BEYOND DIVIDING LINES

Comparative Insights into Cross-Border Cooperation Worldwide

Edited by Sergei Golunov

INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE PAPERS



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This volume brings together papers from the international conference Beyond Dividing Lines: Comparative Insights into Cross-Border Cooperation Worldwide (Almaty, Kazakhstan, September 23–26, 2026). Its 25 chapters examine cross-border cooperation in Europe, North and South America, East Africa, the Caucasus, and Central, South, Southeast, East, and West Asia. The contributors address conceptual and institutional approaches, borderland communities and informal cooperation, shared waters and environmental risks, functional cooperation in mobility, health, and connectivity, the role of states and bilateral relations, and the impact of strategic competition and technology. The book is intended for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners dealing with borders and regional cooperation.

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List of Abbreviations

ACSAC	ASEAN-China Satellite Remote Sensing Application Center
ADB	Asian Development Bank
ADF	Au-delà des frontières
AFAL	Association des frontaliers au Luxembourg
AGAPE	Agence d'urbanisme et de développement durable Lorraine Nord
AGURAM	Agence d'urbanisme d'agglomérations de Moselle
AI	artificial intelligence
ALMERA	Analytical Laboratories for the Measurement of Environmental Radioactivity
AP-MCSTA	Asia-Pacific Multilateral Cooperation in Space Technology and Applications
APSCO	Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization
BDS	BeiDou System
BID	Banco Interamericano de Desarrollo (Inter-American Development Bank)
BiH	Bosnia and Herzegovina
BRI	Belt and Road Initiative
CACSA	China-Africa Cooperation Center on Satellite Remote Sensing Application
CAREC	Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation
CBC	cross-border cooperation
CBFEWS	Community-Based Flood Early-Warning System
CCC	Cámara de Comercio de Cúcuta
CDIFL	Comité de défense et d'initiative des frontaliers du Luxembourg
CEF	Confédération européenne des frontaliers
CEREMA	Centre d'études et d'expertise sur les risques, l'environnement, la mobilité et l'aménagement
CES	Conseil économique et social
CEWARN	Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism
CFL	Société Nationale des Chemins de Fer Luxembourgeois
CIC	Cascadia Innovation Corridor

CIG	Commission intergouvernementale franco-luxembourgeoise
CIQ	Customs, Immigration and Quarantine
CIS	Commonwealth of Independent States
COVID-19	coronavirus disease 2019
CSC	China Scholarship Council
CSL	Chambre des salariés
EAEU	Eurasian Economic Union
ECOWAS	Economic Community of West African States
EEC	European Economic Community
EU	European Union
EVL	Exit, Voice, and Loyalty
EWS	early warning system
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
FIFA	Fédération Internationale de Football Association
FMBAP	Flood Management and Border Areas Programme
GDP	gross domestic product
GECT	Groupement européen de coopération territoriale
GIFMM	Grupo Interagencial sobre Flujos Migratorios Mixtos (Interagency Group for Mixed Migration Flows)
GLONASS	Global Navigation Satellite System (Russia)
GPS	Global Positioning System
GRP	gross regional product
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IBA	Internationale Bauausstellung (International Building Exhibition)
IBA·OIE	Interregionale Arbeitsmarktbeobachtungsstelle / Observatoire interrégional du marché de l'emploi
IC-BTs	informal cross-border traders
ICC-Altai	International Coordinating Council "Our Common Home – Altai"
ICIMOD	International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development
ICQS	Immigration, Customs, Quarantine and Security
IAD	Institutional Analysis and Development
IDEA	Fondation IDEA
IGAD	Intergovernmental Authority on Development

IGSS	Inspection générale de la sécurité sociale
INSEE	Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques
INTERREG	European Territorial Cooperation programs
IOM	International Organization for Migration
IZ	Islamic Community (North Macedonia)
KAS	Konrad Adenauer Stiftung
KFOR	Kosovo Force
LCGB	Lëtzebuerger Chrëschtleche Gewerkschafts-Bond
LISER	Luxembourg Institute of Socio-Economic Research
MCIC	Macedonian Center for International Cooperation
MMTP	Ministère de la Mobilité et des Travaux publics
MMUST	Modèle MUltimodal et Scénarios de mobilité Transfrontaliers
MPC	Macedonian Orthodox Church
MRV	Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina (Međureligijsko vijeće Bosne i Hercegovine)
NATO	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
NGO	non-governmental organization
NS-T	Norte de Santander–Táchira
OCDE	Organización para la Cooperación y el Desarrollo Económicos (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development)
OGBL	Onofhängege Gewerkschaftsbond Lëtzebuerg
OSCE	Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe
PPE	personal protective equipment
PPP	purchasing power parity
PRC	People's Republic of China
PRO-SUD	Syndicat de communes régional pour la promotion et le développement de la région du Sud
PTA	preferential trading arrangement
RFE/RL	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
RIA	regional integration arrangement
RKC	Roman Catholic Church
RP	research participant
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SERM	Service Express Régional Métropolitain

SMMS	Joint Small Multi-Mission Satellite Constellation
SMOT	Schéma de Mobilité Transfrontalier France–Luxembourg
SPC	Serbian Orthodox Church
STATEC	Institut national de la statistique et des études économiques du Grand-Duché de Luxembourg
TB	tuberculosis
TGV	train à grande vitesse
TITR	Trans-Caspian International Transport Route
TRS	Time Release Study
UAE	United Arab Emirates
UN	United Nations
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNDRR	United Nations Office for Disaster Risk Reduction
UNECE	United Nations Economic Commission for Europe
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNFCCC	United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
UNHCR	United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees
UniGR	University of the Greater Region
UNMIK	United Nations Interim Administration Mission in Kosovo
UNSCEAR	United Nations Scientific Committee on the Effects of Atomic Radiation
US	United States
UzStat	Uzbekistan State Statistics Committee
WCC	World Council of Churches
WCO	World Customs Organization
WCRP	World Conference of Religions for Peace
WMO	World Meteorological Organization
WTO	World Trade Organization
WUA	Water User Association
XUAR	Xinjiang Uygur Autonomous Region

Introduction

Sergei Golunov

This volume brings together papers prepared for the international conference *Beyond Dividing Lines: Comparative Insights into Cross-Border Cooperation Worldwide*. The conference was organized in connection with the research project "Cross-Border Cooperation of Kazakhstan with Neighboring Central Asian Countries" (grant no. AP23489647), implemented in 2024–2026 with support from the Science Committee of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Within this project, we considered it important to place Kazakhstan's experience of cross-border cooperation in a broader global context. The conference and this volume were conceived as a way to bring Central Asian cases into dialogue with experiences from other parts of the world.

State borders play a dual role. On the one hand, they create multidimensional discontinuities between neighboring territories: different legal regimes, administrative systems, markets, infrastructures, and political jurisdictions can turn geographical proximity into a barrier. On the other hand, the same proximity produces practical problems and opportunities that are difficult to address from one side alone. Transport links, shared resources, labor and commercial flows, environmental risks, family and community ties, and local security concerns all create incentives for some form of cooperation across the border.

CBC is therefore easy to endorse in general but much harder to define consistently. In different regions, policymakers and practitioners may use the term for rather different phenomena. For some, it refers primarily to cooperation among subnational territories located on opposite sides of a border. For others, the focus is on managing cross-border flows whose origins and destinations may lie far from the border itself. In still other settings, the term is used broadly for cooperation between neighboring states. Moreover, CBC is not always the preferred label: comparable activities may be framed as border-region development, transborder regionalism, economic-corridor development, or sector-specific cooperation.

Despite this diversity, cooperation involving territories that adjoin or lie close to an international border remains the most conventional point of departure. The European Outline Convention on Transfrontier Co-operation places territorial authorities at the center of such interaction, while later scholarship has treated CBC more broadly as sustained cooperation involving public and, in some cases, private actors in border regions (Council of Europe 1980; Sousa 2013). This volume adopts a similarly borderland-centered but flexible understanding. The key consideration is a substantive connection to the problems, opportunities, and interactions of adjacent border territories, rather than conformity to a single legal or institutional form.

Such cooperation can serve several purposes. Border regions are often peripheral in relation to national centers yet immediately adjacent to a different economic, legal, and social system. Differences in prices, skills, infrastructure, services, environmental conditions, or productive capacities may create obstacles, but they may also become resources when neighboring territories are able to use complementary advantages. CBC can reduce transaction costs, support local trade and mobility, coordinate shared infrastructure and natural resources, facilitate emergency response, strengthen communication among neighboring communities, and help prevent or manage localized disputes. Its value, however, depends on how well particular arrangements match the problems they are intended to address.

Effective CBC faces many obstacles. Some are obvious: poor interstate relations, restrictive border regimes, physical barriers, difficult terrain, and weak transport connections. Others are less visible but equally consequential, including differences between political, economic, legal, and administrative systems; large or poorly matched disparities in resources and capacity; limited political commitment; insufficient funding; and weak coordination among the actors involved. Even when governments favor cooperation in principle, these constraints can make apparently straightforward solutions difficult to implement.

The problem of transferring successful practices from one region to another is compounded by the geography of CBC research itself. Much of

the field has developed from European cases. European CBC operates under an unusually favorable combination of deep regional integration, sustained policy support, legal instruments for territorial cooperation, substantial dedicated funding, and comparatively broad room for subnational initiative. Recent scholarship has therefore called for the geographical decentering of CBC research rather than treating European arrangements as an implicit universal benchmark (Nadalutti and Rüland 2025).

Conditions elsewhere may be quite different. Cooperation can be more strongly controlled by central governments, less densely institutionalized, more dependent on international organizations, or more closely intertwined with informal economic practices. It may also be organized through spatial formats broader than conventional border regions, including economic corridors and transborder subregions. These differences do not make non-European cases incomplete versions of a European model. They make it necessary to ask which mechanisms are workable under particular political, economic, geographical, and social conditions.

This is not an argument for discarding European or North American experience. On the contrary, practices developed in these regions may be highly useful elsewhere when their transfer takes account of local institutional capacities, political constraints, patterns of authority, available resources, and the concrete functions that cooperation is expected to perform. The purpose of this volume is therefore comparative rather than prescriptive: to place European and North American experience alongside cases from other regions and to examine both commonalities and differences.

What forms does cross-border cooperation take across different regions and institutional settings, and how should it be understood beyond a single model? Which actors perform cross-border functions, and through what formal and informal mechanisms do they do so? How do meanings, infrastructures, social ties, shared resources, and technologies shape the forms and practices of CBC? Under what political conditions does CBC flourish or decline, and how is it shaped by the broader context of “high politics”? What outcomes, inequalities, vulnerabilities, and trade-offs does CBC produce? These questions provide a common frame for the chapters

that follow, even though individual contributors approach them from different disciplinary and methodological perspectives.

The contributors do not claim to cover the full global variety of CBC. The chapters nevertheless offer strategically diverse comparative material spanning the European Union, North and South America, East Africa, the Caucasus, Central, South, Southeast, East, and West Asia. They include peaceful and conflict-affected borderlands, formally integrated spaces and weakly institutionalized ones, land borders and maritime connectivity, transboundary river basins, and settings in which cooperation is driven by actors ranging from central governments to local communities and informal networks. The volume is organized into seven thematic parts, each highlighting a distinct dimension of CBC – from conceptual and institutional questions, through grassroots and informal forms of interaction and shared environmental and functional challenges, to the influence of high politics and technology on cross-border cooperation.

The first part, *Conceptual and Comparative Approaches to Cross-Border Cooperation*, examines how CBC can be conceptualized and compared across different institutional settings. Christophe Sohn focuses on the symbolic dimension of CBC, introducing the concept of a border semiotic regime and showing how infrastructures, maps, names, images, and everyday practices can recode borders as interfaces, resources, or shared spaces. Such meanings, however, remain contested, while different actors have unequal capacities to produce, circulate, and legitimize particular interpretations. Laurie Trautman, using the Canada–United States borderlands, demonstrates that intensive cooperation need not depend on EU-style institutional formalization and may instead rest on durable networks linking subnational authorities, business, Indigenous actors, and civil society. The Cascadia case shows that this kind of networked cooperation can be sufficiently flexible and effective in responding to cross-border challenges, while nevertheless remaining vulnerable to pressures from high politics, funding constraints, and leadership turnover. Gokul M A compares two non-European relatively open borderlands, showing that openness can be sustained through very different combinations of formal institutions and social practices. While historically rooted social ties and

local customs play a key role in the India–Nepal borderland, mechanisms of formal integration are more prominent in the Kazakhstan–Russia borderland. In both cases, however, sovereignty and porosity coexist, and cross-border cooperation remains vulnerable to external shocks.

The second part, *Institutions, Diffusion, and the Dynamics of Cooperation*, examines how cross-border institutions and cooperative models function, adapt, and evolve across different contexts. Claude Ewert presents a contrasting case in which a dense formal environment does not necessarily resolve cross-border problems and may coexist with persistent asymmetries in the distribution of benefits and social costs. Vedran Obućina examines the cross-border diffusion of interreligious peacebuilding models in the Balkans, showing how the Bosnian Interreligious Council inspired related initiatives in North Macedonia and Kosovo, where the model was selectively adapted to different socio-political contexts with varying degrees of success. Shinasak Suwan-achariya adds a temporal dimension, showing through the Thailand–Malaysia Sadao–Bukit Kayu Hitam corridor that infrastructure and functioning institutions are insufficient when the operating times of interconnected processes are poorly synchronized. Finally, Sergei Golunov shows that Central Asian and, more specifically, Kazakh CBC performs many functions familiar from European cases, but through a different hierarchy of actors and organizational formats. In this case, weak formal institutionalization does not imply a narrow functional repertoire; conversely, functional diversity does not automatically lead to advanced institutionalization.

The third part, *Borderland Communities, Informality, and Everyday Cooperation*, shifts attention from formal arrangements to grassroots interaction, everyday practices, and informal social infrastructures. Using the Sino-Vietnamese borderland as a case, Yejia Ke shows how formal mobility arrangements are translated into everyday labor cooperation through networks of kinship, friendship, shared ethnicity and language, and workplace ties. Lena Merkle uses Nicosia and Belfast to show how spaces created by division can, under particular conditions, become zones of communication and dialogue. Nona Shahnazarian examines kirvaluk, a form of ritually created quasi-kinship that could sustain obligations across

Armenian–Azerbaijani divides without eliminating the identities and boundaries that separated the communities concerned. Diego Andres Pinzon Quesada analyzes informality on the Colombia–Venezuela border as a form of "spatial currency": knowledge of routes, trusted intermediaries, risks, and practical rules enables movement and exchange when formal mechanisms are unreliable. On the India–Nepal border, Amitabh Vikram Dwivedi draws attention to a gendered border infrastructure in which hospitality, care work, kinship, information exchange, markets, and cultural practices help sustain everyday cross-border interaction. Taken together, these chapters show that CBC may depend not only on formal institutions but also on social obligations, local knowledge, and routine practices that are difficult to capture through institutional indicators alone.

The fourth part, *Shared Waters and Transboundary Environmental Risks*, focuses on situations in which practical problems themselves create a need for cross-border coordination. Görkem Atsungur examines water-governance mechanisms in the Chu and Talas basins, showing how informal local arrangements can complement formal institutions and improve short-term adaptability to episodes of water scarcity and infrastructure disruption, while at the same time reproducing inequalities in access to water resources and proving insufficient to address long-term water decline. Krishnendra Meena examines community-based flood early-warning systems along the India–Nepal border, showing that low-cost technologies and dense social networks can sustain practical problem-solving cooperation in managing shared risks even amid strains in broader bilateral and geopolitical relations. Kodirjon Eshonkulov examines the Koshtepa Canal in northern Afghanistan and its possible downstream implications for water availability, livelihoods, and migration in the Amu Darya basin, emphasizing gaps in mechanisms for managing these transboundary consequences.

The fifth part, *Functional Cooperation: Mobility, Health, Connectivity, and Cross-Border Risk*, examines practical domains in which cross-border interdependence creates a need for coordination. Ibrahim Kone argues that, in the IGAD region, COVID-19 paradoxically acted as a catalyst for regional integration by accelerating efforts to adopt a long-stalled protocol

on free movement and transhumance amid a displacement crisis. Nikolai Grudtsyn and Anatoly Chistobaev analyze tuberculosis dynamics in the Russia–Kazakhstan borderlands and show that geographical proximity does not automatically produce a single epidemiological space or uniform patterns on both sides of the border. Nurdaulet Zharmukhan examines how Aktau is discursively constructed as a trans-Caspian connectivity hub, and asks what such framing implies for cross-border cooperation in a setting where dedicated CBC institutions remain relatively weak. Yesbol Sartayev addresses another mismatch of scales: nuclear facilities are regulated nationally, while the consequences of a serious radiological emergency may be transboundary and acutely felt at the local level. Across these cases, functional analysis complements institutional analysis by asking where coordination is needed because the scale of a problem or network does not coincide with the territorial scope of a single authority.

The sixth part, *Borderlands in Bilateral and State Frameworks*, examines the role of states and wider political conditions in shaping the space available for CBC. Ekaterina Mikhailova shows that the warming of Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan relations preceded the gradual incorporation of borderland cooperation into the bilateral agenda rather than producing it automatically. Giorgi Pareshishvili presents a reverse problem: the potential of a cross-border ethnic community with linguistic and cultural ties remains only partly realized where legal frameworks for subnational interaction are weak and civic actors have limited room for action. Ramazan Bakyradinov shows that Kazakhstan, Russia, and China can all frame the Altai as a space relevant to cross-border interaction while simultaneously constructing its significance through distinct national narratives.

The seventh part, *Strategic Competition, Technology, and the Limits of Cooperation*, examines how geopolitical rivalry and strategic technologies reshape the scope, forms, and limits of CBC. Akihiro Iwashita examines periods of severe interstate deterioration and the role of local economic, social, and professional ties as functional bypasses that can preserve limited interaction when relations between central governments freeze. Chisako T. Masuo shows how satellite-based infrastructures can reshape the conditions for CBC by connecting remote borderlands across national boundaries and

facilitating information exchange, while also demonstrating how such technological cooperation can become an instrument of strategic competition and create new dependencies. Syeda Nada Qadri and Hussein Mezher Khalaf bring a technological dimension to the same problem by examining biometric systems, data analysis, facial recognition, and remote surveillance in conflict-affected borderlands. Their chapter also emphasizes that intensified digital control does not eliminate cross-border social ties: diaspora, humanitarian, and informal networks adapt to new surveillance environments and continue to sustain flows of information, assistance, and trust.

Taken together, the chapters encourage us to view cross-border cooperation not as a ladder on which cases can be ranked according to their resemblance to a single normative model, but as a diverse set of practices shaped by specific political, economic, geographical, social, and technological contexts. Comparison remains essential, but its purpose is not simply to identify which cases are more or less "advanced." It is to understand which actors and mechanisms perform particular cross-border functions, under what conditions they work, how they adapt to constraints, and where their limitations become visible. We hope that the volume contributes to a more geographically inclusive comparative study of CBC while preserving close attention to the local conditions that give different forms of cooperation their particular character.

During the editorial preparation of this volume, OpenAI's ChatGPT (GPT-5.6 Sol) and Anthropic's Claude were used as AI-assisted tools for copy-editing, proofreading, consistency checks, reference verification, harmonization of spelling and typography, preparation of the subject index, and technical manuscript preparation. Claude was additionally used to prepare the figures for print and to redraw two diagrams in Chapter 16 whose originals were lost in file conversion. No part of the substantive content, argument, or analysis in this volume was generated by AI, and all substantive editorial decisions remained the responsibility of the editor.

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Part I. Conceptual and Comparative Approaches to Cross-Border Cooperation

1. Making Borders Mean: The Semiotic Regime of Cross-Border Cooperation

Christophe Sohn

Abstract

Cross-border cooperation is not only a matter of coordinating policies, infrastructures, and services across national boundaries. It also involves sustained work on the meaning of the border itself. Local and regional actors seek to recode borders as interfaces, gateways, shared places, economic resources, or increasingly inconspicuous divisions, while national meanings of territorial difference continue to shape institutions and everyday experience. This chapter develops the concept of the border semiotic regime to analyze these processes. Drawing primarily on social semiotics, it defines a border semiotic regime as a relatively patterned assemblage of semiotic resources, meaning-making practices, actors, interpretive conventions, and power relations through which a border is represented, made perceptible, authorized, and socially reproduced. The chapter adapts this framework to local and regional cross-border cooperation and examines its multimodal composition through material infrastructures, maps, logos, names, images, spatial arrangements, events, and everyday practices. Examples from my own research in various European and North American cross-border regions show that cross-border cooperation does not simply erase borders but selectively re-signifies them. The proposed framework also highlights negotiation and contestation between competing meanings, scales, and institutional projects, providing a

basis for comparative analysis of the symbolic and material construction of cross-border regions.

Introduction

CBC is usually approached as a problem of governance: how municipalities, regions, public agencies, firms, and civil-society organizations coordinate action across national jurisdictions, build new cross-border institutions, and participate in territorial rescaling. In Europe, the proliferation of Euroregions, INTERREG programs, European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation, and cross-border metropolitan initiatives has produced a dense institutional landscape of local and regional cooperation (Perkmann 2003; Wassenberg and Reitel 2015; Noferini et al. 2020; Kaucic and Sohn 2022). Comparable arrangements have emerged elsewhere, from North American binational regions to development corridors and border-region partnerships in other parts of the world (Sohn 2018). Yet CBC is never only functional. It also involves attempts to redefine what the border signifies and what kind of space is imagined around it.

This symbolic dimension is particularly important because the political border does not disappear when cooperation intensifies. On the contrary, it often becomes a central resource in the construction of the cross-border project (Sohn 2014). Bridges are turned into emblems of connection, rivers that once signified division are represented as shared landscapes, former checkpoints become sites of memory or public space, maps omit boundary lines, and bilingual names and logos give institutional form to a common territory. Such practices seek to transform the border from a taken-for-granted line of national separation into a different kind of sign: an interface or a gateway, a resource for regional development, a marker of internationality, or an object of political or symbolic recognition (O'Dowd 2002; Scott 2012; Sohn 2014).

Research on cross-border regionalization has addressed parts of this meaning-making process through several conceptual vocabularies. Work on regional identity has shown that cross-border identities are actively performed rather than simply inherited (Prokkola, Zimmerbauer, and Jakola

2015). Studies of place branding have examined how symbols, images, and narratives make new cross-border regions visible and attractive (Hospers 2006; Witte and Braun 2015; Zimmerbauer 2016). Research on spatial imaginaries has highlighted the selective and contested representations through which new spaces of governance are constructed (Varró 2014). Border studies has also emphasized the changing symbolic significance of borders within European integration and CBC (Anderson and O'Dowd 1999; Scott 2012). These approaches are complementary, but they often focus on particular objects – identity, discourse, image, branding, or spatial representation – without a common account of how different meaning-making resources operate together.

The concept of a border semiotic regime is proposed here to address this analytical gap. The aim is not to suggest that CBC produces a single coherent meaning of the border. Rather, it is to identify relatively patterned configurations through which particular meanings become recognizable, circulate across institutions and places, and acquire enough legitimacy to shape how a cross-border region is imagined and practiced. The approach draws primarily on social semiotics, which understands meaning as socially produced through the situated use of semiotic resources, and extends it by foregrounding the uneven power to authorize and stabilize meanings. In this sense, the notion of regime can be read as a power-inflected version of what Kress (2010) calls a semiotic order. The use of the term also resonates, without requiring a detailed synthesis, with broader theoretical traditions that mobilize regimes to analyze the organization of truth, signs, and perceptibility (Foucault 1980; Deleuze and Guattari 1987; Rancière 2004). To illustrate this conceptual proposition, I draw in part on examples from my previous research on cross-border regions in Europe – the Trinational Eurodistrict of Basel, Luxembourg and the Greater Region, Greater Geneva, the Strasbourg-Ortenau Eurodistrict, the Öresund region, and the twin cities of Frankfurt (Oder)-Słubice – and in North America, notably the CaliBaja Bi-National Megaregion.

The argument proceeds in four stages. First, the chapter outlines a social-semiotic understanding of border meaning in CBC. Second, it defines the border semiotic regime and specifies the criteria that distinguish a

regime from a loose repertoire of signs. Third, it examines the multimodal resources through which cross-border cooperation makes borders meaningful. Fourth, it considers negotiation, contestation, and change, paying particular attention to the coexistence of local and regional integration projects with national-territorial meanings of the border.

Social semiotics and the meaning-making work of cross-border cooperation

Social semiotics provides a useful point of departure because it treats meaning as the outcome of social action rather than as the decoding of a fixed system of signs. Developed from Halliday's account of language as a social semiotic, the approach attends to historically formed resources and their situated use (van Leeuwen 2005; Kress 2010). Meaning-makers select from socially available resources according to their interests, institutional positions, competences, and understandings of a situation. A semiotic resource can be linguistic, visual, material, spatial, or bodily: words, typography, colors, images, architecture, maps, clothing, gestures, or spatial arrangements can all provide means for making meaning. These resources have meaning potentials shaped by their material properties, previous uses, cultural histories, and institutional conventions, but their meaning is never fully given in advance.

This relational perspective is particularly well suited to CBC. A river does not intrinsically mean either division or connection. Its meaning depends on how it is legally designated, represented on maps, crossed, narrated, landscaped, and incorporated into everyday routines. In Frankfurt (Oder)-Słubice, the Oder has historically materialized the German–Polish boundary, yet CBC actors have also sought to recode it as a shared space (Jakob and Sohn 2026). The city bridge performs a related transformation: once associated with border control, it has become a recurring emblem and stage for the twin-city relationship, while joint maps, naming practices, and public events reinforce the image of a common urban space. The same material environment can therefore sustain different, even contradictory, meanings over time.

Social semiotics also foregrounds multimodality: meaning is ordinarily produced through ensembles in which several modes interact (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Kress 2010). Cross-border meaning is rarely produced by a single sign or text. The Öresund region was not made imaginable simply by the construction of a bridge between Denmark and Sweden. The bridge acquired symbolic force through its repeated articulation with a regional name, a logo, maps, promotional narratives, institutional organizations, commuting practices, and representations of an open and creative region (Hospers 2006; Löfgren 2008). Similarly, a cross-border park, a bilingual tram stop, or a joint tourist office becomes meaningful through the combination of emplacement, design, language, images, movement, and institutional use. The analytical object is therefore not the isolated sign but the multimodal ensemble through which a preferred reading of the border is produced.

Geosemiotics adds a crucial spatial dimension to this argument. Signs acquire meaning from where they are placed, the users toward whom they are oriented, and the interaction order in which they are embedded (Scollon and Scollon 2003). Emplacement matters especially in border regions because physical proximity to the boundary can give ordinary objects strong indexical force. A bridge, road sign, language shift, pavement change, or former customs building may point to the continued presence of the national border even when no line is explicitly drawn. Conversely, CBC actors can seek to weaken that indexicality by changing the material setting or by redirecting attention toward shared space. The Jardin des Deux Rives between Strasbourg and Kehl and other cross-border public-space projects illustrate how local authorities can resemanticize the boundary itself by transforming spaces of separation into places of encounter (Reitel and Moullé 2015).

Seen in this way, CBC is partly a form of semiotic work. It selects some properties of the border, backgrounds others, and connects signs to broader political projects. This does not mean that cross-border actors can freely choose what the border means. Their interpretations have to contend with state jurisdictions, institutional asymmetries, collective memories, everyday experiences, and alternative spatial imaginaries. Furthermore, their access to

semiotic resources and their capacity to circulate a preferred reading differ sharply. Border semiosis is inherently political. Social semiotics is useful precisely because it combines agency with constraint: meanings are produced through action, but the resources available and the authority to stabilize them are unevenly distributed.

Conceptualizing the border semiotic regime in cross-border cooperation

A border semiotic regime can be defined as a relatively patterned assemblage of semiotic resources, meaning-making practices, actors, interpretive conventions, and power relations through which a border is represented, made perceptible, authorized, and socially reproduced. The qualifier ‘relatively patterned’ is important. CBC settings are rarely coherent enough to support a single, uncontested representation of the border. The concept instead refers to sufficient regularity for a configuration to become recognizable and reproducible across situations. ‘Assemblage’ indicates that linguistic, visual, material, spatial, temporal, and embodied elements operate relationally (Sohn 2016). ‘Practices’ situate meaning in action rather than in signs alone, while ‘actors’ and ‘power relations’ draw attention to the unequal ability to produce, circulate, and legitimate particular readings. This translation is not one-way: a tramline branded as a symbol of urban unity can encourage institutions to narrate a historically divided city as a single functional space (Jakob and Sohn 2026), and a map that foregrounds a cross-border region rather than the national boundary can reshape planning priorities and public imagination (Sohn and Scott 2020).

The concept differs from the institutional notion of a cross-border governance regime. It does not describe the full set of legal competences, policy instruments, financial mechanisms, and organizational relations through which CBC operates. Its object is more specific: the patterned organization of meaning that makes a particular border and cross-border space intelligible, legitimate, and lived. The distinction matters because one governance arrangement can accommodate several competing semiotic configurations, and a semiotic repertoire may survive institutional restructuring. The Öresund bridge, for example, remained a powerful

integration symbol even as the organizations and branding strategies governing the region changed, while the reintroduction of controls after 2015 reactivated meanings of the border as an obstacle and source of conflict (Sohn 2025).

Three properties specify the regime's analytical value. The first is recognizable regularity combined with a politics of visibility (Rancière 2004). Cross-border projects frequently rely on recurring signs of connection – bridge imagery, joined-up maps, bilingual labels, shared logos, slogans of openness, or representations of complementary assets. At the same time, meaning is also produced through what is backgrounded. Greater Geneva offers an emblematic example: the physical and cartographic invisibilization of the Franco-Swiss boundary did not signal an absence of border meaning but operated as a symbolization strategy aimed at presenting the border as increasingly obsolete within the cross-border metropolitan project (Sohn and Scott 2020). CaliBaja relied on a comparable but more economically oriented selectivity. Regional boosters foregrounded the Cross Border Xpress and the gateway advantages of a binational location while omitting the wall and heavily securitized ports of entry from the public-facing image of a competitive megaregion (Sohn forthcoming). The absence of a marker is therefore not the absence of semiosis but a semiotic achievement in its own right.

The second characteristic concerns authorization and legitimation. CBC institutions generally lack the sovereign capacity to redefine the legal border, but they can authorize other ways of seeing it. Strategic plans, maps, statistics, regional brands, public events, and jointly funded infrastructures can give a preferred spatial imaginary an official and repeatable form. In CaliBaja, aggregating population, universities, exports, industrial clusters, and labor resources from Southern California and Baja California made the two sides appear as components of one economic space. In Frankfurt (Oder)-Słubice, the label 'Doppelstadt', a joint logo, maps that refrain from marking the state boundary, and repeated use of the bridge as a shared public space help legitimize the idea of a coherent twin city (Jakob and Sohn 2026). The authority involved is relational rather than absolute: it

depends on institutional backing, circulation, recognition, and the degree to which the proposed meaning resonates with lived experience.

The third characteristic is the capacity to organize perception, imagination, and experience. Cross-border regions are not simply described through semiotic resources; they are made more or less imaginable through them. Regional identities, in this sense, are performed through projects, encounters, signs, and routines rather than existing as attributes that a territory possesses (Prokkola, Zimmerbauer, and Jakola 2015). Daily crossing can normalize the boundary as a routine interface, while a shared festival can temporarily turn a bridge or square into a stage on which cross-border belonging is enacted (Mikhailova 2025). Conversely, a sudden border closure can make a boundary that had faded into the background immediately perceptible again, as the phenomenon of 'covidfencing' has amply demonstrated around the world (Medeiros et al. 2021). A border semiotic regime therefore concerns not only representations produced by institutions but the relationship between these representations and the practical, sensory, and affective conditions under which people encounter the cross-border project.

The multimodal composition of border semiotic regimes

The advantage of the concept is that it directs attention to the combination of semiotic resources rather than privileging discourse or imagery alone. In CBC, material and spatial resources are particularly important because cooperation is often made visible through interventions in the built environment. Bridges, pedestrian connections, tram lines, cross-border parks, joint facilities, renovated former checkpoints, and shared public spaces can be both functional infrastructure and signs of a political relationship. Their semiotic significance depends on emplacement and use. The Öresund bridge became an icon of regional integration because its practical connection between Copenhagen and Malmö was repeatedly linked to narratives of economic complementarity, mobility, and a common regional future (Hospers 2006). In Strasbourg-Kehl, the transformation of the border landscape through the Jardin des Deux Rives helped convert the frontier from a line of separation into a shared metropolitan place (Reitel

and Moullé 2015). Material interventions thus participate in the symbolic recoding of the border while remaining embedded in concrete mobility and planning practices.

Visual resources provide a second major component. Maps, logos, photographs, colors, pictograms, diagrams, and promotional imagery select what should be made salient and what should remain peripheral (Aiello 2006; Kress and van Leeuwen 2021). Cross-border cartography is particularly revealing. A map can emphasize the state line, treat it as a faint administrative trace, or omit it altogether; it can place a river at the center of the image, join settlements through common transport networks, or aggregate data across jurisdictions. These design choices do not erase the legal border, but they can normalize a different spatial reading. In Basel, two photo-reportages commissioned in the context of IBA Basel 2020 produced contrasting visual discourses of the same trinational region. One foregrounded persistent material and symbolic border markers; the other displaced the boundary from view and emphasized embodied interaction, leisure, and shared spaces. Their coexistence demonstrates that an integration project can sustain several visual logics rather than a single unified image of borderlessness (Sohn, Bembnista, and Jakob 2026). Intervisuality – the way images acquire meaning by echoing other images and established visual codes – also plays a significant role. Photographs of cross-border bridges, handshakes, and interlocking emblems draw on a broadly recognizable repertoire of connection that circulates across very different regions. This transnational circulation allows a local cooperative initiative to acquire recognizable, translocal meaning, but it can also flatten local specificity, presenting very different degrees of integration through a similar, reassuring visual vocabulary.

Textual and discursive resources connect these material and visual elements to broader narratives. Policy documents, cooperation agreements, slogans, place names, websites, speeches, tourist materials, and media accounts name the cross-border region and explain why it should exist. Names are particularly consequential because they condense spatial projects into repeatable forms: Öresund, Greater Geneva, Eurodistrict, Doppelstadt, or Megaregion are not neutral labels but attempts to institute a scale of

collective reference. Narratives then attach qualities to these names. The border may be presented as a bridge, gateway, shared heritage, source of diversity, economic differential, or disappearing obstacle. Such metaphors provide causal and normative scripts. Describing a border as a gateway valorizes circulation; framing it as a resource directs attention toward opportunities created by difference; representing it as obsolete supports an imaginary of integration.

Numbers and categories should also be treated as semiotic resources. Cross-border organizations routinely aggregate indicators that are produced within national statistical systems: population, employment, commuting, GDP, exports, research capacity, housing, or transport flows. These data are often essential for policy coordination, but they also perform a spatial operation. By adding together quantities located on both sides of the boundary, they make the cross-border region visible as a measurable entity. CaliBaja illustrates this mechanism clearly (Sohn 2022). Its boosters assembled demographic, educational, industrial, and trade indicators into a single megaregional profile and presented national differences as ‘complementary resources.’ The technique produced an image of critical mass and economic coherence, even though regulatory fragmentation and deep socioeconomic asymmetries continued to structure the region (Sohn forthcoming). Semiotic analysis therefore extends beyond obvious symbols to the seemingly technical devices through which a region becomes countable and comparable.

Performative, temporal, and embodied resources form another layer. Joint ceremonies, festivals, cross-border markets, sporting events, institutional meetings, and the temporary pedestrianization of a bridge can enact cooperation through repeated bodily co-presence. Their significance lies partly in repetition: recurring events sediment expectations about where the cross-border community is located and how it should be performed. Everyday mobility can have a similar effect. Commuting, shopping, studying, or using shared services makes the border familiar and can reduce the salience of national separation, although these practices remain unevenly distributed. Temporal disruption can reverse the process. In the Öresund region, the repeated return of controls after 2015 changed the

collective discourse of CBC stakeholders: the connecting meaning of the border became less prominent, while conflict and obstruction gained salience, even as the border retained value as an economic resource and marker of regional identity (Sohn 2025).

These dimensions should not be treated as independent modes. A bridge is at once material infrastructure, visual icon, spatial threshold, site of events, and object of memory; a map combines graphic design, statistical categories, names, and institutional authority; a cross-border brand links language, color, spatial imagination, and economic narratives. Scollon and Scollon's (2003) notion of semiotic aggregates is useful because it directs attention to recurrent combinations that produce recognizable situations. The empirical task is consequently to trace how resources are articulated, where they circulate, who can deploy them with authority, and how differently positioned audiences interpret them.

Negotiation, contestation, and the transformation of border meanings

To describe cross-border meaning-making as a regime does not imply consensus. CBC is a particularly instructive field precisely because several scales and projects intersect around the same boundary. Municipalities and regional development agencies may seek to foreground connection, while national governments continue to reproduce territorial difference through law, infrastructure, statistics, and public narratives. Local businesses may view the border as a source of market opportunities; residents may experience it as a routine convenience, an administrative burden, or an important marker of national identity. Cooperation institutions therefore operate within an already crowded semiotic field rather than on a blank canvas.

The asymmetry between actors is important. Cross-border organizations usually possess much weaker capacities for stabilization than states. They can name a region, publish a map, create a logo, organize a festival, offer cross-border public services, and even plan and develop cross-border infrastructures, but they cannot simply remove jurisdictional differences. This makes the legitimacy of their semiotic work highly dependent on

repetition, coalition-building, and congruence with practice. Greater Geneva demonstrates the limits of elite-led recoding: the attempt to render the boundary symbolically obsolete coexisted with popular understandings and everyday experiences that continued to give the national border significance, weakening the capacity of the metropolitan imaginary to become broadly shared (Sohn and Scott 2020). Prokkola's (2011) study of the Finnish–Swedish border similarly shows that the harmonious cross-border region imagined in INTERREG documents does not automatically correspond to local institutional practices, which remain strongly structured by national systems.

CaliBaja provides a particularly clear example of competing but partly overlapping configurations. Federal representations of the US–Mexico boundary have emphasized sovereignty, security, and control, whereas local and regional economic boosters recoded the same border as a source of competitive advantage based on labor-cost differentials, manufacturing complementarities, proximity, and gateway functions. The contrast is not absolute. Regional actors also supported smart-border technologies designed to accelerate legitimate trade and travel while preserving security controls. This reveals an important feature of semiotic regimes: competing meanings can coexist, borrow from one another, or become functionally compatible. At the same time, the economic recoding was itself selective and political, because it celebrated low-cost manufacturing and 'the best of both worlds' while backgrounding precarious labor conditions, asymmetrical development, and the frictions of a militarized border (Sohn 2022; Sohn forthcoming).

Contestation can also take place within cooperation projects. Frankfurt (Oder)-Słubice illustrates a temporal form of negotiation (Jakob and Sohn 2026). The city bridge, river, joint logo, and 'Doppelstadt' narrative have helped stabilize a repertoire of openness and shared urbanity, but the COVID-19 closure reactivated the border as material division. Rather than replacing one meaning with another, the crisis layered the reappearance of national separation onto an institutionalized cross-border imaginary. The Öresund case shows a similar path dependency: the bridge remained an

integration icon, yet renewed controls altered the relative salience of the meanings associated with it (Sohn 2025).

This perspective suggests that the most relevant analytical question is not whether CBC succeeds in eliminating the meaning of a border. Borders can be central to cross-border regionalization precisely because they remain meaningful. The question is how their meanings are recoded, which resources support the recoding, and under what conditions a preferred interpretation becomes sufficiently durable to orient institutions and practice. A dominant semiotic regime is therefore not one that suppresses every alternative meaning. It organizes a default field of intelligibility: its signs recur, its categories are familiar, and its interpretations can be reproduced with relatively little explanation. Counter-semiotic practices may challenge this default, but the term counter-regime should be reserved for alternatives that themselves acquire recurrent repertoires, recognizable conventions, organizational support, and practical effects.

For empirical research on CBC, this argument has methodological consequences. Analysis should begin by delimiting a period, a cross-border project, and the relevant actors rather than presuming the existence of a regime. A multimodal corpus can then combine strategic documents, maps, logos, photographs, websites, statistical representations, infrastructures, public spaces, events, and interviews with producers and audiences. Researchers can ask which resources recur; how they are emplaced and combined; which organizations authorize them; what meanings they foreground or suppress; how they are interpreted by local residents and stakeholders; and how these relations change during crises, institutional reforms, or shifts in the border regime. Longitudinal comparison is particularly useful because CBC is characterized by alternating periods of debordering and rebordering that can reactivate previously sedimented meanings.

Conclusion

Cross-border cooperation is usually evaluated through institutions, projects, funding, mobility, or economic integration. These dimensions are indispensable, but they do not exhaust what CBC does. Cooperation also

produces meaning. It names regions, organizes visibility, recodes infrastructures, constructs spatial imaginaries, and provides actors with symbolic resources through which the border can be represented as connection, opportunity, common heritage, or an increasingly inconspicuous division. The concept of the border semiotic regime brings these processes together within a social-semiotic and explicitly relational framework.

The concept is especially useful because it avoids treating the symbolic dimension as a decorative layer added to material cooperation. Bridges, parks, maps, logos, events, statistics, and everyday mobility are simultaneously practical and meaningful. Their effects emerge from multimodal combinations and from the authority of the actors and institutions that circulate them. At the same time, the regime perspective guards against assuming that cross-border meaning-making is coherent or consensual. Greater Geneva, Öresund, Frankfurt (Oder)-Słubice, Basel, and CaliBaja all show, in different ways, that integration narratives coexist with national-territorial meanings, unequal experiences, competing spatial projects, and moments of rebordering.

The analytical contribution is therefore twofold. First, border semiotic regimes provide a framework for comparing how local and regional cooperation projects make borders perceptible and politically meaningful across different institutional and geographical contexts. Second, they draw attention to the conditions under which such meanings become durable: recurrence, recognizability, institutional authorization, multimodal reinforcement, and practical resonance. Future research can build on this framework through multi-sited and longitudinal analyses that connect sites of production, semiotic artifacts, spatial practices, and audiencing. The central point is not that CBC makes borders disappear, but that it participates in the continuous struggle over what borders are allowed to mean.

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2. Cross-Border Cooperation in the Canada–United States Borderlands: A Networked Model of Informality, Resiliency, and Vulnerability

Laurie Trautman

Abstract

CBC, envisioned as a mechanism connecting neighboring countries divided by an international border, is often enacted by actors at multiple scales. Indeed, there is a complex ecosystem of stakeholders including subnational governments, businesses, civil society, as well as news media that can shape regional models of CBC. In one transboundary area of North America, known as 'Cascadia,' there is a well-established yet informal governance network of CBC. This network encompasses Indigenous Nations, in addition to federal, provincial, state, and local governments. The region is also home to a thriving tech industry with business interests on both sides of the border that are actively engaged in supporting CBC. Utilizing a geographic focus on a particular case study highlights the place-based nature of informal and organic models of CBC, which are grounded in unique drivers, ranging from environmental cooperation to economic development. This chapter is based on research that intersects academia, practitioners, industry and communities in the northwest corner of the Canada–United States borderlands and will highlight recent CBC efforts in preparation for the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup. This example can be analyzed to illustrate the benefits, successes, and drawbacks of these informal networks that function within a broader framework which is both

resilient and vulnerable, and differs significantly from European structures. Amid an unprecedented rupture in the Canada–US relationship, this case study provides a living lab that sheds light on the increasing challenges and dynamic landscape of CBC in North America.

Introduction

In 2026, North America hosted the FIFA Men's World Cup, often referred to as the most watched sporting event in the world. With 104 matches spread across 16 cities in 3 countries, this World Cup was a massive undertaking in cross-border cooperation, at a time when relations between the United States and its neighboring countries of Mexico and Canada are under immense strain. The fracturing of the North American relationship is not isolated to the national governments navigating and negotiating trade deals and tariffs, but is also apparent in borderland communities, particularly in the Canada–US context. The Cascadia borderlands was the only region where two FIFA host cities straddled an international land border and is a case study in how preparation for hosting an international sporting event sparked a renewed and positive momentum for actors on both sides of the border – government, media, and businesses – to overcome broader geopolitical tensions in favor of a common goal. Through informal channels of CBC that organically arose to address cross-border planning for the World Cup, this case study widens the lens of transnational actors and illustrates the effectiveness of para-diplomacy in meeting the needs of transient cross-border challenges and overcoming national divides. This bottom-up, informal model stands in contrast to European models of CBC, which tend to be more top down and institutionalized.

Background

The Canada–US border, which is the longest international border in the world, is largely defined by its regions, which vary in the nature of their connectivity (Border Policy Research Institute et al. 2021). For example, some regions, such as the Detroit–Windsor corridor, are characterized by intense trade connections, driven by highly integrated supply chain relationships between urban centers. Others, such as the Great Lakes region,

are more rural in nature, and connected via the management of shared waterways. Remote borderlands in the Alaska–Yukon wilderness have few border crossings, yet isolated communities depend on them for key social and economic relations.

Because the Canada–US border is so vast and varied, there are also unique governance structures that exist throughout the borderlands that shape different models of CBC. One of the most successful and influential models is located in the 'Cascadia' region which spans the coastal areas of southern British Columbia, Canada, and northern Washington State in the US, anchored on either end by the metropolitan areas of Vancouver and Seattle.

The Cascadia Region

The term Cascadia has historical roots in the natural landscape of the broader region, which runs along the length of the Cascade Mountain Range (Alper 1996). The borderland region is also comprised of an interconnected marine ecosystem that weaves together three waterways: one on the Canadian side of the border, one on the US side of the border, and one that straddles the border itself. After much stakeholder engagement and advocacy, the term 'Salish Sea' was formally approved in 2009/2010 by both Canada and the United States to describe the cross-border inland waters in the region. Maps of the Salish Sea typically omit the border to portray the fact that this natural environment knows no borders (see Figure 1).

For many decades, environmental advocacy has shaped CBC in the region, which more recently has focused on protecting marine life and a delicate natural ecosystem amid increased shipping traffic that moves through the Salish Sea. The naming of the Salish Sea was a powerful representation of cross-border connectivity and collaboration, deepening not only cross-border identity but also the ability for government and other stakeholders to engage collaboratively on shared environmental issues (Moscato 2022).

The Cascadia borderlands are also home to a high-volume network of cross-border connections. As Figure 2 illustrates, there are five land border

crossings and two marine border crossings that connect the Cascadia Region, serving road, rail, and ferry routes. Collectively, the land border crossings rank among the three busiest cross-border regions along the entire Canada–US border. In a typical year, over 10 million cross-border trips are made into Washington State and over $18.5 billion of goods cross back and forth (U.S. Bureau of Transportation Statistics n.d.).

