
The EU and the Common Central Asian Higher Education Area: The Kazakh Dimension

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This study topic is highly relevant as it explores the geopolitical dynamics of Kazakhstan, which serves as a hub where the interests of major world powers intersect with regional significance. The purpose of this article is to examine and analyse the state of Kazakhstan within the Central Asian region, considering its characteristics, such as high levels of socio-political and economic development, political stability, and its ability to conduct independent policies. The study utilized a range of research methods including deductive and inductive approaches, historical research, content analysis and event analysis. These methods were employed to analyse the current higher education system in Kazakhstan and explore the potential for its transformation, while also examining the impact of the Declaration on the creation of the Central Asian Higher Educational Area (Turkestan Declaration). The study reveals that Kazakhstan plays a significant role as a geopolitical actor in Central Asia, with stable socio-political and economic development. Kazakhstan aims to elevate the ‘Turkic world’ on the international stage and build strong foreign-policy relations. The findings have implications for specialists, policymakers, and readers interested in the region. The study emphasizes the importance of a ‘Knowledge Society’ and research capacity in forming a Common Central Asian Higher Education Area.

Introduction

One of the consequences of the world’s evolving economic and socio-political processes has become globalization, i.e., the process of worldwide economic, political, cultural and religious integration and unification. In modern socio-political

discourse, it is common to speak of this process as modern, having begun in the second half of the twentieth century, but such a view can hardly be considered scientifically justified. I.M. Wallerstein (2001) dated the globalization process back to the Middle Ages, to the time of the Mongol conquests. Predictions regarding the unification of the many spheres of human life on a global scale can also be found in the writings of the nineteenth century, namely those of K. Marx and F. Engels (1955). They saw the preconditions for the processes described above in the development of the global economic system:

The need for an ever-increasing market for products drives the bourgeoisie around the globe. It has to infiltrate everywhere, establish itself everywhere, and make connections everywhere. By exploiting the global market, the bourgeoisie has made the production and consumption of all countries cosmopolitan. (Marx and Engels 1955)

Speaking of modern times, it can be noted that an inevitable consequence of the globalization process has been the increasing cohesion and interpenetration of the economic systems of existing states (Nepop and Lukachuk 2021; Bodnar 2021). Other areas of social life, such as the political, social, cultural, scientific and educational spheres, have also become inextricably linked. In the context of considering the Central Asian region, the signing of the Declaration on the creation of the Central Asian Higher Educational Area (Turkestan Declaration) (2021) was an important episode of various countries' integration, which was one of the steps towards the objective defined by the second president of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. Thus, it is possible to see the cohesion and formation of more interconnected cultural and political structures within the region in question. It is the analysis of the prospects for the future existence of such a union, as well as the prospects of maintaining its independence, that can provide very fertile ground for research, to which the current study also contributes.

When analysing the available literature on the issue under consideration, it should be noted that the education and science policies of Kazakhstan have been extensively reviewed in the publications of domestic and foreign researchers. The transparency and openness of several states in the region, along with regular reforms in the humanitarian environment, contribute to the situation. For example, Nursultan Nazarbayev, the first President of Kazakhstan, signed a Decree 'On the translation of the Kazakh alphabet from the Cyrillic alphabet to the Latin script' (2017). This decree sparked significant public discussion and outcry due to the upcoming change in the writing system of the Kazakh language by 2025.

This study relies on the studies of a number of researchers, namely the works of V.A. Avatkov (2019a, 2019b), who focuses on the ideological and value factors in Turkish foreign policy and the Turkic states of the post-Soviet space. M.B. Syzdykova's (2020) work centres on employment strategies for graduates of Kazakhstani universities, particularly within the context of regional specifics. X. Laping (2018), in turn, explores the concept of higher education as an instrument of 'soft power' in the context of Russia and China. M.M. Shumilov (2021) and

A.V. Grozin (2021) focus on the Turkish factor in relations between Russia, Kazakhstan, and Eurasian integration, investigating various approaches, institutions, and future prospects. M.A. Chugrina (2019) explores the formation of a unified educational space as a factor of economic integration among the countries of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). The work highlights the significance of educational integration in fostering economic cooperation. Moreover, there are references to the studies of the Dutch scholar and manager studying international higher education, H. de Wit (2016) and J. Hudzik (2016) respectively, whose focus is on internationalization in higher education. Their research examines the future of internationalization in Europe and the integration of internationalization efforts into institutional governance and university leadership.

