

**IBN HALDUN UNIVERSITY
SCHOOL OF GRADUATE STUDIES
DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE AND
INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS**

MASTER'S THESIS

**TRADITIONAL AND NEW HEGEMON POWERS
IN CENTRAL ASIA**

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**THESIS ADVISOR
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ISTANBUL, 2024

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**TRADITIONAL AND NEW HEGEMON POWERS
IN CENTRAL ASIA**

by

AIANA POLAT

**A thesis submitted to the School of Graduate Studies in partial
fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in
Political Science and International Relations.**

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This thesis has been read by us, and it has been decided that it is sufficient in terms of scope and quality to obtain a master's degree in the field of Political Science and International Relations

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ACADEMIC HONESTY ATTESTATION

I hereby declare that all information in this document has been obtained and presented in accordance with academic rules and ethical conduct. I also declare that, as required by these rules and conduct, I have fully cited and referenced all material and results that are not original to this work.

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ÖZ

ORTA ASYA'DA GELENEKSEL VE YENİ HEGEMON GÜÇLER

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Siyaset Bilimi ve Uluslararası İlişkiler Yüksek Lisans Programı

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SSCB'nin 1991'deki dağılmasının ardından Orta Asya'da bir güç boşluğu oluştu ve bu yeni cumhuriyetlerin, küresel güçlerin etki kurma fırsatlarını yaratmasıyla sonuçlandı. Bu bölge, stratejik konumu ve doğal kaynakları nedeniyle büyük jeopolitik öneme sahiptir. Son yıllarda, bölgedeki politik manzara önemli ölçüde değişmiş, Rusya'nın geleneksel hâkimiyetinin azaldığı ve yeni aktörlerin, özellikle de Türkiye'nin, etkisini artırdığı görülmüştür. Bu tez, Orta Asya'daki bölgesel güçler arasındaki dinamiklerin, özellikle de Rusya ve Türkiye arasındaki ilişkilerin evrimini incelemektedir. Rusya'nın zayıflayan etkisini, ekonomik ve güvenlik bağlamındaki faktörleri analiz ederek, bölgedeki ekonomik ve finansal istikrarının zayıflamasına yol açan etkenler ele alınmaktadır. Buna karşın, Türkiye'nin artan diplomatik ve ekonomik girişimleri, onu Rusya'nın uzun süreli rolüne alternatif bir güç olarak konumlandırmaktadır. Çalışma, Türkiye'nin Rusya'nın bıraktığı boşluğu doldurup dolduramayacağı sorusunu irdeler ve Türkiye'nin Orta Asya'da güvenilir bir güç olma potansiyelini değerlendirir. Türkiye'nin yatırımları, diplomatik stratejileri ve Orta Asya devletleriyle işbirliği üzerine odaklanarak, bölgesel entegrasyon ve etki kurma kapasitesi analiz edilmektedir. Rusya'nın azalan otoritesine rağmen, coğrafi yakınlığı ve bölgeyle derin tarihsel bağları hala ikili ilişkilerde önemli bir avantaj sağlamaktadır. Ancak, jeopolitik dinamikler değiştikçe, Türkiye'nin artan varlığı bölgesel işbirliği için yeni fırsatlar sunmaktadır. Temel soru ise şudur: Türkiye, Rusya'nın tarihsel hâkimiyetini aşarak Orta Asya'da lider bir güç olma yolunda başarılı olabilecek midir?

Anahtar Kelimeler: Jeopolitik, Nüfuz Alanı, Orta Asya Ülkeleri, Rusya, Türkiye, Yükselmekte Olan Güçler.



ABSTRACT

TRADITIONAL AND NEW HEGEMON POWERS IN CENTRAL ASIA

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After the dissolution of the USSR in 1991, a power vacuum emerged in Central Asia, with new republics creating opportunities for global powers to exert influence. This region holds immense geopolitical importance due to its strategic location and natural resources. In recent years, the region's political landscape has shifted, with a decline in Russia's traditional dominance and the rise of new actors, including Türkiye. This thesis examines the evolving dynamics between regional powers, particularly Russia and Türkiye, in Central Asia. It analyzes the historical, economic, and security factors contributing to Russia's diminishing influence, leading to weakened economic and financial stability. In contrast, Türkiye's growing diplomatic and economic initiatives are positioning it as a potential alternative to Russia's long-standing role in the region. The study explores whether Türkiye can fill the vacuum left by Russia, assessing its potential to become a credible power in Central Asia. By focusing on Türkiye's investments, diplomatic strategies, and cooperation with Central Asian states, the research evaluates its capacity to foster greater integration and influence. Despite Russia's declining authority, its geographic proximity and deep historical ties to the region still provide it with a significant advantage in maintaining bilateral relations. However, as geopolitical dynamics continue to shift, Türkiye's increasing presence presents new opportunities for regional cooperation. The central question remains: can Türkiye overcome Russia's historical dominance and establish itself as a leading force in Central Asia?

Keywords: Central Asian Countries, Emerging Powers, Geopolitics, Russia, Sphere of Influence, Türkiye.



DEDICATION

To my loving spouse,

Your unwavering support, encouragement, and belief in me have been the cornerstone of my journey through this MA degree. Your presence has been my constant source of motivation, and your faith in my abilities has pushed me forward, even in the face of challenges. Thank you for standing by my side, being my rock, and believing in my dreams as much as I do. This accomplishment is as much yours as it is mine.

To my dear mother and grandmother,

From the earliest days of my education, you both instilled in me a love for learning and a determination to pursue my dreams. Your sacrifices, guidance, and endless support have shaped the person I am today. Every achievement I attain is a testament to your love and dedication. I am profoundly grateful for the foundation you laid and the values you imparted.

This thesis is dedicated to you, with deep love and gratitude.

With all my love,

Aiana Polat.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to express my sincere gratitude to Assoc. Prof. Ali Aslan for his invaluable guidance, unwavering support, and insightful feedback throughout the process of writing my thesis. His expertise, patience, and dedication have been crucial in shaping my research and refining my ideas. I am deeply thankful for his mentorship and encouragement, both of which have played a significant role in the completion of this work.

I would also like to express my appreciation to Assist. Prof. Dr. Zakir Chotayev for his generous assistance and valuable insights throughout the course of my thesis. His willingness to share his expertise, provide constructive criticism, and offer practical advice have been invaluable resources. His contributions have enriched the quality of my research and broadened my perspectives.

I thank both of them for their strong support, encouragement, and commitment to excellence. Their guidance has been indispensable in navigating the challenges of academic research, and I am truly grateful for their presence in my academic journey.

Aiana POLAT
ISTANBUL, 2024

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LIST OF SYMBOLS AND ABBREVIATIONS

CAR	Central Asian Republics
CA	Central Asia
OTS	Organization of Turkic States
USSR	The Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
CSTO	Collective Security Treaty Organization
TIKA	Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency
TURKSOY	International Organization of Turkic Culture
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
EU	European Union
US	United States
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
FP	Foreign Policy
MFA	Ministry of Foreign Affairs
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
CRDF	Collective Rapid Deployment Force
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
EURASEC	Eurasian Economic Community
AKP	Justice and Development Party
DNR	Donetsk People's Republic
LNR	Luhansk People's Republic
PRC	People's Republic of China
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
TANAP	Trans-Anatolian Gas Pipeline
TAP	Trans-Adriatic Pipeline
CCTC	Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking Countries
BTC	Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan Pipeline
LNG	Liquefied Natural Gas
MNR	Mineral Resources

CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The Central Asian region has increasingly drawn the attention of scholars and policymakers alike, particularly in light of the rising influence of powers such as China, Russia, and Türkiye. Power vacuum that emerged following the independence of the five Central Asian republics in 1991 has created both opportunities for cooperation and a competitive environment for regional and global hegemonic powers. As the successor state to the Soviet Union, the Russian Federation has long sought to reestablish its influence in Central Asia, grappling with a complex legacy of trauma and loss. According to Tsygankov, Russia has maintained a consistent geopolitical perspective, viewing the region as critical to its cultural, economic, and political aspirations (Tsygankov, 2003). This enduring interest stems from a historical imperative: Russia has not fully retreated from the Eurasian landscape, and the newly independent Central Asian states face significant challenges that require external support. The post-Soviet era has been fraught with instability both for Russia and Central Asian nations. Disruption of established economic and political ties, previously centralized under the Kremlin, has left these states to navigate an array of new domestic and bilateral issues, including ethnic conflicts, illegal immigration, and trafficking in humans and narcotics.

The importance of this study lies in its contribution to understanding the complex geopolitical dynamics and power shifts in Central Asia. By analyzing the evolving roles of Russia and Türkiye in the region, the study sheds light on the implications for international relations and regional stability. It provides insights into the factors influencing Russia's declining dominance in Central Asia and Türkiye's efforts to establish itself as a significant player in the region. Additionally, the research offers valuable perspectives on cooperation, integration, and the potential for new power structures to emerge in Central Asia. Overall, this study serves as a foundation for further research and discussion on the region's future and the involvement of critical

global actors. The study evaluates the strengths and weaknesses of Türkiye, providing insights into the respective capabilities and strategies of the country towards the region. Secondly, the thesis sheds light on the evolving geopolitical landscape in Central Asia, highlighting the decline of traditional hegemonic powers and the possible emergence of new actors vying for influence, with the respective concentration on Türkiye as a dependent variable at this point. Thirdly, by analyzing the conceptual framework and engaging with the academic discussion on topics such as region, regional order, power, hegemony, cooperation, and integration, this study offers valuable insights into the mechanisms and motivations behind Turkish-Central Asian interactions. Finally, the study opens the door for further research and discussion on the future of the Central Asian geopolitical order, the involvement of global and regional powers, and the potential emergence of a new power structure in the region.

The dependent variable in this context is the ability of Türkiye to fill the vacuum left by Russia in Central Asia (due to an array of co-related reasons) and establish itself as an alternative traditional power in the region. The work discusses how Russia's actions, such as the invasion of Ukraine, have implications for the Central Asian region and influence Türkiye's foreign policy decisions. Additionally, the thesis highlights Russia's use of soft power instruments, such as historical and cultural ties, to advance its interests in the region. Overall, the actions and policies of external actors play a key role in shaping the complex dynamics and relationships between countries in Central Asia and Eurasia, influencing the geopolitical landscape and affecting the foreign policy decisions of Türkiye and other regional players. The thesis suggests that Russia's position in Central Asia may be under threat, especially as other powers, such as Türkiye, seek to strengthen their influence in the region. The Russo-Ukrainian war and the changing geopolitical dynamics have contributed to questioning Russia's dominance in Central Asia. Türkiye's proactive policies and efforts to strengthen its presence in Central Asia are highlighted in the thesis. This growing influence of Türkiye in the region, especially in the context of historical, cultural, and economic ties, may challenge the traditional dominance of Russia in Central Asia. The work discusses how the notion of Russia's influence waning in Central Asia is not baseless, especially in the aftermath of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. The actions of Central Asian countries, such as not supporting Russia's invasion of Ukraine and complying with anti-Russian sanctions, challenge the perception of Russia's continued influence

in the region. Through this work, I sought to explore the evolving dynamics among powers in Central Asia, specifically focusing on Russia and Türkiye. It aims to analyze the changing geopolitical landscape of the region, the decline of traditional hegemonic powers, and the emergence of new actors vying for influence. This work seeks to understand the reasons behind Russia's decreasing influence in the region, assess Türkiye's potential to fill the vacuum left by Russia and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of both actors through a comparative lens. Ultimately, the research aims to contribute to a better understanding of the regional transformations in Central Asia and their implications for international relations.

This evolving landscape has compelled Russia to reassess its geopolitical identity in the region, prompting a reconstruction of its foreign policy framework toward Central Asia. In this context, Türkiye's identity as a Turkic nation provides a compelling basis for its engagement with Central Asia. As noted by Babak Babali, this shared ethnic and cultural heritage motivates Türkiye to strengthen ties with its Turkic counterparts, including Azerbaijan and the Central Asian republics (Babali, 2023). The waning influence of Russia, coupled with Türkiye's strategic use of soft power, has further facilitated closer ties with these nations. Through diplomatic initiatives such as the Organization of Turkic States, Türkiye has sought to strengthen bilateral and multilateral relationships, emphasizing the region's strategic importance for Euro-Atlantic security and energy resources (MFA, 2020). Türkiye's historical recognition of the Central Asian republics and its commitment to promoting stable, market-oriented democracies underscore its aspirations for regional integration based on shared linguistic, historical, and cultural bonds.

Türkiye has always been an exceptional partner for the countries of CA due to its close historical and cultural ties. Considering several factors, such as Türkiye being the first country to recognize the independence of the newly established republics after the collapse of the Soviet Union, it has consistently supported the sovereignty of the Central Asian republics ever since (Izimov, 2022). The Turkish-Central Asian relationship has undergone significant transformations amid shifting geopolitical dynamics. The historical relations between Türkiye and the Turkic republics have also been influenced by various dynamics, with relations sometimes being at their lowest ebb or even frozen, depending on the conjuncture. This study will provide the

background to deepen the understanding of the Turkish-Central Asian integration process by examining the historical and contemporary factors influencing these ties from an international relations perspective. This work will also critically analyze over 30 years of Türkiye's foreign policy towards Central Asia, exploring how this engagement has produced a mutually beneficial "win-win" scenario for both parties. As Central Asian states emerged from the dissolution of the Soviet Union, they provided Türkiye with a platform to leverage its soft and hard power capabilities, thus fostering a unique regionalism. However, today, new factors are driving an accelerated rapprochement between Türkiye and the Central Asian republics, set against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine. On the one hand, this is facilitated by Ankara's strategy, which has pursued an active foreign policy in recent years.

The relevance of this research lies in its critical examination of the dynamics shaping Türkiye-Central Asian relations. Specifically, this study will address several pivotal questions: 1) How have internal policy actors in Türkiye influenced the country's foreign policy towards Central Asia? 2) What are the motivations behind Türkiye's integration efforts with Central Asia, particularly in the context of Russia's historical dominance in the region? 3) Can Türkiye effectively supplant Russian influence in Central Asia, especially in light of recent geopolitical developments following the events of 2022? Ultimately, this thesis will provide valuable insights into the evolving geopolitical landscape of Central Asia, offering a nuanced understanding of Türkiye's role as a potential counterbalance to Russia's waning influence in the region.

This thesis addresses the central research question: "To what extent is Türkiye able to fulfill the waning influence of Russia in the Central Asian region?" By analyzing Türkiye's role as a non-regional actor, this study will investigate how Türkiye seeks to assert its interests in Central Asia, particularly in light of Russia's diminishing foothold. It will also consider how shared historical, cultural, and linguistic ties between Türkiye and Central Asian states shape these relationships and influence regional dynamics. The relevance of this research extends beyond academic discourse, offering critical insights for policymakers and scholars engaged in regional studies and international relations. As Central Asia continues to navigate a complex geopolitical landscape, the findings of this study will illuminate the potential for enhanced regional cooperation and security while also contributing to the broader understanding of

Türkiye's strategic ambitions and the implications for the balance of power in Central Asia. In conclusion, this research aims to provide a comprehensive analysis of Central Asian foreign policies in relation to external influences, with a particular focus on Türkiye's capacity to act as a counterbalance to Russia's diminishing presence in the region. Through this exploration, the thesis will contribute to a deeper understanding of the evolving geopolitical dynamics in Central Asia and their implications for regional stability and cooperation.



CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I aim to provide a comprehensive literature review that examines the intricate dynamics of regional order, focusing on the multifaceted roles played by external powers within these systems. By delving into theoretical frameworks and existing research, I will first outline the conceptual foundations of regionalism and regional order, exploring how these constructs shape interactions and governance within specific geographical contexts. Subsequently, I will address the influence of external actors, analyzing how their involvement can alter regional stability, power balances, and diplomatic relations. The latter part of the chapter will apply these insights to the specific case of Central Asia, highlighting how regional order in this strategically significant area is shaped and reshaped through the engagement of external powers. Through this examination, I aim to elucidate the complex interplay between regional and external forces, offering a nuanced understanding of Central Asia's evolving geopolitical landscape.

2.1. Concept of Region

After 1991 and the end of the Cold War, a new and entirely different world order emerged on the global political stage. This shift was driven by globalization, the large-scale dispersion of power, and the rise of new actors in international relations. It should be noted that the previous world order was regulated by the Treaty of Westphalia of 1648 (over time, the system of sovereign states that were parties to the treaty changed only their number but not the content of the processes underway). This structure was based on two methods of conflict resolution - diplomacy and war, which, according to Carl von Clausewitz, "is the continuation of politics by other means." States, primarily leading ones, have been the actors of international relations and world politics by actively shaping political processes at the international level for many years, starting from the emergence and development of the Westphalian system. A significant

milestone in international research on the role of actors was the 1972 publication of the book “Transnational Relations and World Politics”, edited by J. Nye and R. Keohane. The authors formulated the idea of transformation of the Westphalian model of the world under the influence of non-state transnational actors. Thus, one of the trends of neoliberalism - transnationalism, or pluralism - was initiated. J. Nye and R. Keohane expanded the concept of actorhood in the international arena: along with states, non-state actors began to act as actors in world politics. In the field of international relations, an increasing body of literature reflects a growing interest in regional structures and actors, and the role they play in contemporary world politics (Katzenstein, 2005; Hurrell, 2007; Acharya and Johnston, 2007). The study of regions and, consequently, regionalism has attracted scholarly interest in the field of International Relations since the 1950s. Since then, regions have been viewed as poles, subsystems, or even actors within the international system (Cantori and Spiegel, 1970). The debate has evolved over time, with regions increasingly being treated as regional institutions, which has led to new trends in conceptualizing the topic. Some analysts suggest that regions will play a significant role in shaping the future of world order, while others foresee the development of a new regional architecture in world politics, or even a “world of regions” (Acharya, 2007; Hurrell, 2007). Despite the “regional turn” in the field of International Relations, the concept of regional order has not yet been clearly defined, and its characteristics and values remain vague, largely due to confusion with the concept of region itself.

In the context of a comprehensive conceptualization of a “region,” it is important to examine the relationship between the region itself, power, and order. Regions should not be treated merely as subsystems of the international political system or as new poles and actors on the global stage. According to Godehart and Nabers, indeed, the world system cannot be suggested to be defined as an aggregate of regions since under the conventional distinction between such concepts as a unit and system in international relations theory, the regions would only constitute a new unit that operates like any other unit in an anarchic system (Godehart and Nabers,). In International Relations, regions are understood as independent geographical units, while regionalism is viewed as a set of policies, commonly shared or believed, that are agreed upon by the members of those units (Fawcett and Hurrell, 1995; Fawcett, 2015). As already mentioned, the recent trends in the field of International Relations show

that regions (including regional organizations, blocs, and so far into this classification) are becoming actors in the international arena and, consequently, can be started being suggested as crucial elements of world politics (Acharya, 2007; Langenhove, 2013; Soderbaum, 2016).

Consequently, it is imperative to set the strict definition of the term “region” and, thus, elucidate the nature of this phenomenon. The term “region” is complex and multidimensional, making its study require an interdisciplinary approach. As such, it is challenging to define it a priori (Makarychev, 1999). Most researchers agree that the definition of a region depends directly on the specific area of study, and therefore, there is no single, universally accepted definition. In fact, the concept of “region” is one of the most elusive and misunderstood terms in contemporary regional and international studies. The Latin terms “regionem” or “regio,” meaning “direction,” “boundary,” or “district,” refer to any space that can be clearly distinguished from another area. However, contemporary usage of the “region” reflects a multidimensional concept, which, according to numerous specialists necessitates an interdisciplinary approach (Paul, 2012; Sergunin, 1994; Makarychev, 1999). Most of these scholars assert that the definition of a region is contingent upon the characteristics of the branch of knowledge in which the researcher operates (geography, politics, economics, or international relations). Drawing upon terminology from various disciplines, one can enumerate the following approaches to the term region. If not geographically, the term of the region can be defined in its sociological nexus as follows: “A space of the lifeworld as a basis for the development of meanings, values and, ultimately, the harmonic character of social life” (Kaliev and Temirov, 2021). The term can refer to or be defined by: a) the intra-stratum distribution of space within administrative and legal understanding of the region, partially synonymous with the concept of “district” (Dergachev and Vardomski, 2004); b) a division of world space with a subsequent foreign policy and international-political understanding (Gantman, 2004); c) a group of features that is primary for this or that study (geographical, geopolitical, sociocultural and, etc.) (Dergachev and Vardomski, 2004). Consequently, a particular regional subdivision as “means of selecting and studying spatial combinations of compound complexities of phenomena” will usually depend on the research objectives and will have the character of a social construct

(Gladkiy and Chistobayev, 2002). Ultimately, the definition of a region will depend on the defined research goals and will be characterized as a social construct.

The term “region” has appeared in political discourse relatively recently. Before that, the concept of “province” was commonly used as a collective term for territorial communities (Melville, 2004). In historical retrospect, the concept of “region” is understood as a territorially unified area comprising administrative units that share similarities in natural conditions, historical development, and economic characteristics (Kovalchenko and Borodkin, 1989). In other words, it can also be defined as a part of a territory that is distinguished from others by a set of relatively stable features, such as economic, political, cultural, historical, and national characteristics, among others (Schmidt, 1997). From a historical perspective, a region can be seen as a specific living space that has developed over time through a long process of historical development. In general, the Latin “regio” has a direct meaning of an area and district, which consequently, can be linked to the definition as a specific territory of a country or several countries with more or less homogeneous natural conditions and a typical orientation of the development of productive forces based on the combination of complex natural resources with the corresponding technical and social infrastructure, as well as the singularity of socio-cultural conditions (Semigina, 1999). Since the Roman period, the term “regio” has witnessed an array of various meanings, including such ones as “direction,” “position,” “country,” “part of the world,” and the Latin verb “regere” stands for etymologically related “to manage” indicating a governing component of the term. Over time, the term evolved to refer to defined boundaries and limited areas, acquiring a geographical dimension that has long shaped the study of regional phenomena. Swedish scientist M. Gunnarsson believes the region is the interaction of actors and institutions within a given geographical area (Gunnarsson, 2002). American scientist K. Deutsch argues that a region is a group of countries that are more interconnected with each other than with any other countries, in various respects (Deutsch, 1981). Within the framework of the substantive approach, American professor E. Markusen defines a region as a historically evolving, territorially concentrated community that includes a physical, socio-cultural, economic, and political environment. This environment, along with its spatial structure, distinguishes it from other regions and territorial units, such as cities or countries (Markusen, 1987). Thus, she is the first to highlight the interrelationship

between the concepts of region, nation, and city, and to distinguish the concept of “region” from that of diversity. Another American expert B. Russet offers the following explanatory formulations to clarify the concept of the region: a) regions are both socially and culturally homogeneous, and the states of this region possess the same attitude to the established internal attributes; b) regions are formed of states with similar political properties, because the states of this region have a shared vision of the outside world and the same behavior in the international arena (which is evident and reflected in voting in the UN, for example); c) regions, which are politically interdependent, are interlinked with each other through the “region” (Russet, 1967). The notion of an international-political region has also gained prominence in recent discussions. For example, Prof. A.D. Voskresensky defines an international-political region as a regional totality of international affairs phenomena that are linked to a territorial-economic and national-cultural complex. This complex is based on the homogeneity of geographical, natural, economic, socio-historical, and national-cultural conditions that motivate its identification. These regions are united by a typical structure and logic, so that their historical and geographical coordinates are interdependent (Voskresensky, 2004, 34). Currently, there are various approaches to classifying regions, including geographical, political, socio-economic, ecological, informational, civilizational, and others. In regional studies, the concept of “region” is examined at three levels:

- Macro level: so to designate a group of neighboring countries that represent a separate economic, geographical, or close in national composition and cultural part of the world;
- Meso level: the region is viewed as a part of the country, based on administrative-territorial, legal, or economic criteria;
- Micro level: the region is identified with an administrative district, city, or small territorial area;

Researchers generally divide regions into two large groups: homogenous and functional regions. First is subdivided into subsequent three, which can be listed as follows: a) natural regions, whose shape is determined by common climatic, topographical, and other natural characteristics; b) regions with a strong sense of shared cultural and historical identity; c) economically self-sufficient regions with a

common type of industrial production; The constituents of a functional region are not necessarily similar to each other from the outset. The creation of such regions presupposes interaction and integration among their components, so that, in the end, the territorial elements come together in a complementary way (Makarychev, 1999). Based on the functional approach, N. Vigeland classifies regions into functional, cultural, and administrative types. According to the Norwegian specialist, a functional region has a narrow and specific purpose, primarily focused on achieving certain benefits within a particular sector through regional cooperation. These could be trade, education, integration agendas, or customs policy - secondly, the author typologies cultural region, which is based on the issues related to identity. Common language, heritage, traditions, and similar factors create a self-sustaining homogeneity within a specific territory, distinguishing a cultural region from other regions of the world. It is also worth mentioning that this type of region is considered to form the basis for the development of a functional region. Ultimately, the administrative type of the region refers to the structure existing in states with a hierarchical order between districts, municipalities, and the central administration. From the latter approach, the country can be classified as a region, too.

Taking into account the theory of the regional level, it can be argued that a macro-regional complex, rather than a single state, is a prototype of one of the centers of the emerging polycentric world system. This development path has already been chosen by Europe, which established the European Union, and partially on the part of the United States, which established NAFTA (North American Free Trade Area). China is trying to realize the same option, forming the so-called "Greater China" based on mass emigration and a new quality of economic and political dependence of the "peripheral space" on the "new metropolis" (the modern Chinese concept of Tianxia/The Middle Kingdom) and trying to become the only leading state in East Asia. Apparently, in connection with the global discussion on the rise of East Asia, it would be legitimate to speak about the formation of a macro-region or macro-regional complex "Greater East Asia" (Northeast and Southeast Asia, Central and South Asia), first of all, from the economic and cultural-civilizational point of view (Voskresensky, 2012, 48). In the same vein, there are discussions about the "revival" of the CIS (The Commonwealth of Independent States), the structuring of Central-Eastern Eurasia, etc. This is confirmed by the creation of the EAEU (The Eurasian Economic Union).

