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SOCIOCULTURAL ASPECTS OF THE INTEGRATION OF THE CASPIAN MACROREGION AS A POTENTIAL “CENTER OF POWER”

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Abstract. The aim of the article is to assess the state of the Caspian macroregion integration in the sociocultural sphere, identify barriers to the said sociocultural integration and prospects for its development. The authors consider the Caspian macroregion as a potential center of power in world politics, with a unique geopolitical position, hydrocarbon reserves, and developed transport infrastructure. Further development of the macroregion as a center of power is problematic without a certain level of sociocultural integration. The article presents steps towards integration of the educational, information, and cultural spaces of the Greater Caspian. Interpreting the results of an extensive field research conducted in four Caspian countries, the authors assess sociopsychological readiness to perceive integration, nature of intercultural communications, as well as possibilities for constructing a Caspian macroregional identity. The main barriers to the integration are institutional gaps, nature of center-regional relations in the countries, level of digital divide, weak cognitive motivation to obtain information about neighbors’ lives, and the weakening position of the Russian language in the region. A significant barrier is the competition of geopolitical projects, primarily the Great Turan. Scenarios for the development of the Caspian macroregion integration are presented. In the interest of development of a positive scenario there is a need for a systematic, comprehensive – including government structures and society of the entire Caspian five – coordinated work on the transition to a new level of integration, which would contribute to finding their place in the new multipolar world.

Keywords: Caspian macroregion, sociocultural integration, potential center of power, identity of the macroregion, educational, information, and cultural space, barriers to integration, scenarios for integration development.

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СОЦИОКУЛЬТУРНЫЕ АСПЕКТЫ ИНТЕГРАЦИИ КАСПИЙСКОГО МАКРОРЕГИОНА КАК ПОТЕНЦИАЛЬНОГО “ЦЕНТРА СИЛЫ”

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Аннотация. Целями статьи являются оценка состояния интеграции Каспийского макрорегиона в социокультурной сфере, выявление барьеров социокультурной интеграции и перспектив раз-

вития данного направления. Развитие макрорегиона как центра силы проблематично без определенного уровня социокультурной интеграции. На основе анализа данных обширного полевого исследования, проведенного в четырех прикаспийских странах, авторы характеризуют шаги по интеграции образовательного, информационного и культурного пространств Большого Каспия. Представлены сценарии развития интеграции Каспийского макрорегиона.

Ключевые слова: Каспийский макрорегион, социокультурная интеграция, потенциальный центр силы, идентичность макрорегиона, образовательное, информационное и культурное пространство, барьеры интеграции, сценарии развития интеграции.

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INTRODUCTION

The “centres of power” concept was widely used in national scientific discourse during the last third of the twentieth century [1]. The contemporary processes of geopolitical transformation, as well as the fragmentation and regionalisation of the international order, have brought scholars back to this term – a concept that had been largely forgotten since the 1980s – and have made it possible to develop a discussion on potential changes in the configuration of the centres of power. One definition states that it is “the totality of military, economic, political, and socio-cultural (civilizational) resources, of the state which determine, if present, its geostrategic, geo-economic, geopolitical, and socio-cultural potential and allow it to actively participate in the management of global world processes. If the state has the status of superiority in all four indicators, it can be called a ‘universal centre of power’” [2].

Scholarly research focuses on old and new centres of power [2, 3, 4], their types (individual states, unions of countries, transnational political spaces¹), as well as a set of attributes which, when combined, turn a subject of international relations into a centre of power [5]. These features normally include fastness of territory and population size with positive dynamics, general GDP and GDP per capita, possession of significant natural resources, sufficient military and political potential, “soft power” resources, and others.

¹ The updated Concept of the Foreign Policy of the Russian Federation (2023) pays special attention to the development of multilateral cooperation and consolidation of economic and humanitarian resources on the territory of a single continental space – Eurasia. In May 2022, at the plenary session of the Eurasian Economic Forum, the President of Russia noted that Greater Eurasia “is, without exaggeration, a great civilisational project”.

One of the manifestations of the “discursive power” of modern states is, as recently observed, the ability to put forward significant value-based political projects as a basis for macroregional integration [source 1]. One of the drivers of the ongoing formation of potential centres of power is global regionalisation, which “leads to the creation of new elements of the world political system – global regions that represent a structured space; its main characteristics include both traditional factors (economic, historical, civilizational, and cultural) and new ones having their origin in the postmodern era (networking, communication, virtual, etc.). The characteristics of a global region include the presence of common spaces; supranational nature; the existence of transnational networks” [6]. One author metaphorically referred to the emerging global regions claiming the status of potential centres of power as “geopolitical nuggets” (referring, incidentally, to the Arctic and Greater Caspian macroregions) [7]. A potential centre of power may differ from an actual one in a number of parameters: some features may be absent; there may be internal contradictions among the states forming the region; and there may be rivalry for leadership within the region itself. The current geopolitical transformation can hardly be called a completed process, so it is natural to assume that some global regions – potential centres of power – will be characterised by prevailing integration trends, while others will demonstrate fragmentation trends.

