world politics are attractive. First of all, it concerns issues of the effective functioning of the political system and its focus on ensuring the rights and freedom of citizens, the dominance of a certain value system, ensuring a high level of economic, technological and social development. Over the past decades, these factors have allowed many developed countries to succeed in using various soft power instruments and exert a strong influence on the foreign policy of other states.

Unlike them, China doesn't have a full set of soft power instruments yet, that would ensure the unconditional attractiveness of its socio-political system. However, the current speed of socio-economic development of the country, the increase in the level of well-being and political culture of citizens in the future will be able to create the conditions for turning China into a worthy world center of power. In this regard, Chinese diplomacy in the area of soft power has chosen a slightly different vector of development. The main emphasis is placed on the originality of the country's foreign policy concept, special forms of cultural and economic interaction with other states.

During its history, China has almost always acted as a significant subject in international relations. However, despite many achievements and dominance in relations with other countries, China didn't claim global dominance, didn't strive to turn its empire into a world power, imposing its values on the rest of the world. Certainly, this was mostly determined by both the geographical location and the level of socio-economic development of the country. However, perhaps this approach to international relations let this state to exist for millennia, preserving its unique civilization and culture.

The unprecedented growth of the modern China's economy coincided with the process of disintegration of the world socialist system, and then the USSR. Taking advantage of it, the American foreign policy in the world significantly intensified, aimed at strengthening the leadership of the United States in all the global processes. These circumstances awakened fears in the PRC regarding the potential for the creation of a unipolar world order, which couldn't have a positive impact on the growing Chinese economy. The foreign policy concept of China was supplemented with a new idea indicating the inadmissibility of global dominance and dominance of any state, which increased the degree of vulnerability of the comprehensive security system of the PRC. The foreign policy concept of China began to focus on the formation of the multipolar world order.

According to a number of Chinese researchers, after the end of the Cold War, China realized that the thinking of the old era no longer corresponded to the new times

(Xuetong 2023; Zhang 2023). As for the most important circumstances of the formation of international security in the new Chinese foreign policy concept, its core can be considered common interests of countries, trust and the development of economic cooperation between them instead of demonstrating superiority of force. Naturally, the main condition for ensuring security is common interests, and not the superiority of one country's group of states' force. In spite of the difference in power, if there are common interests, then there is a basis for mutually beneficial cooperation in the field of security. In this context, modern security cannot be based on the growth of armaments, cannot be based on a military alliance, since security must be based on mutual trust and common interests (Yuanyuan 2023). If trust is established between states, the probability of a military aggression or a threat of its use decreases.

The growth rate of China's economy has significantly enabled the country to make extensive use of its increased material resources in implementing its foreign policy strategy. According to Chinese President Xi Jinping, China's current capabilities are fully consistent with its aspiration to create a 'community of common destiny for mankind' where mutual cooperation reigns and a new approach to international relations replaces the outdated one. As Chinese politicians say, a 'community of common destiny' is achieved through the creation of a 'community of common interests' and a 'community of common responsibilities'. Common interests roughly correspond to a situation of economic interdependence, where countries complement each other¹.

The pragmatism of China's modern foreign policy is expressed the following value imperatives: 'not to call oneself a hegemon', 'to hide talents', 'to look for common ground while preserving differences', etc. This leads analysts in many countries, pondering the intentions of the Chinese leadership, to imagine these soft power values as merely a temporary 'freezing before the leap' tactic to ensure the implementation of the Great Chinese Strategy in the 21st century (Kane and Falkovich 2023; Krieger 2022; Men 2020).

The main instruments of Chinese soft power policy in the South Caucasus

Since the early 2000s, China has been moving towards work to form a positive image of the country. The main components were propaganda of the successes in economy, peaceful foreign policy, humanistic values of traditional Chinese thought, ideals of a "harmonious world" and diversity of civilizations. The authorities have stepped up work to create and develop international media capable of spreading the influence of Chinese soft power.

In order to implement its foreign policy plans, China actively uses soft power in the field of culture and education. Thus, in 2007, speaking at the 17-th Congress of the CPC, president Hu Jintao stated that China should expand cultural influence as a component of soft power². Cultural exchanges and educational programs carried out by

¹ MFA of the PRC. 2020. "Remarks by H.E. Xi Jinping President of the People's Republic of China At the High-level Meeting to Commemorate the 75th Anniversary of the United Nations." September 21, 2020. Accessed January 21, 2025. https://www.mfa.gov.cn/eng/xw/zyjh/202405/t20240530_11341449.html.

² CHINA.ORG.CN. 2007. "Hu Jintao's report at 17th Party Congress." October 15, 2007. Accessed January 21, 2025. <http://www.china.org.cn/english/congress/229611.htm>.

the PRC are the obligatory components of the Chinese diplomacy. The main structure for organizing such events is the State Chancellery for the Dissemination of the Chinese Language (Hanban).

In order to implement the soft power strategy, China opens cultural and educational centers – Confucius Institutes – in many countries around the world. Thanks to these institutes, students become familiar with Chinese culture, history and language and, as a result, show more favorable attitude towards China and its geopolitical and geoeconomic projects. The main task of Confucius Institutes is to teach Chinese and introduce the history and culture of the country. The project, launched by the State Chancellery for the Dissemination of the Chinese Language Abroad, began in 2004. Based on information that appeared in the Chinese media several years ago, experts assumed that this organization spends about 100-150 thousand dollars annually on the maintenance of one Confucius Institute. China spends more than 500 million dollars a year on the creation of Confucius Institutes (Lee 2019).

In the early 2000s, Hanban began opening Confucius Institutes in various countries and planned to increase the number of institutes to 1000 by 2020 (Sergeyeva 2013). However, tense relations with the United States prevented the implementation of China's plans. The Western countries, led by the United States, viewing the Confucius Institutes as an instrument of Chinese propaganda and a threat to the weakening of Western influence in the world, began to restrict the activity of these institutions and their sponsor Hanban. For this reason, a number of institutes in Western countries were closed, and in the United States they received the status of foreign missions (O'Keeffe 2020).

As a result, China has changed its soft power tactics, renamed Hanban into the Language Education and Cooperation Center and transformed the headquarter of Confucius Institute into the China Foundation for International Education. This structure coordinates all educational, humanitarian and cultural projects implemented abroad. In addition, thanks to the reforms, existing Confucius Institutes have been given the opportunity to establish bilateral relations with Chinese and foreign universities. The new format, based on cooperation centers with foreign universities and organizations, contribute to the increase of the popularity of the Chinese language abroad, as is done in many countries around the world (Dukic 2020).

Through the Confucius Institute project, China may eventually gain a large number of loyalists scattered around the world. The Chinese language is becoming increasingly popular among students around the world, and, as a result, their attitudes toward China are changing to a more positive one. For instance, Confucius Institutes teach the official Mandarin dialect of Chinese language, which is spoken and written in mainland China (distinguished by its use of simplified hieroglyphs). The teaching materials also introduce the Chinese point of view, and it means that students are likely to follow the official Chinese position rather than others in the Chinese-speaking world, especially Taiwan (which uses traditional, more difficult hieroglyphs).

The second important area for the application of China's soft power is the active attraction of students from all over the world to Chinese universities. According to data statistical report of the Chinese Ministry of Education, before the pandemic, in 2019, more than 490000 students from about 196 countries studied in China, including from

the countries of the South Caucasus³. China's soft power policy in these countries works in a targeted manner and is aimed at involving the most educated and literate strata of society in this process (Rice 2023; Brown 2021; Boc 2015).

In the South Caucasus, particularly, in Georgia and Azerbaijan, two Confucius Institutes are functioning, where there is steady increase in the number of students studying Chinese. As for Armenia, China has also opened a Confucius Institute, which was established within the framework of the agreement signed between the governments of the Republic of Armenia and the PRC, and has been operating since February 26, 2009, in accordance with the agreement signed between Hanban under the Ministry of Education of China, Yerevan State Linguistic University (YSLU) and Shanxi University. The Confucius Institute of YSLU is designed to improve the level of knowledge of the Chinese language and culture among Armenian youth, and to strengthen cooperation between China and Armenia.

The mission of the Confucius Institute is to teach the Chinese language, which gives everyone access to Chinese art, education, science and culture, as well as to preserve and develop informal Armenian-Chinese relations that have a rich historical past. The Confucius Institute library provides textbooks for school-age children, including books, CDs, self-study discs, workbooks, parent or teacher guides and teaching materials, posters and interactive study books. Textbooks are also designed for passing the HSK and BCT exams – the Chinese equivalents of TOEFL and IELTS – with the help of which Armenian students get the opportunity to study in Chinese universities from a month to a year, depending on the chosen program. Textbooks are devoted to the geography, history and literature of China. The texts are presented in Chinese and Russian, with colorful illustrations. The Confucius Institute at YSLU has a collection of books in Chinese, which are devoted to Chinese history, and it is told about one Chinese dynasty in each of them. Similar events are being carried out in Georgia and Azerbaijan as well.

In addition to Confucius Institutes, Chinese language study centers are also opening in various universities in the region (Sun 2022). For example, in 2015, the Center for Chinese Language and Culture opened at Yerevan State University in Armenia. Teaching is conducted by highly qualified specialists from China. A similar center was also opened at the Russian-Armenian University in 2014. Both centers are very popular among students and there is a steady trend of growth in the number of students in them. On August 22, 2018, the opening ceremony of a Chinese school in Yerevan, designed for 405 students, took place⁴. Moreover, even before the opening of the school, the number of applications exceeded the number of available places in the school, which indicates a high interest in the Chinese language and culture in Armenia.

China's success in economic development has significantly changed the country's foreign policy agenda, focusing it on protecting the economy from external challenges, the country's progressive development as a global center and, as a result, transforming

³ Ministry of Education of the PRC. 2019. Statistical report on international students in China for 2018." April 18, 2019. Accessed January 21, 2025.

http://en.moe.gov.cn/documents/reports/201904/t20190418_378692.html.

⁴ ARMENPRESS. 2018. "Armenian-Chinese friendship school opened in Yerevan." August 22, 2018. Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://armenpress.am/en/article/944603>.

soft power into smart power, which implies a combination of soft and hard, mainly economic, methods. However, unlike other centers of power, China doesn't seek to impose its vision of global development and focuses primarily on the interested participation of other countries in joint projects. Emphasis is placed on the need for all countries to adhere to the basic principles of free and fair trade, which have been developed by the entire community of nations over the past decades. In this sense, Chinese President Xi Jinping has been actively calling for greater Chinese influence in many global and regional affairs at the same time. In recent years, the new policy has been embodied in the creation of new institutions, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB), and new initiatives, such as the BRI, to create the physical basis for the future 'community of common destiny'.

In general, the BRI itself certainly has a geopolitical focus. Therefore, the countries involved in this project have to take more balanced approach to the political consequences of implementing this initiative. These problems make a huge influence not only on countries, the interests of which intersect at the regional level, but also on those located at the 'end points' of the route. This is especially true for China itself, which, despite the assurances of its leaders about the lack of aspirations of the state to expand its geopolitical influence in the world, competently, systematically and stably implements a foreign policy strategy of smart power, which ultimately should provide the necessary conditions for turning this country into one of the world leaders.

However, almost all countries express their readiness to be involved to one degree or another in this global project. The initiator state of the BRI only needs to correctly set priorities on the political map of the world in order to, firstly, guarantee its active participation in ensuring political stability in the regions; secondly, develop the infrastructure of transport arteries, thereby ensuring its economic presence in transit countries on a permanent basis; thirdly, achieve a high level of capacity on the relevant communications, which, of course, should increase the level of profitability of the entire project; and fourthly, involve as many states on different continents as possible in the project.

The latter problem is associated with the development of competent logistics for the entire communication system and a balanced foreign policy. First of all, this concerns the issue of eliminating the monopoly position of any state in the entire Eurasian transport network, which is fraught with the weakening of Chinese influence. In our opinion, in order to resolve this problem, in addition to the main transport corridors, a wide network of secondary railways and highways will be developed, which will create the necessary conditions for bypass maneuvers during the implementation of passenger and freight transportation.

Despite the fact, that the northern route of the BRI, which passes through Russia and Belarus, is more profitable from the economic point of view, however, due to the Ukrainian crisis and the escalation of confrontation between Russia and Western countries that have imposed sanctions against Russia, China is forced to reassess all the risks to its foreign trade, as a result of which the southern route, which passes through the countries of Central Asia, the Middle East and the South Caucasus, may temporarily become more expedient. For example, in 2022, China has already sent a freight train from the Chinese city of Xi'an through the territories of Kazakhstan,

Azerbaijan, Georgia, Romania, Hungary, Slovakia and the Czech Republic to the German city of Mannheim (Jamshidian Tehrani and Golshan Khavas 2024; Vida and Illés 2024). In this case, some states that are not located on the main transport artery will certainly gain economic benefits, including the countries of the South Caucasus.

The South Caucasus is one of the most important regions in the world, where the interests of various global and regional powers collide. In recent years, China has begun to pursue an active policy of regulating relations with all the countries of the South Caucasus and the states bordering this region. Azerbaijan occupies a special place in the region, striving to become a key transport hub between Europe, Asia and the Middle East. This is due to the desire to maintain a balance between the main geopolitical players implementing various large-scale transport projects in the South Caucasus. As a result, Azerbaijan is participating in several projects at the same time: TRACECA (which largely coincides with the BRI) and the North-South international transport corridor. The desire to diversify the export routes of its own energy resources, as well as to make the most of the transit potential is manifested in the country's inclusion in alternative projects of diametrically opposite significance in the political sense.

Over the past years, there has been a significant strengthening of economic relations between China and Azerbaijan. According to the latest data, in 2023, trade turnover between China and Azerbaijan increased by 43.5% compared to 2022, reaching 3.1 billion dollars, and the volume of Chinese direct investment in Azerbaijan increased from 800 million to one billion dollars⁵. In turn, the trade between the two countries from January to October 2024 exceeded the previous year's result by 17.1% and has already amounted to more than 3.7 billion⁶. Chinese investors are actively involved in investment projects in the energy sector, oil refining industry, highway construction and telecommunications systems (Kladensky 2024).

In October 2023, China and Azerbaijan signed a memorandum of understanding aimed at developing cooperation and stimulating investment, including in the field of renewable energy. The document was signed following the meeting between Azerbaijani Energy Minister Parviz Shahbazov and Head of the National Energy Administration of China Zhang Jianhua on the sidelines of the Belt and Road Forum for International Cooperation in Beijing. The memorandum is aimed at developing cooperation in the electric power, oil and gas, petrochemical and renewable energy sectors, as well as stimulating investment in energy projects. Particularly, the discussion focused on participation of Dongfang Company in the construction of the 230 MW Garadagh solar power plant and cooperation with China Gezhouba Group Overseas Investment Company on renewable energy projects. The meeting also discussed the prospects for expanding activities of SOCAR Trading Company in the Chinese market (Sharifli 2024). About a year later, in November 2024, SOCAR Green and China Energy Overseas Investment Co. Ltd. signed an agreement to build a 160

⁵ REPORT.AZ. 2024. "AZPROMO: Chinese investments in Azerbaijan near \$1B." Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://report.az/en/business/azpromo-china-s-investment-in-azerbaijan-nears-1b/>.

⁶ Karimli, Ilham. 2025. "China Becomes Azerbaijan's 4th Largest Trade Partner in 2024." *Caspian News*, April 22, 2025. Accessed April 30, 2025. <https://caspiannews.com/news-detail/china-becomes-azerbaijans-4th-largest-trade-partner-in-2024-2025-4-22-32/>.

MW solar power plant in the Fizuli district. Memorandums on the development of renewable energy were also signed with China Energy and China Datang Co. Ltd⁷.

In the context of China's increased activity in the South Caucasus, it is necessary to pay special attention to the example of Georgia, with which China has developed not only humanitarian, but also trade and economic relations, in particular, purchasing almost all agricultural products from Georgia. According to the free trade agreement concluded between China and Georgia in 2017, 94% of Georgian products and services are exported to the Chinese market without customs duties. It mainly concerns the export of wine, alcoholic and soft drinks, tea, nuts, honey, vegetables and fruits, as well as nitrogen and mineral fertilizers, plastic products and other goods. Georgia is the first state in the South Caucasus to conclude such an agreement with the PRC. As a result, China is one of Georgia's largest trading partners, and trade turnover between the two countries has a generally stable growth trend. Thus, in 2022, trade turnover between the two countries increased by 25.8% compared to 2021 and amounted to 1.8 billion dollars. Exports from Georgia to China increased by 19.7% and amounted to 736.7 million dollars⁸. In 2023, trade turnover amounted to 1.6 billion dollars, slightly less than the previous year, but imports from China increased by 18% and exceeded 1.3 billion⁹.

Chinese companies are also involved in the construction of new and development of existing infrastructure objects related to various sectors of the Georgian economy. Chinese capital is present in the Poti port free industrial zone, 75% of which belongs to CEFC China Energy Company Limited since 2017¹⁰, and highways are being built in different regions of Georgia as well (German 2022; Rekhviashvili and Lang 2024).

A major infrastructure initiative in Georgia is the Anaklia deep-sea port project, which aims to enhance the country's role as a transit hub between Europe and Asia. In May 2024, Georgian authorities announced the results of a tender to find an investor to build the deep-sea port. Levan Davitashvili, the country's Minister of Economy and Sustainable Development, announced that the winner was the Chinese consortium China Communication Construction LTD. Due to its location, it has strategic importance for both Georgia and China, as it can be integrated into China's Belt and Road Initiative as a complement to the existing ports of Batumi and Poti in Georgia, creating a more flexible and extensive logistics infrastructure in the South Caucasus (Akhmedova and Gelashvili 2024).

One of the most important infrastructure projects is the construction of a 23-kilometer road and a 9-kilometer tunnel on the Kvesheti-Kobi section, which is an

⁷ REPORT.AZ. 2024. "Azerbaijan signs green energy agreements with Chinese companies." November 14, 2024. Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://report.az/en/cop29/azerbaijan-signs-green-energy-agreements-with-chinese-companies/>.

⁸ GEOSTAT. 2023. "External merchandise trade of Georgia in January-July 2023 (Preliminary)." August 21, 2023. Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://www.geostat.ge/media/55924/External-Merchandise-Trade-of-Georgia-in-January-July-2023.pdf>.

⁹ GEOSTAT. 2025. "External merchandise trade of Georgia in 2024 (Preliminary)." January 20, 2023. Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://www.geostat.ge/media/67898/External-Merchandise-Trade-of-Georgia-in-2024.pdf>.

¹⁰ PB Services. 2025. "Free zones in Georgia: how do they differ from each other?." April 21, 2025. Accessed April 30, 2025. <https://pbservices.ge/blog/free-zones-in-georgia-difference/>.

important part of the high-speed highway modernization project of the North-South international trading corridor and will bypass the existing road – the dangerous Kobi-Gudaur section, where very often there is a risk of avalanches¹¹.

Chinese companies have also increased their activity in the construction of residential complexes in Georgia, in particular in the Hualing Tbilisi Sea Plaza project. The main investor in the project is the Chinese construction and real estate company Hualing Group. Launched in 2013, the project includes the development of a large multifunctional complex of residential, commercial and entertainment areas around the Tbilisi Sea. Chinese investment in the Hualing Tbilisi Sea Plaza project is estimated at approximately 200 million dollars (Lomsadze 2019). This project is one of the largest foreign investments in the real estate sector in Georgia. In the development of the Tbilisi Sea area with the aim of creating modern residential and commercial areas, while contributing to the overall economic growth of the region¹².

In July 2023, during the visit of former Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Garibashvili to China, Chinese President Xi Jinping stated that regardless of the developments in the international arena, bilateral relations between the countries had already reached a new level, which is characterized as a strategic partnership in China's foreign policy concept (Lin and Fu 2024). In addition, the Chinese leadership emphasized in every way that the political trust between Georgia and China is strong, and the results of cooperation in various areas are noticeable and will become even more noticeable (Avdaliani 2023).

Garibashvili also met with the Prime Minister of the PRC Li Qian, who announced a 'new era' of Georgian-Chinese relations; with the Chairman of the Board of Directors of Huawei Lian Huam, who expressed interest in the prospects of working in Georgia; with the President of the AIIB Qin Liqun, with whom the prospects for implementing new investments in Georgia and improving the investment circumstances were discussed (Avdaliani 2023). In addition, a memorandum of understanding on the study of the Chinese language in Georgian schools was signed at the Beijing Language and Culture University (Avdaliani 2023).

It is important to highlight that Georgia has been one of the most loyal allies of the United States for many years. However, today it doesn't prevent the Georgian leadership from developing ties with China, and it was done during the tensest period of relations between China and the United States. The Georgian leadership understands that from China's point of view, Georgia is an important part of an infrastructure project that involves mutually beneficial trade and economic cooperation.

As Georgia, Armenia can also significantly deepen cooperation with China in the economic, educational and cultural spheres, as well as within the framework of the Belt and Road Initiative. Armenia's participation in this project opens up great opportunities for the country, especially if we take into account that economic cooperation between

¹¹ EBRD. 2025. "North-South Corridor (Kvesheti-Kobi) Road Project." Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://www.ebrd.com/home/work-with-us/projects/psd/50271.html#customtab-7daf14d83f-item-17de12cf03-tab>.

¹² European Parliament. 2024. "Three Eastern Partnership neighbours in the South Caucasus." Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/factsheets/en/sheet/172/three-eastern-partnership-neighbours-in-the-south-caucasus>.

China and Armenia has been steadily growing in recent years. In 2023, trading volume between the two countries amounted to about 1.3 billion dollars, which is about 28% more than the previous year¹³. Moreover, this trend has been maintained over the past few years, despite the coronavirus pandemic, which demonstrates China's interest in further expanding bilateral cooperation (Matin and Najdov 2020).

Attention is paid to the development of transport and logistics infrastructure. Two planned logistics routes in Armenia – the North-South highway and the Armenia-Iran railway – if implemented, could be included in the global Chinese project. The North-South highway is one of the most significant projects in the history of independent Armenia¹⁴. It will facilitate access to the Black Sea not only for Armenia, but also for Iran. Thanks to the highway (including the Kvesheti-Kobi section, which is under construction in Georgia), a high-throughput route will be formed from China to Iranian ports, and from there along the North-South highway to the ports of Georgia or Russia. Unfortunately, Armenia has not been able to complete the construction of this highway for such a long time.

The construction of the Armenia-Iran railway could become an additional stimulus for the economic growth of Armenia, Iran and Georgia, since the new railway will significantly increase the volume of cargo transportation between the countries and connect the port of Bandar Abbas and the Georgian ports of Batumi and Poti, which are important links in the BRI project (Vinokurov et al. 2021). However, the construction of this railway requires careful analysis. The problem is that the question of the economic feasibility of the project arises here, as the construction of the railway network connecting Iran, Azerbaijan, Georgia and Russia is almost completed in the region. The construction of the Armenia-Iran railway may be feasible only for geopolitical reasons, since it will be an alternative to the Azerbaijani railway. However, it should be noted that the function of this alternative can also be performed by the North-South highway, which is already under construction.

One of the most notable projects involving China in Armenia is the development of the Smart City. The agreement, signed in 2020, envisages investments of 10-15 billion dollars over 15 years to create a city where innovative technologies will control all systems, ensuring a high standard of living. The project is expected to contribute to the development of innovative technologies in the construction sector of Armenia, as well as deepen scientific cooperation between China and Armenia.

In addition, China National Geological and Mining Corporation (CGM) has shown interest in investing in Armenia's mining industry. The visit by the representatives of the Chinese corporation to Armenia in 2021 led to discussions on possible cooperation, with both sides exploring investment opportunities in the country's mining sector. Unfortunately, in some regions through which important communications for the BRI

¹³ ARMSTAT. 2025. "External trade database." Accessed January 21, 2025.

<https://armstat.am/en/?nid=160>.

¹⁴ ADB. 2025. "Armenia: North-South Road Corridor Investment Program - Tranche 3." Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://www.adb.org/projects/42145-043/main>; EIB. 2016. "Armenia North-South road corridor." Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://www.eib.org/en/projects/all/20100130>; EFSD. 2014. "Construction of the North-South Road Corridor in Armenia." Accessed January 21, 2025.

<https://efsd.org/en/projects/construction-of-the-north-south-road-corridor-in-armenia/>.

pass, high political tensions remain (Jiang 2021). One of these regions is the South Caucasus, where there are many unresolved conflicts dating back centuries. In the 1990s, the conflict in Abkhazia and South Ossetia broke out, which escalated again in 2008, and tensions between Armenia and Azerbaijan are constantly growing. The presence of such problems makes the South Caucasus politically unstable (Yang 2024).