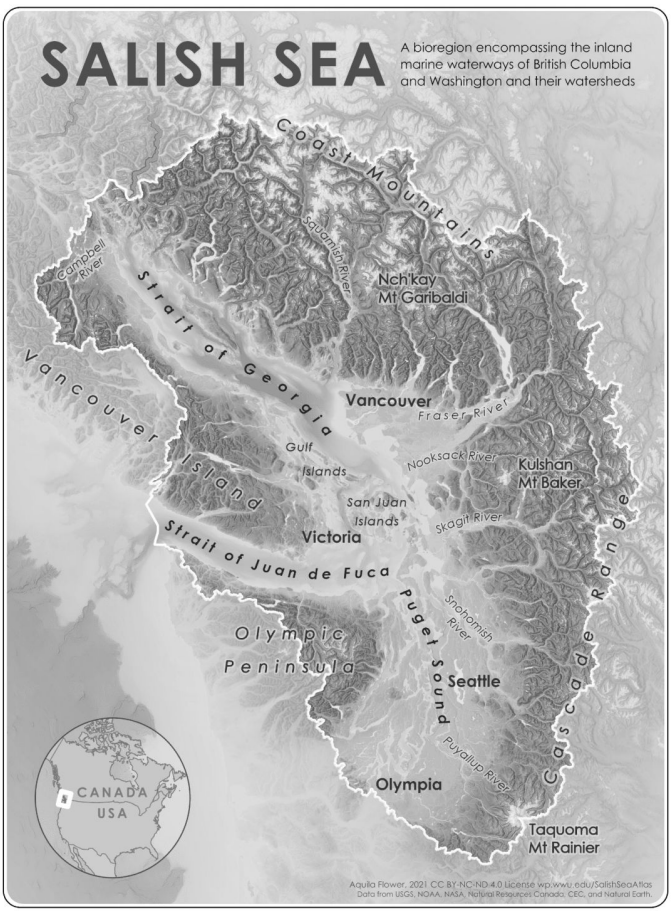


Figure 1. Salish Sea Region (Source: Aquila Flower)

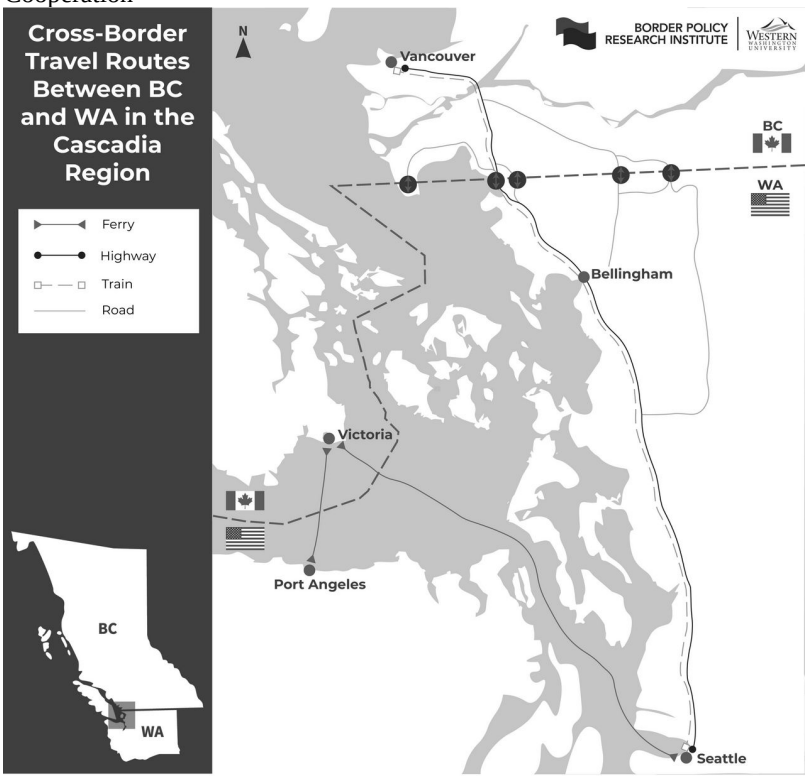


Figure 2. Land and marine border crossings in Cascadia (Source: BPRI)

One of these border crossings connects the exclave of Pt. Roberts, Washington, to British Columbia. As the map displays, the international border cuts through this small peninsula connected to Canada, shaping one of several geographical oddities that exist between the two countries, whereby a US territory can only be accessed by land via Canada. The small exclave community relies on cross-border services from Canada for drinking water and electricity, underscoring the importance of CBC in daily aspects of life.



Figure 3. Coast Salish Language Territories (Source: Deborah Reade, 2017)

There are more than 40 independent Indigenous Nations that have inhabited the Cascadia Region for thousands of years. Collectively part of the Salishan language group, these nations are ethnically and linguistically related. Known as First Nations in Canada and Tribes in the US, the 'Coast Salish' people have ancestral territories that span the Canada–US border. Many of these Nations are actively engaged in cross-border governance, especially related to environmental protection and industrial development (Baloy and Pipp 2024). While cross-border Indigenous governance is beyond the scope of this chapter, it's worth noting that the influence of the Coast Salish provides both an added layer of complexity and resiliency to CBC.

An ecosystem of stakeholders

Located far from capital cities in Washington, D.C., and Ottawa, the Cascadia Region has long been grounded in an ethos of autonomy, which has shaped a robust network of subnational CBC. There are several examples of organizations that are specifically dedicated to advancing CBC across jurisdictions and sectors, including the Pacific Northwest Economic Region and the Cascadia Innovation Corridor (CIC). Both bring together government, industry, and to a lesser extent academia, to tackle a wide range of shared challenges, spanning from transportation to environmental protection to economic development. Importantly, these organizational structures operate within a broader ecosystem of stakeholders, one which is fluid, largely informal, and engaged from the 'ground-up' (Border Policy Research Institute 2018; Broadhurst and Trautman 2023). The efforts of these organizations have resulted in numerous cross-border successes, many of which have gone far beyond the regional borderlands to shape binational policies in Canada and the US (Cappellano, Richardson, and Trautman 2021).

A key aspect of CBC in Cascadia is the region's innovative spirit and strong tech sector. Vancouver and Seattle are both home to tech giants like Microsoft and Amazon, which also shape a larger ecosystem of tech talent and financial capital. Microsoft Corporation in particular has been a central driver of stronger CBC through its support of the CIC effort, which was established in 2016 and is led by business organizations in Vancouver and Seattle (Cappellano 2019). In addition to other goals, the CIC is a leading proponent of developing a cross-border high-speed rail network.

Much of the CBC in Cascadia is driven more by relationships than mandates, more by agreements than regulations, and more by soft forms of diplomacy than institutions. The strong involvement of para-political entities, namely civil society and the private sector, in combination with subnational governments, breaks down some of the silos that could inhibit CBC in Cascadia. Yet even as these more informal, ground-up efforts can be resilient and effective, a lack of structure and institutionalization renders them vulnerable to a loss of funds and changing priorities. This is particularly true when turnover occurs in government agendas or business

leadership, and new fiscal policies develop. The networked model of CBC in Cascadia that is built upon relational infrastructure can be seen as both a strength and a weakness, particularly during times of transition.

Recent geopolitical tensions and borderland impacts

There are numerous examples of the successful ways that Canada and the US have engaged collaboratively on their shared land border. At the binational scale, many of these advancements were formalized in binational agreements, particularly in the wake of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. However, since 2016, there has been no new binational border policy accord to guide the priorities for CBC. This void in a binational framework has occurred alongside deteriorating relations between the two countries, which reached a historic low in 2025. The imposition of tariffs on Canada, as well as the antagonistic rhetoric of the Trump Administration, caused a backlash by Canadians. The collateral damage not only soured relations between the nations, but has also eroded trust and connectivity in the borderlands. Cross-border travel to the US plummeted in early 2025 and many border communities have faced severe economic losses (CBC News 2026; National Post 2026). As a consequence, subnational and regional cross-border relations are under new pressures. Indeed, as national scale relations deteriorate, the impacts are felt disproportionately in the borderlands, where connections are strongest. It is within this context that Cascadia provides a compelling example of how an informal model of CBC can serve as a nimble and dynamic form of diplomacy even as institutional connections weaken.

Planning efforts for the 2026 FIFA Men's World Cup

In early 2024, regional stakeholders began discussing the potential for a massive increase in cross-border travel during the World Cup, and what challenges and opportunities that presented. Previous experiences with sporting events (and Taylor Swift concerts) had led to lengthy wait-times and delays, which not only presented a problem to solve for, but also presented an opportunity to leverage the Games to develop more efficient and secure border processes (Border Policy Research Institute n.d.).

Furthermore, while the FIFA host cities of Seattle and Vancouver were responsible for planning in their respective cities, there was no entity tasked with planning for cross-border travel between the two cities. It was in response to this gap that regional stakeholders – largely convened by existing cross-border organizations – coalesced to form an informal working group to exchange information and advocate for improved border processes.

The working group consisted mainly of Canadian and US border agencies, regional transportation providers, tourism operators, and emergency management personnel from both sides of the border. The group met virtually on a bi-weekly schedule with occasional in-person workshops. These platforms for CBC, information sharing, and relationship building sought to build on the region's tech talent in combination with the strength of existing cross-border networks to advance innovative approaches to accommodating a spike in travel during the World Cup.

While the primary success of this regionally-based informal model of CBC was undoubtedly relationship building, there were several specific policy-relevant achievements worth highlighting. One is related to a broader approach to providing advance information about travelers prior to their arrival at the border, which facilitates their cross-border mobility. In Cascadia, the stakeholder working group brought together transportation providers with the Canadian and US border agencies to develop an approach that enabled motor coach operators to share passenger data prior to arriving at the border. The ongoing working group meetings provided a framework for challenges and impediments to be addressed, and an adequate system was established.

The second achievement was the creation of a 'know-before-you-go' web-based portal. The portal was designed to provide cross-border travelers with the necessary information needed for travel. Spearheaded by a binational organization, the Future Borders Coalition, in partnership with Amazon Web Services, the portal was developed in large part through a public-private working relationship with the Cascadia stakeholder group. The portal is accessible in 25 languages and built on data from official government sources in the US, Canada, and Mexico. By the end of the

World Cup, the portal had received over 1 million queries from more than 120 countries (Watchfire AI 2026).

Both of these examples illustrate the power of para-diplomacy in the borderlands. Not only do these organic and dynamic networks drive progress at a regional scale; they also have the potential to shape vertical channels of coordination from the borderlands to broader networks of cross-border connectivity at the national scale. As previously described, Cascadia has a long history of leading binational advancements in cross-border mobility – largely due to the strong belief in and commitment to the value of CBC. This example demonstrates the importance of multi-level governance, and the important role that local stakeholders and the private sector can have in CBC.

Conclusion

There was a collective sigh of relief in Cascadia when the World Cup came to a close, and there were no hiccups at the border. While borderland communities did not necessarily see the economic gains, or even visitation, that had been predicted when the locations of the Games were first announced, fears about massive border delays had not materialized. Furthermore, the region proved that, despite broader geopolitical tensions, CBC was still alive and well. As the Honourable Adam van Koeverden, Canada's Secretary of State for Sport, recently observed, cooperation during the FIFA Men's World Cup "relied on established diplomatic and professional relationships, exchanges among government experts, and new forums created to address shared concerns – demonstrating that effective international cooperation does not always require new institutions or centralized authority. It depends on clear roles, consistent communication, and trusted relationships" (van Koeverden 2026).

Unlike CBC in the European Union, CBC in the borderlands of North America lacks structure and dedicated funding. While this presents a certain degree of instability and vulnerability, it also leaves room for models of CBC that are organic in nature and driven by border stakeholders who are most impacted by cross-border challenges and therefore more likely to find effective ways to overcome those challenges. The tenuous nature of the

Canada–US relationship could weaken and erode Cascadia's CBC in the future. However, as the case study of CBC for the World Cup demonstrated, a widening gap in broader binational relations could also create a gap that will be filled by enduring relationships in the borderlands. From a policy perspective, planting the seeds that enable an organic model of CBC is an important consideration. Whether that is a culture of collaboration within a particular agency, or a recognition of the value and importance of CBC, breaking down silos and fostering strong cross-border connections requires intention and engagement, which may be as effective as, if not more so than, mandates and institutions.

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3. Sovereignty vs. Porosity: Comparative Institutional Frameworks Governing the Indo-Nepal Open Border and the Kazakhstan–Russia Border Zone

Gokul M A

Abstract

Most comparative analyses of cross-border cooperation are centered on Europe, leaving other global regions comparatively understudied. This study attempts to address this lacuna by jointly investigating two non-European open-border regions: the India–Nepal and Kazakhstan–Russia borders. Drawing on critical border studies and the notion of paradiplomacy, this chapter argues that sovereignty and openness are not antithetical but are perpetually renegotiated by both state and subnational actors. The India–Nepal border sustains cooperation chiefly through enduring social ties and informal local customs, whereas the Kazakhstan–Russia border relies on formal institutional mechanisms established through the Eurasian Economic Union. Nevertheless, both cases reveal that even entrenched cross-border relationships can be disrupted by unexpected political developments. The chapter concludes with practical and policy-oriented observations, notably that formal economic integration frameworks do not inherently prepare states to manage non-economic crisis-induced population flows across borders.

Introduction

Borders are commonly perceived as demarcation lines that separate entities. In much everyday political rhetoric, a border signifies the endpoint of one state's jurisdiction and the commencement of another's – a notion typically exemplified by customs checkpoints, barriers, and security personnel. However, border regions rarely operate in such a simplistic manner. Residents in proximity to a frontier frequently share a common linguistic community, intermarry across the boundary, and participate in the same commercial markets. They relocate for employment irrespective of cartographic delineations. This divergence between the border as a juridical construct and the border as a lived reality constitutes the foundational premise of this study.

Scholarly investigation into this divergence has grown substantially over the past three decades. It continues to concentrate predominantly on Europe, where the European Union has established an exceptionally intricate network of formal institutions that operate across national boundaries. Cases from South Asia, Central Asia, Africa, and Latin America remain comparatively underexplored, despite frequently presenting border dynamics that are equally complex and, in certain respects, more illuminating precisely because they lack the EU's institutional structure. This study contributes to addressing this lacuna by examining two non-European examples: the open frontier between India and Nepal and the border region separating Kazakhstan and Russia.

The central thesis of this study is straightforward. In both areas, national administrations have at various points sought to impose stricter controls over the movement of people and commerce and to address security concerns along the boundary. Local populations, merchants, municipal bodies, and informal networks have nevertheless persisted in maintaining cross-border activities, collaborating with the state at times and circumventing it at others. These two cases diverge markedly in the manner in which this cooperation is structured – one relies on historical social connections, whereas the other depends on formal treaty-based integration – yet both illustrate that state sovereignty and open borders are not immutable or dichotomous circumstances. Rather, they are outcomes continually

generated and regenerated by multiple actors operating across various levels.

Conceptual Framework

This study engages with two interrelated strands of scholarship. The first concerns critical border studies, which moved away from conceptualizing borders as static lines and began to treat them as dynamic social phenomena. Newman and Paasi (1998) contended that boundaries are most effectively comprehended through the narratives and practices that perpetually reconstruct them rather than through their cartographic positioning. Expanding on this perspective, Parker et al. (2009) proposed that borders should be examined as locations where territorial and non-territorial manifestations of power converge, implying that a single boundary can simultaneously function as a rigid security barrier and a flexible social connector. Paasi (2011) further observed that no singular theory of borders can adequately account for every case. This study therefore follows a comparative approach, examining two different regions instead of assuming that one explanation fits both.

The second strand of literature focuses on actors below the national level. Ivo D. Duchacek (1990) described how regions, provinces, and border communities develop what he termed perforated forms of sovereignty. Actors at subnational and local levels build their own connections across international borders even though foreign affairs is formally a national-government function. This concept, which subsequently evolved into the broader notion of paradiplomacy, is pertinent here because it helps explain why cross-border collaboration in both the India–Nepal and Kazakhstan–Russia cases can continue despite strains in national relations: local actors possess their own incentives and channels for maintaining border functionality.

Collectively, these two frameworks suggest that border governance should be evaluated not only by treaty provisions but also by whether local actors have the practical ability to manage routine tensions in the border area. This perspective is applied to both cases in the subsequent sections.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative comparative case methodology. The two cases were chosen because both are often described as open or highly porous borders outside Europe, yet they differ in how this openness originated and is managed, thereby offering a useful contrast rather than a repetitive narrative. The study draws on secondary sources: bilateral treaty texts and summaries, government and think-tank reports, scholarly articles on border cooperation and Eurasian integration, and news reports covering recent border-related events. The analysis is organized around three comparative dimensions: the historical origins of border openness, the institutional frameworks shaping current cooperation, and the way each border responded to a major external disruption. Reliance on secondary materials is a limitation acknowledged in the conclusion; the chapter therefore offers a systematic comparative interpretation rather than original fieldwork.

The India–Nepal Border: An Old Bond under New Pressure

The India–Nepal border spans approximately 1,750 kilometers and is one of the most open international frontiers worldwide. Its openness arises not from a recent policy decision but from the endurance of longstanding movement patterns across the Terai plains, formalized in the Treaty of Peace and Friendship signed by the two governments in 1950 (Kandel 2024). Under this agreement, citizens of India and Nepal can cross without a visa or passport and may reside, work, and own property in each other's territory with few restrictions (Kandel 2024). Nepal's security concerns at that time, including concerns related to developments in Tibet, contributed to the treaty's original rationale alongside enduring social and religious connections between the two countries (Kandel 2024).

However, the treaty's wording is less important than the surrounding society in sustaining the border's daily operations. Communities residing on both sides of the Terai exhibit shared linguistic, familial, and religious practices, as well as cross-border marriages and seasonal employment. Trade is integrated into daily routines rather than perceived as exceptional (Jaiswal 2017). Municipal authorities, local merchant associations, and

informal cross-border networks routinely manage practical issues such as market schedules, minor conflicts, and the transport of goods without awaiting directives from national capitals. Fundamentally, cooperation in this region is characterized by a bottom-heavy structure: it relies on social capital that predates governmental policy.

This same openness has also evolved into the border's most contentious feature. Concerns about counterfeit currency, arms trafficking, and militant networks exploiting unguarded segments of the border have occasionally prompted Indian security agencies to enhance surveillance, especially given the border's estimated 50-plus disputed or poorly demarcated points that complicate monitoring (Tamang 2011). Nepal, in turn, has increasingly characterized the 1950 treaty as outdated and inequitable. An Eminent Persons Group was established to suggest amendments, although implementation of its recommendations has progressed slowly (Haidar and Bhattacherjee 2017). The result is a border where the state periodically endeavors to impose control from above while communities and local institutions continue to manage the practical consequences from below – precisely the combination of sovereignty and porosity that critical border studies would predict.

The Kazakhstan–Russia Border: Institutional Openness Meets Geopolitical Shock

The Kazakhstan–Russia border is one of the world's longest international land boundaries, extending approximately 7,600 kilometers across open steppes with minimal natural obstacles to movement. It acquired its current form in 1991 following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. Its precise legal delimitation was not resolved until 2005, with physical demarcation proceeding in phases thereafter. In contrast to the India–Nepal case, cross-border cooperation here has developed predominantly through formal institutions rather than longstanding informal practices. The Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), which came into force in January 2015, was established to help its member states, including Kazakhstan and Russia, make greater use of intraregional economic ties, modernize their economies, and improve global competitiveness. A single market for goods, services,

capital, and labor is at the heart of the Eurasian integration process (Vinokurov 2017).

Within this framework, citizens of EAEU member states can generally enter each other's territories and seek employment without separate work permits – a substantial change from the more restrictive regulations applicable to non-member migrants (Leonov and Lisinskaya 2021). At the regional level, Kazakhstani border regions and their Russian counterparts have fostered cooperation in trade, transportation, agriculture, environmental management, and communications, treating the border zone as a shared economic space rather than solely a security perimeter (Roy 2022). At the same time, this partnership has never been free of tensions: years of joint border management have also necessitated dealing with irregular migration, cross-border criminal activity, and occasional friction within border communities, suggesting that even a highly formalized border requires continuous management rather than a one-time institutional design (Sagindikov 2013).

The fragility of even this formalized openness became apparent in September 2022, when Russia's declaration of partial military mobilization during the conflict in Ukraine triggered a sudden, large-scale movement of people toward Kazakhstan. Because Russian citizens could enter Kazakhstan with identity documents and without a visa, tens of thousands of men crossed within a few days, producing queues reportedly stretching up to 30 kilometers at certain checkpoints (Geybullayeva and Zardykhan 2022). Kazakhstani officials indicated that they had no intention of closing the border. Local infrastructure in border communities, including Kostanay, experienced considerable strain, with rental costs reported to have tripled and intercity transport operating at full capacity (Geybullayeva and Zardykhan 2022). Certain Russian border areas responded by establishing military recruitment points at crossing facilities to prevent individuals from attempting to leave. At least one publicized incident involved a Russian security official who had entered Kazakhstan to evade mobilization and was subjected to an attempted removal back to Russia (Rickleton 2022). The episode illustrates a situation in which formal, treaty-based openness was challenged not by economic forces – which the EAEU framework was

intended to address – but by a political and military crisis that it had not been designed to anticipate.

Comparative Discussion

Considered together, the two cases differ in their origins and institutional frameworks but converge in their fundamental patterns. The India–Nepal border's openness emerged organically from shared history and society, later receiving a legal structure through the 1950 treaty, whereas openness on the Kazakhstan–Russia border was primarily structured through a deliberate regional integration initiative decades after the border itself was established. Similarly, cooperation along the India–Nepal border depends more on informal social connections and local adaptability, whereas cooperation along the Kazakhstan–Russia border depends more on formalized legal entitlements within the EAEU. Neither approach is inherently superior: the India–Nepal model has shown resilience partly because it does not rely on any single treaty remaining intact, while the Kazakhstan–Russia model has enabled deeper economic integration than informal ties alone could provide.

The genuine point of convergence between the two cases lies in the origin and management of stress. In both areas, the most significant pressure on cross-border openness has arisen not from routine economic or social interactions that the borders were designed to facilitate, but from issues outside the original arrangements – militancy and identity politics in the India–Nepal case, and a war-induced exodus in the Kazakhstan–Russia case. In both instances, local and subnational actors – Terai municipalities and trade networks on one side, and Kazakhstani border oblast administrations and volunteer responders on the other – bore the immediate impacts, undertaking practical tasks of crisis management while national-level diplomacy proceeded more slowly. This reinforces the chapter's central argument, guided by critical border studies and the concept of paradiplomacy: cross-border cooperation is maintained less by the sophistication of formal structures than by whether local actors possess the authority and resources to respond when unforeseen events occur.

Practical and Policy Implications

Several conclusions can be drawn, some of which are more cautionary than celebratory, because the comparison's practical value derives from both its negative and positive findings.

First, concerning the India–Nepal border, the frequent proposal to revise the 1950 treaty should be interpreted as more than a standard diplomatic gesture. A genuine revision process would need to formally recognize the role that municipalities, border haats (markets), and community organizations already play in trade rather than treating them merely as informal solutions to be tolerated. Combining this recognition with enhanced intelligence sharing and technology-based surveillance, instead of broad prohibitions, would address security issues without undermining the social structure that sustains border operations.

Second, regarding the Kazakhstan–Russia case, the events of 2022 underscore a specific and adverse practical lesson: the EAEU's legal framework was designed to manage predictable economic labor mobility, not sudden, politically induced population movements. The events demonstrated the strain that emerges when these categories blur. Policymakers in the region would benefit from creating separate contingency protocols covering shelter, documentation, and legal status for crisis-driven arrivals, distinct from the routine labor-migration procedures around which the union was built. Assigning some of this responsibility to border-region administrations, which are closer to the situation than national capitals, would likely lead to a faster and more humane response than waiting for high-level diplomatic coordination.

Third, at a broader level, this comparison indicates that policymakers and researchers assessing any border's resilience should look beyond the sophistication of its legal framework. A heavily institutionalized border, such as the Kazakhstan–Russia border, is not automatically more resilient than a lightly institutionalized border, such as the India–Nepal border; resilience seems to depend more on whether subnational actors are granted real authority and resources to manage friction as it arises. This is a modest yet transferable finding for other porous borders outside Europe that are seldom studied comparatively.

Conclusion

This study compares two non-European open-border regions – the India–Nepal and Kazakhstan–Russia borders – to argue that sovereignty and porosity are not opposing conditions but are continuously co-produced by both states and local actors. The two borders differ in how their openness originated and how it is institutionally arranged; yet both exhibit the same underlying pattern: everyday cooperation is resilient when local actors have the space to manage it. Both borders faced their greatest strain when developments beyond the original arrangements – militancy and treaty politics in one case and war-driven displacement in the other – exposed the limitations of existing structures. Given that comparative research on cross-border cooperation remains heavily focused on Europe, cases like these merit more sustained field-based investigation. This study, based on secondary sources, is offered as a starting point for a broader comparative agenda rather than a definitive statement on either region.

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Part II. Institutions, Diffusion, and the Dynamics of Cooperation

4. French-Luxembourgish Transborder Cooperation, or the Absence Thereof

Claude Ewert

Abstract

The following pages summarize the special dossier on French–Luxembourgish border cooperation from the magazine forum. The dossier showed the various shortcomings in transborder cooperation between two founding members of the EU that sit in the Schengen area. A deadlock on unemployment benefits and access to daycare was the spat that made it into the press. However, the issues are manifold and include public transport, gentrification, and increasing inequality not only between Luxembourg and the French border region, but within that region itself. The dossier's interdisciplinary nature makes it enriching and gave a predominantly Luxembourgish readership access to the French perspective.

This chapter argues that the Franco-Luxembourgish border is not a corner of the continent that European integration has yet to reach, but a place where European rules are working exactly as designed and producing deadlock. Coordination without harmonization allows the state of employment to internalize the contributions and externalize the social risks; a regulation that permits its own provisions to be made conditional on bilateral agreements allows a state to secure a derogation and then decline to complete it; and a reform intended to close that gap arrives with a transitional carve-out written for the single country it was aimed at. What looks from a distance like an unfinished project of integration is, on closer inspection, a stable equilibrium that the rules themselves sustain.

The evidence draws on number 449 of the Luxembourgish magazine *forum's* special issue *Terres communes ou terres d'exclusion ? Une (brève) introduction aux relations transfrontalières franco-luxembourgeoises* [Shared lands or lands of exclusion? A (brief) introduction to Franco-Luxembourgish cross-border relations] whose 40-page dossier assembled the most recent data and analysis on the question, alongside European legislation, Council documents and reporting published since. The dossier

was written by Tom Becker, Franz Clément, Estelle Evrard, Fernand Fehlen, Philippe Gerber, Vincent Hein, Mathieu Jacquot, Françoise Lavabre-Bertrand, Félix Martins, Isabelle Pigeron-Piroth and Jürgen Stoldt, and coordinated by Naomi Berrend, Liliana Miranda Eires and Philippe Reuter. Where I depart from its authors (on the role of the Council of the EU, and on what the 2026 reform will actually deliver), I say so.

Introduction

Schengen is an ambivalent word. To begin with, it is a small village in Luxembourg. For many outside of the EU, its name rings the equivalent of a tedious visa application. However, inside the EU, it is the equivalent of perfect harmony between nearly borderless nations. The seamless flow of people and services across the borders of the EU member states is physically reinforced by the absence of the now-demolished border posts. It is therefore surprising that when the French minister delegate for Europe, Benjamin Haddad, visited Luxembourg, the transborder cooperation between the two countries led to a botched press conference, during which Haddad walked out.

That day, Haddad experienced the France–Luxembourg journey first-hand by taking the train along with thousands of cross-border workers. Massively overcrowded and often delayed, these train journeys represent the daily toil of the French cross-border worker. Furthermore, as of 2026, 3,000 kids join their parents in this journey (by car, stuck in traffic jams) to attend a daycare in Luxembourg. Haddad and his Luxembourgish counterparts agreed that those kids should not have to attend daycare in Luxembourg, but in France. However, in that scenario, Luxembourg won't finance the daycare, although the parents work in Luxembourg. This supposedly led Haddad to leave early and skip the press conference where the Luxembourgish ministers couldn't add much to the topic (Stoldt and Lavabre-Bertrand 2026, 3–4).

This feeds into a larger narrative of Luxembourg being a victim of its own success. Its economic growth and wealth have exported some of its domestic issues (like housing and public transport) into the neighboring region. While a trickle-down process of exporting wealth affects some

aspects positively, they are outshone by the massive hike in housing prices. While cross-border workers earn on average 65% more than their peers who work in France (Stoldt and Lavabre-Bertrand 2026, 3), their purchasing power does not benefit the region. Given the attractive salary, more French people are drawn to the border but face towns that do not have the means to accommodate them. Those living in the surrounding areas but not working in Luxembourg face massive price hikes that their salaries cannot cover appropriately.

Historically, the region witnessed Franco-German rivalry, with Luxembourg as an independent state witnessing it first-hand in 1870, then again in 1914 and 1940. Iron ore production was the unifying element in what is called the Greater Region, which extends into Germany and Belgium as well. Cooperation with the latter is substantially better than with France, with Belgium especially given the joint history since 1830 and close cooperation within the Belgian-Luxembourgish Monetary Union. The pooling of steel and coal in the ECSC had a unifying effect on the region, although border posts remained, and so did the language barriers, which increased with modern schooling. The 1973 steel industry crisis led to high unemployment in Lorraine. Luxembourg maneuvered its monolithic economy based on steel production into financial services. The construction of the Cattenom nuclear energy plant throughout the 1980s ("Un territoire disputé" 2026, 10–11)[1] hampered relations and continues to do so, as France seeks to extend the operation of a power plant notorious for its malfunctions. Still, the major issue in French–Luxembourgish transborder cooperation remains cross-border workers.

The cross-border working situation

Luxembourg depends on its cross-border workers. 44 percent of all workers affiliated to Luxembourg's social security are cross-border workers (47% of salaried employment, or roughly 235,000 people), of which 54.7 percent are French residents (Fehlen 2026, 6–9; Pigeron-Piroth 2026, 12). The most prominent sectors they occupy are retail (15.6%) and the construction sector (12.6%), followed by finance (10.5%). Cross-border workers make up 88%

[1] The plant was built between 1979 and 1991.

of the working population in the communauté de communes du Pays Haut Val d'Alzette, which includes Audun-le-Tiche and Villerupt, and 52% in the Portes de France-Thionville agglomeration, the largest single concentration. Across the northern Lorraine border area their number has risen by 50% from 2015 until 2025 (Fehlen 2026, 8–9). The strongest increases are in areas further away from Luxembourg (nearly 80%), which shows that people will also take a longer commute into account. This does contribute to the vicious cycle of gentrification. Isabelle Pigeron-Piroth demonstrates that cross-border employment redistributes unevenly even at very short range. Within 15 kilometers of the Luxembourg border, median equivalized income varies by a factor of more than two (from about 18,000 € in Longwy and Mont-Saint-Martin, both former steel bastions still bearing the costs of deindustrialization, to between 37,000 and 40,000 € in the smaller communes north of Thionville) with poverty rates spanning 8% to 34% and unemployment 2.8% to 22.4% across the same zone (Pigeron-Piroth 2026, 12–13).

Perceived inequality affects the harmony of the bordering villages and towns; however, only one part of the population is affected. In contrast, the traffic issues of the daily cross-border exodus (and re-exodus) take a toll on everyone in the region. Pollution, clogged motorways, and overflowing trains and buses (prone to delays) reduce the overall quality of living. Here, Luxembourg can shine, not because its public transportation is flawless, but because it is free. COVID's most unattended side effect, working from home, offered a solution to some of the commute conundrum, but most jobs done by cross-border workers aren't workable from home.

Two separate thresholds govern the practice, and they are easily confused. The fiscal one, set by the 2018 tax convention, currently tolerates 34 days worked from home before France acquires the right to tax the corresponding share of salary; Luxembourg has suggested raising it to 45 days without fiscal compensation, France to 90 with compensation for the revenue it forgoes on work performed on its own territory. The social security one is separate and much higher: under the 2023 EU framework agreement, a cross-border worker may telework up to 49.9% of working

time before losing affiliation to the Luxembourg system (Lavabre-Bertrand 2026, 15; Pigeron-Piroth 2026, 13).

For all the talk of a borderless Europe, borders hit hard once a cross-border worker faces unemployment. The person registers with the unemployment office in their home country (France, in this case). France then pays the person, but they receive much more than another person who had the same job in France, because the allowance is calculated on their actual prior salary, a Luxembourg one. Luxembourg's liability towards France is capped at three months of unemployment benefits, no matter how many social security payments were deducted from the person's salary (which can amount to years). So Luxembourg can claim years of social security payments, but only has to reimburse three months' worth of them in case of unemployment (the regulation's five-month rule was made conditional, at Luxembourg's request, on bilateral agreements that were never concluded) (Martins 2026, 16–17).[2]

However, new EU legislation will affect liability for unemployment benefits. The reform was politically settled in spring and summer 2026, with the shift of unemployment liability to the last state of employment removing the asymmetry at the heart of the Franco-Luxembourg dispute (Council of the European Union 2026). However, formal Council adoption and entry into application were still pending at the time of writing. Nevertheless, Luxembourg has achieved a second derogation on the matter, with a 'transition period' for 'administrative adaptation' lasting three years, and unilaterally extendable by two more years. During that period Luxembourg is also exempted from the new duty to cooperate on supporting and following up unemployed cross-border workers, a curious carve-out, given that the derogation is justified by administrative burden alone. So Luxembourg will have to be liable for unemployment benefits no earlier than the end of the decade, since we have to factor in more time for Council approval and the officialization of the new law.

That said, what Luxembourg practices is for the most part not illegal, but ethically and socially questionable. The exception is family benefits and study grants, where its attempts to trim the cost of its dependence on cross-

[2] In 2024 France paid out 178 million euros and Luxembourg reimbursed 35 million; since 2011 the cumulative shortfall borne by Unédic approaches 1.5 billion euros.

border labor crossed into discrimination and were struck down by the Court of Justice on several occasions (Martins 2026, 16).[3] Contrasted with the Franco-Swiss cross-border worker agreements, where the Geneva canton allows for extensive working from home and a 3.5% retrocession of the gross payroll (paid to the neighboring French regions, which can use it where needed), Luxembourg does no such thing. It argues that it does by building infrastructure such as park-and-rides and other mobility infrastructure. Cross-border rail is run jointly, with CFL services reaching Thionville, Metz and Longwy, but the capacity carrying the bulk of French commuters is predominantly French, supplemented by Luxembourg-subsidized cross-border bus lines with far fewer seats (Martins 2026, 17).[4]

None of this means the arrangement is simply extractive, and Vincent Hein supplies the corrective. He asks what would happen if the whole of Luxembourg's workforce lived on its territory. The 235,000 cross-border workers belong to some 197,000 households averaging 2.7 people, so the country would gain in the order of 530,000 residents, and public spending would swell by roughly 20 billion euros against a budget of about 45 billion. Externalizing half the workforce is, in other words, an enormous fiscal windfall, even if it was never a deliberate strategy. Hein's wider point is that any attempt to reduce the cross-border phenomenon to a balance of public revenue and expenditure will mislead, on either side of the border (Hein 2026, 26–27).

In the future, the number of cross-border workers might also be receding. The Greater Region's labor market has been injected with new dynamism, states Françoise Lavabre-Bertrand. The lower housing prices outside of Luxembourg are more attractive for young families, thus lowering the overall age. We can then observe a trend that favors proximity to the workplace over higher wages, at the price of extensive time lost in the daily commute. This will be further amplified by people moving further away from the border. The border towns are cash-strapped, and the

[3] Martins notes the same pattern in pension totalization and in dependency insurance, where benefits in kind are supplied by the state of residence under its own, thinner, rules.

[4] Geneva retroceded close to 400 million CHF in 2024 to Ain and Haute-Savoie, while Luxembourg co-financed 230 million euros of French rail and road infrastructure between 2018 and 2021 under the Paris protocol and its Belval avenant.

mechanism is structural: income tax on the frontalier salary is levied in Luxembourg, while the proximity of the Grand Duchy deters the businesses whose local taxes would otherwise fund the schools, crèches, hospitals and water treatment that a growing population requires. Housing prices are constantly on the rise, though, engendering a paradox when settling in the towns closest to the Grand Duchy. That is amplified by Luxembourg's own housing situation, regularly featuring among the major concerns of Luxembourg's population in surveys conducted by the local broadcaster RTL. Lorraine is also a less attractive region in France, with professional mobility pushing people to the South or West (Lavabre-Bertrand 2026, 14–15; Stoldt and Lavabre-Bertrand 2026, 3).

Cross-border Mobility

While Lavabre-Bertrand's arguments predict a decline in the daily transborder commute, a research tool developed by a multinational team, MMUST, predicts a 60% increase in transborder mobility by 2040. In this scenario, Luxembourg contributes actively by extending railway mobility, introducing a new high-speed tram, and expanding motorways (ongoing for many years now, and once finished, it might require a further extension from three to four lanes). However, the MMUST researchers say that this will not be enough to accommodate the needs their model has predicted. Here again, working from home might seem like a solution, but it is more likely that AI will eradicate jobs that are workable from home than those requiring manual labor and physical presence (Gerber and Jacquot 2026, 18–19).[5]

The current solutions to the problem have so far only reduced it marginally. Clogged motorways are a part of the daily commute but also extend to all two-lane rural roads and even through villages. This can also clog high streets and residential roads, where many commuters have been caught speeding in streets where pupils walk to go to school. Cities and towns build speed bumps and install speeding cameras, but the former are often no obstacle for an SUV. Additionally, when traffic comes to a full halt, entire villages are trapped in smog.

[5] The +60% figure assumes the strategic planning objectives are fully met; even so, the A3–A31 corridor would remain saturated after widening.

Commuters would also often leave their cars near bus stops and railway stations, but towns have eliminated that possibility by making long-term parking (beyond two or more hours and up to eight) subject to residence. The Luxembourgish government regularly builds new large car parks near railways. The catch is that most of these are now operated with an app, to show that people actually use the premises for park-and-ride transport. The gate to the car park will only open to registered cars (registered via the app). Then, the tracking on the phone will show if they move beyond a specific area (often several kilometers), making them eligible for free parking.

New bus lines have been introduced since the EU payouts of the COVID recovery package. These also extend into the Greater Region. They are also electric, thus reducing CO_2 emissions. However, their capacity is far more limited than trains. Here, transborder commutes and who operates them are subject to distance. The Luxembourgish railway company does not cover those regions with a high influx of border workers. The trains coming from France are French, and the same applies to Belgium and Germany (with their respective national rail operators).

The paradox of Luxembourg's rail policy is that the country is investing heavily in the capacity to move people in and out of it every morning, while being steadily written out of the European long-distance network. The new Luxembourg–Bettembourg line, due to enter service in September 2027, is a conventional double-track line intended to relieve the busiest section of the domestic network; the Howald interchange around which it is organized is a commuter node (CFL 2026). This is infrastructure for the cross-border worker, not for the traveler, and it follows the same logic as the co-financed park-and-ride facilities and cross-border rail investment that Luxembourg offers in place of fiscal compensation.

On the long-distance network, the movement runs the other way. Luxembourg's high-speed connection dates from 2007 and was obtained by co-financing the LGV Est européenne under a bilateral protocol, without a single kilometer of dedicated line on Luxembourgish territory; trains reach the Grand Duchy over the classic network via the Pagny-sur-Moselle junction (French Senate n.d.). That arrangement has proved fragile. Since 2024, the SNCF has been reviewing the profitability of its loss-making

services, with the Paris–Luxembourg TGV among those under scrutiny on an axis where it is far from the most remunerative segment (Les Frontaliers 2024). More tellingly, when a Brussels–Strasbourg–Basel TGV was announced for July 2027, the Luxembourg mobility minister conceded in a parliamentary reply that a direct connection for the Grand Duchy was unlikely, these being commercially autonomous high-speed services (Virgule 2026). The train will call at Lorraine TGV, in open countryside, and pass Luxembourg by. The result is a country wired for commuting but not for connection: paying for infrastructure that brings 235,000 workers across its borders each day, while the new European axes, high-speed, night trains and low-cost alike, are laid out around it (Paperjam 2025).

Cooperation and Representation

The cross-border space is not short of institutions. On the French side alone, the border strip is split between two departments administered from Metz and Nancy, sits within a region governed from Strasbourg, and is organized locally into intercommunal authorities, a metropolitan pole for northern Lorraine, a European Grouping of Territorial Cooperation at Alzette-Belval, and a state planning agency building the French pendant to Belval. Cooperation runs through its own layer again: an intergovernmental commission meeting periodically, Interreg program committees, a cross-border mobility scheme, and a modeling platform built by six French, Luxembourgish and Belgian partners. Four urban planning agencies and research institutes supply the data, two chambers and a think tank supply the arguments, and half a dozen statistical offices supply figures that, as Pigeron-Piroth notes, are still computed within national containers (Evrard 2026, 32).

Cross-border workers themselves are represented, though more thinly than the density above suggests. The two largest Luxembourgish unions have run French *frontalier* (French for cross-border worker) sections for decades, the OGBL with four offices in Lorraine since the 1960s, and *frontaliers* vote in the Chambre des salariés. Beyond that, self-organization is surprisingly recent: the oldest cross-border worker association dates from 1998, a Luxembourg-law offshoot appeared in 2024, a European

confederation in 2025, and the most visible actions have come from a committee formed in 2020 that blocks roads over taxation. The campaign for fiscal retrocession is carried by an association of French elected officials rather than by workers. What none of these channels supplies is a vote: cross-border workers pay income tax in Luxembourg and elect representatives to the Chambre des salariés, but they have no say in the national elections that decide how the money is spent, which is why any Luxembourgish government conceding funds on their behalf does so at a purely electoral loss (Clément 2026, 30–31).[6] The result is not an absence of voice but a cacophony:

Intergovernmental and cross-border cooperation

CIG · GECT Alzette-Belval · Pôle Métropolitain Frontalier du Nord Lorrain · PRO-SUD · Établissement Public d'Aménagement Alzette-Belval · Institut de la Grande Région · Interreg Grande Région · SMOT · SERM Lorraine-Luxembourg · MMUST

French territorial authorities

Région Grand Est · Département de la Moselle · Département de Meurthe-et-Moselle · Communauté de communes du Pays Haut Val d'Alzette · Communauté d'agglomération Portes de France-Thionville · Communauté de communes Orne-Lorraine-Confluences · DREAL Grand Est

Representation and advocacy

OGBL · LCGB · Chambre des salariés (CSL) · Fedil · Chambre de Commerce · Au-delà des frontières (ADF) · Association des frontaliers au Luxembourg (AFAL) · Frontaliers Luxembourg · Confédération européenne des frontaliers (CEF) · Comité de défense et d'initiative des frontaliers du Luxembourg (CDIFL) · Maison du Luxembourg · Unédic

[6] Clément notes how few associations cross-border workers have founded themselves, given their numbers.

Research, data and planning

LISER · Université du Luxembourg / UniGR-Center for Border Studies · IDEA · CES · CEREMA · AGAPE · AGURAM · MMTP · STATEC · IGSS · INSEE · IBA·OIE

If cross-border workers are confused by the number of organizations that exist on the matter or deal with transborder cooperation, we shouldn't expect the politicians to fare any better. The Luxembourgish Ministry of Foreign Affairs refers on its website only to the intergovernmental commission (CIG). That very same chamber was where the press conference debacle happened.

Living Together

French people and Luxembourgers do generally get on well. With French being an official language in Luxembourg and taught at school, communication is generally fine (although for native Luxembourgers it is easier to learn German, given the closeness to Luxembourgish). The cross-border workers are part of everyday life in Luxembourg, and since many work in retail, interactions are daily. Xenophobic incidents occur, but are rare, much to the dismay of far-right populist parties who see political capital in riling up the French and Luxembourgish against one another.

The populist party ADR (Alternative Democratic Reform Party, Alternativ Demokratesch Reformpartei) likes to depict this as Luxembourgers being pushed out of their own country, but also laments the strong presence of the French language in Luxembourg. Conversely, French populist politicians gain more popular votes in regions which are subject to strong gentrification. Neither populist side, French or Luxembourgish, presents an adequate solution, though. Luxembourg cannot exist without the French cross-border worker, and offers lucrative jobs to those in the adjacent territory (Stoldt and Evrard 2026, 23).[7]

[7] In Hayange, where 66% of the valley's working population commutes across the border, the far-right mayor was returned in March 2026 with 73% of the votes cast.

The rules as the obstacle

While Stoldt and Lavabre-Bertrand argue that Paris' requirement of a Luxembourgish vote is the reason for French passivity on the matter, the reality of Brussels does little justice to that. In qualified majority voting, Luxembourg accounts for very little. In unanimity voting on financial matters, Luxembourg uses its veto to maintain its positions. However, Luxembourg can hide behind Brussels legislation, which Switzerland cannot (Stoldt and Lavabre-Bertrand contrast the Luxembourgish–French transborder agreements with those of Switzerland and France) (Stoldt and Lavabre-Bertrand 2026, 4). The more parsimonious explanation is that Luxembourg does not need Paris to be bought, because the regulation already supplies the argument: it can invoke "the treaties" and decline bilateral concessions without ever refusing anything. This is the pattern the chapter has traced. Regulation 883/2004 coordinates national systems without converging them, so contributions accrue where the work is done and risks fall where the worker sleeps. Article 86 then allows the regulation's own provisions to be suspended pending bilateral agreement, which converts inaction into compliance. And Article 87b(8) of the 2026 reform, having identified Luxembourg's exceptional dependence on cross-border labor, treats that dependence as grounds for exemption rather than for responsibility. At no point is anyone in breach. The deadlock is not a failure of the rules but a product of them.

While Luxembourg does finance infrastructure in the border region, it is infrastructure addressed to the cross-border workers. Many of them are no longer exclusively French, but a fair number are Luxembourgers who prefer to live in France where they can afford better housing, thus leading to gentrification of the Lorraine and Moselle border regions (Stoldt and Evrard 2026, 20–23). Other issues include that healthcare workers mostly work in Luxembourg, depriving the French border region of essential workers. During the COVID pandemic and border closures, Luxembourg experienced the dramatic shortcomings of this situation. Also related to health are the heavily discounted prices for cigarettes (and alcohol) in Luxembourg, abundantly available at lucratively placed petrol stations along the borders of the Grand Duchy. The Luxembourgish government

gains the profits of these sales, but the long-term health problems of its consumers are exported to the French healthcare system (this is obviously not an exclusive case, as any country bordering another where cigarettes are much cheaper will face this problem).