The Greater Caspian region is positioned in scientific discourse as a global region, macroregion, mesoregion, and axial region. All of the proposed nominations include references the growing geopolitical role of this region (and, additionally, possible claims to the status of a potential centre

of power in modern world politics). The Greater Caspian region is considered to be the geopolitical axis of Eurasia, forming a “juxtaposition of worlds” – “East and West” – and embodying the breakage of the world’s economic and technological patterns [8]. Most scientific works [8, 9, 10, 11] characterise the potential of the Caspian region by the presence of significant hydrocarbon reserves, the region’s favourable geopolitical position, and its developed transport infrastructure.

The desire of the “new” independent states to assert their national importance amid uncertain geopolitical interests and a lack of resources for their realisation poses a serious obstacle to integration processes [12, p. 84]. According to experts, additional barriers include the absence of sustainable political traditions and economic systems in these states, as well as the presence of internal contradictions that create fertile ground for external influence aimed at generating a situation of “controlled chaos”, along with the impact of the ideology and policy of pan-Turkism [12]. According to a number of scholars, the 2018 Convention on the Status of the Caspian Sea did not halt the attempts of the “Big Five” to promote their infrastructural projects and compete for new transit opportunities [13]. The modern development of the Caspian macroregion is characterised by multidirectional trends: centrifugal and centripetal, cooperation- and confrontation-based. In the current situation, “the decisive role in the growth of conflictogenic potential is played by extra-regional powers and alliances that contribute to the destabilisation of the region” [10]. Real threats also exist in the domain of “brute power”: NATO’s “Partnership for Peace” programmes, involving all Central Asian states, are implementing measures aimed at weakening Russian military and technical influence in the region².

The fate of the Caspian macroregion in the coming years will depend on many internal and external factors, including the ability and motivation of the countries’ leaders to find optimal balances between the development vectors of this

² In July 2024, Birlestik-2024 martial exercises took place in the Caspian Sea with the participation of Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, but without Russia and Iran [source 2].

structure. Using A. Kortunov’s apt metaphor³, one can note that the states of the Greater Caspian region “will have to play with their partners and their opponents in the foreseeable future not on one chessboard but simultaneously on many boards, where each board will have its own rules of the game” [14].

The socio-cultural aspects of the Caspian integration project, as a phenomenon of subjective policy space, have become the focus of attention for political scientist P. L. Karabushchenko from Astrakhan, who believes that this axial region of Eurasia “can be considered a cradle of many civilisations with good reason... Having found itself on the margins of world history, the Caspian is beginning to regain its identity” only now [15, p. 35].

The entity’s status (including the status of a real or potential centre of power) is based on the aggregate or collective perceptions of the place of this state or association in the system of international relations, grounded in values that are recognised as significant [16]. It is possible to overcome the trend toward fragmentation and act as a potential centre of power in world politics by incorporating a full-fledged socio-cultural component into the Caspian integration project – one that can unify various manifestations of a subjective political space: a common positive image of the future, macroregional identity, and cooperation in the fields of culture, education, and mass media.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY AND DESIGN

The core of the project is the concept of a potential centre of power, with one of its attributes represented by socio-cultural integration. The spatial approach treats the Caspian macroregion as an intersubjective social reality. The regional “semantic” space encompasses the subjective perception of spaces, the assessment of available resources, and ideas about forms of integration – functioning as a social construct created and maintained by the population of the macroregion. The identitarian approach allows to consider one

³ A. Kortunov, a member of the Russian Council on International Affairs, used this metaphor in relation to BRICS countries.

of the resources for the Caspian region's development. The authors also employed the concept of "discursive power" as a theoretical basis, defined by I.S. Semenenko as a set of "strategies and mechanisms for promoting ideological attitudes, ideas, meanings and underlying interests in a political communications space" [17, p. 432]. The concept itself has a long history, tracing back to M. Foucault's ideas [18].

The empirical study conducted between 2022 and 2024 was based on a combination of quantitative and qualitative strategies. The mass survey was carried out in the form of electronic questioning via the Survey-Studio platform. The sample included 2,140 respondents from Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, and Russia⁴, as well as Turkmen students studying in Russia. Focus group interviews were organised in Kazakhstan (7), Azerbaijan (5), and Russia (8), covering target groups such as urban and rural residents, young workers, and students. Additionally, six focus group interviews were conducted with students from Turkmenistan studying at various Russian universities (Astrakhan, Maikop, Krasnodar).