Geopolitical parameters allow us to divide overseas Asia into Central, South, Southeast, and East (or Far East), the Near East, and the Middle East. It is worth noting that individual countries can be part of not one but two or even three overlapping regional clusters according to various parameters. In addition, other cultural and geographical agglomerations of states are often distinguished, which can be built on the principle of economic cooperation and joint security system, and “bound” by historical conflicts, disputable problems, traditional hostilities, i.e., it is possible and legitimate to divide the world into geo-economic and geopolitical regions. Moreover, some historical regions have recently acquired quite distinct geo-economic features. Thus, it is worth noting that transformational macro-processes, regionalization, and regionalism are and will become even more widespread and dynamic. As practice and common sense show, all participants in international relations are highly interested in them. The big controversial issue in these regional macro-processes has been and will remain the geopolitical framework, in the different contours of which the parties have different interests. For example, after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the positions of the parties (Russia, other post-Soviet countries, the US, China, the EU, Türkiye, etc.) differ significantly concerning the geopolitical contours of the newly formed regions, including Central Asia. Thus, in contemporary political and international studies, the concept of “region” is one of the most challenging to define, often referred to as a “super-term” (Braudel, 1967). It has undergone substantial conceptual evolution - from an internal structural unit of a state to an actor in world politics. The distinguishing feature of modern state and international regions is that under the existing conditions, they are moving into a completely new phase of their development. The state region increasingly goes beyond interregional interaction within the state and actively begins to function in the international arena. Experts in international relations and world politics explain this process as transforming international relations into world policy (Bogaturov, 2004). The region as a fragment of the global society can integrate, delimit, distribute, organize, and transform, in other words, to fill the global interdependence abstraction with real significance. Thus, the interaction of macro-regions such as East Asia, the Americas, and Europe supports the existence of a worldwide level of relations. However, this process also signals the erosion of the monopoly function of individual actors in international relations when it comes to shaping the world order. This has predetermined the political interest in both territories and spatial relations conceptualized in various projects of localism,

national sovereignty, and supranationality. These questions of how the concept of “region” has been differentially scrutinized in the social sciences and how the construct of regions entails a political process of region-building are incredibly relevant.

Regions are perceived as a manifestation of delicate ties between states and are primarily viewed in terms of geographical spaces. However, these spaces attain meaning only regarding other spaces; in other words, only if they are attributed to a “place.” The space-as-place differentiation emphasizes that the more geographical idea of space already includes the more political notion of “location.” In his celebrated geopolitical study entitled *The Nomos of Earth*, Carl Schmitt asserts that the original nature of nomos resides in the “unity of order and placement” or what Schmitt calls “spatial order” (*Raumordnung*) (Schmitt, 1997; Dünne and Günzel, 2006). Thus nomos is the immediate form in which the political and social order of a people becomes spatially visible” (Schmitt 2003: 70). In keeping with the trend of social geography, what we are dealing with are regions as an expression of spatial order and which, despite the criterion of geographical proximity, must also be given a political criterion. To this extent, the “allocation” of regions and the later delineation of different regions implicitly and inevitably presupposes the need for political interactions between regional actors. This discourse on regions has resurfaced repeatedly in the literature of IR theory. William Thompson’s early work illustrates the complications of defining the regions comprehensively. Thompson has analyzed 22 studies published between 1958 and 1971 and has identified more than 20 features that can be considered criteria for a basic definition of a region. A comparative analysis of various studies reveals that most authors disagree on the political criteria for defining a region (Thompson 1973: 92-4). Therefore, regions are defined according to geographical and political criteria. The diversity of theoretical approaches to the region, in particular regional studies and concepts of regionalism, can be summarized in this way.

2.2. Concept of Regional Order

The question of the world order’s character has remained as relevant as ever twenty years after the end of global bipolarity. The fundamental question of the structure of

the international system remains open; indeed, the need for theoretical orientation has grown in view of the simultaneity of opposing developments. A kind of minimal consensus seems to be emerging among the representatives of the various grand theories that a new stable order is still emerging, while elements of the old order continue to have an impact. At present, the situation can be described as an “interregnum of world orders,” a period of transition between established systems of global governance (Sorensen, 2006), which is relatively orderly on an international level and at the same time endangered by international terrorism, organized crime and military conflicts in the various crisis areas of the world. Especially the military conflicts in the post-Cold War era are a reminder of the growing importance of regional structures of order (Link, 2001; Hurrell, 2007); they also reveal the structural deficits of international conflict management in the globalized world: Neither have the hopes for a new UN-led world order materialized, nor have the great powers found a stable arrangement in questions of conflict management that would be suitable for keeping conflicts as permanently calm as they were at the time of systemic competition. Such developments are one reason regions are on the agenda of theoretical discussions in international relations. There is talk of an emerging regional architecture of world politics (Archaya, 2007) or the future of a multiregional system of international relations (Hurrell, 2007). The interactions of the regional powers influence the regional regulatory structure, which in turn impacts the actors’ policies and promotes or restricts them. The development of regional order structures should therefore be understood as a process that occurs across different levels and involves various actors. Similar interrelationships can be observed both in the domestic political constitutions of the states within a region and in the influence exerted by external actors.

Maria Tanaka’s article proceeds from the premise that, while the problem of international order is crucial to international relations, the notion of “order” itself is still considered mainly in terms of patterns and norms that support rule-governed interactions between states, thereby failing to bridge IR with the more general debate on “social order” in the social sciences. The author’s article, written from an “*emergentist systemicist*” perspective, aims to develop a conceptual framework for the systematic analysis of regional orders, focusing on characteristics shared across all social spheres. The argumentation is organized in three stages. In the first part, she focuses on the emergent features of the system and the process of self-organization to

explain the dynamics of order emergence, maintenance, and eventual dissolution. Secondly, Tanaka discusses the levels of social process and, on the basis of Brante's work, imposes a component-structure-context procedure to explain the vertical variation of order. Third, drawing on the theories of Archer and Bhaskar, the author attempts to construct a "culturally-inclusive" and "historically-inclusive" perspective on order. Finally, the author offers several suggestions on how the proposed framework can contribute to the ongoing debates about the transition of order in East Asia. Although systems theory was initially used in the natural sciences, its use rapidly spread to the social sciences. Talcott Parsons' structural functionalism has been the dominant paradigm in Anglo-American sociology. David Easton, on the other hand, pioneered the application of systems theory to political science, using it to analyze the functioning and dynamics of political systems (Easton, 1953). In the 1950s, particularly in the United States, the methodological conceptualizations of systems theory by Parsons and Easton were applied to the social and political sciences, including the study of International Relations (IR). The first major work introducing a systems approach to IR was Morton Kaplan's book *System and Process in International Politics* (1957). Parsons's theory of social order represents an effort to find a middle ground between Locke's utopian social contract theory, which emphasizes human rationality, and Hobbes's theory of social order, which argues that order is guaranteed solely by the Leviathan—the state as the ultimate authority (Parsons, 1937). Parsons argued a social order is enabled based on the shared values acquired through the process of internalization. He focused on the notion of normative order, arguing that *"normative order ... is always related to a particular system of norms or normative elements, whether goals, rules, or other norms"*. Order in this context implies that a process takes place according to the routes laid out in the normative system: *"... social order ... is an order that cannot have stability without the effective functioning of certain normative elements."* The normative elements of order, according to Parsons, are located within the cultural system, but they *"govern, control, organize"* the other systems that are lower in the hierarchy.

A region can be represented as a complex social system, a structure characterized by nonlinearities, emergent characteristics, hierarchy, self-organization, and openness. It

is possible to think of some subsystems of a given regional system as SES¹; namely, systems in which social, anthropogenic, and environmental entities interact at multiple time and space scales. “Regional order” refers to a configuration of emergent characteristics within a region that exhibits top-down causality, where the system as a whole impacts, manages, and influences the behavior of its individual components. According to the spatial-temporal line of considerations, the regional order can be divided into 1) the spatial component of self-organization, namely a set of exo-structures “containing” external causal factors) and 2) the temporal component of self-organization, which is a configuration of emergent properties of the region endowed with the quality of downward causality. These properties “stabilize” the relationship between the parts and the whole within the system, thereby contributing to its longevity and overall stability. (Tanaka, 2017). The component-structure-context framework was introduced to incorporate the vertical differentiation of the regional order. In this way, a given social phenomenon may be explained as a product of 1) the relationship between the agent and the structure that produced it at the regional level, 2) the structural components belonging to the underlying layers, and 3) the context of this structure belonging to the upper layers. To construct a “culturally inclusive” description of the regional order, a framework of constitutive and derivative structures was introduced. If the constitutive structures are related to the cultural subsystem of the region, the derivative structures (arising as a result of agents’ social practices) are the social relations subsystem.

Among constitutive structures, there are fundamental theories of human behavior, theories of order and change in society, etc. On the other hand, derivative structures “translate” the content of constitutive structures into a concrete spatio-temporal context. To establish a historically inclusive narrative of regional order, the concept of nodes is introduced. The role of nodal points is to mark the systemic geohistorical transitions, facilitating a historically grounded explanation of the emergence, transformation, and submergence of succeeding regional orders. According to Madalin-Catalin Blidaru, the “regional” dimension of International Relations is more essential than ever, particularly in the context of the current crisis. Regional cooperation and institutionalized regional organizations provide significant solutions

¹ Socioeconomic status, in other words, the social standing of an individual or a group.

in addressing these challenges. From managing the complexity of regional markets and economies to fostering opportunities for broader political cooperation, the modern world requires more transnational cooperation than ever before. And this is gradually changing how we govern ourselves. The regional political arrangements are being utilized to address several essential concerns and protecting the climate, stemming biodiversity loss, addressing natural disasters, pooling resources for research and innovation, and combating global pandemics. Regional policy mechanisms are being used to address various challenges, from climate change to global pandemics (Blidaru, 2021). There is no sovereignty in regional structures or orders, which restricts their potential. Indeed, they are not a remedy for the failures of multilateralism, globalization, or international cooperation. Yet, they do succeed in finding solutions to specific regional problems. Their relevance in global governance is growing, and it is high time they received the recognition they merit. Some authors define regional order by incorporating considerations of structure and order, while also emphasizing the social aspects that organizations possess, rather than focusing solely on traditional political, economic, and geographical characteristics.

To frame the discussion of regional order with a focus on external actors such as Türkiye and Russia in Central Asia, it's crucial to contextualize the evolving nature of international order and the specific role that regional and external actors play within this framework. The global system, still grappling with the transition from a bipolar to a multipolar world order, presents a complex landscape characterized by a blend of emerging new structures and persistent elements of the old. This "interregnum of world orders" (Sorensen, 2006) reflects a period of transitional instability, where traditional global governance mechanisms, like the UN, struggle to manage contemporary conflicts effectively. In this shifting environment, regional orders are gaining prominence as essential units of analysis. The concept of regional order extends beyond mere geopolitical arrangements, incorporating the influence of both internal dynamics and external actors. The recent focus on regional structures, driven by persistent conflicts and crises, highlights the limitations of global institutions and the growing importance of localized governance and cooperation (Link, 2001; Hurrell, 2007). This emerging regional architecture (Archaya, 2007) is further complicated by the presence of external powers, which often influence or reshape regional dynamics through their strategic interests and interventions. The role of external actors, such as

Türkiye and Russia, in Central Asia exemplifies the complex interplay between regional and global influences. These powers are involved not only in shaping regional order through direct engagement and influence, but also through their strategic objectives and responses to the evolving geopolitical landscape. Their involvement underscores the need for a nuanced understanding of regional order as a dynamic process influenced by both internal regional factors and external interventions. Maria Tanaka's framework, which integrates systems theory and a culturally and historically inclusive perspective, provides a valuable lens for analyzing these dynamics. By focusing on emergent features, vertical variation, and the intersection of normative and social structures, Tanaka's approach helps clarify how regional orders—including that of Central Asia—are shaped by both internal and external forces. As such, this chapter will explore how Türkiye and Russia's roles in Central Asia fit within this broader theoretical context, examining how their actions impact regional stability and order amidst the ongoing transition in global governance. This analysis aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the interaction between regional and external influences in shaping contemporary regional orders.

2.3. Concept of Regional Power

The concept of regional power has been used since the late 20th century to define a sovereign state with a significant power within a particular geographical area. There are many conflicting definitions of the prerequisites or characteristics a state must possess in order to be defined as a regional power. Wright distinguishes between regional and middle powers, arguing that regional powers are geographically limited. He states: "...States with a general interest in a particular region and the capacity to operate independently within it, allowing them to appear as local great powers..." (Wright, 1978). Flesmes defines of a regional power as "*a regional leader, local great power or major power within a locality, which is suggested as to be powerful within their regions, no matter they relate to relationships of amity or enmity*" (Flesmes, 2007). The first one who had put his efforts into developing a concept was Osterud, who defined "regional great power" as a state 1) which is part of a particular geographical area; 2) which has the ability to influence the affairs taking place within the region; 3) which can stand up against any coalition; 4) which might also posit itself as a great power on the world arena in addition to its characteristic as a regional power (contrary

to a middle power) (Osterud, 1992). However, since 1991, global structures have undergone profound changes, leading to the formation of a new system for organizing political elements. This system, which replaces the state-centric model, is characterized by the more active influence of actors of various types and is referred to as “heterarchy” (Warren McCulloch). This concept was developed in detail by D. Stark, who believed that “heterarchy” is nothing but “a new way of organization that is neither free market nor hierarchical. Whereas hierarchies presume relations of dependency and markets presume relations of independence, heterarchies presume relations of interdependence. J. Rosenau called the new world order system a “bifurcated system” in which the state-centered and multicentered worlds sometimes cooperate, often conflict, and always cooperate. So, the new construction of the global world is multi-centered and represents a structure consisting of various “spheres of competence” (J. Rosenau’s term), where power over the world and the world order are localized. There are many different ways of categorizing these “spheres.” For instance, S.K. Kharbikh has made the regional power, with its distinctive features, a subject of study within the context of the new global order. She proposes to consider the state with the characteristics of two or more poles, which is the center of attraction and influence in the region, and which dominates but does not infringe on the national interests of neighboring countries as a regional power (Kharbikh, 2012). A regional power exerts its influence on the countries of the region mainly through “soft power” (J. Nye’s term), which is based on the attractiveness of the state’s culture, values, political and social programs, sympathy and trust in the part of partners, as well as the appeal of a “positive example.” “Soft power” as an instrument of political influence is the antipode of the concept of “hard power,” the main attributes of which are coercion and reward, realized by military and economic means.

Godehart and Nabers posit an excellent question of who makes region if the latter are considered the outcome of what the actors make of them. There remains an ongoing debate as to who are the actors who have the power and capacity to control - and even direct - the processes of regional construction. Indeed, how can actors influence the construction of a particular regional order? In this collection, we focus on the social relations between regional powers (leaders), and other regional actors (followers) that are co-constitutive and that represent a precondition for the kind of quality (type) of the respective regional order (Godehart and Nabers, 2011). There is a wide range of

existing studies in IR theory on both regional powers and regional actors, including concepts such as “emerging regional power,” “middle power,” and “regional hegemon,” among others. Even the fact of these terms and definitions existing particularly in the scholarship of International Relations highlights the emerging trend of new debates related to “new world order” or “multi-multipolar world order” (Flemes and Nolte, 2008). By analyzing different cases, it is clear that social relations are often already implicit in particular regional configurations. In parallel, however, these concrete relations constitute, reproduce, and further transform - sometimes even challenge - the political order of a specific region.

As a consequence, it follows that the content of the quality of regional orders is dependent on the relations between regional actors, especially the relations between regional powers and other regional actors. Whereas diverse regional contexts define, constrain, or facilitate the different roles of regional actors (e.g., as leader and follower), the structure of a region itself is directly generated by the dominant interpretational frameworks of particular actors. It depends on the nature of the discourse in which regions are structured in broader or narrower terms. In this volume, we advance the idea that regional powers are instrumental in constructing regions. Miriam Prys (2010), with reference to Douglas Lemke (Lemke 2010), defines regional powers regarding their geographical position in a region and their relative dominance in that region in terms of material capabilities. Prys conceptualizes regional power as an “umbrella term” that needs further elaboration because, as she correctly stresses, this rather simplistic approach only serves to identify relevant cases. She emphasizes the tendency of potential regional powers in different regional settings. Still, she fails to clarify whether these powers actually lead or influence other regional actors, contribute to regional development, or specify how they exercise their power. Miriam Prys also identifies and conceptualizes three subtypes of regional powers: regional hegemons, regional detached powers, and regional dominators (Prys, 2010).

Many scholars emphasize both the importance of the state in international relations and the fact that the Westphalian order of independent states has replaced a world characterized by more complex political forms. Since the 1990s, topics such as regional institutions, conflicts, and powers have increasingly dominated debates on the new world order, the changing distribution of power in the post-Cold War era, and the

uncertain economic and security developments across different regions. The decentralization of international relations has strengthened the autonomy of areas that were no longer influenced by or linked to great powers in politics at the international level and increased the role of non-Western powers in international politics (Buzan and Waever, 2003). Regional power structures have become key economic providers, alongside world powers, contributing to the emergence of regional orders. Thus, the conversion of the bipolar system into a “world of regions” (Katzenstein, 2005) facilitated the rise to power of non-Western actors. This, in turn, heightened scholarly attention to these regions, creating a “regional turn in IR theory” (Godehardt and Nabers, 2011). With increased attention to regionality, the long-standing debate about the form of the world order and its reshaping is being transformed in the post bipolar world into a question of how regional systems are constituted and organized and what form regional orders are taking.

In the contemporary landscape of international relations, the role of external powers in shaping regional order has become increasingly pivotal. The concept of regional power, emerging in the late 20th century, is a critical analytical tool for understanding how states influence their geographical spheres. Definitions of regional powers vary, but common elements include significant influence within a specific region and the capacity to act independently on regional matters (Wright, 1978; Flemes, 2007). Osterud’s definition adds further nuance by emphasizing the ability of a regional power to both influence regional affairs and project its power on the global stage (Osterud, 1992). As global structures evolve from a state-centric system to a more complex “heterarchical” order (McCulloch), where interdependence prevails over traditional hierarchies or free markets, the role of regional powers becomes more dynamic. Stark’s concept of heterarchy and Rosenau’s “bifurcated system” illustrate a world where power is distributed across various “spheres of competence,” blending both state-centered and multicentered elements. This shift necessitates a reevaluation of regional powers and their influence. S.K. Kharbikh’s characterization of regional powers as entities that dominate within their regions while respecting the sovereignty of neighboring states highlights the dual nature of regional power—both influential and constrained (Kharbikh, 2012). The notion of “soft power,” as conceptualized by J. Nye, further distinguishes regional powers by their ability to attract and co-opt rather than coerce, thus shaping regional order through cultural and ideological appeal. The

debate on who constructs and controls regional orders underscores the complex interactions between regional powers and other actors. Godehart and Nabers emphasize that regional construction results from social relations and interactions among regional actors, which both shape and are shaped by the regional order (Godehart and Nabers, 2011). This perspective aligns with Miriam Prys's classification of regional powers into various subtypes, such as regional hegemons and regional dominators, reflecting how these powers influence regional dynamics (Prys, 2010). The post-Cold War era has witnessed a "regional turn" in international relations theory, highlighting the rise of non-Western powers and the increasing importance of regional structures in global politics (Buzan and Waever, 2003; Katzenstein, 2005). As regional orders become more prominent, the interaction between regional and external powers, including their respective strategies and influences, becomes crucial for understanding the evolving global landscape. The discussion of regional powers and their role in shaping regional order provides valuable insights into the broader question of how the international system is being reorganized in the post-bipolar world. In sum, analyzing external powers within regional orders reveals a complex interplay of influence, autonomy, and interaction. Understanding these dynamics is essential for grasping the emerging patterns of global governance and the ongoing evolution of regional and international relations.

2.4. Concepts of Cooperation and Integration in IR

Cooperation is generally understood as the act of working together to accomplish a task. Secondly, it can be defined as the process of collaborating with another organization, company, or state to achieve shared goals (Cambridge University Press, 2024). But if one looks for the definitions of cooperation in the IR, the game changes. Some will explain the breadth of this concept, while others will offer extended philosophical definitions, and so on. It is no wonder that in international relations, the process of cooperation—whether labeled as "development," "economic," "social," or "diplomatic"—is inevitably laden with political and, consequently, moral aspects. On a general level, the definition is quite similar to those found in any English dictionary - "act of cooperating and working together in one direction and to one end." Some take one's attention to the fact that the definition of cooperation is the opposite of "competition", but in international relations, which have been so long characterized by

power struggles and security dilemmas, it can be unsurprisingly awaited that cooperation can be used as a tool to seek to gain other states' endeavoring at the same time, isn't it?

Lauri Siitonen, for example, has defined some problematic moments in describing such a vague concept of cooperation. According to the author, even though the concept is commonly used in international scholarly vocabulary, it primarily presents a theoretical problem, as there is no established methodology for explaining the dynamics of international cooperation when it occurs. The issue of cooperation at both regional and global levels also presents significant challenges, much like the problem of development. Regardless of the form of cooperation, it is the internal development within a state that ultimately defines the possibilities for cooperation. Siitonen too says the chances of international cooperation between a developing country and a developed one are meager, and the process cannot be launched if only there is a desire of sides to cooperate (Siitonen, 1990:1). The author very well highlights the critical importance of looking at the structure and a form of cooperation too, but still insists that there is a challenge of a more remarkable sequence, which is the problematic of cooperation in international relations itself. Adler-Karlsson suggests that cooperation is merely the 'positive' counterpart of conflict and argues that it is, in fact, nothing more than a euphemism for new modes of power struggle among politicians (Adler-Karlsson, 1976). This opinion is also relevant, as IR as a discipline has been dominated and developed by realism for centuries, a theory that views the international system as anarchic. In this context, as the latter author suggests, interstate cooperation can be seen as a modern tool for more prosperous and more powerful nation-states to assert dominance over poorer, weaker, and less-developed states. In his famous speech, the two definitions of competition and cooperation are both widely used, with the key difference being that cooperation is linked to both rivalries and benefits—provided the rules of the “game” are correctly maintained.

When talking about global cooperation, it is easy to refer to a wide range of scholars since there is a common opinion on the demand for coordinated and quality actions in moments of urgency as it was once COVID-19 erupted; and in general, so to overcome challenges on a global level as a prevention of financial crises and climate challenges (Kaul, Grunberg and Stern, 1999; Barret, 2007; Kennedy, Messner and Nucheler,

2002). The majority of scholars have been addressing that due to the fact that humanity is driven by egoism and greed, the examples of successful international cooperation instances appear to be exceptional. Consequently, the geopolitical rivalry in this case is somewhere at the corner because each state looks something for itself while cooperating (Bremmer, 2012). On the other hand, several disciplines, such as pro-social psychology, anthropology, and other related fields, view global cooperation and integration processes more optimistically, emphasizing humankind's inherent cooperative abilities. According to some scholars, cooperation is accepted as a vital mechanism to establish complex social structures (Nowak and Highfield, 2011; Benkler, 2011). Tomasello strongly envisions cooperation as “the originator of human culture,” arguing that it arises when humans come together to engage in standard activities (Tomasello, 2009).

Upon examining the term “integration” in common usage, the Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines it as “the process of integrating,” with examples including the consolidation of something within a society or organization (Merriam-Webster, 2024). The Cambridge Dictionary defines integration as a) the action of successfully mixing with a group of people who are from a different background, and b) the act of successfully mixing or combining two or more things (Cambridge University Press, 2024). Paul Streeten views international integration as the result of increased flows of goods, trade, capital, investments, technology, people, and ideas among different nation-states (Streeten, 2001). The phenomenon of international integration involves countries adopting policies as if they were a single unit. The level of integration often prompts analysis to determine whether prices of goods, interest rates, or share prices are consistent or still differ across national markets. The problem of integration as a definition being so vague is that various political actors and different academic communities put their connotations on the concept, reminding a scene from the English tale writer L. Carroll: “When I use a word, it means what I want it to mean – no more no less,” says Humpty Dumpty. Moreover, this character often complains about how some words never lose their power or meaning (Carroll, 1990: 176). The same is the case with the concept of “integration” and one can encounter various interpretations of it. In the case of the CIS space, a hierarchy of experts on integration and cooperation has emerged, shaped by the political influence of each state. As a result, this hierarchical environment is characterized by the monopoly positions of certain

individuals and groups, among other factors (Chelyadinski, 2009). The Latin word “*integratio*” means restoration or replenishment and derives its meaning from the word “integer,” which itself means “whole.” Therefore, the concept of integration in its general sense is interpreted as a state of connectivity of individual distinguished parts and functions of a system, as well as the process leading to such a condition (Great Russian Encyclopedia, 2003). In the current era of globalization and uncertainty, integration can be defined as a voluntary, conscious, and collaborative process of convergence among actors in international relations. Apart from that definition, the integration process can be posited as a mutual adaptation of national political and monetary systems with the potential for future regulation and development based on the national interests of individual states. The main objective of integration is identifying and fostering forms and methods of cooperation on the basis of regional and international efficiency and gains. Integration has the potential to enhance actors' ability to address complex problems through joint cooperation, while also ensuring internal stability as an added benefit.

Russian scholar N. Kosolapov argues that the phenomenon of integration emerged as a theoretical challenge for IR as a discipline, prompting us to consider questions about the mechanisms and conditions of this transitional state. Under these conditions, international relations remain interstate, but they increasingly spill over into the internal level of ties, becoming more complex in nature (Kosolapov, 1998). The evolution of integration has been a natural result of the growth of productive powers, which required the establishment of more reliable networks, connections and relations between actors, and the abolition of many barriers on the way to cooperation. However, this process is achievable once the framework of supranational integration entities is established through political agreements, leading to mutually beneficial cooperation in areas such as economics, military, culture, and more.

There are some elements that have to be distinguished when defining an integration:

- **Prerequisites for integration as** a) a high-level of socioeconomic, legislative, and political development, which will define a level of competence of actors; b) commonality of challenges faced by actors; c) “demonstrative effect,” when the process results in positive shifts affecting social relations too; d) “Effect of domino,” when those who were left outside of the integration’s loop experience

significant constraints; Therefore, some actors in such cases, can later become involved in the process of integration even if did not have any primary interest at first.

- **Objectives of integration** should consist of: a) a formation of a favorable foreign policy environment; b) promoting economic transformation; c) addressing customs policy; d) exploitation of macroeconomic benefits. Integration is more successfully developed when the national economies are on the ascendant because in times of crisis, the subjects favor the internal situation. Building on this idea, Russian economist A. Dynkin noted that national economies may face crises if there are no high-quality products available, or if there is simply nothing to buy (Dynkin, 2009). The solution to this can be achieved by reviving demand through the creation of new demand, which is logically facilitated by strategies of integration and cooperation in relevant areas
- **Geographical proximity** can be a key to establishing an efficient integration process.
- **The will to participate and “high political culture”**. The latter refers to one of the most complex and difficult-to-grasp scientific concepts, which can be described as a system of historically established exemplary perceptions and patterns of behavior (Batalov, 2002).
- **Common linguistic and historical ties**. Apart from that, some scholars, such as Buyanov, suggest that culture and religion—preserved from Soviet times—play a role in shaping a shared mentality and mutual respect among individuals (Buyanov, 2008).