Luxembourg managed to find agreements with Belgium (Reynders-Juncker Fund) ("Rétrocession fiscale, le mot qui fâche" 2026, 28).[8] With the large number of Luxembourgers living in Germany (and massively contributing to the economy), any German–Luxembourgish border disputes could be solved. A Franco-Swiss-style solution, where Luxembourg reimburses France, does not seem plausible. The current dispute also concerns unemployment benefits. This will eventually change because of recent proposed changes to EU legislation by 2030. When this happens (seemingly a 'when', not an 'if' anymore), the Luxembourgish government can blame the financial hole this new legislation will tear into state coffers on Brussels (a convenient way for any EU member to shift the blame from the national to the international). Luxembourg will thus wait until it is obliged to cover unemployment benefits for cross-border workers. And such an EU obligation will be easier to swallow for voters than if any government were to grant the benefits 'prematurely'. That government would suffer at upcoming elections (Stoldt 2026, 29).

Blaming Brussels will also take the wind out of the sails of far-right populists who repeatedly blame cross-border workers for the traffic jams, pollution, and the widespread use of the French language in Luxembourg (conveniently ignoring the fact that French is an official language of the country). The Brussels-blaming will harden euroscepticism but would spare any governing parties a resounding electoral defeat, but this is also just hypothetical.

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[8] The fund, created in 2002, pays Belgium a fixed annual sum, renegotiated every three years and distributed to communes according to their number of resident frontaliers.

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5. Cross-Border Diffusion of Interreligious Councils in the Balkans

Vedran Obućina

Abstract

This chapter examines the cross-border diffusion of interreligious peacebuilding models in Southeast Europe through the role of the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina in supporting the establishment of interreligious councils in North Macedonia and Kosovo. Emerging in the aftermath of the Bosnian war, the Council represents one of the earliest institutionalized platforms for cooperation among Muslim, Orthodox, Catholic, and Jewish communities in the post-Yugoslav space. While its domestic role in reconciliation has been widely studied, its transnational influence remains underexplored.

Focusing on the processes through which this Bosnian model was adapted and transferred, the chapter analyzes how religious actors, international organizations, and local stakeholders collaborated to establish similar frameworks in neighboring contexts marked by ethnic and religious fragmentation. In North Macedonia, the creation of the Interreligious Council of North Macedonia reflected efforts to manage intercommunal tensions following the 2001 conflict, while in Kosovo the Interreligious Council of Kosovo emerged within a fragile post-independence environment shaped by contested sovereignty and deep societal divisions.

The study adopts a comparative and qualitative approach, drawing on institutional documents, policy frameworks, and existing scholarship on interreligious dialogue in the Balkans, but foremost on original semi-

structured interviews with the persons engaged in these historical initiatives. It argues that these initiatives constitute a form of "soft" cross-border cooperation, where religious institutions act as carriers of norms, practices, and organizational models beyond formal political structures. Rather than merely replicating the Bosnian template, the councils in North Macedonia and Kosovo selectively adapted it to their specific socio-political contexts, demonstrating both the possibilities and limits of model transfer in post-conflict societies, but they also failed due to different reasons.

The chapter contributes to understanding how interreligious initiatives can transcend national boundaries and foster regional stability. It highlights the Balkans not only as a space of division, but also as a laboratory of innovative, faith-based cross-border cooperation, and gives a broader look at often unseen cross-border religious diplomacy.

Introduction

Numerous interreligious dialogue and peace organizations promote the role of religion and clerics in peacebuilding and post-conflict reconciliation through the practical work of clerics. There is a historical skepticism of religious peacebuilding because religious institutions and figures have had a negative contribution to peace through hate speech and warmongering; others were just instrumentalized. However, this does not mean that religious actors, institutions, rituals, and values cannot be deployed or utilized for peacebuilding.

In the interdisciplinary research of modern conflicts, religion is often seen as a negative force. Religious leaders are described as supporters of hate, violence, and wars, connected to strong populist movements, ethnic nationalism, and authoritarianism, and using hate speech while pointing to the holy scriptures and the often-one-sided interpretations of God's words. A relatively small amount of research has been done about the role of the clergy in keeping peace and avoiding violence in conflicts and debates, especially in the countries and regions characterized by multi-religious and multi-ethnic communities, such as the countries of the former Yugoslavian socialist federation. Even less research is dedicated to the silent diplomacy of the priests, imams, and rabbis, their motives and drives for religious

diplomacy, except some recent notable examples (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009). Although there is an overarching interfaith agreement at the top levels of every religious community in question, these clergymen are mostly left alone with their peace initiatives in the local surroundings. If they manage to have media appearances, they stand out as individuals singled out from a more institutional environment and bring an instrument that can be, in due time, used for reconciliation between different religious and ethnic communities that were fighting against each other. There is a necessity to look at these religious actors, their respective success and limitations both on local and national levels, acceptance of their work, and blockade that comes primarily from within their religious institutions and political organizations. In this work, their abilities are highlighted in case studies of ex-Yugoslavian countries, whereby an introspective idea of religion-based reconciliation or faith-based diplomatic activity may be theoretically explained.

The Yugoslavian region was always an amalgam of different faith traditions. The universal and cross-national Roman Catholic Church has strong national characteristics; Croatian people use their adherence to the Roman Catholic faith as one of their primary identity markers and make it a very "Croatian" thing. The Orthodox Christian churches in the Balkans and the Middle East form some of the earliest ecclesiastical bodies of Christianity. Nevertheless, in the era of nationalism, many of them defined autocephality within the national frameworks. The old notion of the symphony is superseded by a direct link between church and nation (where nation prevails) as can be seen among Serbians, Montenegrins, and Macedonians. Bosniaks, as Slavic Muslims, have founded their identity on a special Hanafi/Tasawwuf idea of Islam, characteristic of every Balkan Muslim population, including Albanians. However, Albanian religious identity is not as strong as in other nations, as it is religiously heterogeneous and contains Muslim, Roman Catholic, and Orthodox communities. All of these identities have played an important role in wars following the breakup of Yugoslavia: the Croatian War of Independence (1991–1995) between (Roman Catholic) Croats and (Orthodox) Serbs; the Bosnian War (1992–1995) between (Muslim) Bosniaks, (Orthodox) Serbs, and (Roman

Catholic) Croats; the Kosovo War (1998–1999) between (primarily Muslim) Albanians and (Orthodox) Serbs; and the Insurgency in the Republic of Macedonia (2001) between (Orthodox) Macedonians and (Muslim) Albanians. Religious identities were important in these conflicts, visible in the destruction of other sides' holy sites and worship places, but the politicians also instrumentalized religion.

This study is based on the oral history interviews with more than 100 religious leaders in the three countries done for the author's PhD thesis in 2023 and revisited during 2026 for additional questions and insights.

Failure in Kosovo

When the Interreligious Council (MRV) was constituted in Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH), Kosovo and Macedonia were not yet in a violent phase of their conflicts. It occurred at the end of the 1990s and the very beginning of the 2000s. Although brief, these conflicts had a profound impact on the entire political system of these two countries. Very much like in BiH, both countries experienced battles between ethnoreligious groups. Ultimately, the religious leaders in these countries chose to engage in religion-based reconciliation and peacebuilding, with varying levels of involvement and outcomes. For the most part, Kosovo and Macedonia followed the work of MRV and had solid contacts with the Council. That is why a comparative insight into the outcomes of MRV's appeal in these two countries is a significant focus of this chapter.

The success of launching the Interreligious Council of BiH encouraged Religions for Peace organizations and clergy in BiH to propose the creation of similar councils in neighboring countries. Particular interest was given to Kosovo, which in the 20th century had a durable conflict between (Orthodox) Serbs and (mainly Muslim) Albanians. The two nations experienced a complex relationship during the 20th century: "Through extremely polarized evaluations, there has traditionally been a profound division between Albanians and Serbs regarding almost all vital components that constitute a relationship of trust: there is a high level of acceptance of force as means to resolve the conflict; there is the extremely high ethnic distance between Albanians and Serbs; opposed desirable

political solutions are envisioned by both groups" (Nikolić 2003, 66). Both ethnic groups suggested that their claims over Kosovo stem from their civilizational position, based on their historical and religious identities. It was ominously announced in one of the early speeches of Slobodan Milošević: "The Kosovo heroism does not allow us to forget that, at one time, we were brave and dignified and one of the few who went into battle undefeated… Six centuries later, we are again embroiled in battles and quarrels. They are not armed battles, though such things should not be excluded yet" (Ejdus and Subotić 2014, 169).

Kosovo is an internationally partially recognized country in the heart of the Balkan peninsula. The predominantly Albanian population in Kosovo refers to their country as Kosova and sometimes as Dardania. Serbs consider it a continuation of the Autonomous Region of Kosovo and Metohija, or Kosmet for short. In 2011, Kosovo had 1,810,366 inhabitants, excluding Serbian municipalities in the north of Kosovo (North Mitrovica, Leposavić, Zubin Potok, and Zvečan). Ethnically, Kosovo consists of 92.9% Albanians, 1.5% Serbs, and 1.6% Bosniaks. However, the importance of ethnic communities is significant despite their relatively small numbers. In that sense, the census also shows a 0.6% population as Gorani, 0.5% Romani, 0.9% Ashkali, 0.6% Egyptians, 1.1% Turks, and 0.6% as others. It is significant to stress that in 2011, Kosovo did not include the historically present minorities of Macedonians, Croats, and Montenegrins in the census, and debates over real numbers persist (Kuburić 2012, 515). Previous censuses have shown a significant increase in the Albanian population. The ratio between the Albanian and Serb populations was always in favor of the Albanians, but the total numbers were quite different: in 1948, Albanians made up only 68.5% of Kosovo's population, while Serbs made up 23.6%. In 1953, Albanians made up 64.9% and Serbs 23.5%; in 1961, Albanians 67.1% and Serbs 23.5%; in 1971, Albanians 73.7% and Serbs 18.4%; in 1981, Albanians 77.4% and Serbs 13.2%; in 1991, Albanians 81.6% and Serbs 9.9%. The large emigration of Serbs influenced these trajectories from poorly developed Kosovo to Serbia proper and other Yugoslav

republics. Still, in the nationalistic fervors of the late 1980s, emigration was shown as a tactic of Albanians to expel all Serbs from Kosovo.[9]

Regarding religious affiliation, the same census shows that 95.6% of the population identifies as Muslims, 2.2% as Roman Catholics, 1.5% as Serb Orthodox, while only 0.1% identify as non-religious, and 0.1% as belonging to other religions. These findings are interesting as Kosovo is very secularized, where Islam "was reduced to the private sphere: reserved only for worship practices, annual religious feasts and traditional ceremonies for weddings and deaths" (Shehu 2019, 50). In comparison to other Balkan countries, where approximately 80% of the population regard themselves as religious, in Kosovo, this number is only 66% (Kuburić 2012, 515). Islamic identity is not tied only to Albanians but also to Gorani and some of the Roma population (Ashkali and Egyptians), while Roma and Serbs are of Orthodox faith. There are no Orthodox Albanians in Kosovo compared to the members of the Albanian Orthodox Church, who reside primarily in south Albania. The Roman Catholic faith is associated mainly with Albanians, although some smaller ethnic groups are also Roman Catholic. Such ethnoreligious composition of Kosovo society is translated into the constitution, whereby Kosovo is not the national state of Albanians but "a state of its citizens" (Article 2), where the ethnic communities themselves are mentioned only once in constitutional arrangements of the state's parliament, where 20 of 120 seats are guaranteed for representation of communities that are not in the majority in Kosovo: a minimum of 10 seats for the Kosovo Serb community, while other guaranteed seats are Roma (1), Ashkali (1), Egyptians (1), an additional seat for either Roma, Ashkali, or Egyptians, Bosniaks (3), Turks (2), Gorani (1), all with other competitive votes for particular political parties or individuals who represent an ethnic community (Article 64.2).

Religion held a strong symbolic significance in the Kosovo War and previous conflicts, albeit in a somewhat different manner than in BiH.

[9] Metohija derives from the Greek word metokhia, meaning "monastic estates"; it is the Western part of Kosovo, and Serbian politicians use the exclusive terms "Kosovo" and "Metohija". Bishop Atanasije Jevtić mentioned in 1983: "Everything in Kosovo is a sort of metoh, of heavenly beauty, everything on this plateau touches and connects the soil and the sky, the heavenly kingdom with the earthy kingdom" (Ejdus and Subotić 2014, 169).

Similarities are also substantial, as “the domination of political institutions by ethno-nationalist groups meant that peace and reconciliation were affiliated with political defeatism and collective subordination towards other ethnic groups” (Visoka 2017, 17). As peacebuilding within the state did not achieve strong outcomes, since 2011 the European Union has been facilitating the normalization of relations between Belgrade and Priština, with constant ups and downs. Constant disruptions and de-legitimization of peace processes endure in Northern Kosovo, where Serb municipalities do not accept rules from Priština. At the same time, populist and nationalist movements and political parties gain power among Kosovo Albanians, primarily through the support of the Movement for Self-Determination (Lëvizja Vetëvendosje).

Religious identity in Kosovo has historically been more fluid than in Bosnia, with Albanians historically identifying as Muslim, Catholic, or Orthodox while maintaining a strong national identity independent of religious affiliation. This fluidity was shaped by Ottoman policies, socialist secularization under Yugoslavia, and post-war national movements. However, religious sites became primary targets during the Kosovo War, with Serbian Orthodox churches attacked as symbols of Serbian presence and mosques destroyed in Serbian counter-offensives. In the post-war period, religious peacebuilding initiatives – such as interfaith restoration projects supported by the OSCE – have sought to rebuild both physical structures and trust. The success of these initiatives depends on their ability to reconcile historical religious pluralism with contemporary ethno-religious tensions, a challenge compounded by competing narratives of victimhood and resistance.

While the question of protecting religious (primarily Serbian Orthodox) sites is high on the list of demands for sustainable peace, it is significant that the most comprehensive study of peacebuilding in Kosovo, conducted by Gëzim Visoka in 2017, does not mention religious communities either as actors in peacebuilding or disruptors of peace efforts. Still, “practices documented in the past include the common use of pilgrimage sites, shared religious celebrations of holy places and the worshipping of saints and shrines belonging to another religious tradition” (Pasamitros 2017, 300). In

an opinion poll published in 2019, most people perceive religion as having some influence on societal issues in the country, but a very modest impact on political matters (Shehu 2019, 52). At the same time, "religious leaders are perceived to be influential within their community of believers but have only a moderate influence on society as a whole" (Shehu 2019, 52). Furthermore, respondents overwhelmingly think religion had a positive influence in the sphere of tolerance and peaceful coexistence and mixed (positive/negative) influence on good neighborly relations among Western Balkan countries; they believe the interreligious harmony will improve in the next decade, as "Kosovo's interreligious tolerance is deeply rooted and interfaith coexistence has occurred in Kosovo for centuries" (Shehu 2019, 55). The religious communities in Kosovo lack legal entity status despite numerous attempts to enact a new law (Mehmeti 2019, 108). The law recognizes only five religious groups: the Islamic Community (and does not recognize Sufi Tarikats, which exist separately under Islamic law), the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish Religious Community, and the Protestant Evangelical Church.

Officially, the Kosovo government supports interreligious connections and protects religious sites as part of the Cultural Heritage Law (Pasamitros 2017, 301). Religious communities and organizations already tried in March 1999 to organize an interreligious initiative before the NATO bombing of Serbia. A Conference of Religious Leaders, organized by the American Rabbi Arthur Schneier of the Appeal of Conscience Foundation and sponsored by the Austrian government in Vienna, gathered Serbian Orthodox Church (SPC) Bishop Artemije of Raška and Prizren, Qemajl Morina from the Islamic Community, and the late Roman Catholic bishop Marko Sopi, who jointly condemned the violence, interethnic hatred and the destruction of religious sites (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009, 67). A similar delegation took part in the Seventh World Assembly of the World Conference on Religion and Peace (WCRP) in Amman in December 1999. Despite a split within the Holy Synod of the SPC over Kosovo, "Bishop Artemije met with Hashim Thaci and a delegation of Kosovo Albanians in early July 1999 to sign a joint statement calling for the return of refugees and the creation of a multi-ethnic Kosovo" (Bieber 2003, 329).

In February 2000, Mufti Rexhep Boja, the president of the Islamic Community of Kosovo, Episcopate Artemije (Radosavljević), Bishop of the Raška-Prizren Episcopate of the Serbian Orthodox Church, and Msgr. Marko Sopi, Bishop of Prizren of the Roman Catholic Church (RKC), came to Sarajevo and attended the 12th regular session of the Interreligious Council of BiH at the Holiday Inn Hotel. After this meeting, on February 8, 2000, the three representatives gave the Statement of Common Moral Engagement (KTA BKBiH 2000), which reads as follows:

"We, religious leaders of traditional faith communities in Kosovo and Metohija, the Islamic Community, Serbian Orthodox Church, and Roman Catholic Church, worried due to the slow and ineffective peace plan process in Kosovo and Metohija, while visiting Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina, decided to give the following statement:

All peoples of Kosovo and Metohija suffered great tribulations. War is, thanks to God, finished, but unfortunately, insecurity and violence still reign. Our task now is to establish a durable peace founded on truth, justice, and coexistence.

We acknowledge and accept that our religious communities are distinct and that each one feels called to live according to its own faith. At the same time, we recognize that our religious and spiritual traditions share many common values, and that these shared values may provide a trustworthy basis for mutual respect, cooperation, and free coexistence throughout the entire territory of Kosovo and Metohija.

Every one of our traditional Churches and Religious Communities teaches that human dignity and value are a gift of God. Our faiths, each in its own way, call for respect for the basic human rights of every person. Violence or usurpation of their basic rights, for us, is not only breaking of humans but also God's law.

We together, in mutual acknowledgment of our religious differences, condemn all violence towards innocent people and every kind of usurpation or violation of human rights, and particularly, we condemn:

- hate crimes based on ethnic or religious differences,
- desacralization of religious sites and desecration of graveyards,
- expelling people from their homes,

- obstruction of free return in one's home,
- acts of revenge,
- misuse of media for the spread of hatred.

Ultimately, we urge all people of goodwill to take responsibility for their actions. Let us treat others in a way that we would them to treat us.

This statement is intended for all our believers in Kosovo and Metohija, local authorities, and representatives of the international community in Kosovo and Metohija."

In April 2000, members of the MRV of BiH visited the religious leaders of Kosovo and Metohija (KTA 2000, 5–6). Due to conflict disruptions, they had to travel by car to Ljubljana, Slovenia, from where they flew to Skopje, Macedonia, and then by car to Priština. On April 11, 2000, Mufti Boja welcomed the guests in Priština's Hotel Grand, where he stated that "dialogue is practically the only way to peace and tolerance," while the Catholic archbishop of Sarajevo, Cardinal Vinko Puljić, answered that "peace is God's gift, which He does not give without the participation of people. In this participation, religious communities have a big role." The following day, the religious leaders visited several important sacred sites: the Patriarchate of Peć, the Islamic Center in Dečani, and the Catholic Cathedral in Prizren. On the ruins of a mosque in Peć, BiH reis-ul-ulema Mustafa effendi Cerić showed readiness and hope in forgiveness and peacebuilding while condemning all Muslims who desecrated Orthodox graves. The representative of Kosovo's episcope Artemije, Fr Sava Janjić, also condemned all those who were destroying mosques and committed acts of violence against the innocent population. He said: "In the Serbian Orthodox Church and Serbian people, many condemn these acts, but this is not expressed, and there is no possibility to make these beliefs and standpoints public." At lunch organized on the premises of Catholic bishop Sopi, a tendency and readiness for religion-based peacebuilding in Kosovo were accentuated. Episcope Artemije further called for work within the framework of an Interreligious Council, which could be organized in Kosovo.

The creation of such an institution was initiated on April 13, 2000, in Priština. The statement reads in its totality as follows (KTA 2000, 6, 7):

"We, religious leaders of Kosovo, express deepest thanks to our brothers, religious leaders of Bosnia and Herzegovina, for visiting us in Kosovo from April 11 to 13th 2000, which came as a follow-up of our visit to Sarajevo from February 7 to 9.

Respecting their experience, we decided today, on April 13, 2000, in Priština, to form the Interreligious Council of Kosovo.

During the three days of the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina's visit, we visited together places important to each of our communities: Peć, Dečani, Prizren, Gračanica, and Priština. This visit enabled our guests to see Kosovo's reality, both its good and bad sides.

We used their visit to make very important steps, which began in Sarajevo when we signed the Statement of Common Moral Obligation. Our talks today focused on concrete steps that we, as religious leaders, can take to create a better future for all nations in Kosovo. For this purpose, we express our approval on the following points:

With a common voice, we again condemn all acts of violence and violations of basic human rights. These acts, which happened and continue to happen to innocent persons, are evil; as such, none of our religious traditions can condone them.

We commit today to continuing our active cooperation as religious leaders and promoting cooperation among our communities. We shall work on building our structures and tools for cooperation through the Interreligious Council of Kosovo. Additionally, we are pleased that all of us will contribute to the work of the Transitional Council of Kosovo and express our readiness to serve this institution by further enhancing our joint efforts.

Unanimously, we support the creation of local democratic institutions that shall deliver security, peace, and welfare for all inhabitants of Kosovo. We expect the international community to provide the necessary support to the inhabitants of Kosovo in achieving this goal.

We commit ourselves to working together to reconstruct destroyed and damaged religious buildings in Kosovo and appeal to our friends and partners in various international agencies to assist us with the necessary means to fulfill this important task.

> Finally, we appeal to the international community to work with more efforts in finding all prisoners, missing and abducted persons and solving their situation because their unknown fate stays as one of the deepest wounds of our recent tragic conflict.

Once again, we thank our esteemed guests from Bosnia and Herzegovina for their visit, as well as the WCRP, for help and constant support in this process. We are happy to continue our close brotherly cooperation, and with God's help, we will be able to work together on building a stronger future for all nations in our blessed land."

This document laid a sound basis for further peace efforts, but no elements of reconciliation were mentioned. The entire document is devoid of forgiveness and the need to cease mutual blaming. The then reis-ul-ulema of Kosovo Rexhep Boja suggested that Bishop Artemije "issue a statement asking for forgiveness about the wrongdoings of the Serbs against the Albanians in Kosovo; such a statement was never released" (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009, 75). It was a missed opportunity, but also an unusual request, as the urge for such a statement should necessarily come from the bishop himself and not from someone else. A prominent Orthodox priest from Kosovo recalls this initiative: *The Interreligious Council of BiH visited Kosovo in 2000 as an initiative of the then-Chief of UNMIK, Bernard Kouchner. Unfortunately, due to the turbulent events that followed the war in Kosovo, it was impossible to continue with this initiative, and the Council held not a single meeting. However, the religious leaders of Kosovo have met on numerous occasions. It was mainly by invitation of the KFOR command* (Anonymous, interview with the author 2021).

Meetings continued under the auspices of international networks. In September 2001, Kosovo's religious leaders met in Oslo, invited by Norwegian Church Aid, and a plan of action was envisioned. A follow-up training seminar took place in Ohrid, Macedonia, in May 2002. At the time, relations had already grown sour. Bishop Artemije withdrew entirely from participating in any interreligious activity, which was a sort of a surprise, as he was the leading bishop opposing the rule of Slobodan Milošević (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009, 69). The dialogue reached a dead end in 2003, "when the participants concluded that they will no longer meet unless

their senior leaders could meet in Kosovo" (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009, 68), particularly after the SPC blamed RKC for claiming Orthodox monasteries as their own. The situation in Kosovo worsened in the following years, although informal contacts between the clergy survived. One effect of ending the formal religion-based peacebuilding in Kosovo was the removal of Mufti Boja from his position, who was replaced in 2003 by Naim Ternava. Blumi and Krasniqi describe Boja as a person who "lived very much in conditions of spiritual deprivation and political oppression" (Blumi and Krasniqi 2014, 487). He earned his PhD in Saudi Arabia and was named Kosovo's ambassador to Riyadh in 2008. Although he was the dean of the newly formed Faculty of Political Sciences, active in promoting religious tolerance and the preservation of locally built mosques, and had contacts with various clergy, since his removal, he had been sidelined from the religious life in Kosovo. Boja was also a defender of Sufi traditions, which are not in line with the teachings of the Islamic Community of Kosovo (Blumi and Krasniqi 2014, 488). Intrareligious differences abound in Kosovo, and this may be one of the issues hindering the clergy from moving forward with religion-based reconciliation. A Serbian Orthodox monk describes the situation with the Orthodoxy in Kosovo: *You must understand that the early 2000s were very complex, especially in 2004, when 35 Serbian Orthodox churches were destroyed in only two days, and another 4000 people were displaced. In comparison with BiH, where the war was much longer and had many more casualties, Kosovo is indeed more complex. Although there are no Albanian Orthodox believers, and all Orthodox believers belong to the Serbian Orthodox Church, the Serbian ecclesial authorities do not share a single view of Kosovo. On the other hand, we see some initiatives from the Albanian Orthodox Church aimed at intervention. Still, its jurisdiction is exclusively in the Republic of Albania, and it contains ethnic Albanians, with a smaller number of Greeks, Serbs, Montenegrins, and Macedonians* (Anonymous, interview with the author 2021).

An imam from Prizren also mentions difficulties in cohesion within the Islamic Community: *Muslims in Kosovo are primarily Sunni; however, some Dervish groups, the so-called Tariqat Community, are Shi'a. There*

are also Bektashi, whose allegiance lies with their head leader in Albania. Although we consider all of them Muslims, the Islamic Community is not a real representative of all Muslims. For solid interreligious cooperation, we need to determine whether the Islamic Community and Tariqat constitute one or two distinct religious communities (Anonymous, interview with the author 2021).

The status of Kosovo remains unsolved, as is the case with Serbs. Attacks on Serbian monasteries ensued, despite a formal showing of respect by some Albanian politicians, like the visit of Kosovo President Fatmir Sejdiu to Visoki Dečani for Orthodox Easter in 2006, when he spoke with Orthodox clergy in Serbian (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009, 77). The international community requested numerous times from the government in Priština better protection of religious sites and widening religious freedom. In 2006, UNMIK and UNESCO signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the reconstruction and conservation of all religious sites in Kosovo, although progress was slow.

A Serbian Orthodox priest from BiH recalls the effects of a nationalized religion: Albanized Islam is a brake on interreligious dialogue. When I show up as a priest in Kosovo, Albanians come and spit in front of me or behind me because they are disgusted that I pass by them as a priest. It will take a considerable amount of time to establish a stable environment in Kosovo that facilitates interreligious dialogue. Prizren is the most tolerant city. In some cities, I couldn't get out of the car to take a walk because it's not safe and risky. The Sufi orders are a smaller group, but I think they are more open and have broader views and interpretations of Islam. However, they do not get along with each other. Prizren is a distinct city, and only 50 percent of its population are Albanians; the rest are Gorani, Torbeši, and Turks, who are genuinely lovely people. The problem arose with immigration, with uncultivated people who destroyed the dialogue structure of Kosovo cities such as Prizren, Peć, etc. If Albanians return to the original Islamic principles and the Roman Catholic community, then interreligious dialogue can occur. I have all the fondest memories from Prizren. I was walking in a cassock, and everyone greeted me kindly, but the same cannot be said for Gjakova, Peć, and the rest of Kosovo. I do not know how much

the connection between Sufism and traditional Islam could contribute to that culture (Tupeša, interview with the author 2019).

A prominent priest from Kosovo thinks it is a fear that drives religious communities away from communicating with the SPC: *The relations of SPC with the Muslims are relatively solid; there are no mutual attacks in media or negating our identity. But the links are also distant. In normal circumstances, we prepare a gathering every year for Christmas and New Year in our eparchy for all representatives of the religious communities and international organizations. This year, we did not have it due to a pandemic, but the Roman Catholics did not come last year. Others arrived but did not communicate much between themselves. My personal opinion is that Albanian religious communities are in fear that any cooperation with SPC would be understood as cooperation with Serbs, which is an anathema for Albanians. For instance, in Đakovica, we have three old Serbian women who take care of them. The Roman Catholic nuns never visited them or asked if they needed some help. On the other hand, we have visited the monastery of the Sisters of Mercy of Mother Teresa (all of whom are foreign) in Peć, and we always bring some help. They give us small gifts in return, and we cherish them for their work* (Anonymous, interview with the author 2021).

Tupeša's reminiscence about his coming to Kosovo also includes some negative moments when he felt under threat for wearing the priest's cassock. It echoes several incidents in Kosovo where Orthodox priests have been beaten in the streets, most famously Father Mitrofan, who was attacked and beaten in Kosovska Mitrovica in 2012 (Kuburić 2012, 530). In many ways, Orthodox clergy outside Kosovo point to the need to solve the country's status first before any religion-based intervention could follow. Thus concludes an archpriest from Banja Luka: It is impossible to discuss the influence of religious communities in Kosovo. Not only can they not contribute to reconciliation, but they are fighting for mere survival. If you take Orthodox Christians in northern Kosovo or enclaves, monasteries are guarded against physical destruction by armed soldiers of European countries. In such circumstances, there is no possibility of talking about the influence of that religious community or any reconciliation because there

was a destructive group of people. Here, the question of the status and definition of the area and statehood itself must be resolved to talk about reconciliation (Anonymous, interview with the author 2019).

Traits of political pressure on religious leaders are evident in the SPC case, particularly in the case of the Bishop of Raška and Prizren, Teodosije. In May 2019, Serbian President Aleksandar Vučić criticized Bishop Teodosije for holding the Kosovo ID (Durić 2019, 36). This incident occurred during a meeting between President Vučić and the Holy Synod regarding the situation in Kosovo. The Serbian episcopes did not find anything new about the government's policy, but the President used this opportunity to form positive public appearances as a politician who respects the Church. Bishop Grigorije also reached out to the press. He said that President Vučić brought no quality information about Kosovo: "After that, media bullying began against Vladika Teodosije and me, and our names were used by tabloids for a whole month (…) This kind of writing has no effect on me, but probably they do affect the voters in Serbia" (Durić 2019, 37).

Both bishops Teodosije and Grigorije support ideas of closer cooperation with Albanians but strongly see Kosovo as part of Serbia: "Kosovo problem is possible to solve by reaching the civilised norms – people have to respect the law, no one should threaten physically or in other ways anyone, and if this happens, sanctions must follow. We live in a time when houses and temples are destroyed, graves are desecrated, and all with the explanation that 'people fight for their own country.' Someone has to assume responsibility for this" (Durić 2019, 56). Bishop Teodosije is vocal in supporting the interfaith dialogue in Kosovo to preserve Serbian churches and monasteries. And while there is a will to act independently from politics, this is impossible to achieve as politics intertwine with every part of everyday life. As one priest told the author, *SPC is not dealing with politics. Still, we have to raise our voices because of constant violations of our rights, freedoms, court decisions, problems with the return of displaced persons, reconstruction of our churches…* (Anonymous, interview with the author 2021). In 2005, an Orthodox seminary was reopened in Prizren, although there is no talk about the violent conflict from his diocese.

For the renewal of the Interreligious Council in Kosovo, several preconditions should be established, argues a prominent Orthodox priest from Kosovo: *The Council should be reformed and include all the communities. The example of MRV in BiH is a nice one. However, Kosovo's churches and religious communities are under the heavy burden of the post-war situation, multiplying differently than in BiH. Although BiH has problems, the situation after the war is "normalised." By that, I mean there was freedom of movement, many displaced persons returned, property was compensated, there was more rule of law and freedom, and, very importantly, there was no massive destruction of churches and mosques after the war. This is not the case with Kosovo* (Anonymous, interview with the author 2021).

This priest also warns of internal problems within the Islamic Community: *The Islamic Community is in an internal battle to keep its pre-war moderate course against ever-increasing Wahhabi or even terrorist influence. We should not forget that Kosovo is the first European country by the number of foreign fighters in Syria per capita. One part of Muslims are radicalized by new teachings, mainly by opening new mosques and centers where radical ideas are spread* (Anonymous, interview with the author 2021).

Catholic–Muslim relations in Kosovo have been shaped by centuries of coexistence, but Vatican II provided a modern theological foundation for structured interreligious engagement. The principles outlined in Nostra Aetate, which encouraged dialogue with Islam, have been cited by Catholic clergy involved in Kosovo's interfaith initiatives. Despite these theological advances, practical challenges remain. The destruction of religious sites during the Kosovo War has left deep scars, and religious reconciliation efforts are often overshadowed by nationalistic narratives.

Since 2010, the abbot of the Visoki Dečani monastery has been Father Sava Janjić, recognized internationally as the most prolific religion-based peacemaker in Kosovo among the SPC clergy. In 1999, Fr Sava engaged in dialogue with Albanian forces: "The Serbian Orthodox Church in Kosovo was the first institution to engage in dialogue with Kosovo Albanian leaders through UNMIK after the 1999 war. I participated in meetings with the

former bishop in support of reconciliation and condemnation of violence by either side," says Fr Sava, reminding us of the role of the late Bishop Artemije (KoSSev 2020). Fr Sava Janjić and his brotherhood in the special protection zone of Visoki Dečani are targeted by both Serbian and Albanian media. The former criticizes him for having contacts and promoting dialogue with Albanian leaders, while the latter criticizes him for supporting the official SPC standpoints on Kosovo's independence. Fr Janjić also supports the role and presence of KFOR, OSCE, and EU in Kosovo as an international presence that protects the remaining Serbs in Kosovo but is critical of the Kosovo government's policies in general and cultural policies in particular. He warns of promoting a new political concept of heritage in Kosovo by creating a "Kosovo heritage" instead of "heritages of Kosovo." It is a strategy of Albanization of the whole heritage of Kosovo, and against principles of the internationally agreed frameworks of Kosovo, claims Fr Sava and suggests "the way forward should be sought in the peaceful coexistence of different spiritual and cultural traditions, the preservation of their heritage, tolerance of diversity, respect for the law and court decisions" (Tadić 2020). He concludes that cultural and spiritual heritage, regardless of its diversity, insofar as all citizens treat it with tolerance and respect, does not divide people but connects them by respecting their uniqueness and calls for more protection of Serbian monasteries and churches. Namely, some Kosovo media claim these churches are remnants of old Albanian Catholic presence. In his approach to ecumenism and interreligious dialogue as paths of peacebuilding, Fr Sava defends traditional Orthodox refutation of syncretistic ecumenism as perceived in the Protestant churches, acknowledges the need to be closer, even theologically, with the Roman Catholics, and to work closely with the Muslims on peace (Janjić 2015).

Throughout Kosovo's independence and until his death in January 2021, the influential Bektashi Community of Kosovo was led by Baba Mumin Lama. He was born in a well-known Bektashi family in Gjakovica/Gjakova and was chosen as the leader of Gjakova tekke in 1996. His Bektashi tekke was burned on May 7, 1999, by the Serbian forces and rebuilt in 2007 and is now the center of rejuvenation of Bektashi believers in Kosovo. In the

meantime, Baba Mumin began to approach other religious communities to foster peace through religious understanding. As also understood elsewhere, the Bektashi path is critical of tolerance: "Tolerance is to tolerate the other. I do not have to tolerate them but respect them. I respect them because that is how we are taught as Muslims. We are all creatures of God. The Qur'an says do not curse anyone, respect all," said Baba Mumin (Gaxha 2015). Baba Mumin was also critical of the state's role in curbing extremism, which also targets the Bektashi Community: "It is not up to us to deal with any radicalism. Deepening religious radicalism is the fault of the state. What has the state done? Nothing. When they insult Saint Mother Teresa or the Albanian women, why does the state not react? Why do they allow them to create hatred for others? We do not curse or tarnish them. We do not violate anyone's right to their faith. We believe we are doing the right thing!" (Gaxha 2015).

Within the Roman Catholic Diocese of Prizren and Priština, Don Lush Gjergji is known as a notable religious diplomat. He is a prolific writer and biographer of Mother Teresa. In the 1990s, he was a close associate of Ibrahim Rugova and consequently influential in establishing relations between Kosovo Albanian politicians and the Holy See. He sees the small Roman Catholic community as a bridge in multiethnic society: "The only way to live together is to seek unity in diversity regardless of ethnic, religious or national origins. As a Catholic Church in Kosovo, we want to act as bridges, bringers of peace amidst the various realities in the Country" (Mihailova 2018). Although an Albanian himself, Don Lush believes the Serbian people should be allowed to enjoy greater autonomy, as well as the Albanian minority population in Serbia. He warned immediately after the conflict that reconstruction efforts largely neglected the Serbian community, which felt increasingly insecure in Kosovo. He urged Albanian people to work on the Serbs' return to Kosovo. He stressed: "It is necessary to act even more deeply, among the Albanian people, to make it clear that Milošević's dictatorship has enriched and benefited itself, not all Serbs. Until the Albanian people understand that by hating, they destroy and penalize themselves, they will not be able to live with others and will not be free either" (Gjergji 2002). At the same time, Gjergji is aware that Albanian

national consciousness also provides a place for interreligious dialogue: “In Albanian society, Christianity has a very ancient, glorious and martyr tradition, but it has been a minority for centuries. A sense of inferiority has developed, leading to a lack of creativity and initiative. Islamism, on the other hand, is superficial and formal: it thrives on practice and reasoning that does not lead to verifying the faith. It is the starting point from which our religious communities move. However, now history presents us with great opportunities. Interreligious dialogue can develop within the Albanian people, demonstrating that tolerance is not a utopia. In Kosovo, Christianity and Islam have a providential opportunity to show that they can coexist and collaborate. Our fraternity, based on Albanianess, can become a story of active and collaborative tolerance” (Gjergji 2002). He encouraged the men of faith to change themselves and to find the strength to meet more.

Some areas of Kosovo demonstrate that multiethnic communities can coexist in harmony. One such place is Janjevo, an old settlement of Dubrovnik merchants, where Albanians, Roma, Croats, Gorani, and Bosniaks coexist peacefully without any difficulties. Some consider this to be a consequence of the excellent relationship established between the Roman Catholic parish priest and Muslim imam (Kuburić 2012, 531).

Currently, Kosovo continues to host interreligious meetings and conferences. It started in 2006 when a “pioneering interreligious conference took place in Peja/Peć” and included visits to Visoki Dečani, a mosque, and a Roman Catholic church (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009, 77). There are interfaith conferences organized annually in Kosovo, with international speakers and representatives of many faith-based international organizations, but it seems these are only a projection of “a commitment to interfaith tolerance to the international community (…) greater than any concern to address issues of interreligious coexistence in practice” (Pasamitros 2017, 301). Kosovo does not have an obligatory religious class in its schools. Religious communities, in general, lead their schools with boarding systems, and, interestingly, Muslim parents often send their children “to the Catholic boarding gymnasium in Prizren, because they trust not only the quality of education (the diplomas from this school are recognised in Germany) but also the strict supervision of the Catholic nuns

that help prevent their daughters from having premarital sexual relations" (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009, 96).

Serbian Orthodox clergy emphasize the destruction of religious sites and their community's displacement, while Muslim leaders highlight post-war marginalization and discrimination. Some religious actors recall instances of interfaith solidarity but refrain from discussing them publicly due to dominant nationalist narratives. Religious leaders use historical memory to shape present-day interreligious dynamics, reinforcing either reconciliation or division. Thus, when Alistair Thomson's method is used, Kosovo's religious actors present starkly different narratives about their roles in post-war reconciliation, shaped by their affiliations with either the Serbian Orthodox Church or the Islamic Community of Kosovo. Compared to BiH, Kosovo has failed to reach a sustainable interreligious dialogue.

Spoiling the religious diplomacy in North Macedonia

Of all ex-Yugoslavian republics, Macedonia had the thorniest history of ethnic and religious (self)identification. Contemporary Macedonia (named the Republic of North Macedonia after the resolution of the decades-long Greek–Macedonian name dispute in 2019) bears heritages of multiple identities (Slavic, Christian-Byzantine, Islamic-Oriental). Macedonians built national awareness in the 19th and 20th centuries, challenged by the Balkan Wars and two world wars. The formative period of the Macedonian national state and ethnic territory followed in the Yugoslav socialist federation, and from 1991 onwards, Macedonia existed as an independent state. However, Macedonian national identity is constantly questioned by neighboring peoples, although the Macedonians point to their language, religion, national dress, national dances, and ethnic self-identity as indicators of their ethnic identity (Damianopoulos 2012, 110).

The Republic of North Macedonia recognizes five constitutional religious communities: the Macedonian Orthodox Church (MPC), the Islamic Community (IZ), the Roman Catholic Church, the Evangelical-Methodist Church, and the Jewish Community. The MPC (69.6% of the population) and IZ (28.6%) are the two largest communities. Other

communities are smaller and are present in the constitution due to their historical importance and presence.

The data on religious identity may be misleading. There is a significant difference between "belonging to and practising a certain religion, whereby the former is thought of as tradition and heritage and the latter is a personal choice of people who independently decide if they will practice religion or not" (Božinovski and Nikolovski 2021, 29). Indeed, a 2012 Gallup poll places Macedonia as the most religious country in Europe and fifth in the world (Gjorgjevski 2020, 391). However, several surveys have shown people's traditional behavior, especially the youth, which may favor the idea that Macedonia is a very religious society. While 95% of Orthodox are baptized (the habit that did not vanish even in Communist Yugoslavia), 47% of them state they are religious.

The Islamic Community consists not only of Albanians but also of Turks, Roma, and Macedonian/Slavic Muslims (Torbesh). Together, they form 33.3% of Macedonia's population, but not as a coherent Muslim community as languages heavily separate them: Albanian, Bosnian, Macedonian, Roma dialects, and Turkish are all tongues of Macedonia's Muslims. They are all Sunni Muslims of the Hanafi school of jurisprudence, with a single exception of the Bektashi order, who are Sufi Shi'as. After independence, Albanians in Macedonia got a reis-ul-ulema for the first time in their history, as before, there were just muftiates under Istanbul and Sarajevo rule. The position of Sufi orders (particularly Bektashi, Rifai, Melami, and Halveti) is semi-independent. Although they accept the reis' rule, they form their codex. The IZ has a strong opposition to the radical teachings of Islam, Wahhabism in particular (Babić 2014, 392). In 2010, imam Ramadan Ramadani of Isa Bey Mosque was suspended for spreading radical Islam (Gjorgjevski 2020, 395). In the early 2000s, many imams were threatened by radicals financed by various funds from the Arabian Peninsula (Babić 2014). Mutual conflict within the IZ led even to the resignation of Macedonia's reis Arif Emini in June 2005. His successor Sulejman Rexhepi publicly requested help from Albanian political parties and the international community "in dealing with radical groups of Wahhabis and called for measures to stop the spread of radical Islam in

Macedonia" (Babić 2014, 394). While being very secretive, these radicals mostly gather around imams and preachers educated in Saudi Arabia and around the Yahya Pasha Mosque in Skopje. They are mainly featuring marginal fundamentalism but with a potential threat. The IZ claims the government and particular political parties have discriminated against it. The socialist government of Zoran Zaev presumably gave promises of denationalization of religious property belonging to the IZ, including the Burmali mosque in the center of Skopje, but never fulfilled it. That is why the IZ released a statement on religious discrimination in 2019, but already before it boycotted the World Conference on Inter-Religious and Inter-Civilisation Dialogue in Skopje in 2013 and Bitola in 2016 (Gjorgjevski 2020, 396).

The Roman Catholic Church consists of the Skopje Bishopric for Latin Catholics and the Apostolic Exarchate for Catholics of Byzantine Rite and is headed by the same bishop. The Uniates or Greek-Catholics were formed in the 19th century by those who were dissatisfied with the language discrimination from the (Greek-speaking) Ecumenical Patriarchate. Pope Francis visited Macedonia in 2019, praising the country's multireligious landscape as a bridge between East and West, as well as stating joy for respect given to Mother Teresa, an Albanian Catholic who was born in Skopje. The Vatican has for many decades been in contact with the MPC, which angered the Serbian church (Perica 2002, 246). Besides having a sizeable Uniate population, the Macedonian clergy works closely with the Vatican on commemorations of St Cyril, whose tomb is in Rome; in 1982, when the Catholic cathedral was consecrated in Skopje, it was the Macedonian clergy that attended; in 1985 Pope John Paul II received an official Macedonian political and religious delegation; in the same year, Macedonian clergy participated at the ceremony of St Methodius in Croatia; and in 1987 a high-ranking Catholic delegation visited Macedonia to celebrate its autocephality anniversary.

In the 19th century, the Methodist Episcopal Church and the Congregational Church sent British and American missionaries who established the United Methodist Church in Macedonia, firstly in Bitola, then in Skopje and Strumica (Jonovski 2019). It is a small but influential

community, and Macedonia's second president Boris Trajkovski was a lawyer but also a theologian and lay minister in the Methodist church. Smaller Protestant denominations are still outside this religious community, but they formed a formal Alliance of Protestant and Evangelical Churches of the Republic of Macedonia in 1999 (Jonovski 2019, 82). This later became the Evangelical Protestant Initiative, which acts as a loose association of several smaller churches.

The Jewish community has a long history in Macedonia but has a small presence in the country. In WWII, 98% of Macedonian Jews were killed in the Treblinka concentration camp after the Bulgarian fascists deported them. Others left for Israel. The official Jewish community exists with a tiny number of members, but the Macedonian government helped open the Holocaust Museum in 2011.

In 2016 and again in 2020, the Konrad Adenauer Stiftung Skopje, the Institute for Political Research, and the webpage Religija.mk did a national survey under the titles "Macedonia as a Multiconfessional Society" (in 2016) and "Religion in Multiconfessional societies" (in 2020). Some of the findings point to some interesting perceptions. For instance, the majority of Macedonians think the level of religious rights is the same in North Macedonia as it is in the EU (Božinovski and Nikolovski 2021, 44). They also think there is no discrimination between various religions in the EU, but tend to believe the same for Macedonia, in a country where until 2001 the MPC was the only recognized religious community, and where majorization of Orthodoxy and Islam is very visible in everyday life. Furthermore, the poll shows that the citizens do not expect any change in the domination of these two faiths nor in the relation between the religious communities after Macedonia enters the EU (Božinovski and Nikolovski 2021, 46); they also expect the EU to help in the process of gaining canonical status and autocephality of the MPC (Božinovski and Nikolovski 2021, 46).

Religious identities and beliefs are regularly used in political campaigns. Religion was sometimes among the main topics in pre-election campaigns, whether it was the canonical status of the MPC, the building of mosques and crosses, or the position of religion in society. Both Orthodox and

Islamic clergy gave public support to certain political parties during elections. Surveys show that citizens easily recognize the use of religion in political campaigns. However, less than in the last parliamentary election cycles, albeit they perceive these tactics to be successful only with a smaller number of people (Božinovski and Nikolovski 2021, 61). This fact is known to the political parties. Still, strategies are made to catch every possible vote, even if it means stepping out of the political realm.