No field study was conducted in Iran. Due to administrative and language barriers that could not be overcome during the three-year project period, the authors relied on open sources. It is worth noting that Iran has recently shown increased openness to regional integration processes [19]. For instance, Iranian Foreign Minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian, during his visit to Ashgabat in April 2024, declared Iran's readiness to host the next Caspian summit and referred to the Caspian Sea as "a zone of constructive cooperation between the riparian countries" [source 3]. Iran is becoming actively involved in various associations, including those comprising Caspian states [20] and Central Asian countries [21]. Iran views the economy as a primary basis of integration [22].

The field methods of information collection were complemented by cameralistic ones, including the analysis of regulatory and legal documents, national development strategies, and ma-

⁴ In the Russian Federation, the survey was conducted in three constituent entities of the Russian Federation having access to the Caspian Sea – Astrakhan Region, the Republic of Dagestan and the Republic of Kalmykia.

terials from official websites of state authorities, socio-political organisations, and mass media. The final stage of the empirical research involved an expert survey comprising 28 experts from Kazakhstan (10), Azerbaijan (9), and Russia (9). The experts included scholars from universities and academic centres, officials from public authorities and local self-government bodies, active members of socio-political organisations, and journalists.

INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIO-PSYCHOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS OF SOCIO-CULTURAL INTEGRATION

The first Caspian Summit⁵ with the participation of the governors of Russia, Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and Iran (the Caspian Five), was held in Ashgabat in 2002 at the level of interstate communications [source 4]. However, such a summit is not a pan-Caspian institution; it rather represents a meeting format. This format is insufficient to sustain the integration process on a permanent basis. Therefore, in 2021, on the eve of the Caspian Summit in Ashgabat, Russian Foreign Minister S. Lavrov proposed the establishment of the Caspian Council in Astrakhan [source 5]. No objections followed, but the idea was never realised. Lavrov repeated the same proposal in 2023, during a foreign ministers' meeting in Moscow [source 6]. The participants also discussed the possibility of creating the Caspian Economic Cooperation Organisation (CECO), the Parliamentary Assembly of the region (PACECO), and a number of other interstate institutions⁶. The interviewed experts noted the poor efficiency of all-Caspian interstate institutions: "Officially there exists such an organisation as the Caspian States Integration⁷. It does not work properly, I honestly tell you. If it worked like an integration structure, in-

⁵ A common name for meetings of the so-called Caspian Five represented by heads of five Caspian littoral states that meet approximately every four years. Six summits have been held so far.

⁶ Caspian International Petroleum Company, Caspian Interstate Bank for Economic Cooperation, Caspian Development Bank, Centre for Caspian Economic and Political Studies, Centre for Research of Biological Resources of the Caspian Sea [source 7].

⁷ The informant is wrong, this interstate organisation is not known.

stead of just meeting in Astana or somewhere else, just talking and leaving, that would be different” (Expert 5, Dagestan).

After the collapse of the USSR, the educational domain – later joined by the scientific sphere – proved to be the most flexible and ready for creating a unified Caspian space. In 1996, the Association of Caspian States Universities was established, which today operates as the Association of Universities and Research Centres of the Caspian Countries. The initiators were Astrakhan State Technical University (Russia) and Gorgan University of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources (Iran). The Association unites more than 50 members and holds assemblies almost annually [source 8]. A total of 10 universities and 9 research institutes in Iran actively participate in the assembly.

Initially, the Association was tasked with ambitious goals: establishing a unified educational, scientific, and informational space while preserving the distinct features of national educational systems; creating the International Open Cross-Premises Caspian University offering double and triple diploma programmes; establishing the International Open Coordination Centre for Student Tourism; and founding the International Institute of Caspian Region Problems [source 9]. However, none of these institutions has been established so far. Nevertheless, the idea of an educational space – through the holding of assemblies, participation in regional conferences and roundtable discussions, youth festivals, and student sporting games – is being partially implemented.

Attempts to create joint institutions have proven to be the weakest point of socio-cultural integration, due to difficulties in coordinating the location and funding of such institutions, as well as challenges related to intercultural communication and the routinisation of the process. Instead of the proposed multilateral organisations, a number of Caspian institutions were established, though of a unilateral nature: the Non-Profit Partnership Institute for Caspian Cooperation, headquartered in Moscow (2010–2022); the Caspian-Eurasia Centre for International and Socio-Political Studies (established in 2016, still operating in Moscow);

and the Caspian Institute for Strategic Studies (CISS) (established in 2021, also still operating in Moscow).