2.5. What is Hegemony?

Taking its roots from the Greek “*hegemonia*,” which stands for relations between city-states, the term also used to be referred to when describing the dominance of one group over another. The Cambridge Dictionary proposes the hegemony, especially of countries, meaning the position of being the most potent, consequently possessing the ability to control other units (Cambridge University Press, 2023). Today, the term “hegemony” is commonly understood as having a relatively dominant position, while “hegemon” is used as a noun to refer to an actor, group, or state that holds power or dominance. The concept of hegemony can be interpreted in many ways (Anderson, 2017). Schmidt associates the definition of hegemony with terms like “leadership”, “rule,” and “dominant power” (Schmidt, 2018). Some propose the concept of hegemony as the legitimized rule of a dominant power (Haugaard and Lentner, 2006). Once hegemony occurs, it controls the society it governs from top to down; in other words – hegemony controls material resources and leads the process of setting rules and different modes of regulatory processes, and thus, there is a prevailing perception of the dominant power ruling appropriately (Scholte, Casier and Dutkiewics, 2021). The crucial element of any emerging hegemony is legitimacy, though not the well-known legitimacy of democracy, but rather the consent of the majority of people living in a given territory. While some view hegemony and hegemonic power as a matter of social control, others argue that the hegemon is the one who sets the rules of the game (Mastanduno, 2019:481). There are also some inclined hegemons who look for any ways to exert power over others. For example, Nexon and Neumann are confident about hegemon powers not being able to re-design the international order from the beginning. Still, they are fully able to emerge in previously existing social domains and re-design the last ones (Nexon and Neumann, 2018). One definition of hegemony remains predominant and relevant to this day: “Hegemony is the dominance of one group over another, typically supported by the authorization of certain norms and the promotion of specific ideas”.

Two features are believed to be predominant now in world politics: shifting power constellations and crucial global challenges. Against this backdrop, the modern world is increasingly demanding international cooperation. However, one must consider the potential scenarios for the future, especially given the unprecedented volatility of the

current political situation and the uncertainty we face. Hegemony could offer fundamental answers to these questions, especially in times of uncertainty, both domestically and globally, across all aspects of life, including the political dimension. To understand the broad meaning of the term 'hegemony' in discourse, one can look at its definition in linguistics or, more specifically, its etymology in dictionaries. Thus, the Merriam-Webster online dictionary proposes that “hegemony” is a) domination, which is tightly related to the case of preponderant influence or authority over others; b) influence, which can be social, ideological, economic, and culturally exerted by a dominant someone (group/state/actor and, etc.) (Merriam-Webster, 2023). However, if one wishes to analyze the more specific and 'political' sense of 'hegemony,' one should refer to the traditional definition first proposed by Antonio Gramsci. The Gramscian discussion of the hegemony grew of his attempt to conjecture the survival of the capitalist states in the advanced countries of the Western hemisphere. Gramsci defines hegemony as “predominance by consent,” understanding domination primarily as class domination. He aimed to clarify how specific institutional forms, along with economic and, as Gramsci puts it, “material” relations of production, came to the forefront. At this point, Gramsci notes that while brutal domination relies on the modes of production, in advanced capitalist societies, class rule is primarily achieved through consensual means, which he argues are rooted in intellectual and moral leadership or dominance.

According to scholars such as Haugaard, Lentner and Anderson, hegemony can entail legitimated rule by the prevailing or dominant power. Hegemony has a place to be when a supra-power governs this or that society from “top-down” and consequently combines the following elements as: a) concentrated control of material resources, b) existing perceptions among subjects that are being ruled by the hegemon, c) prevailing dominance in setting societal norms and regulatory processes; (Haugaard and Lentner, 2006; Anderson, 2017). However, hegemonic legitimacy is not the type that prevails in democratic regimes. Rather, it is a form of legitimacy in which the ruled are confident in the government and trust it, because they have control over the governing process. Consequently, hegemonic legitimacy exists only when the decisive majority of the dominated population approves of the hegemon and the process by which they are governed. According to the “Hegemony” book, in this hegemonic case, the existing opinion may have an opinion that the best option of governing is actually an autocratic

regime, and on the other hand, the hegemon power does not actively operate with the manipulation or active coercion because the power the hegemon possesses comes directly from the consent of the significant portion of the dominated population (Dutkiewicz, Casier and Scholte, 2021). In International Relations, there is a theory of hegemonic stability, which argues that the most powerful state acts as a leader, assuming most of the responsibilities in driving integration processes. Such theorists as C. Kindelger and S. Krasner point to the need to associate the concept of “hegemon” with the fulfillment of a minimum of four prerequisites, which can be listed as follows: a) the “leader” controls spheres of the production and distribution of natural resources; b) monitors the situation in the most extensive regions; c) directs capital flows; d) supervises the production processes of the costly high-technology modes of production. In the theory of hegemonic stability in IR, it is also being mentioned that states that decide whether to join an integration grouping, such prerequisites as its place in the world economy, and the level of political and legal culture (high-political culture above) are being determined since they are the most important ones when it comes to solving new emerging tasks not related to the partners’ interests (Chelyadinski, 2004). When evaluating the decision of joining the integration void, state should understand that it is not a panacea for all problems, as the experience of the Baltic states, Poland, Hungary has shown; each state has to make its own maximum efforts and contributions, and not reckon other partners will solve its problems. The limited quantity of partner states is the key to more effective integration and cooperation, and it is valuable to mention that feelings of national identity can prevail and, consequently, should be respected and taken into account in such a case. This point seems to have provided grounds for the famous German philosopher J. Habermas to emphasize this idea, albeit with a certain pessimism. He argued that political unions, formed through integration processes, are often selfish projects of political elites and operate within the context of democratic scarcity. He explains this situation, if summarized, by referring to legislation being intragovernmental and bureaucratic (Habermas, 2006). The philosopher also draws attention to the fact that, behind the official rhetoric of partner states and the documents supporting integration, these states often obstruct the true aims of integration, whatever they may be. At this point, it is important to acknowledge that integration is a long and complex process, during which both positive and negative phenomena can arise. The latter are shaped by the current

fragmentation of the world and the convergence and conflict of interests among the actors in international relations.

2.6. Central Asian Case

It can be confidently stated that since the independence of the Central Asian republics, Türkiye has cooperated with these new Turkic republics, which share common language, culture, traditions, and a shared historical background (Yuce, 2022). During the intervening thirty years since the CARs' independence, significant progress has been reached in the relations between Türkiye and Central Asian states. However, the level and scope of these relationships could not be yet at the desired level. The region presents an excellent opportunity to explore the shared concerns of Central Asian security issues that require regional cooperation. Common security issues regarding the vulnerability of Central Asian countries to natural threats and complex emergencies (which can result from territorial disputes, ethnic violence, drug trafficking, counterterrorism, and extremism) demonstrate equally well that regional cooperation is needed to address common problems. Moreover, Central Asia shares a common cultural and traditional heritage, which can serve as a driving force for the regional integration process. When the Soviet Union collapsed, most scholars argued that the region would become independent finally. However, historical analysis of the post-Soviet period shows that the geopolitical interest of the global powers has not disappeared. To a certain extent, historical powers in Central Asia, such as Russia, have regained their geopolitical influence by creating economic and military institutions with the participation of Central Asian countries. During the Soviet era, and even in subsequent periods, the states of Central Asia have consistently sought to balance their identities as post-Soviet republics while asserting their distinct national characteristics. Constructivist theory can help explain the actions taken by Central Asian republics (CARs) to have their identities recognized and respected by external actors. These actions can either facilitate or create obstacles to the cooperation and integration efforts promoted by those external actors. After the official dissolution of the USSR, the foreign policies of the former Soviet republics underwent significant and sometimes contradictory changes. Both local and international scholars agree on the decisive role that external actors played in this process. The United States, followed by Russia and the European Union, invested considerable resources in shaping the

domestic and foreign policies of the former Soviet republics, aiming to influence the regional order or advance their respective visions of international politics (Bechev, 2015; Nitoiu, 2017).

Most states in the post-Soviet space had no choice but to develop a multi-vector foreign policy and find a delicate balance between the interests of their republics and those of more powerful external actors (Hey, 2003; Browning, 2006; Gnedina, 2015). Setting this context not only influenced the way post-Soviet states determined their foreign policy goals but also the policy instruments they elaborated to pursue their respective interests.

Further, post-Soviet foreign policy was shaped by the values and norms that external actors sought to promote in the region (Averre, 2009; Delcour, 2013a). From this perspective, the role of external actors—the United States, Russia, and the European Union—in shaping the foreign policy development of the former Soviet republics over the past 25 years is analyzed. In the early post-Soviet era, the United States encouraged the transition of the region's countries to market economies and the establishment of sustainable democratic structures. This was rooted in a long-standing principle of U.S. policy, which viewed the development of democracy as a step toward promoting peace and stability in the world; the USA was therefore required to assist the new post-Soviet states (Tolstrup, 2013). Hence, the US gradually invested significant resources and efforts in developing the capacity of post-Soviet states to replace their former Soviet identities with liberal democratic states that would fit more naturally into the West than Russia.

In the 1990s, the State Department and other policy institutions, supported by numerous American universities and think tanks, were actively investing in enhancing the diplomatic expertise of the former Soviet republics. The U.S. government was generally interested in undertaking investments in its energy infrastructure and extractive industries to integrate them into the liberal economic system (Stent, 2015). However, as the 1990s progressed, most post-Soviet states failed to democratize, and in some cases—such as Belarus, Moldova, Azerbaijan, and Kazakhstan—became authoritarian regimes. Although Washington has looked the other way at times to the abuses of the various authoritarian regimes in the region, this development, combined

with U.S. activity in other parts of the world, particularly in the Middle East, led in the early 2000s to a gradual decline in U.S. enthusiasm towards the region. For its part, the European Union had to progressively fill this gap. The former Soviet space was seen by the post-Cold War political realm as profoundly rooted in Moscow's sphere of interest. (Thorun, 2008; Gvosdev and Marsh 2013; Tsygankov, 2013; Snetkov, 2014; Cadier and Light, 2015). Moscow intended to maintain some control and to foster the reconsolidation of the former Soviet republics through various regional economic and security initiatives, including the Commonwealth of Independent States, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Eurasian Economic Union. In reality, the Kremlin has backed pro-Russian elites in the former Soviet Union to facilitate the enactment of neutral and often explicitly pro-Russian foreign policymaking. For this purpose, Moscow has used various means: intervening militarily, encouraging separatism and ethnic conflicts, creating conflict freezes, supporting economic coercion, and manipulating energy prices.

The European Union only became interested in engaging with the region in the early 2000s in preparation for the 2004 enlargement. At that time, the assumption in Brussels was that if the European Union wanted to become a significant international player, it had to promote and nurture a strong presence in its proximate neighborhoods (Biscop and Andersson 2007). In contrast to Russia, though, the EU has drawn a clear differentiation in the post-Soviet space between the so-called "eastern neighborhood" such as Moldova, Georgia, Belarus, Ukraine, Azerbaijan and Armenia, and Central Asia. While the latter has become a subsidiary concern of the EU in the last 15 years, the European Union has concentrated on building the foreign policy agenda of its eastern neighborhood. Brussels views shaping the foreign policy of its eastern neighbors as a necessary step to enhance the security of the EU's borders, while also strengthening regional stability and promoting economic development (Averre, 2009; Raik and Dinesen 2015; Nilsson and Silander 2016). Unlike Russia, the European Union used three narrow instruments to accomplish this objective by placing its actions under the umbrella of conditionalization (Lavenex, 2004). In essence, the European Union made further integration and subsequent social, political, and economic benefits contingent on accepting internal reforms and policies. Encountering claims to influence from Russia and the European Union, as well as other external actor, including China, most post-Soviet states initially responded by developing a multi-

vector foreign policy (Gnedina, 2015). These states benefited from collaboration with external actors in state and nation-building efforts, but were constrained by the competing interests of those same actors. Related literature on post-Soviet transformation in the former Soviet Union has concentrated on internal transformations (Schimmelfennig and Scholtz, 2008; Ademmer, 2015; Burlyuk, 2015). By contrast, the contributions of this section focus on how the foreign policy of post-Soviet countries responded to pressures from external actors, primarily the EU and Russia. Most post-Soviet states have pursued a multi-vector foreign policy, combining Soviet and Western practices and institutional frameworks. Simultaneously, these states have had to deal with the threat of separatism, ethnic conflicts, bankruptcy, external interference, and energy scarcity. Studies on Western external actors examine how they promote democratization in the region or, through external governance, seek to impose the rules, norms, and regulations that underpin their political systems. The empirical focus here is primarily on the adoption of rules and norms in post-Soviet states, as well as the implementation of various democratic reforms (Lavenex, 2004; Freire and Kanet 2012; Delcour, 2013b; Delcour and Wolczuk 2015). The relevant studies aim at analyzing the success of EU and U.S. efforts to establish democratic processes within the former Soviet Union. Further studies deal with Russia's efforts to promote autocracy in the post-Soviet space in a more or less targeted manner. The emphasized focus extends here to how Russia may gain leverage over regional states through the creation of various ties both via short-term incentives and coercion (Tolstrup, 2013). As part of the foreign policy analysis tradition, the development of foreign policy in the former Soviet states is framed as a case study of small states. This branch of scholarship examines the influence of external actors as a constant structural phenomenon to which small states are forced to adapt. Yet, studies in this vein do not highlight this as a dynamic process. The post-Soviet states have two main foreign policy types: uni-directional and multi-vector. Single-vector, Western-oriented foreign policies prevail in the Baltic states, Azerbaijan, Georgia, Ukraine (during Yushchenko's rule), and Moldova. A few Central Asian countries and Belarus pursued pro-Russian single-vector policies until the early 2000s. In its purest form, pro-Russian policies now prevail in three of the four existing de facto states (Abkhazia, North Ossetia, and Transnistria, but not Karabakh), as well as in Belarus, though with some modifications. Another alternative foreign policy approach is multi-vectorism (Minasyan, 2012). This approach

dominated in the cases of Azerbaijan and Central Asian states (starting from the late 1990s - early 2000s). Variation of multi-vectorism, usually described as complementarism, has been dominating the whole former Soviet foreign policy of Armenia. Complementarism is an unofficial foreign policy doctrine that Armenia uses to balance the often conflicting interests of various players, including Russia, the United States, Europe, and Iran. Similarly, one cannot detect genuine multi-vectorism in the foreign policy of the Central Asian countries until the second half of the 1990s, when Western influence in the region was minimal, Türkiye and Iran had no significant resources there, and China aroused only minor suspicions and concerns. It was only the highly amorphous nature of Russian foreign policy that allowed Central Asian societies to adopt a completely pro-Russian political orientation at the beginning of the 1990s. By the mid-1990s, however, the term “multi-vectorism” (especially in the case of Kazakhstan) emerged as a euphemism for the “policy of distancing oneself from Russia” undertaken by the Central Asian states. Multi-vectorism in Central Asia remains vulnerable to external political developments. One might even assert that its trajectory is mainly linked to September 11, 2001, and the launch of the U.S.-led operation in Afghanistan, rather than being the result of rational foreign policy decisions. In the meantime, it is impossible to exclude that after the withdrawal of US troops from Afghanistan, the parameters of multi-vectorism in Central Asia are likely to change significantly. For Central Asian countries, on the other hand, multi-vector is largely associated with security considerations. For example, due to the geographically distant location of this region, the EU has little “soft power” influence, and its position does not need to be considered in a multidirectional engagement.

Nicola Contessi’s article examines the multidimensional foreign policy issue of the post-Soviet space. It argues that multi-vector approaches in foreign policy ought to be conceptualized as more complicated than simply balancing the interests of more powerful external powers, which is the standard interpretation encountered in the literature. It is Contessi’s view that ex-Soviet states have tended to classify their foreign policy across different matters and “auction off” these areas to gain the most significant external benefit. In this conception, multi-vector approaches do not represent powerless international actors; rather, they provide post-Soviet states with greater opportunities and autonomy, enabling them to play off each other and strike deals without developing conflictual relations with powerful states. To be precise,

“auctions” enable post-Soviet States to concurrently harmonize their foreign policies with diverse external actors (Nitoiu, 2018). The justification of the attempts of the West and Russia to shape the foreign policy of the former Soviet countries can be examined from two correlated points of view.

To begin with, in different periods, the region has been one of the critical areas of dissemination of the civilizational models of Russia, the United States, and the European Union. Both liberalism in the case of Western powers or an accent on sovereignty or conservative ideas in the case of Russia, the post-USSR states were caught at the heart of the confrontation between different civilizational models. Thus, the ideological facets of these states’ foreign policymaking have reflected a hybrid international identity, a mixture of Soviet, European, internationalist, and conservative values. Secondly, these countries have been forced to perform a balancing act between Western and Russian interests. Being smaller states, these countries had to choose between pursuing a multi-vector foreign policy and almost complete alignment with one or the other pole. Switching from one position to the other in the case of Ukraine and Georgia proved detrimental in the short term and has drawn aggressive behavior on the part of Russia. Albeit the impact of external actors constitutes a significant component in analyzing the development from the perspective of foreign policy engagement in post-Soviet republics, most of the articles in the special issue also indicate the role of domestic factors: interest groups, corruption, background, history, and political culture. Future research could further explore the intersection of internal and external factors when analyzing the influence of the West or Russia on the development of post-Soviet states. The special issue by the author concludes by pointing out that influence on foreign policy developments does not always mean power for actors such as Russia, the United States, or the European Union. Such an assumption denies the autonomy of post-Soviet states. As most contributions point out, small states should be granted more autonomy when analyzing their foreign policy.

The phenomenon of multi-vectorism in Central Asia has been functioning at different levels in different countries since its inception, ranging from the real multi-vector policy of Kazakhstan, through Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan (taking into account the Iranian factor), to the self-isolated equidistance of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, which actually adhere to a policy of neutrality. Based on this, multi-vectorism can be

argued to prevail in Kazakhstan due to its energy resources, geographical size, and political influence. It is present in Kyrgyzstan to a lesser extent due to the peculiarities of the country's geopolitics and the positioning of U.S. and Russian military bases. Azerbaijan and some Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and partly Uzbekistan) possess an essential commodity that sustains multi-vectorism: hydrocarbons. For example, thanks to revenues from oil and gas sales, Baku, unlike Yerevan, does not have to harmonize its foreign policy with the interests of the West, Russia, and Iran. In the same way, unlike Central Asian countries, it does not seek to use relations with the West or China to compensate for its excessive dependence on Moscow and vice versa.

Türkiye was the first country to recognize the Central Asian states. Since 1991, our desire for a stable, independent, and prosperous Central Asia has guided our policy toward the region regarding building free market economies and functioning democracies. Given our shared historical, linguistic, and cultural ties, we have sought to strengthen our cooperation with the region on various issues. High-level strategic cooperation councils with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and more recently, Uzbekistan provide a valuable platform for deepening the relationship between the two countries. Tajikistan also has a similar mechanism. Economic relations between Türkiye and the republics of Central Asia developed rapidly, and significant advances were made in trade, transport, and communication. To provide development assistance to these countries, the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) was established and works well in close collaboration with local governments. In 2019, Türkiye's trade volume with regional countries was approximately \$8.5 billion, and nearly 4,000 Turkish companies were operating there. Human relations also developed in the fields of culture and education. The Turkish Cultural International Organization (TURKSOY) was established in 1993 with the aim to promote Turkish culture, art, language, and historical heritage. We will introduce these values to the world and pass them on to the younger generation. Türkiye runs the Türkiye Scholarship, a comprehensive scholarship program for students from Central Asia and other regions. Our Ministry of National Education operates many schools in the Central Asian Republics. There are two joint universities in Turkestan (Kazakhstan) (Turkish-Kazakh International Hoca Ahmet Yesevi University) and in Bishkek (Turkish-Kyrgyzstan Manas University). Prime Minister of Türkiye has led the Turkish-

speaking Summit since 1992 to strengthen solidarity between the Turkish-speaking countries and create new opportunities for cooperation between the two countries.

According to several scholars of Turkic origin, such as Sucu, Iskandarov, Mahmudov, and Chernov, the importance of the Central Asian republics began to rise in the early 2010s when the Republic of Türkiye defined its regional policy with a robust emphasis on the Turkic world (Sucu, Iskandarov, Mahmudov and Chernov, 2021). Moreover, the shared culture and history provide the rationale for closer ties. It was clear that Türkiye paid attention to its relations with other Turkic states, including Azerbaijan and the Central Asian Republics. One of the most successful checkpoint projects is establishing the Organization of Turkic States, which deals with trade and security cases. At the OTS summit, held in Kazakhstan's capital, Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana), on November 3, 2023, Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that it is the Turkic language family that has fostered the bonds among Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and the Central Asian republics. However, beyond emphasizing shared commonalities, his message was clear: countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan should consider abandoning the Cyrillic alphabet, which ties them to the former regional power, Russia. This call was echoed to highlight the potential for greater unity among the Turkic states soon (Mikovic, 2023). Türkiye is considered a non-regional actor because it does not share borders with any Central Asian country. Nevertheless, it still influences the balance of power in the region. There is no doubt that, for Türkiye, the Turkic bloc, which includes Central Asian countries and Azerbaijan, represents more than just an initiative to create a standard Latin Turkic script or a sense of nostalgia based on shared historical ties.

Being objective on the question whether Türkiye can posit itself as a leading power in CA, it is vital to give a wide range of opinions at this point. The full-scale invasion of Ukraine and Western sanctions have strengthened economic relations between Russia and Türkiye. The Russians have become a critical import partner for Türkiye, while the latter turned out to be a leading purchaser of Russian gas (Engvall, 2024). Apart from this "truly strategic" energy relations, the interactions between Russia and can be observed in two regions where Türkiye's foreign policy leads to a certain degree of geopolitical competition – the South Caucasus and Central Asia. These two regions have been persistently thought to be a part of the "sphere of influence" by Russia.

Türkiye seeks to broaden at extending its influence among Turkic-speaking states of Central Asia and those of the Caspian shore by leveraging Azerbaijan as a gateway (Karcic, 2023). This is a prime example of how the Turkic bloc of cooperation spans a range of fields, including trade, culture, and security. Even having the identity as the “most Russified” Turkic state among others, Kazakhstan has sought to reconcile a balance between different powers and geopolitical interests. Kazakhstan’s foreign policy actions are playing a good role in securing its diplomatic and economic interests. The cornerstone of both its stand in the region and the Turkic world is characterized by the country’s abundant natural resources, which strengthened Kazakhstan’s potential to become an economic leader in the Turkic World. Christian Neef suggests that Kazakhstan could become the leading internal power of the region in the future, depending on various geopolitical factors and the country's ambitions, referring to it as the “regional economic warehouse.” (Neef, 2006).

Before Russian invasion of Ukraine, the positions and the general stand of Kremlin in Central Asia used to be extremely strong. Just before February 2022, it was the Russian army, under aegis of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, that helped Kazakhstani President Tokayev hold on to power. This case has proved that Russia and no other external power, even as great as China, is an external guarantor of security for the CAR. Even if Russia’s strong position in the region of the CAR was shaken because of sanctions and isolation from the world community, Russia is still accepted as the leading power in the region, at least due to its firm stand that the country has been building for more than century. It may seem that Moscow has finally lost its position in Central Asia and that Beijing has become the dominant external power in Central Asia. Prof. Dr. Çağdaş Üngör, a lecturer in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Marmara University, notes that one of Türkiye’s critical strengths in Central Asia is its “soft power.” Russia and China have other advantages which are represented as this country being more as an important security country and a hard power. China, of course, is a significant economic player, too, if emphasizing that both countries lack the cultural and linguistic ties that Türkiye has in Central Asia. One of President Erdoğan’s aims in seeking influence in Central Asia is to reduce Türkiye’s dependence on Europe at a time when relations with the European Union are increasingly strained. Russia, on the other hand, is seeking to deepen its sphere of influence in Central Asia as it faces increasing sanctions imposed by European

countries over its invasion of Ukraine. Tatiana Mitrova, a Russia expert at the Paris School of International Relations, commented on Russia's position in Central Asia: "Russia as a whole is facing major logistical changes. Many of the western routes are no longer accessible".

One of Türkiye's possible objectives could be using its integration with Turkic states to push Russia out of the Caucasus and Central Asia. But the question remains: Are the Turkic states, including those in Central Asia, ready for this, or more importantly, do they share the same ambition as Türkiye? As a researcher, I propose analyzing and evaluating the tools and channels through which Türkiye represents its interests in the region. These will be examined in greater detail in the subsequent chapters of this thesis. In the foreseeable future, Türkiye will not be able to fully replace Russia, which has been building its stand in the region through various sectors. But the Turkish Republic can continue enhancing its role on the territory of the CAR in those areas it is better than other external actors, such as soft power, diplomatic engagement, prospective fruitful cooperation in the framework of Central Asian energy trade, and transit to the West. It should be understood that, while both countries share a common historical background, cultural ties, and political connections, the current geopolitical situation has a significant influence on what each actor can do in the region to secure its own benefits.

CHAPTER III

GEOPOLITICAL ENVIRONMENT OF COMPETITION IN CA

3.1. Geopolitical Importance of the Central Asian Region

In Central Asia, the position of affairs changes not every hour but every minute...It is the blank leaf between the pages of an old and a new dispensation... (Lord Curzon, 1889).

Historically, the importance of Central Asia was lying under its key territories. Central Asia is both geographically and socially the heart of the Eurasian continent. While the Muslim world was flourishing compared to Europe during its Dark Ages, Eurasia as a whole was transitioning into the Middle Ages. It is well known that one of the most important trade routes in world history is the Silk Road, which meandered through the territories of Central Asia. The Great Silk Road served not only as a trade route but also as a bridge between the West and the East — connecting the Macedonian, Byzantine, and Roman Empires in the West with China and India in the East.

Moreover, the territories through which the route passed were far from passive. The great empires, or “*kaganliks*” as they are called in Turkic languages, flourished and exerted influence well beyond the Silk Road. These included the Sogdians, Safavids, Seljuks, Karakhanids, and others. The Silk Road takes its name from the main commodity being sold - silk, but on the contrary, there were many others, such as ivory, glass, fur, gold, plants, and animals, that also moved along the road; consequently, the Silk Road was a thoroughway for the interaction of both cultures and religions (Boulnois, 2005).

Central Asia is a vast region that has served as the birthplace of great civilizations throughout history. For example, it was home to the nomads of the steppes, who domesticated wild horses and mastered the art of living on and conquering new lands. The most famous nomads’ names throughout the history of this region might be Atila

the Hun, Genghis Khan and Tamerlane, depending on what the dear reader has learned during history lessons at school. As great empires and dominions fade over time, as we've seen in these lands, so too did the power of those who once ruled. From the 13th century onwards, the successors of Genghis Khan, along with the tribes and local societies of Central Asia, began to conquer Russian territories. However, as history shows, what rises must eventually fall. More than half a millennium later, Russia not only reconquered the lands it had lost to the Mongol Empire, but also began to colonize territories that had once been part of Central Asian domains. Over time, the great powers of world history and the political map turned the Central Asian nations from subjects of their own fate into objects of foreign dominance and the "Great Game". But once again, according to Rein Mullerson, since the world history teaches us the best lessons and brightly shows that no empire or another form of hegemony has been eternal, there is always rather regress or the scenario of the complete disappearance from the world map (Mullerson, 2007). The example of Attila and his great empire, often compared to that of Alexander the Great, is particularly relevant here. Attila triumphantly led the Huns from Central Asia to the West.