The study aims to present a descriptive overview of the higher education system in Kazakhstan. Additionally, it seeks to explore the areas for potential future activities as outlined in the Turkestan Declaration. The novelty of this study lies in its comprehensive examination of the geopolitical dynamics of Central Asia, specifically focusing on Kazakhstan's higher education system and its cooperation with European states. The scientific hypothesis is that Kazakhstan, with its notable socio-political and economic development, political stability, and ability to formulate policy relatively independently, seeks to position itself as a prominent geopolitical player in Central Asia.

Materials and Methods

The study utilized a range of general scientific and special research methods to examine the current higher education system in Kazakhstan and assess the potential for its transformation. Through deductive analysis, the study described Kazakhstan's education policy from the early 1990s to the 2020s, while inductive methods enabled the generalization of available information and a comprehensive understanding of Kazakhstan's policy, including its interactions with neighbouring countries in the region. Historical research methods were employed to identify key preconditions and motives behind political actions, constructing a chronological overview of Kazakhstan's education policy during its independent existence.

In addition to the aforementioned methods, content analysis and event analysis were also employed. The content analysis allowed for the systematic examination of a vast amount of information, including media publications and official speeches by government officials, to ascertain the general state of education policy in Kazakhstan. Event analysis, on the other hand, highlighted various elements of the political processes under study, particularly the historically influenced characteristics of education policy in the region, both prior to and following the adoption of the Turkestan Declaration.

A generalization of the methodology used in this study enables us to build a semantic architecture, which, first, characterizes the current (i.e., the early 2020s) situation in the education policy of Kazakhstan, and, second, allows us to forecast

further changes in this policy under the impact of the Turkestan Declaration adoption. The research was conducted in three stages.

- (1) During the first stage of the study, an extensive collection of information was undertaken. This information was gathered from various publicly available sources, including historical records. The study also focused on materials that facilitated the identification of the most notable and captivating aspects of the educational policy implemented in both Central Asia and, specifically, Kazakhstan. The first stage highlights the historical preconditions as well as the roots of current political processes affecting education and science, the involvement of other countries in the processes under consideration, and other characteristics of the country in question.
- (2) The second stage, using content and event analysis, provides a descriptive picture of Kazakhstan's current education policy, based on previously signed and still relevant international treaties and agreements.
- (3) The third stage provides an outlook on how the leadership of Kazakhstan will proceed in building cooperation with other countries in the field of education, as well as an outlook on how the education system of the country may change. Moreover, relevant conclusions were drawn, and the theses and results obtained from the study were summarized and systematized.

Results and Discussion

Formation of Kazakhstan's Higher Education System: Historical Background and European Cooperation

After the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics and, consequently, Kazakhstan's independence, the member states of the European Union became one of Kazakhstan's main political as well as economic partners, and diplomatic relations with most of them were established in February 1993 (Ruditsa 2016). The fundamental document of bilateral cooperation between the European Union (EU) and the Republic of Kazakhstan (RK) on political, economic and cultural issues is the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (PCA) (1995), signed in 1995 and entered into force in 1999 for a ten-year period. The PCA is grounded on the principles of international law, democratic values, and human rights. It aims to foster the development of mutually beneficial political relations by promoting economic reconciliation and facilitating interaction across various domains (Karstina and Tsehiel 2021).