The scientific space is created mainly within the framework of the Commission on Science, Research and Technology under the Association of State Universities of Caspian Region Countries. The Commission includes universities and academic institutions from the five Caspian states [source 10]. Since 2021, the scientific space has also been supported by the annual international scientific forum *Caspian Region: Sustainable Development Paths*, which evolved into the *Caspian Science and Education Congress* in 2023. Over the course of two years, more than 1,700 participants took part in the Congress, including over 100 foreign representatives from the Caspian states and other countries. Scientific research results are published in journals focused on pan-Caspian issues, primarily produced in the Russian Caspian area. The socio-political discourse in these journals is dominated by topics such as economic integration, the fuel and energy complex, transport infrastructure, Caspian ecology, and regional security.

The common information space is further supported by the annual *Caspian Media Forum*, initiated by the Caspian Five Summit in 2014. The forum brings together media agencies from all Caspian states. A permanent news agenda is maintained through information portals with pan-Caspian content, such as the Information and Analytical Portal “Caspian Herald”.

The pan-Caspian cultural space began to take shape actively in 2019, when Russia and Iran proposed the establishment of the *Caspian Cultural Foundation*, intended to contribute to the development of the cultural and humanitarian dimension of cooperation among the Caspian littoral states [source 11]. Since 2021, regular cultural events of a pan-Caspian scale have been held, shaping this space in practice. The first international classical art festival, “Caspian Seasons” was triumphantly held in Astrakhan, with the participation of leading musicians and singers from various countries. As part of the festival, the *International Caspian Orchestra* was established, comprising 60 performers from all Caspian states.

Table 1. Russian respondents' attitude towards post-soviet Caspian region countries (Russia-average), %

Response option	I definitely agree	Rather agree than disagree	Rather disagree than agree	Don't agree definitely	I am not sure
Russia and Kazakhstan have a common historical background	22.8	38.1	13.0	3.3	22.8
Russia and Turkmenistan have a common historical background	11.6	30.2	18.1	5.1	34.9
Russia and Azerbaijan have a common historical background	12.6	34.4	15.8	5.1	32.1
Kazakhstan and Russia are good neighbours and friends	19.5	47.4	11.2	3.3	18.6
Turkmenistan and Russia are good neighbours and friends	14.9	41.4	7.0	3.3	33.5
Azerbaijan and Russia are good neighbours and friends	14.4	40.0	10.2	4.7	30.7
Kazakhstan and Russia are brotherly countries	20.0	36.3	12.1	6.0	25.6
Turkmenistan and Russia are brotherly countries	12.6	36.7	11.2	4.2	35.3
Azerbaijan and Russia are brotherly countries	11.2	36.3	11.6	5.1	35.8

Source of Tables 1–6: materials of the survey undertaken by the authors in 2022–2024.

In 2022, during the Caspian Summit in Ashgabat, Russian President V.V. Putin proposed the idea of cooperation among Caspian states in the field of cinematography. At the 2023 Moscow Film Festival, plans were announced to hold an international *Caspian Film Festival* at alternating venues. According to Masood Ahmadvand, Head of the Cultural Representation at the Embassy of the Islamic Republic of Iran in the Russian Federation, “Eastern countries can use films to convey their values and present their vision of the processes that are taking place globally today. At the same time, it is necessary to support Russia’s and Iran’s actions to set up the Russian Cinema Academy” [source 12]. The first film festival is planned to be held in Iran [source 13].

It is also necessary to take into account another important factor that is crucial for building a regional community – the presence (or absence) of socio-psychological readiness for its recognition and the positively oriented nature of intercultural communications. The interpretation of data obtained through online surveys and focus group interviews made it possible to assess how representatives of the post-Soviet Caspian region perceive one another. The attitudes of Russian

respondents toward residents of other post-Soviet Caspian countries – and vice versa – were revealed, ranging from the recognition of a shared historical past, through the acceptance of good neighbourly relations, to the perception of the fraternal nature of the Caspian peoples (Tables 1 and 2). In total, over 50 per cent of respondents assessed relations between representatives of the post-Soviet Caspian states positively⁸. Respondents from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan showed the highest levels of empathy (Kazakhstan – up to 80.9%, Turkmenistan – a maximum of 69.9%). In the case of Azerbaijan, however, there was a noticeable decrease in empathy on both sides across all three indicators – a situation that requires further research and reflection.

PREREQUISITES, PROBLEMS AND BARRIERS TO SOCIO-CULTURAL INTEGRATION

The study of social reality should be based not only on analysing the activities of official insti-

⁸ The exception is the position of the respondents from the Republic of Azerbaijan – only 26.8% of them consider Russia as a brotherly country.