Given the continuous tensions between (predominantly Orthodox) Macedonians and (primarily Muslim) Albanians, as well as religious disagreements between the MPC and SPC, an idea of interreligious dialogue for peace existed in Macedonia for some time. Still, its formation became more nuanced after the conflict of 2001 and was instigated by the late President Boris Trajkovski (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009, 69). Paul Mojzes was also an essential figure in the promotion of interreligious cooperation, and he had strong support from Ratomir Grozdanoski from the MPC. Some contacts between religious groups were present before the conflict. There was an interreligious meeting for peace in Struga during times of the Bosnian War, where the ex-dean of the Orthodox Theology Faculty Jovan Takovski warned of the spread of proselytism initiatives, which provoked a reaction from the IZ (Takovski 2004, 101). Takovski argues that religious leaders did not act timely and just watched how the conflict overspilled from Kosovo, but he is also very critical about a change of the Constitution and the Ohrid Framework Agreement as a tool through which "ethnic cleansing of non-Albanian and particularly Macedonian population" was done (Takovski 2004). He stood against the destruction of sacral objects in majority-Albanian territories, warned of hidden weapons, and of "incidents" that paved a difficult path for reconciliation. His criticism of the international community also points to the fact that MPC during and early after the conflict did not see reconciliation and peacebuilding possible without answering some of the major issues between the two communities. Still, Takovski made it clear that Christianity calls for peace: "St Basil the Great said nothing is so characteristic for a Christian than peacebuilding, which means persecution of hatred, stopping the war, removal of hypocrisy, extinction of revenge" (Takovski 2004, 100, 101). It was not translated into

good narratives, though. When the conflict began, Archbishop Stefan "called for a holy war against the Albanian terrorists who are stealing our territory" (Perica 2002, 175). The Archbishop's closeness to nationalistic politics can be seen even after the conflict. On January 9, 2002, Ljubčo Georgievski and the paramilitary unit Lions appeared at the ceremony where Archbishop Stefan gave them medallions of Christ with the inscription "God is with us" (Phillips 2004, 158).

Lower-level clerics made the first initiative for having a strong interreligious intervention from five religious communities in Macedonia amid the conflict. Although the Initiative for Peace, as it was unofficially named, failed to have a solid institutional role in stopping the armed conflict in 2001, it was the only interreligious action for peace in all of the ex-Yugoslav wars instigated while the conflict was still ongoing. One of the members of this initiative was Gjoko Gjorgjevski, today the dean of the Orthodox Theology Faculty in Skopje. Although not a cleric, Mr. Gjorgjevski is highly respected by priests and monks of the MPC and has the special trust of Archbishop Stefan (Veljanovski), who is the head of the MPC. The author spoke to Gjorgjevski in the palace of the Archbishop in Skopje about the formation of the Initiative for Peace. As mentioned before, both major religious communities in Macedonia understood a need for their initiative to act preventively. However, they were utterly slow in having a decision to reach over to the other community. It was partially due to the historical belief that Macedonia could overcome all difficulties without an armed conflict, just as it did in the early 1990s. When the rest of Yugoslavia was entrenched in warfare, Macedonia succeeded in preserving peace within its borders. After the conflict in nearby Kosovo and an influx of refugees and UCK warriors to Western Macedonia, this belief proved to be false, as Gjorgjevski comments: *What happened in 2001 was partially a result of some tensions from before. Still, no one expected a violent conflict, and we were quite surprised. Before 2001, there were religious communities in Macedonia, with small contacts. The Orthodox Church and the Islamic Community existed parallelly, they had some protocol-based meetings and greetings, but there was no honest dialogue. It is somewhat a continuation of the state present in socialist Yugoslavia. With the conflict of 2001,*

religious communities were called to give some sort of an answer. On the other hand, it was "natural" for a member of one religious community not to know what the "other side" does. I think this was the case for both these communities (Gjorgjevski, interview with the author 2021).

Sudden conflict indeed surprised many in the country, but there was obvious tension between the two ethnic communities. An effect of conflict overspill from Kosovo, where (Muslim) Albanians fought against (Orthodox) Serbs, started to gain an image of conflict between (Muslim) Albanians and (Orthodox) Macedonians. Identification of an enemy was not based on real religious strife but on ethnic weaponization and securitization from both sides. At the time, the Religions for Peace organization was still very much active in BiH, and a solution to quickly respond and stop the war in Macedonia was given at a very early stage of the conflict. Gjorgjevski remembers: *The initiative of religious communities to voice their call for peace in 2001 came from the Methodist pastor Cekov. He called the archbishop, who called all the religious leaders to gather in the Archbishopric palace – these were the Roman Catholics, Methodists, Jews, and Muslims. Everybody came except the reis-ul-ulema, who did not answer this call. It all happened at a time when we had the old Constitution. In it, the only acceptable religious community is the Macedonian Orthodox Church. After 2001, things changed, and now we have five religious communities mentioned in the Constitution. Because the initiator of this appeal for peace was the Orthodox Archbishop, there were calls for an indifferent leader of the initiative. I presumed Cekov got a similar call from the World Council of Churches, and the Macedonian Centre for Interreligious Cooperation was called to be part of the initiative. At the same time, a delegation from the Interreligious Council of BiH came to Skopje, led by Olivera Jovanović as a secretary. It was an initiative of the World Council of Religions for Peace, and there were several meetings. The first aim was that religious leaders give a clear message that they are against the use of violence and that the issues can be solved through dialogue; all attacks on religious institutions and sites cannot be tolerated; and they would need to form a small group to work on a standard text of such a statement* (Gjorgjevski, interview with the author 2021).

The first group consisted of Gjoko Gjorgjevski (MPC), Muarem Vejseli (IZ), Antun Cirimotić (Catholic Church), Mihail Cekov (Evangelical-Methodist Church), and Viktor Mizrahi (Jewish Community). These five were not only the representatives of their respective communities (with Cekov and Mizrahi being also the leaders of their religious institutions) but also personal friends who started to gather around this initiative more informally. Despite this friendly connection, progress was slow. Gjorgjevski explains why: *It was going slow because the tensions were high. At the same time, there were different views of how the religious institutions should act – mostly, these views came from the outside, probably with good examples from abroad. Here is a special position of the MCIC, which had a good connection to the WCC and the finances from the Norwegian and Danish Church Aid. At that time and today, the religious institutions have their representatives on MCIC's boards, forming a solid link. It went similar to the Macedonian dance Oro – one step forward, three steps back. We had several meetings where we dwelled on every word written in a statement. After the meeting, we had additional meetings and debates within our institutions, and later we had to return to the interreligious encounters. All this was going on at the time when the conflict was ongoing* (Gjorgjevski, interview with the author 2021).

The Macedonian Center for International Cooperation (MCIC) is an influential NGO in the transitional process in Macedonia. It was established in 1993 with the support of the Dutch Interchurch Aid (DIA) and the World Council of Churches (WCC). It has implemented more than 1,300 projects, focusing on the health and education sector, capacity building, and inclusion of marginalized groups. For instance, MCIC is almost singlehandedly responsible for improving education among the young Roma population. During the conflicts in Kosovo and Macedonia, MCIC decided first to act through humanitarian aid and then in confidence-building between various ethnic and religious communities. Among the leading organizers for such activities was Aleksandar Kržalovski, with whom the author spoke in the MCIC office in Skopje. The MCIC was also the main organizer of the first interreligious meetings. Kržalovski talks about those first initiatives: It was our initiative. Because of our help through WCC, MCIC had a good

connection with structures within the religious communities. It is particularly true for the MPC and IZ as the two largest communities, but also sometimes with the Roman Catholic Church, the Jewish Community, and Evangelic-Methodist church. When the conflict began, we appealed for peace with the non-governmental organizations in one week. We thought it would be good if the religious leaders and communities would publicly support peace appeals in the early phase of the conflict. They accepted it, and the first meeting was held in MCIC with the five largest religious communities. We were discussing the draft of such an appeal, and it was accepted at our second meeting, but between these two meetings, already three weeks had passed with discussions on how to write it and when and where to pronounce it publicly (Kržalovski, interview with the author 2021).

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The clerics seem to have been very passive if there was an NGO that had to appeal to them and their religious structures. A speedy reaction failed, but when the text was finished, a curious situation occurred: *We concluded and made a text in the Macedonian language, and we had to find a place where it should be signed. Some suggested MCIC, and others suggested a hotel, but at least one of the leaders declined these offers. Any state institutions were also out of the question, as the state was perceived as one side of the conflict. Thus, the place itself turned out to be an issue. It led to a standstill, and the first step of the initiative was not successful. The European Commission led this initiative through an EC representative in Skopje. Between the first meetings in early 2001 and the second stage of negotiations between the religious communities in summer 2001, several months went by without any work done. Also, some people on the initial board changed. I stayed there, but the Islamic representative changed, and the talks became more challenging. The interesting thing was that the new representative was the last reis-ul-ulema of Yugoslavia, Jakub Selimoski, a Muslim Slav. The text did not change much, but Selimoski asked if it should also be in the Albanian language. At that time, the only official language in Macedonia was Macedonian, and it was still a time of conflict before the public realized what would be asked by the Albanian community in the country. Hence, Archbishop Stefan posed the question of why should this text be also in Albanian. As the solution, the text was made in English; it was signed in English and Macedonian, and with paraph in other languages of Macedonia. These were all technical issues, but they couldn't have been overcome here in our country* (Gjorgjevski, interview with the author 2021).

The document is short but strategically clear: "Driven by the principles of our religion and educated to live and work together, as brothers and sisters, since we are all creatures of one God; Believing that the common elements of our religious beliefs should represent the basis for mutual

understanding, action for peace, and believing that the same Lord invokes us in this; Encouraged by the common concern of violence and clashes that are threatening to break our common harmony and democracy, which we build with patience;

We, representatives of the Macedonian Orthodox Church, the Islamic Religious Community, the Macedonian Catholic Church, the Macedonian Evangelical Methodist Church, and the Jewish Community in the Republic of Macedonia, together with the World Council for International Cooperation, met in Morges, Switzerland, from 11 to 13 June 2001, to express our commitment and to pray to the only God for peace in our common country, so we give this Joint Declaration.

As representatives of Churches and religious communities, we strongly condemn violence and clashes, which left only chaos and tragedy instead of a solution. Violence and clashes are not based on religion or religious differences, so we refuse to accept it as an act of religious intolerance because religion cannot support violence. Our churches and religious communities are not involved and firmly refuse to allow themselves to be involved and abused by others, nor do they allow misuse of religious symbols and language for violent purposes. We condemn the violent expulsion as well as misuse of the water and the basic needs of the population and call on our communities to respect human rights, including the right to water and help, as a basis for lasting peace.

We strongly condemn the misuse of sacred sites and objects for warfare, their desecration, and destruction. We also severely judge cases of the mischief of religious leaders. The sacred nature of sacred objects should be respected as well as the personal integrity and dignity of representatives and officials of religious communities.

Peace is too paramount to be left only in the hands of politicians. Peace is also the responsibility of Churches and Religious Communities. We are firmly convinced that responses to problems should always be demanded by open and extended dialogue, based on mutual respect and respect for the differences and values of other religious communities and traditions. It is the only path that stems from God, and no other way exists.

We feel and accept the need, so we have agreed on concrete activities in this regard, both individually and as Church and religious community. We call and advise our believers guided by faith in God to follow the path of non-violence and mutual respect to promote peace and eternal stability, coexistence, and prosperity for all of its citizens. We call upon the Churches and religious communities of Europe and the world to pray for us and to support our efforts for peace, among others, through the support for the integration and empowerment of Churches and religious communities. We call upon the international community to support peace and integrity, strengthening European integration and supporting the peace, stability, and prosperity of Macedonia and the region. God is with us. God encourages us. We know that we can find a solution with Him, but first, we must have faith and trust in Him."

Kržalovski also comments on these events and the statement signed by all five religious communities: The text itself was not an issue, but the place where it should have been proclaimed. The MPC suggested it should be publicly declared in the main church or the Bishopric seat, as it is the largest religious community in the country or the Office of the President. For the IZ, it was not acceptable to be in a church. Still, they did accept to go to the state president, mainly because President Boris Trajkovski was perceived as a person who sought a peaceful solution and a dialogue. The problem was with the Evangelical-Methodist church due to their strict call for separation between church and state. It was somewhat strange because Boris Trajkovski was not only a member of this church but also had a lower preaching position. It went on and on for almost four months. Only in July 2001 did they agree to proclaim this call in Switzerland. This act was too late. The conflict was entering its third month, and such an appeal did not have an immediate effect. Furthermore, the impact of the appeal was lesser as it was signed outside of Macedonia. It did not last long before the spirit of this appeal was partially lost. In only several months, MPC started to comment that it was not in line with the appeal and criticize the IZ for not protecting the churches – as 49 religious sites (churches, monasteries, mosques, tekkes) were damaged or destroyed (Kržalovski, interview with the author 2021).

On the question of whether he thinks this was because of some real technical issues or because of distrust, Gjorgjevski answered: *I think it was more a distrust. But it would have been successful under the auspices of the European Commission. However, the ambassador gave up this initiative when he saw it was not a good moment*. Namely, after the date of public announcement and signing of the initiative was found, 10 Macedonian soldiers were ambushed and killed. Archbishop Stefan then said he could not come out publicly with the statement at that time of mourning. After that, the Initiative again came to a deadlock, and any religious leader gave no appeal. The solution was found in Switzerland: *MCIC tried it again soon afterwards. That was successful, and the appeal for peace was signed and publicly pronounced in Switzerland. Still, the representatives of the religious communities were not the leaders, i.e., the Archbishop and the Reis did not come there. Interestingly, the moderator of this event was the Archbishop of Tirana and the leader of the Albanian Orthodox Church, Anastasios. It was a benign and simple text, with a pure expression of will for peace and a standpoint against war. However, during the conflict itself, the leaders could not produce such a formal statement* (Gjorgjevski, interview with the author 2021).

It was a clear sign for Archbishop Anastasios to be present in Switzerland. He is known for his support of interreligious cooperation. In this particular case, he was probably chosen as "being Archbishop in Tirana, he was well aware of the Albanian mentality and being Orthodox was well aware of the mentality of the North Macedonian Orthodox" (Çupi 2019, 162). The religious leaders not only failed to sign such an important statement in the country, but the leaders of the two most numerous communities could not even meet. Interestingly, there was an unplanned meeting between Archbishop Stefan and Reis-ul-ulema Arif Emini in New York: *After the 9/11 attacks in the USA, an invitation came for a conference of religious leaders who would stand against terrorism. And those who failed in a meeting here met in New York, under auspices of the Religion for Peace. I went with Archbishop Stefan there, and we met with the Reis-ul-Ulema Arif Emini, although we traveled there by different aeroplanes* (Gjorgjevski, interview with the author 2021).

They agreed on forming a Council for Interreligious Cooperation, which had different contours than MRV in BiH. The Macedonian Council immediately opted for a much less formal network, based on grassroots, with four significant points of cooperation: "religious education, property restitution, drafting the law on religion and the inclusion of the Orthodox and Islamic theological faculties in the state university system" (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009, 70). Both major religious communities show great mutual understanding and need to have deep and solid foundations for their work in Macedonia, as both are challenged in the international sphere, MPC by non-canonical status within the Orthodox realm and IZ by rising radical elements and Islamophobia. This mutual understanding had its adverse outcomes too. For instance, the draft law on religion in 2007 excluded the SPC's Ohrid Diocese and the Muslim Bektashi Community, which drew criticism from OSCE and the Council of Europe (Merdjanova and Brodeur 2009, 71).

Mistrust persisted among different religious communities. They did not behave following the signed statement. While striving to negate any mention of the interreligious war in Macedonia, 49 churches, monasteries, mosques, and tekkes were destroyed during the conflict. It preserved a severe permanent distrust: It was not a religious war, but religious symbols were used in attacks and defense. Identification of Macedonians with Orthodoxy and Albanians with Islam was accentuated. If I want to hurt someone, I will hurt him in a place that he cherishes most. In that sense, these were religious sites. For instance, when Albanians caught two Macedonians, they had crosses cut with a knife on their backs. The Lešok Monastery was bombed and put on fire, just as it happened in history when the Turks did the same; in that way, history is repeating itself. On the other side, mosques were destroyed; some defended themselves, saying the rebels were hiding inside the mosques. That is why the religious leaders stressed the importance that no one has any authority to destroy something holy on the other side. None of the clergies ever called or supported the destruction of religious sites in Macedonia (Gjorgjevski, interview with the author 2021).

In the first peace initiative, clerics were extremely slow and passive in providing a crucial religious response to the conflict. They mostly supported their religious and national kin and were highly mistrustful of the other side. Azar's protracted conflict theory suggests they have been involved in the conflict with a durable silence, entrenched in the self-sufficiency of their religious institutions. Several enthusiasts were keen to change this, and international religious organizations quickly comprehended their efforts. The issue with the language in the statement and the place of its signing and public presentation shows durable will to support the Good vs. Evil narrative, seen later also in the comments made by both Orthodox and Muslim religious leaders. Deep disconnections and practicing standpoints against one's teachings were challenged by quite unusual development and the presence of political-religious elements through the presidential initiative. President Boris Trajkovski, himself a Methodist preacher, convened in 2002 a high-profile international conference with leading global theologians in Judaism, Christianity, and Islam and with their Macedonian counterparts. The conference "Confidence Building between the churches and religious communities in Macedonia through dialogue" was a way to foster deep interreligious links and to find a way to sustainable peace in Macedonia in a very critical moment. President Trajkovski was very direct in understanding the position of religion in conflictual situations: "unfortunately, faith was misused throughout history and was a reason for divisions, discrimination, even death. (…) Faith was distorted, changed from think of personal belief to a weapon for worldly powers and coercion" (Trajkovski, quoted in Mojzes and Swidler 2004, 19–20). It is a rare occasion that a president is also a religious minister, and in Macedonia, this turned out to be a very positive addition to religious peacebuilding. Gjoko Gjorgjevski explains why Trajkovski was eager to do that: *As the majority of Macedonians at that time did not enthusiastically accept the Ohrid Framework Agreement, in early 2002, Macedonian President Boris Trajkovski arranged a one-day interreligious conference, where influential theologians from abroad were also invited. Thus, Trajkovski finally gathered all of Macedonia's religious leaders, theologians, and scientists. Their final thought was that maybe they should have done more at the time*

of the conflict. Of course, when time passes, we all know we could have done better. I think since 2002, there was a more sincere approach by the religious communities, which understood that they must do something. The anger slowly went away, and step by step, a more trustworthy and sincere dialogue took place (Gjorgjevski, interview with the author 2021).

It was a tremendously important event for the Macedonian interreligious dialogue, as it was the first time that "nearly fifty official representatives of the five Macedonian religious denominations and forty international participants met for nearly five days of intensive interaction" (Gjorgjevski 2020, 400). Still, Jovan Takovski, the then-dean of the Orthodox Faculty, raised doubts if all necessary preconditions are set for religious peacebuilding; Ismail Bardhi, the then-dean of the Islamic Faculty, did not want to talk directly about Islamic positions but gave a lecture about standard humanism in Christianity and Islam; Roman Catholic bishop Kiro Stojanov recalled the importance of peace in seven ecumenical councils and particularly in the Second Vatican Council; while the Methodist preacher Mihail Cekov called for a more spiritual worldview, according to the holy scriptures. One year later, Trajkovski used his Methodist connections to visit the United States and the US Institute of Peace, where he received valuable information on how to proceed with interfaith cooperation for durable peace in Macedonia (Mojzes and Swidler 2004). His encounters with Paul Mojzes were exceptionally efficient in this regard, and the 2002 conference was instigated and organized with huge help from Mojzes and Leonard Swidler. His Methodist background is vital to understanding his presidential legacy, argues preacher Marjan Dimov from Strumica: *Boris Trajkovski came from our community and was highly religious. He carried his religious beliefs with him also to the presidentship. Our most important event is the annual conference of our church. He never missed it as president, and he cried and prayed for peace at these conferences. He understood very personally how difficult it was to build peace. Many within the state administration did not like his work, particularly those afraid their dark acts may be discovered. He continued, nevertheless, with an all-powerful Biblical message "blessed are the peacebuilders"* (Dimov, interview with the author 2021).

Trajkovski may be designated as one of the prime religious peacebuilders in Macedonia, although he acted as the President of the state. The power of his position proved to be overwhelming to conquer distrust and the unwillingness of MPC and IZ to enter into religious peacebuilding. And while the Interreligious Council of Macedonia did form, it was not the same as in BiH. It is primarily a body for communication between top religious leaders: *It never functioned in its totality, at least not as the Interreligious Council of BiH, which has its offices, employed people, etc. That never happened in Macedonia. The only thing that was firmly accepted is that the Council should be a link, that every year another religious leader should be the president of the Council, but it was never really institutionalized. The leaders always supported all initiatives, but as the leaders themselves make this Council, it is a bit slower. Before, when the Council was in its early stage, the members of it were clergy in the field; they were machines that drove that Council, and they gave more of themselves. When the Council's members became the leaders of religious communities, it did make the Council more visible but also more passive* (Gjorgjevski, interview with the author 2021).

The religious leaders are now the sole members of the Council, and there is no executive board. After the first initiatives and close work with MCIC, the religious leaders in Macedonia usurped their positions and neutralized every effort of the religious peacebuilding in the country. As will be seen in the field research, this move had consequences in utter passivity of the Council even on topics and issues about all religious communities in Macedonia. On the other hand, clerics struggled to make their contributions through political or NGO interfaith meetings. Several interreligious conferences were organized in Ohrid, Tetovo, and Strumica in a more spiritual gathering of the priests, imams, and faithful. Still, it only gave more impetus for an actual activity of the Council. The passivity of the Council is commented on by Kržalovski, too: Our approach was that these relations should occur naturally. The religious communities themselves have to show an interest in such a council. Operatively, it functioned under the auspices of the religious leaders, and they met at least once a year in a formal framework. Others functioned unofficially. This went very slow. I

think the main problem occurred when the foreign interventions came in, such as the foundation Konrad Adenauer, who wanted to frame the cooperation, pace, and form between the religious communities. It was an issue for many, mainly because KAS already gave a statute of such cooperation and ideas of formalization of the council. This suggestion from KAS was made obviously with experience in other countries. Such tips frightened religious leaders a bit, and they felt pressured to be in such a project. So, the council did not start at a natural pace. At the same time, our own project, "Bridging Religions," was finished (Kržalovski, interview with the author 2021).

The Council did have its common positions on many societal issues. Gjoko Gjorgjevski mentions a few of them, such as the support of the Council to the autocephality of the MPC and protection of its name, a common standpoint on the need for confessional religious education in the school, as well as the call for the denationalization of all ecclesiastical property. The Council successfully found one voice in all common problems and issues. Among them, the most important ones were "religious education, property restitution, drafting the law on religion and the inclusion of the Orthodox and Islamic theological faculties in the state university system" (Gjorgjevski 2020, 401). The Council also has one standpoint on morality policies, like marriage, abortion, or some new laws that change the basic religious teachings on ethics. However, the Council members are much more occupied with other issues, as explained by Gjorgjevski, who also reminds us of promising projects that were financed by an external source: *There were some problems within the IZ, and the position of the MPC also is a primary issue, so too much energy was spent here. Another thing is financing. Many events and things that took place in the past were organized with the financial help of various international centers. These included many things, like organized voyages – we even went to Jerusalem. We had interreligious camps and one-week events where the students could listen to theologians from different religions. We published books too. There was also a caravan – we traveled to Tetovo, Gostivar, Ohrid, Bitola, Skopje… Imam and priest would meet, talk together to the people, answer their questions, and have a shared meal. One has to invest finances in the*

work of such a Council. Without investments, initiative rests only upon improvisation and goodwill. We have good relations with the Faculty of Islamic Sciences; we mutually visit each other and make conferences alone or with the help of Konrad Adenauer Stiftung. Maybe there was a perception that there was a bigger need to have such meetings before, and there were resources available, too (Gjorgjevski, interview with the author 2021).

However, not everyone was satisfied with the Council's work in general. A sort of discrimination is felt within the smaller communities. The current president of the Evangelical-Methodist Church, Marjan Dimov, warns of the majorization of the religious landscape by the Orthodox, but he also states that peace in Macedonia could not have been achieved without a thorough work on peacebuilding by the religious communities: *The need to have a formal interreligious council in Macedonia is a big one. It exists, but there were some changes within it. Due to some misunderstandings and issues within the Council, a decision was made that top religious leaders would form the Council. This transformation led to another problem: meetings are mostly held whenever it is vital for the Archbishop of the MPC or, more rarely, for the Reis. I talked to him several weeks ago and told him the Council does not function as it should. There are no talks among us, no initiatives to solve problems like religious education. Even some educational material with unacceptable content, like definitions of marriage, understanding of freedom, and gender equality. However, none of the religious communities said anything against such content; we are simply keeping quiet* (Dimov, interview with the author 2021). Like in all other religious communities in Macedonia, Protestant clerics ask for illiberal values to be implemented through the law. Although this is an issue that all religious communities would support and is in their interest, not even such a challenge has been tackled together through the Interreligious Council.

Concluding remarks

The historical analysis in this study underscores a central paradox: while religious institutions have been deeply implicated in the conflicts of the

Balkans, they also hold some of the most enduring resources for reconciliation. Historical examples of interreligious cooperation – such as the multi-faith solidarity of the 19th-century Balkan uprisings or the ecumenical outreach of post-Vatican II Catholicism – demonstrate that religious actors have the capacity to transcend ethno-religious divisions when institutional structures support such efforts. However, past failures, such as the inability of religious institutions to prevent nationalist mobilization in the 1990s, serve as cautionary lessons. Future religious peacebuilding must therefore integrate historical consciousness into its methodology, ensuring that reconciliation efforts are not merely present-focused but actively engage with the long-term legacies of religious division. Without this historical awareness, religious peacebuilding risks becoming performative rather than transformative.

In the case studies of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kosovo, and Macedonia, peacebuilding activities are ongoing and dynamic. They are carried out through the so-called Dialogue of Life, where people share their spirituality and religious rituals. They find beauty, peace, and connectedness through interreligious concerts, sports events, art, and artisan work, common standpoints over society's issues, and work with youth, women, and war veterans. Many religious peacebuilders aim to position religion as a discourse or system that asks crucial questions and provide these activities as critical connectors in usually divided societies. The success of these efforts depends on whether religious institutions will maintain their authority and legitimacy in the future.

Religious communities are strongly tied to the ethnic territories and their political parties, and they produce content that is aligned with the nationalistic rhetoric or feelings of the populace due to the post-secular environment and blocked religious property, but also historical gaps and durable divisions. Religious peacebuilding efforts are often made in enclaves or separation without much connection to the political peace movements and social movements. Clerics seem to co-opt with political parties to strengthen partisanship, either willingly or under duress. Those clerics who cooperate with NGOs or have individual initiatives are marginalized or punished by the clerical authorities.

Only the Interreligious Council of Bosnia and Herzegovina succeeded in compelling religious peacebuilding efforts with a substantial organization and local branches. While successfully organized, the Interreligious Councils of Kosovo and Macedonia failed to reach this level of success. In all case-study countries, top-level clerics are ready to confirm their efforts for peace, but it is often only a generalized standpoint that diverges due to the political situation. The local religious peacebuilding was very important but was developed unevenly. The approach is based on historical war experiences, but their work's success depends on the will and efforts of respective clerics. Some local boards work excellently and have a lot of projects; others are less effective. However, there is a constant question of whether these boards serve the final goal of the path to reconciliation. Dialogue as a learning process is sometimes overlooked, and clerics sometimes narrate their positions more than listening to the other side. When consensus is not reached, no dialogue ensues. The lack of such readiness shows existing distrust among religious communities, calling for more dialogue training. There are many obstacles to conducting a genuine dialogue. One obstacle is the dialogue through a religious-centric. It is a significant reason for spoilers, too. In essence, their view will be very defensive every time they talk about their faith. Others have to dialogue through this heavy, dense sense of defensiveness, which is a severe obstacle.

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6. Time Beyond Borders: Temporal Coordination and the Continuity of Cross-Border Cooperation

Shinasak Suwan-achariya

Abstract

Cross-border cooperation is commonly evaluated through institutions, agreements, infrastructure, and connectivity. Yet the existence of cross-border connections does not ensure that the processes through which they operate occur at mutually compatible times. This chapter examines this problem through the concepts of temporal asymmetry and temporal coordination capacity. Temporal asymmetry refers to mismatches between the operating times, processing durations, or availability windows of interdependent cross-border processes, while temporal coordination capacity describes the ability of actors, institutions, and infrastructures to complete required functions in a workable sequence within mutually compatible time windows. Using the Sadao–Bukit Kayu Hitam corridor between Thailand and Malaysia as a diagnostic case, the chapter examines how waiting at one node can reduce usable time downstream, how interventions such as parallel processing, flow separation, and pre-arrival procedures seek to alter these temporal relationships, and how faster movement may relocate bottlenecks or redistribute economic circulation. The chapter argues that cross-border performance should therefore be assessed not only by processing speed or physical capacity, but by whether time gained at one process remains usable in subsequent processes. It develops a practical diagnostic sequence that locates waiting, identifies its

mechanism, examines possibilities for temporal repositioning, traces displaced waiting, and assesses the redistribution of circulation. Connectivity makes cross-border circulation possible; temporal coordination determines whether it can continue.

Introduction

Cross-border cooperation is often assessed through the institutions, agreements, infrastructures, and networks that connect territories located on opposite sides of state borders. This perspective has generated an extensive literature on cross-border regions, multi-level governance, institutionalization, and territorial integration. Perkmann's influential work, for example, explains cross-border cooperation through the emergence and institutionalization of governance arrangements connecting subnational actors across national boundaries (Perkmann 2003).

Yet connectivity does not establish that cross-border systems can operate continuously. Two territories may be physically connected, customs procedures may exist, and public agencies may cooperate, while travelers, vehicles, cargo, documents, or payments still encounter substantial waiting between interconnected processes. The problem is therefore not always whether cooperation exists, but whether the activities on which it depends become operational *at mutually compatible times*.

This distinction is particularly visible at busy land borders. A traveler or shipment does not simply "cross a border." Movement depends on a sequence involving arrival, immigration or customs processing, inspection, authorization, release, onward transport, and subsequent economic activities. Each component may function according to its own institutional procedures while the overall sequence nevertheless produces substantial delay. The constraint may therefore lie not within an individual process, but in the temporal relationship among processes.

Trade-facilitation practice already recognizes time as an important dimension of border performance. The World Customs Organization's (WCO) Time Release Study (TRS) provides an established methodology for measuring the time between the arrival and physical release of goods and identifying bottlenecks in border procedures (World Customs Organization

2025). The WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement similarly encourages members to measure and publish average release times (World Trade Organization 2017, Art. 7.6).

This chapter takes a complementary step. Instead of asking only how long a particular process takes, it asks whether its completion occurs early enough for the next interconnected activity to remain operational.

This distinction matters because delays can propagate. Time lost at immigration reduces the time available for onward travel and destination activities. A truck released after a scheduled connection has departed may wait until another operational cycle. The relevant constraint is therefore not duration alone but *temporal compatibility among interdependent processes*.

The chapter conceptualizes mismatches of this kind as *temporal asymmetry* and introduces *temporal coordination capacity* to describe the ability of institutions, infrastructures, and economic actors to complete interdependent functions in a workable sequence within mutually compatible time windows.

The Sadao–Bukit Kayu Hitam corridor between Thailand and Malaysia provides the empirical case. Before the opening of the new border configuration in July 2026, peak-period congestion reportedly generated processing times of three to four hours, while some travelers failed to complete return crossings before the border closed. The new configuration seeks to alter these temporal conditions through expanded parallel processing, differentiated traffic flows, technological upgrading, and closer physical connection between the Thai and Malaysian facilities.

The case also exposes a potential trade-off. Reducing waiting may improve corridor predictability, while faster through-movement may bypass commercial areas that previously captured expenditure from slower traveler circulation. Temporal optimization may therefore generate distributional consequences as well as efficiency gains.

The chapter consequently asks:

How does temporal asymmetry constrain cross-border cooperation, and how can the design of border processes and infrastructure improve temporal coordination without simply relocating disruption elsewhere in the corridor?

The central argument is that effective cross-border cooperation requires more than connectivity or additional physical capacity. It requires a *temporal architecture* capable of coordinating heterogeneous processes so that required functions become available when subsequent activities need them. The relevant objective is therefore not maximum speed at every node, but predictable sequencing across the circulation system.

The chapter first positions this argument within research on cross-border cooperation and trade facilitation, then develops the concepts of temporal asymmetry and temporal coordination capacity. The Sadao–Bukit Kayu Hitam case is subsequently used to examine recurrent temporal bottlenecks and attempts at temporal redesign, before the chapter considers their broader analytical and policy implications.

Research Design and Analytical Approach

This chapter adopts a *conceptually guided qualitative case-analysis approach*. It does not seek to estimate statistically the causal effect of the new Sadao checkpoint or claim that the July 2026 intervention has already produced durable improvements. Instead, the case is used diagnostically to examine how temporal constraints become visible in cross-border operations, how actors respond to them, and how interventions seek to alter the temporal organization of circulation.

The analysis draws on three categories of evidence. First, official government and border-related materials establish the institutional significance, configuration, operating arrangements, and stated objectives of the Sadao–Bukit Kayu Hitam crossing. Second, contemporary reporting and statements from customs officials, business associations, and local economic actors identify reported operational problems, including peak-period waiting, traffic congestion, processing arrangements, and concerns about redistribution of economic activity following the new alignment. Third, established trade-facilitation approaches, particularly the WCO TRS and relevant provisions of the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement, provide a benchmark against which the temporal-coordination framework can be distinguished.

Evidence is organized through the following diagnostic sequence:

Temporal condition → waiting point → downstream consequence → intervention → expected temporal effect → possible displacement of the constraint.

The approach does not assume that every delay constitutes coordination failure. Inspection, verification, security, and regulatory compliance legitimately consume time. The analytical issue is whether these processes generate waiting that becomes incompatible with subsequent activities in the circulation sequence.

Nor does faster processing necessarily improve the system as a whole. Removing one bottleneck may shift congestion downstream, while faster through-movement may reduce economic circulation within an intermediate border community. The analysis therefore distinguishes *node efficiency* from *corridor synchronization*.

Sadao is consequently treated as a diagnostic case through which mechanisms of temporal constraint and attempted temporal redesign can be identified. These propositions can subsequently be tested using systematic observations of processing times, queue lengths, traffic flows, peak-period variability, and downstream logistics performance.

Cross-Border Cooperation: From Connectivity to Coordination

CBC has conventionally been examined through territorial, institutional, political, and economic relationships that develop across state boundaries. A substantial body of research, particularly from the European experience, has focused on the emergence of cross-border regions, governance institutions, subnational authorities, and supranational programs. Perkmann, for example, conceptualizes cross-border regions as institutional arrangements shaped by domestic institutional conditions, European regional policy, and multi-level governance. Related research has examined cross-border regionalization as a process through which political and economic interactions are reorganized across territorial boundaries (Perkmann 2003).

More recent syntheses demonstrate the breadth of this field. Cross-border cooperation encompasses geographical, political, economic, and socio-cultural dimensions and may involve formal institutions as well as

collaboration among public authorities, economic actors, and civil society. This literature explains why cooperation emerges, which actors participate, how borders are institutionally governed, and how cross-border regions become economically and politically integrated.

These perspectives, however, leave a distinct operational question:

When cross-border institutions and connections exist, can the processes that depend on them actually operate in a mutually compatible sequence?

This question matters because institutional connectivity does not necessarily imply operational coordination. Two adjacent territories may possess roads, customs agreements, border facilities, digital systems, and established channels of cooperation while still experiencing recurrent congestion and interruption. The existence of cooperative arrangements therefore does not establish that the activities required to make them operational occur at compatible times.

Cross-border corridors make this distinction particularly visible. Movement may depend on transportation, immigration or customs processing, documentary verification, cargo inspection, financial authorization, onward logistics, and modal transfer. These activities are institutionally distinct but operationally interdependent. Each may perform according to its own rules while their combination nevertheless generates waiting or interruption.

Trade-facilitation practice already provides important tools for examining the temporal dimension of this problem. The WCO's TRS measures the time associated with the arrival and release of goods to identify bottlenecks and opportunities for improvement (World Customs Organization 2025). The WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement similarly encourages members to measure and publish average release times (World Trade Organization 2017, Art. 7.6). More recent WCO methodology extends this logic toward whole-of-border performance involving customs, other regulatory agencies, and private-sector stakeholders (World Customs Organization 2025).

The present argument builds on rather than replaces these approaches. Its analytical focus is not simply the amount of time consumed by a border

process, but the compatibility of that time with the processes that precede and follow it.

Consider two cases. A customs procedure completed in 20 minutes may still generate an operational interruption if the truck is released after its scheduled onward connection has departed. Conversely, reducing the same procedure from 20 minutes to 10 may produce little end-to-end improvement if the cargo subsequently waits several hours for another required function.

In both cases, measuring the duration of the individual procedure remains valuable, but it does not by itself reveal whether the time gained or lost changes the continuity of the wider sequence.

The analytical unit therefore shifts from:

> How long does process A take?

to:

> Does process A finish within a time window that allows process B to remain usable?

This chapter refers to this relationship as *temporal coordination*. Temporal coordination does not require all processes to operate at the same speed. It concerns whether differently timed but interdependent processes remain compatible enough for circulation to continue without avoidable interruption.

This distinction provides the bridge from the established literature on cross-border connectivity and border performance to the framework developed in the next section. The problem is no longer simply whether territories are connected or individual procedures are efficient, but whether the multiple processes through which cross-border cooperation becomes operational can function as a coordinated temporal sequence.

Temporal Asymmetry and Cross-Border Coordination Capacity

Temporal Asymmetry

Cross-border systems operate through multiple institutional and operational rhythms. Government agencies follow opening hours, staffing arrangements, inspection procedures, and authorization sequences. Logistics firms organize vehicle schedules, loading windows, warehouse access, and

delivery commitments. Travelers coordinate border crossing with accommodation, commercial activities, and return journeys. Financial and documentary processes introduce additional verification and settlement times.

These activities are interconnected, but their timing is not necessarily synchronized.

This chapter defines *temporal asymmetry* as:

a mismatch between the operating times, processing durations, or availability windows of interdependent cross-border processes.

Temporal asymmetry does not mean simply that different activities require different amounts of time. Such differences are normal. The problem arises when the completion or availability of one process no longer fits the usable time window of another.

Consider a simplified sequence:

Arrival → border processing → release → onward transportation → destination activity

When arrivals can be processed within available capacity and subsequent functions remain accessible, circulation continues. When demand exceeds processing capability, however, waiting accumulates. The significance of this waiting lies in what it does to the remainder of the sequence: time consumed at one stage reduces the usable time available at subsequent stages.

Delay can therefore propagate:

Temporal asymmetry → waiting → compressed or missed time window → synchronization failure → disrupted circulation

The outcome need not be complete system failure. More commonly, circulation becomes less predictable. Activities become concentrated into narrower periods, downstream schedules require adjustment, and coordination becomes increasingly costly.

The analytical importance of temporal asymmetry therefore lies not in the existence of different operational rhythms, but in the point at which their incompatibility begins to impair the continuity of the cross-border sequence.

Waiting as a Diagnostic Variable

Waiting provides an observable indication of such incompatibility.

A border facility may possess substantial nominal capacity while still generating long queues during periods of concentrated demand. Conversely, relatively modest infrastructure may perform adequately where arrivals, staffing, inspection, and onward movement remain temporally aligned. Capacity alone therefore cannot reveal whether a cross-border system is operating as a coordinated sequence.

Waiting can be treated as evidence of *temporal friction* between interconnected operations. Its diagnostic significance depends not only on its duration but also on the usable time it removes from subsequent activities.

A two-hour delay, for example, has different consequences depending on what follows it. If the next required function remains continuously available, circulation may recover with limited disruption. If the delay causes a vehicle or traveler to miss a fixed closing time, transport departure, delivery window, or other time-sensitive activity, the same two hours can generate an interruption extending into the next operational cycle.

This gives waiting a relational rather than purely quantitative meaning:

waiting time → remaining usable window → downstream consequence

The relevant diagnostic question is therefore not simply whether waiting exists, but whether the system possesses sufficient temporal room for the sequence to continue after waiting has occurred.

This distinction is especially important at borders because many downstream activities operate through fixed or semi-fixed windows: border closing hours, train departures, warehouse slots, port cut-off times, hotel or tourism schedules, and delivery appointments. Once such a window is missed, a relatively small initial delay can produce a disproportionately larger interruption.

Temporal Coordination Capacity

If temporal asymmetry identifies the mismatch, *temporal coordination capacity* describes the capability required to prevent that mismatch from disrupting circulation.

It is defined here as:

the ability of interdependent actors, institutions, and infrastructures to complete required cross-border functions in a workable sequence and within mutually compatible time windows.

Temporal coordination capacity does not require every component to operate at maximum speed. Indeed, accelerating individual processes may produce little system-wide improvement when their timing remains incompatible.

The objective is therefore *synchronization rather than acceleration alone*.

Several mechanisms can increase this capacity.

Parallelization increases the number of processes that can occur simultaneously, reducing the accumulation of queues when demand rises.

Flow separation prevents activities with different processing requirements and durations from obstructing one another.

Pre-processing relocates documentary or verification activities away from the congested physical node by completing part of the process before arrival.

Temporal buffering provides limited operational slack through which short delays can be absorbed without immediately causing the next required function to become unavailable.

Inter-institutional synchronization aligns operating hours, information availability, authorization processes, and downstream logistics across organizational or jurisdictional boundaries.

Although these mechanisms differ, they address the same underlying problem: preventing local delays from becoming interruptions elsewhere in the circulation sequence.

Temporal coordination capacity can therefore be understood through three related questions:

Can the required function be completed?
Can it be completed within the available time?
Does enough usable time remain for the next function to proceed?

The third question is crucial. It moves analysis beyond the performance of individual nodes toward the continuity of the cross-border sequence as a whole.

The Sadao–Bukit Kayu Hitam Corridor: From Temporal Bottleneck to Temporal Redesign

The Sadao–Bukit Kayu Hitam corridor provides a useful case for examining cross-border cooperation through a temporal lens. It is a major gateway for movements of people and goods between Thailand and Malaysia and one of Thailand's most economically significant land-border crossings. Official Thai sources reported bilateral trade through Sadao at more than THB 482 billion, indicating the importance of the corridor to cross-border circulation. The new road connection between the Sadao CIQ facility and Malaysia's Bukit Kayu Hitam ICQS was formally opened on July 10, 2026, as part of a bilateral effort to improve connectivity and reduce border congestion (Government Public Relations Department 2026b).

The analytical significance of the case lies in the nature of the constraint preceding the new configuration. Thailand and Malaysia were already physically connected, and cross-border institutions were already operating. The recurring problem emerged when concentrated demand exceeded the ability of existing processes to maintain a workable sequence. Sadao therefore provides an opportunity to examine the transition from *physical connectivity to temporal coordination*.

Before the New Crossing: A Recurrent Temporal Bottleneck

Peak-period congestion had become a recurrent problem at Sadao before the opening of the new configuration. Local tourism representatives reported that Malaysian visitors could spend three to four hours completing entry procedures during periods of heavy congestion. In May 2026, the Hat Yai–Songkhla Hotel Association warned that such delays were affecting tourism activity and called for procedural improvements (Manager Online 2026).

The temporal consequences extended beyond waiting at the checkpoint. Shortly before the new crossing opened, the head of Sadao Customs referred to previous cases in which Malaysian travelers had failed to complete their return crossing before the border closed and consequently had to remain overnight in their vehicles until operations resumed the

following day (National Broadcasting Services of Thailand, Songkhla 2026).

This provides a particularly clear example of the mechanism identified in Section 3. A delay initially measured in hours crossed a fixed operating boundary and became an interruption extending into the next operational cycle.

For travelers, the same mechanism can operate before the closing threshold is reached. Border processing is followed by onward travel, hotel arrival, consumption, tourism activities, and eventually the return journey. Time consumed at the border reduces the usable window available for these subsequent activities.

The sequence can therefore be represented as:

Peak mobility concentration → border waiting → reduced usable time → compressed or missed downstream activities → lower circulation reliability

The relevant constraint was thus not simply the existence of a queue. It was the inability of the border-processing sequence to absorb concentrated demand without consuming time required elsewhere in the circulation system.

Increasing Temporal Capacity through Parallel Processing

The new Sadao facility attempts to address this constraint partly through increased parallel processing. Reported facilities include 11 vehicle inspection lanes on each side, 14 immigration inspection lanes on each side, 8 cargo-processing lanes in each direction, and 2 fast-scan X-ray systems for freight inspection (Government Public Relations Department 2026a).

These investments increase physical capacity, but their temporal significance lies in their ability to reduce sequential dependence. Where multiple vehicles must pass through a small number of processing points, concentrated arrivals rapidly generate queues. Additional parallel channels allow more processes to occur simultaneously.

The distinction is therefore between two effects:

Physical capacity: how much traffic the facility can accommodate.

Temporal capacity: how much of that traffic can be processed concurrently within the available time window.

This distinction is important for the Sadao case because the problem was especially visible during periods of concentrated demand. Infrastructure that increases parallel processing can enlarge the amount of demand that can be absorbed before waiting begins to consume downstream usable time.

This does not establish that the new facility has already eliminated the bottleneck. The short period since its opening does not permit such a conclusion. It identifies instead the mechanism through which the intervention is expected to alter temporal performance.

Separating Heterogeneous Flows

The redesign also involves greater differentiation among border users. Business representatives described arrangements intended to separate passenger and tourism traffic more clearly from freight and logistics traffic.

This matters because these flows impose different processing requirements. Private vehicles, tourist buses, and freight trucks differ in documentation, inspection requirements, processing duration, and onward movement. When heterogeneous flows compete for constrained processing capacity, delays generated in one flow can affect another.

Flow separation therefore reduces temporal interference by matching different categories of movement with more appropriate processing pathways:

flow type → processing requirement → processing duration → designated capacity

The objective is not necessarily to make every flow equally fast. It is to prevent differences in processing requirements from generating avoidable waiting across otherwise distinct circulation sequences.

In this sense, the border is not merely a point through which traffic passes. It is an operational system that must sequence heterogeneous flows under a finite time constraint.