At the beginning of the 21st century, the Central Asian region emerged as one of the most critical geopolitical centers of the modern world. Before analyzing the current position of Central Asian countries in the world political system, it is necessary to define the geopolitical framework of this concept. Central Asia was first designated as an independent region in 1843 by German geographer Alexander Humboldt (Murataliyeva, 2017). During the Soviet era, no region was called "Central Asia" on the world political map, and the term "Central Asia and Kazakhstan" was used within the borders of the unified Soviet state. Central Asia has many other names, such as Middle Asia, Inner Asia, Central Eurasia, etc. Some other names were used towards the region during different political and social hegemon changes; for instance, during the USSR period, the Russian word "*tsentralnyi*," which means "that of the central one" or "that which is situated in the center" was applicable towards the region of Central Asia, and thus, during the Soviet period, the region was often labeled as "Middle Asia" or in Russian "Tsentralnaya Aziya". The regionalization of the "Central Asian region" phenomenon remains relevant. Central Asia was first designated as an independent region in 1843 by the German geographer Alexander Humboldt, as mentioned above. According to his interpretation, this region

encompassed “the area from the south of the Altai Mountains to the northern slopes of the Himalayas.” During the Soviet era, there was no region called “Central Asia” on the world political map, and the term “Central Asia and Kazakhstan” was used within the borders of the unified Soviet state. An important milestone in determining the boundaries and terminology relevant to this region, which is being considered after the collapse of the Soviet Union, will be the meeting of the five heads of state of the region (Republic of Kazakhstan, Republic of Kyrgyzstan, Republic of Tajikistan, Republic of Kazakhstan, Republic of Tajikistan) on the initiative of Nursultan Nazarbayev; where it was decided to abandon the term “Central Asia and Kazakhstan” used during the Soviet era and introduce the term “Central Asia,” in which the discourse of “Asia” has got an international glossary use.

Region’s boundaries have fluctuated over millennia, expanding or shrinking depending on the shifting balance of forces and political changes. Historically, the Central Asian region would have included modern-day Iran and Afghanistan, as well as at least part of China, specifically the area known as Xinjiang. The modern geographical boundaries of the Central Asian region were largely shaped during the Soviet period. Both the territories and the distribution of peoples were determined by Tsarist and later Soviet rule. As a result, communities that had shared a common history for centuries were separated, with those in Central Asia cut off from their counterparts in Xinjiang and other neighboring regions. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the newly independent states established their own geopolitical boundaries. However, Western researchers have struggled to fully understand this phenomenon, leading some to propose the term “Greater Central Asia” (GCA), often abbreviated as BCA, or the “Greater Central Asia Partnership” (GCAP). The term is based on Hartland H. Mackinder’s geopolitical theory. “Greater Central Asia” was coined by S. Frederick Starr, director of the Washington-based Institute for Central Asia and the Caucasus. In 2005, he published an article in *Foreign Affairs* magazine entitled “Greater Central Asia Partnership for Afghanistan and its Neighboring Countries” (Starr, 2005). In the article, the authors expanded the geographical scope of the region. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, he included five republics, plus western China (Xinjiang), Mongolia, northern Iran, Afghanistan, and the Caucasus.

In this section of the research, the focus will primarily be on the five Central Asian states—Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—often referred to as the “stans.” These countries became symbols of the uncertainty that characterized the post-Cold War environment. Gaining independence in 1991, they were confronted with the challenges of state-building and democratization, while also grappling with emerging border disputes and localized conflicts. These new “stans” have originated from the former Soviet Union and had been interlinked even before the period of the USSR’s hegemon in the region. According to a report by the United States, the Central Asian republics were experiencing a period of extraordinary, rapid, and profound change in 1991. The “stans” had freed themselves from Communist Party rule, communist ideology, and Moscow's control. They transitioned from a command-administrative economy to a market-driven one, new political parties were formed, and a more open press began to emerge. However, the irony and challenge of this transformation lay in the issue of identity. The people of these former Soviet republics were grappling with a dilemma of self-definition, facing a unique identity crisis as they navigated their post-Soviet realities. But I would like to note that the lingua franca of the Central Asian states, which is Russian, played a somehow unifying role as French in the Francophone states of the British Commonwealth. What factors made this region so important that it immediately attracted attention on the international stage?

According to Lord Curzon, one of the reasons is the vast carbohydrate resources that have been discovered under the soil of several “stans” (Routledge Curzon, 2004). The energy geopolitics of the region make thus two countries – China and Russia interested in cooperation with the CARs. A second reason could be the "War on Terror" campaign, which prompted the U.S. and other Western countries to focus on Central Asia due to its proximity to Afghanistan and other terrorist hotspots. Located at a strategic intersection between Europe and Asia, Central Asia is composed of five countries, known as the “stans,” that were formerly Soviet republics: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. The region’s geopolitical significance has steadily increased in the three decades since these nations gained independence following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, and it is expected to become even more critical in the years to come. Many of the critical foreign policy challenges facing the Western world today, such as the resurgence of Russia, the

growing boldness of Iran, and the spread of Islamic extremism, have converged in the geopolitical landscape of Central Asia (Kim, 2021). The region's abundant natural resources, including hydrocarbon and mineral deposits, add another layer of strategic importance to the area. In recent years, energy-hungry and increasingly ambitious China has made significant inroads into the region through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). By expanding this infrastructure project, China has established itself as one of the top five trading partners for each Central Asian country, signaling its clear geopolitical ambitions.

3.2. Traditional Hegemon in CA: Russia

It is already clear that the Central Asian region has always been of considerable significance to neighboring states, including the modern Russian Federation. There is a long history that ties all five Central Asian countries with Russia during the different historical periods of the last one, including the Tsarist Empire and the Soviet Union periods. The emergence of independent Central Asian governments in 1991 held great significance for Moscow and has remained a region of paramount importance in Russian foreign policy. The region's economic value to Russia lies in its rich natural resources and the vast potential for developing trade relations. Additionally, instability in Central Asia could quickly and promptly spill over to the Russian borders. Thus, Russia is also worried about the potential negative consequences and ramifications of developments in Afghanistan, particularly of the Taliban's actions conflagrating on the country's territory (Singh Roy, 2001). The historical legacy of Russia's control over the region, combined with its overwhelming military superiority and geographical proximity, creates an enduring situation in which Russia's role in Central Asia is unlikely to be undermined for years to come. The unexpected collapse of the Soviet Union was a monumental geo-political event, comparable to the collapse of the Ottoman and Habsburg Empires during World War I. The emergence of Central Asia and the collapse of the Soviet Union changed the map of Asia both literally and figuratively. The impact of this new strategic reality had just beginning to be felt in the surrounding regions in the early 1990s. Still, yet the full effect of these events on the politics of Asia is yet to be determined. There is no doubt that many factors play a vital role in shaping foreign policy. In the case of CAR and the Russian Federation, factors as a) internal events within both sides, b) the political preferences of the state

leaders, c) the role of other “players” in the region – China, Türkiye, etc. d) the policies of international hegemon powers as the EU and the US with consequent political, economic and military decisions;

The strategic location and geopolitical importance of Central Asia, along with its rich natural resources, have drawn the attention of numerous countries, including Iran, Türkiye, Saudi Arabia, India, South Korea, and others. (Kalyuzimova and Lynch, 2000). During the first two decades of independence, the United States strengthened its influence over the Central Asian states, which posed a significant challenge to Russia's position in the region. Given factors such as geographical proximity, historical ties, and the presence of a substantial Russian diaspora, Russia views Central Asia as a region of vital interest. There is a fact that Russia is still looking at the CAR as a part of itself, taking those strong ideas from the “old days.” For instance, Andranik Migranyan, a political advisor to President Yeltsin, referred to the former Soviet Central Asian republics as a “sphere of Russia's vital interest.” Furthermore, he argued that the independent Central Asian republics should not be allowed to form alliances outside of Russian influence. He was commenting on the last one, “either with each other or with third countries that have an anti-Russian orientation”. It is true that both Russia and the Central Asian republics were undergoing significant transformations simultaneously, with economic and political reforms urgently needed. After the collapse of the USSR, the Russian Federation, along with the other post-Soviet states, faced a range of pressing social, economic, and political challenges, as there was no longer a “central system” to provide guidance for developing the newly independent states. In order to avoid conflicts with the Western world and project a strong image as a “Western-influenced state,” Russia sought to establish itself as a modern, non-colonialist power—reminiscent of the approach it adopted during the Cold War, when tensions between the United States and the Soviet Union were at their peak. Following the dissolution of the USSR, a debate emerged among both local and Western intellectuals about the best path forward for the Russian Federation to maintain its prominence and preserve its “glory.”

In 1991, Russian scholar Alexander Solzhenitsyn argued that the Central Asian countries were a hindrance and liability to Russia’s economic and political progress. He further suggested that Russia should allow the Central Asian republics (CAR) to

pursue their own interests in order to alleviate this burden. The timing of the Soviet dissolution is significant for understanding the importance of the post-Soviet Central Asian states to Russia, even though Solzhenitsyn's view of CAR as a "liability" may seem controversial when considering the evolving dynamics of Russian-CAR relations, both then and in the present day. In 1991 the Russian economy as well as of CAR was in a state of collapse, with the value of the ruble falling from 60 to 1\$ in December, 1991 to over 1000 rubles to 1\$ just in two years after the collapse of the USSR (Brill Olcott, 1995). In the light of these circumstances, Russia decided to ask for financial assistance from the West and was given a 5 year 24 billion \$ aid package per year. However, this amount was significantly less than what was required to rebuild the Russian economy. It is essential to give a reader an example so as to compare: Germany used to spend 90 billion \$ yearly only on the eastern part of the country (Kissinger, 1993). In 1991, the calculation for reviving processes of the Russian economy was done by David Roche (Morgan Stanley International), and he came to the conclusion it needed between 76-167 billion \$ each year to implement some social and economic reforms (The Economist, 1992). For the biggest country in the world in territorial terms, the sum of 24 billion \$ was a significantly small amount.

During the period from 1991 to October 1993, the Russian government under Boris Yeltsin struggled to adopt a clear and coherent foreign policy toward the Central Asian countries. Instead of a unified approach, various institutions, including the Council on Foreign Policymaking, the Russian military, and the Russian Security Council, were involved in the policymaking process. The lack of consensus among these bodies inevitably led to a power struggle, further complicating Russia's strategy and foreign policy direction in Central Asia. As a result, Russia ended up having no clear foreign policy axis towards former Soviet republics, including CAR. During this time, as it had been during the Soviet period, Russia's internal needs served as the driving force behind its foreign policy interests. Throughout history, Russian foreign policy has been influenced by three primary schools of thought, which are: a) Westernizers, b) Slavophiles, and c) Eurasianists. First sought to modernize Russia according to the Western model, while second wanted to do the same but according to pure Russian culture and ideas, and the last school representatives used to envision Russia as a balanced power standing between Asian and European powers. The diversity of Russian foreign policy takes its roots from the confronting ideologies three different

schools of thought used to possess. The influence of the Eurasian school of thought in Russian foreign policy began to grow, with its ideas coming to be seen as having a “civilizing role” for Russia in Central Asia (Malik, 1994). Thus, after 1993, Russia’s increasing involvement trends in the region of Central Asia came into the game.

3.2.1. Russia’s Interests in the Region

According to Duarte, the region of Central Asia is not fully defined by international relations (IR) theory due to its nature as a geographically “closed” region (Duarte, 2014). But still, located in the heart of Asia and being able to draw attention of world-leading powers such as Russia, China, and the United States, as well as other regional powers such as Türkiye, India, and Iran to itself, the region has turned into a region of international attraction (Selim and Mohamed El-Sayed, 2020).

The interest of the Russian Federation in Central Asia has always been evident and pretty unambiguous if the historical background between these two is analyzed. The Russian government’s long-term objectives in Central Asia are pretty clear: to preserve stability in the region to prevent any potential negative consequences. Any conflict in Central Asia would create a power vacuum that could have profound security implications for Russia. Therefore, it is in Russia’s best interest to ensure that the Central Asian Republics remain within its sphere of influence, not only for energy supply, but also for other strategically important areas. The CAR’s oil and gas pipeline connections with other regional states, such as Türkiye, Pakistan, Iran, and China, are of great concern to the Russian side. If the CARs could transport their energy resources through these countries without involving Russia, it could result in significant revenue for the CARs, which would then be used to establish their independent forces and stable economies. This, in turn, would decrease the CAR’s dependence on Russia and weaken Russia’s long-term strategic and economic interests. As part of its long-term strategy, Russia aims to counter any potential penetration by the United States, NATO, and other regional powers. The energy resources comprise a vital sphere of influence and a vast chain of opportunities to introduce reforms supporting the Russian economy. The significance of Russia's active involvement in the Central Asian republics (CAR) even after the dissolution of the Soviet Union extends to its stability and the secure import of energy from the region. Despite having its own oil and gas

reserves, Russia remains heavily reliant on the Central Asian states for its energy supply. Although Russia's oil and gas exports accounted for almost 60% of federal budget revenues in the first few years after independence, it still imported low-cost oil and gas from the Central Asian republics to later supply them to the European market. Russia has always sought to leverage its geographical position as a transit country for energy supplies to the lucrative European markets, leading it to enter into numerous agreements with the Central Asian republics in the energy sector. Specifically, from 1994 to 2000, Russia reconsidered its approach to purchasing gas from Turkmenistan. The shift was prompted by Gazprom, the Russian energy giant that held 20% of the world's gas reserves at the time, which found Turkmen gas prices unprofitable for its operations.

3.2.2. Russia's Foreign Policy Approach Towards Central Asia

According to the official Foreign Policy dossier on the Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs website, Russia's relationship with the Central Asian states is based on strategic partnership. The foreign policy approach has been implemented through constructive and effective political dialogue at the highest levels. At this point, there is a fascinating discourse of the last; in the Russian language, the English word “influential levels” was used actually, which could mean that meeting at high levels, consequently with the leaders of the CAR, is the best way for Russia to push their influence through and thus, project own interests. “Injecting significant dynamism into future development of relations” is pretty interesting, too, but what is more compelling is that the file in its original (Russian) language consists of absolutely different meaningful sentences. It is a known fact that Russia is operating with soft power instruments such as the Russian language, historical and cultural ties, etc., well enough. In Russian, the dossier discloses the following information:

“For Russia, the region of Central Asia and its five countries construct a zone of historically predefined interests, which makes the region an important partner for privileged cooperation in trade (economic), cultural-humanitarian and military-political spheres, as well as ensuring the security throughout the states of Eurasia from the southern direction.”

Way different, isn't it? The Russian Foreign Policy website provides general information on the flow of relations with the Central Asian states starting from 2008

and continuing through 2019. There are no FP approaches or projects shared yearly either. In summary, Russia asserts that it maintains “strategic partnership” and “alliance” relations with all Central Asian countries, which inherently implies “mutual assistance” in the event of aggression or any significant security threats. However, as mentioned earlier, the primary motivation behind this military cooperation is Russia's reluctance to allow the spillover effects of instability from the Central Asian republics to affect its own security.

Another point to consider is that Russia maintains a constructive and ongoing dialogue at the highest levels, with notable examples including President Putin's visit to Kyrgyzstan in 2019, as well as reciprocal visits by Kazakhstan's President Tokayev and Tajikistan's President Rahmon to Russia in the same year. However, it is well known that official visits have continued beyond 2019, highlighting the enduring nature of these diplomatic exchanges. Moreover, Russian MFA highlights the fact that not only leaders of the countries have official meetings but also representatives of the heads of foreign ministries by implying the bilateral ties with each CAR are mainly based on inter-parliamentary ties and horizontal cooperation, Russian MFA means the cooperation between all the countries of the Central Asian region and economic actors of it respectively. Russia claims that 70% of the 9,000 intergovernmental agreements signed in 2019 were economic treaties, highlighting its role as the main investor in the Central Asian republics (CAR). The trade between Russia and the CAR also accounts for significant volumes. Over the past five years, Russia has provided \$6.7 billion in assistance for the region's development, with \$4 billion allocated on a bilateral basis and \$2.6 billion channeled through international organizations. The Russian Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) also emphasizes that the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) and the EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union) provide a vast market and opportunities to develop trade and economic relationships. Together, these organizations represent a consumer base of over 182 million people (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Russia, 2024).

In this particular part of the research, the foreign policy of Russia towards CAR is going to be viewed since the phase of Vladimir Putin's presidency (2000), because earlier periods (since the dissolution of the USSR) are not marked with any clear Central Asian policy as well as with no foreign policy doctrine telling how to deal with

the rest of post-Soviet countries. With a main emphasis on security cooperation, Russia entered an active era of policymaking and increased involvement in the region following the events of 9/11. This shift marked a turning point, as Russia sought to strengthen its role in Central Asia, particularly in the context of regional security and the fight against terrorism (Laruelle, 2009). Many scientists also have a common opinion on Moscow, having viewed the region as a whole in this particular context of security preservation. There have also been significant developments in the economic relationship between Russia and the Central Asian republics, particularly since the early 2000s. For example, trade between Russia and Central Asia tripled between 2003 and 2007, rising from \$7 billion to \$21 billion. The hydrocarbon sector played a key role in this growth, with energy exports and related investments driving much of the increase (Russian Federation Ministry for Economic Development, 2012). Even at that time, Russia's trade with Central Asia lagged behind China's, which recorded \$40 billion in trade by the same period. By 2012, China's trade with the region had risen to \$46 billion, with further sharp increases expected in the coming years (Oliphant, 2013). When analyzing the foreign policy approach of one towards another, it is possible to take a close look at the official FP² approaches of the country, in our case, Russia's in Central Asia. In the 2013 FP Concept, the Russian Federation gives a place to the risks and opportunities linked with the region of CA (The Foreign Policy Concept of Russia, 2013). On the one hand, the Central Asian region is of the highest significance due to its rich hydrocarbon resources and its vital geopolitical position. As a result, Russia's—and other potential actors'—interests in the region are not difficult to identify. The region's energy wealth and strategic location offer numerous opportunities in both economic and trade spheres. Additionally, the presence of Russian-speaking populations and Russian nationals in the region, along with strong cultural ties, serve as both an opportunity and a channel for influence. The 2013 FP approach of Russia, however, also lists the possible threats and challenges for its relationship with the states of Central Asia; those can be summarized as a) transnational crime, b) rise of drug trafficking, c) illegal migration, which is to be overcome and combatted with the help of joint powers in the framework of CIS³ member states by ensuring security mechanisms and operating with joint efforts.

² Foreign Policy;

³ Commonwealth of Independent States;

Zbigniew Brzezinski once wrote that Russia is too weak, both politically and economically, to completely isolate the Central Asian region from external influence and to independently develop the region on its own. The relations between Russia and the former Soviet Republics of Central Asia were not easy during the first decade of their separate existence. However, the tendencies toward disintegration were ultimately outweighed by mutual integration, particularly after Vladimir Putin assumed leadership. Following the 2010s, cooperation between the Central Asian countries began to grow increasingly closer, reaching a qualitatively new level (Fedulova, 2010). At that moment, globalization provided both sides with an opportunity to reassess their priorities, as it appeared that real prospects for cooperation and development were emerging in the context of a more interconnected world. So, what does Russia want from the region if asked simply? According to Alexey Malashenko, the motives can be listed below:

- To withhold its influence in the region as a part of the plan to keep the remnants of the post-Soviet area under its supervision and leadership;
- The willingness to contain other powers such as China, US, etc., while simultaneously balancing between competition and partnership with them;
- To protect local regimes that are politically similar to the Russian system, or simply to support all of them, as most are authoritarian.; (Malashenko, 2010).

Security has always been the key factor linking Russia with the countries of Central Asia, particularly in response to challenges such as religious extremism, border conflicts, and power struggles. These issues have provided a broad area for cooperation, especially in military-political and military-technical fields, as both Russia and Central Asian countries sought defense solutions to address these threats. Indeed, religious extremism, in particular, became more pronounced during the first decade of independence, as the Soviet era had suppressed authentic identity factors, including Turkic languages, cultural holidays, traditional practices, and, importantly, Islam. Extremist religious groups were always present, even if driven underground by the authorities, so the interests and advantages of the partners here have somehow coincided. Thus, The CSTO (Collective Security Treaty Organization, which includes Russia, Belarus, Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) has become more active. The Collective Rapid Deployment Force (CRDF) was created within the

framework of this organization. Its participants were the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan.

Moreover, Russian and Central Asian leaders supported NATO coalition forces in the fight against the Taliban in Afghanistan, which posed a shared terrorist threat. Even at this point, however, Russia's power seemed insufficient to guarantee security and stability across the five Central Asian countries, leading other international and regional actors to increasingly engage in the region. One can remember SCO and the case when Uzbekistan started having tight relations with the US.

The Central Asian region is no longer peripheral and is actively involved in world politics. The geopolitical position of Central Asia between the West and the East predetermines the particular importance of its transit potential, which will only increase with time. But the main thing remains the presence of rich natural resources in the region, and not only oil and gas (more than a third of the world's uranium ore reserves are concentrated here, gold, copper, manganese, zinc, nickel, aluminum, etc.), which makes it extremely attractive for major world powers. Apart from Russia, the European Union, the USA, Japan, China, India, and Iran are increasingly active here. At the same time, the parties pursue their own goals and compete fiercely with each other. For China, India, and Iran, Central Asia is a raw material base that is practically right next door. To strengthen its energy security, the European Union seeks to create alternative oil and gas transportation routes independent of Russia. The U.S. supports this aspiration, but it is not only the economic component that is important for them but also the possibility of weakening Russia's position.

Moreover, Washington has attempted to establish military and political control in the region, though unsuccessfully, viewing it as a key component of its broader strategy for global hegemony (Fedulova, 2010). Post-Soviet Central Asia is a single natural and climatic region with a standard "history" of mountain formations and fertile plains, as well as the emergence of semi-deserts and deserts. This commonality is also reflected in the natural riches it possesses. Of course, a single natural-climatic region can be divided into distinct zones—western, eastern, northern, and southern—along with mountainous, plain, semi-desert, and desert areas. These zones are characterized by specific diversities and are reflected in the concentration and manifestation of natural

resources, such as mineral and fuel-energy reserves. This has resulted in a division of natural resources across the region: Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are rich in oil and gas, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are abundant in water and hydropower resources.

According to A. Niyazi of the Institute of Oriental Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences, it is no coincidence that the zones of strategic interests proclaimed by Washington coincide directly with the geographical location of the largest hydrocarbon reserves. American strategists have been making concerted efforts to "cut off" Russia and China—seen as the main competitors on the world stage—from Central Asian resources. The goal is to redirect these resources to Western Europe, bypassing Russia, and to Asian countries aligned with the United States, bypassing China. Russia's monopolistic position in Central Asia is a thing of the past. To maintain its leading role in the region, Russia must continually reaffirm its right to a special place in the region's political, economic, and security affairs. The Eastern Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, which emphasize the multi-vector nature of their foreign policy, should be interested in Russia not as a metropolis but as a mutually beneficial partner. In other words, Moscow's efforts should primarily focus on securing a strong economic position in Central Asia. Meanwhile, it is easy to notice that economic integration here, contrary to the general unifying trends, has been practically stagnant. This is largely due to the lack of internal prerequisites - a weak industrial base and underdeveloped market relations. It is characteristic that even the Eurasian Economic Community ("EURASEC"), which by its functions and stated goals is a purely economic association, is primarily of political significance for its members. The ineffectiveness of EurAsEC as an instrument of economic interaction does not seem to disconcert anyone. Membership in it plays the role of a kind of identifying sign, signaling the intention to stick together and rely on Russia. The example of Uzbekistan, which joined the organization during the aggravation of relations with Western countries caused by the Andijan events, is illustrative. Russia's active participation in the implementation of hydrocarbon production and transportation projects, in the development of such natural resources of Central Asia as uranium and gold, in the construction of power plants, railroads, and highways not only ensures purely economic but also political interests of Russia. Russia gains control over export supplies of gas and oil from this region, which, in turn, eases the

way to equal cooperation with the world's leading economies in globalization. An undoubted foreign policy success of the Russian leadership, which has far-reaching implications, is that it managed to get its partners to agree to cooperate in supplying gas to foreign markets along mutually beneficial routes. V. Putin convinced N. Nazarbayev and G. Berdymukhammedov of the need for manufacturers to control the flow of energy resources to Europe, rather than allowing this control to be dictated by consumers. On May 12th, 2007, the presidents of Russia, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan signed a joint declaration constructing the Caspian gas pipeline. At the same time, a second, already quadrilateral joint declaration was signed with the participation of Uzbekistan - on the development of gas transportation capacities in the Central Asian region. As a result, all parties benefit. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan gain access to Russia's relatively cheap gas transportation system. The Russian Federation strengthens its role in the region's energy sector and strengthens its position in the Western discourse.

3.3. New Emerging Power in CA: Türkiye

3.3.1. Importance of CA for Türkiye

In addition to being located in the heart of the Asian continent, the literature on both geography and geopolitics does not provide a consensus on the precise definition of Central Asia. Geoffrey Wheeler, a prominent expert on Central Asian affairs, offers a more restricted geographical definition, limiting the region to the former Soviet republics at the heart of Asia—namely Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Turkmenistan—while excluding Kazakhstan (Wheeler, 1964). In contrast to Wheeler, the most widely referenced encyclopedia, “Britannica”, defines Central Asia more broadly. It describes the region as a vital area extending from the Caspian Sea in the west to the western part of China in the east, bordered by Russia to the north, Iran to the south, Afghanistan to the southwest, and China to the southeast. As the geographical unity proposed by the encyclopedia, this region includes Mongolia, the south of Siberia, the northern part of Afghanistan and Iran, and five well-known countries of CA when one is asked to define the region. It is believed that Wheeler excluded Kazakhstan from his definition based on a religious-geographical criterion, taking into account the fact that a large part of Kazakhstan's population is ethnically

Russian. This demographic factor likely influenced his decision to limit the region to the Central Asian republics where Turkic and Persian cultures, along with Islam, are more dominant. In contrast to Wheeler, Encyclopedia Britannica seems to have relied only on geographical criterion. Central Asia is a strategically important region situated within the geopolitical scope in the region of Eurasia, being precisely in the center of it. Due to its geographical and natural extension, CA serves as a link and bridge between Europe and Asia, thus connecting the south and east to the west of the world outside the scope of it. According to Halford Mackinder, the author of the famous "Geographical Axis Theory of History," control over the region of Central Asia is key to controlling the world. Mackinder argued that whoever controls the "Heartland" (which includes Central Asia) holds significant strategic power, as it is positioned at the center of Eurasia and serves as a gateway to both Europe and Asia. The significance of the region is derived from its location and resource wealth, resulting in its growing role in the global economy.