Table 2. Foreign respondents' attitude towards Russia, %

	I definitely agree	Rather agree than disagree	Rather disagree than agree	Don't agree definitely	I am not sure
Kazakhstan and Russia have a common historical background	52.2	2.7	9.6	7.8	1.7
Kazakhstan and Russia are good neighbours and friends	50.4	26.1	11.3	3.5	8.7
Kazakhstan and Russia are brotherly countries	45.2	22.6	12.2	11.3	8.7
Turkmenistan and Russia have a common historical background	57.9	5.5	3.9	24.6	8.1
Turkmenistan and Russia are good neighbours and friends	66.7	3.2	5.2	20.7	4.2
Turkmenistan and Russia are brotherly countries	62.5	6.5	4.9	21.4	4.9
Azerbaijan and Russia have a common historical background	27.7	29.3	19.8	9.8	13.4
Azerbaijan and Russia are good neighbours and friends	24.7	27.4	23.5	10.7	13.7
Azerbaijan and Russia are brotherly countries	13.7	13.1	22.3	30.2	20.7

tutions that structure this reality but also, as the prominent sociologist A. Schutz argued, on the “conceptualisation in the minds of people going through everyday life in their community” [23, p. 59]. Therefore, an important part of the present research was the analysis of how residents of the Caspian region mentally reflect on the key realities associated with integration processes and, by extension, with the prospects for forming a potential “centre of power”. Given the prerequisites and the evident aspiration of regional leaders toward integration – possibly influenced by the existing status quo (e.g., the activities of the Caspian Five) – it is also essential to undertake practical steps toward integration, including efforts to shape public opinion.

What factors can integrate the Caspian region into a single community capable of constructing a macroregional identity in the future? The respondents' opinions about the factors that contribute to uniting Caspian region residents are presented in Tables 3 and 4.

Slightly over a third of the respondents, almost equally across the board, identified the common territory of the Caspian region as the main geographical factor. A quarter of the respondents from the Republic of Kazakhstan (29.4%), Turk-

menistan (26.9%), and the Russian Caspian region (24.1%) pointed to the common historical background as a still significant factor of unity. This percentage is somewhat lower in the Republic of Azerbaijan (18.6%). The third most important factor identified by respondents was economic prosperity – or the challenges associated with achieving it.

Despite the fact that over 90% of the population in Caspian countries is Muslim, religion is not viewed as a decisive factor. It was considered significant by only 3.1% of respondents from Kazakhstan, 3.5% from Azerbaijan, and 5.6% from Turkmenistan. Among respondents from the Russian Caspian region, 6.1% identified religion as important – with a notable concentration among Dagestani respondents (17.3%), compared to just 2% in Astrakhan and complete disregard of the factor among residents of Kalmykia.

However, during the focus group interviews – where respondents were not offered a predefined set of parameters – they often found it difficult to articulate clear preconditions for the formation of a Caspian community. As revealed by the combined analysis of the online survey and focus group interviews, the Caspian countries appear to be united not so much by shared roots, achieve-

Table 3. Grounds for constructing pan-Caspian identity, as voiced by the respondents from Caspian region countries, %

Basis for uniting Caspian region residents	Kazakhstan	Azerbaijan	Turkmenistan
Total area of the Caspian region	32.2	35.3	33.7
Common historical background	29.4	18.6	26.9
Language	7.3	3.1	4.2
Mentality	4.8	4.2	6.0
Culture	4.2	11.3	6.4
Religion	3.1	3.5	5.6
Cuisine	3,1	2,0	3,4
Economic well-being/hardships	1.8	4.7	8.2
Other	0.3	0.7	
Nothing in common	2.1	4.4	1.8
I am not sure	0.7	12.2	3.6

Table 4. Grounds for constructing pan-Caspian identity, as voiced by the respondents from Russian Caspian regions, %

Response option	Average by region	Republic of Kalmykia	Republic of Dagestan	Astrakhan region
Total area of the Caspian region	31.1	30.9	29.9	37.5
Common historical background	24.1	25.2	20.5	28.1
Language	2.2	2.3	0.8	6.3
Mentality	7.7	7.0	10.2	3.1
Culture	5.9	5.7	7.1	3.1
Religion	6.1	2.0	17.3	
Cuisine	2.4	2.3	2.4	3.1
Economic well-being/hardships	13.1	15.8	7.1	12.5
Other	0.2			3.1
Nothing in common	0.9	1.0		3.1
I am not sure	6.3	7.7	4.7	

ments, or mutual connections, but rather by common problems related to the Caspian Sea and the region's natural resources (see Tables 5 and 6).

Respondents from Kazakhstan (22.9%), Azerbaijan (23.9%), and the Russian Caspian region (21.8%) identified the ecological situation in the Caspian region as the main problem. This issue was also mentioned by 11.5% of respondents from Turkmenistan. Focus group participants listed a range of environmental concerns, including:

- general climatic problems – deserted territory, hot climate, dust storms, water supply problems: “*I know for sure that in ecological terms we have an insufficient amount of water, we face a problem with water supply. It is not like in African coun-*

tries, but still, we have these problems compared to Russia because Turkmenistan is mostly a desert and water is scarce” (focus group 2, Turkmenistan);

- problems with the Caspian Sea water basin – shallowing, pollution, death of wildlife: “*Yes, the ebb-tide is very strong. Aged people say that there was a seashore some 20–30 years ago, but one can see now a couple of new buildings already erected in this place*” (focus group 2, Azerbaijan);

- “*Never before have I seen crabs in such numbers washed ashore. I did not in fact realise that we have so many crabs. The whole shore is strewn with dead crabs*” (focus group 1, Dagestan).