The cooperation programme includes specific initiatives focused on involving all stakeholders in the education sector. It also facilitates the formulation of cooperation plans, which are based on the Republic of Kazakhstan's participation in the Trans-European Mobility Programme for University Studies (TEMPUS) Community programme. This programme is funded under the TESIS (Technical Assistance for the Commonwealth of Independent States) framework (Bogatryeva and Shukusheva 2020). In addition, the possibility for Kazakh higher education institutions to establish direct links with foreign and international institutions and organizations through the conclusion of relevant agreements should also be

mentioned. Also, the possibility to send students and teachers to foreign educational and scientific institutions was provided, which was outlined in a number of regulatory legal acts, for instance, in the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan 'On education' (2007) and the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 2110-III 'On higher education' (1993) that defined the principles of state policy in the field of education.

After many years of cooperation under the PCA, eight rounds of talks with the European Union were held in December 2015, which resulted in an extended PCA being signed by the Kazakh leadership. Kazakhstan was thus the first country in the Central Asian region to sign a so-called 'second generation' agreement with the EU, which, unlike the 'first generation' agreements, is based on a dual legal framework, namely the Treaty of Rome and the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (Shumilov 2021). In the 20 years since the signing of the PCA, there has been a considerable rapprochement between the EU and the RK in the economic field, while business relations have been maintained through political dialogue and cooperation in European education and research programmes (Grozin 2021). One of the priorities for further cooperation under the new agreement is to further develop and strengthen contacts in the areas of human capital development, education and research programmes (Avetisyan and Gevorkyan 2016). Contracting parties shall facilitate the international mobility of students, researchers, teachers and relevant administrative personnel.

When considering the history of Kazakhstan's adoption of the European Education Plan, two main stages can be distinguished, which correspond to the main principles and directions of Kazakhstan's higher education policy. As mentioned above, the beginning of the first stage was marked by Kazakhstan's adoption of new legislation on education, which included granting universities the right to establish independent relationships with international partners (Syzykova 2020). Another important milestone was the signing in 1995 of the Partnership and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the Republic of Kazakhstan and the resulting involvement of Kazakhstan in a number of relevant organizations, including the TEMPUS programme (Chavykina 2017). The implementation of projects under this programme has contributed to the integration of the country's higher education system into the Bologna Process. The universities in Kazakhstan are supported in the reform of educational programmes and can also learn from the European experience in implementing the main parameters of this process with great success (Voyvoda 2022). There are also mutually beneficial and long-term ties between Kazakh and European universities and research institutions (Laping 2018).

In its turn, at the second stage, Kazakhstan took part in the implementation of the European Education Programme as a participant of the Bologna Process, as well as being the first Central Asian country to sign an Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement with the EU in 2015 (Frolova 2016). The purpose of this act was to establish the development of human capital. Monitoring of the Bologna Process on the one hand and academic flows on the other clearly shows that 90% of the conditions of the Bologna Process in Kazakhstan are fulfilled. Given the influence of European education programmes, Kazakhstan has become a leader

among its regional neighbours in terms of internationalization and mobility. Kazakhstan has formulated a national strategy for the internationalization of higher education, which has been supported by all universities in the state. One important indicator of internationalization and mobility is the participation of the academic community in partnerships, international networks and programmes, which is present to a large extent in Kazakhstan (Pavlova *et al.* 2017).

The Current Situation of the Education System in Kazakhstan: Current Challenges and the Turkestan Declaration Factor

Over the last decade, since 2010, there has been a trend towards a certain dynamic of the youth migration movement. Since 2014, the flow of immigrants has begun to change. As the most mobile group, young people are the most responsive to the economic situation in the country. As soon as prerequisites for an economic crisis arise (or the crisis itself enters its active phase), the intensity of youth migration immediately increases (Mizintseva and Chavykina 2017). The signing of the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union and Kazakhstan's accession to the EAEU is a positive factor, as it has created favourable conditions for the training of migrants (Glazyev 2016). The treaty includes provisions regarding the labour activities of workers within the member states of the union. These provisions specifically address the mutual recognition and establishment of equivalence for educational documents issued by the member states of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). This ensures that educational qualifications obtained in one member state are recognized and considered equivalent in other member states of the EAEU (Chugrina 2019).