In our opinion, given these circumstances, the question arises about the expanding of China's military presence in regions where there is high political tension. The military-political component of China's foreign policy doesn't correspond to the role that China plays in the global economy. In this regard, China's military presence in many unstable regions would allow it to reliably protect its economic interests, which are linked to the global projects (Bayramov, Safarova and Garajayev 2023; Fawn and Bruder 2022). In particular, according to some sources, within the framework of the Iranian-Chinese agreement of 2021, the content of which are not disclosed, a project to build a Chinese military base on the coast of the Persian Gulf is being considered. It should be taken into account that the American fleet is located in the Persian Gulf, and on the other side of the Gulf, in Qatar (only 200 km from the Iranian coast), there are large US and Turkish air bases. The construction of the military base by China in Iran will mean a significant change in the balance of power not only in the Persian Gulf itself, but also in the entire Middle East. A military presence in Iran will allow China to protect the communications it has invested in the region to supply its economy with the necessary resources from the Middle East, and will also create a reliable basis for expanding its presence in the South Caucasus.

In our opinion, in cooperation with states for which the establishment of peace in the relevant regions, including the South Caucasus, is also vitally important, China will be able to play a significant role in ensuring stability on the entire Eurasian continent as a whole, which will preserve and strengthen the conditions for mutually beneficial cooperation between states. This circumstance will also become a deterrent for those forces, the activities of which may lead to a weakening of China's geopolitical influence in Central and Middle Asia.

Conclusion and discussion

Therefore, China's infrastructure projects in the South Caucasus under the Belt and Road Initiative have significant potential to transform Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia into an important bridge between Asia and Europe. The region's strategic location allows it to be used as a transit hub for cargo transportation. Investments in infrastructure, energy and trade reflect China's interest in integrating the South Caucasus into its broader Eurasian strategy. Major infrastructure projects such as the Baku-Tbilisi-Kars railway and the construction of the Anaklia port will help China create a Middle Corridor to speed up trade with Europe, create alternative routes through Central Asia and the Caucasus, and reduce dependence on maritime trade routes. The latter issue is especially relevant for China given the increased geopolitical tensions in the Asia-Pacific region between China and the U.S. in recent years. However, with Donald Trump taking office as U.S. President, there is a possibility that economic interests will ultimately prevail, resulting in bilateral agreements between China and the U.S.

Expanding trade ties can boost local economies, create jobs and attract additional foreign investment in regional logistics, which can facilitate smoother trade flows between China and Europe, increasing the economic potential of the South Caucasus and offering local businesses access to new Chinese markets. Relations with these countries also allow them to diversify their external partnerships. Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia have traditionally balanced their foreign relations with larger powers such as Russia, the EU and the U.S., each of which has unique strategic and economic interests in the region. China's approach of pursuing economic development without imposing political conditions makes it an attractive partner, as the South Caucasus countries can benefit from investments without compromising their foreign policy independence (Sigurdh 2024).

China's soft power policy in the South Caucasus demonstrates a strategic approach aimed at developing influence through economic, cultural and diplomatic engagement rather than coercion, investing in infrastructure projects, promoting trade through the BRI, and facilitating education and cultural exchanges, in order to establish itself as a reliable neutral partner in the region. This strategy allows China to navigate the complex geopolitical dynamics of the South Caucasus while avoiding traditional direct competition with powers such as Russia, Türkiye and some Western countries. However, the effectiveness of China's soft power remains limited by local skepticism, cultural differences and limited historical ties with the region. Despite these challenges, China is taking a pragmatic and long-term approach. Ultimately, China's influence in the region will depend on its ability to balance its strategic interests with the needs and sensitivities of local states.

In general, all these circumstances allow us to assert that China, in the process of implementing its foreign policy strategy, successfully applies in practice such means and methods of foreign policy activity that are inherent in the smart power, combining various political and economic levers of influence. At the same time, not only the political and economic influence of the PRC is expanding in the world, but also impulse is given to the development of the economies of many countries.

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Conflict of Interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical Standards

The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects

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THE NEXUS BETWEEN INTERNATIONAL HUMANITARIAN LAW AND PEACEBUILDING IN AFRICA: A COMPREHENSIVE ASSESSMENT OF PREVENTIVE MECHANISMS

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Abstract

This article is a comprehensive study that examines the complex and symbiotic relationship between international humanitarian law and peacebuilding in the African context. The article examines the crisis and humanitarian dimensions, focusing on the potential of African countries in conflict prevention and resolution. In this context, it takes into account the peace and conflict characteristics of Africa, which are characterized by a complex interplay of factors including political instability, ethnic tensions, competition for resources and external interventions. This study highlights the key role of the nexus between international humanitarian law and peacebuilding in Africa's quest for peace, stability and development. By embracing this synergistic relationship, African governments, regional organizations and the international community can contribute to a comprehensive and holistic approach to conflict prevention and resolution. Addressing the challenges and limitations identified is imperative to unlocking the transformative potential of this nexus and paving the way for a more peaceful and prosperous African continent. The article highlights the urgency of preventing and mitigating these conflicts, thereby seeking to clarify how international humanitarian law and peacebuilding can function as complementary pillars in the pursuit of sustainable peace and security. By examining the practical application of these mechanisms, the study elucidates how they contribute to the prevention of armed conflict and the promotion of durable peace. Implementation gaps, where the principles of international humanitarian law are not effectively translated into practice, remain a persistent problem. Furthermore, the prevalence of political interests among the parties involved can hinder peacebuilding efforts, leading to the perpetuation of conflicts. Resource limitations in African countries, both in terms of funding and capacity, pose significant obstacles to the full realization of the potential of international humanitarian law and resilient peacebuilding.

Keywords: *International Humanitarian Law, Peacebuilding, Africa, Preventive Mechanisms, Humanitarian Crises, Triple Nexus Approach, Conflict, Development, Sustainable Peace.*

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Introduction

International humanitarian law and peacebuilding, rooted in a body of international treaties and customary practice, provide the legal framework governing the protection of human rights during and after armed conflict. Its fundamental principles, covering the protection of civilians, the rights of combatants, and humanitarian assistance, carry with them inherent preventive mechanisms. By setting standards for responsible conduct in conflict, international humanitarian law serves as a critical deterrent against the escalation of violence and the commission of atrocities. Resilient peacebuilding, by contrast, is a holistic approach to conflict prevention and resolution. It encompasses a range of strategies and interventions aimed at addressing root causes, promoting reconciliation, and facilitating socio-economic development. This approach recognizes that achieving lasting peace requires addressing not only the symptoms but also the underlying structural and societal problems that fuel conflict. The relationship between international humanitarian law and peacebuilding is clarified through their shared civilizing goals and complementarity. Both areas prioritize the protection of civilians, the promotion of human rights and humanitarian assistance. This interrelationship opens up opportunities for joint and strategic interventions that leverage the strengths of each framework. The study carefully examines the various preventive mechanisms that emerge from the synergies between international humanitarian law and peacebuilding in the African context. These mechanisms include early warning and conflict response systems, the incorporation of international legal principles into peace agreements, reconciliation and transitional justice initiatives, and security sector reform.

The African continent has been marred by a long history of conflict and humanitarian crises, creating a complex and deeply entrenched challenge (Sarkin 2010). The spectrum of conflicts in Africa encompasses civil wars, inter-ethnic tensions, and insurgencies, all of which have inflicted significant human suffering, displaced populations, and disrupted economic stability. This persistent recurrence of conflicts underscores the urgent need for comprehensive strategies to both prevent and resolve them (Kalu 2009). The historical context of Africa's conflicts cannot be understated. Many African nations grapple with the legacy of colonization, which imposed artificial borders and exacerbated ethnic tensions (Aboagye 2009). In the post-independence era, these nations faced the daunting task of forging national identities and managing diverse populations within their borders. These historical factors continue to contribute to the region's intricate and multifaceted conflict landscape (Fomekong 2020).

Resource competition is another pivotal factor driving conflict in Africa. The continent is endowed with abundant natural resources, including minerals, oil, and fertile land (Enaifoghe 2022; Likoti 2006). However, competition over the control and exploitation of these resources has often led to armed conflicts and hindered sustainable development (Opongo 2022; Solomon 2024; Ojo-Adewuyi 2024; Afolabi and Marumo 2024). These resource-related conflicts highlight the importance of addressing the economic dimensions of conflict prevention and resolution.

External interventions have also played a significant role in African conflicts (Sarkin 2009; Jeche 2024; Mbanje 2024). Global powers and regional organizations

have been involved, either through military interventions or diplomatic efforts, adding layers of complexity to conflict dynamics. These external actors often pursue their strategic interests, sometimes exacerbating tensions rather than contributing to peace.

Humanitarian crises have tragic consequences for African conflicts. Displaced communities, refugees, and internally displaced persons have become all too common in the continent's conflict zones. The scale of human suffering underscores the urgent need for humanitarian assistance and the protection of civilians caught in the crossfire (Zambara 2010; Kemedjio 2024). Given the multifaceted nature of conflicts in Africa and their devastating impact, there is a growing recognition of the need for innovative approaches to address them comprehensively (Yeboah and Okoro 2024). This research study aims to explore one such approach by examining the relationship between International Humanitarian Law (IHL) and peacebuilding. IHL, a body of international treaties and customary practices, has evolved to govern the conduct of armed conflicts (Yuni, Iloh and Ngang 2025). Its principles, including the protection of civilians, combatant rights, and humanitarian assistance, provide a legal framework designed to alleviate the suffering caused by armed conflicts. However, a critical question arises: can IHL not only serve as a means to mitigate the consequences of conflicts but also contribute proactively to their prevention? In parallel, peacebuilding has emerged as a holistic approach to preventing and resolving conflicts. It recognizes that sustainable peace requires addressing not just the surface-level symptoms but also the root causes of conflicts. This approach emphasizes reconciliation, socio-economic development, and addressing the structural issues that perpetuate violence (Omotola 2025). Within this broader context, this research study aims to delve into the intricate interplay between IHL and peacebuilding in Africa. It seeks to uncover how these two frameworks, with their shared objectives of protecting civilians and promoting human rights, can synergize to create preventive mechanisms that may contribute to reducing the recurrence of conflicts in the region (Kilonzo and Chitando 2023; Singh 2024).

Research Objectives and Significance

The primary objective of this comprehensive research study is to unravel the intricate and symbiotic relationship between IHL and peacebuilding within the African context (Mraja 2023). This relationship, often overlooked in academic and policy discourse, carries profound implications for the prevention and resolution of conflicts on the continent. At its core, this research seeks to answer a critical question: how can IHL and peacebuilding function synergistically as mutually reinforcing pillars in the pursuit of sustainable peace and security in Africa? To achieve this overarching objective, several specific research objectives have been delineated:

- Understanding the African Conflict Landscape: One of the initial aims is to provide a nuanced understanding of the African conflict landscape. This involves dissecting the various factors that contribute to conflicts, including political instability, ethnic tensions, resource competition, and external interventions. Such an understanding is essential to contextualize the role that IHL and peacebuilding can play in mitigating these complex challenges.
- Examining IHL as a Preventive Mechanism: This research delves deeply into the components of IHL, exploring how its fundamental principles, such as the

protection of civilians, combatant rights, and humanitarian assistance, inherently carry preventive mechanisms. By setting standards for responsible behavior in conflict, IHL serves as a critical deterrent against the escalation of violence and the commission of atrocities. This examination aims to illuminate the potential of IHL in preventing conflicts before they escalate.

- **Analyzing Peacebuilding as a Holistic Approach:** Another crucial research objective is to analyze peacebuilding as a holistic approach to conflict prevention and resolution. This involves studying the spectrum of strategies and interventions encompassed by peacebuilding, with a focus on addressing root causes, promoting reconciliation, and fostering socio-economic development. Understanding how peacebuilding addresses not only the symptoms but also the underlying structural and societal issues that fuel conflicts is pivotal.
- **Identifying Shared Objectives and Complementarity:** The research investigates the nexus between IHL and peacebuilding by identifying their shared objectives and complementarity. Both frameworks prioritize the protection of civilians, the promotion of human rights, and the provision of humanitarian assistance. Recognizing and understanding these intersections paves the way for collaborative and strategic interventions that leverage the strengths of each framework to maximize their impact on conflict prevention and resolution.
- **Scrutinizing Preventive Mechanisms:** The study scrutinizes various preventive mechanisms that emerge from the synergy between IHL and peacebuilding within the African context. These mechanisms encompass conflict early warning and response systems, the incorporation of IHL principles in peace agreements, reconciliation and transitional justice initiatives, and security sector reform. By investigating the practical applications of these mechanisms, the research elucidates how they contribute concretely to the prevention of armed conflicts and the promotion of lasting peace.

Significance of the Research

This research is of paramount significance in the context of Africa's quest for peace, stability, and development. African governments, regional organizations, and the international community must embrace the synergistic relationship between IHL and peacebuilding as a cornerstone of a comprehensive and holistic approach to conflict prevention and resolution on the continent (Muthien 2024). Furthermore, this research study highlights the challenges and limitations that must be addressed to fully realize the potential of the IHL-peacebuilding nexus. It emphasizes the imperative of closing implementation gaps in IHL, navigating political interests among involved parties, and overcoming resource constraints to unlock the transformative potential of this relationship (Troy 2017). Ultimately, the research aims to provide actionable insights and recommendations that can guide policy and practice, offering a roadmap towards a more peaceful and prosperous African continent (McClintock and Brachet 2019). By doing so, it contributes to the broader global efforts to prevent conflicts and alleviate human suffering in regions facing persistent instability and violence (Tschudin 2024).

The African Conflict Landscape

In this part, we delve into the complex and multifaceted African conflict landscape. We aim to provide a comprehensive understanding of the various factors that contribute to conflicts across the continent (Mekonnen Mengistu 2015). By examining historical legacies, resource competition, external interventions, and the resulting humanitarian crises, this part sets the stage for understanding the urgency of conflict prevention in Africa.

Factors Contributing to Conflict in Africa

Africa's history has been shaped by a complex web of factors that have contributed to the recurrent conflicts witnessed across the continent. These factors, both historical and contemporary, have often intertwined to create a volatile environment conducive to conflicts.

The enduring impact of colonization stands as a foundational historical factor influencing numerous conflicts across Africa (Sauti and Makaripe 2024). Colonial powers, in their pursuit of imperial dominance, imposed artificial borders that frequently disregarded ethnic, linguistic, and cultural distinctions. In the post-independence era, these imposed boundaries have evolved into sources of tension and conflict, as various groups within these confines strive to assert their identities and interests.

Ethnic and religious diversity, while contributing to cultural richness, has concurrently acted as a catalyst for conflict on the continent. Deep-seated rivalries among ethnic groups and religious disparities have given rise to tensions and, in some instances, violent confrontations. The competition for resources, political power, or territorial control can further intensify these tensions, culminating in localized or widespread conflict (UN 2001).

The abundant natural resources found in Africa, encompassing minerals, oil, arable land, and water sources, have frequently become focal points of contention. The struggle for control over these resources can escalate into armed conflicts as groups or states vie for economic advantages and access to vital commodities (Kim, Mitchell and Wylie 2024). This resource curse phenomenon contributes to the exploitation and looting of resources, perpetuating a cycle of violence.

Political instability, fueled by weak governance structures, corrupt practices, and authoritarian regimes, has played a pivotal role in many African nations (Ottuh 2025). The absence of accountable and transparent governments fosters grievances among populations, leading to protests, rebellions, or civil wars. Moreover, political instability can create power vacuums that armed groups or militias exploit for their gain.

External interventions by global powers and regional organizations in African conflicts have been a double-edged sword. While intended to address and resolve issues, these interventions often complicate matters further. Motivations behind external involvement range from geopolitical interests, such as access to resources, to a desire to shape the political landscape (Sweet 2021). The presence of foreign military forces, peacekeeping missions, or diplomatic interventions can introduce additional complexities to conflict resolution efforts (Gambari 2021).

The humanitarian consequences of these conflicts are profound and devastating for civilian populations. Displaced communities, refugees, and internally displaced persons (IDPs) endure severe hardships. The breakdown of social systems, infrastructure, and access to basic services like healthcare and education exacerbates the suffering of vulnerable populations, leaving an indelible mark on the human fabric of the affected regions (Etefa 2019).

Understanding these multifaceted factors contributing to conflict in Africa is essential for policymakers, researchers, and peacebuilders. It underscores the complexity of the challenges facing the continent and emphasizes the need for holistic and context-specific approaches to conflict prevention and resolution. By addressing the root causes and manifestations of these conflicts, there is a greater chance of fostering lasting peace, stability, and development in Africa.

The Urgency of Conflict Prevention

The urgency of conflict prevention in Africa cannot be overstated, given the profound human, social, and economic costs associated with recurrent conflicts on the continent. These conflicts have far-reaching implications that extend beyond borders, affecting not only African nations but also regional stability and the global community (Makwerere 2024).

At the core of the pressing need for action lies the humanitarian suffering experienced by African populations trapped amid conflicts. Armed confrontations lead to the mass displacement of millions, compelling them to abandon their homes in pursuit of safety. Those displaced, including refugees and internally displaced persons, endure profound hardships, grappling with issues such as food scarcity, inadequate access to clean water, deficient healthcare, and disruptions to the education of children (Nedziwe and Tella 2023). These dire humanitarian conditions underscore the moral imperative to prioritize conflict prevention.

The toll of armed conflicts in Africa extends beyond the immediate loss of lives to encompass the erosion of livelihoods. Beyond direct violence, the secondary effects of conflict, including disease, malnutrition, and insufficient medical care, contribute to a significant human toll. Moreover, these conflicts disrupt livelihoods, resulting in economic setbacks and increased poverty. Destruction of infrastructure in conflict zones further compounds the challenges faced by communities, hindering their ability to rebuild and recover (Tar 2021).

African conflicts seldom confine themselves within national borders; instead, they frequently spill over into neighboring nations, intensifying regional instability. Cross-border conflicts trigger refugee flows, the proliferation of violence, and the mass displacement of populations across regions. This regional instability can have far-reaching global repercussions, influencing the rise of transnational terrorist groups or impacting international trade and diplomacy.

The destructive nature of conflicts in Africa acts as a formidable impediment to development efforts. Scarce resources that could otherwise be allocated to education, healthcare, and infrastructure development are diverted to military expenditures and humanitarian assistance. This diversion hampers progress toward achieving Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), perpetuating cycles of poverty and inequality.

The urgency for conflict prevention is intricately linked with other critical challenges confronting the continent, including climate change, food security, and public health crises. These challenges can exacerbate existing tensions and contribute to the initiation or escalation of conflicts. A comprehensive approach is imperative, combining conflict prevention measures with strategies addressing resilience and sustainable development to effectively tackle these interconnected challenges (Frimpong 2025). In light of these urgent and interconnected challenges, there is a compelling case for proactive and comprehensive conflict prevention strategies in Africa. The international community, African governments, and regional organizations must collaborate to address the root causes of conflicts, promote good governance, and build robust peacebuilding mechanisms. By doing so, they can work toward a more peaceful, stable, and prosperous future for the continent, where the emphasis is on preventing conflicts rather than reacting to their devastating consequences (Moyo and Khumalo 2025).

Principles and Framework of IHL

This part delves into the core principles and framework of IHL. It is critical to establish a solid foundation of knowledge about IHL, as it forms one of the pillars of this study. This part explores the historical development of IHL, its legal framework, and the fundamental principles governing the conduct of armed conflicts. By doing so, we lay the groundwork for understanding how IHL can serve as a preventive mechanism.

International Humanitarian Law, often referred to as the laws of armed conflict or the laws of war, is a body of international law specifically designed to regulate the conduct of parties involved in armed conflicts, with the primary aim of reducing the suffering of civilians and combatants who are no longer taking part in hostilities (de Koningsh 2023). The framework of IHL is rooted in several fundamental principles and legal instruments. At the core of IHL lies the principle of distinction, a fundamental precept that requires parties engaged in armed conflicts to differentiate between combatants and civilians, as well as between civilian objects and military objectives. This foundational principle explicitly prohibits the intentional targeting of civilians and civilian infrastructure. It also mandates that combatants must visibly wear a distinctive uniform or openly carry their weapons to ensure their identification as legitimate targets.

Another key principle within IHL is that of proportionality, dictating that the use of force during armed conflicts must be proportionate to the military objectives pursued (Agbo, Haruna, Oladunni et al. 2024). In essence, the harm inflicted on civilians and civilian objects should not exceed what is deemed necessary for the anticipated military advantage. This principle seeks to strike a delicate balance between the requirements of military necessity and humanitarian considerations.

The principle of humanity underscores the overarching goal of IHL—to alleviate human suffering during armed conflicts. Parties involved in the conflict are obligated to take all necessary measures to protect civilians, the wounded, and individuals no longer participating in hostilities. This obligation includes providing medical care and humanitarian assistance to those in need, irrespective of their affiliation or status.

Recognizing the distinct roles of neutral states and impartial humanitarian organizations in armed conflicts, IHL incorporates the principle of neutrality. Neutral states are expected to refrain from taking sides in the conflict, while impartial humanitarian organizations, such as the Red Cross and Red Crescent, are granted special protection and privileges to provide aid and assistance to those affected by the conflict.

IHL is codified in various legal instruments, with the four Geneva Conventions of 1949 and their Additional Protocols of 1977 serving as primary pillars. These conventions delineate the rights and protections afforded to the wounded, sick, shipwrecked, prisoners of war, and civilians in times of armed conflict.

The Rome Statute of the International Criminal Court (ICC) further complements IHL by establishing individual criminal responsibility for war crimes. In addition to treaty-based IHL, customary international law plays a crucial role. This body of law consists of practices and rules that have evolved and are universally accepted as legally binding. Customary IHL principles, such as the prohibition of torture, the protection of cultural property, and the ban on the use of certain weapons, apply across both international and non-international armed conflicts, forming an essential part of the global legal framework.

IHL's framework and principles serve as a critical foundation for governing the behavior of parties involved in armed conflicts. By setting standards for responsible conduct during times of war, IHL aims to reduce the suffering and devastation caused by armed conflicts and to uphold the dignity and rights of individuals, particularly civilians and those who are no longer participating in hostilities. Understanding and upholding these principles are essential to achieving the overarching goal of IHL: to mitigate the human cost of war and promote respect for humanitarian values even amid armed conflict.

IHL as a Preventive Mechanism

While IHL is primarily known for its role in regulating the conduct of armed conflicts and mitigating the suffering caused by such conflicts, it also plays a vital role as a preventive mechanism, contributing to the deterrence of armed conflicts and the promotion of peace. This preventive aspect of IHL is often less recognized but holds significant potential in the broader context of conflict prevention.

The IHL plays a pivotal role in setting clear and binding standards for the conduct of parties involved in armed conflicts. By doing so, it sends a robust message to potential belligerents that there are legal and moral limits to the use of force. This aspect of IHL acts as a deterrent, dissuading parties from engaging in actions that would violate these standards, as such actions could lead to international condemnation and legal consequences.

A fundamental principle of IHL is the protection of civilians and civilian objects, emphasizing the importance of safeguarding non-combatants. By focusing on this principle, IHL encourages parties in conflict to consider the potential harm inflicted on civilian populations. The awareness that violations of these principles can result in reputational damage and potential legal accountability acts as a powerful disincentive against targeting civilians (Kemedjio 2024).

IHL mandates that parties to a conflict allow and facilitate the delivery of humanitarian assistance to those in need, irrespective of their affiliation. This provision underscores the significance of providing aid to affected populations. The knowledge that humanitarian organizations can operate independently and safely in conflict zones contributes to reducing the severity of crises, making parties more willing to seek peaceful solutions.

Combatant rights form another crucial aspect of IHL, granting certain protections to combatants, including prisoners of war and those who are no longer participating in hostilities. By ensuring that even captured combatants are treated with dignity and respect, IHL incentivizes compliance with the law and the humane treatment of individuals in custody. This approach can contribute to mitigating the hostility and brutality of conflicts.

IHL's principle of proportionality, which mandates that the use of force must be proportionate to military objectives, acts as a preventive mechanism by discouraging parties from engaging in actions that might escalate conflicts. Understanding that disproportionate actions may lead to unintended consequences encourages parties to exercise restraint and explore diplomatic alternatives. Moreover, IHL contributes to the establishment of a normative framework that promotes respect for international law and humanitarian values. This framework influences state behavior by shaping the expectations of the international community and fostering a culture of compliance with legal norms (Łagiewska 2024). States and non-state actors may be more inclined to seek peaceful resolutions to disputes within this framework, contributing to a more stable and just global order.