Moving Administrative Time Away from the Border

A further proposed intervention concerns the movement from paper-based documentation toward online pre-submission. Private-sector representatives have advocated completing selected immigration and transport

documentation before vehicles physically reach the checkpoint (Thai PBS 2026).

The temporal significance of such a change lies in the relocation of processing time.

A predominantly counter-based sequence can be represented as:

arrival → document submission → verification → approval → movement

Pre-arrival processing changes the sequence:

document submission and preliminary verification → arrival → final confirmation → movement

The regulatory requirement need not disappear. Instead, part of the time required to satisfy it is moved outside the congested physical node.

This distinction is important because digitalization does not automatically produce temporal improvement. Its operational value arises when it changes *when* a required function can be completed and thereby reduces the amount of time for which physical movement must wait.

For the Sadao corridor, pre-arrival processing can therefore be understood as an attempt to decouple documentary time from physical border time. If successfully implemented, it should reduce the amount of administrative work that must be completed after arrival and increase the usable time available for subsequent movement.

From Checkpoint Efficiency to Corridor Synchronization

The new checkpoint also exposes the limits of treating border infrastructure as an isolated facility. Thai and Malaysian authorities have emphasized multimodal connectivity, while private-sector actors in Songkhla have argued that the checkpoint should be connected effectively with roads, rail, warehouses, digital customs systems, ports, and other logistics infrastructure.

The implication is straightforward:

A faster checkpoint does not necessarily produce a faster corridor.

Reduced border-processing time creates system-wide value only if the time gained remains usable at subsequent nodes. If faster customs clearance feeds into road congestion, unavailable warehouse capacity, missed rail

departures, port delays, or another documentary process, waiting is displaced rather than eliminated.

The relevant operational sequence therefore extends beyond the checkpoint:

Border clearance → inland transport → consolidation/storage → modal transfer → port or destination processing

This changes the scale at which temporal performance should be assessed. Checkpoint efficiency concerns the performance of a particular node; *corridor synchronization* concerns whether the output of one node becomes available at a time when the next node can use it.

A corridor may consequently contain highly efficient individual facilities while performing poorly as an integrated system. The relevant constraint is not necessarily its slowest component in isolation, but the temporal incompatibilities that generate waiting between components.

For Sadao, this means that the ultimate value of faster border processing cannot be established from checkpoint performance alone. It depends on whether the resulting flows can be absorbed by the connected transport and logistics system without reproducing delay elsewhere.

A Critical Trade-off: Faster Corridors Can Bypass Local Economies

The Sadao case also reveals a potential distributional consequence of temporal redesign.

The new alignment enables travelers to proceed toward Hat Yai without necessarily passing through the older commercial area of Dan Nok. Before the new crossing opened, local traders, hotel operators, and other businesses expressed concern that the more direct route could reduce visitor circulation through the local economy (Manager Online 2026).

Early post-opening reports suggest that this concern was not purely hypothetical. Local business representatives reported declines in commercial activity after traveler flows were redirected away from the traditional Dan Nok route (Thai PBS 2026). These reports remain preliminary and do not yet establish the magnitude or durability of the economic effect, but they provide early evidence that changing the temporal

and spatial organization of circulation can redistribute economic activity within the corridor.

Reducing travel time can therefore improve corridor efficiency while reducing the time – and potentially the expenditure – retained at intermediate nodes.

The relationship can be expressed as:

faster through-movement → reduced intermediate circulation → possible redistribution of local expenditure

For through-travelers and freight operators, reduced waiting and more direct movement may improve reliability. For businesses whose revenues depend on travelers stopping or passing through a particular location, the same change may reduce opportunities to capture expenditure.

Temporal improvement is therefore not necessarily distributionally neutral. A corridor can become more efficient as a circulation system while particular locations become less central to that circulation.

This distinction matters for cross-border policy. The objective should not be to preserve congestion in order to protect local businesses. Rather, where infrastructure redesign changes established circulation patterns, policymakers should distinguish the benefits of removing unnecessary waiting from the separate problem of maintaining the economic accessibility of border communities.

The policy question is consequently broader than how to make movement faster:

How can temporal efficiency be improved without unintentionally disconnecting places whose economic functions depended on the previous circulation pattern?

Early Implementation Problems and Adaptive Coordination

The initial operation of the new checkpoint also indicates that physical redesign does not automatically produce immediate synchronization. On the first day of full operation, heavy traffic developed at several points around the new crossing, while insufficient or unclear directional signage contributed to confusion among road users. Provincial authorities subsequently introduced measures to improve traffic management, signage,

and coordination among agencies operating within the CIQ system (Government Public Relations Department, Songkhla 2026).

This is analytically useful because the intervention itself changes the system it is intended to improve. New roads, processing lanes, traffic rules, and routing arrangements alter movement patterns. Users must adapt to new routes, agencies must adjust procedures, and bottlenecks may emerge at locations that were not previously critical.

Temporal coordination must therefore include a feedback capability:

infrastructure change → altered flows → emerging friction → detection → operational adjustment

The relevant capability is not the ability to design a system in which no new bottleneck ever occurs. It is the ability to identify where temporal friction has moved and adjust operations before temporary mismatches become persistent constraints.

The early Sadao experience therefore reinforces an important distinction between *infrastructure provision* and *operational coordination*. Physical infrastructure establishes potential capacity; continuing observation and adjustment determine how effectively that capacity becomes usable over time.

What the Sadao Case Demonstrates

The Sadao–Bukit Kayu Hitam case yields four propositions.

First, physical connectivity does not guarantee temporal compatibility. A functioning international crossing can still experience serious disruption when concentrated demand exceeds the time-sensitive processing capacity of the system.

Second, capacity becomes operationally valuable when it changes temporal relationships. Parallel processing, flow separation, and pre-arrival procedures matter insofar as they reduce avoidable waiting and preserve usable time for subsequent activities.

Third, node improvement does not guarantee corridor improvement. Time saved at the border creates system-wide value only when connected transport, logistics, information, and administrative processes can absorb the resulting flow.

Fourth, *temporal redesign can redistribute circulation*. Faster movement may improve corridor performance while altering the economic position of intermediate communities.

The Sadao case therefore suggests that cross-border performance should not be judged by speed alone. The more demanding objective is to create *predictable, synchronized, and* adaptable circulation across interconnected border systems.

Discussion:
From Border Efficiency to Temporal Coordination

The Sadao–Bukit Kayu Hitam case suggests a shift in how cross-border cooperation is evaluated. Conventional measures of connectivity establish whether institutions, infrastructures, and procedures exist to enable cross-border movement. Measures of border efficiency establish how effectively particular processes perform. Neither, however, necessarily establishes whether the outputs of those processes become available at times that allow the wider circulation sequence to continue.

The distinction is between *process performance* and *temporal compatibility*.

A border process may perform efficiently according to its own benchmark while still generating little system-wide improvement if its output arrives too late for the next required activity. Conversely, a process need not operate at maximum speed if its completion remains compatible with downstream availability. Cross-border performance therefore depends not only on how rapidly individual processes operate, but on how their operating times relate to one another.

This suggests a different interpretation of temporal efficiency. Time saved at one node should not automatically be treated as a system-level gain. Its value depends on whether it becomes *usable time downstream*.

The central mechanism can therefore be expressed as:

time gained or lost at one process → remaining usable window → downstream accessibility → continuity or interruption

This relational interpretation of time provides the principal analytical contribution of the chapter.

Beyond Faster Clearance

The WCO TRS provides an established methodology for measuring border-processing time, identifying bottlenecks, mapping business processes, and supporting coordinated improvements, while the 2025 Guide further strengthens its emphasis on coordinated border management and the analysis of release processes across participating stakeholders (World Customs Organization 2025).

Does an improvement measured at one process increase usable time in the next interconnected process?

Suppose border clearance is reduced by 30 minutes. From a process-efficiency perspective, this is an improvement. From a temporal-coordination perspective, however, its system-wide significance depends on what happens next. If cargo subsequently waits several hours for warehouse access, another inspection, a train departure, or a port window, the 30-minute gain may have little effect on end-to-end circulation.

Conversely, a relatively small reduction in processing time may have substantial consequences when it prevents a fixed downstream window from being missed.

Time saved does not translate automatically into system-level value. What matters is not only the quantity of time saved but its position within the circulation sequence.

This distinction provides a bridge between established border-performance measurement and the wider problem of cross-border continuity.

Synchronization Rather Than Maximum Speed

The framework also changes the objective of cross-border improvement.

A corridor consists of heterogeneous operations with different legitimate processing durations. Customs inspection, immigration processing, security screening, transportation, freight consolidation, financial verification, and commercial activities neither can nor need to operate at identical speeds.

The objective is therefore not maximum acceleration at every node but *temporal compatibility across nodes*.

Consider two configurations. In the first, border processing is extremely fast, but cargo is released into a downstream system that remains unavailable for several hours. In the second, border processing is somewhat slower but aligned with the availability of onward transport. The second configuration may generate shorter and more predictable end-to-end circulation despite containing the slower individual process.

The relevant performance principle is therefore:

Minimize avoidable waiting between interdependent processes rather than processing time at each node in isolation.

This also clarifies the role of digitalization. Electronic documentation, interoperability, and pre-arrival verification can be valuable, but their contribution should ultimately be assessed through the temporal relationship they alter. A document available instantaneously produces little operational gain if the institution required to authorize the next function remains unavailable.

Digital connectivity should therefore be understood as an enabling condition for temporal coordination rather than evidence of coordination itself.

From Node Performance to Corridor Continuity

The framework has a further implication concerning the appropriate scale of analysis.

If the performance of one process depends on the availability of another, the checkpoint cannot be treated as the terminal unit of cross-border performance. The analytical boundary must extend far enough to observe whether time gained at one node survives the transition to subsequent nodes.

This produces three distinct levels:

Node efficiency asks whether an individual process performs effectively.

Temporal coordination asks whether interconnected processes operate within compatible time windows.

Corridor continuity asks whether those relationships allow movement to proceed across the wider sequence without avoidable interruption.

The distinction is important because bottlenecks are mobile. Improving one node may eliminate waiting there while exposing insufficient capacity

or incompatible timing elsewhere. A successful intervention can therefore change the location of the constraint rather than eliminate it.

This is why post-intervention assessment should follow the movement of waiting through the corridor rather than measuring only the location at which the original bottleneck occurred.

Temporal Optimization and the Distribution of Circulation

Temporal coordination also has a spatial consequence.

Faster movement changes not only how long circulation takes but potentially *where circulation occurs*. The concerns raised by businesses in Dan Nok illustrate this mechanism. A more direct route may improve movement toward Hat Yai while reducing the role of an intermediate commercial node.

The important distinction is therefore between:

circulation efficiency – how effectively movement proceeds through the corridor; and

circulation distribution – where economic interaction associated with that movement is retained.

The two outcomes need not move in the same direction.

This introduces a spatial political economy into temporal coordination. Transport infrastructure can alter accessibility and the spatial organization of economic activity, with effects that vary across infrastructure types and economic sectors (Liu et al. 2026). From a temporal-coordination perspective, this implies that an intermediate location whose economic role partly depended on previous movement patterns may become less central when those patterns are reorganized.

This does not justify preserving congestion. Rather, it means that removing temporal friction and maintaining local economic accessibility are separate policy problems. Where temporal redesign changes established circulation patterns, complementary policies may be required to reconnect affected communities to the new flow structure.

The broader implication is that temporal coordination should not be evaluated solely by asking whether movement has become faster. It should be evaluated by asking whether time has become more usable across the

system, whether interruptions have been displaced elsewhere, and how the resulting circulation has been redistributed across space.

From Temporal Coordination to Cross-Border Diagnosis

The framework suggests a practical shift in the diagnosis of cross-border performance. Rather than asking only whether sufficient infrastructure or processing capacity exists, policymakers should examine where usable time is lost across the circulation sequence and whether that loss prevents subsequent functions from remaining accessible.

This diagnosis can be organized around five questions.

First, where does waiting occur? Established instruments such as the WCO TRS provide a basis for measuring border-processing time, mapping processes, and identifying bottlenecks (World Customs Organization 2025).

Second, why does waiting occur? Similar waiting times may result from different mechanisms. Possible causes include insufficient processing capacity, concentrated arrivals, sequential rather than parallel processing, incompatible operating hours, documentary requirements, delayed information, or unavailable downstream functions. Diagnosis should therefore distinguish the observed delay from the mechanism producing it.

Third, can the required process be repositioned in time? Some functions cannot be accelerated without compromising inspection, security, or regulatory requirements. They may nevertheless be performed earlier. Pre-arrival documentation and verification illustrate this principle: the requirement remains, but part of its processing time is moved outside the congested physical node.

Fourth, where does waiting move after intervention? Removing a bottleneck at one location does not establish corridor-wide improvement. Reduced clearance time may shift congestion to roads, terminals, warehouses, modal transfers, or ports. Assessment should therefore follow the circulation sequence beyond the point of intervention.

Fifth, how does the changed temporal structure redistribute circulation? Faster movement may benefit travelers, carriers, and exporters while changing the volume of economic activity retained at intermediate locations. Temporal assessment should therefore consider not only

aggregate time savings but also where the resulting flows – and associated economic opportunities – are redirected.

Together, these questions form a diagnostic sequence:

Locate waiting → identify its mechanism → reposition or redesign the process → trace displaced waiting → assess redistribution

This sequence changes the role of infrastructure assessment. Physical capacity remains important, but its operational value depends on whether it preserves usable time across interconnected processes.

For the Sadao–Bukit Kayu Hitam corridor, future evaluation could therefore move beyond aggregate throughput and average crossing time. Relevant indicators would include the distribution and variability of crossing times under normal and peak demand, queue accumulation and recovery after demand surges, compatibility between border release and downstream transport schedules, the location of subsequent waiting, and changes in traveler circulation through Dan Nok.

Such evidence would make it possible to determine whether the new configuration has produced three distinct outcomes: faster processing at the checkpoint, improved synchronization across the corridor, or merely a relocation of waiting from one node to another.

The distinction is important because these outcomes are not equivalent. Improved corridor performance should not be inferred from faster performance at the intervention point alone. Its wider operational value depends on whether the time released there remains usable elsewhere in the circulation system.

Conclusion

Cross-border cooperation takes place in space, but it operates through time.

This chapter has argued that physical connectivity and institutional cooperation do not by themselves guarantee continuous cross-border circulation. Interdependent activities may function individually while remaining temporally incompatible as a sequence.

The chapter conceptualizes this problem as *temporal asymmetry*: a mismatch between the operating times, processing durations, or availability

windows of interdependent cross-border processes. It introduces *temporal coordination capacity* as the ability of actors, institutions, and infrastructures to complete required functions in a workable sequence and within mutually compatible time windows.

The Sadao–Bukit Kayu Hitam case illustrates why this distinction matters. Recurrent peak-period waiting before the July 2026 reconfiguration demonstrates how delay at a border node can consume usable time downstream and, when fixed operating windows are missed, extend interruption into another operational cycle. The new configuration provides an early case of attempts to alter these temporal relationships through parallel processing, differentiated flows, technological upgrading, and the relocation of selected administrative processes.

The argument is not that every process should be accelerated. Inspection, security, verification, and regulatory compliance legitimately require time. The relevant distinction is between time required to perform a necessary function and avoidable waiting produced by incompatibility among interdependent functions.

This leads to a different question for cross-border governance:

Can each required function become available early enough for the next function to remain usable?

The answer cannot be established from checkpoint throughput or average clearance time alone. It requires attention to remaining usable time, downstream availability, peak-demand variability, displaced bottlenecks, and the distribution of circulation across the wider corridor.

The broader implication is that cross-border cooperation should be understood not only as the construction of connections across territorial boundaries, but also as the coordination of the different clocks through which those connections operate.

Connectivity makes cross-border circulation possible. Temporal coordination determines whether it can continue.

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7. Kazakhstan's Borders in the Context of Central Asian Cross-Border Cooperation

Sergei Golunov

Abstract

This chapter examines Kazakhstan's cross-border cooperation (CBC) against the broader background of interaction among Central Asian states, using the Kazakhstani case to identify both region-wide characteristics and their variations. It shows that Central Asian CBC develops outside conditions of deep integration and is characterized by the dominance of central governments, limited autonomy of subnational and non-state actors, modest dedicated funding, and a weakly defined borderland focus. Its main functions concern practical economic benefits, management of shared resources and infrastructure, and prevention of localized conflicts, although its functional repertoire is considerably broader than its degree of institutionalization might suggest. CBC operates through diverse sectoral and spatial formats, ranging from water-management mechanisms and border centers to interregional forums and economic corridors. International organizations play an important role as initiators, donors, and providers of expertise, but their models are adapted to the region's hierarchical political conditions. European models should therefore not be treated as universal benchmarks.

This chapter examines Kazakhstan's CBC in the broader Central Asian regional context. It argues that Central Asian CBC differs substantially from its European counterpart in several respects, including its relationship to deep integration, the autonomy of subnational authorities, the involvement

of non-governmental organizations, the clarity of its focus on borderland problems, and the availability of dedicated funding.

Kazakhstan provides a strategically useful vantage point for examining the specific characteristics of Central Asian CBC, allowing both common regional features and variations among them to be observed particularly clearly. At the same time, Kazakhstan constitutes a distinctive case within Central Asia as the region's largest country, the state with the greatest transit potential, and one of those most open to cooperation with its neighbors. Kazakhstan borders three other Central Asian states, and these borders represent markedly different cases. The Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan border remains relatively closed and runs predominantly through areas whose physical geography is unfavorable to intensive cross-border interaction. The degree of contact across the Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan border has increased dramatically since the second half of the 2010s, while the Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan border remained the most open among Central Asia's internal borders throughout most of the post-Soviet period.

How are the general and distinctive features of Central Asian CBC reflected in Kazakhstan's borders with its Central Asian neighbors? To address this overarching question, the chapter examines three interrelated issues. First, which geographical, historical, and political-economic conditions account for differences among Kazakhstan's individual borderlands, and how have these conditions changed over the post-Soviet period? Second, which functions, substantive priorities, and organizational formats are most characteristic of Kazakhstan's CBC with its Central Asian neighbors? Third, which actors play the key roles in this cooperation, and how do the positions of central and subnational authorities, businesses, local communities, and international organizations relate to one another? Examining these questions makes it possible to identify both the common features of Central Asian CBC and the distinctive characteristics of the Kazakh case.

Against the broader comparative framework set out in the Introduction to this volume, the analysis now turns to the geographical and historical conditions shaping Kazakhstan's borderlands.

Geography

Kazakhstan is the largest state in post-Soviet Central Asia and accounts for roughly two-thirds of the region's territory. Like all Central Asian states, it is landlocked. Within the region it borders Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, but not Tajikistan. Kazakhstan is also the only Central Asian state bordering Russia, one of three bordering China, and one of two with a Caspian coastline. Through the Caspian, it is connected to Azerbaijan and westward routes towards Europe, as well as to Iran and routes leading towards the Persian Gulf.

Two broad physical-geographical zones shape much of Central Asian cross-border connectivity: deserts and semi-deserts in the west and mountains in the east. Kazakhstan extends into both. The Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan border and most of the Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan border cross sparsely populated arid areas where settlements and transport links are widely separated and freshwater rivers are scarce, making intensive CBC relatively difficult. Along the mountainous Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan border, movement is channeled through a small number of valleys, above all the Chuy Valley. Between the western arid zone and the Tien Shan, the foothill section linking Kazakhstan's Turkistan Province with Uzbekistan's Tashkent area forms one of the most intensively connected parts of the Central Asian borderlands. Kazakhstan does not extend into the Fergana Valley, which is simultaneously one of the region's most interconnected and conflict-prone border areas.

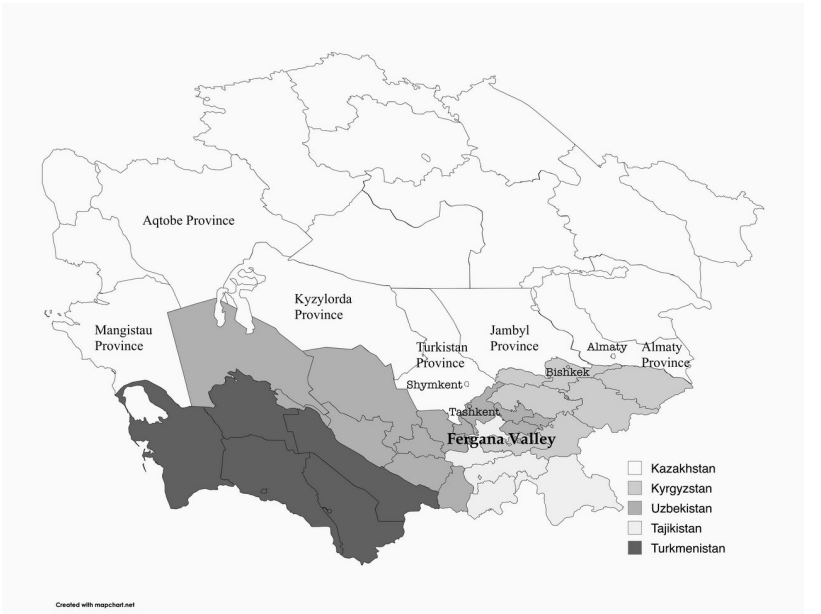


Figure 1. The subregional dimension of Kazakhstan's borders and those of other Central Asian states

Cross-border inequality in resources and capacities is an important factor shaping the spatial patterns of interaction. National-level differences can appear very large, but they do not necessarily describe the asymmetries that actors experience in particular borderlands. In 2025, Kazakhstan's GDP per capita at purchasing power parity was about 4.8 times that of Kyrgyzstan and 3.3 times that of Uzbekistan (World Bank Group n.d.). At subnational and urban scales, however, these gaps often narrow or even reverse. Along the Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan border, Bishkek's approximate PPP-adjusted output per capita exceeded that of adjacent Jambyl Province; in the Fergana Valley, the national and provincial gap between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan largely disappeared when Andijan and Osh were compared (Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan 2025a; National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic n.d.; SIAT 2026). Wage disparities may also be markedly smaller than output disparities: although gross regional product (GRP) per capita in Kazakhstan's Mangystau Province was about 5.7 times

that of neighboring Karakalpakstan, average wages differed only about twofold (Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan 2025b; Statistics Agency under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2024). Finally, large income differences do not generate a US–Mexico-type mass labor market across Central Asian borders, because Russia and other extra-regional destinations absorb much of the region's migrant labor (Bossavie and Garrote Sánchez 2022). This does not eliminate local cross-border migration, including seasonal Uzbek employment in agriculture in Kazakhstan's Turkistan Province.

One of the most consequential cross-border asymmetries is control over water resources. Along its southern borders Kazakhstan is predominantly a downstream state in relation to Kyrgyzstan and, for important river systems, Uzbekistan, which makes it dependent on the allocation and operation of shared water infrastructure. Yet the Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan and especially Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan cases show that such asymmetries need not lead only to conflict: their management can itself become a major field of cooperation. The Chu–Talas Water Commission, established to coordinate water allocation and the maintenance of shared infrastructure, is an unusually institutionalized example in Central Asia that at least formally incorporates central, subnational, and non-state participants (UNECE 2006; Zinzani 2017).

Evolution

The present borders among the Central Asian states are primarily products of Soviet ethno-territorial policies. Some borders were subsequently revised, while other territorial complications reflected local economic and administrative arrangements. In the Fergana Valley, for example, the status of some disputed plots and enclaves was shaped by Soviet-era leasing and use arrangements that later became difficult to reconcile with the new international borders after 1991 (Megoran 2017).

Kazakhstan's Soviet-era boundaries changed to different degrees along different sectors. The most substantial changes affected the western part of the future Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan border, notably the removal of the Karakalpak Autonomous Soviet Socialist Republic from the Kazakh ASSR

in 1930 and its later incorporation into the Uzbek SSR, as well as several transfers in the southern and southeastern borderlands. By contrast, the boundaries of Soviet Kazakhstan with Turkmenistan and Kyrgyzstan remained comparatively stable. In the post-Soviet period Kazakhstan consequently faced less protracted territorial contention with its Central Asian neighbors than occurred on the Kyrgyzstan–Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan–Uzbekistan borders. Delimitation with Uzbekistan was largely settled by the early 2000s, while local protests over demarcation with Kyrgyzstan remained limited and did not have a lasting effect on CBC (Megoran 2017).

Post-Soviet cross-border regimes were shaped even more strongly by the political and economic priorities of Central Asian governments than by territorial disputes. By the early 2000s, two of Kazakhstan's three Central Asian neighbors maintained particularly restrictive systems. Turkmenistan combined economic protectionism and highly authoritarian rule with severe limits on mobility, including visas for Kazakh and Uzbek citizens introduced in 1999, although limited exemptions for residents of adjacent areas initially remained. Uzbekistan's policies had still greater regional consequences because it borders every other Central Asian state. From the late 1990s to the second half of the 2010s, protectionism, securitized bordering, and tighter regulation of cross-border mobility contributed to disputes and strained relations with several neighbors, although territorial issues with Kazakhstan were settled relatively quickly. The accession of Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016 became a major regional turning point: Uzbekistan shifted towards improved relations with its Central Asian neighbors and liberalization of cross-border economic ties while retaining tight political control over subnational and non-state activity.

The Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan border stands apart: despite periodic disputes over water allocation and particular cross-border flows, it remained the region's most consistently open border to cooperation throughout most of the post-Soviet period. International support also helped establish the above-mentioned Chu–Talas Water Commission.

Strategic focus

Cross-border cooperation is a familiar term in Central Asia, but it is not consistently used as an operational label for cooperation among adjacent subnational territories. CIS framework instruments employ a territorially conventional understanding centered on neighboring subnational units, although they do not grant those units meaningful autonomy (CIS Council of Heads of Government 2020). International organizations have also used CBC terminology in conflict-management programs, especially in the Fergana Valley. The OSCE, however, often uses the term more broadly for cooperation between neighboring states, reflecting the organization's intergovernmental structure (OSCE 2014; OSCE Secretariat 2022). In Kazakhstan's relations with its Central Asian neighbors, relevant practices are more often organized through sector-specific formats than through a coherent CBC policy. Examples include the Chu–Talas Water Commission on the Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan border and centrally managed water arrangements with Uzbekistan, as well as territorially concentrated industrial and logistics projects such as the Alatau complex and the Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan Central Asia International Center for Industrial Cooperation.

Kazakhstan's cross-border relations with its Central Asian neighbors also use broader formats, many of them initiated by partner governments or international organizations. Uzbekistan has promoted interprovincial forums that involve both border and non-border provinces, although border regions often play a particularly active role. The earlier forum format with Kazakhstan was subsequently reorganized into a Council of Heads of Regions under stronger central coordination, suggesting an effort to make interregional cooperation more systematic and closely managed. International organizations have promoted even broader spatial frameworks. The Asian Development Bank, for example, supported the Almaty–Bishkek and Shymkent–Tashkent–Khujand economic-corridor initiatives, which envisage multisectoral development along major transport axes. Their practical results have so far been limited, with many activities functioning mainly as coordination or umbrella mechanisms for projects already

pursued by the participating governments (Asian Development Bank 2023; CAREC n.d.).

What is Central Asian CBC for?

Across these heterogeneous formats, three priorities are particularly visible: practical economic gain, the management of local border conflicts, and the coordinated use of water and other shared infrastructure.

Economic benefit is the most explicit priority. Official reporting on interregional and cross-border contacts frequently emphasizes growth in trade and the value of agreements reached. The interprovincial and border-center formats discussed above operationalize this logic by treating proximity as a logistical advantage, reducing transaction costs, and connecting complementary production and transport capacities.

A second priority is the management of border conflicts. This function has been particularly visible in the Fergana Valley, where Central Asian governments and international organizations have supported mechanisms for addressing disputes over land, water, roads, enclaves, border crossings, and incidents involving local residents and security personnel. In 2017, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan created a Council of Heads of Border Provinces comprising three Fergana Valley provinces on each side. As acute conflict-management concerns diminished and the bilateral relationship stabilized, its agenda shifted towards economic cooperation; in 2025 it was transformed into a broader Council of Heads of Provinces (Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic 2017; Osmonalieva 2022; Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan in the Republic of Kyrgyzstan n.d.).

A third priority is the joint use and maintenance of water infrastructure with cross-border significance, rooted in the need to operate formerly unified Soviet systems under conditions of increasing scarcity. On the Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan border, this is institutionalized through the Chu–Talas framework discussed above, with Kazakhstan also contributing to the maintenance of relevant facilities located in Kyrgyzstan. Elsewhere, comparable arrangements are more strongly dominated by central

authorities, including the Kempir-Abad (Andijan) Reservoir and the Tuyamuyun hydrosystem (Ziganshina 2023; Zinzani 2017).

This does not mean that other functions identified in CBC scholarship are irrelevant. Sousa (2013) distinguishes awareness-raising, mutual aid, functional cooperation, and common management of public resources and services. Awareness-raising in Central Asia includes numerous, though not always regular, visits by regional delegations that symbolically demonstrate willingness to cooperate even where practical interaction remains limited, as on parts of the Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan borders. Mutual aid includes emergency response, law-enforcement cooperation, and joint action against locust outbreaks; although these activities are usually conducted by territorial branches of central agencies, urgent situations may require rapid direct coordination. Functional cooperation more often involves coordinated projects implemented by each side on its own territory, including transport infrastructure and border centers. Many such projects have faced substantial delays. The repeatedly proposed shorter road between the Kazakh metropolis Almaty and the Kyrgyz resort Lake Issyk-Kul is a prominent example: despite decades of discussion, it has not yet been completed. Border-center projects backed at the highest political level have generally advanced further, but several also remain under construction behind schedule.

Two additional functions highlighted in other approaches deserve attention: the transfer of knowledge and experience, and the construction of cross-border identities. Because many Central Asian border regions, including southern Kazakhstan, have large agricultural sectors, knowledge transfer is particularly visible in agriculture. The Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan borderlands provide a clear example. Farmers and enterprises in Kazakhstan's Turkistan Province have adopted Uzbek experience in crop production, including cotton cultivation, biological pest-control methods, and, more recently, the cultivation of crops such as pomegranates, bananas, and papayas, previously untypical for the area. In the opposite direction, Uzbek partners have drawn on Kazakh experience in livestock production (Shimyrbayeva 2014; BAQ.KZ 2023; Dolukhanov 2018).

Despite integrationist rhetoric, Central Asian governments are generally cautious about encouraging cross-border identities and other forms of transboundary mobilization that they do not fully control. They may nevertheless support limited and depoliticized identity-building when it serves practical goals. The Western Tien Shan transboundary World Heritage property, shared by Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan and inscribed by UNESCO in 2016, has generated international recognition and a common conservation frame for adjoining protected areas (The Astana Times 2016). Governments have also made limited efforts to promote multi-country tourism routes under the Silk Road brand, using a shared historical reference primarily as a tourism resource rather than as a basis for political integration.

Actors

A wide range of actors participate in Central Asian CBC, including in Kazakhstan's borderlands. Central governments dominate and closely supervise provincial authorities. Territorial branches of centrally controlled agencies – including the police, border and customs services, emergency-management bodies, and water and agricultural authorities – also play important roles. District administrations are even more subordinate to higher levels of government, yet in some settings, particularly conflict management in the Fergana Valley and the resolution of local water, pasture, and market-access problems, their detailed local knowledge can give them a degree of operational importance.

Business actors form another broad category, ranging from large industrial, trading, construction, and transport companies participating in government-sponsored forums to small firms operating with little direct official support. Larger firms may influence the commercial agenda of interprovincial cooperation and conclude agreements through state-supported events, while smaller enterprises often rely on informal or intermediary arrangements to solve practical cross-border problems. One example from the Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan borderland is the use of intermediary firms around Korday in the distribution of Kyrgyz dairy products.

Grassroots communities play a less formalized role in Central Asian CBC than in many classical European and North American cases because the region's authoritarian governments are wary of organized cross-border activism with political implications. Their influence is nevertheless visible both in local policy demands and in informal economic practices.

First, governments must take account of key local needs in managing relations with the neighboring side. These include water allocation, access to pastures, border-crossing arrangements, and access to markets. Water-related grievances and local demands have repeatedly shaped the agenda of interaction in the Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan borderlands; in the latter case, disputes over market access and crossing procedures have also periodically generated pressure for bilateral solutions.

Second, informal cross-border trade is highly developed in Central Asia. It includes agricultural goods, excise products such as fuel and cigarettes, the re-export of Chinese consumer goods, and informal transport services. Whether such activity should be treated as CBC is debatable, but the distinction between informal trade and potentially legitimate cooperation is partly created by regulation itself. Restrictive regimes can push otherwise ordinary small-scale commerce into illegality, and under less burdensome rules some activity – especially trade in agricultural products – could be formalized. The case is more complicated for untaxed re-export and excise goods, which states have stronger reasons to keep under tight control. Proposals to legalize or facilitate parts of informal border trade through lighter regulation and border markets have appeared in research and policy discussions (Kaminski and Mitra 2012; Asian Development Bank 2020).

Restrictive border regimes have repeatedly pushed otherwise ordinary commerce into informal channels. Turkmenistan has pursued the most restrictive policy towards informal cross-border trade in post-Soviet Central Asia, combining tight controls on mobility with measures intended to suppress unauthorized commerce with Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. Under President Karimov, Uzbekistan's protectionist system likewise produced routine seizures of large consignments on the Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan border. After 2016, trade liberalization, exchange-rate reform, and lower customs barriers formalized or reduced some of these flows. Informal trade

nevertheless persists even on the comparatively open Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan border because of restrictions on Chinese-goods re-export, sanitary and veterinary controls, and Kyrgyz limits on untaxed fuel imports (Tsereteli 2018; Sputnik Kyrgyzstan 2018).

International organizations and foreign governmental development agencies constitute another category of actors that is less characteristic of classical European and North American CBC. In Central Asia, relevant organizations include UN agencies, the OSCE, EU-supported programs and institutions, the Asian Development Bank, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, the German Agency for International Cooperation, the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, the United States Agency for International Development, and others. They have often introduced or promoted CBC-related models such as integrated water-resources management, integrated border management, economic corridors, and transboundary protected areas. Their contribution includes organizational and technical expertise, funding – often modest but important for poorer states – and international recognition. This can encourage governments to adopt externally promoted institutional forms in a process resembling coercive institutional isomorphism (DiMaggio and Powell 1983). Yet imported arrangements are frequently reshaped to fit domestic political priorities: participatory and multilevel designs may formally survive while decision-making remains strongly hierarchical (Zinzani 2017; Nadalutti and Rüland 2025).

Conclusion

The Kazakhstan case reflects the main features of the Central Asian model of CBC in several respects: its development outside the context of deep integration; the dominance of central governments; modest project funding; the lack of a clear territorial and institutional focus specifically on borderlands among projects that can be regarded as CBC-related; the utilitarian orientation of many such projects towards obtaining material benefits; and the prominent role of international organizations in initiating many relevant projects.

At the same time, the three border dyads diverge sharply. The Kazakhstan–Turkmenistan border remains low-contact under a combination of desert geography and restrictive mobility; the Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan border became markedly more open after 2016; and the Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan border remained the region's most open throughout most of the post-Soviet period.

Most functions associated with European CBC can also be identified in Kazakhstan, but their hierarchy differs. Practical economic gain, management of scarce resources, and conflict prevention are most prominent. Mutual aid is particularly developed in the disaster-prone Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan borderlands, while knowledge transfer is especially visible in the agricultural Kazakhstan–Uzbekistan borderlands. Cross-border institutions remain relatively few and strongly hierarchical. CBC-related initiatives also frequently operate through formats either narrower or broader than conventional CBC – from border industrial and logistics centers to interregional forums and economic corridors – whose effectiveness remains difficult to assess conclusively.

Central governments remain the decisive actors, while provincial and local authorities mainly implement centrally authorized cooperation and contribute local expertise. Business actors enjoy greater practical autonomy, whereas organized civic cross-border activism remains constrained; borderland communities influence agendas mainly through pressing local needs and informal economic practices. International organizations are unusually important as initiators, donors, and providers of expertise. Their role is most clearly illustrated by the Chu–Talas Water Commission, a rare regional example of formally multilevel cross-border water governance.

The Kazakhstan case demonstrates that cross-border cooperation outside the EU and North America has important specific characteristics that should be fully taken into account when relevant experience is transferred to Central Asian settings. In particular, the European and North American models should not be treated as universally applicable benchmarks. Some of their key assumptions, including the central role of local authorities and the encouragement of civic cross-border activism, may not necessarily prove workable under Central Asian conditions.

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Part III. Borderland Communities, Informality, and Everyday Cooperation

8. Shaping Cross-border Labor Cooperation: Ethnic-kinship Networks in the Sino-Vietnamese Borderland

Yejia Ke

Abstract

This chapter examines everyday cross-border labor cooperation in the China–Vietnam borderland, focusing on two adjacent villages inhabited by closely related ethnic communities. Drawing on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2025, it explores how cross-border employment is organized and sustained in a context where formal institutions regulate mobility but do not themselves provide the social mechanisms. Recruitment and everyday employment are facilitated through overlapping kinship, friendship, and co-ethnic networks. Rather than treating formal and informal cooperation as opposites, the chapter demonstrates their interdependence. The findings highlight the importance of relational infrastructures for understanding cross-border cooperation beyond institution-centered and Eurocentric models.

Introduction

Cross-border cooperation is generally understood through institutional frameworks that allow actors located on different sides of an international border to work together. Much of the conceptual research surrounding cross-border cooperation has developed from European experiences, where cross-border cooperation has been supported by regional integration, formal legal frameworks and dedicated funding. However, in many border regions outside Europe, political support is relatively limited, and formal mechanisms aimed at fostering cross-border cooperation remain relatively weak. However, the absence of strong institutional arrangements does not necessarily imply a lack of cooperation. In many border areas, people continue to cross national boundaries for work, trade, marriage, family visits, information exchange, and the maintenance of social relationships. Such cross-border interactions may be organized not primarily through

formal cross-border organizations but through historically embedded social relationships in everyday life in those borderlands.

This chapter examines such processes through cross-border labor cooperation in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands. It focuses on two adjacent cross-border ethnic communities, Da Village (a pseudonym) on the Chinese side and Thuquet Village (a pseudonym) on the Vietnamese side. Residents of the two communities belong to the Zhuang ethnic group (called Tay-Nung in Vietnam), a cross-border ethnic group who share the same language, cultural practices, kinship and social ties. Therefore, cross-border interactions, including kinship visits, marriage, small-scale trade, and labor mobility, have long developed in this border area.

The rapid development of tourism in Da Village has created labor demands that the small local population cannot fully meet. Local hotels, shops, and other businesses consequently recruit workers from nearby communities, including Thuquet Village. Although administrative arrangements permit cross-border movement and employment for border residents, these arrangements alone cannot explain how employers find workers, why workers choose work across the border, or how employment relationships are sustained in this borderland area. Ethnographic research demonstrates that these processes are organized through locally embedded networks. Employers contact relatives and acquaintances across the border, and existing Vietnamese workers introduce friends and fellow villagers, and employment information circulates through everyday interaction. Therefore, in the process of this cross-border recruitment cooperation in Da Village and Thuquet Village, the shared language facilitates communication and kinship generates trust and reduces uncertainty for both employers and workers.

Based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2025, this chapter asks how cross-border labor cooperation is organized and sustained when formal institutions alone do not provide the social mechanisms necessary for everyday cooperation. I argue that this case reveals the importance of cross-border networks in practical cross-border recruitment cooperation. In the borderland, such networks encompass cross-border kinship, friendship, shared ethnicity and language, and everyday

interactions through which border residents transform the institutional possibility of mobility into concrete practices of cooperation. This chapter does not argue that informal social relations should replace state regulation. Rather, it reveals the interactive relationship between the two: formal institutions regulate the conditions of mobility, while cross-border networks organize collaboration within everyday practices. This perspective contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of cross-border cooperation that is often overlooked by institution-centered approaches.

From Institutional Cooperation to cross-border networks

Cross-border cooperation has been strongly shaped by European experiences of regional integration. In influential studies of European border regions, cross-border cooperation has often been understood in relation to institutionalized collaboration between contiguous subnational authorities, supported by European regional policies, multi-level governance, legal frameworks, and funding mechanisms (Perkmann 2003; Scott 2012). Perkmann (2003), for example, conceptualizes cross-border regions primarily through relatively institutionalized cooperation among subnational authorities and demonstrates how their development has been closely associated with European regional policy.

However, the institutional conditions underlying this model are not universal. Golunov (2025) points out that European cross-border cooperation reflects exceptionally favorable circumstances, which include strong political support for regional integration and enabling legal frameworks, institutional autonomy, and substantial financial resources.

Using European experience as a general benchmark can therefore obscure forms of cooperation emerging in political and institutional environments where such conditions are absent or considerably weaker. A similar point is made by Golunov and Bitabar (2025) in their comparative study of Central Asian cross-border cooperation. They demonstrate that cross-border cooperation cannot be analyzed in isolation. Instead, it must be understood in relation to diverse political systems, border regimes, and informal economic practices.

As Turner (2010, 2013) shows, ethnic-minority communities along the Sino-Vietnamese border maintain trading networks through kinship ties. Similarly, border markets do more than generate income. They help sustain enduring social ties across the national divide (Nguyen and Ta 2021). Other studies demonstrate that intimate practices such as cross-border ethnic marriage are also deeply shaped by the interaction between long-standing ethnic relations and changing forms of state regulation (Barabantseva 2015).

These studies reveal an important point. They demonstrate that cross-border interaction is embedded in historically constituted social relations rather than generated solely by contemporary institutions. However, scholars often frame these practices as livelihood strategies, rather than analyzing them as institutionalized forms of cross-border cooperation. Consequently, a gap remains between two bodies of scholarship. Cross-border cooperation research focuses on institutional arrangements, while borderland ethnographies have documented rich forms of everyday cross-border interaction without relation to the cross-border cooperation framework.

This study analyzes how cross-border cooperation among ethnic minority communities is achieved in borderlands governed by contemporary nation-states. In doing so, it draws attention to the cross-border social ties that connect ethnic communities and kinships. These ties consist of overlapping networks of kinship, friendship, shared ethnicity and language, workplace relations, and everyday encounters.

However, those cross-border networks should be understood neither as a substitute for formal institutions nor as evidence that the state is absent in the borderland, because the state provides the legal regulations for cross-border cooperation. In practice, socially embedded networks enable residents to make these legal possibilities into actual cooperation.

Therefore, the Sino-Vietnamese case shows that cross-border cooperation can be understood as the product of the interaction between institutional regulations and locally embedded cross-border networks.

Field Site and Methodology

This study draws on ethnographic fieldwork conducted between 2019 and 2025 in the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands. The research sites are Da Village in Guangxi Zhuang Autonomous Region, China, and Thuquet Village in Cao Bang Province, Vietnam. To protect research participants, this research uses pseudonyms for geographical and personal details.

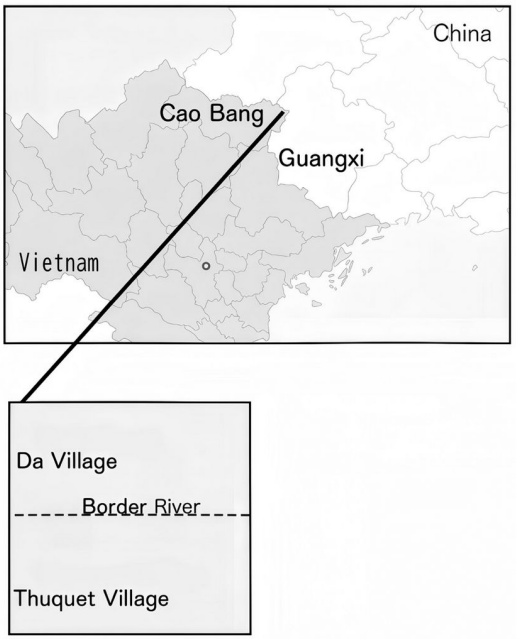


Figure 1. Location of Da Village and Thuquet Village. Source: compiled and adapted by the author from D-Maps (Guangxi map: [https://www.d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=22534&lang=es]; Vietnam map: [https://www.d-maps.com/carte.php?num_car=985&lang=es]); schematic inset drawn by the author.

As shown in Figure 1, the two communities are located on opposite sides of the international border and are inhabited predominantly by closely related ethnic populations, who share an ethnic language, cultural practices, and extensive kinship ties. Residents have historically maintained

relationships through intermarriage, kinship visits, trade, festivals, and labor mobility. Therefore, crossing the border has become a part of daily life.

The research employed participant observation and semi-structured interviews. Fieldwork took place in households, hotels, restaurants, shops, markets, and other spaces of everyday interaction in Da Village and Thuquet Village. Interviews included residents in both villages, part-time and full-time Vietnamese workers and business owners.

The analysis focused on how those Vietnamese workers accessed job information and how employers recruited staff. It also examined how both sides built trust and negotiated everyday employment relations.

Tourism Development and Social networks in cross-border labor cooperation

Da Village has experienced rapid tourism development since 2000. It created economic opportunities in accommodation, restaurants, retail, and other services. Tourism has generated labor demand in Da Village that the relatively small local population cannot fully meet. Local business owners therefore recruit workers from surrounding communities, including Thuquet Village across the border.

Geographical proximity makes this job highly attractive to Vietnamese villagers. Some workers can work in Da Village while continuing to reside in Thuquet Village and maintain their family lives.

Besides this, residents noted that wages on the Chinese side are much better. For seasonal agricultural work, such as sugarcane harvesting, daily earnings on the Chinese side were roughly 20 percent higher than in Vietnam. In recent years, although tourism in Thuquet Village has also developed, many local tourism enterprises rely heavily on household labor, thereby limiting opportunities for other villagers.

Cross-border recruitment in Da Village frequently occurs through networks rather than the labor market. When businesses require labor, owners in Da Village turn to personal networks. They reach out to relatives or acquaintances across the Vietnamese border. They also rely on current Vietnamese employees to make recommendations.

The case of two Vietnamese workers in Da Village, Thuy and Giang, illustrates this mechanism. Thuy first worked in the kitchen of a hotel in Da Village. When the restaurant later needed another employee for a front-desk position, Thuy contacted Giang directly. Through this personal referral, Giang was recruited to the business.

Employment opportunities can also happen through ordinary encounters. Vietnamese visitors often cross the border for personal visits or shopping. During casual conversations with shop owners, they may learn about hiring needs. Information could subsequently circulate back through their own social networks.

These social networks transmit more than information. They generate mutual trust and reduce uncertainty on both sides. One shop owner shared an example. She recently hired a young Vietnamese relative whose background was already familiar to her. The worker had originally planned to find factory work elsewhere. However, the shop faced a labor shortage during the peak summer tourist season. The owner convinced her to take the local job for several months first.