An equally important factor – both unifying and problematic – is economic welfare and as-

Table 5. Common problems mentioned by the respondents from Caspian region countries (sample average), %

Response option	Kazakhstan	Azerbaijan	Turkmenistan
Environmental issues	22.9	23.9	11.5
Common economic problems	21.2	22.6	38.3
Common political issues	13.3	11.9	13.3
Activity of terrorist organisations	8.2	3.5	3.9
Problems on ethnic grounds	8.2	5.3	2.3
Territorial claims	4.5	8.8	3.0
Other	19.7	13.9	13.9
I am not sure	2.0	10.1	13.8

Table 6. Common problems mentioned by the respondents from Russian Caspian regions (sample average), %

Response option	Average by region	Republic of Kalmykia	Republic of Dagestan	Astrakhan region
Environmental issues	2.8	2.8	23.1	18.6
Common economic problems	19.9	21.1	16.5	20.9
Common political issues	9.6	9.9	9.1	9.3
Activity of terrorist organisations	6.4	5.6	5.0	16.3
Problems on ethnic grounds	9.0	8.9	8.3	11.6
Territorial claims	5.8	5.6	7.4	2.3
Other	17.4	17.2	18.2	16.3
I am not sure	10.1	9.9	12.4	4.7

sociated challenges. This was mentioned by 12% of respondents from Kazakhstan, 13.1% from the Russian Caspian region, 8.2% from Turkmenistan, and only 4.4% from Azerbaijan, where greater emphasis was placed on cultural similarity (11.3%). Some respondents believe that the economy is the only aspect that brings the nations together in any meaningful way. The percentage of those who view it as a problematic factor is significantly higher: Kazakhstan (21.2%), the Russian Caspian area (19.9%), Azerbaijan (22.6%), and Turkmenistan (38.3%). Focus group participants emphasised that the core unifying factors are the shared Caspian subsoil reserves, trade, and trade routes.

Most participants drew the interviewers' attention to the shortage of employment opportunities and low salaries, and also mentioned corruption as a key obstacle to economic development. Respondents and experts from the Russian regions additionally expressed concern over uncontrolled migration.

So, to what extent is the Greater Caspian perceived by today's population as an established

community? This question proved difficult even for Russian experts, as it required them to independently define the foundations of such a community. Below are several examples of their attempts to articulate its essence. "...I have already lived my life here and met local people, so I really identify myself with the Caspian region. What can bring people together? I don't know. Perhaps it's some kind of inner energy" (Expert 4, Dagestan).

Some experts believe that one can talk about commonality only within the Russian Caspian area:

- "The sense of community? Oh, no. Talking, for instance, that the Caspian region extends to Kazakhstan and Iran and Azerbaijan – I don't think so... Well, once they were Soviet Union republics, so talking of my interest and esteem for them, if any, I might have it only in terms of their status of union republics that once made up the USSR. But I have no interest in them in the current version" (Expert 2, Dagestan);

- "...Of course, I identify myself with them, but not with Kazakhstan or Iran or Azerbaijan, Turk-

menistan – I mean these are different states. I only identify myself with the Russian Caspian zone, 590 kilometres – the Russian coastline” (Expert 1, Dagestan).

Some experts are quite categorical: *“I don’t perceive myself as a Caspian region constituent particle, I feel myself a Russian citizen. There is no need to form such an identity, and it will not be formed. This identity could theoretically be formed only on religious grounds as a unifying point. Or, which is even worse in my opinion, it could be formed owing to the penetration of the Turan world ideas”* (Expert 10, Dagestan).

Some barriers to the integration of Caspian states have been previously highlighted; therefore, the authors will continue using those formulations [24]. One of the crucial barriers is the weak institutional structure, both at the interstate and socio-cultural levels. As shown earlier, most existing institutions either function only formally or are localised within a specific constituent entity, effectively promoting their own narratives. While none of the Caspian states deny the need for closer integration, they are generally in no hurry to implement it. Only initiatives originating from an interested organisational centre – such as Astrakhan State Technical University under the Association of Universities and Research Centres of Caspian Countries – remain more or less operational.

Another important barrier is the uneven inclusion of macroregional countries in the global and regional information space, shaped by “the varying state of digital inequality observed not only through inter-country comparison but also in terms of inter-regional comparison within each of the Caspian region countries” [24, p. 175].