In summary, IHL's preventive role goes beyond mitigating the consequences of conflicts; it encompasses efforts to deter the outbreak of armed conflicts in the first place. By setting standards, protecting civilians, and promoting humanitarian values, IHL encourages parties to conflicts to consider the costs and consequences of their actions. This, in turn, contributes to the broader goals of peace and stability by preventing conflicts and encouraging the pursuit of peaceful and diplomatic solutions to disputes.

Peacebuilding in Africa

This part shifts the focus to peacebuilding as a holistic approach to conflict prevention and resolution. We explore the diverse strategies and interventions that fall under the umbrella of peacebuilding. These include reconciliation efforts, socio-economic development initiatives, and addressing root causes. Understanding peacebuilding in depth is essential to recognize its complementarity with IHL.

Holistic Approach to Conflict Prevention and Resolution

Peacebuilding, as a holistic approach to conflict prevention and resolution, represents a paradigm shift in how the international community addresses conflicts. It recognizes that enduring peace cannot be achieved by simply silencing the guns or brokering ceasefires; it demands a comprehensive understanding of the root causes, dynamics, and context of conflicts (Ibnouf 2020).

Peacebuilding, at its core, transcends conventional conflict management strategies, adopting a comprehensive and multifaceted approach (Harris 2021). A fundamental principle of peacebuilding involves addressing the root causes of conflicts. Rather than merely responding to surface-level symptoms, this approach delves into understanding and resolving the underlying issues that fuel violence (Khadiagala 2021). Factors such as political grievances, economic inequalities, ethnic or religious tensions, and historical legacies of violence are scrutinized. By tackling these fundamental issues, peacebuilders aim to prevent the recurrence of conflicts.

Reconciliation stands as a cornerstone of peacebuilding, acknowledging the deep divisions and wounds caused by conflicts. This facet involves fostering dialogue, promoting truth and reconciliation commissions, and encouraging forgiveness and understanding among conflicting parties. Such efforts are indispensable for building trust and social cohesion in post-conflict societies.

Recognizing the intrinsic link between sustainable peace and socio-economic development, peacebuilding initiatives encompass rebuilding infrastructure, revitalizing economies, and providing opportunities for marginalized populations. By addressing issues like poverty, unemployment, and inequality, peacebuilding aims to reduce the socio-economic grievances that can ignite conflicts (Ayissi 2021).

Inclusive political processes represent a key element of peacebuilding. This entails ensuring that all relevant stakeholders, including women, youth, and minority groups, have a seat at the table in peace negotiations and post-conflict governance. Inclusive decision-making processes are vital for building enduring peace by preventing the exclusion of any group that could potentially become a source of future conflict.

Peacebuilders adopt a transformative approach, focusing on changing the nature of conflicts rather than merely suppressing them. Conflict transformation involves shifting parties from a zero-sum mentality to one of cooperation and collaboration. This approach encourages dialogue, negotiation, and non-violent means of resolving disputes.

Establishing the rule of law and delivering justice are integral aspects of peacebuilding. This may entail setting up mechanisms for transitional justice, such as truth commissions or war crimes tribunals, to address past atrocities and provide accountability. A functioning and the fair legal system is essential for building trust and ensuring that grievances are addressed through legal means.

Security sector reform is often included in peacebuilding efforts, encompassing the transformation of security sectors, including the police and military. The objective is to ensure that these entities prioritize the protection of civilians and adhere to human rights standards. Transforming security forces from instruments of repression to protectors of the population is crucial for building trust and stability.

In essence, peacebuilding recognizes that a one-size-fits-all approach to conflict resolution is inadequate. Each conflict is unique, shaped by its own historical, social, and political context. Therefore, peacebuilding seeks to tailor strategies to the specific circumstances of each conflict, addressing the root causes while promoting reconciliation, development, inclusivity, and justice.

This holistic approach to conflict prevention and resolution acknowledges the interconnections between different aspects of society and conflict dynamics. By

understanding and addressing these interconnections, peacebuilding aims to create a stable and lasting peace that can withstand the challenges of post-conflict transitions and contribute to the long-term well-being of affected populations.

The Role of Peacebuilding in Sustainable Peace

Peacebuilding is instrumental in the pursuit of sustainable peace by addressing the complex and interconnected factors that give rise to conflicts and by fostering the conditions necessary for lasting stability and development. It is not merely about ending hostilities but about creating the foundations for societies to thrive in peace. Several key elements highlight the pivotal role of peacebuilding in achieving sustainable peace.

At its essence, peacebuilding is characterized by a proactive approach to conflict prevention and resolution. The overarching goal is to forestall the eruption of conflicts and resolve existing ones through diplomatic means. By diligently identifying and addressing root causes, peacebuilding endeavors to create an environment where disputes are managed peacefully, averting the escalation into violence (Mayanja 2024). In situations of ongoing conflict, peacebuilders engage in negotiation, mediation, and dialogue to convene conflicting parties and craft sustainable peace agreements.

Post-conflict stabilization is a critical facet of peacebuilding efforts, particularly in the aftermath of conflicts. These endeavors focus on stabilizing fragile post-conflict environments, encompassing the disarmament of combatants, ensuring civilian security, and rebuilding essential infrastructure. Stabilization aims to establish a secure environment wherein communities can recover from the trauma of conflict and initiate the process of rebuilding their lives (Awasom 2024).

Acknowledging that the wounds of conflict run deep, peacebuilding prioritizes reconciliation as an imperative for sustainable peace. This intricate process involves recognizing past wrongs, promoting truth and justice, and fostering forgiveness and understanding. Reconciliation efforts play a pivotal role in rebuilding trust and social cohesion within divided societies, laying the foundation for peaceful coexistence.

In the pursuit of sustainable peace, peacebuilding emphasizes the necessity of inclusive governance structures and institutions representing all segments of society. Advocating for inclusive political processes and responsive institutions, including women, youth, and minority groups, is paramount. Inclusive governance serves to prevent the marginalization of certain segments of society, a potential catalyst for future conflicts.

Economic stability and development are deemed essential components of peacebuilding, as they contribute to the maintenance of peace. Initiatives within peacebuilding aim to rebuild economies, create jobs, and provide opportunities for communities affected by conflict. Socio-economic development not only reduces grievances and inequalities that can fuel violence but also enhances the overall well-being of societies.

Conflict transformation stands as a core principle of peacebuilding, emphasizing the alteration of conflict dynamics from violent confrontations to peaceful negotiations. This approach encourages conflicting parties to engage in dialogue, find common ground, and seek non-violent solutions to their differences. Conflict transformation

acknowledges that conflicts may persist but endeavors to manage them without resorting to violence.

Integral to sustainable peace are the principles of upholding human rights and the rule of law. Peacebuilders work towards establishing legal systems that protect individual rights and ensure accessible and fair justice. This fosters a sense of accountability and trust in legal institutions, contributing to the prevention of the re-emergence of conflicts.

In essence, peacebuilding is a long-term and comprehensive endeavor that recognizes that peace is not merely the absence of violence but the presence of justice, reconciliation, and social harmony (Maphaka, Tsholo and Zondi 2024). By addressing the underlying causes of conflicts and promoting these essential elements, peacebuilding contributes significantly to the achievement of sustainable peace, ensuring that communities can thrive and prosper in the aftermath of violence and turmoil.

The Nexus between IHL and Peacebuilding

This part is at the heart of this study, as it examines the interplay between IHL and peacebuilding. Here, we analyze how these two frameworks share common objectives and are inherently complementary. By drawing connections between the principles of IHL and the strategies of peacebuilding, we highlight the potential for collaboration and synergy.

Shared Objectives and Complementarity

The nexus between IHL and peacebuilding is illuminated through their shared objectives and inherent complementarity. These two vital frameworks, though distinct in their primary functions, converge in their overarching goals and values, offering a foundation for synergistic efforts in conflict prevention and resolution.

The protection of civilians emerges as a central and shared objective between IHL and peacebuilding, emphasizing the importance of shielding non-combatants caught amid armed conflicts. IHL, with its core principles, mandates the safeguarding of non-combatants, while peacebuilding endeavors to create environments where civilians can live free from violence. This mutual commitment to the well-being of civilian populations establishes a robust foundation for collaboration between the two frameworks (Boadu 2025).

Both IHL and peacebuilding prioritize the promotion and preservation of human rights, underlining the fundamental importance of respecting and protecting these rights even in times of armed conflict. IHL ensures the preservation of human rights during conflicts, while peacebuilding strives to establish societies where rights such as the right to life, liberty, and security of the person are upheld. This alignment underscores the significance of human dignity within both frameworks.

The provision of humanitarian assistance during armed conflicts is a shared focus in both IHL and peacebuilding. IHL mandates that parties to a conflict allow and facilitate the delivery of aid to those in need. Simultaneously, peacebuilding often involves humanitarian efforts to address immediate needs in conflict-affected areas. This shared

commitment to humanitarian assistance creates a basis for collaboration in providing relief to vulnerable populations.

While IHL primarily operates within the context of armed conflicts, its principles inherently carry preventive mechanisms by setting standards for responsible behavior in conflict situations. IHL serves as a critical deterrent against the escalation of violence and the commission of atrocities. In contrast, peacebuilding explicitly focuses on conflict prevention and addresses the root causes that fuel conflicts. The convergence of these complementary approaches highlights the value of combining efforts to prevent conflicts before they erupt.

Both IHL and peacebuilding are deeply rooted in humanitarian values that prioritize the well-being and dignity of individuals. Compassion, impartiality, and the desire to alleviate human suffering are shared values that guide practitioners in both fields. By aligning their actions with these values, practitioners can collaborate to create environments that reflect these shared humanitarian principles (Fiseha 2024).

The intersection of IHL and peacebuilding presents opportunities for strategic interventions. For instance, peacebuilding initiatives may incorporate IHL principles into peace agreements, ensuring that parties commit to upholding humanitarian standards during post-conflict transitions. Similarly, IHL considerations can inform the design and implementation of conflict prevention strategies within peacebuilding frameworks, demonstrating the potential for synergistic efforts to enhance the effectiveness of both approaches.

This shared commitment to humanitarian values, human rights, and the protection of civilians creates a strong foundation for collaborative efforts in conflict-affected regions (Opongo 2022). While IHL focuses on mitigating the consequences of conflicts, peacebuilding takes a proactive approach to addressing root causes and preventing conflicts from erupting. By recognizing their complementarity and synergizing their strengths, these frameworks have the potential to create a more comprehensive and effective approach to conflict prevention and resolution, ultimately contributing to the pursuit of sustainable peace and security.

Opportunities for Collaborative Interventions

The nexus between IHL and peacebuilding offers numerous opportunities for collaborative interventions that leverage the strengths of each framework to advance conflict prevention and resolution efforts. These collaborative initiatives can address the complex challenges presented by conflicts in Africa and beyond, fostering a more comprehensive and effective approach (Mișcoiu and Petrica 2023).

Effective collaboration can significantly enhance conflict early warning and response systems. IHL, with its primary focus on the protection of civilians, offers invaluable data and insights into conflict dynamics. This information becomes a critical resource for peacebuilders, enabling them to anticipate and respond to emerging crises. The collaborative efforts between IHL and peacebuilding initiatives empower preventive measures, mediation of disputes, and diplomatic engagements before conflicts escalate, contributing to more effective conflict prevention strategies (Wani 2021).

In the realm of conflict resolution, peace agreements play a central role, and collaborative approaches can strengthen their impact. By integrating IHL principles into these agreements, parties commit to upholding humanitarian standards even as they work towards peace. This incorporation reinforces the paramount importance of respecting human rights and safeguarding civilians throughout the peace process, fostering a more just and sustainable resolution.

Collaborative interventions significantly enhance reconciliation and transitional justice efforts. IHL provides a framework for addressing crimes committed during armed conflicts, and peacebuilding initiatives complement this by facilitating truth and reconciliation commissions, reparations, and community-level reconciliation dialogues. Together, these approaches promote healing, justice, and social cohesion, providing a comprehensive foundation for post-conflict recovery.

Transforming security sectors is integral to building sustainable peace, and collaborative interventions ensure alignment with IHL principles. By emphasizing the protection of civilians and respect for human rights, peacebuilding initiatives support security sector reform through the promotion of community policing, accountability mechanisms, and inclusive governance (Mzali 2018.). Such collaboration enhances the effectiveness of efforts to create security structures that serve the well-being of the population.

Collaborative capacity-building efforts are pivotal for empowering local actors in conflict zones. By jointly offering training and technical assistance, IHL and peacebuilding practitioners strengthen the skills and knowledge of governments, civil society organizations, and security forces. This collaborative approach enables local stakeholders to engage effectively in conflict prevention, human rights protection, and peace promotion, fostering self-sufficiency and sustainability.

Cross-sectoral partnerships between IHL organizations, peacebuilding NGOs, and humanitarian agencies amplify the impact of interventions. By pooling diverse expertise, resources, and networks, these collaborations address the multifaceted challenges of conflicts in a more coordinated and holistic manner. Such partnerships create a comprehensive approach to conflict prevention and resolution, leveraging the strengths of each sector.

Collaborative advocacy efforts play a crucial role in raising awareness about the importance of IHL and peacebuilding. By jointly advocating for adherence to humanitarian principles and the prevention of conflicts, organizations from both fields can influence policymakers, governments, and the public. This collaborative advocacy shapes the discourse around conflict prevention and resolution, fostering a broader understanding of the collective efforts required to address these complex challenges.

These collaborative interventions highlight the synergistic potential of IHL and peacebuilding when working together to address conflicts. By combining their expertise, mandates, and resources, practitioners from both fields can develop more effective strategies that take into account the complexities of conflict situations. Ultimately, these collaborations contribute to a more comprehensive and coordinated approach to preventing conflicts, protecting civilians, and promoting sustainable peace and security.

Preventive Mechanisms

In this part, we scrutinize specific preventive mechanisms that emerge from the synergy between IHL and peacebuilding within the African context. These mechanisms include early warning and response systems for conflicts, the integration of IHL principles into peace agreements, initiatives related to reconciliation and transitional justice, and the reform of security sectors. Each of these mechanisms is explored in detail to demonstrate their practical contributions to conflict prevention and resolution.

Conflict Early Warning and Response Systems

In the context of Africa, where recurring conflicts and complex security challenges persist, Conflict Early Warning and Response Systems (CEWRS) hold particular significance. These systems are instrumental in detecting and mitigating potential conflicts in a region marked by diverse conflict dynamics, ethnic tensions, resource competition, and fragile governance structures. CEWRS within the African system benefits from collaborative efforts that involve IHL and peacebuilding initiatives.

Regional mechanisms in Africa play a pivotal role in Conflict Early Warning and Response Systems (CEWRS), with organizations like the African Union, Regional Economic Communities (RECs), and specialized institutions like the African Centre for the Constructive Resolution of Disputes (ACCORD) serving as vital platforms for the development and implementation of CEWRS. Collaborative interventions can further enhance the capacity of these regional bodies, enabling them to monitor and respond to conflicts more effectively (Marenaya 2023; Rokhideh, Fearnley and Budimir 2025).

Cross-border dynamics often characterize conflicts in Africa, transcending national borders. Collaborative CEWRS efforts are crucial in addressing these transboundary challenges by facilitating information-sharing and coordinated responses among neighboring countries. The principles of IHL, particularly those related to the protection of civilians and the conduct of armed conflicts, can offer valuable insights to analyze cross-border conflict scenarios.

Effective CEWRS in Africa requires an understanding not only of early warning signs but also of the root causes of conflicts. IHL's focus on addressing underlying structural and societal issues aligns with peacebuilding approaches. Collaboratively, CEWRS can engage in comprehensive conflict analysis to identify root causes and inform preventive strategies, promoting a more holistic and sustainable approach.

Recognizing that communities often stand at the forefront of conflict dynamics in many African contexts, collaborative CEWRS initiatives can emphasize local and community engagement. Involving local actors, civil society organizations, and traditional leaders in early warning and response efforts ensures that these systems are more contextually relevant and effective, drawing on the rich knowledge and perspectives of those directly affected by conflicts.

CEWRS within the African context can benefit from the involvement of IHL practitioners who engage with armed actors to promote adherence to humanitarian principles. Concurrently, peacebuilding initiatives can facilitate diplomacy and mediation efforts to address emerging conflicts. Collaborative efforts enhance the

synergy between these preventive measures, fostering a more comprehensive and integrated approach to conflict prevention and resolution.

Addressing resource constraints and capacity-building needs is another area where collaborative interventions can make a significant impact within CEWRS. By pooling resources and expertise, IHL and peacebuilding actors can support the development and strengthening of early warning systems, ensuring they are adequately staffed, technologically equipped, and capable of producing timely and accurate assessments (Engel 2023).

Effective coordination mechanisms are critical for CEWRS in Africa due to the multitude of stakeholders involved. Collaborative efforts can establish clear coordination structures involving government agencies, regional bodies, civil society organizations, and international partners. These mechanisms facilitate the timely sharing of information and the implementation of rapid responses, contributing to a more streamlined and efficient CEWRS.

In summary, CEWRS within the African context benefits from collaborative interventions that bridge the expertise of IHL and peacebuilding initiatives. By working together, these approaches can contribute to more accurate conflict prevention, enhanced protection of civilians, and the promotion of lasting peace and security across the continent. In a region where conflict prevention is of paramount importance, collaborative CEWRS represents a holistic and proactive approach to addressing the diverse and evolving challenges of conflict.

Incorporation of IHL Principles in Peace Agreements

Incorporating IHL principles into peace agreements within the African context represents a crucial step toward achieving lasting and just resolutions to conflicts on the continent. This practice aligns with the broader goal of promoting respect for humanitarian values, the protection of civilians, and the prevention of further violence.

In Africa, conflicts often unfold within complex and protracted dynamics involving multiple armed groups, governments, and diverse stakeholders. Recognizing the conflict-specific relevance of IHL principles, incorporating them into peace agreements becomes crucial. This recognition extends to addressing pertinent issues such as the treatment of prisoners of war, the protection of civilians, and the prohibition of certain weapons, all of which are indispensable for mitigating the human cost associated with African conflicts (Papale 2025).

Peace agreements that integrate IHL principles provide humanitarian safeguards for both civilians and combatants. Emphasizing the importance of respecting fundamental human rights and protecting vulnerable populations during and after conflicts, these agreements may include provisions for safe humanitarian access, the humane treatment of detainees, and the demilitarization of civilian areas.

The integration of IHL principles into peace agreements goes beyond humanitarian safeguards; it enhances the legitimacy and accountability of the accords. Committing to uphold humanitarian standards demonstrates a dedication to international law and humanitarian values. Such commitment not only enhances the legitimacy of the signatories both domestically and internationally but also establishes a basis for

accountability, as violations of IHL principles can be subject to scrutiny and consequences.

African conflicts are often marred by cycles of violence and fragile peace agreements. The inclusion of IHL principles in peace accords plays a significant role in breaking these cycles by emphasizing the importance of preventing the recurrence of hostilities. Provisions related to the disarmament and demobilization of combatants, the protection of civilian infrastructure, and the removal of landmines, for instance, contribute to creating conditions conducive to sustainable peace (Rosas Duarte and Souza 2024).

The inclusion of IHL principles in peace agreements requires diplomatic efforts and negotiations aligned with humanitarian diplomacy. This approach underscores the promotion of humanitarian values and the reduction of human suffering as essential components of peace processes. Humanitarian diplomacy encourages conflicting parties to prioritize the protection of civilians and adhere to humanitarian norms, fostering an environment conducive to lasting peace (Turunen 2020).

Moreover, the incorporation of IHL principles into peace agreements contributes to the normative influence of humanitarian law. This influence transcends the specific conflict context and can shape the behavior of both state and non-state actors in future conflicts. Over time, the consistent inclusion of IHL principles in African peace agreements has the potential to contribute to a broader culture of respect for international law and humanitarian values.

The incorporation of IHL principles in peace agreements within the African context serves as a powerful means to promote the protection of civilians, and human rights, and the prevention of further violence. By recognizing the relevance of IHL to the specific dynamics of African conflicts, peace agreements can provide humanitarian safeguards, enhance legitimacy and accountability, prevent the recurrence of hostilities, and contribute to the normative influence of humanitarian law (Kwon 2020; Engelbrekt 2023). This practice underscores the importance of upholding humanitarian values in pursuit of sustainable peace and security on the continent.

Reconciliation and Transitional Justice Initiatives

In the African context, reconciliation and transitional justice initiatives hold significant importance for post-conflict societies grappling with the legacy of violence and division. These initiatives represent an essential step towards healing wounds, rebuilding trust, and fostering social cohesion in the aftermath of conflicts. Within this context, several key considerations underscore the significance of these efforts.

African conflicts are often deeply rooted in history, shaped by intricate factors such as colonial legacies, ethnic tensions, and longstanding grievances. Initiatives focused on reconciliation and transitional justice acknowledge the imperative of addressing these historical complexities. They provide a crucial platform for acknowledging past wrongs, delving into the historical context of conflicts, and fostering understanding among different groups.

Truth and Reconciliation Commissions (TRCs) have been established in many African countries to unearth the truth about past atrocities and human rights abuses (Graham 2022). These commissions serve as forums where victims can share their

stories and seek acknowledgment of their suffering. Moreover, TRCs aim to create an official record of past events, promoting reconciliation by nurturing a shared understanding of the historical context.

Transitional justice initiatives within the African context often incorporate measures to ensure accountability for crimes committed during conflicts. This may involve the prosecution of individuals responsible for war crimes, genocide, or crimes against humanity. Beyond seeking justice for victims, these measures act as deterrents against future violations.

Reconciliation efforts in Africa frequently integrate local and traditional approaches to conflict resolution. Traditional leaders and customary justice systems play a pivotal role in resolving disputes and promoting reconciliation at the community level. Emphasizing community ownership of the reconciliation process, these approaches contribute to long-term stability.

Effective reconciliation and transitional justice initiatives prioritize inclusive participation, ensuring a broad range of stakeholders, including women, youth, and minority groups, have a voice in shaping the processes and outcomes. Inclusivity fosters a sense of ownership among all segments of society, helping prevent the marginalization of vulnerable groups (Xu, Wan and Chen 2024).

Transitional justice often includes measures to provide reparations and support to victims of conflict-related violence. Such measures encompass compensation, rehabilitation, and psychosocial support, addressing the needs of victims to restore their dignity and facilitate their reintegration into society.

Successful reconciliation initiatives recognize that healing extends beyond individuals to entire communities. They promote community-based healing and reintegration programs that address the collective trauma experienced during conflicts. These programs encompass efforts to rebuild infrastructure, revive local economies, and restore social services.

In the African context, reconciliation and transitional justice initiatives play a vital role in addressing the profound social, political, and psychological impacts of conflicts (Schliesser 2024). They offer a pathway toward healing, justice, and the reintegration of formerly divided societies. By acknowledging historical complexities, involving local approaches, and ensuring inclusivity, these initiatives contribute to the broader goals of lasting peace and stability on the continent.

Security Sector Reform

Security Sector Reform (SSR) holds immense significance within the African context as it addresses the intricate challenges posed by post-conflict and conflict-prone environments. In Africa, many conflicts are characterized by a volatile mix of armed groups, government forces, and external interventions. SSR initiatives within the African context are pivotal in transforming security institutions, restoring public trust, and promoting the rule of law. Several key considerations highlight the importance and complexities of SSR efforts in Africa.

African nations grapple with the enduring legacies of authoritarian rule, military coups, and human rights abuses, shaping the landscape of their security sectors. Security Sector Reform (SSR) emerges as a transformative endeavor seeking to break

these cycles by advancing civilian control over security, promoting demilitarization, and upholding human rights standards. The imperative lies in addressing historical legacies to forge trust between security institutions and the populace.

In the context of African conflicts, civilians often face profound threats, including displacement, sexual violence, and attacks on communities. SSR initiatives prioritize the protection of civilians by reshaping security forces to champion human rights and adhere to international humanitarian law. This transformation involves the comprehensive training of security personnel, instilling a commitment to prioritize the safety and well-being of civilians in their actions (Hope 2023).