In this situation, for the employer, recruitment through existing relationships meant that the worker was not a complete stranger. For employees, a job guaranteed by a relative, close to home, and better paid is highly attractive. These social networks lower risks for employees as well. Workers rarely enter unfamiliar workplaces alone. They often share the same local dialect with their employers or peers. Furthermore, many find opportunities to work alongside relatives and hometown friends. Relatives and acquaintances often help arrange temporary leave or adjust work shifts.

In this sense, cross-border networks do more than facilitate initial hiring. They sustain employment relationships over time and keep daily operations workable.

Cross-border labor cooperation thus operates through kinship, friendship, shared ethnicity, workplace ties, and face-to-face encounters.

Discussion and Conclusion

The case of Da and Thuquet Villages suggests that cross-border labor cooperation is sustained through an interaction between state regulation and historically embedded networks.

Formal administrative arrangements establish the possibilities of mobility. Yet institutional permission alone does not produce cooperation. Official policies do not locate qualified workers or build mutual trust. Nor do they bridge language differences, track changing labor demands, or handle day-to-day employment matters. These findings demonstrate that cross-border social networks play an important role in translating the formal possibility of mobility into everyday practices of cooperation.

Kinship, friendship, shared ethnicity and language, and everyday encounters in the borderland together build this cross-border recruitment cooperation on the ground. Formal institutions regulate cross-border mobility; in turn, local networks organize and sustain practical cooperation.

These findings offer broader perspectives for comparative border studies. Mainstream cross-border cooperation studies focus largely on formal European institutions. As a result, they often overlook informal and grounded forms of cooperation. Future comparative studies should also examine how residents generate and sustain everyday cooperation through their own social relations.

These findings also carry practical implications. Grounded kinship and shared dialects serve as important social resources. They help translate formal mobility policies into everyday reality. Therefore, effective cross-border policy may benefit from understanding how formal arrangements interact with existing local relationships.

These patterns reach far beyond the Sino-Vietnamese borderlands. Similar forms of cross-border ethnic and kinship connectivity can be found across many parts of mainland Southeast Asia. Across mainland Southeast Asia, modern borders divide local cross-border ethnic and kinship communities, who share deep linguistic, cultural, and kinship ties. The Sino-Vietnamese case therefore provides a valuable insight for examining a broader form of cross-border cooperation in Southeast Asia. If such practices are widespread across Southeast Asia, scholars must rethink global

cross-border cooperation models. Instead of asking only whether formal institutions exist, research should investigate how border residents themselves build and sustain cooperation through daily social relations.

Therefore, the significance of the case lies not only in documenting a particular form of labor mobility between China and Vietnam. It highlights the need to integrate ethnic and kinship ties into comparative cross-border cooperation research.

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9. Liminality in Cross-Community Dialogue

Lena Merkle

Abstract

To mobilize communities in conflict towards dialogue is an ongoing challenge in many conflict and post-conflict settings. Increasingly, we see the supposed solution of walls and fences to keep people apart and thus keep an appearance of peace. As we know, however, increasing segregation only tends to further feelings of distance towards the other side and leads to an increasing stereotyping of 'the enemy'. Cross-community dialogue is a central means of counteracting these tendencies in segregated and divided communities. Yet, it needs to be done carefully and with the needs of both – or all – communities in mind to prevent backfiring. In this chapter I would like to discuss the relevance of liminality, and particularly, of liminal spaces for cross-community dialogue. The chapter uses the example of two organizations involved in cross-community projects, one in Northern Ireland and one in Cyprus, and how they use the in-between of the border to create neutral zones of gathering where both communities can come together without losing face and without putting themselves into harm's way. I argue for the central relevance of the physical position of those spaces in or on the border and the symbolic power that lies in a repurposing of the material reality of security infrastructure for projects of mental de-bordering.

Introduction

Conflicts which include closed borders add a long-term complication to their situation, namely the physical absence of the respective other from the lives of the conflicting communities. While this might seem like an advantage at times during conflict when it helps to keep constant confrontation out of the everyday experience, it can become a significant hurdle during peacebuilding and reconciliation. An absent other is much harder to humanize and cannot counteract conflict narratives of their monstrosity. While borders, walls and fences might help in keeping an appearance of peace, they also hinder any kind of positive and transitional interaction.

In this chapter I look at the cases of Belfast and Nicosia, two divided cities, where conflict resolution and transitional notions of peace have been a struggle for decades. The inhabitants of both cities live in largely still segregated communities with often little interaction. The segregated nature of the neighborhood limits casual interaction but can also pose a significant complication to any efforts of societal peacebuilding.

As an approach towards reconnection, I introduce two initiatives that use spaces which are not claimed by either community to come together on neutral ground. I further analyze their approach through the concept of liminality. In understanding these spaces of connection as liminal spaces, not simply as unclaimed and neutral, their potential becomes more apparent. The contribution of this chapter thus lies in the added analytical dimension of understanding liminal spaces as unique opportunities for inter-communal dialogue and translating this understanding into lessons for peace processes beyond the examples given. To do so, the chapter draws from interviews and ethnographic research within both cities.

Northern Ireland and Cyprus: Two Divided Islands

The islands of Ireland and Cyprus share some striking similarities. Both were colonized by Great Britain and have since independence gone through phases of severe armed conflict that also heavily affected the civilian inhabitants of each island and left them divided. Since Brexit, both have now also become EU external borders. And, while non-violence is mostly

the lived reality on both islands, nowadays, the conflicts are far from resolved with questions of national sovereignty, ethno-national self-determination and loyalty to neighboring countries being major points of friction. On both islands the South is a recognized independent state while the North is either part of another country (in the case of Northern Ireland) or of disputed status (the Turkish Republic of Northern Cyprus).

Both islands also harbor divided cities. Of course, their situations are vastly different. While Belfast is the capital of Northern Ireland and firmly located within its territory, Nicosia lies right on the border that divides the two parts of Cyprus. In this sense, it is much more divided from a perspective of sovereignty, as it includes an actual national and EU border. Crossing it requires passports, border control checks and, in some cases, visas. This leads to real consequences for those who call the city their home. The conflict has led to forced displacement and resettlement according to ethnic distinctions in the 1970s. Yet, especially with the contested situation of the North, daily work commutes across the border are a common occurrence leading to long queues and significant traffic and waiting times at the only three border crossings that exist in the city, two of which are only open to pedestrians. The actual border consists of two rows of barricaded streets, house fronts, etc., and a buffer zone in-between that at times runs along the course of a street and varies in width.

Belfast, on the other hand, is not part of the actual border, the latter being an open border where crossers need to be in possession of adequate forms of identification and permissions to cross but will not be checked for them. Yet, Belfast is divided in a different way. The so-called peace walls were erected starting in the 1970s and continuously fortified and raised throughout the conflict. They were built across the city in areas which were deemed particularly affected by the violence as a means to segregate communities and, thus, prevent or at least hamper violence. With the conflict, Belfast also became an increasingly segregated city. Many of those who lived as minorities in their neighborhoods either moved voluntarily or were violently driven out of their homes. Those areas that were considered most affected by the conflict, which often coincides with otherwise precarious and deprived living circumstances, are, to this day, nearly

entirely segregated with public infrastructures reflecting this reality. The walls are still mostly in existence with many of their gates being still closed daily at nighttime while others remain permanently closed. For many living in their vicinity, they represent an important guarantee of their security and thus efforts to take them down are regularly met with strong resistance from those living in their shadows.

Living on 'the other side' is unimaginable for many people in both cities. The trauma and hurt of the conflicts are still very present in the communities. As both conflicts happened within the lifetime of many current citizens (the Cyprus conflict was at its height in the 1960s and 1970s while the conflict in Northern Ireland escalated in the early 1970s and lasted until 1998) and most people were affected by it in some shape or form, reconciliation is a tremendous undertaking. Younger generations, on one hand, grew up with the stories of the conflict and, on the other hand, tend to have very little interaction with the other side due to the ongoing segregation.

Yet, efforts to bridge the divide exist in numerous forms on both islands ranging from international efforts to bipartisan grassroots initiatives. The latter shall be the focus of this chapter. Before diving into the intricacies of their work, the next section will provide an introduction to the concept of liminality.

Liminality

Liminality as a theoretical concept originates within the discipline of cultural anthropology. With the folklorist Arnold van Gennep the term became part of the academic canon. He described it as one stage of rites of passage where individuals enter a transformative phase within the social structures of small-scale societies. Such rites are typically structured in three phases with those undergoing transition being still in their old (social) role during the first and entering their new role during the last. The middle one is the so-called liminal phase where social rules are upended or suspended. It is a time of danger and insecurity and can often be considered a test of the initiand (Thomassen 2015, 43). The anthropologist Victor Turner further developed the concept and can also be credited with firmly

establishing it within the anthropological canon. He included notions of liminality in his understanding that are not limited to a well-ordered transition process but also include more diverse forms of suspension or entrapment between what is deemed appropriate by society (Neumann 2012, 474).

Since then, many disciplines have recognized the explanatory and theoretical value liminality holds as a concept and have developed it further from its initial intent as describing very specifically individual rites of passage. It is now understood more broadly as a useful framework for understanding all kinds of states of in-betweenness and ambiguity (Banfield 2022, 611). The theoretical potential of liminality lies in its ability to contextualize core human experiences especially where they don't fall within the neat structures of societal rules. It describes the unavoidable yet, in its insecurity, potentially frightening experience of change and transition in human lives. When expanding the concept from the individual to the societal dimension, the insecurities grow and the expectation that the liminal period will end and a new structure will arise becomes increasingly uncertain (Thomassen 2015, 52–55).

Liminal Spaces and Debordering Imaginaries

The spatial dimension of liminality has been particularly established by geographers who emphasized not only the concept's applicability to many different spaces and places of marginal or complex meaning but also the spatial dimension that is at the core of the concept itself (Banfield 2022, 611–612). This marginality doesn't need to be a geographical one but may also be understood as "spaces on the margin of meaning" (Cobb 2013, 27).

In this chapter I argue that such spaces can be particularly relevant to contexts of conflict resolution and reconciliation.

Spaces and places tend to carry heavy meaning in conflict and post-conflict situations. (In)official memorial sites, places associated with trauma and violence, and disputed land are only some of the spatialized dimensions of conflict (Murphy and McDowell 2019, 2503). In both conflicts I refer to in this chapter there is the added complexity of segregation with border regions already being inherently liminal (Szakolczai 2015, 22–24). Each

place belongs to either one or the other side with places that are not split up by this binary being a rarity. Nonetheless, in both cities grassroots initiatives have found ways to use the little neutral space as places of connection.

In Nicosia, the buffer zone consists of a barricaded area that lies in-between the respective checkpoints of both sides and crosses the whole city (and the rest of the island) from east to west. The buffer zone is administered by the United Nations and accessible through the official crossing points. Within the zone, a few NGOs and community organizations have established their quarters in an effort to be accessible and potentially non-partisan to both communities. The buffer zone has also repeatedly been a site of protest. One notable such case was the beginning of the grassroots initiative Unite Cyprus Now which developed as the result of the failed negotiations that were held between Cyprus and Turkey in Crans-Montana. The talks were discontinued in 2017 without any success, leading to significant frustration among the inhabitants of the island who had hopes to finally move forward with the protracted situation. Hence, many followed the call to protest which Turkish Cypriot journalist Esra Aygin published on her blog leading to a phase of daily protest which then developed into an initiative that focuses on bipartisan dialogue and conflict-related education. Their protests from the beginning were situated in the buffer zone. This had the very practical advantage that citizens from both sides could easily access it. It also created a clear message that neither side was trying to dominate the movement but that participants would, in a very literal sense, start on equal ground.

In Belfast, the Black Mountain Shared Space Project took a similar approach when deciding on the location for their community space. The project developed as a neighborhood initiative to create a building that provided support for their communities in one of the most deprived areas of the city. It was from the get-go meant to be a space where both communities also came together to find ways of living together. The area is heavily segregated and has been at the epicenter of the conflict with peace walls dividing it almost completely to this day. The shared space was built on an old factory site with significance to the adjacent neighborhoods. It borders

both loyalist and nationalist neighborhoods. The original factory was a relevant provider of jobs to the communities but, as many at the time, practiced discriminatory employment standards. During the height of the conflict the abandoned site saw fighting and was at times used by snipers. It lies in a unique location as the still very urban neighborhoods go right up to its grounds but then end abruptly and give way to the countryside. Due to this, the site grounds are surrounded by peace walls but outside of the territory of either community. The building the project built there was thus accessible from both communities via respective entrances and literally became a space outside of either area where their paths crossed. The project team took tremendous care in establishing good relations and building trust with either community to avoid the destiny of many other similar projects which all ended up being frequented by only one community, and using a space that could not be claimed as 'theirs' easily by either community was a relevant part of that process.

Looking at the protracted situation of both conflicts with little violence but segregation and no real solution in sight, I argue that the meaning of both sites goes beyond the immediate interpretation of neutral sites. In addition, they can be understood as liminal spaces. This neither-nor position, the in-between, is different from a neutral point. They are not neutral in the sense that they are heavy with meaning. They are visible sites of the societal divide; they hold personal and communal memories of conflict and are part of the complex histories of the islands. In an understanding of the conflict, they are important.

However, they also lie outside the rigid order of segregation. In societies where places typically are either one or the other – and the respective ownership can be clearly named, at least by those affected – spaces that avoid this categorization are rare. As they fall outside of the established order, there is a potential for irritation that is useful for bipartisan community work in divided societies. The space outside of the order allows for out-of-the-order behavior.

Building peace in the in-between

When sides have hardened in conflict and lives are lived as segregated realities, perspectives become inflexible, too. It is immensely difficult to encourage openness towards new steps in working on building peace and especially towards the other side.

Irritation and interruption can be helpful ways to allow for new creativity and receptiveness towards alternative experiences. I suggest in this chapter that one way of doing that is to create liminal spaces where people can more easily step outside of their usual behavior and beliefs.

The neither-nor of the space vacates societal norms; the disruption of the usual order creates room for new ordering and meaning making. While such does not necessarily need to have a spatial component, it certainly helps in acknowledging the spatial and grounded dimension of many conflicts where the violence is physically inscribed into the land. Liminality and liminal spaces do not have to come into existence by chance but can actively be created (Thomassen 2015, 50).

Of course, the space by itself is not going to do much and a permanent liminality can also create harmful and destructive circumstances as we can see by understanding the transition from conflict to peace as a liminal phase itself: if it takes too long and the transition is not made, the suspension in liminality can lead to severe consequences (Szakolczai 2015). The liminal space as discussed in this chapter is first and foremost a mere potential that sensible peace workers and motivated communities can use to their advantage. In such spaces, new meanings can be created and brought from there into the everyday. To do so means to allow for the liminal potential of dissolution, chaos and ambiguity to take hold and to endure the insecurities that come with it. Yet, especially in protracted situations of long-term conflict, the opportunity to uproot all convention and expectation holds real promise.

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10. Kirvaluk across the Divide: Quasi-Kinship as Vernacular Cross-Border Cooperation in the Armenian–Azerbaijani Borderlands

Nona Shahnazarian

Abstract

This chapter examines *kirvaluk* (also *kirvelik, kirva, kirve, kirvo*) as a historically embedded form of vernacular cooperation across ethnic and religious boundaries in the South Caucasus, focusing primarily on Armenian–Azerbaijani relations in historical Karabakh (until 1991). Rather than treating cross-border cooperation exclusively as a formal or institutional process, the chapter draws attention to the informal social infrastructures through which people living in culturally and politically divided communities created trust, reciprocity, and mutual protection.

Kirvaluk is a form of artificial or quasi-kinship established through ritual, most characteristically through participation in baptism or circumcision. By transforming friendship into a kin-like relationship, it extended obligations beyond individuals to families and, in some cases, across generations. Among Karabakh Armenians, the distinction between an ordinary *ashna/dost* (friend or acquaintance) and a *kirva* was particularly significant: the latter represented a deeper and morally binding relationship, involving hospitality, assistance, loyalty, and protection. Ritual and folk beliefs could also motivate interconfessional godparenthood in situations of illness or child mortality, making religious difference itself a potential source of additional protection.

Drawing on ethnographic research and oral histories collected since 2001, including approximately 12 interviews concerning kirva relationships amid escalating Armenian–Azerbaijani nationalist rivalry, the chapter pays particular attention to memories of Azerbaijani kirvas who protected or rescued their Armenian pseudo-kin during the late-Soviet and early post-Soviet violence surrounding the Karabakh conflict. These accounts illuminate how pre-existing relational obligations could persist, and at times acquire life-and-death significance, when nationalist mobilization increasingly demanded that former neighbors become enemies. The analysis brings the concept of everyday peace into dialogue with Veena Das's account of the "descent of violence into the ordinary," asking how intimate social relations both sustain coexistence and are transformed by violence.

At the same time, *kirvaluk* should not be romanticized as an inherently peace-making institution. Its capacity to cross ethnic and confessional boundaries coexisted with mechanisms that reproduced them, including restrictions on marriage and the maintenance of endogamous communities. Comparative evidence from Nakhichevan, where *kirva* has survived largely as an intra-Azerbaijani Muslim practice following the disappearance of the Armenian population, further demonstrates this transformation.

The chapter therefore conceptualizes *kirvaluk* as a vernacular infrastructure of cross-border cooperation that simultaneously crosses and reproduces boundaries. Its history suggests that in conflict-prone borderlands, cooperation may be sustained not only through formal institutions but also through culturally embedded relationships of kin-like obligation, reciprocity, and protection.

Introduction

Border regions are often described primarily through the language of separation: borders divide states, ethnic groups, religious communities, and political loyalties. Yet borderlands are also spaces of sustained proximity and plurality, where people develop everyday practices for living with difference. Such practices may remain largely invisible to formal institutions and may disappear from view once conflict transforms

neighbors into enemies. Nevertheless, they can constitute important forms of social infrastructure that make coexistence possible.

Border regions in the South Caucasus have historically functioned as spaces of cultural convergence, social hybridity, and informal cooperation despite recurring political tensions and violent conflict. This chapter examines *kirvaluk* (also *kirvelik*, *kirva* or *kirve*) as one such institution in the Armenian–Azerbaijani borderlands of the South Caucasus, with particular attention to Karabakh – a form of intercommunal quasi-kinship historically practiced between Armenians and Turkic-speaking populations in frontier zones such as Karabakh, Syunik, Meghri, and Lori – as a mechanism of cross-border social integration "from below." I argue that *kirvaluk* can be understood as a form of vernacular cross-border cooperation: a culturally embedded mechanism through which unrelated people, including members of different ethnic and religious communities, were transformed into kin-like persons bound by obligations of mutual assistance, hospitality, loyalty, and protection. The term "cross-border" is used here deliberately but somewhat differently from conventional studies of interstate cooperation. I am interested not only in the crossing of territorial borders, but in the crossing of social, ethnic, religious, and symbolic boundaries that organized everyday life in mixed communities.

The central argument is that *kirvaluk* performed a double function. It could de-border social relations by transforming an Armenian–Azerbaijani friendship into a quasi-kinship relationship, while simultaneously re-bordering those relations through ritual and rules of marriage, confessional distinction, and endogamy. Thus, *kirvaluk* was neither simply a mechanism of integration nor simply an expression of separation. It was a social institution for managing difference.

My analysis draws on ethnographic research, oral histories, and earlier research on kinship and interethnic relations in Karabakh and other Armenian border regions. Since 2001, through numerous ethnographic field trips, I have collected approximately a dozen interviews specifically concerning *kirva* relationships and their meanings in periods of intense nationalist rivalry. These materials are particularly valuable because they

preserve memories of relationships that became increasingly difficult to acknowledge publicly as Armenian–Azerbaijani conflict intensified.

Kirvaluk as artificial kinship

In anthropological terms, *kirvaluk* belongs to the broad field of artificial or quasi-kinship: relationships that are not based on biological descent but acquire many of the moral, social, and practical characteristics of kinship. Marshall Sahlins's concept of the "mutuality of being" is particularly useful here. For Sahlins, kinship is not reducible to biological relatedness; it is constituted through participation in one another's existence, through shared obligations, vulnerability, and responsibility (Sahlins 2013).

This perspective helps illuminate what *kirvaluk* actually did. It did not merely give a ceremonial name to an existing friendship. It transformed the relationship itself. A person who had previously been an *ashna* or *dost* – a good acquaintance or friend – could become a *kirva*, and the relationship could then extend from two individuals to their families and, in some cases, across generations (Shahnazarian and Shahnazarian 2010).

Among Karabakh Armenians during the Soviet period, this distinction between *ashna* and *kirva* was meaningful. An *ashna* could be a trusted Azerbaijani acquaintance with whom one exchanged hospitality and assistance. A *kirva*, however, represented a much deeper and more formalized relationship. Families connected through *kirvaluk* could regard one another as relatives; they were expected to maintain contact, exchange food, attend weddings and funerals, provide assistance, and remain loyal to one another (Mkrtchyan 1995).[10] The relationship could be inherited, with the children of *kirvas* continuing the connection established by their parents (Laura K., RP).

The relationship was rooted in ritual. On the Muslim/Azerbaijani side, the *kirva* was traditionally the person who held or supported a boy during

[10] Among Armenians and Azerbaijanis of Soviet Karabakh, the distinction between an ordinary acquaintance or friend (*ashna/dost*) and a *kirva* was meaningful. A *dost* could be a trusted Azerbaijani acquaintance with whom one exchanged hospitality and assistance, but the relationship could become *kirvaluk* after years of friendship, often following the birth of a child and participation in a baptism or circumcision ceremony. The resulting relationship was understood as extending beyond the two individuals to their families and potentially into subsequent generations.

circumcision (*sünnet*). Blood and ritual participation endowed the relationship with particular force.[11] Armenian informants sometimes compared *kirva* to *kavor*, the Armenian godparent (Ninok S., RP; Rashid B., RP). In mixed communities, therefore, baptism and circumcision could become ritual occasions through which friendship was transformed into a socially recognized form of artificial kinship (Hamo Ch., RP). The Karabakh material makes this mechanism particularly visible. In my earlier research with Robert Shahnazarian, I described kirvaluk as a form of quasi-kinship in which unrelated people deliberately transformed friendship into a relationship resembling blood or spiritual kinship. The ritual could be especially significant in situations in which families perceived themselves as vulnerable and required an additional network of support beyond biological kinship.

The meaning of the practice went beyond the ritual itself. The *kirva* became a morally obligated person: someone who could be called upon for help, hospitality, mediation, and protection (Stepan G., RP). The institution thus created a parallel network of social security, particularly valuable in communities where formal mechanisms of protection were limited.

This is why I propose understanding *kirvaluk* as a vernacular technology of social cooperation. It converted an interethnic relationship from a potentially fragile friendship into a morally binding form of pseudo-kinship.

Karabakh: from friendship to kinship

Karabakh is particularly important for understanding this process because Armenian and Azerbaijani populations lived in sustained proximity while simultaneously being separated by powerful ethnic and religious boundaries. The coexistence of difference did not eliminate these

[11] Kirvaluk was therefore much more than a ceremonial role. It constituted a parallel network of friendship, kin-like obligation, mutual assistance and protection. The prohibition of marriage between the two families was itself part of this transformation: the relationship was symbolically and socially recoded as one between relatives, making possible a degree of intimacy that would otherwise have been restricted by ethnic, religious and gendered boundaries. As Namık Kemal Dinç's account of Kurdish–Armenian memories of *kirve* demonstrates, the institution could allow members of different ethnic and religious communities to enter one another's households and social worlds in ways that ordinary relations between outsiders did not permit (Dinç n.d.).

boundaries. Rather, people developed cultural mechanisms for negotiating them.

My earlier research described *kirvaluk* as a set of ritual practices that made non-kin relations resemble familial relations. The practice was particularly revealing because it emerged precisely where direct social contact was intense. Karabakh Armenians distinguished between the ordinary Azerbaijani acquaintance, *ashna/dost*, and the *kirva*, whose relationship with the family was considerably more intimate. Families linked through godparenthood could become "relatives" despite remaining divided by religion and ethnicity.

Ritual and folk belief also played an important role in legitimizing these relationships. According to my ethnographic materials, interconfessional godparenthood could sometimes be established in situations in which children repeatedly became ill or died. The participation of a person belonging to another religious community was interpreted as bringing additional sacred protection: the child could symbolically be placed under the protection of both religious traditions (Hrachik S., RP). The significance of the practice therefore cannot be reduced to pragmatic friendship. It involved a culturally meaningful attempt to transform difference itself into a source of protection.

This is important for understanding *kirvaluk* as an institution of social cooperation. The relationship was often created not despite vulnerability, but *because of vulnerability*. People who lacked sufficient protection – whether because of illness, social marginality, or their position within a divided community – could create additional networks of support through ritual kinship.

Kirvaluk and everyday peace

The concept of *everyday peace* helps us interpret these practices without romanticizing them. Roger Mac Ginty defines everyday peace in terms of the methods through which individuals and groups navigate life in deeply divided societies, emphasizing bottom-up practices of survival, accommodation, and local agency. Such practices become particularly

important where formal peacebuilding and state institutions are inadequate (Mac Ginty 2014).

Kirvaluk fits this perspective remarkably well. It was not a peace agreement, an intergovernmental institution, or a formal mechanism of conflict resolution. It was embedded in ordinary relationships: family visits, food exchange, weddings, funerals, childcare, agricultural assistance, and obligations between households. Yet these seemingly mundane practices could have significant political consequences because they created social relations that did not correspond neatly to the categories of ethnic nationalism.

Veena Das's work allows us to take this argument further. In *Life and Words*, Das asks not simply what extreme violence does to societies, but how violence enters "the recesses of the ordinary" – how extraordinary violence becomes incorporated into everyday life and transforms relationships, practices, and subjectivities (Das 2007). This perspective is particularly productive for Karabakh. The question is not only how Armenians and Azerbaijanis once lived together, but what happened to everyday relationships when nationalist mobilization and violence descended into ordinary life. What happened when the person who had been a *kirva* suddenly became a member of an allegedly hostile ethnic group?

Kirva as protection in the midst of nationalist violence

Here the rescue stories in my ethnographic material become especially important (Shahnazarian, Sukhashvili, and Bayramova 2019). Since 2001, in the course of repeated field research, I have recorded approximately 12 interviews that directly address *kirva* relationships in the context of Armenian–Azerbaijani nationalist confrontation. A recurring theme in these oral histories is the memory of Azerbaijani *kirvas* protecting or rescuing their Armenian pseudo-kin during the escalating nationalist conflict of the late Soviet and early post-Soviet period (Stepan G.; Lorents A., RP). These narratives do not suggest that all *kirvas* behaved in the same way (Lyuda B., RP), nor that *kirvaluk* could overcome the conflict as such (Liza M.; Lyova A., RP). Rather, they reveal moments when an already existing moral

obligation became a basis for action at precisely the moment when nationalist categories demanded separation (Javakhyan 2007).

According to these interview accounts, some Azerbaijani *kirvas* protected Armenian families, helped them escape danger, warned them of impending threats, or otherwise intervened on their behalf during the violence surrounding the Karabakh conflict. In some cases, doing so involved personal risk. The significance of these stories lies not only in the acts of assistance themselves but in the moral language through which they are remembered: the person being protected was not simply an Armenian neighbor or acquaintance but a *kirva* – someone who had become, through ritual, "one of us."

This is where *kirvaluk* intersects most directly with everyday peace. The relationship did not necessarily produce political reconciliation. It could, however, create a moral exception to the logic of collective hostility. For some people, the relational identity created through *kirvaluk* proved stronger, at least temporarily, than the ethnic category imposed by nationalist mobilization (Ghevond Z., RP).

One Azerbaijani informant interviewed in research on Nakhichevan expressed this relationship with striking clarity: without *kirva*, he argued, Armenians and Azerbaijanis would not have been able to live together after earlier episodes of violence (Baranov and Guliaeva 2023; Andreeva and Guliaeva 2022). Other interviews recalled mutual assistance during the First Karabakh War.

The same pattern appears in a literary form in Levon Javakhyan's 2007 short story *Kirva*. The story recounts the relationship between an Armenian grandfather, Ashot, and his Azerbaijani *kirva*, Hasan. After Hasan has been displaced and is living as a refugee, he nevertheless sends money that he still owes Ashot for a cow. The story is striking precisely because the moral obligation established before displacement survives the political rupture that has transformed the two men into members of hostile communities.

Such stories should not be treated as evidence of universal interethnic solidarity. Their value is different. They reveal the persistence of *relational obligations within conditions of collective antagonism.* They show that

ethnic categories never completely exhaust the identities through which people act.

Nakhichevan as a comparative case

Nakhichevan provides an important comparative perspective and, in some ways, a tragic confirmation of the Karabakh argument. Recent ethnographic research by Dmitry Baranov and Evgenia Guliaeva, based on interviews conducted in 2021–2023, demonstrates that *kirva* historically created interethnic and interfaith social networks among Armenians and Azerbaijanis. Azerbaijani families frequently invited Armenians to become *kirvas*, and the resulting relationships involved, in the same way, mutual hospitality, assistance, food exchange, and participation in family events.

Yet the contemporary transformation of the institution is revealing. With the disappearance of the Armenian population from Nakhichevan, *kirva* has largely become an intra-group Azerbaijani Muslim practice. The institution survives, but its former interconfessional dimension has been lost.

This transformation demonstrates that *kirvaluk* depends not simply on cultural tradition but on *social proximity*. Once the social world that made intercommunal relationships possible disappears, the institution itself can survive only in altered form. The Nakhichevan case therefore helps us understand what happened in Karabakh as well: when mixed communities are replaced by ethnically homogeneous spaces, the relational infrastructure of coexistence becomes difficult to reproduce.

Crossing and reproducing the boundary

The most important theoretical implication of *kirvaluk* is therefore its paradoxical character. On the one hand, it crossed boundaries. It enabled Armenians and Azerbaijanis to create relationships of trust, hospitality, assistance, and protection that could extend across families and generations. It created a social space in which the category “other” could be transformed into “kin-like.”

On the other hand, kirvaluk did not abolish difference. The very existence of the institution presupposed religious and ethnic distinction. The ritual was especially associated with Muslim circumcision, and marriage

between the families connected through kirvaluk could be prohibited. In this sense, the institution could reinforce endogamy even while facilitating intimate interethnic cooperation. Contemporary research in Nakhichevan similarly concludes that kirva could simultaneously create interethnic networks and emphasize group difference (akin to similar grassroots ritualized relationships such as amanat, as well as milk kinship, throughout the broader regions of the North and South Caucasus, the Middle East, and Anatolia).

This is why I prefer the formulation "crossing and reproducing the boundary." Kirvaluk did not create a borderless society. Instead, it offered a culturally legitimate way of moving across a boundary without necessarily eliminating the boundary itself (Mkrtchyan 1995).

This observation also complicates conventional understandings of cross-border cooperation. Cooperation does not always emerge from institutions designed explicitly to overcome borders. It may emerge from practices whose primary purpose is familial, religious, economic, or ritual. In borderlands, these practices can become forms of social infrastructure long before anyone describes them as "cooperation."

Conclusion

Kirvaluk offers a small-scale but theoretically significant example of how people create cooperation under conditions of structural division. It demonstrates that borders are not only political lines. They are also lived through everyday distinctions of ethnicity, religion, marriage, trust, and belonging – and they can be negotiated through equally everyday practices.

The Karabakh case shows particularly clearly that artificial kinship may become consequential when political violence transforms neighbors into enemies. Oral histories of Azerbaijani *kirvas* protecting Armenian pseudo-kin during periods of nationalist mobilization reveal the capacity of relational obligations to survive, and occasionally challenge, collective categories of hostility (Lida P., RP). These are not stories of an idyllic past or evidence that traditional institutions automatically generate peace. Rather, they are evidence of local moral agency under conditions of conflict.

Seen through Mac Ginty's concept of everyday peace, *kirvaluk* was a bottom-up practice through which people managed coexistence and vulnerability. Seen through Das's analysis of violence and the ordinary, it also reveals what happens when such everyday relationships are placed under pressure by nationalist violence. And seen through anthropological theories of relatedness, it demonstrates that kinship can be actively produced through ritual, obligation, care, and shared vulnerability rather than simply inherited through blood.

The broader comparative lesson is that cross-border cooperation should not be studied exclusively through formal institutions, state agreements, or organized civil-society initiatives. Borderlands also possess *vernacular infrastructures of cooperation*: friendships, ritual relationships, exchange networks, hospitality, reciprocal obligations, and memories of assistance. These may be fragile, uneven, and historically contingent, but they can matter profoundly.

Kirvaluk was therefore not simply a bridge across the border. It was a social infrastructure that made proximity possible while preserving difference. Its history suggests that one of the most important resources for understanding cooperation in divided societies may lie not in the institutions created after conflict, but in the relationships that people created before, during, and sometimes despite it.

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11. Making Borders Work: Informality as Spatial Currency in the Colombia–Venezuela Borderlands

Diego Andres Pinzon Quesada

Abstract

How is cross-border cooperation sustained under conditions of uncertainty, fragmented governance, and political volatility? Drawing on ethnographic cartographies, cognitive mapping, interviews, and field observations conducted with IC-BTs in the NS-T borderlands, this chapter argues that cooperation emerges through continuous processes of risk assessment embedded in everyday mobility. It introduces the concept of *spatial currency* to explain how border actors convert territorial knowledge, social networks, mobility practices, negotiated access, and risk tolerance into resources that facilitate circulation and exchange across overlapping regimes of control.

Building on Hirschman's *Exit, Voice and Loyalty* framework, the chapter reconceptualizes these concepts as interconnected and mobile decision-making processes rather than discrete strategic responses. *Exit* occurs through the rerouting of trajectories towards alternative circuits and crossings when risks become excessive; *voice* is enacted through negotiated interactions with state and non-state authorities that reshape the practical conditions of mobility; and *loyalty* emerges through continued attachment to trusted routes, infrastructures, and socio-spatial networks that provide relative predictability under conditions of uncertainty. Together, these mechanisms constitute a dynamic risk-management system through which

border actors sustain cooperation despite surveillance, violence, and institutional fragmentation.

Empirically, the chapter demonstrates that the NS-T border functions not as a fixed territorial line but as a relational and metastable assemblage of bridges, checkpoints, *trochas*, commercial nodes, and mobility circuits continuously reconfigured through movement, negotiation, and adaptation. The study contributes to border studies and cross-border cooperation research by advancing a non-Eurocentric account of cooperation beyond formal institutional frameworks, showing how informality functions as a spatial currency that enables actors to collectively manage uncertainty and reproduce border life in contexts marked by crisis and contested governance.

Introduction

The Colombia–Venezuela border has historically functioned as an integrated socio-economic region where dense commercial exchanges, family ties, and everyday mobilities have fostered a strong sense of regional belonging that frequently transcends national boundaries (Bustamante 2011; Llambi, 2011). Yet, over the last two decades, this borderland has been repeatedly reshaped by political tensions, economic crisis (Cheatham, Roy & Labrador, 2023), migration pressures (GIFMM 2021), fluctuating border policies and violence (Idler, 2019). These transformations produced four successive border regimes in the NS-T region: the Changing Border Regime -2010-2015- (CCC 2014), characterized by routine cross-border interdependence; the Unstable Border Regime -2016-2019- (CCC 2017), marked by political rupture and growing informality; the Closure Border Regime -2020-2023- (BID and OCDE 2021), defined by mobility restrictions, the COVID-19 pandemic and informal cross-border circulation; and the Reopening Border Regime -2023-present-, a hybrid configuration in which formal and informal systems of mobility and exchange coexist (Sánchez Chacón, 2007).

Throughout these shifting regimes, informal cross-border trade has remained a central mechanism sustaining economic circulation and social reproduction across the border. Particularly during periods of political

disruption and the COVID-19 border closure (Trabalón, 2024), informal networks enabled the movement of goods, people, and resources, helping local communities mitigate shortages, sustain livelihoods, and maintain cross-border connections (Forero, 2016). Despite its importance, informality is often interpreted through a narrow binary that contrasts formal legality with illegality, associating informal practices primarily with governance failures, strong dependence on the oil industry (Rapier, 2023) weak state control, or market dysfunction.

This chapter challenges such interpretations by arguing that informality is not merely a residual condition operating outside state regulation but a productive spatial practice that actively shapes border development. Drawing on ethnographic research conducted in 2023 among informal cross-border traders in the NS-T borderlands, the chapter conceptualizes informality as a spatial currency (Marx & Kelling, 2019) through which actors negotiate mobility, livelihoods, authority, and territorial access. Rather than existing outside governance, informality works through networks of negotiation that connect fragmented territories and sustain cross-border cooperation under changing political conditions.

The chapter demonstrates that informality operates simultaneously as a mechanism that weaves together dispersed social, economic, and territorial relations and as an expression of spatial agency (Guarmeros-Meza & Jenss, 2022) through which border actors continuously remake the borderscape. In doing so, it contributes an alternative understanding of cross-border cooperation, showing that in contexts of instability and institutional disruption, cooperation often persists not despite informality, but through it.

Research Question

This chapter aims to examine how informal cross-border trade operates as a form of spatial currency in the Norte de Santander–Táchira borderlands and to understand how informal practices sustain mobility, livelihoods, and territorial integration through a complex decision making structure based on assessing the risk (Riaño Garzon et al, 2020), this time analyzed throughout the EVL framework (Hirschman, 2018). Building on Hirschman's EVL framework, the chapter interprets informality as a risk-based decision-

making process through which border actors evaluate alternative courses of action and spatial displacements under conditions of uncertainty and institutional change as a constant negotiation *(Informal spatial currency)*. In doing so, it demonstrates that informality is not simply an outcome of governance failure but a productive mechanism that enables actors to negotiate access, circulation, and *cooperation* across a politically volatile borderscape.

Therefore, this chapter stems from the question: How does informality function as a spatial currency that enables EVL as a form to asses cross-border cooperation in the Colombia–Venezuela borderlands under changing border regimes?

Informality as Spatial Currency – EVL – and cooperation: A Conceptual Framework

Informality has long occupied a central place in urban studies, yet its meaning remains contested. Early approaches frequently interpreted informal economic activities as residual spaces of development (Santos, 1975), manifestations of state weakness, market failure, or incomplete modernization. More recent scholarship has challenged these assumptions (De Soto, 2003), demonstrating that informality is neither exceptional nor external to formal systems of governance (Roy, 2005; Devlin, 2018). Instead, informality constitutes a mode of urbanization through which states, institutions (Chiodelli, 2021), and citizens continuously negotiate access to land (Uzzell, 1990), resources, mobility, and livelihoods. In border regions, where legal frameworks, sovereignties, and territorial controls frequently overlap and conflict, informality emerges not as an anomaly but as a structural condition of everyday life, a negotiable dimension in constant transformation and bargain, a currency (Mark & Kelling, 2019).

Building on this perspective, and drawing on Hirschman's Exit, Voice and Loyalty framework, this chapter conceptualizes informality as a form of spatial currency through which border actors navigate dissatisfaction, uncertainty, and institutional volatility. Although Hirschman's work has been widely employed to analyze public responses to services (James & John, 2021), political transformations (Isaacs, 2022), and economic

development (Beard, Macher, & Mayo, 2015), the framework is extended here to explain how actors assess risks, opportunities, and potential outcomes across competing border regimes. Rather than viewing border informality as a passive consequence of governance failure, the chapter argues that informal practices constitute a repertoire of resources (Ødegaard, 2016), relationships, and spatial opportunities that enable strategic decision-making under conditions of uncertainty. Therefore, informality as spatial currency is understood as the capacity to convert territorial knowledge, social networks, mobility practices, and negotiated access into material and social value (Jatkar, 2024).

Viewed through this lens, informality mediates alternative responses to border regulation. Where formal arrangements are perceived as restrictive, costly, insecure, or politically risky, informality enables exit by facilitating alternative routes, crossings, transactions, and circulatory practices beyond official channels. Where formal circulation networks fail to provide reliable access, predictability, or protection, informality enables voice, allowing actors to negotiate, adapt, and reshape the practical operation of border regimes through everyday interactions and informal agreements (Casaglia, 2020). Loyalty, meanwhile, is not a fixed attachment to formal institutions but a contingent and continuously recalibrated assessment of risk, security, and opportunity (Borneman, 2012). For border traders (Brown et al 2023), remaining committed to cross-border livelihoods frequently entails reliance on informal crossings and trusted intermediaries that, despite their legal ambiguity, are often perceived as more dependable and predictable than official infrastructures.

Rather than representing isolated responses to dissatisfaction, exit, voice, and loyalty can therefore be understood as interconnected forms of cooperation through which border actors collectively sustain circulation across fragmented regulatory landscapes. In contexts characterized by overlapping sovereignties, competing legal orders, and shifting border policies, cooperation rarely emerges through formal institutions alone. Instead, it is mediated through spatial currency, which allows actors to mobilize social relations, territorial knowledge, negotiated access, and mobility practices to reduce uncertainty and maintain cross-border

connections. Informality thus becomes both the medium and outcome of cooperative action, enabling traders, migrants, transporters, and local communities to exchange information, distribute risks, coordinate movements (Mezzadra & Neilson, 2013), and preserve livelihoods across the borderscape (Rumford, 2012).

From this perspective, exit does not represent withdrawal from cooperation but its reconfiguration. When formal channels become excessively restrictive or unpredictable, border actors activate informal routes and networks grounded in trust, reciprocity, and coordination, generating alternative geographies of circulation (Brambilla, 2015; Sidaway, 2015). Voice similarly operates through cooperation, as actors use informal negotiations and everyday practices to compensate for the limitations of formal governance and sustain territorial connectivity (Guarneros-Meza & Jenss, 2022). Loyalty, in turn, reflects a collective investment in the social and spatial arrangements that have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to maintain circulation under changing political conditions. Commitment to informal networks is therefore less an expression of resistance than a pragmatic confidence in forms of cooperation that consistently deliver access, mobility, and opportunity.

Cooperation emerges as the central mechanism through which border societies navigate uncertainty, sustain circulation, and reproduce livelihoods across fragmented regulatory environments. Rather than being generated exclusively through formal institutions, cooperation is continuously assembled through practical negotiations among traders, migrants (Bedoya, 2020), transporters, local communities, and state actors operating across overlapping regimes of authority. Within this process, informality functions as a form of spatial currency that enables actors to mobilize territorial knowledge, social networks, mobility practices (Ballinger, 2012), and negotiated access as resources for collective action. Exit, voice, and loyalty should therefore be understood not as isolated responses to dissatisfaction (Moyo, 2024), but as cooperative strategies through which actors manage risk and maintain circulation. Cooperation, therefore, does not emerge in opposition to informality. Rather, informality constitutes the medium through which cooperation is organized (Morales & Morales, 2007),

reproduced, and sustained across the borderscape, making it a fundamental component of how border space itself is continuously produced and governed (Newman, 2011).

Study Area and Methodology

This study focuses on the NS-T border region, one of the most dynamic and politically contested borderlands in Latin America (UNHCR, IOM, and UN-Hábitat 2021). Extending along the Cúcuta-Rubio-San Cristóbal corridor and centered on key crossing points such as La Parada-San Antonio and the Simón Bolívar International Bridge, the region has historically been characterized by intense economic interdependence, cross-border mobility, violence (Knight & Tribín, 2020; Zambrano Miranda, Pinzón Solano & Pontón Álvarez, 2019), and recurrent political and economic crises (Universidad Simón Bolívar, 2016). These conditions provide an ideal setting for examining how cooperation is sustained when formal systems of mobility and exchange become unstable or contested.

The chapter draws on empirical material collected during my doctoral research; specifically ethnographic cartographies generated through rapid ethnographic fieldwork conducted in 2023 (Vindrola-Padros, 2021). The analysis focuses on IC-BTs (Pardo, 2017), whose everyday mobility practices offer insight into how border actors mobilize spatial currency to maintain circulation, livelihoods, and cooperation under conditions of uncertainty.

Two complementary methods were employed. First, cognitive mapping exercises documented participants' spatial perceptions, movement trajectories, territorial knowledge, and operational networks. Second, semi-structured interviews generated detailed accounts of livelihoods, mobility strategies, risk assessment, and interactions with formal and informal authorities. Together, these methods enabled the reconstruction of the routes, nodes, and socio-material assemblages that structure everyday border circulation (Aguiar, 2012).



Figure 1. This composite cartography synthesizes 13 cognitive maps produced by Informal Cross-Border Traders, revealing a shared spatial system of routes, checkpoints, bridges, commercial nodes, and informal crossings through which actors collectively organize circulation, negotiate risk, and sustain cross-border cooperation across the NS-T borderscape.

Mobilizing Spatial Currency: Evidence from Ethnographic Cartographies

The analysis draws on 13 cognitive cartographies and accompanying semi-structured interviews collected through Rapid Ethnographic Engagement (Streule, 2020; Vindrola-Padros, 2021). Participants were former IC-BTs, particularly Bachaqueros (local term of IC-BT coined in the Norte de Santander – Táchira region), recruited in Rubio, San Cristóbal, and San Antonio. Through mapping exercises, participants reconstructed routes, crossings, supply networks, checkpoints, and territorial landmarks that structured their everyday mobility practices. These cartographies reveal how border actors convert territorial knowledge, social networks, and negotiated access into forms of spatial currency that sustain circulation and cooperation under conditions of uncertainty (Sierra & Zambrano, 2017).

Rather than treating informality as a deviation from governance, the maps demonstrate how actors continuously evaluate risks and opportunities across formal and informal infrastructures, producing cooperative responses that can be interpreted through Hirschman's Exit, Voice, and Loyalty framework.

EXIT: Alternative Routes and Cooperative Reconfiguration:

The first set of cartographies reveals how informality enables exit when formal infrastructures become restrictive, unpredictable, or excessively risky. Participants consistently identified international bridges, Alcabalas (Militar checkpoints) (Gurevitch, 2019), and state controls as critical sources of uncertainty, particularly along the Rubio-San Antonio-Cúcuta and San Cristóbal-San Antonio-Cúcuta corridors. The cognitive maps show actors responding by mobilizing alternative routes, particularly Trochas and the Ragonvalia route, which functioned as cooperative infrastructures allowing circulation to continue despite border closures and intensive surveillance (Krasteva, 2016).

The Ragonvalia circuit is particularly illustrative, as traders deliberately accepted longer journeys and poorer infrastructure in exchange for lower exposure to checkpoints and extortion practices (Koff, 2016). Exit therefore did not represent withdrawal from the border economy but a collective reconfiguration of circulation through alternative spatial arrangements.