Moreover, the region has always been of great significance due to the trade routes laying through it, as well as it was serving the role of a cultural and civilization center. The well-known Silk Road, which used to connect China to the Mediterranean coastline, established the strategic importance of Central Asia in the 3rd century BC. These factors were not newly emerging at the end of the Cold War; it is inaccurate to view the region of Central Asia as a creation of 1991, the year of the official dissolution of the USSR. The historical, cultural, and geopolitical significance of the region predates this event, and the modern configuration of Central Asia is deeply rooted in centuries of interaction, both within the Soviet framework and in its broader historical context. Today, the region serves the role of an important corridor for energy pipelines (Arafat, 2007).

The dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in the early 1990s led to the emergence of new independent Turkic republics in Central Asia and the Caucasus. These republics shared historical, cultural, and religious ties with Türkiye, particularly through their common Turkic heritage and the influence of Islam. These republics, including Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan in Central Asia, and Azerbaijan in the Caucasus declared their independence following the collapse of the USSR. Even the fact Türkiye was the first state in both regional and

international political arenas to recognize these republics and establish embassies with them shows how important it was for Türkiye to revive those once common historical, linguistic, and cultural bonds once again as soon as Turk republics officially gained their independence. These steps taken by Türkiye were enthusiastically welcomed by both its nation and elites along with the politicians, who were naming this development as the beginning of the “Turkish Century” and the formation of a “Turkish Union.” The idea of a Turkish Union was both a politically and culturally necessary method of uniting all Turkic peoples under one "roof," particularly in the context of the Cold War's legacy and the uncertainty of the time. The aim of the Turkish Union was to bring together all the modern independent Turkic states, creating a vast geopolitical span from the Adriatic to the Great Wall of China—territory historically known as “Turkestan.” Turkestan had once been a unified region, but during the Stalin era, it was divided into various autonomous socialist republics. After the collapse of the USSR, these republics emerged as independent nations with a shared historical heritage, united by the common identity of being “Turkic” peoples. It can be confidently claimed that since the independence of the Central Asian republics, Türkiye has actively cooperated with these new Turkic states, which share common language, culture, traditions, and a shared historical background. This cooperation has been driven by both cultural affinity and geopolitical interests, as Türkiye has sought to strengthen its ties with these newly independent Turkic nations (Yuce, 2022). During the intervening thirty years since the CARs’ independence, significant progress has been reached in the relations between Türkiye and Central Asian states. However, the level and scope of these relationships could not be yet at the desired level.

According to the Central Asian Barometer's 2022 survey on the topic of “Public Perception of Türkiye in Central Asia,” the attitudes and opinions towards the Republic of Türkiye are generally quite positive among the survey participants, who represent the five Central Asian countries. This reflects the strong cultural, historical, and political ties between Türkiye and the region. The responses to the question, “Thinking about other countries, please tell us if you have a very favorable, somewhat favorable, or very unfavorable opinion of Türkiye?” showed the following percentages of respondents who answered "very favorable": - Kazakhstan: 31% - Kyrgyzstan: 40% - Uzbekistan: 20% - Turkmenistan: 28% These figures indicate a generally positive view of Türkiye across the region, with Kyrgyzstan showing the highest level of

favorability (Kuandykov, 2023). Türkiye is the most favored country in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, and the second most favorable in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. According to the survey, 90% of respondents from these countries noted Türkiye's positive and friendly attitude toward their nations. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Türkiye acknowledges that Türkiye's foreign policy towards the Central Asian republics has been significantly influenced by their newly acquired independence in the 1990s. Given their shared language, as well as historical and cultural ties, cooperation between the Central Asian republics (CARs) and Türkiye has rapidly expanded into various fields. Mutual benefits and advantages have driven the ongoing broadening of these relations. Türkiye has consistently supported the Central Asian states as independent and politically and economically stable nations. As part of this support, Türkiye has actively worked to foster cooperative ties between these countries and their neighbors in the broader Eurasian region. This approach aligns with Türkiye's broader strategy of strengthening its influence and promoting regional stability through collaboration. In parallel with the developing cooperation among CARs and Türkiye, not only have the states both embraced democratic values and integrated into the international community, but also have continued to develop and maintain their existence. Over time, Türkiye has become an essential partner for the Central Asian countries, thanks to its foreign policies that align with the interests of these states, as well as its active engagement in areas such as trade, security, and cultural exchange. Türkiye's support for the region's political and economic stability, along with its strategic position in Eurasia, has further strengthened its role as a key partner in Central Asia. The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 led to the emergence of five Turkic republics as independent states, which sought to establish their place in the new world order and forge new cooperative relationships with their cognates. Türkiye played a significant role in supporting the sister republics in their transition to the new era and was the first country to recognize their independence and establish embassies. These new states, united by shared historical and cultural values, turned to Türkiye for guidance and support as they embarked on their journey as independent nations.

Türkiye was the first to recognize the official independence of the Central Asian republics at the dawn of the late twentieth century, doing so without discrimination. Moreover, Türkiye has consistently provided economic support to the Central Asian republics, helping them navigate the challenges of independence and fostering mutual

cooperation in various sectors. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) has played a critical role in the region through its training initiatives, development assistance programs, and technical support across various fields. As one of the world's 20 largest economies, Türkiye has not only been a significant regional actor but also an important investor in Central Asia. To date, Türkiye has provided valuable investment opportunities to the countries of the region, helping to drive economic development and strengthen bilateral ties. The country's continuous economic growth has made it an attractive ally and partner for economic and trade relations. The Republic of Türkiye aims to expand further and diversify this cooperation bond with Central Asian republics through a wide range of mechanisms, which include high-level reciprocal visits and meetings on the level of states, mixed economic visits, commission visits, which touch the topic of the development of cooperation with the countries of the region. This approach by Türkiye reflects its commitment to fostering strong and mutually beneficial relationships with each country in the Central Asia region.

The Central Asian countries—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan—are rich in underground resources, making the region a wealth of natural assets. These resources, including oil, gas, and minerals, not only contribute to the region's economic potential but also enhance its strategic importance, attracting interest from global powers like Türkiye. However, these countries face various challenges in adequately utilizing their resources, including social, cultural, economic, political, technological, and geopolitical difficulties. Among these challenges, geopolitical problems are fundamental regarding using underground resources. In international politics, countries are categorized in various ways, with one of the criteria being whether or not they have a coastline. Having a coastline provides a country with numerous advantages, such as to sell its resources to global markets directly.

In contrast, landlocked countries like the Central Asian Turkic Republics must rely on neighboring countries to access international markets, which disadvantages them of suffering from this geopolitical dependence. The Central Asian Turkic Republics, being landlocked, rely on their neighboring states for access to resources that can be converted into wealth. This situation creates a paradoxical dynamic, wherein the possession of underground resources offers the potential for prosperity but also

engenders geopolitical dependence. In the aftermath of the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the newly independent states of Central Asia were compelled to prioritize the establishment of a national identity as a means of ensuring their survival. With the collapse of Soviet authority, these countries faced the challenge of defining themselves politically, culturally, and socially, while navigating the complexities of independence and securing their sovereignty in a rapidly changing world order.

Consequently, in the wake of the USSR's suppression of Turkic identity, each of the Central Asian states—comprising Kazakhs, Kyrgyz, Uzbeks, and Turkmen—pursued policies aimed at fostering and maintaining their own national identities. This process involved reclaiming cultural traditions, reviving languages, and asserting political independence. It is worth noting, however, that despite attaining independence, the autocratic governance model, characterized by single-party rule (initially under the Communist Party), largely persisted in the region, with many of the newly independent states maintaining centralized, authoritarian regimes. As a result of the policies implemented during the Soviet era, the post-independence leadership in these states opted to pursue distinct foreign policies from one another. It is noteworthy to say, that some Turkic states did strengthen their relations with the old ally in the face of the Russian Federation, which is the official predecessor of the Soviet Union. Thus it can be said, these relations are somehow a continuation of the USSR. The other Turkic states of Central Asia decided to strengthen their ties with countries such as the US, the UK, and China (Akengin, 2017). Thanks to the Republic of Türkiye, Central Asian Turk republics and Azerbaijan paved their way to different international fora and platforms. Turkmenistan adopted a policy of neutrality, while neighboring countries like Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, and Uzbekistan joined the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. The last ones are also members of the Collective Security Treaty Organization, the chair and founder of which is the Russian Federation. The reason nearly every Central Asian Turkic state inherited security issues and border disputes is due to the geographical conditions and the “population settlement” policies implemented during the Soviet era to establish autonomous state borders. These border demarcation issues still require effective solutions, as they have led to ongoing conflicts among ethnic minorities, such as those between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, or Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan—disputes that have persisted for over 30 years. These conflicts are further complicated by the distribution of populations across the region,

exacerbating tensions and making resolution more difficult. At this point, the border disputes among the Central Asian Turkic states should also be taken into account when reviewing the relations between the CARs and Türkiye.

According to many scholars, both Western and Turkic ones, the policies once run during the USSR in the framework of the communist ideology have played essential roles in the post-independence period of the Central Asian Turkic states. This is one of the points that should be pointed out: the policies in different fields, both in the political and cultural lives of the Soviet Union, had linked all the member-states to the central “organ”, so the identities of being Turks and Muslims have been somehow blurred or put on the background plan during the first decade of the independence. This created not very sustainable grassroots for developing cooperation and relations between Central Asian Turkic states and Türkiye. Consequently, despite sharing a common “Turkic” identity, the people of Central Asian states have differentiated the concepts of “Turkicness” and “nation.” Each nation within the CARs emphasizes its own distinct origin, with identities such as “Azeri,” “Turkmen,” “Kyrgyz,” and “Kazakh” often being perceived as superior.

According to several prominent Turkic scholars, including Sucu, Iskandarov, Mahmudov, and Chernov, the significance of the Central Asian region began to rise in the early 2010s when the Republic of Türkiye established its regional policy, emphasizing a robust discourse of the “Turkic world.” (Sucu, Iskandarov, Mahmudov and Chernov, 2021). Moreover, the shared culture and history provide the rationale for closer ties. It was clear that Türkiye paid significant attention to its relations with other Turkic states, including Azerbaijan and the Central Asian republics. One of the most successful checkpoint projects is establishing the Organization of Turkic States, which deals with trade and security cases. At the OTS summit held in Kazakhstan's capital, Nur-Sultan (formerly Astana), on November 3, 2023, Türkiye's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan stated that it is the Turkic language family that has fostered and strengthened the bonds among Türkiye, Azerbaijan, and the Central Asian republics. However, beyond the discourse of shared commonalities, Erdoğan's message was clear: he urged countries like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan to abandon the Cyrillic alphabet, which ties them to their former regional power, Russia. This echoing call was shared to highlight the ability of the Turkic states' unity in the near future

(Mikovic, 2023). Türkiye is considered a non-regional actor because it does not share borders with any of the Central Asian republics (CARs), yet it still has a significant impact on the balance of power in the region. For Türkiye, the Turkic bloc, which includes the Central Asian countries and Azerbaijan, is not just an initiative to create a common Latin Turkic script or a nostalgic connection based on shared historical ties; it represents a deeper, strategic alignment with long-term implications for regional cooperation. One possible objective of Türkiye's ambitions could be using its integration with the Turkic states to crowd Russia out of the Caucasus and Central Asia. The question, however, is whether the Turkic states, including those in Central Asia, share this same ambition with Türkiye—or are they ready to pursue it?

As a researcher, I propose analyzing and evaluating the tools and channels through which Türkiye represents its interests in the region. Those include the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, except the Turkic Council. The region is rich in energy resources, and after the collapse of the USSR, it has become a focal point of both regional and global interest from a geopolitical perspective.

- **Trade Objectives:** The transportation of energy resources produced in the region, as well as the alternative scenario of the Central Asian republics playing a role as a transit hub, has increased the importance of Central Asia in global energy politics. One key trade initiative is the Middle Corridor project, a transportation route that will pass through several Central Asian countries, Azerbaijan, and Türkiye, connecting to the Caspian Sea and opening a trade link to Europe. Meanwhile, Russia has launched its own trade corridor initiative, the Southern Transport Corridor. Despite the common transportation project between Türkiye and the Central Asian countries, the geographical positioning of OTS members makes them dependent on Russia's territory for oil and gas pipelines that run through the Russian Federation.
- **Strengthen local regimes:** Security threats, fundamentalism, human and drug trafficking (particularly from Afghanistan) create the primary sources of instability that could easily destabilize the entire region. These challenges hinder the region's progress and prevent it from achieving sustainable development in the modern era of globalization and technological

advancement (Nadtochey and Safranchuk, 2019). Despite being a member of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), Kyrgyzstan has purchased Türkiye's Akinci and Aksungur drones to enhance its border security. Moreover, Kyrgyzstan has got Bayraktar⁴, which is also Turkish-made, during border clashes with Tajikistan in 2022.

Based on a literature review I have made, it is a discourse of Türkiye's approaches being categorized as provision of aid, peacekeeping, multilateral diplomacy, and indirect support of governance, which can be seen through ages since the independence date of CAR's countries. Thomas Wheeler, in his briefing on Türkiye's role and interests in the Central Asian region, has written that from the early 2000s until 2013, Türkiye became a more visible international actor, with a population of approximately 75 million and experiencing significant growth in its GDP, among other developments. (Wheeler, 2013). Even if many scholars incline that the main factor urging Türkiye to engage in the Central Asian region is the common historical background and socio-cultural ties with brotherhood nations, there is also another huge factor as a foreign policy theory and the political elites and parties implementing this or that foreign policy course. To clearly analyze this aspect of the research, the study will focus on the foreign policy actors of the relevant period (2000s–2020s), including the presidents of the respective countries and the political parties involved. Türkiye's "Justice and Development Party" (AKP), which came to power in 2002, drew significant attention from the international community, including key actors in the field of international relations, by demonstrating that Türkiye had the potential to be an active player in both regional and global politics. Ankara incorporated the Central Asian countries into its foreign policy strategy, categorizing the region as part of Türkiye's "wider neighborhood." Right after the official dissolution of the USSR and thus after the process of five new independent republics being created, Türkiye has focused its diplomatic efforts and channels on its goal to launch the process of integration with the CAR by referring to the central objective of "the Turkic sister republics" and telling that it wants them to become stable functioning states being able to integrate into the international system. It is possible that Türkiye's rejection from EU membership in 1989 also played a role in motivating the country to engage more actively with the

⁴ Crewless aerial vehicles (UAVs)

Central Asian republics, emphasizing common cultural, religious, ethnic, historical, and linguistic ties. As noted by Olga Olikier and Thomas S. Szayna in a RAND report, Central Asia was seen as a strategically important region for Türkiye, both economically and politically. The region was viewed as a bridge between the post-Soviet world and the West, offering Türkiye an opportunity to strengthen its influence and expand its role in the global arena (Olikier, O. and Szayna, T.S., 2003). Moreover, it is well-known that Türkiye was the first country to recognize the independence declarations of the Central Asian republics. This demonstrates Türkiye's intention to establish diplomatic relations immediately, while also deepening them through actions such as promoting economic integration, facilitating free capital flows, and announcing trade agreements. In addition, Turkish satellite television was broadcast in the region, and Türkiye offered academic scholarships and grant programs to the Turkic peoples of Central Asia. These initiatives highlight how Türkiye effectively used soft power, alongside diplomatic and economic efforts, to strengthen its ties with the region (Wheeler, 2013).

Well, the question here is whether Türkiye could keep the words given back then as a big sibling to its “younger sisters”? For example, Aras and Fidan argue that Türkiye failed to fully implement its prescribed role as a model Turkic country and a bridge to others, despite the fact that the model of Turkish democracy was praised by Western countries and presented as a model to the Central Asian republics (Aras and Fidan, 2009). It is clear that Türkiye has its own approaches and objectives for engagement in Central Asia. However, like any situation, there are two sides to the coin. The question remains whether both sides can support each other effectively in terms of diplomacy. Türkiye has launched several successful initiatives, such as the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) and TİKA, that promote integration and cooperation. However, the aid provided was not sufficient for the Central Asian republics (CAR), and as a result, these countries have remained uncertain about Türkiye’s ability to assume the role of a “big brother” and lead them. The question of leadership is also debatable, because the five Central Asian countries, having newly gained independence and freed themselves from centuries of Russian patronage, are cautious about closely integrating with another country. Nevertheless, in recent years, most of the post-Soviet Central Asian nations—if not all—have shown a clear desire

to move away from Russia's sphere of influence and to pursue greater independence in all aspects.

3.3.2. Fields of Cooperation: Türkiye's Relations with Central Asian Republics

Central Asia is of strategic importance to the security and stability of the Euro-Atlantic region. Its energy resources are critical to global energy security, and it is also a key hub for gas and oil pipelines and trade corridors. In the 29 years since their independence, the Central Asian republics have made significant progress in many areas, particularly in strengthening their sovereignty, institutionalizing their state structures, and increasing their level of integration with the world. In recent times, global interest in Central Asia has intensified due to various dynamics, including the situation in Kazakhstan⁵, the Russian-Ukrainian war's side effects on the region, the Taliban's rise to power, and finally, the CSTO's increased activities. Türkiye has taken an active role in these events, positioning itself as a leader of the "Turkic World" and seeking to exert influence in the region, alongside other key actors such as China and Russia. However, the ambitions and prominence of Türkiye were diminished during the period following the collapse of the Soviet Union, which weakened the Turkish position and status as a Western bloc's frontier and, thus, brought to light the need to extend Türkiye's influence into newly established Central Asian republics, especially remembering the fact of all these nations possessing common historical and cultural heritage. The Turkish development model, which respects Islamic values, combines a democratic political system with secularism, and promotes market economies, was seen as a key factor in this framework. Moreover, the shared ethnic and denominational characteristics of these states were considered significant, and this commonality was used as a key argument in favor of Türkiye's role as a prospective international representative of the Turkic-speaking states. But for new independent Central Asian Turkic states, this scenario was the least desired one since they were unwilling to continue their development under "another ruler" after the USSR, and thus, Türkiye had nothing to do but to limit interactions and, consequently, integration

⁵ It was agreed to intervene in Kazakhstan on January 6, 2022, due to the violent unrest there. According to Article 4 of the Collective Security Treaty, "in the event of aggression against any member state, all other member states must provide the necessary assistance, including military support, upon the request of the affected state."

processes with the states of the region in the framework of economic, cultural and humanitarian cooperation.

Türkiye was the first country to recognize the Central Asian states. Since 1991, our desire for a stable, independent, and prosperous Central Asia has guided our policy toward the region, focusing on building free market economies and functioning democracies. Given our shared historical, linguistic, and cultural ties, we have sought to strengthen our cooperation with the region on a wide range of issues. High-level strategic cooperation councils with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and more recently, Uzbekistan provide a valuable platform for deepening the relationship between the two countries. Tajikistan also has a similar mechanism. Economic relations between Türkiye and the republics of Central Asia developed rapidly, and significant advances were made in trade, transport, and communication. To provide development assistance to these countries, the Turkish Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) was established and works well in close collaboration with local governments. In 2019, Türkiye's trade volume with regional countries was approximately \$8.5 billion, and nearly 4,000 Turkish companies were operating there. Human relations also developed in the fields of culture and education. The Turkish Cultural International Organization (TURKSOY) was established in 1993 with the aim of promoting Turkish culture, art, language, and historical heritage. We will introduce these values to the world and pass them on to the younger generation. Türkiye runs the Türkiye Scholarship, a comprehensive scholarship program for students from Central Asia and other regions. Our Ministry of National Education operates many schools in the Central Asian republics. There are two joint universities in Turkestan (Kazakhstan) (Turkish-Kazakh International Hoca Ahmet Yesevi University) and in Bishkek (Turkish-Kyrgyzstan Manas University). Prime Minister of Türkiye has led the Turkish-speaking Summit since 1992 to strengthen solidarity between the Turkish-speaking countries and create new opportunities for cooperation between the two countries.

Presently, Türkiye's efforts to bolster its regional role and standing depend on enhancing the cooperation with countries of Central Asia. The positive dynamics are already seen and the main fields of cooperation and strengthening the country's role in the region can be classified as a) Economic cooperation; b) Military Cooperation; c) Soft Power; which will be analyzed in the subsequent parts of the current work.

3.3.3. FPA of Türkiye Towards the CAR

Modern Türkiye was founded on the remnants of the Ottoman Empire and has pursued a secular, Western-aligned policy by joining NATO and seeking closer ties with the European Union. The country positions itself as a European nation, as reflected in the national foreign policy concept articulated by Türkiye's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, which states: "Türkiye is a part of Europe and a founding member of almost all European institutions." If we look at the synopsis of Türkiye's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, it becomes clear what the main objectives of the country's foreign policy are. Turkish foreign policy has concrete goals aimed at protecting Türkiye's interests both regionally and globally, as well as shaping an environment conducive to sustainable development in its neighborhood and beyond. MFA Türkiye posits this idea as the primary goal to be achieved while contributing to prosperity and peace in the world. The last is known to be an enduring objective though, if more precise, then it was set by the founder of the Republic of Türkiye Mustafa Kemal Atatürk, who also used to operate with the objective "Peace at home, peace in the world." The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA) views Türkiye as navigating a period marked by unpredictable crises and conflicts that threaten sustainability and peace. Türkiye's foreign policy can be characterized as both grounded and strategic, actively engaging on the ground and at the diplomatic table. It is shaped by a deep-rooted tradition of diplomacy and the effective use of cultural and humanitarian tools to advance its interests (MFA, 2023). Türkiye's location between Asia and Europe allows it to exert significant influence in the Caucasus, Central Asia, the EU, the Mediterranean, and the Middle East. Based on the 1936 Montreux Convention, Ankara controls transit through the Turkish Straits (Bosphorus, Sea of Marmara, and Dardanelles). The strait connects the Black Sea and the Aegean Sea - an important waterway through which hundreds of millions of tons of cargo are transported each year. The US and her NATO forces are stationed at several bases here, and US nuclear weapons are located at Incirlik Air Base. The country has also been involved in many conflicts in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War. As a result, it was also an important transit point during the migrant crisis that hit the region. President Erdoğan is seeking to further expand Türkiye's influence, especially in the Middle East, but with the declining US presence, Ankara wants to fill the vacuum. Turkish foreign policy has undergone two significant shifts: the first following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, and the second with the rise of

the Justice and Development Party (AKP) in 2002. The primary outcome of these shifts has been an increased focus on the states of Eurasia. Ankara's foreign policy in this context has aimed at strengthening economic and trade relationships, with a particular emphasis on securing and promoting transit routes that are beneficial to Türkiye. Despite the common heritage with Turks of the Central Asian region, the factor which could have played the main role in securing economic and trade cooperation, AKP had decided to set the main goal of energy interests rather than ethnic solidarity; Thus Ankara, under this party has focused on Caspian Sea region and South Caucasus rather than remote and less resource-rich Central Asia (Çeviköz, 2016). It is true that in the years following the disintegration of the Soviet Union, Türkiye emphasized its linguistic and cultural ties with other Turkic states such as Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan, promoting the concept of a “Turkic World.” However, this period posed challenges for Türkiye, as the political uncertainty that followed the collapse of the USSR and the dissolution of the Warsaw Pact led to a diminished strategic importance for Türkiye in the eyes of its NATO partners. These factors forced Türkiye to reassess its foreign policy approach, shifting its focus eastward. In this context, Türkiye has somewhat assumed the role of a “big brother” to the newly independent Turkic states of Central Asia, guiding their integration into the global economic and political systems. Even if the FPA mainly was concentrated on eastward reorientation, Türkiye still has pushed its efforts towards increasing integration processes with the CAR by establishing such organizations as the Turkish International Cooperation and Development Agency (TIKA) so to implement projects characterized by the main goal of development among the post-Soviet states of CA region, the Black Sea Economic Cooperation (BSEC), and embarked on the summit meetings of six Turkic countries, namely Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Kazakhstan. The second significant revision of Türkiye’s FPA throughout Eurasia came into play with the victory of the AKP in November 2002, along with the dynamics that took place in the international political arena, mainly the terrorist attacks of September 2011 and intervention in Afghanistan, the global environment was perceived as full with both risks and opportunities by Ankara. The advisor of then PM Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Professor Ahmet Davutoğlu inspired the FPA of Türkiye with his ideas and theoretical framework written in his book “*Strategic Depth*”. In summary, Davutoğlu believed that with the end of the Cold War, Türkiye was presented with an opportunity to become a global power and assert dominance in

its own strategic hinterland, which included the Balkans, the Middle East, and the Caucasus. He saw these regions as offering Türkiye a new sphere of influence, providing a range of advantages for the country in terms of geopolitical leverage, economic growth, and regional leadership. Central Asia in Davutoglu's "Strategic Depth" takes place in the third plane, among a total of three, which can be summarized as follows: the Caucasus, with its continuity to the eastern coast of the Caspian Sea, can 1) be affected to the changes in a global balance; 2) the regional locale is seen to have an importance too since the regional actors (Russia, Türkiye) have implications for both the Black Sea and the Balkans, which means automatically the interest in Central Asian and Middle Eastern regions respectively; 3) and the third one, which views the relevant region with its neighbors Russia, Iran and Türkiye, which can open a way towards CA through the Caspian Basin (Davutoglu, 2009). Regionalism was seen as less effective than bilateralism by the Turkish political elite, who also viewed the regions of Central Asia and the Caucasus as two distinct areas with critical differences from the perspective of Turkish policymakers. Under AKP, the Turkish FPA gave top priority rank to the Middle East. Both these significant factors of FPA being rearranged had their way of influencing the relationship between Türkiye and Central Asia. Ünal Çeviköz, a former Turkish diplomat and president of the Ankara Policy Center, in his analysis of Türkiye's role and foreign politics in Eurasia, divides Türkiye's engagement with the relevant region into three periodical phases: 1) 1989-1991, when Türkiye was building links with the CAR primarily through Moscow; 2) 1991-1993, when Türkiye understood the potential of the Turkic "hinterland" which could be easily established by the discourse of the cultural and linguistic commonalities. Türkiye and many scholars shared the view that the Turkic states of Central Asia would be inspired by Türkiye's role model as a state with democratic, secular, and Western-oriented political institutions. Consequently, these countries would be more inclined to adopt Turkish development models and pursue more sustainable political systems, rather than following those of Russia. Oran mentions in his work, where he analyzes the Turkish Foreign Policy as a whole, that it was that period when CA started to obtain Pan-Turkic and Turanian colorings, and that was the main reason for Turkish FPA to take a closer look at this region and include it to its foreign policy axis (Oran, 2005). And finally, 3) the last period of Türkiye's engagement in Eurasia highlighted by Çeviköz, was the period between 1993-1995, when Russia, known as a traditional hegemon and regional power in CA started to fill

the power gap in the relevant space of post-Soviet Turkic republics after the collapse of the USSR. After this period, it became clear to Türkiye that confronting Russia while attempting to expand its cooperation with the Central Asian Republics (CAR) would not be a viable strategy. As a result, Türkiye adopted a more cautious and pragmatic approach in its foreign policy towards the region. With a focus on energy issues, Türkiye shifted its attention towards the Caucasus and the Caspian region, becoming more active in these areas rather than emphasizing Central Asia. The author highlights that, in shaping Türkiye's foreign policy in Central Asia and Eurasia as a whole, other factors—including the policies of Russia, the United States, the European Union, and China—played a significant role.