Ensuring accountability for the actions of security forces during conflicts is a recurrent theme in SSR efforts across Africa. Mechanisms for accountability may involve prosecuting individuals responsible for human rights violations and establishing oversight bodies to monitor security institutions. These measures aim to address impunity, provide justice for victims, and act as deterrents against future abuses.

A critical facet of SSR in conflict-affected African nations is demilitarization, encompassing the disarmament and demobilization of combatants, reduction of armed groups' influence, and control of weapons proliferation. This process is indispensable for fostering a secure environment conducive to peacebuilding and development. Effective SSR initiatives place a premium on inclusivity and representation within security institutions. Diversification efforts include integrating women, minority groups, and underrepresented communities into security forces. Inclusive security institutions are better positioned to address the diverse needs and concerns of the population, thereby mitigating potential grievances that could fuel conflicts (Farah Hersi and Akinola 2024).

Civilian oversight and good governance principles are central to SSR endeavors. Transparent and accountable security institutions operating within the rule of law framework are increasingly recognized as pivotal in African countries. Strengthening governance within the security sector contributes to stability and mitigates the risk of abuses.

Building trust between security forces and communities is a fundamental aspect of SSR in Africa. Tensions and conflicts between security forces and marginalized communities necessitate community engagement efforts within SSR initiatives. These efforts foster dialogue, rebuild trust, and strive to reshape the perception of security institutions from potential threats to protectors.

Capacity building and training programs form a cornerstone of SSR, enhancing the skills and knowledge of security personnel. Such programs cover areas including human rights, conflict resolution, and community policing. Well-trained security personnel are better equipped to navigate complex conflict dynamics and effectively protect civilians.

In summary, SSR within the African context is a multifaceted and transformative process that addresses the unique challenges posed by conflicts and post-conflict environments. By prioritizing civilian control, human rights protection, accountability, and community engagement, SSR initiatives contribute to the broader goals of sustainable peace, security, and development in Africa. The complexities and historical

legacies of African conflicts make SSR efforts crucial for breaking cycles of violence and building resilient societies.

Challenges and Limitations

This part acknowledges and analyzes the challenges and limitations of the IHL-peacebuilding nexus. We address issues such as the implementation gaps in IHL, the influence of political interests in peacebuilding efforts, and the constraints posed by limited resources. Identifying and understanding these challenges is crucial for crafting effective strategies to overcome them.

Implementation Gaps in IHL

In the African context, as in many regions globally, there are notable implementation gaps when it comes to IHL. While IHL provides a vital legal framework governing the conduct of armed conflicts, several challenges hinder its effective implementation across the continent.

A critical challenge in the effective implementation of IHL in Africa is the limited awareness and understanding of its principles among various stakeholders (Omona 2024). This lack of awareness extends to military personnel, armed groups, and even some governments. The absence of adequate training and education on IHL can lead to violations as these stakeholders may not fully grasp their obligations under international law.

The enforcement of IHL poses a significant challenge on the African continent. Weak or fragmented legal structures, particularly in conflict-affected countries, hinder efforts to hold violators accountable for their actions. This lack of accountability contributes to ongoing violations and undermines the credibility of IHL. The complexities of African conflicts, involving diverse actors such as state and non-state armed groups, regional powers, and international interventions, further complicate the attribution of responsibility for violations and their effective address under IHL.

Resource constraints represent a substantial impediment to the full adherence to IHL principles in many African countries. Insufficient funding and capacity limitations in terms of legal expertise and infrastructure hinder the effective implementation of IHL. Political interests and power dynamics also play a significant role, with governments sometimes prioritizing their political objectives over their international law obligations, leading to violations and impunity for perpetrators.

Access constraints in conflict zones present a formidable challenge to the delivery of humanitarian assistance as outlined by IHL. Armed groups, government forces, and various actors often restrict access to vulnerable populations, hindering the provision of essential aid. Moreover, the influence of non-state armed groups, prevalent in many African conflicts, further complicates the accountability for violations, as these groups may not recognize the legal obligations imposed by international treaties governing IHL.

Inconsistencies in the implementation of IHL across African states add another layer of complexity. While some countries have made efforts to incorporate IHL principles into their legal frameworks and policies, others may lag, resulting in

inconsistencies in the application of IHL standards. Furthermore, IHL faces challenges in the realm of conflict prevention, where insufficient efforts to address root causes often lead to the perpetuation of violence and the erosion of respect for IHL.

Addressing these implementation gaps in IHL within the African context requires a concerted effort from governments, international organizations, civil society, and the international community. Strengthening awareness, capacity-building, legal frameworks, and accountability mechanisms are critical steps toward improving the application of IHL principles and promoting a culture of compliance with humanitarian norms in African conflicts.

Political Interests and Peacebuilding

Peacebuilding efforts in Africa are often influenced by complex political interests that can both enable and obstruct progress toward sustainable peace. Understanding the interplay of these interests is crucial for effective peacebuilding within the African context.

Africa's geopolitical landscape is intricately shaped by competing geostrategic interests, with the continent's abundant natural resources, strategic location, and economic potential drawing the attention of regional and global powers. This involvement often translates into complex dynamics that can hinder peacebuilding efforts. External actors may pursue their political, economic, and security agendas, leading to complications such as proxy wars and support for specific factions, thereby exacerbating conflicts.

The principle of state sovereignty stands as a central challenge to peacebuilding in Africa. Governments, protective of their autonomy, are often wary of external interference even in the face of conflicts that pose regional threats. Striking a delicate balance between respecting state sovereignty and addressing humanitarian crises and human rights abuses is a significant political challenge in the peacebuilding process.

Ethnic and identity politics frequently contribute to the complexity of African conflicts. Political elites may exploit ethnic divisions, aggravating tensions and fostering violence for personal gain. Navigating these intricate identity dynamics becomes crucial for peacebuilding initiatives, necessitating inclusive dialogue and reconciliation while mitigating the risk of further polarization.

Resource competition, encompassing land, water, minerals, and other valuable assets, serves as a driver for conflicts in Africa. Political and economic dimensions often intersect as powerful actors seek to control and exploit resources. Successfully managing conflicts related to resources requires addressing both the political and economic aspects of the issue (Boadu 2025).

Transitional politics often characterize peacebuilding efforts, involving processes like power-sharing agreements and transitional governments. While these arrangements may serve short-term political interests, they also present challenges for long-term stability. Striking a balance between political compromises and the establishment of accountable and legitimate governance structures becomes imperative in navigating transitional political landscapes (Karamalla-Gaiballa 2025).

International partnerships are integral to African peacebuilding, involving collaboration with entities such as the United Nations, regional organizations, and

donor countries. The interests of these external actors significantly shape the direction and priorities of peacebuilding initiatives. Ensuring alignment between international and African interests emerges as a crucial factor for the success of peacebuilding endeavors.

Economic interests, spanning trade, investment, and infrastructure development, play a significant role in influencing peacebuilding efforts in Africa. While economic incentives may motivate constructive engagement in peace processes, they can also lead to competition and conflicts over economic opportunities.

Civil society organizations play a critical role in advancing peacebuilding initiatives in Africa. They act as advocates for peace, provide humanitarian assistance, and hold governments and armed groups accountable. However, these organizations may face political pressure and restrictions on their activities, highlighting the inherent tension between political interests and the peacebuilding efforts of civil society (Olaitan 2024).

Navigating these political interests in peacebuilding requires a nuanced and context-specific approach. Effective peacebuilding efforts must be informed by a deep understanding of the local, regional, and international political dynamics at play. Balancing the pursuit of peace with the preservation of sovereignty and addressing the root causes of conflicts while managing political compromises is a complex and ongoing challenge within the African context (Sule 2024).

Resource Constraints

Resource constraints represent a significant challenge in the context of peacebuilding efforts in Africa. These constraints encompass financial limitations, limited infrastructure, and human capacity challenges, all of which can hinder the effectiveness of peacebuilding initiatives on the continent.

A significant hurdle in successful peacebuilding endeavors across many African countries is the challenge of securing adequate funding. Resource constraints often translate into limited budgets allocated to critical peacebuilding activities, encompassing conflict prevention, reconciliation, and development projects. The shortage of funds can impede the comprehensive implementation of these vital programs, hindering progress in building sustainable peace.

Building and sustaining a skilled workforce for peacebuilding efforts present considerable human capacity challenges. Resource limitations frequently hinder the ability of governments and civil society organizations to recruit, train, and retain qualified personnel specializing in conflict resolution, peacebuilding, and humanitarian assistance. This deficiency in human capital can disrupt the delivery of essential services and jeopardize the long-term viability of peace initiatives.

Inadequate infrastructure, spanning transportation, communication networks, and basic services, poses another obstacle to effective peacebuilding activities. Insufficient infrastructure makes it challenging to access remote or conflict-affected areas, impeding the delivery of humanitarian aid, the mobilization of peacekeepers, and the execution of development projects. Addressing infrastructure deficiencies is crucial for ensuring the reach and impact of peacebuilding efforts.

The digital divide emerges as a significant concern within the African context, impacting peacebuilding efforts. Limited access to technology and the internet affects

data collection, information sharing, and communication among stakeholders. This technological constraint can impede the monitoring of conflicts, coordination of responses, and engagement with affected communities, thereby hindering the efficiency of peacebuilding initiatives.

Many African peacebuilding initiatives heavily rely on external donors for funding and resources, underscoring the challenge of donor dependence. While international support is indispensable, overreliance on donors can lead to issues such as donor fatigue, shifting priorities, and funding uncertainties (Fukutomi 2024). This dependence creates vulnerabilities in the sustainability of peacebuilding programs, emphasizing the need for diverse and locally sourced funding.

Resource constraints often result in competing priorities within governments and organizations. Peacebuilding initiatives find themselves in competition with other pressing needs like healthcare, education, and infrastructure development. This competition for limited resources can divert attention and funding away from peacebuilding efforts, highlighting the complex task of balancing various societal needs amidst resource limitations (Chikerema, Chakunda and Ncube 2025).

Resource constraints can exacerbate existing inequalities and regional disparities, presenting a challenge to comprehensive and equitable peacebuilding. Some regions may receive more attention and resources than others, leading to uneven development and potentially fueling grievances and conflicts. Addressing these disparities is essential for fostering a sense of inclusivity and preventing the emergence of new sources of tension.

Despite resource constraints, embracing innovative and cost-effective solutions is a viable approach to peacebuilding. Local capacity-building, partnerships with non-traditional actors, and leveraging community-driven initiatives are examples of creative strategies that can maximize the impact of limited resources. These approaches ensure that peacebuilding efforts remain adaptable and context-specific, fostering resilience in the face of financial limitations.

Advocacy efforts play a crucial role in mobilizing resources for peacebuilding. Engaging with donors, governments, and international organizations to raise awareness about the importance of peacebuilding and its positive long-term effects can help secure additional funding and support. Advocacy serves as a powerful tool in highlighting the value of sustained investment in peacebuilding efforts, ultimately contributing to the resilience and success of such initiatives.

Addressing resource constraints in African peacebuilding efforts requires a multi-faceted approach that involves governments, civil society, international donors, and the private sector. By strategically allocating existing resources, seeking innovative solutions, and advocating for increased investment in peacebuilding, it is possible to mitigate the impact of these constraints and advance the critical work of building lasting peace and stability on the continent.

Conclusion and discussion

In the complex and dynamic landscape of conflict, humanitarian crises, and peacebuilding in Africa, this comprehensive assessment has illuminated the critical interplay of IHL and peacebuilding. Africa, marked by recurring conflicts, historical

complexities, and resource constraints, stands at a crossroads where the synergy between these two vital frameworks can chart a course toward sustainable peace and security on the continent. Africa's conflict landscape is characterized by a web of factors, including political instability, ethnic tensions, resource competition, and external interventions. The urgency of preventing and mitigating these conflicts underscores the significance of this research, which has sought to elucidate how IHL and peacebuilding can function as mutually reinforcing pillars in the pursuit of enduring peace. IHL, rooted in a body of international treaties and customary practices, offers a legal framework governing the conduct of armed conflicts. Its principles encompassing the protection of civilians, combatant rights, and humanitarian assistance inherently carry preventive mechanisms. By setting standards for responsible behavior in conflict, IHL serves as a critical deterrent against violence escalation and the commission of atrocities. Peacebuilding, conversely, embodies a holistic approach to conflict prevention and resolution. It encompasses an array of strategies aimed at addressing root causes, promoting reconciliation, and fostering socio-economic development. This approach recognizes that enduring peace necessitates confronting not only the symptoms but also the underlying structural and societal issues that fuel conflicts. The nexus between IHL and peacebuilding has been illuminated through their shared objectives and complementarity. Both domains prioritize the protection of civilians, the promotion of human rights, and the delivery of humanitarian assistance. This interconnection offers opportunities for collaborative and strategic interventions that leverage the strengths of each framework. The research has scrutinized various preventive mechanisms arising from the synergy between IHL and peacebuilding within the African context. These mechanisms encompass conflict early warning and response systems, the incorporation of IHL principles in peace agreements, reconciliation and transitional justice initiatives, and security sector reform. By investigating the practical applications of these mechanisms, the research has elucidated how they contribute to the prevention of armed conflicts and the promotion of lasting peace.

However, despite the promise of this nexus, several challenges and limitations have been identified. Implementation gaps, where IHL principles are not effectively translated into practice, remain a persistent concern. Political interests among involved parties can obstruct peacebuilding efforts, perpetuating conflicts. Resource constraints, both in terms of funding and capacity, pose significant barriers to realizing the full potential of the IHL-peacebuilding nexus. In conclusion, this research underscores the pivotal role of the nexus between International Humanitarian Law and peacebuilding in Africa's quest for peace, stability, and development. By embracing this synergistic relationship, African governments, regional organizations, and the international community can foster a comprehensive and holistic approach to conflict prevention and resolution. Addressing the identified challenges and limitations is imperative to unlock the transformative potential of this nexus and pave the way for a more peaceful and prosperous African continent. The lessons learned from this comprehensive assessment can serve as a guiding compass for policymakers, practitioners, and stakeholders committed to a future of peace, security, and resilience in Africa.

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Conflict of interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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NEW CYBERSECURITY CHALLENGES: DIGITAL TRANSFORMATION AND THE POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS OF THEIR IMPLEMENTATION

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Abstract

The purpose of this article is to analyze modern challenges in the field of cybersecurity and mechanisms for countering cyber threats, assess the problems our country faces in this area, and identify possible solutions. To achieve this goal, the article studies the basic concepts related to cyberspace, considers real examples of cyber attacks recorded in recent years, and studies the experience, legislative and institutional framework of the leading countries in this area. In this context, the author highlights the structural similarities and differences of the countries in question. The relevance of this article is due to the analysis of new challenges to cybersecurity and the growing scale of application of information technologies in all spheres of human political activity. In the era of digitalization, information is acquiring the status of the most important object, a strategic resource of both the state and any management structure in the political management system. In this context, the relevance of the research topic is manifested in the development of the concept of a knowledge and information society developing on the basis of modern information and communication technologies. Information as a strategic resource requires a special state attitude not only in terms of its development and accumulation, but also protection. The article also analyzes the development of new information technologies, which causes an increase in the technological gap between the increasingly complex requirements for information resource security indicators in all countries and the capabilities of information technologies and software and hardware used to ensure information security.

Keywords: *cybersecurity, cyberspace, cyberwar, cyberattack, cyberterrorism, cyber diplomacy, cyber activism, hacking.*

Introduction

The development of modern technologies has not only enabled the implementation of various informational activities but has also made the information field physically vulnerable. Access to the internet, the creation of user accounts, and the use of modern

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online communication tools have become imperatives of the times. Alongside these advancements, significant attention is being paid to security measures. Programs and antivirus software are being developed to protect systems from attacks. However, hacking technologies are also rapidly evolving, often outpacing security systems. As a rule, antivirus and other protective measures are reactive, responding to already-occurred attacks or newly created viruses. In this regard, cybersecurity and the protection of cyberspace have become critically important.

Cyber threats pertain to the security of individuals, organizations, and states. It is the responsibility of each state to protect the security of its citizens, organizations, and critical infrastructure. States develop policies to ensure the security of cyberspace. Many countries have strategies that define the guidelines states must follow in order to remain as secure as possible in cyberspace and, more broadly, in the information domain. In the modern world, wars are fought not only through armed conflicts but also via informational and cyber attacks. Often, the battle takes place solely in the cyber or information domain, which is why being "armed" in cyberspace has become an imperative of our time. It is worth noting that there is a growing need for scientifically based methods and technological solutions to update and improve the information security system, but the difficult process of scientific and practical developments in the field of creating information security tools and software and hardware systems cannot provide a solution to this problem. As the cyber domain evolves rapidly, the threats associated with it demand not only offensive actions but also defensive strategies. Cyber attacks can impact the security of states, their economic prosperity, and public stability by disrupting critical infrastructure, stealing sensitive information, damaging or disabling services, and causing panic. Therefore, states must include not only military or law enforcement forces in their defense strategies but also specialized teams focused on cybersecurity and information protection.

This is a complex process that requires international cooperation, rapid response mechanisms, education, and the development of knowledge in the field of cybersecurity. States need to collaborate with international organizations, the private sector, and public organizations, pooling resources and expertise to mobilize their defenses in cyber conflict.

Mechanisms for preparedness in cyberspace imply not only the creation of technical measures, but also the adoption of strategic decisions to respond to future threats. In this context, it is useful to study the experience of leading countries of the world, since Armenia is also making efforts to create institutional mechanisms for regulating the sphere and counteracting existing and potential threats in cyberspace.

What is cyberspace?

There are various definitions and descriptions of cyberspace, and the term began to be used as early as the 1980s. Interestingly, its first use was found in William Gibson's (1984) science fiction novel *Neuromancer*. It is clear that the artistic depiction of cyberspace, especially in a science fiction book, significantly differs from its contemporary meaning (Singer and Friedman 2014; Murphy 2024).

Over time, attempts have been made to define the concept. The efforts have involved the U.S. Department of Defense and the Pentagon. In 2008, the Pentagon assembled a team of experts, which took nearly a year to define cyberspace. It was defined as a “global domain within the information environment, consisting of the interdependent network of information technology infrastructures, including the internet, telecommunications networks, computer systems, and embedded processors and control systems.” (US Air Force 2023).

According to another definition, cyberspace is a virtual computer world, specifically the electronic means used to facilitate interaction and communication through a globally interconnected network of systems. It encompasses a vast network of computers consisting of numerous global subnetworks that use the TCP/IP (Transmission Control Protocol and Internet Protocol) protocols for communication and data exchange (Raghad et al. 2024).

Cyberspace enables users to exchange information, conduct business, and create interactive media, among numerous other activities. In the modern cyberspace, artificial intelligence plays a crucial role in shaping virtual interactions—from personalized news feeds to AI-powered chatbots that increase user experiences (Li and Bai 2025). In other words, cyberspace is the virtual, networked domain where any network-based activity is possible, and anyone with access to the global network can be its user. Cybersecurity, in turn, is the security of cyberspace. Just as physical state territory is an object of international relations, the question of the objectivity of cyberspace also arises. Gradually, cyberspace is becoming a subject of interdisciplinary discussion and is aspiring to become an object of international relations as well as international law. In this regard, discussions about establishing regulations related to cyberspace are intensifying across various levels.

Numerous economic, social, and political regulations related to cyberspace have been implemented at local, national, and international levels. Notably, security has taken central stage as a critical factor influencing intergovernmental cooperation. Information and communication technologies have significantly impacted international relations, reshaping interactions between international organizations, their members, and other stakeholders of the information society. These technologies have fostered the development of horizontal networks, which complement rather than replace existing hierarchical structures.

Currently, the international institutional framework for cyberspace governance is witnessing a surge in initiatives aimed at enhancing cooperation at the global level. This includes a redistribution of roles among existing actors. Such dynamics can be seen as a cornerstone for ensuring security within cyberspace and expanding the information society. To date, states have largely promoted existing global institutions by assuming responsibilities related to the cyber domain and reshaping their agendas to address these emerging challenges.

Efforts to adapt theories of international relations to the demands of the information society remain limited, primarily because the focus has largely been on the development of internal (domestic) regulations. Attempts to create conceptual frameworks rarely build on one another, making it difficult to advance comprehensive

concepts or intermediary theories grounded in interdisciplinary approaches (Kremer and Müller 2014).

Dimensions of cybersecurity assurance

Cybersecurity encompasses any technology, activity, or policy aimed at preventing cyberattacks or mitigating their impact (Singh 2025). Its primary goal is to safeguard computer networks, applications, devices, data, financial assets, and individuals from malicious software, fraud, data theft, deception, and other cyber threats (Tabrizchi and Aghasi 2025).

Cybersecurity is critical because cyberattacks and cybercrimes have the potential to disrupt, harm, or destroy businesses, communities, and lives. Successful cyberattacks can result in identity theft, personal and corporate extortion, disruption of business operations, loss of sensitive information and critical business data, which in turn may lead to the loss of customers and even the closure of businesses (Beuran 2025; Jøsang 2025).

The importance of cybersecurity extends beyond personal and business domains. Its significance is increasingly evident in international relations, driven by the growing reliance of states on digital infrastructure and the internet. Cyberattacks have become threats to national security, targeting economic, political, and military sectors. Infrastructure-focused cyberattacks can be carried out by both independent hacking groups and state actors. Some states are even creating cyber armies not only to counter potential cyber threats but also to conduct their own offensive cyber operations. These attacks can serve various purposes and objectives, making no state immune to cyber threats. Consequently, in recent years, states have intensified their cooperation in the cyber realm to achieve greater security. In this context, the concept of 'cyber diplomacy' has emerged, referring to a set of tools and strategies employed by states, groups, and individuals to conduct their activities in cyberspace (Paulus 2024). The goal of cyber diplomacy is to protect national interests and foster relationships in political, economic, cultural, and scientific domains during peacetime (Chihaia and Rempala 2023).

Cyber diplomacy encompasses the use of diplomatic tools and initiatives to achieve objectives in the complex and continuously evolving cyberspace. States rely on universally accepted rules, protocols, and customary laws, both codified and informal, to facilitate collaboration among global public and private sector stakeholders.

Cyber diplomacy is expected to mitigate the consequences of cyber aggression against critical infrastructure, cyberattacks, data breaches, cybercrimes, cyber espionage, online theft, and other disruptive cyber operations carried out by both state and non-state actors. Given the nature of cyberspace, proactive cyber diplomacy is deemed more effective than relying solely on reactive cyber defense measures.

State and non-state actors actively use cyberspace and the internet for manipulation, service disruption, fraud, extortion, data theft, and money laundering. The internet has become a stage for geopolitical conflicts and the dissemination of disinformation. In this context, the political dimension is particularly significant. Cyberattacks are also employed during election campaigns, such as the U.S. presidential elections,

Emmanuel Macron's campaign, the German Bundestag elections, and others (Williams and Rowe 2025).

Notable examples of cyber attacks

Among the major recorded cyberattacks is the series of attacks on the American company SolarWinds. Between 2019 and 2020, a group of hackers (known as Nobelium by Microsoft or SolarWinds Hackers) targeted the Orion system, gaining access to the networks, systems, and databases of SolarWinds' clients. As a result of the attack, the hackers were able to access not only the data and computers of Orion users but also the data of SolarWinds' partners and clients using other software. Companies such as Microsoft, Intel, Cisco, and Deloitte were among those affected by this cyberattack (Amador et al. 2025). Following this series of attacks, many stakeholder organizations strengthened their security systems by implementing mechanisms to prevent and quickly neutralize future cyberattacks (Oladimeji and Kerner 2023).

As noted, due to geopolitical circumstances, cyberattacks often target specific states and their infrastructures. An example of such an attack is the NotPetya cyberattack, which primarily targeted Ukraine. The attack began in June 2017, and from the outset, Russia was accused of being behind it. Notably, at the time, Russia and Ukraine were not engaged in active warfare, meaning the attack occurred during a period of relative peace.

The consequences of the attack were severe, affecting a large number of individuals and organizations. The attack was carried out using a modified hacking program that completely erased users' data from computers. In some cases, victims were asked to pay ransoms in bitcoin to recover their data (Möller 2023). However, even after making payments, no data was restored, and it was practically impossible to recover the deleted information.

It should also be noted that the attack did not only harm Ukraine and Ukrainian organizations but also caused significant damage to other countries and their entities. The effects of this cyberattack were felt in the United States, Poland, Germany, France, and several other nations (Stoddart 2022).