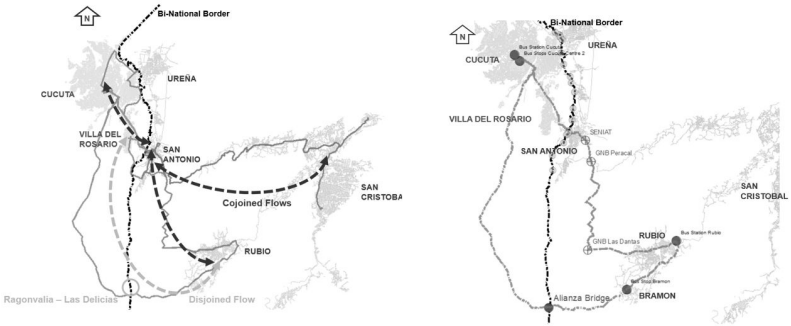


Figure 2. This figure shows how border traders respond to high levels of surveillance, extortion, and uncertainty by abandoning heavily controlled corridors such as the San Antonio-Peracal route and mobilizing alternative pathways, particularly the Ragonvalia–Las Delicias circuit, demonstrating that exit is not a withdrawal from cross-border exchange but a cooperative reconfiguration of circulation based on spatial knowledge, risk assessment, and informal networks that sustain mobility when formal infrastructures become unreliable.

VOICE: Negotiating Border Governance:

The second set of cartographies demonstrates how informality enables voice through everyday negotiations that reshape the practical operation of border regimes. Participants described a border landscape composed of checkpoints, bridges, exchange points, transport nodes, and Trochas, where access depended less on formal regulations than on continuous negotiation with state officials, transport providers, local communities, and paralegal actors (Lenart-Cheng, H. (2017).

Instead of directly challenging border governance, traders adapted to it through informal agreements, negotiated payments, route switching, and the strategic use of local knowledge (Sager, 2021). The Trocha (informal passes) system itself emerged as a negotiated infrastructure tolerated by multiple actors because it sustained circulation and alleviated scarcity during the closure regime. Informality therefore functioned as a mechanism through which border actors collectively reshaped the operation of mobility systems when formal circulation networks failed to provide reliable access.

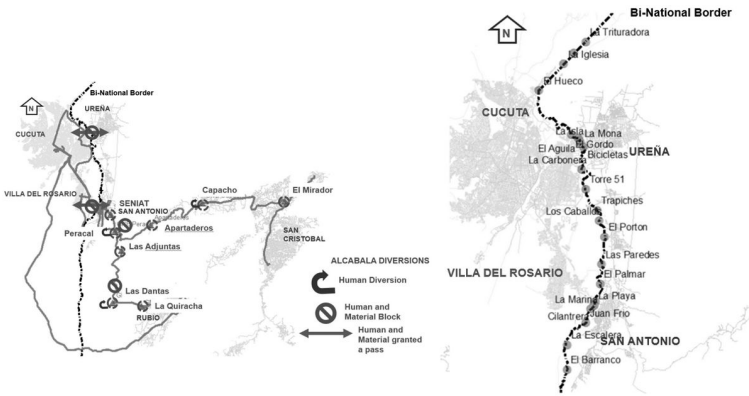


Figure 3. Alcabalas and Trochas demonstrate how voice is exercised through continual negotiation and adaptation, as border traders mobilize informal agreements, local knowledge, and tolerated practices to reshape the operation of formal and informal control systems, sustaining circulation where official mobility networks fail to provide secure and predictable access.

LOYALTY: Trusting Informal Infrastructures

The final group of cartographies highlights loyalty as a continuously recalibrated assessment of risk, security, and opportunity. Participants repeatedly demonstrated enduring commitment to specific routes, Trochas, intermediaries, and exchange networks, even when these operated outside formal institutional frameworks. Loyalty was therefore directed not towards state infrastructures but towards arrangements that had proven capable of sustaining mobility and livelihoods over time (Schelling, 1978).

Across multiple cognitive maps, traders consistently relied on familiar Trochas such as La Platanera and other long-established crossing points. These routes were often perceived as more reliable and predictable than official channels because users understood their rules, actors, and risks. This suggests that loyalty emerged through accumulated experience and trust, transforming informal crossings into durable cooperative infrastructures despite their legal ambiguity (Perrier Bruslé, 2013).

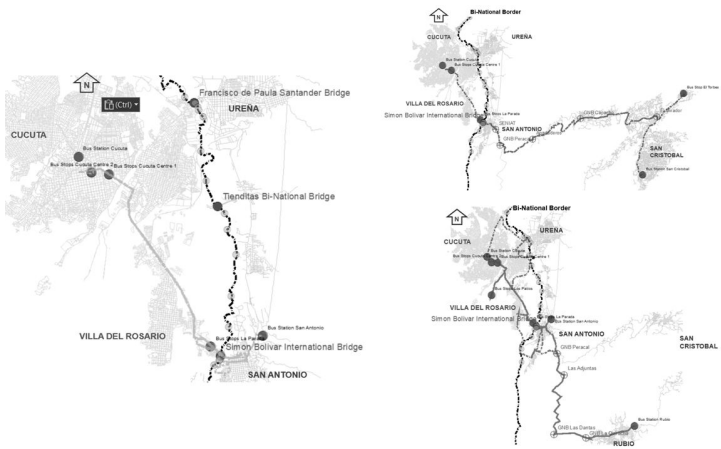


Figure 4. The loyalty maps show how border traders maintain circulation through continued trust in specific Trochas, routes, intermediaries, and cross-border networks that, despite their informal status, are repeatedly perceived as more reliable and predictable than formal infrastructures, demonstrating that loyalty is a pragmatic and cooperative investment in socio-spatial arrangements that have consistently reduced uncertainty and sustained livelihoods under changing border regimes.

Cooperation Through Spatial Currency:

Taken together, the cartographies reveal that border circulation is sustained through cooperation rather than individual action. Exit, voice, and loyalty operate as interconnected strategies through which actors collectively manage uncertainty and maintain livelihoods. Informality functions as a form of spatial currency because (Keshavarz, 2024) it allows border actors to convert local knowledge, social relations, mobility experience, and negotiated access into resources that facilitate circulation across fragmented governance regimes (Dilla Alfonso, 2015). The empirical material therefore demonstrates that cooperation emerges not despite informality but through it, enabling border communities to sustain exchange, mobility, and social reproduction within the politically volatile Norte de Santander–Táchira borderscape.

Discussion Part 1:
Exit, Voice and Loyalty as Forms of Border Cooperation

The ethnographic cartographies and interviews collected in 2023 reveal that IC-BTs do not respond to border uncertainty as isolated individuals but through collective practices that sustain circulation across the NS-T region. The cognitive maps reconstructed a shared spatial system connecting Cúcuta, San Antonio, Rubio, San Cristóbal, Alcabalas, international bridges, transport terminals, commercial zones, and trochas, demonstrating that circulation is organized through a relational network rather than through a simple opposition between formal and informal infrastructures.

Viewed through Hirschman's (1970) Exit, Voice and Loyalty framework, these practices can be understood as complementary forms of cooperation. Exit emerges when traders respond to restrictive, costly, or unpredictable border controls by activating alternative routes and mobility circuits. Rather than abandoning exchange, participants reconfigure circulation through trochas, secondary crossings, and diverted pathways such as the Ragonvalia route. Exit therefore represents a cooperative adaptation through which actors collectively maintain mobility despite institutional barriers.

Voice appears through continuous negotiation within existing border structures. The cartographies revealed that bridges, checkpoints, customs controls, and informal crossings function not as fixed barriers but as spaces where mobility is constantly renegotiated. Through informal agreements, negotiated passage, route adjustments, and everyday interactions (Tonkiss, 2024) with both state and non-state actors, traders actively reshape how the border operates in practice. Voice therefore emerges less as overt political contestation than as a cooperative process of adaptation that enables circulation where formal infrastructures fail to provide predictable access.

Loyalty, meanwhile, reflects continued investment in networks, routes, and territorial relations that have repeatedly demonstrated their capacity to sustain livelihoods. Participants consistently relied on familiar crossings, trusted intermediaries, established commercial nodes, and long-standing social relationships despite changing political and economic conditions. Loyalty was therefore directed not primarily towards formal institutions but towards socio-spatial arrangements that provided reliability within an otherwise volatile borderscape.

Taken together, Exit, Voice, and Loyalty reveal cooperation as the principal mechanism through which border societies sustain circulation under conditions of uncertainty. Rather than representing separate responses, these three practices operate simultaneously, enabling actors to adapt, negotiate, and remain connected within a fragmented governance environment. The border thus emerges not as a space defined by separation but as a constantly reproduced field of cooperation organized through mobility, negotiation, and territorial attachment.

Discussion Part 2:
Informality as Spatial Currency and Cooperative Infrastructure

The findings suggest that informality should not be understood as a residual outcome of governance failure (Tucker, 2020) but as a productive resource that enables cooperation across the borderscape. Building on recent debates in urban informality and border studies, this chapter conceptualizes informality as a form of spatial currency: the capacity to convert territorial

knowledge, social relations, mobility practices, and negotiated access into value.

The cartographies demonstrate that this currency is continuously mobilized by border actors. Knowledge of alternative routes, familiarity with checkpoint dynamics, relationships with transport operators, awareness of trocha networks, and access to trusted intermediaries all function as resources that facilitate circulation. These assets acquire value because they reduce uncertainty and expand opportunities for movement, exchange, and livelihood reproduction. Informality therefore operates not outside governance but within it, producing practical forms of coordination across overlapping regimes of authority.

From this perspective, spatial currency functions as the mechanism that links Exit, Voice, and Loyalty. It enables exit by providing access to alternative circulatory systems when formal routes become excessively risky; it enables voice by supplying the knowledge and relationships required to negotiate access within existing structures; and it sustains loyalty by reinforcing trust in networks and infrastructures that have repeatedly proven effective in maintaining circulation. Informality is therefore not merely a strategy of survival but a medium through which cooperation is organized and reproduced.

The broader implication is that cooperation in border regions often depends less on formal institutions than on the capacity of actors to mobilize and exchange spatial currency (Van Houtum, 2012). Through everyday practices, border traders transform local knowledge, social ties, and mobility skills into collective resources that sustain circulation despite border closures, political volatility, violence, and economic crisis. Informality thus emerges as a cooperative infrastructure that enables the continuous production of border space, contributing to the resilience and adaptability of the NS-T borderscape.

Conclusion and Contribution

This chapter has argued that cooperation in the Colombia–Venezuela borderlands is sustained through continuous processes of risk assessment embedded in everyday mobility. Informality functions as a form of spatial

currency that enables border actors to convert territorial knowledge (Agier, 2016), social networks, negotiated access, and mobility practices into resources for circulation and survival. Through the intertwined processes of Exit, Voice, and Loyalty, traders continuously evaluate risks, adapt routes, negotiate access, and maintain attachments to trusted socio-spatial networks (Dilla Alfonso, 2015).. Rather than representing isolated responses, these mechanisms operate together as cooperative strategies that allow circulation to persist under conditions of border closure, violence, and fragmented governance. The study therefore contributes a non-Eurocentric understanding of border cooperation, demonstrating that cooperation often emerges not from institutional integration alone but from the everyday capacity of border populations to mobilize spatial currency and collectively manage uncertainty

The chapter contributes theoretically by linking debates on informality, borderwork, spatial agency, and cross-border cooperation through the concept of spatial currency. Rather than understanding cooperation as an outcome of formal institutional arrangements, the findings suggest that cooperation can be enacted through everyday practices of circulation, negotiation, and adaptation (Moyo, 2022). Exit, Voice, and Loyalty are therefore reinterpreted not as individual responses to dissatisfaction but as interconnected cooperative strategies through which actors manage uncertainty and reproduce cross-border relations (Moze & Spiegel, 2021). This perspective extends existing understandings of cooperation beyond state-centered frameworks and demonstrates how informality can function as an enabling mechanism that reconnects fragmented territories despite unequal power relations, violence (Ávila, Leon, &. Niño Ascanio, 2013), and regulatory instability.

Methodologically, the chapter demonstrates the value of combining cognitive cartographies, interviews, field observations, and ethnographic interpretation to capture the lived geographies of border actors (Simone, 2004). The resulting cartographies reveal a border composed not of fixed territorial divisions but of overlapping circuits, routes, checkpoints, trochas, and social networks that are continuously reorganized through practice. Ultimately, the case of the Norte de Santander–Táchira border suggests that

informality should be understood not as the absence of order but as a productive territorial mechanism through which cooperation, circulation, and border life are sustained under conditions of uncertainty.

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12. Women at the Border: Songs, Care Work, and Informal Cross-Border Cooperation in the India–Nepal Borderlands

Amitabh Vikram Dwivedi

Abstract

The India–Nepal border is usually described through treaties, strategic rivalry, migration statistics, and security concerns. Such accounts miss the daily labor that turns legal openness into a usable social world. This chapter develops the concept of gendered border infrastructure to explain how women's songs, care work, kinship practices, market activity, and communicative labor sustain cross-border cooperation. Reading Bhojpuri, Maithili, and Nepali expressive traditions alongside scholarship on migration, bordering, and informal exchange, it shows that songs preserve practical knowledge about departure, natal homes, marriage, danger, and return. Care work converts mobility into durable relationships by hosting travelers, tending children and elders, transmitting news, and maintaining obligations across distance. These practices do not constitute an untouched realm of harmony. Caste hierarchy, household authority, anti-trafficking surveillance, stigma, and precarious migration distribute mobility's benefits and burdens unevenly. The chapter therefore recasts the open border as a jointly produced institution whose operation depends on labor that policy rarely recognizes. A people-centered border policy should protect mobility without criminalizing women, support care and market networks, and treat expressive knowledge as evidence about how cooperation actually works.

The Border's Quiet Infrastructure

The India–Nepal border is open in law but made livable in practice. Article 7 of the 1950 Treaty promises citizens the "same privileges in the matter of residence" (Treaty of Peace and Friendship 1950, 7), yet a legal entitlement cannot feed a traveler, maintain a marriage, locate safe lodging, or interpret a checkpoint. Those tasks are performed through repeated social labor, much of it assigned to women and naturalized as kinship, duty, hospitality, or custom. This chapter calls that labor gendered border infrastructure. The term identifies the human arrangements that connect treaty rights to actual movement: songs that retain shared meanings, caregivers who absorb absence, market women who circulate goods and information, and relatives who translate mobility into belonging. Recognizing this infrastructure changes the analytical question from whether the border is open to who continually produces openness, under what constraints, and at whose cost.

Infrastructure is useful here only if it remains attentive to people rather than reducing them to channels. Migration scholarship calls for a new optic, "a new way of seeing and thinking about migration" (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, S124), because movement is assembled by social, commercial, regulatory, humanitarian, and technological actors. In the India–Nepal borderlands, women frequently occupy several of those positions at once without being named as brokers. A woman may host a migrant, care for his children, relay news to affines, remember a ritual calendar, and sell small goods during one cycle of departure and return. Each act appears domestic or incidental when viewed alone. Together they stabilize circulation across households and jurisdictions. Gendered border infrastructure therefore describes a relation among mobility, social reproduction, and communication, not a celebration of feminine sacrifice or an assumption that informal networks are naturally equitable.

Such a perspective also relocates political significance. South Asian borderlands are "places at once removed from and central to" debates about identity, security, risk, and survival (Cons and Sanyal 2013, 5). Their apparent marginality enables national institutions to treat women's work as local detail even when bilateral life depends on it. A marriage across the frontier affects residence, inheritance, caregiving, and citizenship; a

seasonal song carries memories of routes and absences; a market relationship converts familiarity into credit. These practices are political because they allocate access and reduce uncertainty before officials become involved. They are also historical, since colonial lines and postcolonial treaties intersect with older linguistic, caste, commercial, and familial geographies. Reading them together prevents two errors: romanticizing an unbounded cultural region and mistaking the territorial line for the only place where bordering occurs.

The chapter consequently treats the border as both institution and struggle. Critical border theory locates in border space “a space of political creativity” (Brambilla and Jones 2020, 289), but creativity emerges inside unequal fields of violence, recognition, and mobility. The verb form carries the argument: borders are less objects than acts, and are best understood as bordering, “an ongoing strategic effort to make a difference in space among the movements of people, money or products” (van Houtum and van Naerssen 2002, 126). If bordering is an effort, it can be performed by relatives, employers, and neighbors as readily as by officials, and it can be performed a long way from the line. The analysis is an interpretive synthesis of published ethnographies, song collections, policy texts, and comparative border studies rather than a report of original fieldwork. Its throughline is that women’s expressive and reproductive labor makes cross-border cooperation durable while simultaneously exposing women to discipline by households, states, and intermediaries. Songs reveal the emotional grammar of this arrangement; care work supplies its temporal continuity; and informal networks provide its operational form. The final sections show why governance that values circulation but ignores these labors can deepen precarity, and why a people-centered approach must protect the very relationships on which formal openness silently relies.

Sources and Method

The evidence assembled here falls into three layers. The first is expressive: George Grierson’s 1884 collection of Bihari folk-songs, the Maithili lyrics of Vidyapati, and modern ethnographies of Bhojpuri and Nepali performance. The second is ethnographic and demographic, comprising

studies of migration, care, trade, and anti-trafficking on the India–Nepal frontier and its neighbors. The third is conceptual and comparative, drawing on border theory and on cases from the India–Bangladesh boundary, Mizoram, Accra, and the Lake Chad Basin. Songs are read as social documents in Jassal's sense rather than as illustration, which means asking what a lyric teaches its listeners about obligation, timing, and risk rather than whether it reports an event. Comparative material is used to specify mechanisms; it is not offered as evidence of equivalence between borderlands whose histories differ sharply.

The song corpus carries a problem of mediation that the argument must state rather than absorb. Grierson recorded that "the great preservers of these songs are the women of all classes, and it is therefore impossible for a European to obtain them direct from their storekeepers" (Grierson 1884, 196). The sentence concedes this chapter's central claim and the archive's limit at once. Women held the repertoire, and it reached print only through a male deputy magistrate who wrote it down and a colonial philologist who transliterated, annotated, and framed it. Grierson insists that he printed the songs "exactly as they have been taken from the mouths of the reciters" while dismissing Indian scholars as "only too ready to invent readings which have never existed" (196), a pairing that shows how colonial knowledge authorized itself at the moment it preserved women's speech. Border studies has been slow to reckon with that inheritance, although empire "is especially legible at frontiers and borders" (Sidaway 2019, 270). Nineteenth-century material is therefore used for the durable grammar of separation it preserves, while claims about present practice rest on contemporary ethnography.

Three limits follow. The chapter reports no original fieldwork and cannot establish how common any described practice is, only that it is documented and consequential. Its coverage is uneven, since scholarship on the Nepali side is richer for migration than for performance and richer for the eastern corridor than for the far west. And the translation of Vidyapati used here is not reliably paginated, so quotations from it are cited without page numbers. What the synthesis can support is an account of how

cooperation is produced and who bears its costs, not a claim about how widely it is distributed.

Formal Openness and Lived Operation

The India–Nepal frontier differs from the region's heavily fortified boundaries, since "the movement of people, goods and capital are least regulated" (Ghimire 2024, 399). That relative openness is neither timeless nor uniform. Colonial boundary-making, strategic calculations, ecological conditions, and the 1950 Treaty produced a distinctive regime whose permeability changes with location and crisis. Nor is that openness irreversible. India has interrupted overland trade with Nepal during each of its neighbor's political crises: in 1962, again between 1988 and 1990, when 13 of 15 crossing points closed, and once more during the unofficial blockade of 2015–16, which came close to sextupling the price of cooking gas (Vindegg 2024, 585). The unresolved Kalapani dispute has since supplied territorial nationalism with a renewed anchor in domestic politics on both sides (Aryal and Pulami 2024, 691–692). Openness is therefore a revocable settlement rather than a standing condition, and the households that organize their lives around it absorb the shock when it is suspended. Formal openness establishes a field of possibility, but it does not distribute the capacity to move equally. Money, gender, caste, marital status, documentation, and reliable contacts decide whether a person experiences the frontier as a neighborhood path or a zone of danger. This distinction is central to the chapter's argument. Scale compounds the difficulty of assessment: perhaps two million of Nepal's roughly 30 million citizens are working in India at any moment, and the figure remains an estimate precisely because the crossing generates no record (Vindegg 2024, 585). Women's networks do not merely benefit from an already open border; they actively convert legal possibility into practical access while compensating for gaps in transport, welfare, information, and official protection. Unequal resources turn the same aperture into sharply different regimes of opportunity.

Treaty openness also generates political ambiguity. In the Darjeeling hills, mobility provisions become entangled with "anxieties of citizenship"

(Sharma 2023, 81), as Indian Gorkhas can be misrecognized as recent foreigners rather than citizens with distinct histories. The same clause that supports residence and commerce can therefore unsettle belonging when language and appearance are treated as evidence of alien origin. Women encounter this ambiguity through marriage registration, children's documents, linguistic performance, and household reputation, not only through diplomatic debate. A song shared across the border may affirm cultural continuity while a bureaucracy demands categorical nationality. Gendered infrastructure operates within this contradiction by using kin recognition and local knowledge to bridge institutional uncertainty. The contrast with Nepal's northern boundary sharpens the point. There a bilateral treaty has produced a demarcated border zone in which residents living within 30 kilometers hold border citizen cards that authorize crossing without passport or visa (Shneiderman 2013, 25). The India–Nepal frontier grants far wider rights while issuing no comparable document, so recognition at the crossing rests on face, speech, and vouching rather than on paper. Kin networks supply what the state declines to print. Yet the success of such improvisation can conceal the need for clearer protections, leaving women responsible for repairing exclusions that the bilateral framework itself does not resolve.

Article 7 grants mobility through "reciprocal" privileges (Treaty of Peace and Friendship 1950, 7), but reciprocity between states differs from reciprocity among households. State reciprocity is abstract and symmetrical; household reciprocity accumulates through meals, visits, gifts, childcare, ritual attendance, and remembered favors. It is precisely this second register that allows formal rights to survive moments of weak administration. A traveler welcomed by affines needs no hotel, a trader trusted by a household may receive goods on credit, and a migrant's child can be cared for during absence. Women commonly keep the accounts of these obligations even when men appear as the recognized mobile subjects. The distance between the two registers is administrative as well as conceptual. Nepali citizens are under no legal obligation to identify themselves at the crossing, yet officials routinely demand documents (Vindegg 2024, 596), with the result that labor migration and "the marriage migration that follows from it is thus cast as

legal but illicit" (Hausner and Sharma 2013, 113). A right that is formally unconditional can still be administered as a suspicion. Women carry more of that suspicion than men, since marriage is the mobility form most exposed to official questions about consent, age, and destination. The treaty thus supplies a juridical aperture, while gendered social reproduction supplies continuity. Conflating the two obscures how much unpaid time is required to maintain openness and how quickly movement becomes inaccessible when those relations are strained.

Porosity becomes durable through history rather than through the absence of rules. On the eastern Nepal–India corridor, earlier crossings create "trusted connections with people across borders" (Banki 2025, 299), enabling information, resources, and collective action to travel along established paths. Such path dependence explains why family and community networks remain consequential after regulatory conditions change. It also clarifies women's infrastructural role: maintaining a relation during quiet periods preserves a route for moments of illness, displacement, protest, or employment. Phone calls, marriage visits, ritual invitations, and hospitality renew connections that later appear as spontaneous cooperation. The border's usability is therefore stored in relationships. Because this social archive is distributed across people rather than housed in an agency, officials may see only an informal crossing, not the years of trust that made it safe and intelligible. That labor keeps routes socially legible.

Openness is also geographically selective. In Chitwan, Tharu communities on both sides were "linked by ties of kinship" (Guneratne 2022, 12), yet forest and malaria historically constrained north-south exchange despite political permeability. This case interrupts easy claims that culture naturally dissolves borders. Kinship must be enacted through viable routes, bodily safety, labor availability, and seasonal conditions. The same principle holds for women's cooperation more broadly: relations offer resources, but ecology, transport, policing, and household permission shape whether those resources can be activated. Gendered infrastructure is material as well as affective. It includes food, beds, phones, paths, remittances, and time. Treating kinship as sentiment alone would miss both its practical force and its limits, while treating the border as a line would

miss the social and environmental terrain through which every crossing occurs. Seasonality can therefore function as a social gate.

Songs as Social Documents and Acoustic Coordination

Songs enter this infrastructure as mobile social documents. A nineteenth-century Bihari lyric makes separation geographically legible when "my beloved is dwelling in a foreign land" (Grierson 1884, 208). The line is brief, but its recurring situation joins work, distance, desire, and uncertain return. It belongs to the *barahmasa*, the "song of the twelve months," whose form Grierson described with unusual precision: "Some woman laments the absence of her beloved or of her son. Each verse is devoted in order to a month of the Hindu year; in it she describes the peculiar woe which she experiences at that season" (Grierson 1884, 200). The genre is a calendar organized around a missing person. In borderland performance, such language does not provide a cartographic itinerary; it teaches listeners how mobility feels and which relationships it disturbs. Repetition allows an individual absence to become collectively recognizable, giving a community an idiom for waiting and complaint. Women's voices thereby archive consequences that migration statistics flatten. The archive is embodied and revisable: a remembered refrain can accompany agricultural labor, a marriage ritual, or an evening gathering, acquiring new relevance as destinations and transport change. Its social authority lies not in fixity but in shared recognition. Listeners inherit a vocabulary for evaluating uncertainty.

This documentary quality is analytical rather than merely illustrative. Women's songs are "pedagogical, critical, and interrogative" (Jassal 2012, 2), because performance makes kinship rules, labor burdens, and moral expectations available for reflection. A singer may voice the dutiful wife while exposing the unfairness of duty, or invoke the natal home while questioning marital confinement. The ambiguity matters. Direct political speech may be sanctioned by elders, husbands, caste superiors, or employers, whereas a familiar genre can shelter critique within convention. Song is thus an acoustic technology of negotiation: it distributes observations without requiring a single woman to claim sole authorship.

Collective performance can transform a private grievance into common knowledge while preserving strategic deniability. This capacity makes expressive labor part of informal cooperation, since communities cannot coordinate care or obligation without shared interpretations of absence, respect, danger, and reciprocity.

Vidyapati's love lyric compresses arrival into domestic restoration: "today my house is again home" (Vidyapati 1963, n.p.). Home here is not a building that waits unchanged; it becomes home through the beloved's presence. That distinction illuminates the borderland household, whose continuity depends on returning bodies and on those who sustain it during absence. Women's songs often stage the natal home, marital home, and distant workplace as an emotional geography organized by gendered movement. A bride crosses into another household, a labor migrant leaves, and a visiting relative temporarily repairs separation. The lyric's intimacy therefore bears institutional weight. It makes belonging contingent on relations, a lesson obscured when residence is treated as an administrative status. By singing home into being, women interpret mobility's social costs and keep return morally significant rather than allowing migration to appear as a one-way economic transaction.

The social document remains useful because it changes with circumstances. Folksongs are "malleable social texts" (Sinha 2018, 203), capable of retaining recognizable forms while absorbing new experiences of marriage, wage migration, and communication. Malleability should not be mistaken for unreliability. It is the mechanism through which a community updates its knowledge. A reference to a distant city, a phone call, a remittance, or a delayed husband can enter a conventional language of separation, enabling new mobility to be judged through inherited ethical terms. The older collections already show the mechanism at work. In one song the departure is commercial, since "my beloved left me and became a merchant" (Grierson 1884, 207); in another the husband has "gone away, and entered into service" (Grierson 1884, 237). Trade and wage employment had entered the lyric of longing well before the labor regimes that organize the borderlands today. This process also creates a cross-border vernacular. Bhojpuri and Maithili performance communities exceed the

territorial line, so variants can remain mutually intelligible while registering local differences. Songs coordinate interpretation by teaching what counts as neglect, fidelity, endurance, or welcome. Their changing words are therefore evidence of social reasoning, not decorative residue around the supposedly real domains of economy and policy.

Migration songs organize time as much as space. Seasonal movement becomes an "anticipated series of departures and returns" (Stirr 2017, 669), allowing communities to prepare emotionally and practically for absence. Anticipation distributes labor before departure: crops, children, animals, debts, and rituals must be reassigned, while promises of communication and return are negotiated. Songs give this cycle a public rhythm. They can normalize migration as recurrent and still preserve criticism of the loneliness or inequality it produces. In this sense, performance works like a calendar with moral commentary. It reminds listeners that departure creates obligations and that return should restore relations, not merely display earnings. One *barahmasa* states the accounting directly: "Baisakh is the season for performing four happy things, bringing home brides, marrying young people, building houses, and singing songs, but, without my beloved, they all seem to be untimely" (Grierson 1884, 207). The verse measures absence against the community's own calendar of reproduction. Marriage, housebuilding, and song are the works by which a household extends itself, and migration renders them untimely rather than impossible. The complaint is infrastructural in the strict sense: it names what can no longer be scheduled once labor has left. The song's temporal form connects intimate waiting to a wider labor regime, making audible the care infrastructure that allows migrants to leave repeatedly without household collapse. Ritual timing binds this calendar to reciprocal visits.

The genre *kajarī* "monsoon song" shows how labor and expression share a setting. Women's apparently obscene speech can "temporarily invert social hierarchies" (Chauhan 2025, 395), especially in collective performances where irony, double meaning, and laughter relax ordinary constraints. Such inversion is neither complete emancipation nor empty release. It permits women agricultural laborers to evaluate husbands, sexuality, work, and respectability in a socially legible register. The body

that labors in field and household also produces rhythm, humor, and critique. Performance therefore links material cooperation with an expressive commons: singers pace work, sustain one another, and test judgments about gendered conduct. Because the inversion is temporary, it reveals the hierarchy to which women return. Its political value lies in making that hierarchy speakable and in creating solidarities that can later support practical acts of assistance. Humor rehearses judgments that ordinary etiquette suppresses.

Voice itself must be understood beyond propositional speech. Democratic expression includes "the active performance of silence" (Kunreuther 2018, 2), along with cries, noise, gesture, and collective resonance. The Nepali term *āwāj* "voice" joins sound with political presence, showing why a quiet or veiled performance can still raise a claim. Borderland songs similarly operate through tone, repetition, occasion, and audience. A lowered voice before elders, laughter among peers, or a chorus during labor communicates social position as clearly as lyrics do. This acoustic perspective guards against treating women's speech as either absent or fully liberated. It asks how expression travels, who can hear it, and which forms avoid punishment. Informal cooperation depends on these calibrated signals because trust is often maintained through what can be implied, shared, or withheld rather than through explicit contracts. Acoustic restraint can itself be tactical.

Songs also carry a scale of community larger than the isolated household. Across Nepal and India, shared sacredness and kinship can provide "a grammar of sameness" (Joshi 2024, 262), but sameness is performed rather than guaranteed. Melodies, deities, marriage idioms, and seasonal repertoires help listeners recognize one another across political territory. This recognition lowers the interpretive costs of exchange: a visitor knows the ritual, a bride understands an allusion, and a trader hears familiar speech. Yet caste and gender position speakers differently within that grammar. Some voices define respectability, while others appear vulgar, rustic, or suspect. Joshi's ethnography of a footbridge crossing shows how quickly the grammar is qualified in use. Friendship between the two states is enacted through kin visiting and shared pilgrimage, while caste

propriety and gendered respectability decide whose crossing reads as devotion and whose as transgression (Joshi 2024, 271–277). Songs therefore make cooperation possible while also exposing its hierarchy. Their value for border studies lies precisely in this double action. They reveal a cultural field wide enough to support trust and fractured enough to show who must work hardest to belong.

Care, Kinship, and the Reproduction of Mobility

Care work turns episodic crossings into sustained circulation. On the India–Bangladesh border, women who hosted traders, cooked, persuaded contacts, and managed phone calls were "central to kinship, relationality, and trade for the future" (Sur 2020, 555). The comparison clarifies a process often hidden in India–Nepal accounts: exchange is stabilized inside homes before it appears in markets. Meals extend negotiations, childcare releases another person's time, and patient communication manages delay. None of these tasks is ancillary to trade. They produce the trust, bodily maintenance, and temporal flexibility on which movement depends. Calling this labor infrastructure does not turn affection into a commodity. It shows that markets and migration continually draw on socially valued acts whose costs are absorbed by women. The future of cooperation is built through repeated care in the present. Hospitality operates as economic maintenance without formal wages.

Male migration makes this dependence visible by reorganizing household authority. In western Nepal, women often carried greater workloads without gaining control, since "their bargaining power within the family does not usually increase" when husbands migrate (Thieme and Müller-Böker 2010, 112). Senior men or absent spouses could retain decisions over money, land, and movement, leaving women responsible but not autonomous. The finding complicates empowerment narratives that equate a man's absence with a woman's freedom. Care responsibilities expand because someone must cultivate, parent, tend elders, and represent the household, yet social recognition may not follow. Cross-border circulation is therefore subsidized by a gendered asymmetry between responsibility and authority. A useful account of cooperation must ask not

only how networks keep migrants moving but also how households distribute the labor and decision-making that movement creates. Responsibility without authority is a recurrent subsidy to migration.

The category of the woman “left behind” is itself too static. Migration research shows that “social relations embedded in social structures” shape participation among women in migrant households (Shrestha, Pakhtigian, and Jeuland 2023, sec. 2). Caste, age, wealth, household composition, and community institutions alter whether additional duties open public roles or reinforce exclusion. A daughter-in-law living with senior relatives may experience absence differently from a woman heading a nuclear household; membership in a user group may not translate into influence. Women who stay are still participants in migration because their labor, decisions, and constrained opportunities make departure sustainable. The border passes through their daily schedules even when they never approach it. Reframing non-migration as infrastructural participation joins household reproduction to cross-border mobility without presuming that all women share one experience. Participation must be measured as voice, not attendance alone.

Women’s own migration further destabilizes the division between mobile worker and stationary caregiver. Nepali migrant women seek wages, autonomy, and escape, yet their choices may amount to “constrained agency within options of violence” (Grossman-Thompson 2023, 234). Domestic abuse, debt, recruitment, state restrictions, and precarious employment shape which routes appear possible. Research on Nepali women workers in overseas domestic sectors likewise shows that migration can combine economic provision with new exploitation and stigma (Gurung 2009, 375–396). Care moves across scales: a woman may leave her children in another woman’s care to perform paid care abroad, then remit earnings that sustain the household. The India–Nepal border often becomes an intermediate infrastructure in this longer chain, especially when restrictions divert travelers through Indian airports. Mobility and care are therefore not opposites but unevenly linked forms of reproductive labor.

Comparative research on women traders makes the connective mechanism explicit. Informal networks persist through “reciprocity and trust, strong ties or bonds of empathy” (Wrigley-Asante 2018, 205),

providing credit, advice, lodging, companionship, and help with children. These ties are assets, but they are not frictionless. Reciprocity can burden poorer members who lack resources to return favors, and vertical relations can reproduce dependence on better-connected actors. Applied to the India–Nepal borderlands, the comparison explains why women's cooperation cannot be measured only by formal association membership. Its strength lies in repeated exchanges that join economic and psychosocial support. Its vulnerability lies in unequal capacity to reciprocate. Policy that simply celebrates resilience risks converting women's networks into an excuse for absent services, whereas policy that ignores them destroys working systems of trust. Empathy becomes materially useful when organized as dependable response.

Care also maintains the possibility of return. Migrants' dense ties reduce risk, yet "networks enable them to migrate, but also constrain them" (Thieme and Müller-Böker 2010, 118). Obligations provide destinations, emergency support, and reputational guarantees, while simultaneously limiting work choices, residence, marriage, and spending. Women commonly mediate this ambivalence by keeping communication open among migrants, spouses, children, and elders. Their labor prevents a delayed remittance or missed visit from becoming a permanent rupture, but it can also enforce conformity through gossip and moral judgment. Informal cooperation is thus regulatory as well as supportive. It secures mobility by making people answerable to relations. The same network that rescues a traveler may discipline a woman whose movement exceeds accepted roles, revealing why infrastructure must be analyzed through power rather than praised as community solidarity alone. Belonging is secured through this double-edged accountability.

Circular migration intensifies these pressures because departure becomes a long-term household condition. Women migrants described a "cycle of migration and remittances" organized around family survival and children's education (Wu et al. 2024, 257). Each cycle requires new arrangements for care, debt, documents, transit, and reintegration. The economics are self-reinforcing as well as burdensome. Remittances supply Nepal with essential foreign exchange but are spent largely on consumption,

including the imported fuel whose price they help sustain, so that the earnings of one departure raise the household costs that make the next departure necessary (Vindegg 2024, 597). Women manage the resulting budgets and absorb the gap between what is remitted and what things cost. The open India–Nepal border may lower one barrier while restrictions elsewhere increase dependence on agents and irregular routes. Women consequently provide care at both ends of migration: by financing families from afar and by rebuilding relationships on return. Celebration of remittances cannot capture the emotional and bodily costs of repeated separation. A gendered infrastructure approach follows the whole cycle, showing how household continuity, informal brokerage, and state policy combine to produce mobility that is economically necessary yet socially precarious. Its durability depends on caregivers who repeatedly reorganize ordinary life around exceptional risk.

Informal Cooperation as Infrastructure

Informal cooperation is most visible when formal systems fail or arrive late. Porous borders enable “bi-directional flows of information” (Banki 2025, 299), allowing news, warnings, documents, and claims to circulate through trusted contacts. Information is one of three mechanisms Banki identifies, alongside the path dependence established by earlier crossings and the differential resources available on either side, all of which “rely on the physical, social, and symbolic aspects of borderlands” (Banki 2025, 297). Women’s routine communication belongs within this political economy of information. A call about a delayed traveler, a message carried to affines, or a song that names the costs of absence can change decisions about routes and support. Information is not valuable merely because it crosses; its credibility depends on relationships. Repeated care and reciprocal exchange create the social verification that turns rumor into actionable knowledge. These circuits can support households, markets, activism, and crisis response without a centralized command. Their informality is therefore organizational, not chaotic. They operate through norms, memory, and reputational accountability. Women’s relational credibility frequently supplies the missing verification.

Small-scale trade reveals the same combination of creativity and vulnerability. Informal cross-border commerce can allow traders, "often women, to feed their families" (Brown et al. 2024, 123), especially where historical markets and communities straddle territorial lines. The north Indian idea *jugaad* "making do" captures improvisation under constraint, but it can romanticize systems that expose low-income traders to confiscation, bribery, and harassment. Women's ability to carry goods, negotiate small credit, and activate kin contacts constitutes livelihood infrastructure, yet it is shaped by intermediaries and security personnel. Comparative work on Mizoram likewise shows that local security may be grounded in communal well-being and kinship rather than fortification (Ralte and Thomas 2026, 557). Cooperation survives because residents possess practical norms for negotiating authority, not because the state is absent. Transparent public support can preserve flexibility without abandoning traders to coercion.

The cumulative effect resembles everyday peace. Such peace consists of "routinized practices used by individuals and collectives" to navigate divided social worlds (Mac Ginty 2014, 549). At an open border, its repertoire includes courteous exchange, topic avoidance, multilingual accommodation, flexible credit, shared ritual, and the quiet honoring of reciprocal obligations. These acts rarely resolve interstate disputes, but they keep difference from hardening into daily antagonism. Women's care and expressive labor are central because they organize repeated contact at intimate scales. A meal offered to a cross-border relative or a song recognized by both sides produces coexistence through use. Mac Ginty's typology names five such practices, "avoidance, ambiguity, ritualized politeness, telling and blame deferring" (Mac Ginty 2014, 555), and the fourth is where gender and caste do most of their work at this frontier. Telling, the rapid reading of name, dress, accent, and bearing, is the skill by which a woman traveling alone is sorted into the categories of bride, trader, pilgrim, worker, or suspect. Yet routine can also normalize injustice. Everyday peace may calm conflict while leaving caste, domestic authority, or exploitation intact, so its value must be judged alongside the power

relations it stabilizes. The question is which routines sustain coexistence without freezing inequality.

Seen infrastructurally, cooperation is a constellation rather than a single institution. Migration systems have become “both easier and more cumbersome” as facilitation expands alongside regulation (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, S122). The India–Nepal border embodies that paradox. Visa-free movement coexists with documentation problems, gendered migration bans, citizenship anxieties, and private brokerage. Women connect the components by translating between household expectations, market opportunities, ritual calendars, and official demands. Their work is infrastructural precisely because it coordinates heterogeneous systems without eliminating their contradictions. This perspective also prevents informality from being defined as the opposite of the state. Treaty rights, police discretion, transport, mobile phones, kinship, and songs interact in the same mobility process. Cooperation emerges through their alignment, while precarity appears when one element shifts costs onto actors with the least bargaining power. Its failures are relational before they are technical. The pattern is not peculiar to South Asia. In the Lake Chad Basin, daily crossings sustain regional solidarities that show how regionalism “is not only imagined by states but enacted from below” (Mulugeta and Wando 2025, 1615). Naming that enactment matters, because integration is habitually credited to treaties whose routine operation depends on people who were never party to them.

Temporal coordination is equally important. At another South Asian border, women’s communication and hospitality extended the time available for passage, while a “signal clear” created narrow windows for movement (Sur 2020, 552). The comparison shows that border infrastructures operate through waiting, timing, and rapid response, not only through roads and gates. India–Nepal mobility likewise follows bus schedules, agricultural seasons, marriage calendars, wage cycles, festivals, and sudden closures. Women often synchronize these temporalities by preparing households, relaying changes, and absorbing delays. Songs of monsoon, departure, and return supply a cultural rhythm for the same work. Informal cooperation succeeds when people can align multiple clocks. It

fails when states impose abrupt closures or documentation deadlines without recognizing the care arrangements and livelihood cycles that make movement possible. Temporal justice requires notice, flexibility, and support for those coordinating other people's time.

Unequal Openness: Caste, Surveillance, and Precarity

The infrastructure described here is never outside moral regulation. Women migrants' status can depend on "careful, consistent, and continuous self-positioning" (Ghosh 2015, 1226), because earnings do not automatically overcome suspicions about sexual respectability or independent movement. Reputation becomes a border carried home in gossip, kin judgment, and employment exclusion. This internal bordering is gendered: men's travel may signify provision or experience, while women's travel can invite questions about morality even when it supports the household. Songs offer one place to contest these judgments, but performance cannot remove their material effects. A woman labeled improper may lose work, housing, or family support. Informal networks therefore produce both mobility and surveillance, rewarding those who can maintain acceptable narratives and exposing others to sanctions that no treaty formally records. Respectability becomes an informal passport whose renewal is never guaranteed.

Anti-trafficking interventions can intensify this portable border. Research on returning Nepali women highlights an everyday "biography of the border" (Laurie et al. 2015, 91), in which rescue, return, stigma, and advocacy stretch bordering practices far beyond the territorial crossing. Protection is not a single benevolent act. It can classify women as victims, question their consent, mark their documents, and reorganize their access to community. The same NGOs and peer networks may provide essential support while operating within funding and policy frameworks that privilege particular stories. This complexity cautions against celebrating all bottom-up agency. Women's solidarities are shaped by caste, reputation, institutional authority, and uneven access to advocacy. A people-centered approach must listen to women's accounts without requiring them to perform either helpless victimhood or heroic resilience. Support becomes coercive when recognition depends on an approved biography.

The concept of trafficking borders captures how control multiplies along a route. These formations are “spaces of restriction and negotiation” (Bhagat 2022, PDF p. 1), produced through families, recruiters, officials, NGOs, airports, and checkpoints. Women may evade one restriction only to become more dependent on an agent who promises an alternative path through India. The open border then functions as both resource and risk: it enables movement that policy blocks elsewhere, but it may remove travelers from official records and remedies. Criminalizing the route does not eliminate the economic or domestic pressures that motivate departure. It can instead increase the price of secrecy. Effective protection must separate coercion from mobility itself, expand lawful options, and make assistance available without treating every mobile woman as incapable of judgment. Choice improves only when safety is not conditioned on secrecy.

Violence is consequently not an exceptional interruption of mobility. Nepali women may choose movement within circumstances that leave “limited options available for young and multiply marginalised women” (Grossman-Thompson 2023, 234). Caste discrimination, food insecurity, abusive marriage, debt, recruitment fees, and restrictive law form a chain in which each attempted solution can generate another exposure. The border is one moment in that chain, not its sole cause. Gendered infrastructure can reduce harm by offering shelter, information, and trusted escorts, yet dependence on personal relations leaves those without strong networks especially vulnerable. The analytical task is to value informal protection without making it a substitute for rights. Women should not need a well-connected relative to travel safely, report abuse, retrieve wages, or return without stigma. Rights-based protection would reduce this network penalty while preserving women’s control over decisions.

Everyday bordering explains how such inequalities become ordinary. Border controls are “shifting and contested between individuals, groupings and states” (Yuval-Davis, Wemyss, and Cassidy 2018, 230), appearing in workplaces, households, document checks, and judgments about belonging. In the India–Nepal context, a nominally open frontier can coexist with intimate gatekeeping by husbands, senior kin, employers, agents, and community leaders. Caste and class determine whose accent, clothing, or

papers attract suspicion and whose informal crossing is tolerated. Women may also be recruited into bordering others through advice, rumor, or respectability norms. This distributed power is why formal liberalization alone cannot guarantee equitable mobility. The line may be open while the social route remains crowded with checkpoints. Attention to distributed gatekeeping links border policy with inheritance, employment, language, and family law, where belonging is decided in mundane daily encounters.

Crisis makes hidden dependencies visible. During the pandemic, an "overnight shutting of the open border" stranded migrant workers and broke routines of people-to-people aid (Shakya 2020, 229). Abrupt closure converted familiar paths into sites of quarantine, police force, hunger, and waiting, with Dalit and low-wage travelers bearing disproportionate harm. It also exposed how little formal contingency planning existed for the population whose labor linked the two countries. Women faced intensified care burdens as income disappeared, relatives returned ill, and mobility for food or treatment contracted. The 2015–16 blockade had rehearsed the pattern at smaller scale. Fuel scarcity left buses infrequent and overcrowded, and in one Kathmandu valley household a woman "did not always get to work during the blockade" because her husband could not obtain petrol for the motorbike that carried her (Vindegg 2024, 592). A closure enacted at the border travels inward as a transport failure and settles, finally, as a woman's lost wage. A resilient border policy cannot treat such social infrastructure as infinitely elastic. Emergency measures require advance coordination, accessible information, safe transit, and support for the caregivers who absorb policy shocks inside households. Closure was territorial, but its harshest consequences traveled through kitchens, care schedules, wages, and unequal access to public relief.