Asli Aydintaşbaş has discussed the idea that Türkiye's foreign policy is shaped by a desire to maintain a presence in multiple camps. In her 2021 article, “Türkiye Will Not Return to the Western Fold,” she refers to Samuel Huntington's 1993 “Clash of Civilizations,” suggesting that Huntington's prediction about Türkiye was accurate—specifically, that the country's pro-Western inclinations would be replaced by nationalist and Islamic tendencies. Moreover, Aydintaşbaş emphasizes that Türkiye does not seek to distance itself from the West by cultivating a relationship with Russia. She points to Türkiye's role as a mediator in the bilateral conflict between Russia and Ukraine as an example. Aydintaşbaş argues that Türkiye's main motivation in this approach is a desire to maintain a presence in multiple arenas, ensuring that its foreign policy remains multilateral rather than choosing to ignore or confront the West by aligning exclusively with Russia and China (Aydintasbas, 2021). President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and the AKP, a conservative party with Islamist roots, came to power in 2002 after a decade of political instability and financial crisis. The AKP pushed for economic and political reforms to bring Türkiye closer to EU standards, and the country's economy grew by an average of 7.5% annually between 2001 and 2011. In foreign policy, the AKP's motto is “zero problems with neighboring countries,” and Ankara aims to expand Türkiye's influence by building trade relations, promoting democracy, and emphasizing its Islamic identity (Robinson, 2023). After being re-elected for the next 5 years, President Erdogan and the AKP are likely to continue implementing the same trajectory of foreign policy concept of the leader. For instance, Steven Cook, a CFR expert, has argued that Türkiye's foreign policy under Erdoğan would largely remain the same, meaning that Türkiye would continue to occupy a

“grey zone” between the West and Russia—or, in other words, between the West and Eurasia (Cook, 2023). The last can also be characterized by the Türkiye’s obtained role as mediator of the conflict between Russia and Ukraine.



CHAPTER IV

CAN TÜRKİYE BECOME A HEGEMON IN CA?

4.1. Waning Power of Russia

Russia has indeed lost much of the power and influence that the USSR once enjoyed, prompting Moscow to seek to reclaim its leadership position among neighboring countries. However, the former Central Asian territories that were once firmly within the USSR's sphere of influence have since become independent, leaving only the remnants of Soviet control that have increasingly fallen beyond the Kremlin's reach. Central Asia became the key region for Russia's hopes of restoring its status as an international political actor. Additionally, Russia aimed to strengthen its position in the region and use it to further its broader geopolitical goals (Malashenko, 2013). Alexey Malashenko, a Central Asia expert, has written the culmination of his long-year research under the name of "The Fight for Influence: Russia in Central Asia", where he highlights the importance of the region for Russia and how the last aims to contain the influence and foreign policy vectors of "outsiders" and thus, strives for balance between the West and the East. Even though the work was published in 2013, it still offers valuable insights into Russia's interests and actions in the region. At the time, Malashenko argued that Russia's ability to maintain significant influence in Central Asia had been steadily declining, making it increasingly unlikely for Moscow to bring the newly independent Central Asian republics (CARs) back under its control. Russian director of "The Carnegie Moscow Center" Dmitri Trenin proposes Russia needs to concentrate more on solving already existing problems rather than attempting to rebuild the once powerful area of influence on the relics of the Soviet Union; Trenin is right due to the fact Russia has to deal with newly independent states not the former Soviet states, there is no more common ideology that could help Russia to regain its influence. This situation has led the Russian Federation to develop new strategic programs and approaches to promote mutual interests with the Central Asian states. In the foreword part of Malashenko's academic work, Trenin has concluded his insights

on the topic with the following words: “It will be soon clear whether Russia’s ruling establishment is capable of understanding this new landscape and acting accordingly.” (Malashenko, 2013).

In this part of the work, the question of whether Russia’s authority in Central Asia is waning and what could be possible reasons for that will be analyzed and discussed. The opinion among international researchers and mass media will be reviewed related to the particular topic of the Russian invasion of Ukraine having negative implications on the CAR. Undoubtedly, the Russian ambition to conquer the entire territory of Ukraine has placed both the international community and order in a precarious state. The conflict, as any other of this type, has had grave consequences such as Ukraine’s risk of losing its territorial sovereignty, losses of civilians, etc. The war has also affected the economies of both countries, with a great potential to lead to even more significant losses in Central Europe and worldwide. Central Asia, located between Russia and China and bordering conflict zones like Afghanistan and Iran, is considered one of the regions most affected by the war in Ukraine and the Western sanctions imposed on Russia.

Around a year ago, Russia's influence in the region was strong enough that Russian foreign policymaking institutions did not feel threatened by China's growing interest and involvement in Central Asia. However, Russia’s invasion in Ukraine has led to a big chain of correlation of geopolitical changes both regionally and internationally, including the decline of Russia’s influence in the post-Soviet space, with a bunch of countries have started distancing themselves from Moscow. On one hand, any gestures from Moscow’s line being denied by CAR is perceived as an attempt of the last ones to diminish and sever ties with the Russian Federation, which provokes hot discussions about the end of Russia’s authority in the region. On the other hand, there have been instances suggesting that Russia's influence in Central Asia is, in fact, growing. Formal indicators supporting this hypothesis include increased trade turnover, record-breaking official summit meetings, and significant migration flows in both directions. The Polish academics have a common opinion on the fact that the consequences of the Russian-Ukrainian war extended to the economies of CA, and, for that reason, “stans”, which have been experiencing the collapse of local currencies and limitations of trade routes, are implementing various measures to mitigate the impact of sanctions imposed

on Russia (Filkowska, 2022). Despite these challenges, which probably are going to grow with the time passing by since the conflict is not yet solved, the region of CA is seen as a rich territory with abundant natural resources, leading to the region's growing importance both in the region as well as on international level too.

The notion of Russia's influence waning is not without basis. Since the start of the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, various developments in Central Asia have occurred that could be seen as "inconsistent with the friendly relationship" that Russia would likely expect. The first and the primary notion is that Central Asian countries not only did not support the Russian invasion of Ukraine but also have publicly stated they are complying with anti-Russian sanctions. Moreover, no government of CA has recognized DNR and LNR, and other Ukrainian territories as a part of the Russian Federation, which all five "stans" have officially announced without regard to Russian "terminology preferences." In addition to the points mentioned above, it can also be noted that the region is distancing itself from Russian integration projects. Several actions support this trend, such as: in October 2022, Kyrgyzstan canceled CSTO military exercises on its territory; and in December, Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev postponed his visit to Bishkek to avoid meeting Vladimir Putin at the EAEU summit. Many believe this theory is not without merit, as attention is also being directed toward "non-Russian" projects gaining popularity among Central Asian countries, such as those within the framework of the Organization of Turkic States. People of post-Soviet countries and Central Asia had also supposed even tiny details and actions taking place on the common ground between Russia and CAR, pointing at the waning power of Russia in the region. Putin was not greeted as "not enough festive" at the airport, presidents of Central Asian republics were late for the official meeting with Putin, they not coming to his birthday or sitting away from him on summits, etc., all being interpreted as a manner of CAR' distancing and openly confronting Russia's policy in the region. However, it is important to note that these actions do not necessarily indicate a complete estrangement between Central Asia and Russia, nor do they provide a fully objective picture of the underlying reasons behind this relationship.

Temur Umarov, for instance, argues that the reason Central Asian countries are reluctant to develop or support Russian-Central Asian relations is that the Russian

invasion of Ukraine has created too many pressing real-world issues for them to address at the moment. He says the current behavior of CAR may seem new to one who is not from Eurasia or who does not follow the region's news, but it is less so than one might think (Umarov, 2022). CARs have not supported Russia's military ambitions even back in 2008 ⁶when back then, president of Russia Dmitry Medvedev attempted and failed to secure the support of Central Asian countries on the topic of Russia's actions in Georgia. Similarly, in 2014, CAR did not recognize the annexation of Crimea. So, at that period of time, the sanctions implemented towards Russia did not have any escalating threat factor for Central Asian "stans," and, consequently, those sanctions did not require CAR to define their position so clearly as it was compulsory after the invasion of Russia into the territory of Ukraine. Yet, for Central Asia, addressing their behavior related to the topic of sanctions, which have anti-Russian discourse, is not about supporting or confronting the Russian Federation. It is just a simple and, yet so vital, attempt and responsibility as a state to preserve economic stability in the environment of any political conflict or particular order's collapse. Since gaining official independence after the dissolution of the USSR, Central Asian countries have consistently pursued a multi-vector foreign policy, which remains a crucial factor for their minimum economic stability and prosperity. This approach is particularly important now that it has become clear that Russia lacks both the power and the willingness to compensate the region for any future losses if Central Asia were to sever ties with the West or criticize the sanctions imposed on Russia. This is one of the reasons the Kremlin did not publicly pressure or urge the Central Asian countries to show solidarity with Russia during its invasion of Ukraine in 2022. Nevertheless, Russia occasionally reminds the Central Asian countries of their dependency on it. For example, it suspended the Caspian pipeline, which passes through Russian territory, as a way to underscore its leverage over the region. Kazakhstan relies on this pipeline for about 80% of its oil exports to the European energy market. However, Russia has not, at least for now, taken any concrete actions to pressure Kazakhstan regarding issues such as compliance with sanctions, confronting the West, or breaking ties with Western countries. Otherwise, if it was so, Russia would have started to manipulate way earlier and far more significant than just reminding the dependency factor. Of course, one could argue that Russia no longer has the luxury of a wide range of choices

⁶ SCO summit in Dushanbe.

among its allies after the invasion of Ukraine. It can hardly afford any actions that might lead to the loss of allies or provoke confrontations, both regionally and internationally. However, this very environment has forced the Kremlin to place a higher value on its ties with Central Asia. In this sense, the war in Ukraine and the resulting rupture with the Western coalition have, in fact, heightened Russia's interest in the region. It is also important to provide a brief historical background of Russia's interests in the region to better understand the broader context and reduce the complexity and fluidity of the topic surrounding Russian-Central Asian relations. In his research article published in *Saferworld*, Craig Oliphant takes a closer look at these relations' dynamics taken place from 1991-2013. In his work, he highlights that even a decade ago, it was believed that Central Asian countries were distancing themselves from Russia in terms of both their political and economic affairs. The discourse of "Russia's waning influence in Central Asia" was already evident at that time, though the reasons for this view varied. However, it was generally considered premature, as both Russia and the Central Asian republics were experiencing fluctuating dynamics since their independence. In the early post-Soviet period, Russia struggled to redefine its position and role in Central Asia, a region that had once been part of the USSR. Russia's strong desire to regain its influence in the region became apparent through a series of actions that resurfaced intermittently over time. Intentions were projected on some region countries in the framework of the Customs Union, with potential expansion of the authority through the involvement of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Oliphant also draws attention to the fact of the long-term picture remaining unclear enough so the plans would be viable, and this is mainly due to the foreign policymaking institutions of the relevant countries, since in the forthcoming periods the leadership positions could be shifted and, consequently, their associated implications either (Oliphant, 2013). The historical ties between Russia and Central Asian countries are the most extensive ones when compared to other possible hegemonies in the region. The Russian Tsarist and Soviet periods span several centuries, with much of the territory of modern-day Central Asia being part of the Russian Empire as early as the 18th century, and later incorporated into the Soviet Union. Over the 70 years of Soviet rule, Moscow's influence in the region was firmly consolidated, shaping its political and administrative structures. While the Soviet period left its mark on the region, it was primarily focused on reinforcing Moscow's control over the Central Asian republics. Even after independence, Russia's domination continued to

exert significant influence in Central Asia through a variety of means, including the presence of pro-Russian elites, strong cultural ties, historical connections, and media influence, among others. But the most critical levers can be classified in these relationship are economic and security spheres. In terms of migration, millions of Central Asians are working periodically on the territory of the Russian Federation. Conversely, after the mobilization following the Russo-Ukrainian conflict, millions of Russians fled to Central Asian countries. It is important to note that many of these countries already had large ethnic Russian populations dating back to the post-Soviet period.

The current evaluation may present a mixed picture, but it's important to remember that Central Asia's strategic location and extensive hydrocarbon reserves make it a key region. These factors drive both regional and international great powers and middle powers to closely monitor and engage with the area. And this was the ground for Russia to start acting and not losing a “winter garden,”⁷ once it used to have and support its own economic stability thanks to these CAR. Despite the complex and uncertain political environment, Russia has remained the most prominent external power in Central Asia. This is largely due to its security cooperation (which also serves Russia's own interests) and its strong political relationships with the ruling administrations and elites in the region. By the beginning of the second decade of the 21st century, another external power began to have a significant influence in Central Asia—China. China's growing economic strength and its wide range of successful projects in the economic sphere started to attract the attention of Central Asian republics. A key milestone in this development occurred in September 2013, when Chinese President Xi Jinping made an official visit to the region. Political experts and media representatives suggested that this could potentially force the countries of the region to make a difficult choice between the significant economic benefits they receive from cooperation with China and the remittances that contribute to their GDP, which come from Central Asians working in Russia. Fortunately, since there has never been a formal expectation for Central Asian countries to choose one side over the other, these states have been able to maintain diplomatic flexibility with both Russia and China. This approach is often referred to as a multi-vectored foreign policy. It is

⁷ One of the ways Central Asian region is referred to during the Soviet Union's administration.

clear that maneuvering between these two regional powers serves the strategic interests of Central Asian states, as well as other external actors, rather than being dominated by any single power.

4.2. What are the Motives of Türkiye to Search for Integration with CA?

Türkiye is currently experiencing a period of increased political activism in Central Asia and has been pursuing a strategy of external influence in the region, often referred to as “soft power.” Türkiye's interest in Central Asia is supported by shared historical and geopolitical ties in regions such as the Balkans, the Caucasus, the Caspian and Black Sea basins, the Eastern Mediterranean, the Middle East, and beyond. Some scholars suggest that the modern foreign policy goals of the Turkish Republic in Central Asia are referred to as “neo-Ottomanism,” and additionally, the country aims to become the “energy transit-state” of Eurasia (Dzakupov, 2018). Türkiye is willing to establish this plan by monopolizing the flow of energy carriers from east to west, as evidenced by the striking proof of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan oil pipeline, which is already in service and supplies 50 million tons of crude oil annually (Laumullin, 2012). There is no doubt that the internal political dynamics within any country can impact its foreign policy goals and, consequently, influence its motivations for seeking integration and cooperation with other nation-states. Currently, both Türkiye and Russia are key partners and external actors with whom the Central Asian region maintains significant relations. The normalization of relations between Ankara and Moscow was expected to positively influence the strengthening of Türkiye's role in the region. In addition to being an economic partner of the Central Asian republics, there are other factors beyond shared strategic goals. For instance, the potential destabilization of Afghanistan and Türkiye's involvement in China's “Belt and Road Initiative” are likely to further encourage Ankara's interest in establishing broader and more sustainable interactions with the Central Asian states. Another key factor influencing Türkiye's incentives to seek greater cooperation with Central Asia is its geopolitical position. Located at the crossroads of East and West, Europe and Asia, Türkiye plays a pivotal role in one of the world's most strategically important—and also most challenging—regions. Türkiye's foreign policy is based on active transnational dialogue, where it pursues an assertive approach aimed at addressing both regional and global challenges. Over time, Ankara has revisited the policies of

the 1990s, which included elements of Pan-Turkism. This shift in foreign policy has had significant implications for Türkiye's relationships and foreign policy objectives, particularly with Central Asian countries and those in the Caucasus. It has also influenced the political ambitions of key regional players such as Iran, China, and Russia (Sotnichenko, 2012). The main idea of Pan-Turkism⁸ is simply to unite all Turkic peoples according to an ethnic or ethno-confessional grounds. There is also a related concept of Pan-Turanism, which stands for the unification of Eurasian peoples on a single ethno-geopolitical basis, on the territory of "Turan"⁹ respectively. All these socio-political developments have focused on Türkiye as a state that not only succeeded more than any other nation-state in synthesizing the Oriental and Western traditions in comparison to other neighbors, which had an experience of building a multinational empire but also as a state that united the most significant number of Turkic representatives.

Turkish foreign policy has been partly influenced by the concept of "Neo-Ottomanism," particularly under the AKP (Justice and Development Party) in the early 21st century. However, it would be incorrect to assume that this concept directly shaped Türkiye's foreign policy approach toward the Central Asian Republics (CAR). To understand this apology, the definition of the concept of "Neo-Ottomanism" should be analyzed first. The doctrine of neo-Ottomanism as a significant concept of Turkish foreign policy refers to a revival of Turkish influence and reassertion of engagement in regions that used to be a part of the Ottoman Empire. Neo-Ottomanism experienced a revival driven by significant domestic trends and ideals, which were later reflected in the AKP's foreign policy as well. AKP has advocated social norms of the theory, which later served as a basis for further efforts to transform domestic and foreign policy trends. Logically, Central Asia was never part of the Ottoman Empire, so the concept of Neo-Ottomanism cannot be directly applied to Türkiye's foreign policy approach toward the region. When it comes to the Central Asian Republics (CAR), Türkiye's approach can be considered multifaceted, encompassing cultural

⁸ Pan-Turkism is a political philosophy and movement that emerged in the late 19th century, aiming to unite all Turkic-speaking peoples across the Ottoman Empire, China, Iran, Afghanistan, and Russia. It sought to bring together Turks in response to the growing Russian Tsarist hegemony in the region.

⁹ The term "Turan" is believed to be an ancient name for the Central Asian region, with roots in the Iranian language. Historically, the term was used by ancient Iranian nomads to refer to the Turkic peoples. Literally, "Turan" means "the land of the Tur." This concept is deeply tied to the region's history and the interactions between the Turkic and Iranian cultures.

similarities, historical ties, as well as geopolitical and economic considerations. It is essential to highlight that some elements of Neo-Ottomanism may send a word to Türkiye's foreign policy approach to Central Asia. At the same time, Ankara's foreign policy is shaped by contemporary geopolitical realities, including competition with other regional and external powers such as Russia, China, and the U.S., as well as Türkiye's own domestic policies, priorities, and strategic interests.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Türkiye sought to fill the geopolitical vacuum that emerged, particularly along Russia's southern borders, which included the newly independent Central Asian states. Ankara actively established multi-vector foreign policy and relations with the newly independent states such as Azerbaijan and the CAR. Firstly, the cultural proximity with the Central Asian republics and the decline in the influence of Russia in geopolitical terms, particularly on the post-Soviet territory, gave Ankara grounds to declare itself as an “elder brother” for the Turkic states of CA. The thesis of “The Turkic world will be becoming a dominant figure in the Eurasian space from the Balkans to China” was put forward by back-then Turkish President T. Ozal in 1992. Moreover, he proclaimed the 21st century to be the century of Turks (Avatkov, 2014). During the same period, Prime Minister S. Demirel discoursed about the Turkic world from the Adriatic Sea until the Great Chinese Wall and about Türkiye as a cultural and historical center for the recently sovereign states, thus referring to those of Central Asia (Druzhilovski, 2013). The new foreign policy strategy was officially announced in the Turkish Parliament on July 30, 1993, as part of the government's 50th program agenda. It was said that the emergence of new independent states in the post-Soviet space has established an important development for the country.

Türkiye, bound by close ties to the Turkic republics, felt a responsibility to support and guide them during their integration into the “world community.” (Urazova, 2010). The real actions toward the Central Asian Republics (CAR) began in 2002, when the Justice and Development Party (AKP) came to power, and the previously outlined agenda was further developed. At that time, Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoğlu is regarded as the architect of the theoretical and ideological framework that guided Türkiye's foreign policy toward Central Asia. Davutoglu, during the time he was a Minister of Foreign Affairs emphasized the unbalanced foreign policy by referring to

the “Western inclination” and the need to pay more attention to other parts of the world and regions, respectively. A central theme in Ahmet Davutoğlu's numerous publications is the need for the revitalization of Pan-Turkism. In his widely known work “*Strategic Depth*”, he elaborates on a concept that emphasizes Türkiye's role as a “central state.”. Türkiye's assertion as a regional leader was closely linked to its transformation into an influential actor on the international stage, driven by its strategic geographical location, rich historical heritage, and economic appeal (Yeşiltaş, 2013). The principle of “zero problems with neighbors,” proposed by Davutoğlu, emphasizes the need to strengthen relations with regional states, including those with which Türkiye had previously problematic ties. This concept later became a cornerstone of Türkiye's foreign policy doctrine. The doctrine of neo-Ottomanism was also a part of the ideas expressed by Davutoğlu, which was mentioned above. The concept defines the modern foreign policy axis of Türkiye, as well as plays the role of a strategic course. The main idea of the doctrine is to revive the influence of Türkiye that it used to possess back to the Ottoman Empire and is based on four tenets, which are Ottoman cognition, soil, blood, and language¹⁰. The new "neo-Ottoman" concept and the strategy based on it can be distinguished by several fundamental principles: a) It does not promote any aggressive stance; rather, it represents the legitimate interests of the state. b) Türkiye no longer views itself as a junior partner of the US and NATO. Instead, it identifies as the center of Eurasia and asserts its primary role in the region's security.

The areas primarily influenced by the Neo-Ottomanism doctrine-based strategy include the Middle East, North Africa, the Caucasus, the Balkans, and Central Asia. Elements of this doctrine are indeed observable in Türkiye's foreign policy in the context of CA since the latter having historical relations with Türkiye is of great importance for the country both culturally and strategically. Türkiye has been striving to deepen and strengthen its ties with the Central Asian countries, especially after the official collapse of the Soviet Union. Various initiatives have been undertaken by Türkiye in the region of CA, including cultural exchanges and educational programs.

¹⁰In this context, "blood" refers to a primary orientation toward Turkic peoples, while "soil" represents the territorial aspect. This doctrine-based foreign policy creates an ideological foundation for a new axis of thinking, promoting the development of a supra-Turkic identity through humanitarian and economic methods. Ultimately, this leads to Türkiye's emergence as a supra-regional actor with a leading position.

Turkish leaders frequently stress the common Turkic heritage and historical ties between Türkiye and the CAR, the narrative of which may be observed as being consistent with the principle of neo-Ottomanism. However, it should be noted that Türkiye's foreign policy toward Central Asia is multifaceted and influenced by several factors, including geopolitical calculations, economic interests, and regional dynamics. While elements of Neo-Ottomanism may shape Türkiye's approach to Central Asia, it is not the sole determining factor in its foreign policy in the region. Whether neo-Ottomanism can be explicitly applied to Türkiye's foreign policy in Central Asia ultimately depends on how the framework is defined and interpreted, as well as the concrete actions and strategies pursued by Türkiye in the region.

Generally, there can be several objectives listed as reasons for Türkiye to seek cooperation and integration with the CAR at the current period:

- **Historical and cultural ties:** Türkiye and Central Asian countries share historical and cultural connections through their common Turkic heritage, including language, history, traditions, and identity. Thus, the basis for closer cooperation and successful integration is provided due to the commonly shared beliefs and norms, which increases mutual understanding.
- **Geopolitics:** With its strategic geographical location and significant geopolitical influence, Türkiye, as a Eurasian power, aims to expand its influence in regions that are not geographically close to it. Türkiye seeks to strengthen its geopolitical position by deepening ties with the Turkic states of Central Asia. In addition, cooperation with the Central Asian republics offers Türkiye valuable diplomatic leverage on the international stage.
- **Regional security:** At this particular juncture, Türkiye appears willing to contribute to regional stability by addressing extremist threats and other common security challenges in the region.
- **Energy security:** Türkiye is heavily reliant on external energy suppliers, and cooperating with the Central Asian republics in the energy sector offers the opportunity to diversify both energy reserves and imports. Pipeline projects can play a key role in achieving this goal, not only by diversifying energy

sources but also by expanding energy infrastructure, allowing for transportation routes that extend beyond Türkiye.

- **Economic opportunities:** In addition to micro- and macro-economic projects, the natural resources of Central Asia provide a sustainable foundation for trade and investment, particularly in sectors such as infrastructure, construction, and energy. Economic cooperation holds great potential to be mutually beneficial for both Türkiye and the Central Asian republics.
- **Cultural and educational exchange:** Türkiye has been utilizing its soft power in the Central Asian region through media and educational initiatives. It promotes cultural and educational exchange by establishing universities and offering various educational programs, aiming to strengthen people-to-people ties with the Central Asian republics. This also fosters a better understanding of Turkic cultures among Türkiye's own population.

The formation of newly independent states due to the collapse of the USSR was taken advantage of by Ankara to broaden its sphere of influence in Central Asia and the Caucasus. The political and economic structure of Türkiye was offered as a template for the newly formed Turkic republics. The proliferation of the so-called “Turkish model,” combining Islam, democracy, human rights, and market economy, was supported by the West. The establishment of ties with the post-Soviet Turkic states was to highlight in the West’s eyes the strategic importance of Türkiye as a “gateway” to Eurasia (Parlar and Ersen, 2014: 264-266). By demonstrating its readiness to take on a leadership role in the region and making significant investments in regional development, Türkiye has established itself as one of the key trade and economic partners of the post-Soviet Turkic republics for years to come. Trade and economic interaction was carried out based on bilateral agreements on trade, elimination of double taxation, mutual promotion, and protection of investments, and establishment of direct aviation services. The Turkish Cooperation and Coordination Agency (TIKA) was established in 1992 to implement economic agreements, provide financial assistance to Turkic countries and peoples, and strengthen relations in trade, education, and culture. TIKA offices were opened in Moldova, Tajikistan, Georgia, Uzbekistan, Azerbaijan, and Ukraine. In the Caucasus, Türkiye is actively involved in international infrastructure projects, including the construction of railways and highways, the refurbishment of Caspian and Black Sea ports and the development of pipelines to

transport the region's oil and gas resources outside of Russian-controlled transport systems. The Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan, Baku-Tbilisi-Erzurum, TANAP projects are a vivid example of cooperation with the countries of the region, which also have a positive impact on Türkiye's image in the world, contribute to its transformation into a key player in the energy security system of Europe and open new opportunities for the Turkish economy (Zhiznin, 2012). In 2009, at the initiative of the Republic of Türkiye, the Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking Countries (CCTC) was established, bringing together Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, with Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan actively involved in the work of the Council. The Council's competencies include economic, energy, cultural, and educational matters. In 2012, the Agreement on Financial Regulations of the Cooperation Council of Turkic-speaking Countries, the Agreement on the Establishment of the Turkic Academy of the Turkic Council, the Agreement on the Establishment of the Turkic Culture and Turkic Heritage Support Fund of the Turkic Council were signed at the FTAF Summit in Kyrgyzstan. In culture and education, the Council established the "Pride of the Turkic World" award. The main geopolitical achievement of the CCTS in the transport sphere is the conclusion of agreements between the ministries of transport and customs authorities in the preparation and commissioning of the railway from Türkiye to Georgia and Azerbaijan to the Caspian Sea to Kazakhstan and China.