During the ongoing Russia-Ukraine war, hostilities have extended into the cyber realm. Since the conflict began, both sides have attempted to disrupt each other's infrastructures, damage networks and control systems, and acquire intelligence data (Brantly and Brantly 2024). In quantitative terms, Russian cyber operations have become more intense, as the majority of cyber attacks carried out by the Russian side since 2014 and more intensively since 2022 are destructive in nature (Bronk, Collins and Wallach 2023).

Ukraine's efforts in the cyber domain are primarily focused on neutralizing threats originating from Russia. Offensive operations, on the other hand, are aimed at disrupting critical infrastructure. Specifically, there have been attempts to destabilize the functioning of banking systems, certain administrative websites, and airport operations (Tavakkoli et al. 2025).

The Arab-Israeli conflict also features numerous elements of cyber warfare. On October 7, 2023, Hamas' attack on Gaza was accompanied by cyberattacks primarily

targeting critical infrastructure, telecommunications systems, energy supplies, and transportation networks (Mizobuchi 2025). These actions were labelled as cyberterrorism by Israel. It is worth noting that these cyberattacks had a significant impact on Israeli society, causing both material and psychological harm (Singh and Bajeje 2025).

Israel's cyber operations are not as overt as those of its adversaries; however, the country does engage in cyber activities, primarily utilizing espionage software. In recent years, there has been significant discussion about the Israeli-made Pegasus software, developed by the NSO Group (Kotliar and Carmi 2023). According to its creators, Pegasus is designed to assist in uncovering money laundering, drug trafficking, and terrorism (Kaster and Ensign 2022).

In recent years, cyberactivism has also been gaining momentum. Perhaps the most prominent group in this sphere is Anonymous, which began its activities in the early 2000s and continues to operate today. The group is known for organizing protest actions, conducting cyberattacks, and orchestrating information leaks. This type of activist (known as hacktivists) advocates for information freedom and opposes censorship. Anonymous was one of the groups that supported WikiLeaks, which had disclosed a series of classified documents to the public (Romano 2024).

In recent times, the number of cyberattacks attributed to China has significantly increased. This June, several countries, including Australia, Germany, the United States, the United Kingdom, Canada, New Zealand, South Korea, and Japan, detected cyber activities conducted by China within their networks. This was not the only instance this year when various governments reported cyber operations targeting their networks, allegedly carried out by China (Wade 2023; Singh and Bajeje 2025).

Institutional mechanisms of cybersecurity

Many countries have a cybersecurity strategy that defines and guides the measures to be implemented to neutralize potential threats to cyberspace. Among these countries is the Federal Republic of Germany, which has developed a comprehensive cybersecurity doctrine¹. In a modern high-tech and digitized industrial nation like Germany, the security and functionality of the state, economy, and society are heavily reliant on digital processes and infrastructures (Couretas 2022).

Germany, too, has seen a year-by-year increase in the number of cyberattacks, carried out by both state and non-state actors. One of the Federal Government's primary responsibilities is ensuring the safety of the country, its society, and its citizens. Citizens rightfully expect their government to protect the state and society from digital threats.

In the Federal Republic of Germany, responsibility for cyber security lies with the Federal Ministry of the Interior and Community, which has developed a Cyber Security Concept². As part of its cyber security strategy, the Federal Government has

¹ Bundesministerium der Verteidigung. 2021. "Cyber-Sicherheitsstrategie." Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://www.bmvg.de/de/themen/cybersicherheit/partnerschaften-zur-cybersicherheit/cyber-sicherheitsstrategie--12078>.

² Federal Ministry of the Interior. 2025. "Cyber Security and Digital Policy." Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://www.bmi.bund.de/EN/topics/it-internet-policy/it-internet-policy-node.html>.

established measures to protect information and communication technologies, with a focus on cooperation between government agencies and the involvement of relevant societal groups.

Particularly important bodies in this context are the National Coordination Centre for Cybersecurity (NCC-DE)³, which implements the main goals and objectives of the Cybersecurity Strategy. Nevertheless, the internet never stops. Cybersecurity is an issue that requires constant, round-the-clock vigilance and the integration of cutting-edge technologies for its maintenance. The Federal Armed Forces (Bundeswehr) aim to strategically harness the potential of innovations and actively participate in the so-called ‘digital startup ecosystem’ (Kayser, Telukdarie and Philbin 2023). This is precisely why the Cyber Innovation Hub was established, serving as a bridge between startups and the Bundeswehr.

The Federal Armed Forces (Bundeswehr) actively cooperate with NATO’s Cooperative Cyber Defence Centre of Excellence. Every year, ICT experts from the ministry and the Bundeswehr take part in the Locked Shields exercise. During this exercise, a simulated cyber attack scenario is created and the participants must work to neutralise the attack.

France, like other EU countries, is making significant efforts to ensure cybersecurity. The French National Cybersecurity Strategy was updated in 2021. It is part of the national defense and security doctrine, focusing on the protection of critical national infrastructures, the growth of digital diplomacy, and the development of offensive cyber capabilities.

The National Agency for the Security of Information Systems (ANSSI) plays a key role in the new cyber environment around France and the EU, investing in and working on nine strategic areas that must be implemented by 2030⁴. All of this demonstrates France’s determination to take a leading role in ensuring cybersecurity within the EU (Vitel and Bilddal 2015; Vogiatzoglou 2025).

The UK is one of the leading countries in cybersecurity within the European region. The UK’s Cybersecurity Strategic Document is updated regularly, with the latest update in 2022. The UK’s Cyber Security Strategy document is regularly updated, most recently in 2022, which looks at the challenges in this area, the UK’s vision and the five key pillars of cyber security⁵. The Strategy highlights the UK’s commitment to a balance between the public, private and third sectors in addressing cyber security challenges. In addition to the National Cyber Strategy, the United Kingdom has

³ Federal Office for Information Security. 2025. “National Coordination Centre for Cybersecurity (NCC-DE).” Accessed January 21, 2025. https://www.bsi.bund.de/EN/Themen/Unternehmen-und-Organisationen/Informationen-und-Empfehlungen/NKCS/nkcs_node.html.

⁴ Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs. 2025. “France and Cyber security.” Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://www.diplomatie.gouv.fr/en/french-foreign-policy/security-disarmament-and-non-proliferation/fight-against-organized-criminality/cyber-security/>; ANSSI. 2023. “The French approach to cyber.” November 28, 2023. Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://cyber.gouv.fr/en/french-approach-cyber-0>.

⁵ Cabinet Office. 2022. “Policy paper: National Cyber Strategy 2022.” December 15, 2022. Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/national-cyber-strategy-2022/national-cyber-security-strategy-2022>.

another strategic document related to the field: the Government Cyber Security Strategy for 2022-2030⁶.

The primary body responsible for cyber security in the UK is the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), as its activities focus on protecting critical infrastructure, responding to incidents, developing cyber security guidance, providing advice and ensuring international cooperation. Although the government also plays a role in implementing measures to strengthen cyber security, as outlined in the government's key cyber security strategy documents, the primary responsibility lies with the NCSC (Montasari 2023; Lamb 2025).

The first document is broader in scope, emphasizing the security of various infrastructures and addressing both domestic and international efforts to strengthen cybersecurity and the UK's role in these endeavours. In contrast, the 2022-2030 Strategy focuses specifically on the government's actions to bolster cybersecurity and achieve the set objectives.

The Russian Federation is also taking active steps to increase its capabilities in this area, and Cybersecurity is considered in the Doctrine of Information Security of the RF in 2016. It is noteworthy that this Doctrine does not use the term "cybersecurity", but uses the term "information security" instead. At the same time, Russia's information security is considered a matter of national interests, and threats to information security are considered threats to national security (Bartnicki, Kużelewska and Ożóg 2023).

The importance of ensuring Russia's information security is emphasized, along with defining the bodies responsible for it and the resources and measures that play a critical role in securing the Federation's information security (Konovalova, Kandrina and Kazantseva 2023). This Doctrine is entirely devoted to protection against information threats, especially emphasizing threats coming from foreign countries that may have military objectives. It also emphasizes the potential danger coming from terrorist and extremist groups. In addition, it emphasizes the negative impact of computer crimes on the financial and economic sectors, and also defines strategic goals and directions for achieving information security.

In the Russian Federation, cybersecurity is also prioritized at the institutional level. Several agencies are responsible for cybersecurity and information security, with the most significant being: 1) The Federal Security Service (FSB); 2) The Ministry of Digital Development, Communications, and Mass Media; 3) The Federal Service for Technical and Export Control; 4) The National Coordination Center for Computer Incidents; 5) The Ministry of Defense.

In the knowledge and digital society, the United States of America is undoubtedly the leading country in this area. The key document in this domain is the National Cybersecurity Strategy⁷. Alongside this strategy, there are numerous other legislative documents and a range of agencies whose core mission is to ensure cybersecurity. These include: 1) The Department of Homeland Security (DHS); 2) The National

⁶ Cabinet Office. 2022. "Policy paper: Government Cyber Security Strategy: 2022 to 2030." February 17, 2022. Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/government-cyber-security-strategy-2022-to-2030>.

⁷ The White House. 2023. "The National Cybersecurity Strategy." Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://bidenwhitehouse.archives.gov/oncd/national-cybersecurity-strategy/>.

Security Agency (NSA); 3) The Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency (CISA).

Notably, the U.S. adopted its first cybersecurity strategy document back in 2003, which was periodically updated and renamed over time until 2023. The latest version of the National Cybersecurity Strategy, like the UK, identifies a number of key pillars:

- Protect critical infrastructure,
- Disrupt and dismantle threat actors,
- Build capabilities to ensure security and resilience,
- Invest in a more resilient future,
- Forge international partnerships based on shared goals.

These pillars reflect the U.S.' comprehensive approach to national and global cybersecurity as it emphasizes its leadership role in this area and not only strives to maintain domestic security but also seeks to act as a unifier and leader on the international stage. As seen, the abovementioned countries possess both institutional and doctrinal preparedness to counter cyber threats. In the cases of France and the UK, responsibility for the field lies with specialized institutions—namely, the National Agency for the Security of Information Systems (ANSSI) and the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC). In contrast, for Germany and Russia, the primary coordinators are ministries, notably with the involvement of their defense ministries. In the U.S., both the government and individual agencies play a significant role.

The strategic documents of all these countries generally highlight the importance of countering external threats, protecting critical infrastructures, incorporating innovative technologies into cybersecurity measures, and fostering international collaboration (Uslu 2024). A commitment to assuming a leadership role in the field is particularly evident in the case of the U.S. (Özdemir and Yıldız 2024).

The five-pillar approach in the UK and US strategies is also noteworthy, as although the titles of their strategies differ, there are clear similarities in the content, particularly in the context of protecting infrastructure, building resilience and taking a visible role in the international arena. In this context, it is also important to note that these strategic documents are periodically updated, which a natural necessity is given the rapid changes in cyberspace and technology, as well as the emergence of new challenges and threats.

Institutional mechanisms of Cybersecurity in the Republic of Armenia

Armenia has implemented and continues to develop mechanisms for regulating cyberspace, where the fight against cyber threats is a priority for the country. Given its participation in a hybrid war, Armenia is not immune to external cyber attacks, which require significant efforts not only to counter and neutralize, but also to detect (Elamiryan and Margaryan 2018).

The National Security Strategy of Armenia (2020) addresses the cyber domain. In the section titled “Ensuring Open and Secure Information and Cyberspaces,” it highlights the following challenges: 1) the lack of a comprehensive state policy in the field of information and cybersecurity; 2) the absence of legislation ensuring the protection of critical information infrastructures; 3) insufficient institutional capacities

of computer incident response structures; 4) the absence of a coordinating body for cybersecurity⁸.

This strategic direction emphasizes Armenia's commitment to improving its institutional framework and capabilities to address cyber threats effectively (Spînu 2020).

Since 2023, the draft Law on Cybersecurity of the RA has been introduced and is currently under discussion. The draft states that “relations arising in the field of ensuring cybersecurity are regulated by the Constitution, this law, international treaties of the RA, other laws, and legal acts adopted on their basis.”⁹ It also specifies that “the state policy in the field of cybersecurity is developed and implemented by the body authorized under the Law on the Structure and Activities of the Government.”¹⁰

The draft law further defines:

- The functions of the body responsible for implementing cybersecurity policy,
- Measures to ensure the cybersecurity of critical infrastructures in emergency situations,
- The responsibilities of persons accountable for cybersecurity,
- Plans for establishing a Computer Emergency Response Team,
- Requirements for cybersecurity service providers,
- Mechanisms for monitoring compliance with the law and legal acts adopted based on it¹¹.

The adoption of the law would be a significant step forward in regulating the field. In the RA, gaps related to cybersecurity are evident at the institutional level as well; there is no primary governing body overseeing the field. Challenges in the cyber domain are currently addressed by the National Security Service, Police, Ministry of Defense, and, in the context of international treaties, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. The establishment of a coordinating body would enable a more systematic approach to addressing these challenges.

Post-war Armenia's efforts have primarily focused on neutralizing cyberattacks and their consequences, such as Azerbaijan's (Ismailzade 2024) use of the Pegasus spyware to monitor the phones of Armenian citizens. However, preventing such attacks would be a far more effective approach. Organizing and mitigating such attacks require substantial material and human resources. Given its limited resources, the RA must optimize their use and eliminate any potential oversights.

Efforts must be undertaken by both the public and private sectors. The protection of critical infrastructures should be prioritized, as any disruption in their operation due to cyberattacks could lead to irreversible consequences and significant losses. For Armenia, it is crucial to study the experiences of leading countries in the field and implement mechanisms that address the country's unique challenges. This does not

⁸ MFA. 2020. “National Security Strategy of the Republic of Armenia: A Resilient Armenia in a Changing World.” Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://www.mfa.am/filemanager/security%20and%20defense/Armenia%202020%20National%20Security%20Strategy.pdf>.

⁹ The Draft of Law on Cybersecurity of the RA. Accessed January 21, 2025. <https://www.e-draft.am/projects/6656/about>.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

imply copying the legislation or practices of any specific country but rather adapting the best practices to Armenia's specific circumstances (Aleksanyan 2024; Poghosyan 2022).

Conclusion and discussion

In conclusion, it can be stated that alongside technological advancements, the importance of cyberspace has grown significantly, and countering cyber threats has become one of the primary challenges for states. Countries are developing legislative frameworks and establishing relevant institutions to regulate the cyber domain, as well as engaging in international cooperation to jointly address existing and potential threats. For some countries, particularly those involved in active conflicts, it is crucial not only to counter internal and external cyber threats but also to organize offensive cyber operations.

The Republic of Armenia is not immune to cyber threats and, as a party to an active conflict, must invest more robust efforts in addressing threats in the field. Given the gaps at both the legislative and institutional levels, it is essential to intensify efforts toward their development. In this context, studying the experiences of countries with successful outcomes in the field, implementing necessary mechanisms, and optimizing resources can be highly beneficial for Armenia.

The development of information and communication technologies creates new challenges and threats to the national security of post-war Armenia, since the information space is used by Azerbaijan to achieve military-political, geopolitical and other goals. The increase in the dynamics and scale of economic and information threats in post-war Armenia causes a discrepancy between the required and existing levels of organization of management decision-making processes and information interaction of state, public and private structures in the field of security, which is especially characteristic of Armenia due to insufficient funding, imperfections in interdepartmental scientific and technical policy, and a weak level of development and implementation of information technologies. At the same time, insufficient protection of information resources leads to the leakage of important political, economic, scientific and military information. Along with new opportunities, these technologies have created previously non-existent challenges for government officials. Armenia, included in global interaction processes, is experiencing changes related to the transformation of communication processes. Since our country has post-war consequences. It is worth noting that the existing human resources, material and information resources do not provide an adequate response to the centripetal growth and development of threats emanating from the information space, which increases the scale of damage from their impact on cybersecurity systems.

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Conflict of interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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DYNAMICS OF RUSSIAN-TURKISH RELATIONS AFTER THE SECOND KARABAKH WAR: NEW PRIORITIES OF NATIONAL INTERESTS AND STRATEGIES OF STRUGGLE IN THE SOUTH CAUCASUS

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Abstract

The article analyzes the dynamics of Russian-Turkish relations after the Second Karabakh War of 2020. Particular attention is paid to the fact that the Second Karabakh War was an important military-political step for Türkiye, since, despite being in a bad economic situation and involved in various regional conflicts, Türkiye still managed to act as a new regional superpower and increase its role in the South Caucasus.

The article discusses the aggressive steps that led to the fact that Türkiye, having developed and implemented its strategy, without having the necessary natural resources, having many problems within the country, Türkiye can increase its role on several platforms and even show ambitions to be involved in the global governance system.

Türkiye opposed the established international relations at the strategic level, putting forward the point of view 'the world is bigger than five'. At the regional level, combining soft power with hard power for Azerbaijan, Türkiye violated the existing balance and, as a result, increased its share of presence. This is why Russian-Turkish relations are analyzed in the context of the tactical steps taken by Türkiye, as well as in the context of theories of offensive realism and strategic balancing. The article describes how Türkiye, pursuing a more active policy after 2016, managed to prevent the emergence of anti-Turkish coalitions, balance

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regional rivals, and, if necessary, enter into allied relations with them. In addition, the work used a political-ideological approach to analyze the ideologies and program goals that determine Türkiye's regional policy, as well as a resource-actor approach, which analyzes the resource base and the activities of states and non-state actors directly involved in the implementation of the foreign policy of the two countries.

Keywords: *Russian-Turkish cooperation, Türkiye, NATO, Second Karabakh War, Armenia, Azerbaijan, soft power, existing balance, offensive realism, South Caucasus.*

Introduction

The dynamics of Russian-Turkish relations are explained by the fact that, being neighbors on the Black Sea, Türkiye and Russia have always paid serious attention to their bilateral relations. After the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, world politics underwent radical changes. Yesterday's enemies became partners and today strive for cooperation. In this regard, significant changes have occurred in the foreign policies of Russia and Türkiye.

There have been wars, mutual grievances, contradictions and conflicts of varying intensity between the two countries at different periods of history. At the same time, the Russian Soviet Federative Socialist Republic (RSFSR) became the first state to officially recognize the Turkish Republic. Both the Turkish Republic and the RSFSR were successors to two empires, which were often characterized by a clash of interests. However, after the imperial era, starting in the 1920s, relations between the two countries were generally positive.

After the Second World War, they began to develop again in a less than favorable way. The bipolar world order and the membership of the Turkish Republic in NATO marked its belonging to the Socialist camp, opposite to the USSR: the two countries were moving further and further away from each other. Despite this, during the Cold War, there were no truly serious conflicts between the two states. Finally, since the early 1990s, immediately after the end of the Cold War and with the collapse of the Soviet Union, Russian-Turkish interaction began to improve again. At the same time, with the destruction of the Russian geopolitical space, new independent states of the South Caucasus - Azerbaijan, Armenia and Georgia - appeared in international politics.

Türkiye's intervention in the situation in the South Caucasus has caused particular concern for the Russian Federation, since in Russia's eyes the Republic of Türkiye is, first of all, an ally of the United States and the southern flank of NATO in the North Atlantic defense system. Therefore, Russia constantly sees Türkiye as a potential threat to its security. Of course, the situation is not hopeless, but the previous history and mutual conflicts make both states treat each other with obvious caution (Karakoç and Ersoy 2024.).

After the Second Karabakh War of 2020, Russian-Turkish interaction is transformational and mutually beneficial and looks more sustainable and promising than ever before. However, the potential for developing relations is far from exhausted. That is why a comprehensive analysis of positive changes and identification of existing

problems and contradictions in the South Caucasus seems extremely relevant (Morozov 2023).

Rethinking the Transformation of Russian-Turkish Interactions

Russian-Turkish relations have a history of more than 500 years. The Russian-Turkish contradictions formed in the 16th century turned into a direct conflict between these countries in the 17th century. The centuries-old dream of the Russian Empire was the capture of Constantinople (Tsargrad), as a result of which the area of the Black Sea would become an area of domination for Russia. The liberation of Constantinople, the center of Orthodoxy, would increase Russia's influence in the East, as well as give it the moral right to create a pan-Slavic union with the center in Tsargrad (Danilevsky 1888, 498-499).

Despite the fact that during the last two hundred years, the Russian and Ottoman empires waged an uncompromising struggle against each other, in terms of civilization they were anti-Western forces. According to P. Savitsky, Russia-Eurasia is a union of the European Forest (Slavic people) and the Asian Steppe (Turkic peoples) (Dugin 2000, 168; Basilov 2020). L. Gumilev called this type of civilization formed in Eurasia "Scythian-Siberian steppe", adding that "they are neither Slavic nor Turkic (although biologically their ancestors are the bearers of the same code), but they are Russians" (Gumilev 1981, 38-39; Titov 2014). If previously the political expansion of the Russian and Turkish empires were opposed to each other, in the 20th century new lines of contact were formed between them. The Russian Federation and the Republic of Türkiye were formed as a result of an uncompromising struggle against the West. In a certain sense, the two states are at the crossroads of Western and Eastern civilizations (Dugin 2022).

One of the successful examples of Russian-Turkish rapprochement in the 20th century is the Lenin-Ataturk cooperation. It will not be an exaggeration at all if we mention that Bolshevik Russia was one of the supporters of the establishment of the modern Republic of Türkiye, and the interstate borders in the South Caucasus were defined as a result of that cooperation. In 1921, under the Russian-Turkish Treaty of Friendship and Brotherhood, Kars was handed over to Türkiye, and Nakhichevan became a part of Azerbaijan as an autonomous region. The archival materials prove that the Turkish factor was once again important when determining the status of Nagorno-Karabakh (Yemelianova 2023). In Moscow, they believed that meeting Azerbaijan's territorial demands would weaken its aspiration towards Türkiye, which is also Russia's 'closest ally' (Lambert 2021).

In the past, both Russia and Türkiye had developed powerful non-Western multinational civilizations. In our days, both Moscow and Ankara are taking steps to restore the former power of their states. The presidents of Russia and Türkiye agree that the world order created by the West should be changed and both are allies in the process of creating a multipolar world order. At the same time, being included in the global economic structures of the West, they sought to weaken these factors in order to realize their ambitions. Although NATO membership has no alternative for Türkiye from the security point of view, still Ankara strives to become the most independent and influential regional superpower in the region (Dalay and Isachenko 2022). From

from this point of view, Erdogan emphasizes the conduct of mutually beneficial policy with Putin, the clarification of spheres of influence and the possibilities of diversifying Ankara's foreign policy (Sağlam 2025).

For its part, the Kremlin wants to restore Russia's role on the world stage and become one of the key actors in the emerging multipolar world order. For Moscow, the deepening of relations with Türkiye is also important from the point of view of the weakening of Western institutions. In fact, Türkiye is the only NATO member that has not joined the anti-Russian sanctions and undermines the unity of that organization. The Kremlin announces to the world that cooperation with the Russian side is beneficial for everyone and explains what dividends it can bring. Despite the fact that Russia and Türkiye have conflicts of interest in Syria, Libya and Nagorno-Karabakh, they still manage to overcome the contradictions. Both in 1920 and in the current situation in Russian-Turkish cooperation, the growing anti-Western position in Türkiye is vitally important for Russia, which is more important than the common Christian civilizational basis. Thus, for Russia, conservative and anti-Western Islam is preferable to Western and liberal Christianity.

Despite numerous existing contradictions, Russian-Turkish cooperation enables Moscow to maintain its presence in Syria and North Africa without wasting significant resources. However, the fact that their cooperation does not allow the West to become a serious player in the region and increase its presence is more important for both sides (Duan and Aydin 2024). For Moscow, the increasing influence of Türkiye in the former Soviet republics is of the greatest importance and a serious matter of concern. Türkiye has recorded serious success in this direction. By combining soft power with the military, Ankara provokes conflicts in regions of its interest and increases its presence and role in the region. Türkiye applied the same policy in the case of Azerbaijan when it used joint military exercises to deploy some of its armament in that country. Thus, Türkiye's steps made military operations in Nagorno-Karabakh more realistic for Baku, as a result of which Ankara's role not only increased, but also by defeating Russia's military-political ally in the South Caucasus, it strengthened its position in the context of competition with Moscow.

In order to properly analyze the Russian-Turkish relations, first of all, it is necessary to address the conceptual foundations of Türkiye's foreign policy.