During the period of joining the Bologna Process, the external outbound academic mobility of Kazakhstan is 9729 people to universities of Europe, which is 58% of the total number; Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) – 3939 people; Asia – 2760 people; the United States (US) – 406 people (Kazakhstan. The Bologna Process . . . , 2020). In the programme for attracting foreign specialists, scholars from Europe are the priority, with 3733 people (43%) invited. In addition, in the programme for inviting top managers, European universities are the priority, representing the majority, namely 62 people or 67%. Joint and double-degree educational programmes with EU universities amount to 453 programmes, namely 52 universities in 2019. In 2019, out of 61,884 international treaties and projects, 2435 of them were European agreements. Moreover, agreements have been reached with 55 EU and European Development Bank funds and 143 Erasmus+ programmes. Thus, according to the adopted Strategy for Assistance to Central Asia, the EU has allocated €531,105,397 for the period of 2007–2013 for the development of relations with Kazakhstan, and €89,618,457 have been allocated for the development of education (The European Union . . . , 2021).

These figures demonstrate the priority of the European experience in Kazakhstan as an effective model for the successful development of higher professional education standards. The entry into force of the Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) between the European Union and Kazakhstan on 1 March 2020 was a great advancement. This new agreement, which is the first of its kind to be

signed by the EU with a partner in Kazakhstan, outlines the comprehensive framework within which the bilateral relationship is implemented and takes EU–Kazakhstan cooperation to a new level. The EU Strategy for Central Asia provides a common basis for regional cooperation.

The Turkestan Declaration, signed during the Turkestan Cooperation Council summit in March 2021, should not be overlooked when examining the education policy of the state in question. This document is aimed at the further development of comprehensive and mutually beneficial cooperation between the Turkic-speaking states. Another interesting fact is that the summit was also held to coincide with the birth anniversaries of a number of prominent figures in Turkic history and culture. It was decided to hold concerted events to celebrate the anniversaries of a range of poets, thinkers and statesmen of the Turkic world (poets Zhambyl Zhabayuly and Alikhan Bukeikhanov were among them). The document itself aims to create a common area in the field of higher education within the territory of Central Asia. The education ministers of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, took part in the event under consideration. Representatives from the Council of Europe, the European Commission, the Bologna Follow-up Group, and other hierarchies of the education systems of third countries were also present (Kuramayeva 2020; Baisultanova *et al.* 2020; Rusakova 2015).

When considering the trends set out in this document, a number of theses and directions for the way forward can be noted:

- (1) The Central Asian states intend to expand regional cooperation, in particular by integrating the scientific, creative and intellectual potential of higher education institutions across Asia.
- (2) A free zone is being prepared to enable students and academic staff of higher education institutions to move freely for study purposes, to share experience and knowledge, and to engage in collaborative studies.
- (3) There are plans to increase the number of educational programmes aimed at student exchanges, to create joint research projects, and to hold forums for rectors of universities in Central Asian states in order to exchange experiences and discuss directions for future activity.
- (4) As the governing structure, a governing body, namely the Secretariat, will be formed. The tasks of the Secretariat will involve coordinating the efforts of the ministries of education in the relevant region. Additionally, the Secretariat will have a public relations role, aiming to promote and enhance the appeal of higher education in Central Asian countries to potential consumers.

Internationalization of Higher Education in the Central Asian Context and its Connection with Related Political Trends

The internationalization of higher education is a relatively new phenomenon that encompasses a wide range of theoretical interpretations, highlighting its intricate and detailed nature. Examples of acts aimed at building up educational internationalization are the various scholarship programmes, such as the Marie Curie Programme

and the Erasmus programme mentioned above. The implementation of these initiatives was made possible by socio-economic processes, including globalization. Additionally, the transition to a post-industrial or informational socioeconomic formation in the latter half of the twentieth century played a significant role. This transition emphasized the growing importance of knowledge and information in society (de Wit 2016). It is crucial to recognize that there is no one-size-fits-all model for education internationalization. The dynamic nature of internationalization processes is characterized by ongoing transnational variations, influenced by the unique national specificities of different countries (Hudzik 2016).