Also significant are the remoteness of capital cities from the Caspian Sea and the current unsuitability of the coastline for residential use or the development of resort infrastructure. As a result, in some areas, the Caspian region is not perceived as something meaningful, largely due to the vastness of the territory and the lack of proper maintenance. *“You can drive hundreds of kilometres before you meet something that catches your eye. And you see a striking difference between this land and other lands... No manufacturing plants, it’s all run-down, completely wasteness, as concerns, particularly,*

*Lagan*⁹. *There is no normal road to that place”* (focus group 3, Kalmykia).

A significant socio-psychological barrier is the weak cognitive motivation to seek information about the lives of neighbouring countries. “It seems the reason for this trend is not so much the language factor as a certain focus on narratives substantiating the new national and state identity in the countries of the post-Soviet space” [24, p. 176]. *“In Russia, people know other regions. Well... I don’t know about Turkey, whether are we friends or not. I also don’t know about Iran, whether they are friends or not – because we close the “doors”* (focus group 1, Azerbaijan); *“I don’t have much information (about Kazakhstan), but I remember them as our friends”* (focus group 2, Azerbaijan).

An equally significant barrier to unification is the gradual and persistent promotion of the Great Turan project [25]. This project seeks to differentiate Caspian countries and regions based on the presence or absence of Turkic roots in their populations. Iran and Kalmykia (as a part of Russia), as well as the Russian population of the Astrakhan region and the non-Turkic peoples of Dagestan, remain outside the Turkic world: *“Honestly, I do not like this Pan-Turkism. But it is probably genetically designed. This is because we are not Turkic-speaking people... The mountaineers separate themselves from Turkic speakers living on the plains”* (Expert 5, Dagestan).

Iran occupies a somewhat distinct position in our analysis. As an ancient civilisation, it is relatively isolated from its younger Caspian neighbours. Unlike the other Caspian states, Iran has no institutionalised shared history with Russia, nor a Soviet past, and consequently no sense of post-Soviet identity – yet it also harbours no grievances or nostalgia regarding the collapse of the USSR. The history of Iran (Persia) and Russia as neighbours has been marked by frequent wars and conflicts, initiated by both sides and often involving Western powers. Iran also lacks a common intercultural communication language with its Caspian neighbours, one that older generations could use to recall a shared past. Iran remains the

⁹ A city in the Republic of Kalmykia located on the shore of the Caspian Sea.

only religious state among the Caspian countries, with governance mechanisms that differ entirely from those of its neighbours. Although Iranians, like most of the Caspian region population, are Muslims, they follow Shia Islam, which at times distances them from their largely Sunni neighbours rather than uniting them. Despite these challenges and Iran's civilisational distinctiveness, there is hope for rapprochement. The Caspian region has long held special significance for Iran. Historically, Russian guests were received more warmly in the Caspian than in other parts of Persia [26]. In Russia – especially in Astrakhan – a Persian cultural space gradually developed and has partially survived to this day [27]. Persian migration influenced the region's ethnic composition, and intermarriages with Tatar women led to the emergence of a new ethnic community: the Agrzhan Tatars. This historical cultural diffusion demonstrates that communication is possible – and not only conflict – offering hope for cooperation through the opening of Iranian consulates in Caspian cities and the creation of joint educational and cultural associations.

The Strategic Partnership Agreement, signed on 17 January 2025, represents another step toward closer ties between Iran and Russia¹⁰.

In 2018, the International Humanistic Centre for Ecology and Culture (St. Petersburg) held The Caspian House Forum: Principles of Formation and Development Strategies, where an attempt was made to articulate a new vision of pan-Caspian identity rooted in the preservation of nature and culture – designated as The Caspian House [source 14]. This idea was not further developed, possibly due to its strong eco-humanistic orientation.

Nevertheless, the majority of our respondents expressed doubt not only about the existence of a Caspian identity but even about the need for its formation. Indeed, current integration processes among the Caspian states can be described as sluggish – especially in identitarian terms. As shown in this study, this tendency is characteristic of the

¹⁰ Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty between the Russian Federation and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Russian Federation, 17.01.2025. Available at: https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/international_contracts/international_contracts/2_contract/62722/ (accessed 24.01.2025).

former Soviet republics and can be explained by the perception of independence as a defining historical milestone – arguably the most important one in the modern history of these nations [28]. As a result, any integration initiative – aside from strictly economic or environmental cooperation – may be viewed by society as a potential threat to sovereignty.

At present, no unified motivation or strategic drive to intensify or coordinate integration efforts is visible at the level of the Caspian Five's political leadership. Nor does the general population seem to have a clear understanding of whether there is a need to identify with the Caspian region – and if so, on what basis and, most importantly, why?