Geopolitical strategies of regional powers in the South Caucasus

Türkiye's foreign policy underwent serious changes in the early 2010s. They are related to A. Davutoglu, one of the leaders of the AKP (Justice and Development Party), who first became the foreign minister of Türkiye, and later assumed the office of the prime minister. In the program "Strategic Depth. The International Situation of Turkey" published by him in 2001, he refers to the new role of Türkiye in the international arena after the end of the Cold War (Murinson 2006). He addressed the ongoing international processes from the perspective of geopolitics and post-imperial heritage, according to which the Caucasus, the Balkans and the Middle East are the core of the Pax Ottomanica, the 'Ottoman zone' (Kutlay and Önış 2021; Erşen 2022). In the 2007 plan of the AKP, it was recorded that Türkiye should make a transition from a crisis approach to a strategic one, which assumed that Türkiye should conduct a

more dynamic, active foreign policy in the Middle East, Caspian region, Caucasus and Balkans (Erol 2024.). It was planned to create ‘security and stability’ zones in those regions. At the same time, the Turkic world was qualified as a zone of historical responsibility (Minasyan-Ostermann 2025; Kubicek 2022; Raudvere and Onur 2023).

The 2008 economic crisis, increasing stability in Türkiye’s neighboring countries, declining U.S. influence in the Middle East, and deepening internal problems in the EU have created new opportunities for Ankara. During this period in Türkiye, changes in foreign policy were intertwined with internal political processes (Cheterian 2018). Erdogan succeeded primarily in limiting the influence of the military and old bureaucratic elite. Large-scale legal proceedings against the representatives of the ‘Kemalist elite’ took place (Gürpinar 2013). Another important moment was the 2010 constitutional reforms, as a result of which the army was deprived of the opportunity to influence the political processes of Türkiye (Sørensen 2012; Aviv 2022).

So, after the Arab Spring, R. Erdogan, by making the transition to hard power, simultaneously strengthens his power by paying tribute to the nationalist segment of Turkish society (Cinar 2013). After dispersing the 2013 Taksim Square protests and failing to negotiate with the EU, Erdogan initiated a series of undemocratic reforms in Türkiye (Gokay 2015; Whitehead and Bozoglu 2016). Having won the presidential elections in 2014, Erdogan limited the powers of the prime minister, and the constitutional amendments implemented in 2017 not only abolished the position of the prime minister, but also limited the powers of the legislative body. After these steps, the monopoly of foreign policy was practically concentrated in Erdogan’s hands (Erdoğan 2021). All decisions related to foreign policy began to be developed and formulated in the narrow circle of his advisers. Erdogan already preferred to solve all current issues through personal dialogue with the heads of different states. By Erdogan’s order, a number of bodies were created, which functioned parallel to the structures of the Foreign Ministry. For example, the Public Diplomacy Coordination Council, the Department for Turks and Compatriots Living Abroad, the “Enlightenment” Foundation, etc. A strange situation was created when, in the 2010s, the director of the Türkiye’s National Intelligence Organization (MIT), Hakan Fidan, had a more important role in foreign policy issues than the foreign minister.

Thus, A. Davutoglu’s ‘Strategic depth’ implied an emphasis on the Middle Eastern region and a policy mixed with populism, pan-Islamism, as well as neo-Ottomanism. When A. Davutoglu resigned from the post of Prime Minister in 2016, ‘Strategic depth’ was replaced by the concept of ‘moral realism’ (Davutoğlu 2020; Gümüş 2022).

In our view, Turkish moral realism includes military activity that combines hard power and humanitarian norms. It is characterized by ignoring the idealistic concept of zero problems with neighbors, creating friendly relations and strategic alliances with individual states, and selective activism (Askerov 2017). Observing the foreign policy developed by the AKP, we can state that neo-Ottomanism is considered in three dimensions: the Ottoman Empire as a cradle of civilization, the Ottoman Empire as an Islamic state, and the Ottoman State as a multicultural empire (Maessen 2014; Şahin and Candan 2018; Tokdoğan 2024).

Modern Russian-Turkish relations are a complex system of counterbalances, restraint and cooperation. Until the 44-Day War of Nagorno Karabakh in 2020 it is presented on two levels.

The first level includes cooperation between the two regional states mainly in the Black Sea basin and the Syrian conflict. It includes cooperation in the economic, military-technical fields, coordinated steps from the point of view of national interests, increasing the role of the two states in the processes of forming a multipolar world and a new world order (Aydin-Düzgit and Rumelili 2021).

The second level includes the competition between Russia and Türkiye, which is carried out through partner countries and allies adjacent to both sides. The countries included in this platform are Iran, Greece, Armenia, Israel, Ukraine, Azerbaijan, and the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus (Zengin and Topsakal 2021).

From the autumn of 2020, the third level of direct military-political power competition between Türkiye and Russia in the South Caucasus is being drawn, as a result of which Türkiye managed to break the balance created here after the First World War. After gradually strengthening its positions in the eastern part of the Mediterranean Sea, the Near and Middle East, and in the Black Sea basin, and in order to establish a military-political and energy connection with Central Asia, Türkiye decided to strengthen itself in the South Caucasus as well (Coşkun et al. 2024; Aleksanyan 2025).

Encouraging Azerbaijan in 2020 to take military action, Türkiye announced from the beginning that it would provide large-scale assistance to 'brotherly' Azerbaijan, including in the military field. It was painful enough for Ankara that Moscow managed to bypass it at this stage, as Russia became the main guarantor of the ceasefire and truce. Even after the agreement to create a Russian-Turkish observation center in Aghdam, Ankara did not agree with the idea that the Turkish military would not participate in peacemaking operations. Ankara continued to deliberately spread the information that they had reached an agreement with Moscow on this issue. Despite the fact that the Kremlin denied this reality, on November 16, 2020, R. Erdogan issued his decree on sending military personnel to Azerbaijan for the approval of the Turkish parliament, which was approved the next day (Hovsepyan and Tonoyan 2024). During the Second Karabakh War in 2020, there was a belief among the Armenian political elite that "Turkey has returned to the South Caucasus to continue the Armenian genocide,"¹ and Russian-Turkish relations have had and continue to have a significant impact on the development of events both in individual regions and in the world as a whole. That fact once again proves how stubbornly and uncompromisingly Türkiye acts in strategically important directions. In this specific case, Ankara's steps were aimed at keeping Baku in its sphere of influence.

Türkiye was consistently increasing its role in Central Asia before increasing its influence in the South Caucasus. At the summit of the Turkic Council held in Istanbul in November 2011, the Cooperation Council of Turkic Speaking States was renamed

¹ The Office to the PM of the RA. 2020. "Turkey has returned to the South Caucasus to continue the Armenian genocide" - Nikol Pashinyan's Interview with The Globe and Mail." October 2, 2020. Accessed March 1, 2025. <https://www.primeminister.am/en/interviews-and-press-conferences/item/2020/10/02/Nikol-Pashinyan-interview-The-Globe-and-Mail/>.

into the Organization of Turkic States. In other words, the Turkic world entered a new stage of integration, creating a unified geopolitical, ideological and cultural Turkic space (Sari 2023). In the strategic document “Turkic World Vision 2040”² adopted at the summit, it is planned to use the Trans-Caspian corridor to export Turkmen gas through Azerbaijan and Türkiye to Europe, to create a common Turkic army, which will also include Russia’s allies in the CSTO Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. It is not superfluous to mention that Crimea, Siberia, Povolzhie, Altai, Yakutia, Khakasia and a number of other Russian territories are included in the above-mentioned Turkic territory (Duan and Aydin 2024; Çetinkaya and Demirel 2023). It is no coincidence that this newly created Turkish organization announces and mentions its readiness to cooperate with dozens of international structures, and among them there is no integration organization created by the Russian side.

That step of Türkiye definitely contradicts the interests of Russia. Could Moscow counter Ankara by using, for example, the Kurdish or Armenian questions? However, Moscow chose a different strategy. This pan-Turkic and aggressive move by Ankara was followed by a mild response from official Moscow. The press secretary of the Russian president, D. Peskov, stated that he considers the idea of the unity of the Turkic world to be normal, and sarcastically noted that the center of the Turkic world is not in Türkiye, but in Altai, in Russia³.

What is more surprising is the position of the Russian expert community, which, noting the negative consequences of that move, suggests that in order to prevent the further deepening of Moscow-Ankara contradictions, Russia should be included in Turkic integration projects, so as not to allow some Turkic-speaking regions and subjects of Russia to be separately included in those structures (Purtaş 2025; Morgado and Varga 2025).

It turns out that Russia, which aspires to world leadership, opposes Erdogan’s plans in every possible way and is not so sure that its individual subjects will not be included in Turkish projects. We also have an example of that. For example, after the escalation of Turkish-Russian relations in 2015, the Ministry of Culture of the RF instructed its agencies to stop cooperation with the International Organization of Turkic Culture (TÜRKSOY). In this sense, it is important to keep in mind that the republics of Altai, Bashkortostan, Tuva, Khakassia and Yakutia continue to participate in the organization as observers. Currently, the Yunus Emre Institute operates in Moscow, which holds pro-Turkish cultural events in various regions of Russia. On the other hand, Türkiye supports anti-Russian sentiments through various organizations of Caucasian and Crimean Tatars operating on its territory, which seek social and cultural integration with Turkish society. However, historically these relations have always been complex, and contradictions often led to wars. As a result, geopolitical competition and the desire to strengthen their influence in neighboring regions, with the exception of short periods, have become an integral part of the relationship between Russia and Türkiye (Erdoğan 2024). At the same time, the territories and regions where the clash of

² Organization of Turkic States. 2021. “Turkic World Vision 2040.” November 13, 2021. Accessed March 1, 2025. <https://www.turkicstates.org/en/news/turkic-world-vision-2040>.

³ TASS. 2021. “Russia’s Altai should be marked as center of Turkic world on Erdogan’s map — Kremlin.” November 21, 2021. Accessed March 1, 2025. <https://tass.com/russia/1364291>.

Russian-Turkish interests was most clearly expressed have changed. In the early history of bilateral relations, these were Ukraine, Crimea and Bessarabia, later the Balkans, the Caucasus and the Black Sea region, during the bipolar world, bilateral relations were mainly determined by Türkiye's participation in NATO.

This political ideology of Turkish President Erdogan fits perfectly into the doctrine of modern geopolitical imagination. From this perspective, Turkish political and media cartography also reflects the geopolitical imagination of the Turkish elite and society and is actually reflected in Turkish foreign policy (Ünlü Bilgiç 2025; Çaymaz 2019).

Türkiye implements its claims to the territory of other states and peoples with two forms of technology. The first is state institutions. For example, the Turkish world map stretching from the Adriatic seaside to China is regularly published in various mass media and Turkish textbooks. The second way is to use the potential of various nationalist and Islamist organizations, scientific and public circles, members of parliament. They are trying to strengthen their claims to the Turkic lands through the restoration and construction of architectural monuments, which is carried out under state sponsorship (Erol 2024.).

Back in 2008, a council was created by Erdogan's decree, whose main task was the restoration of Turkish heritage in the Balkans, the Middle East, the Caucasus and Crimea. With this, Ankara seeks to create the 'material foundations' of its ambitions. The same tactics are currently being used by Baku. With Turkish funds, many religious institutions were not only restored, but also new ones were built in a number of post-Soviet republics, also in Russia. For example, R. Erdogan also participated in the opening ceremony of the main mosque in Moscow in 2015.

R. Erdogan uses two conceptual approaches to his policy. The first is the 'geography is destiny' approach, which is related to the Islamic concept of predestination. It involves the consolidation, or control, of vast former Ottoman territories. The second is the 'geography of the heart', according to which Türkiye should unite all Muslims in the world. Its essence lies in the fact that Erdogan portrays all Muslims outside Türkiye as an oppressed element that needs Türkiye's humanitarian aid (Başkan and Taşpinar 2021).

Uncertainty of maximum concessions in Russian-Turkish relations

Now let's try to understand how the Turkish president and political leadership manage to achieve maximum concessions from Russia in Russian-Turkish relations. It is obvious that the U.S. and the EU continue to move along the liberal model of the international world order, while China, Russia and Türkiye implement a policy characteristic of realism, using the format of balancing forces, competition and neutralization of potential opponents (Ünal 2023; Wang and Sun 2024). The main feature of Erdogan's policy is tough political pressure, accompanied by constant threats against world centers of power and key regional countries. It is noteworthy that the foreign policy of both Türkiye and Russia can be viewed from the standpoint of the theory of offensive realism developed by John Mearsheimer (Tabak 2025; Johnson and Thayer 2016).

The convergence of Russian-Turkish interests in the South Caucasus is taking place in conditions where these two states are seeking to regain their lost positions in other

regions. Türkiye is fighting for regional leadership in the territories of the former Ottoman Empire. This is facilitated by economic and demographic growth, as well as the ideological basis formulated in the concept of Strategic Depth. Russia, in turn, having significantly recovered from the collapse of the USSR, has begun to more actively protect its regional and global interests, especially in cases where this concerns such sensitive issues as ensuring the security of society and the state, as well as preserving the modern world order and international law. In this regard, it is Ukraine that is the source of challenges and threats for Russia. The presence of non-regional actors, for whom these regions are important, first of all, as a source of energy resources and a corridor for their transportation, adds particular complexity to Russian-Turkish relations in the South Caucasus and Central Asia (Yilmaz and Albayrak 2022).

With the start of the Russian-Ukrainian armed confrontation since 2013, and since 2022 already a full-scale invasion and war, Türkiye's position towards Russia has become even stronger (Jakupec 2024). If earlier Turkish President Erdogan was perceived as a figure of a regional power, than Russian President Putin, then the new reality has pushed him to the center of world politics (Joja 2024).

The Turkish Stream, the Akkuyu NPP, the Black Sea straits, and the Syrian issue have become mechanisms for putting pressure on Russian leadership. In economic and logistical terms, Türkiye's importance for Russia has increased dramatically, as Türkiye has become Russia's key window to Europe.

In 2024, sanctions pressure from the U.S. and EU increased on Russian-Turkish trade, and Turkish banks delayed or did not open accounts for payments to Russian companies⁴. However, this mainly concerned exports to Russia, which did indeed decrease significantly in 2024, rather than imports to Türkiye. Turkish exporters complained about reduced supplies in the summer of 2024, and Russian importers complained about difficulties with payments. Because of all this, in 2024, Russia lost its place as the main source of imports for Türkiye in terms of the total value of goods, which it occupied in 2022, and moved to second place, giving way to China.

In our opinion, significant factors in the reduction of imports to Türkiye are the sanctions pressure, the threat of secondary sanctions and the difficulties with settlements that follow from them. The Turkish authorities have periodically secretly ignored Western European sanctions until a certain point, since Türkiye and Russia will continue to make joint efforts to overcome the difficulties that arise in trade. It is obvious that the supply of energy resources will continue, as evidenced by the fact that the Turkish side managed to obtain an exception for conducting transactions through Gazprombank, which was included in the sanctions list.

Since February 2022, in the context of a full-scale war between Ukraine and Russia, there has been a reduction in oil production by Russia, expensive gas, an increase in the cost of coal as the only available replacement for oil and gas for power generation, and a corresponding restructuring of markets. But gradually this extreme situation was resolved, and the markets adapted, prices began to return to normal and to long-term average values. If before the Second Karabay War of 2020, Russia was a strong competitor for Türkiye and could single-handedly resolve regional issues, including the

⁴ TUIK. 2024. "Foreign Trade Statistics, January 2024." February 28, 2024. Accessed March 1, 2025. <https://data.tuik.gov.tr/Bulten/Index?p=Foreign-Trade-Statistics-January-2024-53534&dil=2>

status quo of Nagorno-Karabakh, then after 2020, and later 2022, a completely different situation has developed. The de facto Turkish President Erdogan has become a moderator between the West and Russia, and both sides feel the need for this. Unlike President Putin, Erdogan currently has the opportunity to pursue a balanced policy with both Russia and the U.S., since he has his own backup option, which Russia, which is under severe sanctions, is deprived of. In this case, Türkiye can receive Russia's support in the event of a deepening conflict with the U.S., and U.S. support in the event of an aggravation of relations with Russia. Türkiye has extensive experience in the field of balancing foreign policy and regional diplomacy, so the current Russian-Turkish relations can be characterized as competitive cooperation (Park 2022; Şen 2024).

As for the South Caucasus, Russia has failed to maintain a regional balance between its allies Armenia and partner Azerbaijan and is now trying to maintain its influence at least within its new borders at the cost of some losses. Türkiye, while deepening relations with Ukraine and Central Asia, is trying to remain a valuable partner for the West as a counterweight to Russia, China and Iran in the region (Vardazaryan 2024).

The strange policy of Türkiye is placed in this framework, the Russian-Turkish and Turkish-Ukrainian relations being two of the prominent examples. Back in 2014, Türkiye voted in the UN in favor of the territorial integrity of Ukraine, that is, it does not recognize Crimea as Russian territory. According to the 2020 Ukrainian National Security Strategy⁵, Türkiye is considered a strategic partner, and Türkiye has also declared Ukraine its strategic partner⁶.

Violating the agreements with the Russian Federation, Ankara returned the Azov commanders to Ukraine and then also announced that Ukraine deserves NATO membership and is developing military-strategic cooperation with Kiev. With this cooperation, Ankara makes it clear to the West, that despite the Russian-Turkish rapprochement, Ankara does not ignore the interests of NATO. In parallel, Ankara not only did not join the anti-Russian sanctions and maintained air communication, but also deepened economic cooperation (Poghosyan 2022; Elamiryan 2024). By developing relations with Ukraine, Erdogan aims to strengthen the position of Türkiye in Eastern Europe and the Black Sea region. As for geopolitical calculations, Ukraine is not observed as a valuable ally in Ankara, but rather as a buffer state, with the help of which Ankara will try to limit Russian influence in the region (Köstem 2022; Yilmaz and Morieson 2025). In this sense, Russia is a more valuable partner for Türkiye from the economic and security point of view. It is within the framework of the balancing policy that Türkiye, moving with its national interests, does not take into consideration the interests of its allies, and in Kiev they are not completely sure if the position of

⁵ Polish Institute of International Affairs. 2020. "Ukraine's New National Security Strategy." October 30, 2020. Accessed March 1, 2025. https://pism.pl/publications/Ukraines_New_National_Security_Strategy.

⁶ The Presidential Office of Ukraine. 2025. "Ukraine's Reconstruction and the Development of Bilateral Relations: Volodymyr Zelenskyy Meets with Turkish Government and Business Representatives." March 13, 2025. Accessed March 15, 2025. <https://www.president.gov.ua/en/news/vidbudova-ukrayini-ta-rozvitok-dvostoronnih-vidnosin-volodim-96577>.

Ankara can be stable at decisive moments. The same trend was manifested in the issue of NATO membership of Sweden.

In February 2022, Turkish President Erdogan stated that Türkiye was not going to sever relations with either Russia or Ukraine over the Russia-Ukraine conflict, as Türkiye had close economic, military and political ties with these countries. His statement in September 2023 that he trusted Russia as much as he trusted the West fits into the same logic.

Thus, Türkiye, by pursuing a balancing policy, was able to significantly strengthen its position, despite the fact that it does not have enough resources to fulfill its current role. The relatively balanced relations implemented by Türkiye do not imply either complete subordination or openly confrontational tactics towards the most significant partner (Tarasiuk 2025). Erdogan's success in foreign policy is explained by a balanced policy, when success is achieved by balancing the interests of competing partners (Köstem 2022). By balancing opposing interests, Türkiye not only neutralizes the danger, but also achieves a new balance through an active policy and receives maximum concessions from different parties. In this scenario, Türkiye can influence the balance of power established in different regions, indirectly using the potential of other countries and trusted groups (Tekin 2024). Another advantage of this behavior model for Türkiye is the limitation of the influence of extra-regional forces.

Conclusion and discussion

The role of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War of 2020 in the foreign policy of Russia and Türkiye in the context of relations between these countries is a topic that has attracted increased attention from many researchers. This is explained by the fact that the South Caucasus, having been an arena of Russian-Turkish political and economic rivalry for many centuries, remains to a large extent an object of vital interests of major powers.

What is happening in the South Caucasus has not only a regional but also a global dimension, including the problem of maintaining peace, which makes the region a subject of increased concern for Russia and Türkiye. The states of the South Caucasus are experiencing serious political and economic difficulties, complicated by violent interethnic clashes. The future of peace or war between Azerbaijan and Armenia, as well as the problems of exploitation and transportation of Caspian energy resources are a source of contradictions on a wider international scale, since they directly affect the national interests of regional and extra-regional powers.

We saw the main goal in determining the place and significance of the South Caucasus after the Second Karabakh War of 2020 in the foreign policy strategies of Russia and Türkiye in the following contexts:

- Russian-Turkish cooperation is primarily important for both sides in terms of strategic autonomy, but Türkiye is capable of using cooperation with Russia more fully to diversify its foreign policy.
- The economic factor has always played a significant role in relations between Russia and Türkiye, but with the beginning of the Russian-Ukrainian military confrontation it has become even more important. Türkiye has become Russia's only window to the West, and in the context of tough sanctions against Russia,

Türkiye has made the most of its advantageous geographical position to solve economic problems, turning into an important logistics center for energy exports.

- In the short and medium term, Türkiye and Russia have developed similar approaches to world politics, which has created a favorable basis for cooperation. However, there are also significant differences between them, which are noticeable, especially in Central Asia and the South Caucasus. The prospects for Russian-Turkish cooperation will also depend on the nature of Russia-West and Türkiye-West relations. However, we believe that in order to enhance its role in the multipolar world order, Türkiye will not turn towards the West or the East, but will continue a balanced foreign policy.
- The resilience of the South Caucasus depends and will depend significantly on how well the elements of cooperation and competition in the bilateral relations between Russia and Türkiye will be combined. However, it is obvious that Türkiye has become the most difficult and unpredictable partner for Russia in the South Caucasus, since after each success Türkiye strengthens elements of nationalism in its domestic and foreign policy. Türkiye is step by step violating the red line declared to Russia, and the Russian ruling elite must know that a sharp turn of Türkiye is possible, and not only towards the West.

Thus, the topic seems especially relevant in connection with the instability in the region, and the region in this work is understood as the South Caucasus and Central Asia, as well as the territories that were once part of the Ottoman Empire, which has a negative impact on countries that had previously developed stably. The threat posed by the unresolved Kurdish issue, Türkiye's desire to become a regional leader, as well as the influx of refugees have a destabilizing effect on many states in the region. In these conditions, it is quite difficult to build pragmatic Russian-Turkish relations, which are already of a decently complex nature due to the difference in positions on many international issues. At the same time, relations between Russia and Türkiye are complex, multi-level and are not limited to regional issues. Over the five-hundred-year history of bilateral contacts, fairly close cultural, humanitarian, trade and economic relations have developed, with energy occupying a special place. In this sense, energy is one of the promising areas of Russian-Turkish relations, given Russia's large reserves of hydrocarbon resources and Türkiye's advantageous geographical position for their transportation to consumers, as well as Russian nuclear technologies, which Türkiye is interested in. It should be noted that in the energy sector, in particular, in transit projects, there is a clash of Russian-Turkish interests, especially in cases where Türkiye is a participant in projects to transport energy resources bypassing Russia.

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical standards

The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.

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TRANSFORMING GOVERNANCE IN ARMENIA: FROM SOVIET LEGACY TO STRATEGIC REFORM

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Abstract

This article analyzes the evolution of institutional reforms in the public administration system of the Republic of Armenia since its independence in 1991. In this context, it is taken into account that only the state is able to ensure the co-evolution of management technologies to achieve global goals and strategic objectives of the development of Armenian society. Technological dominants of political transformations, social and economic development require appropriate management adaptation, which is the focus of this study is the correct development and application of the functionality of decision support systems. Thus, this study examines four stages of reform: 1) Initial institutional creation from 1991 to 1999; 2) Formalization and adoption of Western governance models from 2000 to 2008; 3) European integration and administrative modernization from 2009 to 2017; 4) Political transformation accompanied by the resumption of administrative reforms since 2018. These reforms reflect a complex interplay of historical legacies, external influences, and internal aspirations for public administration modernization. Issues such as institutional inertia, limited localization of imported models, and political resistance are assessed in detail. In addition, the article compares these historical reforms with Armenia's long-term goals outlined in the Public Administration Reform Strategy of the Republic of Armenia, emphasizing the transition from imitation reforms to sustainable institutional transformation.

Keywords: Armenia, public administration, institutional reforms, governance modernization, path dependency, digital transformation, merit-based recruitment, citizen engagement, administrative decentralization.