4.3. Economic Opportunities

Central Asia is undoubtedly a region of rising competition between great and regional powers. In terms of economic relationships, there is a process of Eurasian integration involving Russia, China, the US, and Türkiye. Great powers like China are leading ambitious economic projects, such as the Belt and Road Initiative, while the US has proposed the New Silk Road, among other initiatives. However, there are also emerging powers that have gained significant importance in the region in recent years, though they have often been overlooked. Türkiye is one such country, having developed close diplomatic and economic ties with the Central Asian republics since their early days of independence. This section, therefore, aims to analyze Türkiye's trade relationships and cooperation with the Central Asian republics.

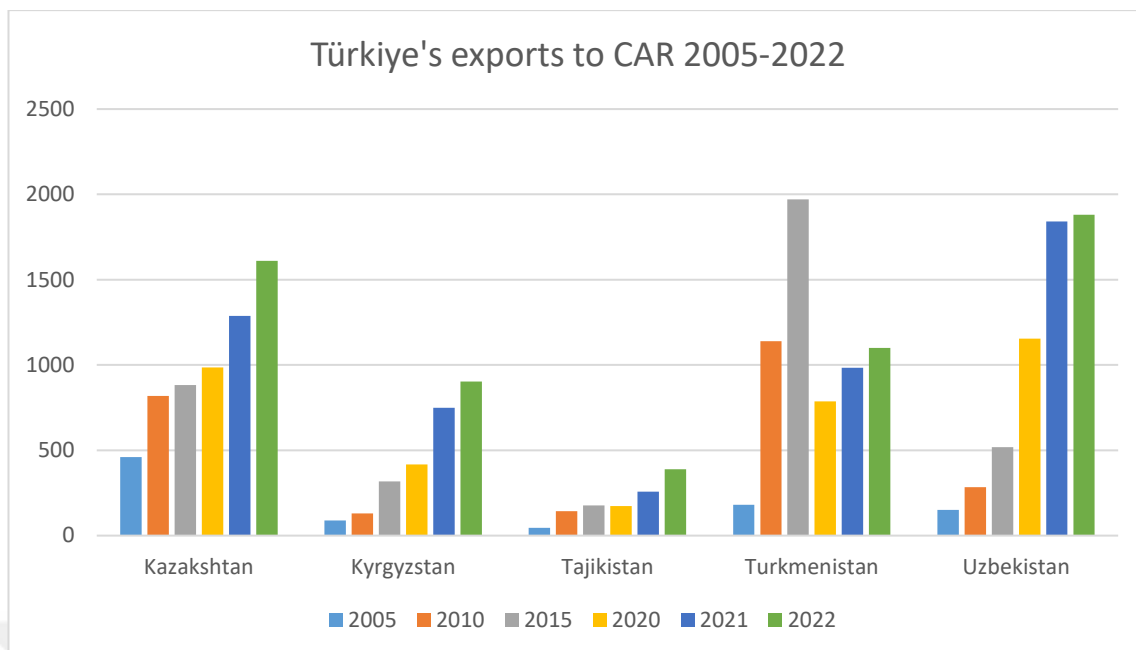


Figure 4.1. Türkiye’s Exports to CAR 2005-2022

Reference: Trading Economics, 2024

As it can be seen from the statistics based on the data provided by “Trading Economics”¹¹ Türkiye’s main countries in the region it exports to are Uzbekistan for the last couple of years, and Kazakhstan with Turkmenistan with leading export virtue rates. In the table below I would like to provide what type of commodities Türkiye exports to the CAR in majority of cases:

Table 4.1. Products Imported from Türkiye by the CAR

	Electrical equipment	Machinery, nuclear reactors	Articles of iron and steel	Furniture, prefabricated buildings	Plastics	Precious stones and metals
Turkmenistan	\$191.00	\$176.77	\$107.00	\$65.63	\$64.04	\$10.82
Tajikistan	\$32.36	\$35.56	\$5.92	\$11.82	\$27.93	\$17.95
Uzbekistan	\$131.71	\$519.95	\$80.62	\$66.06	\$148.49	\$3.15
Kyrgyzstan	\$25.18	\$48.89	\$24.26	\$8.58	\$18.30	\$273.53
Kazakhstan	\$153.65	\$257.11	\$42.59	\$45.51	\$66.04	\$8.44

Reference: The Author’s compilation based on the Trading Economics data

¹¹ An open-source platform that provides accurate information for 196 countries worldwide, including both historical data and forecasts based on various economic indicators.

Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Kazakhstan are among the largest importers of Turkish electrical and electronic equipment in Central Asia, with import values of \$131.71 million, \$191 million, and \$153.65 million, respectively. This could indicate a high demand for modernizing technical infrastructure or some industrial facilities in respective countries. In contrast, the lower imports of Turkish electrical products suggest potential areas for growth or simply a limited demand in these areas. Kazakhstan is the largest importer of machinery and boilers from Türkiye, with respective values of \$257.11 million. This could reflect the country’s efforts to establish a developed industrial base and indicate investments in industrial projects. Uzbekistan is the primary importer of plastics from Türkiye, with a significant value of \$148.49 million, which means the wide range of consumer goods, packaging, construction materials, etc. Kyrgyzstan seems to be the largest importer of pearls and precious stones from Türkiye among other Central Asian states, with imports valued at \$273.53 million. The situation could be related to Kyrgyzstan’s mining industry or the demand for raw materials for the related processes and subsequent export. Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan stand out as the leading importers of prefabricated buildings and furniture, which could suggest demand for construction materials and furniture for both residential and commercial projects.



Figure 4.2. CAR Exports to Türkiye 2010-2022

Reference: Trading Economics, 2024

Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are the main exporters to Türkiye from Central Asian states. As seen in the graphics, 2021 was a notable year when Kazakhstan exported goods worth \$4.8 billion to Türkiye. In 2022, both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan remained active exporters, with respective values of \$1.46 billion and \$3.97 billion in goods exported to Türkiye. Other Central Asian states are either smaller in economic scale or lack open-access data; for example, Turkmenistan has no available data in official reports. Kyrgyzstan, due to its smaller economy, has relatively lower export levels to Türkiye, with exports valued at \$139 million in 2022 and \$90.3 million in 2021. Türkiye's imports from the region predominantly consist of metals, agricultural goods, and raw fuels. According to the Turkish Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the total trade volume between Türkiye and Central Asia was \$8.5 billion in 2019, with over 4,000 Turkish companies and enterprises successfully operating in the region. (MFA, 2020). In total, Türkiye's imports from the Central Asian region amounted to \$2.7 billion in 2020, indicating a positive trade balance with the Central Asian republics. During the 1st International Forum B5+1 in Almaty, it was announced that the trade volume between Türkiye and the Central Asian republics had surpassed \$11 billion. This was claimed by the vice-minister of Kazakhstan's National Economy, who also has drawn the participants' attention towards some reports. He says if mutual trade between the countries of CA is examined, then it is seen how the trade and, consequently, the economics of the relevant states have been being actively developing for the last 10 years since during this period, the trade amount has increased 2.5 times and thus, reached \$11 billion. Timur Zhaksylykov, the vice-minister, has highlighted the importance of these processes since more jobs are being created during CAR trade turnover, which means the most significant contribution to the economic systems of all sides (Keskin, 2024). Overall, the total volume of mutual trade between Türkiye and the Central Asian republics has exceeded \$11 billion, with Kazakhstan accounting for 70% of this trade, including exports valued at \$5.5 billion to its neighboring Central Asian countries. The B5+1 forum was hosted in Almaty with the participation of government representatives of all the CAR and the US. Türkiye's head of diplomatic mission in Kyrgyzstan, Ahmet Sadik Dogan used to participate in this forum as well as holding a speech during the opening ceremony. It was announced that Türkiye is one of the leading trading partners of Kyrgyzstan, as well as other Central Asian countries. Between 2018 and 2022, Türkiye's trade turnover with Kyrgyzstan alone

increased by 1.6 times, with exports rising by 34.9% and imports growing by 1.7% (Ministry of Economy and Commerce of the Kyrgyz Republic, 2024).

It is important to note Türkiye's ability to maintain active bilateral relationships with all the states in the Central Asia region, strengthening not only economic ties but also increasing cooperation in other areas. The geopolitical situation in the region is characterized by both high competition and cooperation, especially with other major external powers such as Russia and China. In addition to these major powers, there are other international players, such as Iran, with which Türkiye may need to compete in order to secure and strengthen its position in the region.

Another closely related, if not subsequent, area of economic relationship with Central Asia is energy geopolitics. Türkiye, at this point has a significant disadvantage when compared to Iran since it is essential to remember the absence of geographical proximity with the region of CA. In contrast, Iran could play a better role as a transit country when it comes to both trade turnover and transit routes for energy trade sector, the latter will become highly significant in the upcoming decade due to the fact of Chinese BRI presence and implementation. Türkiye also uses transportation via Iran, thanks to which the trade with the member-states of the Commonwealth of Independent States has increased from 565 thousand tons in 2016 to over 1 million tons in 2019 already (Khitakhunov, 2021). Recognizing Türkiye's growing dependence on transit routes, Iran began raising tariffs on transportation to Türkiye in an attempt to reduce the competitiveness of Turkish goods in the Central Asian market. In response to this, Türkiye sought to diversify the transportation of its goods to the Central Asian region by developing trans-Caspian routes and strengthening cooperation with Caspian countries (Rahimi and Heydari, 2020). In December 2020, Türkiye dispatched its first train to China, which traveled a distance of 8,700 kilometers from Istanbul, passing through Türkiye, Georgia, Azerbaijan, the Caspian Sea, and Kazakhstan, before arriving in the city of Xi'an, China. This export route has been expected to bring down trade costs and duration of commerce and increase the competitiveness of Turkish industries (Daily Sabah, 2020). In addition to transport, mutual business cooperation, implementation of joint projects and economic performance of the countries are important for bilateral trade. For example, Turkish companies are active players in the market of Turkmenistan, undertaking a wide range

of projects, from infrastructure development to industrial ventures. As an outcome, these companies have contributed significantly to the boost in trade, which peaked in 2014 at over \$2.2 billion. Thus, despite the absence of common borders with the Central Asian republics, Türkiye has proven to be one of the region's most important trading partners, which has a direct positive impact on economic relations between them. Türkiye continues to utilize traditional trade routes while also diversifying new transit routes to strengthen successful cooperation with the Central Asian countries. Trade and joint economic initiatives with Türkiye are also beneficial for the Central Asian republics, as Türkiye is seen as a growing market, offering advantages in terms of new transport routes and increasing exports from the region.

4.4. Energy Security Opportunities

Türkiye aims to diversify and enhance its energy security by establishing broader cooperation systems and joint projects, thereby diversifying its sources of energy imports. In this regard, Central Asia offers both rich natural energy resources and alternative transit routes, with significant reserves of natural gas and oil. By implementing projects such as the Trans-Caspian Pipeline and the TAP I Pipeline, Türkiye can reduce its dependence on traditional energy suppliers, ultimately strengthening its energy security. With an estimated population of over 85 million people, Türkiye's demand for energy resources is expected to grow rapidly over the next half-century. Türkiye is a significant economic player in the region, with an impressive leap in economic development over the past 20 years. Between 2001 and 2018, GDP per capita growth actually doubled from \$13,235 to \$24,811 (Likhachev, 2021). Such a significant leap was paralleled by a comparable increase in energy resource consumption, which required a solid proactive policy on the part of the authorities, given the poor natural resource endowment and high dependence on imports. According to the International Energy Agency, Türkiye has successfully reformed its energy system to optimize energy demand increases, bring down energy prices for consumers, and slow the growth rate of imports. These reforms included modernization, liberalization, and the expansion of domestic industrial capacity, along with increased private and international investments. Notably, the country has significantly diversified its energy profile over the past decade. In particular, there has been impressive growth in the renewable energy sector, with renewable energy

production tripling over the last decade. The commissioning of Türkiye's first nuclear power unit in 2023 will further diversify the country's energy balance. However, Türkiye continues to be heavily dependent on imports, in particular oil and gas 93% and 99% respectively (International Energy Agency, 2021). To meet this demand, the government has set renewable energy goals as one of the most critical priorities. It has started taking steps to increase the consumption of renewables in the country, such as solar and wind power. Although the country has its reserves of such fossil fuels as oil and gas, Türkiye still depends on imports and sources more than 74% of its energy from outside (World Nuclear Association, 2023). This means that the country's local oil production accounts for only 7% of its increasing energy demand, resulting in Türkiye being heavily dependent on imported oil to meet its energy needs. The government plans to open and begin construction of its first nuclear power plant this year as part of its efforts to diversify its energy sources (Priday, 2022). In the past decade, Türkiye has made significant strides toward diversifying its energy mix, and the commissioning of its first nuclear power facility in 2023 will further diversify the country's fuel mix (IEA, 2021). v. Putin convinced N. Nazarbayev and G. Berdymukhammedov of the need for manufacturers to control the flow of energy resources to Europe, rather than allowing this control to be dictated by consumers (Pritchins, 2022). Access to energy is a crucial precondition for human development, and therefore, the sustainable development and prosperity of any nation depend on the availability and accessibility of energy resources. Thus, this desire of nations automatically increases the demand for energy in many sectors since the production of goods, services, etc., is tightly connected with energy access.

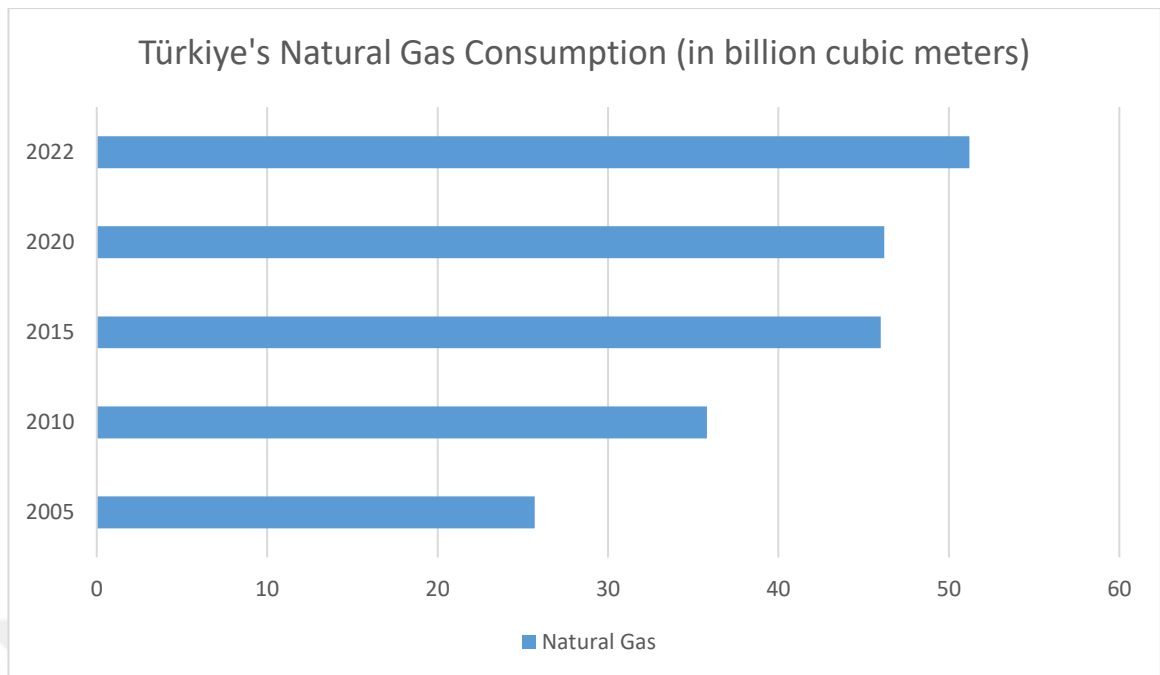


Figure 4.3. Türkiye's Natural Gas Consumption (in Billion Cubic Meters)

Reference: Chemical & Resources, 2022

In 2019, the Russian Federation accounted for 34% of Türkiye's natural gas imports, followed by Azerbaijan with 21% and Iran with 17%. However, in the early 2000s, Russia was the dominant supplier of natural gas to Türkiye (International Energy Agency, 2021). The need to diversify natural gas imports has become a key driver behind Türkiye's active foreign policy in the Caspian Basin and Central Asia. With growing natural gas consumption, Türkiye is under increasing pressure to secure new suppliers to reduce its dependency on traditional partners like Russia, Iran, and Azerbaijan. This shift is essential for maintaining energy security and achieving a more balanced energy mix. Thus, according to the assessments of the Deputy Minister of Energy of Türkiye A. Bayraktar, the consumption of natural gas is on the rise, which requires the authorities to take further steps to intensify the search for new suppliers in order to maintain the balance of independence from the main traditional partners, which are Russia, Iran and Azerbaijan. Bayraktar estimates that natural gas consumption in the country in 2021 may be higher than 60 billion cubic meters of gas, which is higher than the forecast by the Turkish Energy Market Regulatory Council. Since the beginning of 2021, Türkiye's natural gas consumption has been forecasted to reach 50.865 bcm, up from 47.968 bcm in 2020. This increase in consumption

highlights the growing demand for energy and the need for Türkiye to seek diversified energy sources to ensure long-term energy security. In the first 7 months of 2021, consumption increased by 14% to 31 bcm (Svintsova, 2021). Despite such a severe dependence on imports due to the liberalization of the gas market when only a part of gas supplies is carried out under long-term contracts and mostly traded on the domestic market under short-term swap operations, as well as due to the diversification of suppliers, Türkiye not only ensures a fairly low price level on the domestic market, but also expects to become a key transit country for gas from Russia, Iran, and the Caspian basin to the EU countries. Ankara has a similar strategy for oil imports. Türkiye produces less than 10% of its oil needs. Most imports traditionally come from the Middle East. Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia together account for nearly three-quarters of Türkiye's total energy imports, with Russia and Azerbaijan also being significant suppliers. Türkiye currently imports pipeline gas from Russia through two pipelines, which are Blue Stream ¹²and Turkish Stream respectively, and also imports raw materials from Azerbaijan through Georgia as part of the Southern Gas Corridor. Another pipeline supplier is Iran, which supplies gas via the East Anatolian Pipeline. In addition, Türkiye receives liquefied natural gas from Qatar, Algeria, Nigeria, and the United States (Ermakov, 2020).

The developments in global energy dynamics following the Russian-Ukrainian war have prompted a reassessment of European energy security, particularly focusing on the role of Central Asia and Türkiye. At the same time, it should be noted that Europe, acting together with the United States of America, imposes an oil embargo on Russia and simultaneously makes decisions on new options regarding Russian imports, constituting about 40 percent. The most important of Europe's decisions is that the oil embargo was the first to be decided upon. Europe had intended that Russia, one of Europe's oil suppliers, natural gas, and coal, would suffer significant revenue losses due to the prohibitions imposed on Russian oil. The war in Ukraine has put even European Union countries such as Germany, France, and Italy, which have been the most supportive of the Russians in Europe, in a quandary. Russia's first response to the embargo was to relocate its sales to Asian markets, making China and India its biggest purchasers. According to the newly formed bloc, India and China have become

¹² A major gas pipeline lying through Black Sea, carries gas to Türkiye from Russia.

Russia's two leading customers. For example, India has become a country that buys 40% of Russian oil. 20% of Russian oil realized by sea transportation goes to India. Although this situation does not please the US, the result is obvious. As a result of the war and sanctions, the situation in the EU energy markets is far more complicated. Oil prices, which are not expected to be as high, are closely linked to energy security worldwide, including Europe and Türkiye. Since oil prices in Türkiye also depend on international prices, they have risen to around 30-33 Turkish lira per liter (Pala, 2022). The Baku-Ceyhan pipeline can play a key role in transporting more Turkmen and Kazakh oil, which is important for diversifying energy routes and reducing dependence on traditional suppliers.

Due to declining production at the Azeri-Chirag-Guneshli field, the primary source of oil for the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan (BTC) pipeline, the pipeline is unable to operate at its full potential. Thus, by supplying Kazakh and Turkmen oil through this pipeline, it will be able to transport 1 million 2502 thousand barrels per day, which could ease the pressure on world markets in terms of balancing oil prices. As experts point out, Türkiye was also interested in the natural resources of Central Asian states, primarily Kazakhstan. As part of the discussion of pipeline projects, Ankara also counted on connecting oil from Kazakhstani oilfields to the projects envisaged from Azerbaijan. Thus, in 1995, the 1995 Declaration on Further Development and Deepening of Cooperation between Kazakhstan and Türkiye was signed to find opportunities for the construction of a pipeline to the Mediterranean Sea through Türkiye to deliver Kazakhstani oil to the world market (Zhiltsov, Zonn, Ushkov, 2003: 126). But these plans were not destined to come true. The pipeline to Novorossiysk was chosen as the main export route for Kazakh oil.

Türkiye is prominent in terms of LNG, including a new floating LNG storage and gasification unit to be built in Saros Bay, as well as an LNG terminal and other facilities at Marmaraereğlisi. The LNG to be delivered to these Turkish facilities will be transported directly to Greece via the Trans-Anatolian and Trans-Adriatic Pipeline (TANAP-TAP) and from thence to Europe or via Bulgaria from the now empty 14 billion cubic meter West Line project to Ukraine and Poland. Türkiye plays a crucial role in this regard. Türkiye not only proposes Azerbaijani natural gas through the TANAP-TAP system as part of the Southern Gas Corridor but also suggests that

Turkmen natural gas could be integrated into this framework. In this context, the dialogues between Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan are being built. If the EU signs an agreement with Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan has the potential to open the way for Turkmen natural gas. At least 8-10 billion cubic meters of Turkmen natural gas could be transshipped to Greece and other European countries such as Bulgaria, Albania, and Italy via Türkiye and the TAP pipeline, with TANAP's capacity rapidly expanding to 31 billion cubic meters. Secondly, BOTAS¹³ has profound unoccupied capacities in the pipeline system in its own country. Some construction works, investments and technical studies, such as relocation of compressors, are needed to make these idle capacities available for transit traffic. But those can all be done in a very short time. Türkiye, having its infrastructure investments and small construction projects, is the most suitable country to find a solution using Turkmen and Azeri gas within 6-8 months for countries of the European Union.

The EU made a strategic mistake by signing a memorandum of understanding to buy natural gas from Israel and Egypt on 12 June 2022. This is an agreement with two countries where it is unclear whether these resources will be able to deliver 20-25 billion cubic meters even after 5 years. For this agreement to be enforceable and provide a quick response, 300 kilometers of Israeli gas must be transported to Egypt via pipelines, and then produced and sold to Europe either through pipelines or as LNG (liquefied natural gas) from Egypt (European Parliament, 2022). However, the LNG reservoirs in Egypt are already at full capacity, leaving no room for Israel to allocate its gas for export. As a result, the Greek Cypriot administration has been completely sidelined by this agreement, as no one has addressed their concerns or the pipeline they constructed across the sea. The reason the Greeks are so vocal and aggressive toward Türkiye is that they are trying to divert attention from the fact that Türkiye is the most reliable country capable of providing critical alternative energy resources, thanks to its well-established infrastructure. This makes Türkiye a key player in ensuring energy security for the European Union during these crucial times. In this context, Athens has large reserves in the Eastern Mediterranean and reflects these reserves as capable of producing gas to Europe within 1 year. Egyptian and Israeli natural gas can cover the deficit of natural gas in Europe in 3-5 years.

¹³ Botas is a petroleum pipeline corporation with state-owned natural gas and crude oil.

On the other hand, Türkiye has 31 billion cubic meters of TANAP, 15 billion cubic meters of the BOTAS system, and an empty western line that can be used as transit. In addition, through LNG, the facilities can be utilized by entering into a swap agreement with Türkiye. This would allow for the efficient distribution of energy resources, further strengthening Türkiye's role as a key player in regional energy security. With all this infrastructure, Türkiye can quickly transport natural gas to the European borders. In addition, Türkiye has also discovered natural gas in the Black Sea region. Working together with Romania in the Black Sea means that Türkiye is making a significant contribution to the security of Europe's energy supply. Currently, it makes more sense for Europe to evaluate Black Sea gas rather than East Mediterranean gas. By developing cooperation with both Black Sea gas producers and Romania and Bulgaria in this context, Türkiye can not only ensure the security of supply to Europe by connecting Black Sea gas to the main western pipeline, but also make a significant contribution to Europe's energy security with its completed TANAP-TAP system. This strategic collaboration would enhance the diversification of energy sources and strengthen Türkiye's position as a key energy transit hub for Europe. The omission of Turkmen natural gas, estimated to have reserves of 20 trillion cubic meters, is not understandable. Turkmenistan currently has natural gas reserves of 40 billion cubic meters that can be extracted and transported quickly. In this context, the EU needs to sign an agreement with Turkmenistan and secure commitments from Azerbaijan to transport this natural gas to Europe (Öğütçü, 2024). Türkiye can make an immediate contribution to European energy through its LNG facilities and, within six months, via pipelines. This contribution could be doubled within one year. No other country or resource is likely to be as critical to the EU, as these are realistic projects that can be implemented using Türkiye's existing infrastructure at a relatively low cost. The key lies in integrating Turkmen and Azerbaijani natural gas into these existing systems.

4.5. Resources in CA

A formal examination of a map of Central Asia reveals a vast expanse of primarily sandy deserts, which are predominantly characterized by green plains of the Central Asian steppe in the northern region and are enclosed in the south and east by towering snow-clad mountain ranges that demarcate the region's boundaries with Iran, Afghanistan, and the People's Republic of China. Despite possessing two inland seas,

the region is generally arid and barren, spanning approximately 4,000 kilometers from east to west; and encompassing an area comparable to Europe. The disparities between the countries in the region are notably pronounced; three boast substantial reserves of fossil fuels, while the remaining two primarily rely on hydroelectric power. The deserts are intersected in some areas by gas and oil pipelines and in others by extensive irrigated farms cultivating cotton and wheat. From the mountains to the valleys, a diverse range of life forms can be found.