In the context of the Central Asian trend towards the internationalization of higher education, it is worth mentioning that the Common Higher Education Area is considering the implementation of a streamlined procedure for recognizing qualifications earned by students. This process draws inspiration from the established practice in the European Higher Education Area, aiming to facilitate the recognition of qualifications across borders. Within the framework of the Turkestan Declaration, the formation of the Central Asian Higher Education Alliance and the creation of an accreditation council aimed at ensuring the maintenance and improvement of the education quality of the countries in the region of interest are envisaged.

When considering the assessment of the Summit, the document itself and further prospects for such cooperation by the leadership of the Central Asian states, one can quote the second president of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, who noted that ‘the objective of Turkic-speaking countries is to make the Turkic world one of the most important economic, cultural and humanitarian spaces in the 21st century’ (Grozin 2021). He also called for ‘the modernisation of Turkic civilisation to begin, first and foremost, with the presentation to the world of the heritage of Yasawi and of sacred Turkestan’. That is why today’s summit is called ‘Turkestan – Spiritual Capital of the Turkic World’. Various cultural and educational organizations actively participate in Central Asia, aiming to foster a unified Turkic world. Their interests extend beyond official objectives and encompass ideological influence, as well as the cultivation of lobbying potential among the local establishment (Zvyageskaya 2019).

Such organizations also include ‘TURKSOY’, established by the ministers of culture of several Turkic-speaking states (Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkey, and Turkmenistan). In its practical activities, ‘TURKSOY’ provides funding for various cultural and educational programmes and events across different regions, including Transcaucasia and Asia. Through these initiatives, ‘TURKSOY’ manages to bring together state and intellectual elites who are supportive of these emerging trends. Consequently, this contributes to the formation of a national intelligence community oriented towards the unification of Turkic peoples around Turkey (Avatkov 2019b). In addition to the aforementioned organizations, other structures, such as the Council of Presidents, the Council of Ministers of Foreign Affairs, the Council of Elders of Turkic-speaking States and some others are also members of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking States.

Thus, the established ‘Common Central Asian Higher Education Area’ should become an advisory body for shaping the foreign policy strategies of the Central Asian countries, for solving economic, environmental, cultural and humanitarian problems, and for promoting the processes of society’s global digitalization.

Conclusion

Summing up the findings of this study, and based on the array of material studied and examined, a number of relevant statements can be made. The state of Kazakhstan considered within the study today has a range of characteristics that are of interest to a number of researchers. These include, for instance, high levels of both socio-political and economic development, as well as political stability (especially when compared with both the post-Soviet space and the neighbouring countries of the Central Asian region). At the same time, as the flagship of the region, Kazakhstan, inevitably involving other countries in Central Asia in its orbit, is able to conduct a relatively independent policy, including one aimed at cooperation. This factor holds significance in establishing relationships not only with Kazakhstan but also with its Central Asian neighbours. It should be considered in the implementation of diverse projects and programmes, including those of military, political, social, and economic nature, within the territories of these states.

The prospective model for a Common Central Asian Higher Education Area emphasizes the ‘Knowledge Society’ and innovation, built upon highly educated human capital. It aims to foster a highly intelligent nation and well-rounded individuals, with research and education capacity being crucial for identifying needs, disseminating results, and achieving local, regional, and global impact.

The study suggests that Kazakhstan’s integration into the international education arena will continue to advance through the use of ‘soft power’ instruments such as academic mobility. This approach aims to enhance the image of Central Asian countries, increase the competitiveness of higher education in the global market, and facilitate open dialogue for international cooperation. This study seeks to address a gap in the literature on this topic by scrutinizing Kazakhstan’s geopolitical dynamics and their implications for regional and global interactions, shedding light on its potential impact on reducing the influence of previously dominant geopolitical acts.

Competing Interests

The authors declare no competing interests.

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