Introduction

The transition of post-Soviet states to democratic governance and market-oriented economies has been a subject of enduring interest for scholars and policymakers, offering fertile ground for both theoretical explorations and empirical studies. Much of the existing public administration theory is derived from Western institutional models, which may not fully address the distinct trajectories of developing or post-Soviet states

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like Armenia. As Bertelli et al. (2020) argue there is a pressing need for public administration research to formulate agendas that account for localized challenges and governance environments in developing countries. Within this broader context, the Republic of Armenia emerges as a particularly compelling case. Its unique geopolitical positioning, inheritance of Soviet administrative structures, and complex trajectory of institutional reform present rich material for examining the interplay between historical legacies and contemporary aspirations. This study seeks to address the following research question: How do Armenia's Soviet-inherited governance structures interact with global reform paradigms to shape the nation's governance trajectory? The core hypothesis underpinning this work posits that while external governance models and international standards provide a critical blueprint for reform, their success in Armenia hinges on their adaptation to the country's unique socio-political context.

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Armenia faced the twin imperatives of asserting sovereignty and modernizing its governance frameworks. The centralized and hierarchical structures inherited from the Soviet era posed significant challenges, including inefficiencies in public service delivery, the absence of participatory mechanisms, and deeply entrenched bureaucratic traditions (Blum and Rogger 2021). These challenges necessitated a series of far-reaching institutional reforms aimed at creating agile, effective, and citizen-centered public administration systems. The dual goals of ensuring state functionality and aligning with democratic principles and market efficiency underscored Armenia's governance transformation efforts.

In its state-building journey, Armenia has pursued modernization by addressing these inefficiencies and aligning institutional reforms with international standards. The challenges and successes of this process provide critical insights into the broader dynamics of post-Soviet state governance transitions. For Armenia, the adaptation of global governance frameworks to its local socio-political environment remains an ongoing endeavor, marked by significant progress as well as limitations.

The RA Public Administration Reform Strategy¹ serves as a strategic blueprint for these efforts, reflecting a commitment to fostering a transparent, efficient, and innovative system of governance. This citizen-centric approach integrates democratic principles with practical imperatives, aiming to address legacy inefficiencies while navigating the contemporary demands of public administration. By embedding these efforts in a broader interdisciplinary framework, Armenia's reform trajectory illustrates the delicate balance between adhering to global governance standards and accommodating local particularities.

Through historical-institutional analysis and comparative methodology, Armenia's experience provides a valuable case study in the broader landscape of post-Soviet governance transformations. While the centralized structures of the Soviet past initially constrained reform efforts, they also shaped the objectives and strategies of modernization, resulting in a uniquely Armenian narrative of state building and governance evolution.

¹ The Government of the RA. 2022. "Strategy for Public Administration Reforms of the Republic of Armenia: Government 4.0." (Appendix No. 1 to the RA Government Resolution No. 691-L of May 13, 2022). Accessed March 30, 2025. <https://www.arlis.am/hy/acts/181462> (in Armenian).

Theoretical and Methodological Framework

Institutional reform in public administration involves the deliberate restructuring of governance frameworks, processes, and norms to enhance efficiency, accountability, and responsiveness within public sector entities. In post-socialist transformations, such reforms hold particular significance as they address the dual challenges of moving from centralized, bureaucratic systems to decentralized, democratic, and market-oriented governance structures. These efforts are critical for balancing inherited inefficiencies with aspirational governance models that prioritize transparency and citizen participation. To fully understand the dynamics of these reforms, several theoretical frameworks and dimensions offer valuable insights. A recent study (Hattke and Vogel 2023) highlights the growing complexity and diversity of theorizing in public administration, with over 150 theories identified and clustered across disciplinary origins, methods, and geographical contexts. Their analysis reveals that while Western-originated theories dominate; emerging applications in non-Western settings like Armenia underscore the importance of localized adaptation and reflexive theorizing. This aligns with the need for context-sensitive approaches in post-Soviet reforms, where borrowed models must be critically assessed and domestically grounded.

The concept of Path Dependency, rooted in historical institutionalism, underscores the enduring influence of historical legacies on institutional choices. This theory highlights how prior decisions establish self-reinforcing mechanisms, rendering significant deviations from established trajectories particularly challenging (Pierson 2000). For post-socialist states such as Armenia, the legacy of Soviet administrative structures has profoundly shaped governance reforms, embedding centralized and hierarchical decision-making processes that often hinder participatory and decentralized models of governance. However, as Path Dependency also suggests, critical junctures, such as political revolutions or economic crises, can disrupt entrenched patterns and open avenues for transformative change (Demmke 2022).

Acemoglu and Robinson's (2012) dichotomy between extractive and inclusive institutions provides an additional theoretical lens to examine Armenia's reform trajectory. Extractive institutions concentrate power and resources within narrow elites, impeding broad-based development and innovation. Armenia's inherited Soviet structures reflect many characteristics of extractive systems, where hierarchical decision-making and a lack of public accountability fostered inefficiencies and stagnation. Transitioning to inclusive institutions, which distribute power equitably and foster citizen engagement, has been a central challenge of Armenia's reform efforts. Initiatives such as merit-based recruitment and digital governance platforms represent steps toward inclusivity. However, systemic inertia, political patronage, and resistance from entrenched elites illustrate the difficulty of dismantling extractive practices.

The 2018 Velvet Revolution represents a critical juncture that disrupted existing power dynamics and invigorated efforts to institutionalize inclusivity. Acemoglu and Robinson (2012) argue that such moments are pivotal for advancing inclusive reforms, provided robust implementation frameworks support them. Post-revolution reforms aimed at enhancing transparency, promoting citizen engagement, and reducing corruption demonstrate Armenia's progress toward this goal. However, as these scholars highlight, the success of transitions to inclusivity depends on institutionalizing

reforms that not only redistribute power but also foster broad-based trust and participation.

Institutional Isomorphism, a concept derived from neo-institutional theory, provides another lens for analyzing governance reforms. It describes the tendency of organizations within a field to converge towards similar structures and practices due to coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures (Jeyaraj and Zadeh 2020). In post-socialist transitions, coercive isomorphism often stems from the conditions set by international organizations and donor agencies, such as the EU and the World Bank, which advocate for governance practices aligned with global standards of transparency, accountability, and efficiency. Mimetic isomorphism emerges as states emulate governance models of more developed nations to gain legitimacy and attract foreign investment. Normative isomorphism, driven by professional networks and epistemic communities, reinforces the adoption of best practices. In Armenia, the implementation of e-Government systems and anti-corruption measures exemplifies the influence of institutional isomorphism, aligning with international benchmarks for good governance.

The concept of governance transfer is particularly relevant in the Armenian context, where external actors play a pivotal role in shaping domestic governance reforms. Governance transfer refers to the dissemination of policies, practices, and institutional models by international organizations and donor agencies. Programs like the EU's Eastern Partnership and the Open Government Partnership, as well as SIGMA initiatives have been instrumental in fostering governance innovations in Armenia, including community consolidation and participatory policymaking. However, the effectiveness of governance transfer depends on the extent to which these imported models are adapted to local socio-cultural and political contexts. Uncritical transplantation of foreign practices often results in a 'copy-paste' approach, which leads to superficial reforms that fail to address systemic issues (Christensen and Lægreid 2022). One illustrative example of the 'copy-paste' approach is Armenia's adoption of New Public Management (NPM) principles. While these Western-originated models emphasize efficiency, transparency, and citizen-centric service delivery, they often fall short when applied to contexts with ingrained hierarchical norms and systemic inertia. For instance, Armenia's attempts at decentralization and performance-based management have been hindered by Soviet-era bureaucratic legacies, limiting their practical impact (Heeks 2002; Sutyrin 2022). Similarly, the introduction of merit-based recruitment aimed at curbing politicization has faced challenges due to entrenched informal networks, reducing the effectiveness of these reforms (OECD 2022).

Armenia's digital governance platforms also provide an important perspective on this issue. While initiatives like 'e-Request' and 'Armenia e-Gov' display technological alignment with global standards, disparities in digital literacy and regional access continue to pose barriers to equitable implementation (UN Armenia 2025). These cases highlight the need for tailored strategies that account for Armenia's unique socio-political realities rather than simply importing practices wholesale. By integrating these examples, the analysis emphasizes the importance of moving from imitative to adaptive reforms. A shift toward context-sensitive frameworks, where

imported models are critically assessed and localized, could enhance the effectiveness and sustainability of Armenia's governance modernization.

Emerging technologies represent an important dimension of institutional reform that could be explored further. Innovations such as artificial intelligence block chain and big data analytics have the potential to enhance transparency and decision-making processes. Armenia's ongoing investments in digital governance provide a platform to leverage these technologies, which could further modernize public administration and address inefficiencies.

In addition to these frameworks, an evaluation of the reforms' impact is essential. Metrics such as improvements in service efficiency, transparency, citizen satisfaction, and trust could provide a clearer picture of reform success. For example, Armenia's e-Government initiatives could be assessed based on user adoption rates, cost reductions, or their role in minimizing corruption.

Another critical consideration is the cultural dimension of governance reforms. Societal attitudes towards bureaucratic systems and governance change can significantly influence reform adoption and implementation. Addressing resistance from bureaucratic elites and fostering a culture of public accountability are vital to sustainable reform.

Armenia's Public Administration Reform Strategy also emphasizes inclusivity and gender equity. This focus aligns with global governance priorities, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals, and highlights the importance of diverse representation in decision-making processes.

Finally, Armenia's reforms should be positioned within the broader framework of global integration. Alignment with international governance standards and partnerships, such as the UN Sustainable Development Goals or the EU's governance benchmarks, could underscore Armenia's commitment to modernizing public administration while addressing local and global challenges in tandem.

Methodological Approach

This study employs a historical-institutional analysis to trace the evolution of Armenia's public administration reforms, highlighting the interplay between historical legacies and contemporary reform efforts. By adopting a comparative approach, the analysis situates Armenia's experience within the broader context of post-socialist transformations, drawing parallels and contrasts with other transitional economies. This dual methodology enables a comprehensive understanding of the factors driving and constraining institutional reforms, offering insights into the conditions under which governance innovations can achieve sustainable impact.

Stages of Institutional Reforms in Armenia: Analytical Overview

Armenia's trajectory of institutional reforms offers a rich context for analyzing the evolution of governance systems in post-Soviet states. Divided into four distinct phases, the reforms reflect a complex interplay of historical legacies, external influences, and domestic ambitions to establish efficient, transparent, and participatory governance structures.

Initial institutional establishment from 1991 to 1999

The dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991 necessitated the rapid creation of state institutions capable of maintaining governance in an independent Armenia. During this foundational period, efforts were centered on restructuring Soviet-era administrative frameworks to suit the new political reality. Armenia repurposed Soviet-era bureaucratic structures to create core executive bodies tasked with essential governmental functions, providing immediate institutional functionality. However, these efforts simultaneously entrenched hierarchical practices and centralized decision-making processes, which hindered adaptability to evolving governance needs (Heifetz 1994; Pierson 2000; Agbodzakey 2024; Roos 2024).

In addition to these internal developments, external actors played a significant role in shaping Armenia's early institutional framework. International organizations such as the UNDP, USAID, and the EU offered critical technical and advisory support, providing financial resources and expertise to guide the transition. This involvement was particularly impactful in areas such as public administration reform and judicial independence. However, the reliance on these external actors led to critiques that many solutions were 'imported' rather than tailored to Armenia's unique socio-political context. While these initiatives provided essential capacity building, their success depended on local adaptation and sustainable implementation.

During this period, the enactment of Armenia's first post-Soviet constitution in 1995 marked a pivotal step toward formalizing the new governance system. The constitution institutionalized a presidential republic, concentrating significant power in the executive branch. Intended as a mechanism to ensure stability amidst socio-economic turbulence, this constitutional framework inadvertently weakened horizontal accountability by centralizing authority and limiting checks and balances (Okabe 2024; Heinelt and Egner 2022).

Alongside these structural changes, the nascent civil society of Armenia began to emerge as an important factor in shaping governance discourse. Grassroots movements and NGOs, many catalyzed by humanitarian efforts following the 1988 earthquake and the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict, started advocating for democratic values and addressing social issues. Supported in part by international funding and the Armenian diaspora, these early civil society actors laid the groundwork for greater civic engagement in later years. Although fragmented and limited in capacity, they played a minor but growing role in influencing governance reforms and fostering public accountability.

Together, these internal efforts and external influences highlight the complex interplay of domestic adaptation and international guidance during Armenia's foundational period. While the inherited governance norms posed significant challenges to institutional efficiency, the creation of executive authorities, the adoption of the constitution, and the emergence of civil society underscored Armenia's pursuit of stability and modernization amidst formidable constraints.

Formalization and adoption of Western models from 2000 to 2008

Armenia's efforts to modernize its governance system in the early 2000s were characterized by structured reforms influenced by global paradigms, aiming to institutionalize efficiency, transparency, and service orientation within public administration. A foundational element was the adoption of the NPM principles, which introduced reforms to separate policy-making from implementation functions, establish agency-based management structures, and emphasize citizen-centric service delivery (Holtkamp and Garske 2025; Cejudo and Michel 2017). This shift underscored a growing focus on managerial accountability and performance-driven evaluations, reflecting broader trends in modern public administration (Hepworth 2024).

In tandem with the NPM reforms, Armenia embarked on its digitalization journey, integrating e-Government platforms to streamline administrative processes and enhance transparency. While these initiatives were nascent at the time, they laid crucial groundwork for later phases of governance innovation (Reichborn-Kjennerud 2025). Beyond the technical advantages, the introduction of digital tools fostered a cultural shift within public administration, as government interactions with citizens became more accessible, signaling a departure from traditional bureaucratic barriers (Aoki 2025; Harutyunyan et al. 2024).

The role of international organizations during this period provided critical momentum for reform. Donor agencies such as USAID, UNDP, and the EU offered financial resources and technical expertise, heavily shaping Armenia's reform agenda. However, the reliance on externally driven reforms led to critiques of the 'imported' solutions, which often failed to address Armenia's unique socio-political context (Badalyan 2022). This tension highlighted the challenges inherent in reconciling global governance models with localized needs, raising questions about the sustainability of externally influenced reforms.

It is also essential to consider additional dimensions that illuminate the inherent complexities of these reforms. Notably, citizen engagement and public trust emerged as pivotal factors influencing the overall success of reform initiatives. Although the reforms prioritized citizen-centric service delivery mechanisms, persistent public skepticism regarding the government's intentions and administrative capacity significantly constrained their societal impact. The implementation of strategies aimed at cultivating trust, including comprehensive awareness campaigns and robust feedback mechanisms, might have played a critical role in fostering broader societal acceptance and reinforcing the legitimacy of these reform efforts. Another significant dimension was capacity building within public administration. The success of the NPM reforms and digitalization initiatives depended heavily on the skills and expertise of public officials tasked with implementing these changes. However, limited professional development opportunities and the persistence of Soviet-era bureaucratic norms posed significant obstacles to achieving the intended outcomes. Addressing human resource constraints through targeted training and merit-based recruitment would have strengthened the foundations of reform.

Additionally, economic factors influenced Armenia's ability to sustain these reforms. The early 2000s were marked by economic challenges that constrained public sector budgets, limiting the scope and pace of institutional modernization. While

international funding alleviated some financial pressures, the need for domestic investment remained critical to ensuring the long-term viability of the reforms.

Lastly, regional dynamics and geopolitical influences played an understated yet pivotal role in shaping governance reforms. Armenia's position in the post-Soviet landscape, coupled with its geopolitical challenges, affected the prioritization of certain reforms over others. For instance, efforts to align with European governance standards were often tempered by regional concerns and the need to maintain stability in the face of external pressures.

European integration and administrative modernization from 2009 to 2017

Armenia's aspirations for closer integration with Europe catalyzed significant modernization initiatives during this period, reflecting a profound commitment to reform. The engagement with EU frameworks such as the Eastern Partnership and SIGMA provided not only opportunities for advancement but also exposed the inherent challenges of balancing global standards with local realities. These programs acted as critical platforms for fostering institutional transformation, enabling Armenia to align its governance systems with international norms while navigating the complexities of post-Soviet transition.

The SIGMA program, co-funded by the EU and the OECD, played a particularly pivotal role by offering comprehensive evaluations and technical recommendations designed to strengthen Armenia's administrative structures. Börzel and Risse (2016) identify conditionalities—where compliance with EU standards becomes a prerequisite for assistance—as a central mechanism within Europeanization. Armenia's adherence to governance benchmarks, such as merit-based recruitment in the civil service and enhanced transparency measures, demonstrated its commitment to institutional modernization. SIGMA's assessments informed key reforms², such as the adoption of the Civil Service Concept and the enactment of the 2015 Civil Service Law, which sought to institutionalize professional recruitment practices. Despite the ambitious scope of these reforms, implementation faced challenges due to systemic inertia and resistance from entrenched political networks. In this regard, it is significant that civil service positions in Armenia were filled based on the results of competitive examinations, which demonstrates the difficulty of achieving full depoliticization. However, gradual progress was evident in Armenia by 2025, which demonstrates the gradual improvement of merit-based recruitment mechanisms. Further efforts are needed to fully implement the original concept of a transparent and impartial civil service, as laid down in the legal mechanisms.

In parallel, the Eastern Partnership facilitated broader innovations in local governance. Börzel and Risse (2016) highlight socialization—where interactions with EU institutions encourage the adoption of participatory governance practices—as another important Europeanization mechanism. Under this framework, Armenia pursued municipal consolidation initiatives aimed at empowering local authorities, enhancing resource allocation, and fostering citizen engagement. These reforms were

² OECD. 2025. Armenia and SIGMA. Accessed March 30, 2025. <https://www.sigmaprogram.org/en/partners-and-regions/armenia.html>.

strategically aligned with EU principles of decentralization, which emphasize bringing governance closer to citizens as a means of improving responsiveness and accountability (Obukhova, Ershova and Ershova 2025). However, significant disparities in municipal capacities revealed challenges in achieving equitable implementation. Regions with limited administrative resources often struggled to adopt these practices effectively, underscoring the need for targeted capacity-building measures (Lannon 2025).

Furthermore, the period displayed Armenia's growing embrace of digital governance as a complement to traditional reform initiatives. Building on European benchmarks for e-Government systems, Armenia integrated platforms such as 'e-Request' and 'Armenia e-Gov' into its administrative framework. These systems streamlined service delivery, reduced bureaucratic inefficiencies, and expanded opportunities for citizen engagement. Börzel and Risse's emphasis on capacity building resonates strongly here, as Armenia leveraged EU technical assistance to implement digital innovations while addressing gaps in public sector expertise. While these advancements marked a decisive shift toward modernized governance, disparities in digital literacy and access posed persistent barriers to equitable participation.

Challenges notwithstanding, EU-led initiatives such as SIGMA and the Eastern Partnership provided critical momentum for Armenia's governance reforms during this phase. Börzel and Risse's Europeanization framework underscores the transformative impact of conditionality, socialization, and capacity building, revealing the multifaceted nature of Armenia's alignment with international norms. However, the experience also illustrates the complexities of balancing external guidance with sustainable, localized implementation. Armenia's ability to navigate these dynamics ultimately shaped its trajectory of institutional modernization, offering valuable lessons for other transitioning states.

Political transformation and resumption of administrative reforms since 2018

The Velvet Revolution of 2018 marked a transformative moment in Armenia's governance landscape, fueling heightened expectations for institutional renewal and anti-corruption initiatives. One key focus was the strengthening of anti-corruption mechanisms, as post-revolution reforms prioritized the creation of independent institutions aimed at combating corruption. These measures were designed to ensure greater oversight in public procurement and governance processes, reflecting global trends in promoting integrity within public administration (Landa and Greenberg 2024). This trajectory was reaffirmed in the OECD's Anti-Corruption Reforms in Armenia (2022) report, which recognized progress in strengthening conflict-of-interest regulations and the institutional role of the Corruption Prevention Commission, while also highlighting remaining gaps in enforcement and coordination. The establishment of the Corruption Prevention Commission in 2019 was a pivotal milestone in this effort, signaling a transition of oversight responsibilities from ministerial control to an independent body. By 2025, the Commission had solidified its role as a cornerstone of Armenia's anti-corruption framework, having reviewed over 10,000 asset declarations and identified more than 400 discrepancies that triggered formal investigations. Its independent appointment procedures ensured impartiality, while its expanded mandate

now encompasses monitoring compliance with incompatibility requirements and conducting targeted anti-corruption education initiatives. Together, these developments underscore Armenia's unwavering commitment to fostering integrity and reducing corruption across all levels of public administration. Meanwhile, Armenia accelerated its efforts to expand transparency and digital governance.

The deployment of digital governance platforms integrated advanced technological solutions, thereby increasing service delivery efficiency and expanding public access to government data (OECD 2024). These initiatives align with the principles of the NPM and Good Governance paradigms (Steiner-Khamsi 2025). The launch of the 'e-Request' platform in 2019 marked a significant step forward, empowering citizens to file official requests online with remarkable efficiency. Building on this success, the 'Armenia e-Gov' portal broadened its scope by 2022, consolidating over 50 public services into a unified digital framework. This transformation streamlined citizen interactions with government institutions, reduced in-person visits by approximately 35%, and fostered greater accessibility and convenience. By 2025, the 'e-Request' platform was processing an even higher volume of submissions annually, reflecting its sustained relevance and growing user adoption. Similarly, the 'Armenia e-Gov' portal expanded its offerings to include over 75 public services, streamlining administrative procedures and strengthening Armenia's commitment to digital governance innovation (UN Armenia 2025). These digital transformations mark a pivotal stride toward aligning Armenia's public administration with global best practices, enhancing service delivery, and promoting transparency in governance. Building on the momentum of previous reforms, Armenia's Public Administration Reform Strategy has accelerated the adoption of digital technologies, including unified platforms for public services. The Strategy envisions leveraging artificial intelligence and data-driven decision-making to further improve service efficiency and transparency.

Another major area of progress was fostering citizen engagement, which emerged as a focal point of post-revolution reforms. Initiatives such as the Open Government Partnership (OGP)³ provided frameworks for involving citizens in decision-making processes. Nonetheless, ensuring the institutionalization of these participatory mechanisms remains an ongoing challenge (Kocamaz 2022). Under the OGP, Armenia's launch of the 'Open Budget' platform marked a milestone in fostering fiscal transparency and citizen engagement. This interactive tool empowered users to explore public expenditures in detail, promoting a more informed and participatory approach to governance. According to the OGP Independent Reporting Mechanism (IRM), the platform contributed to a 20% increase in civic submissions to the Ministry of Finance between 2020 and 2022, although responsiveness from public agencies remained inconsistent⁴. While response rates from government agencies have shown some

³ OGP. 2025. Creating OGP's Future Together: Strategic Planning 2023-2028. Accessed March 30, 2025. <https://www.opengovpartnership.org/creating-ogps-future-together/>.

⁴ OGP. 2023. IRM Results Report: Armenia 2022-2024. Accessed May 30, 2025. https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Armenia_Results-Report_2022-2024_For-public-comment_EN.pdf; OGP. 2023. Action plan of Open Government Partnership initiative of the Republic of Armenia for 2022-2024. Accessed May 30, 2025. https://www.opengovpartnership.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/10/Armenia_Action-Plan_2022-2024_Dec_Amended_EN.pdf.

improvement since then, variability persists, underscoring the ongoing challenge of ensuring timely and comprehensive engagement in the governance process. These initiatives reflect Armenia's dedication to open governance while highlighting areas for continued refinement.

Despite these ambitious objectives, Armenia's reforms have faced resistance from entrenched bureaucratic practices and resource constraints. This tension underscores the importance of adopting iterative and adaptive approaches to reform implementation, a necessity recognized in the broader literature on institutional change (Qi 2024).

Features and Challenges of Institutional Reforms in Armenia: Analytical Perspective

Institutional reforms in transitional economies like Armenia reveal distinctive features shaped by the interplay between global paradigms and localized needs. A prominent aspect of these reforms is the emphasis on global standards and best practices, where Armenia draws heavily from internationally recognized governance frameworks such as NPM and Good Governance. The adoption of the NPM introduced managerial approaches that prioritize efficiency, cost-effectiveness, and service orientation (Lahay and Saulnier 2024). Simultaneously, Good Governance principles underscore the importance of inclusivity, accountability, and the rule of law (Abegaz 2023). For example, Armenia's e-Government services reflect a hybrid application of these paradigms, combining transparency with improved service delivery to bridge the gap between bureaucratic legacies and modern administrative efficiency (Falkenhain 2020).