Illustration 4.1. Physical Map of Central Asia

Reference: Free World Maps, 2024

Some parts of the region serve as a “crossroads” for Asian and Mediterranean species, while other areas harbor unique centers of endemic species. The Central Asia Atlas of Natural Resources delineates the region’s:

- geographic and climatic features,
- environmental, economic, and social profiles,
- energy, minerals, and water resources,

- ecoregions and ecosystems,
- significant fauna and flora,
- agriculture and fisheries,
- peoples and cultural traditions,
- and progress towards sustainable development (Asian Development Bank, 2010).

Given the environmental and sustainability implications of non-renewable energy resources, energy security has become a critical concern both locally and globally. As a result, many countries have shifted their focus towards exploring alternative energy sources, particularly renewable ones, in an effort to reduce both the consumption of non-renewable energy and dependency on it. The Central Asian region, rich in significant energy reserves, is considered a major exporter of energy to the global market. The region could boast approximately 5.5% of the global hydro potential; moreover, Central Asia is home to over 20% of the world's discovered uranium, mainly from the main producers in the face of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. When it comes to natural gas, the most widely consumed resource in the region, 75% of it is consumed by Uzbekistan. Coal ranks second, with 93% of the region's reserves being utilized in Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are the primary oil producers in Central Asia, with Kazakhstan producing 1.2 billion metric tons of oil and Uzbekistan contributing up to 730 million barrels. For Kyrgyzstan, energy security could potentially be achieved through the development of renewable energy resources, as the country has significant potential in areas such as solar power, hydropower, and biomass. The country's growing population and the need to address socioeconomic challenges could be met through the viable solution of harnessing renewable energy. However, it is important to note that the development of energy infrastructure in Central Asia remains a key prerequisite. For example, the construction of pipelines is essential, as the region's vast energy reserves attract the interest of both regional powers and international actors.



Illustration 4.2. Russia's and China's Quiet Contest in Central Asia

Reference: GIS, 2018

The present-day relief features a complex combination of rubbly and sandy plains (with areas of shallow soils), mountain ranges, and massifs, the highest of which exhibit alpine forms of relief. The mineral resources of Central Asia are largely unexplored. North-West China is home to significant deposits of oil (Karamai, Urgo, Tushandzi, Yuimen) and coal (Turfan, Hami), while the MNR contains hard coal (Darkhan, Tsogt-Tsetsii), lignite (Choibalsan), iron ore (Sharyn-Gol, Tamryn-Gol, etc.). Central Asia is rich in rare and non-ferrous metals, table salt, and other minerals (Central Asian Geoportal, 2024). The Central Asian region plays an essential role in the world system of mineral trade as well as in the energy supply system to developed countries. The main reason for this lies in the well-known fact that the region possesses extensive reserves of mineral and natural resources, particularly petroleum (oil) and natural gas. Up to a certain point, the region's most resource-rich states were stable in terms of the political situation. They appeared to be both predictable and reliable partners from the point of view of foreign investors. However, several factors complicate this otherwise favorable situation, such as the fact that the Central Asian region is surrounded by three large states: Russia, China, and Iran. Additionally, these countries position themselves as competitors to other global powers, such as the EU and the US, for influence in the region. From a geographical perspective, the transport routes pass through areas within the zones of influence—or even under the direct

control—of these powers. Russia and China are themselves major purchasers of natural resources and seek to establish their own “rules of the game” in the Central Asian mineral market.

Due to its post-colonial status over the past three decades, the region has held significant potential, especially for the newly independent states. However, this potential has not always been fully realized and the geopolitical situation in the region was not the most stable one. The weakness of the five newly independent political systems, coupled with the absence of a developed financial elite, were the main reasons why the Central Asian “stans” have not been able to establish well-functioning economic systems based on the production, transportation, and trade of the natural resources they possess. From 1991 to 2020, the Central Asian region had a relatively small share of the global economy, not exceeding 0.3 percent. Nevertheless, during this period, the region was recognized as a significant source of raw materials by the world economy. Around the mid-2010s, the total oil reserves in Central Asia were estimated to be between 15 and 31 billion barrels, accounting for approximately 7 percent of the world’s resources. The natural gas reserves in the region were estimated to be between 230 and 360 trillion cubic meters, representing around 7 percent of the world’s reserves (Semey Ainasy, 2023). If considered as a single entity with standard trade regulations, the Central Asian region could be ranked among the top ten largest gold producers globally. The mining, metallurgical, and chemical industries, as well as fuel and energy complexes, are primarily concentrated in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan. Turkmenistan’s economy is heavily dependent on gas sales, while Uzbekistan meets its fuel needs through domestic production but is not solely reliant on the sale of minerals. Kazakhstan appears to have developed a hybrid economic model that is not entirely state-based but remains heavily reliant on oil and gas sales. As of 2019, the Central Asian region's oil and gas reserves have attracted significant regional attention. The total officially proven oil reserves amount to 31.4 billion barrels, while the region holds 825.8 trillion cubic feet of natural gas (Dwivedi, P. and Turaga, U., 2020). The region’s significance in terms of resource supply far outweighs its modest role in the global economy.

4.6. Effects of Russian-Ukrainian Conflict on Central Asia

The ongoing conflict in Ukraine has significantly impacted the economies of Central Asian countries by disrupting various industries and causing the depreciation of local currencies. This has led to financial crises and economic stagnation, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan. Türkiye aspires to become a regional power in the regions highlighted by its foreign policy axis, especially in the Middle East and Central Asia within the Eurasian geography. Türkiye seeks to expand its geopolitical influence beyond its immediate neighbors, aiming to diversify its alliances. Central Asia, with its longstanding historical significance, occupies a geographically strategic position at the crossroads of Europe and Asia. This region's importance has only been underscored by recent geopolitical developments in international relations, highlighting its strategic role not only in Eurasia but also on the global stage. It is impossible to attribute Türkiye's efforts to seek integration and cooperation with the Central Asian republics (CAR) to a single factor or reason. Rather, a combination of historical, geopolitical, economic, and strategic considerations has motivated Türkiye to engage with the region. Central Asia is an interest to various regional and external powers, including China, Russia, Iran, USA, and the EU. By fostering closer ties with Central Asian states, Türkiye is willing to bolster its position and image in regional affairs and also strengthen its stand as a critical player in geopolitics taking place in Eurasia. Russia's war against Ukraine is now in its third year, and its consequences are global: the conflict has shifted the world's political perceptions, it is disrupting the global economy, and it is paving the way for geopolitical turmoil. Perhaps nowhere have the consequences of the Russian invasion been felt more than in Central Asia. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan find themselves in a different world after 24 February 2022. Moscow has long been the leading external actor in the region. Still, the war has changed the perception of Russia in Central Asia, creating opportunities for China, Türkiye, the US, and the EU.

Some analysts consider the war on Ukraine has launched an array of negative effects both internally and externally, which undermines Russia's authority and position in the region of Central Asia. Moreover, Russia's actions in disregarding Ukraine's territorial integrity have placed it in a precarious position regarding its bilateral relations with the Central Asian republics (CAR). In response, these countries have

begun reassessing Russia's role as a security guarantor in the region. As a result, CAR states have increasingly sought to engage with other international actors, including in the security sphere, prompting discussions about the long-term viability of Russia-led organizations in the region. Those are Eurasian Economic Union and Collective Security Treaty Organization. Although the economic impacts of the war were not as severe as initially predicted by analysts, the negative effects have still been significant enough to strain the already unstable economic systems of the Central Asian republics (CAR). These countries have experienced high inflation rates and economic disruptions. In response, the “stans” have sought ways to diversify their trade relationships and have signed joint agreements that bypass Russian transit routes, aiming to reduce their reliance on Russia and mitigate the economic fallout. Despite the long historical background commonalities and close security ties after independence, Central Asian countries have refrained from countersigning Russian acts of aggression in Ukraine. They have abstained from voting on UN resolutions condemning Russia’s invasion, such as resolutions dating back to March 2, 24 2022, October 12, 2022, November 14, 2022, and February 23, 2023 respectively, which called for a “comprehensive, just, and lasting peace in Ukraine” based on the principles of the United Nations Charter (UN Digital Library, 2022,2023). Despite the fact that the Central Asian republics neither voted in favor nor against the resolution, many analysts and U.S. officials interpreted their stance as a sign of the CAR distancing themselves from Russia and refraining from siding with it (Stronski, 2023). Though Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have publicly expressed their backing positions for Ukraine’s territorial integrity by also stating that they do not recognize Luhansk and Donetsk¹⁴. In 2017, Uzbekistan had already distanced itself from Moscow by refusing to recognize the two self-proclaimed separatist “republics.” (RFE/RL’s Uzbek Service, 2022). Among the Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine, while Kyrgyzstan officially expressed its commitment to the core principles of international law, emphasizing territorial integrity and the peaceful settlement of conflicts. Despite widespread media coverage and public expressions of solidarity with Ukraine's territorial integrity among Central Asian citizens, officials in countries like Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan have urged their populations to remain neutral in the conflict (MFA Kyrgyzstan, 2022; Zanini, 2022).

¹⁴ The two self-proclaimed republics through Russia’s backing up. They were formed in 2014, Spring following Ukraine’s pro-Western opposition protests period.

On the other hand, the governments of Turkmenistan and Tajikistan have not made any significant statements, leaving analysts unable to draw clear conclusions about their positions on the Russian-Ukrainian conflict. Overall, public opinion on the matter is divided, largely due to a generational gap. Older generations, many of whom grew up during the Soviet period, along with pro-Russian elites, continue to view Russia favorably, while younger people may have more varied or critical perspectives.

The prevailing view in Central Asia was that Russia would become a harmful partner, and thus, cooperation with it would not be sustainable. Yet, the past two years since the war have revealed a reality in which, despite Russia's growing isolation and economic challenges, it remains an essential partner for the Central Asian region. Even after this period, Moscow continues to be a valued partner in certain sectors of cooperation. At the same time, Russia itself views the five Central Asian countries as increasingly important, particularly as a gateway to a world that is increasingly isolated due to sanctions (Standish, 2024). In Central Asia, public perceptions of Russia have been transformed. People now see Russia through a different prism. Surveys conducted by the Central Asia Barometer and Demoscope have confirmed this trend, noting a new tendency for a predominance of disapproving attitudes towards their northern neighbor. The war in Ukraine played a crucial role in changing public sentiment. Russia's invasion of Ukraine has brought increased global attention to Central Asia, and the region has become a focal point in international geopolitics (Chapman and Zhandayeva, 2023).

In a poll conducted by the Central Asian Barometer titled "Russian-Ukrainian War: Public Opinion in Central Asia," the differences in opinions were clearly visible. The respondents were asked who they believed was primarily responsible for the situation in Ukraine (Kuandykov, 2022):

Table 4.2. Russian-Ukrainian War: Public Opinion in Central Asia

Wave 11. Central Asian Barometer.				
CAR	<i>Russia</i>	<i>Ukraine</i>	<i>Both</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
Kyrgyzstan	14%	36%	7%	29%
Kazakhstan	28%	19%	10%	27%
Wave 12. Central Asian Barometer.				
CAR	<i>Russia</i>	<i>Ukraine</i>	<i>Both</i>	<i>Don't know</i>
Kyrgyzstan	19%	30%	9%	26%
Kazakhstan	27%	23%	3%	29%

Reference: Central Asian Barometer, 2022

Three other CA countries did not join the survey. In another poll conducted across three countries, the survey revealed a generally favorable opinion of Russia. Specifically, 86% of Kyrgyz respondents, 55% of Kazakh respondents, and 76% of Uzbek respondents expressed positive views toward Russia (Koseoglu, 2022). The President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Kassym-Jomart Tokayev, has repeatedly expressed the country's complete readiness to act as a mediator in the conflict, should both Russia and Ukraine request Kazakhstan's involvement. But back then, no country had offered Kazakhstan to mediate the conflict. In addition to the country's leader, other high-ranking officials, including Kazakhstan's Deputy Foreign Minister Roman Vasylenko, have also voiced their opinions in the media. In an interview with DW, Vasylenko expressed Kazakhstan's willingness to help end the bloodshed in the ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine (Smolentseva, 2023). He states the position of Kazakhstan is clear. It is based on the need to respect the territorial integrity of the states worldwide, including Ukraine, under the UN Charter's basis. The conflict is of great concern to Kazakhstan, which is home to 3.5 million Russians and 250,000 ethnic Ukrainians. The country has made every effort to raise awareness of this issue and contribute to its resolution, aiming to stop the violence and promote a peaceful settlement of the ongoing conflict. Vasylenko has also emphasized that Kazakhstan's position is strictly "pro-Kazakh," with the ultimate goal being to build open, trustworthy, equal, and mutually beneficial relations with all partners, including Russia, Ukraine, China, and the West. In an interview with DW, Deputy Minister

Vasylenko clarified that the Republic of Kazakhstan does not align with any particular side—whether pro-Russian, pro-American, or pro-Chinese. He stressed that the country's foreign policy is based solely on its national interests. At this point, it is clear that Central Asian states not only should, but must, implement a multi-vector and mutually beneficial foreign policy in order to maintain a basic level of stability across all spheres.

There was also a plan to help Ukrainians named “Yurts of Indestructibility”, which has nothing to do with the Foreign Ministry of Kazakhstan but was being actively discussed in the Kazakh society. The most active representatives of the society have participated in various programs, including sending humanitarian aid from the Kazakh society and installing of yurts. In Central Asian cultures, including Kazakh culture, the yurt holds sacred significance and serves the functional role of a mobile home. Almost one year ago, after a long period of hiatus since the ongoing conflict in Ukraine, the world has once again started discussions on concrete proposals to cease Russia’s war against Ukraine. China has drawn global attention with its 12-point “Peace Plan” proposal, which was met with significant skepticism, particularly from the West. Chinese Foreign Minister Wang Yi visited Moscow, and the following day, on February 24th, the plan was released. The statements in the plan align with key principles of international law, such as “ending hostilities,” “respecting the sovereignty of other states,” and “abandoning the mentality of the Cold War,” among others. Vasylenko has also mentioned Astana has been supporting the peacebuilding project named “Peace Plan” launched by China and consisting of 12 points. Kazakhstan has expressed a favorable opinion regarding this offer and hopes for its swift implementation. The country also seeks to work with the international community to help end the bloodshed and return the conflict to a diplomatic path. Ukrainian President Volodymyr Zelensky has voiced his general approval of the proposal but did not comment on its specifics. However, his position was later clarified by his advisor, Mykhailo Podolyak, through his personal Twitter account. He highlighted that the content of the "Peace Plan" lacks practical approaches to ending the war. Instead, the main proposal of the Chinese plan focuses more on "freezing" the conflict rather than achieving a resolution. Jake Sullivan, the US National Security Advisor, has also indicated that respect for sovereignty ought to be prioritized first. The sanctions imposed against Russia have had a negative influence both regionally

and internationally, including as it has its implications by hitting hard the economic stability in Central Asia. As Oledzki notes, Kazakhstan's strong connection to the Russian ruble has caused the tenge to lose value relative to the USD. Since the outbreak of the war, the exchange rate saw a sudden jump from 430 to 467 tenge per dollar, and by March 2022, the rate had already reached 511 tenge per dollar (Oledzki, 2022).

In the long term, the countries of Central Asia face a critical challenge. First, they must actively interact with the international communities, with the top priority being to transform external financial and political opportunities into internal advancement. Secondly, they must find a subtle balance in their relations with Russia and other key global players. They need to avoid the perception of blind support for Russia's actions while at the same time avoiding any accusations of anti-Russian attitudes on Moscow's part. Achieving this balance will be crucial for the future stability and prosperity of Central Asia. The Ukrainian war has forced the Central Asian states to become more courageous in their foreign policy and has increased the region's importance as a corridor for international commerce. Until February 2022, both the European Union and China considered the northern trade route between Asia and Europe via Russia sufficient, as it made use of Moscow's extensive railway network and relatively loose customs regulations. At the time, the Middle Corridor, stretching from the Black Sea across the Caspian Sea to Central Asia, had remained in the shadows, receiving minimal investment and attention from major power actors (Standish, 2024). But since Russia's invasion, the situation has changed: Western powers, China, Türkiye, and smaller states along the route have been making efforts to expand and diversify the trade route. For Central Asian countries, this means more space and opportunities.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS

In conclusion, this academic work shed light on the complex interconnectedness of different geopolitical powers and dynamics in Central Asia. The region's strategic geopolitical significance and importance were underscored due to its location and due to the region's rich natural resources. This situation makes Central Asia a focal point not only for the regional powers in the neighborhood but for global powers too. The decline of traditional hegemonic powers, notably the Russian Federation—especially following its full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022—has opened up a range of opportunities for emerging regional actors like Türkiye to assert their influence and presence in Central Asia. Through detailed analysis of foreign policies, historical backgrounds, and economic dependencies, this thesis elucidated the main factors contributing to Russia's waning power and authority in Central Asia. The Russo-Ukrainian war turned out to have coupled the effect and speed of this process to come out to the geopolitical arena of the region. The decline of Russia's role and responsibilities created a vacuum, providing space for alternative actors to emerge and capitalize on the situation for their own benefit.

Türkiye has been actively pursuing its proactive policy towards Central Asia, which it considers a strategically important region due to its geographical location, energy resources, and historical ties. In addition, Türkiye's historical, ethnic, religious, and cultural ties with Central Asian countries represent a great opportunity to strengthen Ankara's role and engagement in the region. Türkiye's policy toward Central Asia is based on three main pillars: political cooperation, economic development, and cultural exchange. The fact that the Republic of Türkiye was the first country outside the region to officially recognize the independence of the newly formed Central Asian republics highlights how early Türkiye understood the strategic importance of the region and the potential benefits of seeking integration with these states. While Türkiye may possess significant advantages in areas such as diplomatic agility, well-executed soft power,

and economic strength, geographical proximity has proven to be the key factor for sustainable and effective cooperation and foreign policy implementation. On the other hand, Russia benefits from both shared borders and historical ties, which are powerful assets in terms of executing an effective foreign policy. After the disintegration of the Soviet Union, all five states of CA have found themselves in a severe economic crisis, along with the growing internal conflicts exacerbating their relations with the Russian Federation. The latter sought to rebuild its previous global and regional influence following the restoration of Russia's political and economic systems under Vladimir Putin's leadership, particularly in Central Asia, which notable to mention Russia considered to be in its sphere of influence. Russia aimed to restore its position as a significant player in the international arena, especially need to remind the fact since it had the power to compete with the US internationally and engage regional forces, such as Türkiye, at least aimed to confront the foreign policy of Türkiye, in which Central Asia has been having not the last place since it is considered as a vital field. This is not surprising, as these countries share historical, cultural, religious, linguistic, geographical, and other ties. However, on the other hand, there is Russia, which also shares a common historical heritage with the Central Asian republics, having experienced much of that history together. This led to both countries pursuing strategies to gain influence and impose their ambitions through the prism of foreign policy approaches, including economic and military models. Both actors sought a prominent position in the region for various reasons related to their strategic priorities, including direct intervention and supporting to the republics to overcome long-standing crises since the independence date of the CAR.

Moving forward, the evolving geopolitical situation in Central Asia presents numerous opportunities for deeper cooperation and potential integration with the Central Asian republics. Türkiye operates through various means, including cultural ties, diplomatic engagement, and economic cooperation, which directly influence the dynamics between Türkiye and Russia in Central Asia. It would be highly challenging for Türkiye to displace Russia from the region, given Russia's deep historical, economic, security, and political ties with the Central Asian states. Russia has deep-rooted ties with Central Asia, stemming from historical connections dating back to the Soviet Union era. Additionally, Russia has made significant economic investments in local businesses and enterprises, and maintains security cooperation through established

organizations such as the CSTO. Another important factor is Russia's military presence in the region, with military bases in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, allowing it to maintain a strong strategic foothold in Central Asia. Türkiye can certainly increase its presence in the region through various initiatives, thereby strengthening its influence. However, it is unlikely that Türkiye could completely replace Russia in Central Asia, as doing so would require a significant shift in geopolitical dynamics at both the regional and international levels. Türkiye can complement Russia's role in Central Asia at times when Russia is unable to fulfill its responsibilities, as has been the case in recent years due to shifts in the geopolitical environment caused by the war in Ukraine.

Prior to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the Kremlin held a very strong position in Central Asia. Just before February 2022, it was the Russian military, under the auspices of the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), that helped Kazakhstani President Tokayev maintain his grip on power. This case has proved that Russia and no other external power, even as great as China, is an external guarantor of security for the CAR. Even if Russia's strong position in the region of the CAR was shaken because of sanctions and isolation from the world community, Russia is still accepted as the leading power in Central Asia. This strong position is, at least in part, the result of Russia's influence, which it has been building in the region for more than a century. It may seem that Moscow has finally lost its position in Central Asia and that Beijing has become the dominant external power in Central Asia. The Chinese leaders' declarations of support for the territorial integrity of Central Asia, numerous high-level visits, record Chinese trade and investment in the region, and the pompous first China-Central Asia summit in May 2023, followed by the formation of the mechanism's secretariat in March 2024, lend credence to this perception. In reality, however, the situation is different. First of all, the five landlocked countries of Central Asia—Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan—do not benefit from having one influential neighbor simply replace another (Umarov, 2024). Therefore, they all strive to diversify their ties with the external world. Both Russia and China are important in this regard, often as a tandem of major powers that have built a pragmatic interaction with each other. Even the fact that one of these countries is now in confrontation with the West and the other is actively preparing for such a conflict has not changed the situation.

Türkiye has always been a privileged partner for the countries of Central Asia, thanks to its close historical and cultural ties with each of them. Türkiye first recognized the independence of the newly created republics after the disintegration of the Soviet Union and has been consistently supportive of the sovereignty of the Central Asian states ever since. But today, against the backdrop of the war in Ukraine, new factors are emerging for the accelerated rapprochement between Türkiye and the Central Asian states. On the one hand, this is fueled by Ankara's strategy, which has pursued an active foreign policy in recent years. Especially after the success in Karabakh, the Turkish authorities decided to move further and strengthen their military and political influence in Central Asia (Izimov, 2022).

On the other hand, the institutionalization of Turkic integration processes is helping to strengthen Türkiye's role in the region. In 2021, the summits of Turkic-speaking countries officially evolved into a full-fledged international organization—the Organization of Turkic States. This now includes five member states: Türkiye, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. And this fact is often used by Turkish ideologists in domestic politics, promoting the principle of “One Nation - Five States.”

Prof. Dr. Çağdaş Üngör, a lecturer in the Department of Political Science and International Relations at Marmara University, notes that one of Türkiye's critical strengths in Central Asia is its “soft power.” He adds, “Russia and China have other advantages, particularly in terms of security, with these countries being viewed more as important players in hard power.” China, of course, is a crucial economic player, too, if emphasizing that both countries lack the cultural and linguistic ties that Türkiye has in Central Asia. One of President Erdoğan's aims in seeking influence in Central Asia is to reduce Türkiye's dependence on Europe at a time when relations with the European Union are increasingly strained. Russia, on the other hand, is seeking to deepen its sphere of influence in Central Asia as it faces increasing sanctions imposed by European countries over its invasion of Ukraine. Tatiana Mitrova, a Russia expert at the Paris School of International Relations, commented on Russia's position in Central Asia: “Russia as a whole is facing major logistical changes. Many of the western routes are no longer accessible,” she says. The United States is also seeking to woo the Central Asian countries to undermine Moscow's efforts to avoid isolation

and contain China's growing influence. Experts say these ambitions could help Ankara and Washington find common ground (Jones, 2023).

On the other hand, the trend of Russia's security guarantor role had been under question long before the Ukrainian conflict. Moscow used to prioritize its own military interests, which led to a failure in fulfilling its responsibilities for Central Asia in terms of security cooperation. The war has just undermined Russia's "security manager" position, and thus, Türkiye and China have just used the vacuum to fill the void. Central Asian states have always followed and applied multifaceted foreign policy and implemented subtle balancing between or even among different regional powers. So this situation is not a new one. Another factor that provided a solid foundation for Türkiye to establish better cooperation with Central Asia and secure its own benefits was economic relations. Traditionally, the region has favored Russia in this regard. However, following the Ukrainian conflict and the subsequent Western sanctions, the Central Asian republics had little choice but to diversify their allies and expand their trade with other countries. Perhaps nowhere beyond Ukraine have the impact waves of war been felt more keenly than in Russia's closest neighborhood. Russia's commercial and economic ties with its former Soviet neighbors had undergone significant changes long before the outbreak of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Russia's neighbors actively sought to diversify their trade relations, including with partners such as China, Türkiye, Iran, and the Gulf states. However, the war has brought a new dynamic to the most complex and vital part of their overall relationship since February 2022. The changes are quantitative and qualitative and of great importance to both sides. Economic relations between Russia and other former Soviet republics have long been one-sided, with Russia seeking to use its size and geographical position to gain geopolitical advantages and strengthen its influence over other countries. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which includes Armenia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Russia, was created by Russia to counterbalance the EU and was seen by Moscow as a critical tool to keep its neighbors in its economic orbit. For example, under intense Russian pressure, Armenia, in 2013, abandoned its plan to sign an extensive association and free trade agreement with the EU and instead joined the EAEU in 2014 (Economist Intelligent Unit, 2014). In the foreseeable future, Türkiye will not be able to fully replace Russia, which has been building its stand in the region through various sectors. But the Turkish Republic can

continue enhancing its role on the territory of the CAR in those areas it is better than other external actors, such as soft power, diplomatic engagement, prospective fruitful cooperation in the framework of Central Asian energy trade, and transit to the West. It should be understood that while both countries share a common historical background, along with cultural and political ties, the current geopolitical situation heavily influences what each actor can achieve in the region to secure its own benefits.

Finally, from a broader Eurasian perspective, it can be inferred that Russia's influence and position in Central Asia have diminished, with other powers now seeking to expand their influence and potentially build their empires on the remnants of the Russian one. But in reality, this case is based on the myriad of interrelated factors and geopolitical dynamics influencing each other and pointing out whether Russia is waning out of the region and whether Türkiye as the regional power would be able to replace it. The future trajectory of CAR's geopolitical dynamics and foreign policy choices will depend on multiple factors, including actions obtained on regional and international levels by critical actors and some global powers. This academic work contributes to a better understanding of the nature of both Russian-Central Asian and Turkish-Central Asian relationships, as well as their implications for international relations. It also paves the way for further research in academia and deeper discussions on the future of this issue.

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