PROSPECTS FOR THE FORMATION OF A POTENTIAL CENTRE OF POWER

The integrative potential of the Caspian macroregion appears to be insufficiently actualised, and the formation of a pan-Caspian identity in the near future remains highly problematic. This conclusion is supported by the diverse opinions expressed by respondents in their attempts to conceptualise themselves as part of the Greater Caspian. Several factors underlie this assessment. Firstly, a common institutional framework for the Caspian macroregion hasn't been established yet. Both state and public institutions are largely temporary and sporadic in nature, operating periodically from one event to another, without any unifying structures that carry out regular coordination across the entire Greater Caspian space.

Secondly, public and private interests – especially those of individual companies – currently prevail over pan-Caspian concerns. Public opinion, when considered independently, tends to highlight ecology and economy as the primary unifying factors. Thirdly, the Russian language, once the main medium of intercultural communication in the region, is gradually being replaced by Turkish and English. This linguistic shift has occurred without adequate response from Russia, diminishing its soft power influence in the region. Furthermore, pan-Caspian integration efforts are hindered by the active involvement of non-riparian states, which seek to redirect regional dynamics toward alternative geopolitical projects – such

as the Turan world – by interfering in economic and political processes.

Today, non-Western civilisational projects are increasingly competing to shape global and regional futures, challenging the universalism of the Western liberal model both theoretically and practically. A visible competition has emerged between the “discursive forces” of individual countries and broader geopolitical initiatives. At the October 2024 BRICS summit, Kazakhstan was granted partner country status, joining Russia and Iran as active participants in the association. China is already a full member, while Turkey holds a partner status – both countries having distinct interests in the Caspian region. It is therefore necessary to define principles and priorities for the interaction between these two integrative associations.

In its current form, the unification of Caspian states represents more of a dialogue platform than a true integrative association. This “floating format” suits most participants, who are reluctant to limit their sovereignty. Beyond situational benefits for certain actors or the anti-Western stance of others, what is lacking is a clear mission for integration and the construction of a shared, positive vision of the future.

Nevertheless, the current stage – best described as a bifurcation point – still holds the potential for a shift in the trajectory of integration, primarily through the formation of public opinion. For now, the peoples of the post-Soviet Caspian states generally maintain a positive attitude toward each other, viewing themselves as neighbouring and even brotherly nations. However, there are emerging trends that raise concerns about the region’s future. This bifurcation point may well represent one of the last opportunities for the Caspian macroregion to transition from its current amorphous state – where actors are loosely connected by the common water body and a shared historical past (sometimes perceived as a burden in light of modern memory politics) – to a more cohesive status as a potential centre of power. Such a transformation, though slow and still hypothetical, would require more than shared borders and common interests in areas like the economy and geopolitics. It would require the emergence of a “regional universal centre of power”, capable of uniting all

regional entities around itself, strengthening them through mutual support. Without such a centre, the region cannot realistically aspire to global influence or status. Therefore, at present, the region can be described as being at a bifurcation point with three possible development scenarios.

Floating. A temporary stabilisation of the current, relatively “fragile” status quo, in which the multi-vector policies of certain states contribute to the instability of international contacts, eventually leading to a transition to another scenario.

Negative / fragmenting / centrifugal. The status quo is disrupted and a process of fragmentation is initiated. Each entity, while still maintaining essential economic, transport, and environmental projects – mostly on a bilateral basis – continues to strengthen its national identity, distancing itself from its neighbours in socio-cultural and political terms. Russia, in this case, finds itself in the most disadvantageous position due to the complexity of its confessional landscape in the Caspian region. Should integration occur along religious lines, the situation may worsen, as both Sunni and Shia branches of Islam are represented in the area. In this scenario, there is no room for the emergence of a potential centre of power.

Positive / centripetal. Caspian states identify a shared axial platform for integration and gradually transform into a potential, and eventually a real, centre of power. In this scenario, Russia could acquire the status of a universal core within the emerging regional centre of power. This will be promoted by joint efforts of the *educational cluster* (joint multilateral Master programmes aimed at improving intercultural communications, cross-border scholarship programmes¹¹, etc.); the *tourism cluster* developing long-promised tourist routes around the Caspian Sea, including cruise routes; the establishment of a Greater Caspian educational and scientific centre in the Russian Caspian area that would bring together scholars from all Caspian states in developing joint humanitarian knowledge preserving the traditions and cultural values of Caspian peoples.

¹¹ Such an example already exists: the Republic of Azerbaijan’s advanced scholarship for talented students of Astrakhan State University named after V.N. Tatishchev.

In the foreseeable future, a *hybrid scenario* is most likely to be realised – characterised by the dominance of the floating model, with intermittent positive breakthroughs in the field of socio-cultural integration, based on bilateral or multilateral cooperation. The realisation of a fully positive scenario will require systematic, comprehensive, and coordinated efforts by both the state institutions and societies of the Caspian Five to elevate the level of integration and secure the region's rightful place in the emerging multipolar world.

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