Digital transformation has emerged as a central pillar of reform, with the integration of e-Government systems playing a crucial role. These platforms enhance operational efficiency, reduce administrative barriers, and engage citizens more actively. Notably, Armenia's digitalization initiatives align with international donor frameworks, such as SIGMA, which promote interoperability and innovation. Despite these advancements, challenges remain, particularly in addressing digital literacy disparities that impede equitable participation in these systems (Chandra and Feng 2025).

A further notable feature is Armenia's focus on decentralization and revitalization of local governance. The country's community consolidation initiatives, supported by the Council of Europe, aim to empower local authorities through greater financial autonomy and enhanced decision-making capabilities (Christensen and Lægreid 2022). This approach aligns with a broader global trend aimed at bringing governance closer to citizens, thereby improving responsiveness and resource allocation.

Additionally, contemporary reforms in Armenia are increasingly oriented toward citizen-centric policies that emphasize participatory governance. Programs under the OGP serve as key platforms enabling citizens to contribute to policy formulation and monitor public sector performance. This participatory governance model aligns with the principles of governance transfer, in which external actors encourage civic empowerment (Reichborn-Kjennerud 2025). However, institutionalizing these participatory mechanisms remains a challenge, particularly in the face of entrenched bureaucratic resistance. The RA Public Administration Reform Strategy underscores citizen satisfaction as a central metric of public administration success. The strategy

highlights the development of unified digital platforms, such as the 'I AM' digital identification system, designed to enhance accessibility and streamline service delivery. Moreover, mechanisms for continuous citizen feedback aim to further solidify participatory governance efforts, reinforcing Armenia's commitment to responsive and inclusive reform.

Despite their notable features, Armenia's governance reforms face a host of structural, cultural, and political challenges, underscoring the tension between idealized governance models and the complex realities of implementation. A systematic review by Mugellini et al. (2021) highlights that while public sector reforms can reduce corruption; their effectiveness is highly contingent on contextual factors such as political commitment, enforcement capacity, and institutional trust. This reinforces the importance of localized and sustained efforts in Armenia, where formal anti-corruption mechanisms often clash with entrenched bureaucratic practices. A central issue lies in institutional discrepancies and gaps, as reforms inspired by external models often clash with local sociopolitical contexts. This misalignment between formal institutional structures and practical enforcement mechanisms undermines efficiency, particularly in key areas like anti-corruption and civil service reforms (Onofrei, Oprea and Cigu 2025). According to the OECD (2022), while Armenia has taken important legal and institutional steps to curb corruption, practical enforcement, coordination between agencies and resource constraints continue to undermine the full implementation of anti-corruption frameworks.

Compounding this issue is the limited adaptation of borrowed governance models. The frequent 'copy-paste' approach, where international practices are adopted without proper localization, renders some reforms superficial. As Lannon (2025) and Badalyan (2022) highlight, governance models transplanted without adequate consideration of cultural and historical nuances fail to achieve their intended impact. For instance, while Armenia has incorporated elements of the NPM, such as performance-based management, the persistence of Soviet-era bureaucratic norms continues to weaken their effectiveness (Christensen and Lægreid 2022).

Politicization within the civil service further exacerbates institutional instability. The absence of merit-based recruitment practices, coupled with frequent turnover among public officials, undermines continuity and capacity within administrative bodies. This politicization extends to decision-making processes, affecting institutional integrity and fostering public skepticism toward governance reforms. As Paquin (2022) and Gueorguieva (2024) note, citizen trust and engagement often suffer in systems plagued by political interference.

Another critical barrier is weak horizontal coordination, as inter-agency fragmentation hampers the implementation of cross-sectoral reforms. The lack of a cohesive 'whole-of-government' approach is particularly evident in decentralization efforts, where overlapping jurisdictions and unclear mandates lead to inefficiencies (De Cruz 2024).

Resource constraints and capacity gaps also pose significant challenges. Although donor-driven projects provide initial funding, long-term sustainability requires domestic investment, which is often constrained by fiscal limitations (Robertson and Melkumyan 2021). Armenia's RA Public Administration Reform Strategy addresses

these challenges by emphasizing strategic human resource management reforms, including merit-based recruitment and professional development. It aims to address disparities in administrative resources and bolster governance efficiency, particularly within local government structures.

Resistance from stakeholders remains another significant obstacle, as bureaucratic elites and political actors frequently perceive reforms as threats to their stakes. This phenomenon is common in transitional economies, where governance reforms disrupt entrenched power dynamics. Navigating this resistance necessitates strong leadership and the establishment of consensus-building mechanisms to ensure successful implementation of reforms.

Conclusion and discussion

In the context of regional conflicts and integration, Armenia's institutional reforms represent a commendable effort to overcome the challenges of governance modernization in a transitional context. Over three decades, the country has evolved from repurposing Soviet-era administrative structures to adopting and adapting global governance models. While significant gains have been made, particularly in the areas of digital governance, anti-corruption frameworks, and participatory policymaking, key challenges remain, including capacity constraints, politicization of public administration, and resistance to change within entrenched institutional frameworks.

The Public Administration Reform Strategy of Armenia serves as a critical roadmap to address these challenges, with its focus on citizen-centered governance, digital transformation, and alignment with international standards such as the SIGMA principles. By promoting merit-based recruitment, strengthening local governance, and enhancing institutional resilience, the strategy aims to institutionalize reforms that are both effective and contextually relevant. Lessons from Armenia's reform experience highlight the importance of balancing imported governance models with localized adaptations. This case study offers new insights not only for Armenia but also for other post-Soviet and transition economies following similar trajectories. Strategically sustainable reforms, as the Armenian experience shows, require iterative adjustments, stakeholder engagement, and a long-term commitment to aligning governance systems with societal needs and expectations.

Digital transformation, caused by the restructuring of social and economic processes against the background of the spread of digital technologies, has a great impact on the activities of people, society, the business environment, and modern organizations. The changes that are taking place affect political systems and the quality of the organization of public authorities, including the implemented business processes, connections and communications, as well as corporate culture and organizational behavior. This occurs as a result of the development and implementation of digital tools that improve management processes in various areas of management, including strategic management, operations management, management decision-making, information, resource and financial support, as well as quality control, accounting and reporting.

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Conflict of interests

The author declares no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical standards

The author affirms this research did not involve human subjects.

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THE CRISIS OF SMALL TOWNS IN ARMENIA: TERRITORIAL PECULIARITIES AND TRANSFORMATIONS OF THE REGIONAL SETTLEMENT SYSTEM

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Abstract

The article summarizes the results of a sociological survey conducted in 2024, as well as official statistical data on the manifestations of the crisis in the regional cities of the Republic of Armenia. The quantitative study was conducted to identify public perceptions of the situation in the enlarged communities of the Republic of Armenia. Based on the analysis, the authors note that the partial deindustrialization of small towns of the Republic of Armenia, which occurred as a result of ineffective public policy, led not only to an economic crisis, but also to a certain spread of ruralism in them. The public policy of enlarging communities of the Republic of Armenia has created new risks in this regard, continuing to reproduce social and spatial inequality between them and the capital and increasing the vulnerability of small urban settlements.

Keywords: *deindustrialization, small town, urbanization, rurality, crisis, community enlargement, infrastructure.*

Introduction

The change in the geopolitical, social and demographic situation, the organization of interaction between state, regional and local government bodies, and the transformation of economic relations necessitate the study of Armenian cities in general, including small ones.

The relevance of the study is primarily due to the fact that small towns are an important element of the urban framework of settlement in Armenian regions, which close the network of rural settlement. Small towns as regional centers are the core of

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solving many problems of social and economic development of rural areas; their dispersion allows for the management of a vast territory, solving social and economic development problems in the entire region. In the context of the formation of market relations, the shortcomings of small towns, inherent in them as a type of settlement, have become even more acute (Olczak and Hanzl 2025; Bański, Kamińska and Mularczyk 2023).

Crisis in everyday thinking is viewed from a strictly negative perspective. It is presented as a great and lasting threat, a profound disruption of order. In essence, crisis creates chaos, a situation where “all events are equally possible” (Mkrtichyan 2008, 19). Unregulated social processes lead to uncertainty in public life and existential dangers.

In the field of theoretical thinking, a crisis is a period characterized by the collapse of the existing order. From the point of view of chaos theory, it is a regular stage of the development of systems, a necessary transitional period, a bifurcation zone. The system can exit this zone either by increasing its own complexity and improving its orderly organization (progress), or by reducing the degree of that complexity as a result of orderly losses (regression). The real possibility of a regression in development is the basis for a negative assessment and evaluation of crises. However, in the case of a social order, the way out of a period of disruption also depends on the evaluator, on the volume and effectiveness of his efforts. Their sufficient implementation can lead to social progress, and in this case the crisis will become the basis for further upward development (Curtis et al. 2025). Therefore, much depends on the social subject.

Considering the crisis situation in Armenia with this approach, it should be noted that there are still opportunities for progress in public life. If we correctly diagnose the causes of the crisis, we can find appropriate solutions. The foundations of the current problems were laid decades ago, when the crisis of the USSR created the opportunity for political independence. Armenia took advantage of that opportunity. But the crisis was also economic: it was necessary to build a new economic system. On the way to building, there were huge losses, which were partly due to objective circumstances, and partly to subordinate mistakes and crimes.

First, the establishment of the private property class was largely due to the expansion of commercial capital. At the same time, the economic capital of the wealthy importers increased disproportionately. And the Armenian importers were backed by foreign capital pursuing their own interests. These interests often contradicted the imperative of developing local production in Armenia. Through some representatives of Armenian importers, foreign capital invaded the state and political sphere of the Republic of Armenia in order to influence state policy in favor of their own interests and exploit Armenia solely as a market for their own products. A telling example is the closure of the industrial giant “Nairit”. The consequence was the deindustrialization of our country, which led to a sharp reduction in the goods necessary for organizing exports in accordance with the volumes of imports, the elimination of a large number of jobs created in industrial Soviet Armenia. In order to overcome the financial imbalance between imports and exports and somehow survive, we export labor instead of goods, in order to close the gap between imports and exports at the expense of the financial resources sent to Armenia by Armenians working abroad. An exodus of the

Armenian population began and continues to this day, which negatively affects both the internal (civic activism) and external (national security) strength of our country. Deindustrialization also reduces the quality of the country's urbanization.

The urbanization process is closely related to the scientific and technical progress underlying industrialization on the one hand, and to the modernization of social relations on the other. The undermining of this process is clearly manifested in the context of the deindustrialization of small towns in Armenia. Collapsed industrial enterprises, unemployment, emigration, disruption of the urban lifestyle, cultural life, distortion of the architectural appearance of cities, etc. Taking all this into account, we can speak of the crisis situation of small towns in Armenia. Ruralism has spread to these towns (Chigbu 2013, 815), in the behavior of citizens, leisure, forms of economic management, and employment structure. Partial destruction of urban infrastructure (water supply, centralized heating, sewage, asphalted streets, city parks, stadiums, etc.) can be observed in almost all small towns. Even the capital Yerevan has not been spared from such a decline in the quality of urban life.

Research results: During the Soviet era, the urban development norm was to have a population of at least 12,000, of which at least 85% were employed in the urban economy, not agriculture. In that case, the settlement could receive the status of a city. The city had to have cultural (e.g., theater) and sports (e.g., stadium), and in some cases, scientific and educational (e.g., university) infrastructure. As of April 1, 2023, in addition to the capital Yerevan, 48 other settlements in the Republic of Armenia have the status of a city, half of which do not meet the above norm (ANIARC 2024). The smallest of them is Dastakert in Syunik province, where only 300 residents are counted. The compliance of many regional cities, which make up the other half, with the Soviet norm in terms of employment is problematic.

We can understand the state of Armenia's cities three decades after independence from the data presented in Table 1, using the example of the Syunik region of the Republic of Armenia, which has a relatively high percentage of urban population and hired workers (85.7%).

Table 1. Basic statistical data of Syunik region, 2019-2023

	2019	2020	2021	2022	2023
The number of permanent residents of the region as of the end of the year, 1,000 people	137.3	135.8	134.7	114.4	116.4
including urban	93.2	91.8	90.7	76.9	78.3
rural	44.1	44.0	44.0	37.5	38.1
Labor resources, 1,000 people	96.5	94.4	94.7	102.9	85.4
of which: employed	56.7	58.4	62.2	65.2	51.0
unemployed	10.0	8.8	6.7	8.5	6.5
Number of primary health care facilities	17	17	17	16	16
Number of registered crimes	783	744	896	977	1 411
Number of preschool institutions	51	56	55	53	53
Number of secondary schools	117	117	117	117	117
Number of state specialized theaters	2	2	2	2	2
Number of operating museums	4	4	4	4	4
Number of sports organizations	12	12	11	11	11

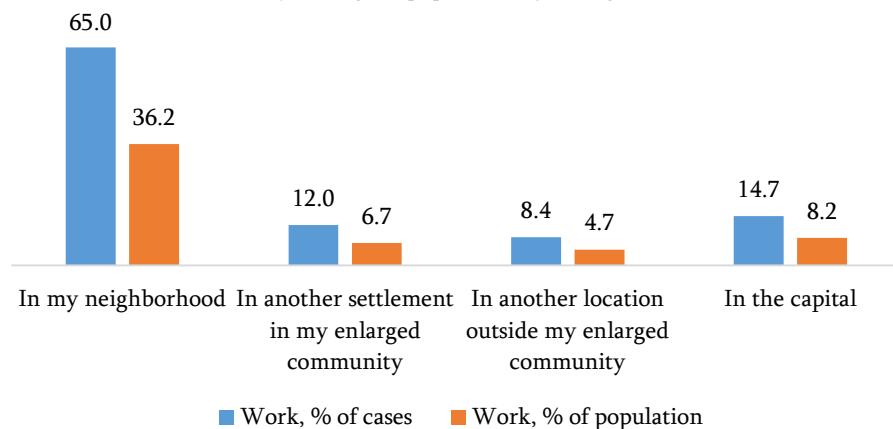
Source: ARMSTAT 2024b (2022-2023 - according to the current population census data 2022).

As we can see, a number of indicators characterizing urban life are showing a decline. In particular, the reduction in the number of urban population in 2019-2023, the decrease in the number of employed people, the almost doubling of the number of crimes, the decrease in the number of primary health care and preschool institutions indicate the presence of crisis phenomena in regional cities. The problem is further complicated in the context of the enlargement of communities implemented in the Republic of Armenia. Currently, 64 enlarged communities have been formed in all regions of the Republic of Armenia, of which Kotayk region has the largest share (17.2%). Kotayk is followed by Lori (14.1%), Aragatsotn, Armavir and Syunik regions (all three 10.9%). Ararat and Tavush regions have the fewest enlarged communities (4 communities each or 6.3% of the total number of communities). By attaching several rural communities to regional urban communities, prerequisites have been created in enlarged communities for the disruption of urban lifestyles and the spread of rurality, social ties and behavioral patterns typical of villages.

The sociological survey conducted in 2024, 63.8% of respondents indicated that their household members receive medical care in their own place of residence, while 66.7% indicated that they have to go to another place of residence¹. 19.5% of respondents indicated that their family members work in another place of residence (see Figure 1), only 38.6% declared their affiliation with any labor collective, which is also an indicator of the spread of ruralism. And ruralism in Armenia is also in crisis (Vermishyan et al. 2022), which leads to emigration. In the context of remittances from abroad, the most frequently mentioned source of income was Gegharkunik region (23.3% of respondents), followed by Lori and Shirak regions (17.6% and 16.3%, respectively).

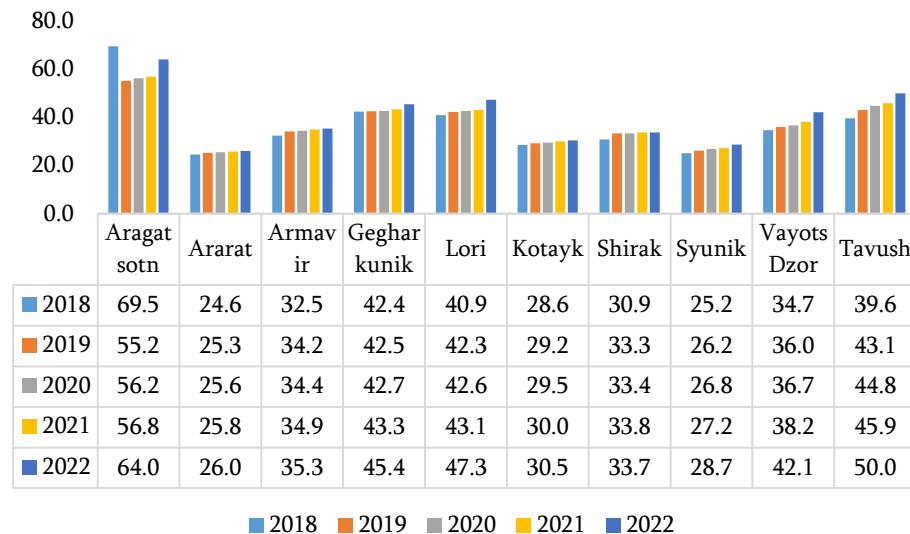
¹ A multi-stage random sample was constructed to carry out the research, covering all regions of the Republic of Armenia. In the first stage, a stratified proportional sample was constructed according to the permanent population of the regions of the Republic of Armenia, then a cluster sample was formed on its basis, setting the size of each cluster at 14. Taking into account the randomness of the sample, as well as the information gap regarding the variations of the variables under study due to the lack of previous similar studies, a design effect coefficient of 1.55 was chosen to calculate the sample size, which is within the range (1.5-2) widely used for constructing such samples. As a result, the size of the simple random sample obtained by assuming a 95% confidence level, a 5% margin of error, and a 50% prevalence of the phenomenon under study and the size of the sample formed through the design effect is 600. The sampling unit is the household (H/H), from which the selection was carried out using the fixed step method. One member from each household participated in the survey. Thus, 600 residents of 19 enlarged communities in the regions of Armenia participated in the survey.

Figure 1. Work-related mobility among the population of enlarged communities



The problem of housing security in urban areas of the RA regions also remains unresolved. According to the data of the RA Statistical Committee, there were no significant changes in this issue during 2018-2022 (see Figure 2) (ARMSTAT 2019, 2020, 2021, 2022, 2023, 2024a).

Figure 2 Housing affordability in urban areas



Such a situation causes a flow of regional population to Yerevan, where housing construction has reached a large scale in recent years. The hyperurbanization of Yerevan, caused by the continuous flow of population from underdeveloped settlements, in the conditions of the limited infrastructural capacity of the Republic of Armenia, disrupts the stable functioning of these settlements. Uncontrollable processes of hyperurbanization, in the context of which the population is concentrated in the

capital, and the demographic situation in regional urban settlements worsens, lead to a violation of the principle of ensuring equal opportunities for the development of settlements, since in the perspective of a short-term strategy it is not expedient to implement large-scale urban development programs in settlements with a decreasing population.

The typology of regions determined by the ratio of rural and urban settlements in enlarged communities is noteworthy. In particular, in all enlarged communities of the Republic of Armenia, the share of communities formed only by rural settlements is 34.4%, communities formed from rural and one urban settlement are 59.4%, and communities formed from two or more cities and rural settlements are 6.25%. Within the framework of the intra-regional distribution of enlarged communities, the largest share of enlarged communities formed by rural settlements is in Aragatsotn and Armavir regions (both 57.2%). In the case of communities formed from rural and one urban settlement, the leaders in intra-regional indicators are Ararat and Gegharkunik regions (both 100%). Finally, in the case of communities formed from two or more cities and rural settlements, the leader is Syunik region with 28.6%.

It is noteworthy that the highest rates of enlarged communities with a population of 5,001-20,000 are recorded in the southern regions of the Republic of Armenia, while in the case of communities with a population of 20,001-30,000, Tavush region stands out with 25%. Finally, in the context of the population of 70,001-100,000, the highest indicator belongs to Ararat region (28.6%). Looking at the numbers of residents of individual enlarged communities, it becomes clear that the enlarged community with the largest population is the Artashat community of Ararat region, where 91,404 people live, and the least populated community is the Metsamor community of Aragatsotn region (419 residents) (ARMSTAT 2024a). Research data also show that the highest indicator of the number of people per settlement is in Kotayk region: 3,883.3 people/settlement. This number is far from the norm of urban development in the USSR (at least 12,000 inhabitants).

Community enlargement is a practice of territorial governance in which the management processes of social infrastructures, in contrast to land consolidation or territorial consolidation (based on the functionality of infrastructures), lead to a reinterpretation of their characteristics and significance in community life. Particular attention should be paid to the spatial organization of social infrastructures, since social infrastructures, according to Kelsey and Kenny, are defined as "... physical spaces in which regular interactions are facilitated between and within the diverse sections of a community, and where meaningful relationships, new forms of trust and feelings of reciprocity are inculcated among local people" (Kelsey and Kenny 2021, 11). These are the meaningful spaces in which the actors form and reproduce a sense of place through their interactions with each other. In parallel, within the framework of the reproduction of interactions between the actors operating in the studied area, the importance is given to mutual trust, attachment, relationship, involvement in social life, and other processes.

The results of the sociological survey allow us to conclude that the physical engagement of residents of enlarged communities in their settlements is mainly formed not so much through individual, but through social interactions. In other words, we

again document the widespread spread of ruralism. In the context of the enlargement of individual communities, there was almost no systemic impact that would be visible to residents, information about the processes being implemented was not provided sufficiently and was not targeted at them. The enlarged community of Gavar is noteworthy as a settlement with relatively low level of sense of place, spatial engagement and place leadership.

The presentation of views on community enlargement also indicates the positive aspects of this practice. To the question *"If we try to compare the situation in your settlement before community enlargement and after enlargement, what impact did community enlargement have on you and the residents of your settlement?"*, 30% of the survey participants indicated that community enlargement had a positive impact on them and the residents of their settlement². According to respondents with a positive perception, through enlargement, they improved road construction in settlements (22.2%), lighting (15.7%), utility infrastructure (such as water supply, gas supply, garbage collection) (19.7%), educational and cultural infrastructure (8.6%), as well as effective management of settlements (15.7%).

Those survey participants for whom community enlargement had a negative impact identified specific manifestations of that impact. According to the data obtained, the most common view regarding the negative impact is that enlargement has led to a decrease in local self-governance, which, combined with the insufficient skills of local government representatives, weakens the capacities of localities (73.4%). It is noteworthy that 42.2% of respondents noted the absence of any impact of community enlargement.

Conclusion and discussion

The monofunctional structure of the economy, the orientation of the city-forming enterprises in the past to the regional and federal sales markets determined the high dependence of small towns on fluctuations in the leading production (Turgel, Panzabekova and Antonova 2023). The reduction or complete absence of government orders led to a drop in production volumes, and social tension increased. Of particular concern is the aggravation of demographic problems: a decrease in natural growth is accompanied by a migration outflow, and small towns have ceased to be centers of attraction for the population from their immediate surroundings. Not having sufficient internal potential, small towns are currently losing their support from rural areas, and the proportion of people over working age is growing (Okamoto 2024). Settlements remote from the district center are losing their population in migration exchange with large cities in the region. These problems require a special study of the development features of small towns. It is obvious that in the context of changing social and economic relations in the country as a result of radical reforms, one of the important problems that requires a solution is the organization of interaction between the republican and local levels of government. The study of the mechanism of interaction

² Regression analysis revealed that residents living in enlarged communities with high population dispersion are more likely to believe that enlargement has had a positive impact (37.9%) than those living in more centralized enlarged communities (26.5%).

between state authorities and local governments, the specifics of the formation of municipal budgets is one of the conditions for developing a strategy for interbudgetary relations aimed at stabilizing the situation in small towns.

Thus, territorial governance in the Republic of Armenia, conditioned by community enlargement, has not yet reached its fundamental goal and continues to reproduce socio-spatial inequality between settlements, and consequently, the vulnerability of individual urban settlements. Thus, we can conclude that territorial enlargement in the settlements of enlarged communities of the Republic of Armenia is not parallel to community enlargement, since urbanization in small regional cities is in crisis, which is measured by role diversity and mobility, weak community control, non-agricultural employment, public entertainment (restaurants, parks, museums, etc.), the availability of apartments with communal amenities and modern infrastructure (internet, transport, central sewage, health institutions, universities, etc.).

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Conflict of interests

The authors declare no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research.

Ethical standards

The authors affirm this research did not involve human subjects.

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