Toward People-Centered Border Governance

Policy must begin by distinguishing openness from security neglect. Treaty mobility has generated benefits, but it also intersects with "viewed as foreigners and illegal migrants" narratives that unsettle citizenship (Sharma 2023, 81). Bilateral mechanisms should therefore clarify documentation for cross-border spouses and children, standardize non-discriminatory

procedures, and provide multilingual help at local crossings. Such measures would not formalize every intimate relation. They would reduce the need for women to repair administrative uncertainty through personal pleading and reputation. A precedent exists on Nepal's other frontier, where a treaty-defined zone gives residents a document that authorizes short-range crossing without passport or visa (Shneiderman 2013, 25). The point is not to import that model, which was designed for a controlled boundary and carries exclusions of its own, but to establish that documentary recognition of borderland residence is administratively ordinary rather than exceptional. Local consultation must include women from different caste, class, linguistic, and occupational positions, not only established male representatives. Their knowledge of care schedules, market routes, ritual travel, and recruitment practices can identify risks invisible to strategic dialogue. Formal governance becomes stronger when it recognizes the practical intelligence already coordinating movement. Recognition should move from consultation toward shared local authority.

Economic policy should protect small exchange without celebrating precarity. Informal trade rests on "historic patterns of trade" as well as present survival needs (Brown et al. 2024, 123), but opaque rules enable rent-seeking and selective harassment. Low-value trader permits, transparent fee schedules, safe waiting areas, childcare, complaint channels, and women-led market committees could preserve livelihood flexibility while reducing dependence on middlemen. Comparable borderlands show that kinship-based mobility persists despite securitization, so regulation should work with local sociability rather than assuming that fencing creates order (Ralte and Thomas 2026, 557–559). Support must remain accessible to traders without literacy, digital devices, or elite contacts. The goal is not to replace trust with paperwork, but to ensure that a woman's safety does not depend solely on whom she knows. Predictable rules would strengthen rather than extinguish community knowledge.

Finally, policy should treat care and expressive knowledge as evidence. Borderscapes reveal "sites of generative struggles and resistances" (Brambilla and Jones 2020, 289), and women's songs show how communities diagnose neglect, separation, and unfair obligation. Cultural

programs should not freeze those songs as heritage detached from labor. Participatory archives, local-language consultations, and compensation for performers and caregivers can bring experiential knowledge into planning. Migration support should include childcare, eldercare, psychosocial services, and reintegration that does not presume shame. Anti-trafficking systems should offer voluntary assistance and lawful routes rather than paternalistic bans. These measures recognize that cooperation is already being produced from below, while refusing to make women bear its costs without resources, authority, or protection. Such evidence reveals when efficient controls transfer danger from institutions to households, routes, or clandestine intermediaries with very little accountability.

Conclusion

The India–Nepal border endures through more than strategic tolerance or treaty design. Its daily peace is built through "intergroup contact and civility" (Mac Ginty 2014, 549), enacted in visits, markets, songs, caregiving, and small accommodations that rarely enter official narratives. Women are central to this process because gendered divisions of labor place them at the junction of household continuity, communication, kinship, and informal exchange. Calling these practices infrastructure makes their political and economic value visible. It also reveals their fragility: cooperation depends on time, bodily effort, and reciprocal relations that crises or unequal power can exhaust. The open border is therefore a jointly produced institution. States authorize mobility, but communities make it usable, and women disproportionately maintain the conditions under which use remains possible. Their maintenance is a public good even when performed privately and without pay.

Songs disclose this infrastructure's moral imagination. Cultural and kin relations can make the frontier reproduce "sameness rather than difference" (Joshi 2024, 267), yet performance also records longing, marital displacement, labor, and protest. The border is lived because people repeatedly narrate and repair it, not because political difference disappears. Care work gives those narratives duration by sustaining homes through departure and receiving people on return. Informal networks translate

shared language into credit, warning, welcome, and obligation. Together, these practices form a quiet architecture of cooperation. Their quietness should not be confused with consent. The same relations can enforce caste hierarchy, respectability, and unequal authority, making recognition inseparable from redistribution and rights. The analytic gain is an account where culture, economy, and governance converge in the routine, institutionally consequential reproduction of mobility and collective social and political life.

A people-centered border policy must therefore protect the capacity to cooperate while reducing the need for self-sacrifice. Women's songs remain a "shared tradition through which emotions are expressed" (Jassal 2012, 3), but they are also records of institutional consequence: who leaves, who waits, who cares, and who is believed. Listening to them alongside migration and market evidence reveals an alternative measure of bilateral success. A functioning border is not merely one across which people can move. It is one in which movement does not require women to accept violence, invisibility, or endless unpaid repair. Recognizing gendered border infrastructure makes that standard thinkable and offers a grounded basis for cooperation that is open, socially durable, and more just. The measure joins diplomatic cooperation to bodily security, household authority, and the equitable distribution of time and social recognition. What a synthesis of this kind can establish is the shape of a mechanism and the distribution of its costs; measuring how widely each practice holds across the borderlands would require the sustained multi-sited fieldwork that the argument is intended to motivate.

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Part IV. Shared Waters and Transboundary Environmental Risks

13. Cooperating Across Depletion: Localized Water-Sharing Practices in the Chu and Talas River Basins

Görkem Atsungur

Abstract

The transboundary Chu and Talas river basins, shared between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, are currently facing a critical ecological reality. Accelerating climate change and significant glacier depletion in the northern Tien Shan mountains have led to a steady reduction in water volumes, directly threatening the livelihoods of agricultural communities on both sides of the border. While the 2000 Chu–Talas Agreement established a framework for interstate cooperation, state-level water diplomacy often stalls due to shifting political tensions between Astana and Bishkek, leaving downstream farmers in Kazakhstan and upstream users in Kyrgyzstan vulnerable to seasonal shortages.

This chapter identifies a significant conceptual gap in current hydropolitical discourse: while high-level negotiations frequently reach impasses, local borderland sub-districts – specifically *akimats* in Kazakhstan and *ayyl okmotus* in Kyrgyzstan – have developed informal, micro-level mechanisms to manage water scarcity. Drawing on original field research, including interviews with local water management officials, farmers, and border community leaders, the study documents how these "bottom-up" practices bypass formal diplomatic bottlenecks to ensure survival during peak irrigation periods. These localized arrangements often rely on historical social networks, informal technical exchanges, and ad hoc operational adjustments that remain largely invisible to central authorities.

The practical contribution of this research moves beyond top-down state narratives to highlight the resilience of informal water-sharing mechanisms. The chapter argues that these localized practices represent a vital, yet underfunded, layer of regional stability. It concludes with three concrete policy recommendations: (1) the formalization of local-level communication channels within the Chu–Talas Commission framework; (2)

the creation of a dedicated “Borderland Ecological Fund” to support joint micro-infrastructure repairs; and (3) the integration of local knowledge into national climate adaptation strategies. By empowering sub-district authorities to formalize and fund these ecological agreements, central governments can prevent resource-driven conflicts and build a more resilient, decentralized model of transboundary water management.

Introduction

Transboundary water governance in the Chu and Talas basins cannot be understood solely through interstate agreements between Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan and basin-level institutions (Zinzani and Menga 2017; Sehring 2022; Kanybek 2024; Osmonova 2020). In the literature, it is shown to be shaped by multi-scalar power dynamics and borderlands practices (Zinzani and Menga 2017), gendered institutional norms (Sehring 2022), distributional inequities and Soviet legacies (Kanybek 2024), and the relative importance of political over purely institutional factors (Osmonova 2020). Formal arrangements establish legal responsibilities, but the day-to-day distribution of irrigation water depends on operational decisions made by district engineers, canal operators, farmers, and community leaders. These actors determine when gates are adjusted, how repairs are organized, and how shortages are distributed among users. The central argument of this chapter is therefore not simply that informal cooperation exists, but that it performs identifiable governance functions under specific conditions of seasonal scarcity.

In this vein, the chapter aims to make three contributions. First, it demonstrates how local actors translate formal allocation principles into practical rules for particular canals, offtakes, and irrigation schedules. Second, it identifies the social and professional relationships that enable rapid cross-border coordination when formal communication is delayed. Third, it examines the limits of such cooperation by asking whether informal arrangements distribute scarcity equitably or merely preserve the advantages of head-end users and well-connected groups. As Zinzani and Menga (2017) argue, formal institutions “*alone do not determine governance outcomes*.” Informal governance is thus treated as politically

ambivalent: it can strengthen operational resilience while simultaneously creating risks of exclusion, elite capture, and weak accountability.

The analysis advances the following proposition: informal water-sharing is most likely to support cooperation when local actors face mutual dependence, possess repeated opportunities for interaction, and can draw on recognized mechanisms of monitoring and reciprocity. Its effectiveness is reduced when hydrological decline exceeds historically familiar variation, when local authority is fragmented, or when informal networks exclude affected users from decision-making. This proposition provides a clearer basis for evaluating both successful and failed episodes of cooperation in the two basins.

Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

The chapter combines four perspectives, but it uses them for distinct analytical purposes rather than treating them as interchangeable. First, Ostromian institutional analysis is used to reconstruct the practical rules governing allocation, maintenance, monitoring, and sanctions (DeMattee and Swiney 2021). Second, critical hydropolitics is used to examine how power is distributed across space and social groups, particularly between upstream and downstream users, head-end and tail-end communities, and state authorities and local actors (Sneddon and Fox 2006; Furlong 2006). Third, everyday diplomacy directs attention to informal communication and technical relationships that maintain cross-border working ties. Last, multi-

level governance provides a wider institutional framework for examining how local, national, and transboundary authorities interact.[12][13][14][15]

These perspectives are integrated through a mechanism-based model. By integrating insights from Ostromian institutional analysis, critical hydropolitics, and multi-level governance, the analysis moves beyond a narrow focus on formal agreements to examine how power, practices, and nested institutions interact across scales to shape the actual functioning of transboundary water governance in the Chu and Talas basins (see Sneddon and Fox 2006; Hooghe and Marks 2003; Zinzani and Menga 2017).

This framework distinguishes three possible outcomes. Informal mechanisms may produce cooperative resilience when they maintain access, distribute adjustment costs reasonably, and remain open to affected users.

[12] Ostromian institutional analysis refers to the analytical approach developed by Elinor Ostrom and associated scholars for studying how institutions (formal and informal rules) shape collective action and the governance of common-pool resources. It emphasizes the Institutional Analysis and Development (IAD) framework, the design principles for robust common-property institutions, and polycentric governance, focusing on how rules-in-use at multiple levels interact to produce outcomes in resource management (Ostrom 1990, 2005, 2010).

[13] Critical hydropolitics is an approach to the study of transboundary water politics that moves beyond conventional, state-centric analyses of conflict and cooperation. Articulated most clearly by Sneddon and Fox (2006), it draws on critical geography and political ecology to examine how power operates across multiple scales (from borderlands to the international), how formal institutions interact with informal practices, and how a wider range of actors beyond states shape water governance outcomes.

[14] Everyday diplomacy refers to the informal, quotidian practices of negotiation, representation, mediation, and relationship management that ordinary people, communities, and non-state actors engage in on a daily basis. Drawing on work in critical diplomatic studies and anthropology (Constantinou 2016; Marsden, Ibañez-Tirado, and Henig 2016), the concept challenges the traditional view of diplomacy as the exclusive domain of professional state diplomats and instead highlights how diplomatic modes of agency operate in everyday social interactions, local settings, and across multiple scales.

[15] Multi-level governance refers to the dispersion of authority and decision-making across multiple territorial and functional levels (local, regional, national, and supranational/international), involving both public and private actors. Developed particularly in the study of the European Union and later applied more broadly to complex policy domains such as environmental and water governance, the concept emphasizes the interplay between vertical levels of government and horizontal networks of non-state actors, rather than hierarchical, state-centric control (Marks 1993; Hooghe and Marks 2001, 2003).

They may produce unequal stability when they prevent open conflict but systematically privilege influential or head-end users. Finally, they may result in coordination failure when trust, authority, infrastructure, or hydrological conditions are insufficient to sustain reciprocal action. This typology allows the study to assess informal governance without assuming that cooperation is automatically equitable or sustainable.

Methodology: Sites, Participants, and Data

This study uses qualitative methods to examine how informal water-sharing arrangements operate under conditions of scarcity. Research was conducted in the border regions of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan during June–August 2025, November 2025, and April–June 2026. The study sites were located in Kazakhstan's Zhambyl Region, including areas around Taraz and the Shu–Talas Basin Water Management Department, and in Kyrgyzstan's Chui and Talas regions, including areas near the Orto-Tokoi and Kirov reservoirs. Sites were selected to capture variation in upstream and downstream position, head-end and tail-end access within irrigation systems, and the extent to which infrastructure required cross-border coordination.

The study draws on 47 semi-structured interviews, analysis of the Chu–Talas Commission sessions – held in Bishkek in September 2025 and Taraz in May 2026 – and analysis of official and project documents.[16] Interview participants included experts, officials from national and basin-level water agencies, local water users or Water User Association representatives, and civil-society or NGO actors. Interviews were conducted in Russian, with translation assistance where necessary, and lasted 45–90 minutes. With informed consent, all interviews were transcribed and thematically coded. Identifying details were removed, and locations were generalized when disclosure could create political or administrative risks. Interviews addressed allocation rules, responses to shortages, maintenance responsibilities, cross-border communication, dispute resolution, and relations with formal authorities.

[16] For more information, please see the following site: https://www.cawater-info.net/yearbook/index_e.htm https://www.cawater-info.net/yearbook/index_e.htm

The documentary corpus includes the 2000 Kazakhstan–Kyrgyzstan Agreement, Chu–Talas Commission protocols and decisions (including the 2006–2007 and 2008–2009 reports, as well as recent protocols and decisions from 2020–2025 obtained through participant observation and official documentation channels), national water codes and basin-management plans, project reports from the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe, the United Nations Development Programme, the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe, and the Asian Development Bank, as well as local administrative records, seasonal allocation schedules, irrigation maps, and Water User Association lists.[17] These materials establish the formal institutional framework, document decisions and infrastructure, and help reconstruct specific events. Documentary evidence was compared with interview accounts and observation rather than treated as automatically authoritative. The data were analyzed thematically, with attention to institutional rules, power relations, informal practices, implementation, and distributional effects. The design is not intended to produce statistical representation; it supports analytical comparison of the conditions under which informal water-sharing is sustained, contested, unequal, or unsuccessful.

Case Selection, Comparative Logic, and Selection Bias

The study uses theory-driven, maximum-variation case selection rather than a success-case design. Cases were selected according to four theoretically relevant conditions: (i) their position within the transboundary basin and local irrigation network; (ii) exposure to intra-seasonal shortages; (iii) the interdependence of canals, offtakes, reservoirs, and weirs; and (iv) the capacity of local administrative and water-user institutions. The sample includes episodes of sustained coordination, contested or uneven cooperation, and breakdown. Outcomes were established through

[17] The documentary corpus includes formal legal instruments (2000 Agreement, national water codes, basin-management plans); bilateral Commission protocols and decisions (2006–2007, 2008–2009, and 2020–2025); project reports from UNECE, UNDP, OSCE, and ADB; and local operational documents (seasonal allocation schedules, irrigation maps, administrative records, and WUA lists for WUA Jorgo, WUA Uzun Kyr, and WUA El Suu). These materials enable triangulation between formal rules, documented decisions, and operational practices. See bibliography for full references.

documentary evidence and accounts from multiple respondent groups, not assumed from a site's reputation or accessibility.

The pre-fieldwork sampling frame was constructed from irrigation maps derived from Landsat 7 (30 m resolution) and MODIS satellite imagery (250 m to 1 km resolution) for the period 2000–2017; administrative records and regional water agencies; seasonal allocation schedules and operational protocols approved by the Chu–Talas Commission; Water User Association lists including WUA Jorgo in the Talas Basin, WUA Uzun Kyr and WUA El Suu in the Chu Basin; Chu–Talas Commission protocols and decisions; national water codes and basin-management plans; project reports from UNECE, UNDP, OSCE, and the Asian Development Bank; and prior studies on transboundary water governance in the Chu and Talas basins. While the systematic baseline mapping relies on the most comprehensive remote-sensing dataset available for the sampling-frame period, more recent imagery and national hydrometeorological records (2020–2025) were consulted supplementarily during fieldwork to contextualize current irrigated-area dynamics. Sites were eligible when they met three criteria. They had to be substantially dependent on irrigation and have experienced a documented intra-seasonal shortage, such as reduced expected supply, emergency rationing, delayed release, or an infrastructure-related interruption. Their canals, offtakes, reservoirs, or weirs also had to require sequential or joint coordination among users, local authorities, or water-management bodies. Finally, sufficient documentary and interview evidence had to be available to reconstruct allocation and maintenance practices, including disagreement or uncertainty. Sites were excluded when they lacked significant irrigation dependence, had no meaningful connection to the wider transboundary or basin system, or lacked the evidence needed to reconstruct an episode.

The sampling frame was based only on information available before fieldwork. Evidence collected in 2025 and 2026 was used afterward to refine case descriptions, reconstruct scarcity episodes, and assess outcomes; it was not presented as part of the original sampling frame. Because poorly documented settings may differ systematically from well-documented ones,

the study records evidentiary limitations and does not treat limited documentation as proof that cooperation or conflict was absent.

The sample varies across Kyrgyz and Kazakh jurisdictions, basin positions, and head-end and tail-end command areas. These dimensions are analyzed separately because national jurisdiction, hydrological position, administrative authority, and location within an irrigation network do not always coincide. Head-end users may receive more reliable supplies during declining flows, while tail-end users may bear greater adjustment costs; however, these outcomes may also depend on local rules, pumping capacity, political influence, maintenance responsibilities, and enforcement. The study therefore treats these relationships as empirical questions and examines whether coordination distributes scarcity costs equitably, stabilizes access for particular groups, or reproduces existing inequalities.

The primary unit of analysis is the scarcity episode, nested within a community and irrigation system. An episode is a bounded period in which reduced flow, infrastructure failure, delayed release, or competing demands require actors to change an established allocation or maintenance arrangement. Where the evidence permits, episodes are classified as primarily hydrological, infrastructural, administrative, or demand-related, while recognizing that several pressures may occur together. For each episode, the analysis reconstructs the sequence of events, identifies the actors involved, examines information exchange, and traces how decisions were made, implemented, monitored, contested, and revised.

Cooperation is assessed across several dimensions rather than treated as a binary outcome. The analysis asks whether actors coordinated an allocation or maintenance adjustment, whether the arrangement was implemented and sustained, how benefits and costs were distributed, whether affected actors considered it legitimate or fair, and what monitoring or enforcement mechanisms existed. An arrangement may therefore produce coordination among some actors while simultaneously creating unequal access or shifting scarcity costs onto less powerful users. Informal practices are distinguished from formal rules, but their interaction is examined. Proposed mechanisms must be supported by convergent evidence from documents, interviews, and, where available, observation or

contemporaneous records. Conflicting accounts are retained and evaluated according to their evidentiary basis rather than being reduced to a single retrospective narrative.

Comparison occurs at two levels. Communities and irrigation systems are compared across basin position, infrastructure interdependence, shortage exposure, and institutional capacity. Scarcity episodes within and across those settings are then compared to determine why similar pressures produce coordination, contestation, or failure. System characteristics are treated as contextual conditions, while episode-level interactions are analyzed as the proximate mechanisms linking informal governance to allocation, maintenance, and distributional outcomes. This nested design supports analytical generalization about the conditions under which informal arrangements are durable, contested, exclusionary, or unable to manage scarcity.

Respondent Selection and Representation

Respondents were recruited for their knowledge of relevant scarcity episodes and their position within the associated community or irrigation system. The sample included local and district water officials, canal operators, Water User Association representatives, farmers in head-end and tail-end areas, smallholders, and community members involved in disputes, allocation negotiations, monitoring, or collective repairs – specifically drawn from Kazakhstan's Zhambyl Region (including areas around Taraz and the Shu–Talas Basin Water Management Department) and Kyrgyzstan's Chui and Talas regions (including areas near the Orto-Tokoi and Kirov reservoirs). Recruitment also sought women and other groups whose experiences may be underrepresented in accounts from formal leaders. Respondents were assigned different areas of inquiry: officials and leaders were asked about formal rules, institutional responsibilities, and documented decisions, while users and affected residents were asked about implementation, reliability, informal

Initial recruitment was purposive and followed the case-selection framework and the institutional and infrastructure structure of each site. Selective snowball sampling was then used to identify participants involved in informal exchanges, dispute resolution, monitoring, or collective repair.

To reduce network and elite bias, no single referral chain was treated as sufficient. Referrals were supplemented by direct outreach in tail-end areas and among smaller landholders, less influential users, and residents who had experienced disputes, exclusion, delayed delivery, or unreliable access. Recruitment continued across contrasting participant categories until episodes could be reconstructed from more than one institutional position, subject to access and saturation constraints.

Accounts were compared across respondent positions and, where possible, checked against allocation schedules, administrative records, contemporaneous communications, maintenance records, and other documents. Divergent accounts were retained as evidence of contestation, unequal information, or competing interpretations of fairness. The study did not automatically privilege official records, majority narratives, or statements from community leaders.

The study records limits on access and participation. In the Zhambyl Region of Kazakhstan, two canal command areas in the lower reaches of the Shu River could not be reached due to border security restrictions and administrative delays in obtaining local-level permits; in Kyrgyzstan, one ayyl okmotu in the Talas Region was inaccessible because the community had experienced a contentious allocation dispute in the preceding season and local leaders declined to participate. Additionally, three former members of the Chu–Talas Commission – one Kazakh and two Kyrgyz – could not be interviewed because they were no longer in public service and could not be located through official channels; two basin-level water agency officials in Kazakhstan were unavailable due to institutional gatekeeping by their respective departments, which required higher-level authorization that was not granted within the fieldwork period. One Water User Association in the Chui Region declined participation, citing sensitivity around informal water trades that operated outside formal reporting requirements. Political sensitivity, border restrictions, language barriers, security concerns, and institutional gatekeeping may have constrained recruitment. These limitations were documented as part of the case record and considered as potential sources of selection bias. Communities experiencing severe conflict, weak institutions, contested allocation, or politically sensitive

informal practices may be less accessible than other communities. Accordingly, the respondent pool is not presented as representative of all governance outcomes in the two basins, and claims about the prevalence, durability, or fairness of informal arrangements are appropriately bounded.

Confidentiality protections also inform interpretation. In politically sensitive settings, participants may minimize conflict, attribute decisions to others, or describe informal practices in ways that protect their relationships and material interests. The study therefore distinguishes reported perceptions from independently corroborated events and avoids identifying respondents through unnecessary detail. Interview accounts are treated as situated evidence produced within unequal institutional and social relationships, not as transparent records of events.

Comparative Analysis and Analytical Generalization

The cases are not intended to estimate statistically how often informal cooperation occurs across the Chu and Talas basins. They provide analytical variation for assessing the study's proposed mechanisms. Each scarcity episode is examined using the same questions: Were actors mutually dependent? Did they interact repeatedly? How did information circulate? What monitoring or sanctions existed? How did formal institutions support or constrain local action? How were the costs of scarcity distributed?

Episodes of sustained cooperation are compared with those involving contestation, unequal outcomes, or failure. This approach supports analytical generalization to theoretically specified conditions, not empirical generalization to every community in Kazakhstan or Kyrgyzstan. Similar patterns across sites that differ in location, administrative structure, and social composition strengthen confidence in the proposed mechanisms. Cases that do not conform to expectations are treated as theoretically informative because they may reveal weak informal networks, decisive formal institutions, limits to customary adaptation, or cooperation that benefits some users while disadvantaging others.

Triangulation and Robustness

Where evidence is incomplete or contradictory, the analysis preserves the uncertainty. No single source – whether official record, interview account,

or observation – is treated as definitive, and cases with divergent narratives are retained as analytically valuable precisely because they reveal how scarcity and governance are interpreted differently across positions within the irrigation system. The conclusions are therefore bounded by the logic of qualitative, nested comparison. The selected cases do not show that informal cooperation is universal, inherently equitable, durable, or superior to formal institutions. They identify mechanisms and scope conditions that explain how informal practices interact with formal institutions under specified ecological, infrastructural, institutional, and political conditions. The findings are thus analytically transferable to comparable settings, but they are not statistically representative of all communities or governance outcomes in the two basins.

Main Findings and Analysis

Rules-in-Use

Field evidence shows that local water-sharing is organized through a combination of formal entitlement and practical adjustment. In ordinary conditions, participants refer to official schedules and administrative responsibilities. During shortage periods, however, these rules are modified through direct communication among canal operators, local officials, and farmer representatives. The relevant rule is not simply that water is allocated according to a written schedule, but that the schedule is adjusted through a sequence of calls, site visits, flow observations, and reciprocal concessions. The important institutional question is therefore who has authority to request an adjustment, whose information is treated as credible, and how the resulting decision is communicated to users.

One documented episode illustrates this process. During the 2025 irrigation season, particularly in August, a reduction in flow at the Shu River threatened users in Kazakhstan's southern Zhambyl Region. According to an anonymized local water management official from the Zhambyl Region, the initial response involved direct communication between Kyrgyz and Kazakh water managers and local authorities to negotiate an operational adjustment. The adjustment was accepted because of the reciprocal expectation established by the Chu–Talas Commission

framework and the shared recognition of the technical necessity to prevent a complete collapse of water supply for downstream agriculture. The episode demonstrates that informal coordination did not replace the formal regime; rather, it translated broad allocation principles into a temporary operational arrangement. It also reveals the distributional consequences of the decision: users in the Zhambyl Region ultimately received the water they needed to secure their harvest, while the shortage was effectively borne by Kyrgyz agricultural producers upstream, who had to limit their own water intake during a critical period of acute scarcity. This outcome was justified by the higher-level agreement that prioritized fulfilling the interstate water delivery schedule to maintain regional stability and prevent a cross-border crisis.

A contrasting episode occurred in the 2025 irrigation season, specifically in early July, when coordination effectively broke down for tail-end users but simultaneously produced an unequal stability for better-connected groups nearer to the border – neatly illustrating the distinct outcome categories (coordination failure vs. unequal stability) proposed in the theoretical framework. In that case, a key intake gate on the Talas River in Kyrgyzstan failed, triggering a 10-day delay in repairs because the responsible maintenance team could not be mobilized promptly, and cross-border communication between district water officials of the Zhambyl and Talas regions broke down over who bore financial responsibility for the spare parts. Tail-end users in the lower reaches of the Zhambyl Region reported that their fields remained dry for a critical two-week period during peak crop maturation, resulting in an estimated 30–40 percent yield loss, while officials or better-connected farmers nearer to the Kyrgyz border were able to secure advance notice of the reduced flow and exclusive access to supplementary pumping from localized groundwater reserves, allowing them to protect their harvests entirely and even sell surplus at inflated prices. This negative case is analytically important because it shows that social embeddedness is not sufficient for fair governance. Trust and reciprocity may operate within a restricted network while excluding actors who lack access to that network. Comparing the successful and unsuccessful episodes demonstrates that informal mechanisms are conditional institutions rather than universally reliable solutions.

Critically, these two episodes unfolded on different river systems – the Talas and the Shu, respectively – and involved separate operational networks, local authorities, and canal command areas. The failure of coordination in the Talas case did not necessarily undermine the cooperative mechanisms active in the Shu basin, as the relevant actors, infrastructure interdependencies, and historical working relationships differed significantly across the two watersheds. This variation reinforces the study's conditional model: informal governance is sustained through localized, network-specific relationships rather than through a single, basin-wide cooperative culture.

Analysis of Power, Inclusion, and Inequality

The operation of informal water-sharing should be evaluated in relation to power. Local rules are not created by socially equal participants. Land size, location within the irrigation network, administrative status, gender, wealth, ethnicity, and access to cross-border contacts might all shape a user's ability to influence allocation decisions. Head-end users may receive water earlier or more reliably, while tail-end users may bear the consequences of adjustments negotiated by actors closer to the source. Similarly, community leaders may present a settlement as consensual even when less influential users have limited capacity to object.

For this reason, the study treats participation and distribution as separate analytical dimensions. A mechanism may be participatory among officials and established farmers while remaining inaccessible to poorer households or marginal groups. The analysis therefore records not only whether a cooperative arrangement was reached, but also who participated, who was represented indirectly, whose claims were rejected, and how the costs of scarcity were distributed. This approach prevents the language of local knowledge and community cooperation from concealing unequal outcomes.

The evidence further suggests that informal sanctions require careful interpretation. Reputation, kinship pressure, and community criticism may encourage compliance, but they can also silence dissent or punish individuals who challenge established hierarchies. Informal enforcement should therefore be assessed according to both its effectiveness and its legitimacy. A system that secures compliance through social pressure may

maintain operational order while weakening individual rights and procedural accountability.

Climate and Hydrological Context

Climate change is treated in this study as a changing background condition rather than as an assumed explanation for every local dispute. The analysis distinguishes among three forms of hydrological stress: (i) predictable seasonal variation, (ii) short-term drought or infrastructure disruption, and (iii) longer-term changes associated with glacier retreat and altered runoff patterns. This distinction matters because institutions that are effective under ordinary seasonal fluctuation may fail when shortages become more frequent, severe, or difficult to predict.

To establish this context, the study combines local accounts with hydrological and meteorological records from gauging stations operated by Kyrgyzstan's and Kazakhstan's national hydrometeorological services, remote-sensing datasets on irrigated area dynamics in the Chu and Talas basins, and glacier monitoring data for the northern Tien Shan covering the period from approximately 2000 to the present, with particular attention to the 2016–2026 decade. These data are drawn from multiple sources: weather and gauging station observation data in the Shu River basin (the northern Tien Shan), which have been used in recent studies to project that mean annual flow for the basin's rivers will decrease by 25 to 30 percent on average by 2050; irrigated area maps derived from Landsat 7 and MODIS satellite imagery for the period 2000–2017, which show that irrigated areas on the Kyrgyz side of the Talas Basin approximately doubled and total irrigated area in the Chu River Basin tripled since 2000; glacier area datasets indicating that glacierized areas in the northern Tien Shan decreased from approximately 269.6 km² in 1955 to 141.7 km² in 2021, a reduction of 47.4 percent; and Chu–Talas Commission protocols, seasonal allocation schedules, and hydrometeorological monitoring reports documenting coordinated gauging and water quality sampling. These data are used cautiously: they do not determine how communities interpret scarcity, but they help distinguish exceptional events from longer-term trends. Interview evidence is then examined alongside the timing and magnitude of flow changes to assess whether local rules are adapting to

genuinely new conditions or merely reproducing older responses to familiar variability.

The analysis indicates that informal mechanisms can improve short-term adaptability but cannot, by themselves, resolve structural water decline. They may coordinate release timing, share repair labor, or reduce immediate conflict, yet they cannot create additional water or guarantee equitable access when the overall supply is persistently shrinking. Informal cooperation should therefore be understood as one component of adaptation, to be combined with infrastructure investment, demand management, improved monitoring, and accountable basin-level planning.

Informal Cooperation as a Conditional Governance Mechanism

The comparative analysis indicates that informal water-sharing in the Chu and Talas basins should be understood as a conditional governance mechanism rather than as a universally effective alternative to formal institutions. Across the examined scarcity episodes, local coordination was most effective when actors were mutually dependent, interacted repeatedly, possessed relatively reliable channels for exchanging technical information, and could draw on recognized expectations of reciprocity. Under these conditions, informal practices enabled local authorities, canal operators, and farmers to adjust release timing, organize minor repairs, and redistribute water temporarily without waiting for higher-level authorization.

The findings do not support the stronger claim that informal cooperation consistently resolves scarcity or produces equitable outcomes. The comparison between sustained, contested, and failed episodes shows that informal arrangements can maintain operational continuity while leaving underlying inequalities intact. In particular, the position of users within irrigation networks shaped their ability to benefit from local flexibility. Head-end users and actors with access to administrative or cross-border networks were often better placed to influence adjustments, whereas tail-end users and less-connected farmers faced greater uncertainty. Informality therefore has a dual character: it can reduce immediate conflict and transaction costs, but it can also stabilize unequal distributions of risk.

This finding revises a common assumption in discussions of local environmental governance. Social embeddedness should not be treated as

evidence of collective equality. Kinship, neighborhood relations, professional trust, and customary consultation may facilitate rapid coordination, but they also define who is recognized as a legitimate participant. The relevant question is not simply whether a community possesses social capital, but how that social capital is distributed, who can activate it, and whether affected users have meaningful opportunities to challenge decisions. Informal governance is consequently best evaluated through both its coordination capacity and its distributional consequences.

Rules-in-Use, Rules-in-Form, and Institutional Hybridity

The study's process tracing supports a more precise understanding of the relationship between formal and informal institutions. Local actors did not generally disregard the 2000 Chu–Talas Agreement, the Commission framework, or national water regulations. Instead, they interpreted broad formal rules through practical arrangements adapted to particular canals, release schedules, infrastructure conditions, and shortage episodes. Informal governance therefore operated through institutional hybridity. Formal rules supplied legitimacy, general expectations, and a potential escalation pathway, while local rules-in-use supplied the flexibility required for daily operation.

This relationship is neither purely complementary nor purely oppositional. In some episodes, local arrangements translated formal principles into workable decisions. In others, informal coordination bypassed official channels because formal procedures were too slow, politically constrained, or poorly matched to the scale of the problem. Such bypassing could preserve cooperation, but it could also reduce transparency and make decisions dependent on personal relationships. The findings therefore suggest that hybridity should be analyzed as a negotiated relationship involving both support and circumvention. The presence of an interstate commission does not eliminate informal governance; nor does the existence of local cooperation demonstrate that formal institutions are irrelevant.

Theoretically, this extends the rules-in-use perspective into transboundary settings. Local working rules are not confined to a single community or jurisdiction. They may connect actors across borders through

repeated technical exchanges, shared infrastructure, and synchronized irrigation calendars. The relevant institutional unit is therefore sometimes a cross-border operational network rather than a territorially bounded community. This observation broadens common-pool resource analysis by showing that practical cooperation can be organized through relationships that cross administrative and national boundaries without becoming fully formalized.

Everyday Diplomacy and the Production of Transboundary Order

The evidence also supports a broader interpretation of everyday diplomacy. Cross-border calls, informal technical consultations, personal visits, and emergency exchanges are not merely secondary activities that occur when official diplomacy fails. They help produce the practical order within which formal agreements become operational. By exchanging information about flows, repairs, and temporary adjustments, local actors reduce uncertainty and prevent isolated decisions from escalating into wider disputes.

At the same time, the study cautions against treating everyday diplomacy as inherently peaceful or politically neutral. Informal relations may preserve working ties during periods of national tension, but access to those relations is uneven. Officials, engineers, and established community leaders may communicate effectively across the border while ordinary users remain excluded from the decisions that affect them. Everyday diplomacy can thus reduce interstate friction without resolving local injustice. Its contribution to peacebuilding should be assessed alongside questions of representation, accountability, and resource distribution.

This distinction has implications for research on environmental peacebuilding. The absence of open conflict cannot be taken as sufficient evidence that governance is functioning fairly. A borderland may display durable cooperation at the level of local elites while concealing persistent grievances among downstream or socially marginal groups. The analytical value of everyday diplomacy lies not only in demonstrating that cooperation survives political tension, but also in revealing the social conditions and unequal relationships through which that cooperation is maintained.

Resilience Under Climate Stress

The findings refine the concept of resilience by distinguishing short-term operational adaptability from long-term social and ecological sustainability. Informal arrangements were valuable during discrete scarcity episodes because they enabled rapid adjustments, mobilized local labor, and maintained communication when formal processes were delayed. These practices contributed to what may be termed operational resilience: the capacity to keep water systems functioning during temporary disruption.

Operational resilience, however, does not guarantee equitable or transformative adaptation. If declining flows become persistent, customary rotation schedules and reciprocal obligations may no longer provide a sufficient basis for allocation. Repeatedly shifting shortages onto tail-end users may preserve the appearance of stability while deepening inequality. Similarly, informal repair practices may address immediate infrastructure failures without replacing deteriorating systems or improving measurement capacity. Informal governance should therefore be understood as one layer of adaptation rather than as a substitute for hydrological monitoring, infrastructure investment, demand management, and accountable planning.

This distinction also clarifies the relationship between climate change and institutional change. Local practices are often highly adaptable to short-term variability, but their flexibility has limits. When environmental conditions move beyond the range of historically familiar experience, actors may require new information, financial resources, technical support, and revised allocation rules. The theoretical implication is that resilience depends not only on the existence of local self-organization but also on the capacity of formal institutions to recognize, resource, and revise local arrangements as ecological conditions change.

Power, Scale, and the Limits of Localism

The comparative design demonstrates why scale matters in the analysis of water governance. Local arrangements can be highly effective for problems that are immediate, technically specific, and socially visible. They are less capable of addressing cumulative basin-wide decline, national investment disparities, or the redistribution of water across multiple administrative

levels. The scale at which cooperation occurs therefore shapes both its strengths and its limitations.

Localism can also obscure power. Decisions made through informal negotiation may appear flexible and consensual because they are not recorded as formal disputes. Yet the absence of written objection does not establish the absence of disagreement. Users with fewer resources may comply because challenging local decisions is costly, socially risky, or unlikely to succeed. The chapter consequently treats the informal sphere as a site of political contestation as well as cooperation. This perspective strengthens critical hydropolitics by connecting spatial inequalities in water access to the social networks through which local decisions are made.

The broader implication is that multi-level governance should not be understood as a simple vertical partnership between central authorities and autonomous communities. It is a contested arrangement in which authority, information, money, and recognition move unevenly across scales. Effective institutional design must therefore create channels through which local knowledge can influence basin-level decisions while also creating avenues for appeal when local arrangements reproduce exclusion. Support for local self-governance should be accompanied by minimum standards of transparency, representation, and accountability.

Implications for Hybrid Institutional Design

The results support a nested institutional model in which formal and informal institutions perform complementary but distinct functions. Local actors should retain discretion over context-specific operational adjustments, particularly where rapid action is required. Basin-level and national institutions should provide legal recognition, technical monitoring, financial support, conflict-escalation procedures, and safeguards for groups that are weakly represented in local networks. This division of labor would preserve the adaptive advantages of informal governance while reducing its vulnerability to elite capture and political disruption.

The practical implication is not to formalize every informal practice. Excessive formalization could slow decision-making, discourage candid communication, or transform flexible relationships into bureaucratic reporting requirements. Instead, formal institutions should recognize the

existence of local arrangements and establish limited interfaces for communication, resource support, documentation, and review. Such interfaces should be designed with local participation and evaluated according to whether they improve reliability and equity rather than merely increasing administrative visibility.

The proposed local communication channels are therefore most effective when linked to procedural safeguards. Communication mechanisms should include representatives from local authorities, canal operators, water-user organizations, and affected farmers. Funding decisions should use transparent criteria, require maintenance plans, and include joint monitoring. Adaptation planning should incorporate local knowledge through shared decision-making rather than one-way consultation. These measures would help ensure that hybrid governance strengthens local capacity without converting local knowledge into an extractive resource or legitimizing unaccountable authority.

Scope Conditions and Future Research

The study's claims are bound by the logic of qualitative comparison. The selected cases provide analytical leverage but do not establish the frequency of informal cooperation across all communities in the two basins. The findings are most applicable to settings characterized by shared or sequential infrastructure, repeated interaction among water managers, seasonal scarcity, and partial institutional overlap. They may not transfer directly to basins where users lack mutual dependence, where local authority is fragmented, or where water allocation is governed primarily through centralized technical systems.

Future research should test the proposed mechanisms across a larger number of scarcity episodes and include systematic comparison with communities where cross-border relationships are weak or absent. Mixed-method research could combine process tracing with hydrological data, network analysis, and household-level surveys to examine whether reported cooperation corresponds to measurable changes in reliability and distribution. Further work should also investigate gendered participation, the role of water-user associations, and the effects of new monitoring technologies on informal trust and communication.

Policy Recommendations and Safeguards

The first recommendation is to establish a formal local communication channel within the Chu–Talas Commission while preserving the flexibility of operational coordination. The channel should include designated contact persons from relevant akimats, ayyl okmotus, canal operators, and water-user organizations. Its mandate should be limited to reporting flow conditions, infrastructure failures, emergency adjustments, and unresolved disputes. It should not convert every local exchange into a central authorization procedure. A short written record of significant decisions should nevertheless be maintained so that local arrangements remain reviewable and do not depend entirely on personal relationships.

The second recommendation is to create a dedicated “Borderland Ecological Fund” to support joint micro-infrastructure repairs. The proposed local communication channels should operate through transparent and jointly administered criteria. Eligible projects could include small canal repairs, measurement devices, gate maintenance, erosion control, and emergency works that benefit users on both sides of the border. Funding decisions should require evidence of local consultation, a clear maintenance plan, and public reporting of expenditures. Local representatives should participate in project selection, but they should not be the sole decision-makers. Independent technical review and periodic social audits would reduce the risks of elite capture and unequal distribution.

Finally, integrating local knowledge into climate-adaptation planning should involve shared authority rather than symbolic consultation. Local knowledge should be recorded with the consent of communities, attributed carefully, and returned to participants in accessible form. National agencies should explain how local observations affected final plans and why particular recommendations were not adopted. Representation should include tail-end users, smallholders, women, and groups whose interests may not be reflected by established community leaders. These safeguards would allow policy to benefit from local expertise without treating communities as passive sources of information.

Limitations and Scope of the Study

This study has three principal limitations. First, its qualitative design provides analytical depth rather than statistical generalization. The findings should therefore be understood as explanations of institutional processes in selected locations, not as claims about every community in the Chu and Talas basins. Second, access to informal practices is uneven. Actors may conceal arrangements that are politically sensitive, legally ambiguous, or disadvantageous to particular groups. Third, fieldwork captures governance during a defined period and may not fully represent how institutions change across different hydrological or political conditions.

These limitations are addressed through triangulation, comparison, and explicit uncertainty. Interview accounts are compared with observations and formal documents; successful episodes are examined alongside breakdowns; and claims are limited to practices supported by more than one form of evidence wherever possible. The study also distinguishes between reported norms and observed behavior. This distinction is essential because actors may describe cooperation as consensual even when operational evidence reveals unequal access or unresolved conflict.

Conclusion

The analysis shows that localized water-sharing is neither a marginal residue of weak state capacity nor a complete alternative to formal diplomacy. It is a conditional and politically ambivalent form of governance that can translate formal rules into operational cooperation under conditions of mutual dependence and repeated interaction. Its benefits are greatest when local networks are sufficiently open, information is shared, and formal institutions provide recognition and support. Its risks become more pronounced when informal authority is concentrated, hydrological decline is persistent, or affected users lack effective avenues for appeal.

The broader theoretical contribution lies in treating transboundary water governance as an outcome of interaction across scales. Interstate agreements, basin commissions, local administrations, technical networks, and community practices jointly produce the rules through which water is allocated and conflicts are managed. A resilient governance system must

therefore combine local adaptability with formal accountability. For the Chu and Talas basins, the most promising pathway is not a choice between formal and informal institutions, but a carefully bounded hybrid arrangement that supports local problem-solving while addressing the inequalities and ecological limits that informal cooperation alone cannot resolve.

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14. Flood Warning Cooperation between India and Nepal

Krishnendra Meena

Abstract

Annual monsoon flooding along the India–Nepal border creates a recurring transboundary risk for communities located along rivers flowing from Nepal into the Indo-Gangetic plain. This chapter examines community-based flood early-warning cooperation, with particular attention to the borderlands of southern Nepal and the Indian state of Bihar. It argues that effective warning depends not only on formal bilateral water-management mechanisms but also on the interaction of low-cost information and communications technology, civil-society organizations, local authorities, and dense cross-border social networks. Community-Based Flood Early-Warning Systems use locally calibrated water-level sensors and mobile communication to transmit warnings from upstream to downstream settlements. These arrangements demonstrate how practical cross-border cooperation can emerge around shared risk even when wider bilateral and geopolitical relations are periodically strained. Their principal limitation is uneven territorial coverage, suggesting that scaling up should preserve the community participation and local knowledge on which the systems depend.

Introduction

Recent concern over transboundary glacial floods on the Nepal–China frontier illustrates the wider salience of Himalayan flood hazards (Lord 2025). Along Nepal's southern frontier with India, however, the most recurrent problem is monsoon flooding. India shares a 1,751-kilometer

border with Nepal, and many rivers originating in the Himalayas flow southward into the Indo-Gangetic plain. Heavy rainfall in upper-riparian Nepal can therefore create severe flooding in border districts on both sides, damaging crops, displacing populations, disrupting livelihoods, and causing deaths of people and animals.

At the same time, the border is unusually open and socially interconnected. Family, kinship, marriage, trade, and religious ties cross the boundary, while the 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship provides a broad institutional framework for mobility. These conditions have enabled local communities and civil-society actors to develop practical mechanisms for sharing flood information. Cheap telephony, water-level sensors, and existing social networks have been combined into early-warning arrangements in which information generated upstream can be transmitted rapidly to vulnerable settlements downstream. This chapter focuses on those mechanisms, especially in the Nepal–Bihar borderlands, and asks what they reveal about the relationship between formal bilateral cooperation and community-based cross-border practices.

Monsoons and Transboundary Flood Risk

The South Asian monsoon is essential for agriculture and water supply, but it also exposes large areas to recurrent flooding. Rising precipitation extremes associated with climate change are increasing concern about the scale and severity of these events (Azeem et al. 2023). In northern India, Bihar and Uttar Pradesh are especially affected because major rivers descend from Nepal into the Ganga basin. These include the Kosi (Saptakosi in Nepal), Gandaki (Narayani), Ghaghara (Karnali), and Sharda (Mahakali), together with thousands of smaller streams and tributaries. Their hydrological connectivity means that rainfall and water-level changes on one side of the international border can have immediate consequences on the other.

India addresses flood protection through the Flood Management and Border Areas Programme (FMBAP). According to the Government of India, 21.213 million hectares are affected by floods nationally, while 20.538 million hectares are protected by flood-management measures

(Government of India 2026). The River Management Activities & Works related to Border Areas component of the program also funds maintenance of flood-protection works connected with the Kosi and Gandak projects in Nepal and anti-erosion and flood-protection measures in border areas. Formal India–Nepal flood cooperation operates through a three-tier structure consisting of the Joint Ministerial Level Commission on Water Resources, the Joint Committee on Water Resources, and the Joint Standing Technical Committee (Government of India 2022). Hydropower development in Nepal adds another layer of upstream–downstream interdependence because river regulation and infrastructure north of the border can affect downstream areas in India.

Geopolitical Context and the Open Border

The practical need for flood cooperation exists within a politically sensitive border environment. The 1950 Treaty of Peace and Friendship has long facilitated extensive mobility by citizens of both countries, but the treaty and India's role in Nepal have also been subjects of political debate. Periodic bilateral tensions, including those associated with the Madhesi movement, have increased scrutiny of the relationship. At the same time, Nepal has expanded its economic and infrastructure ties with China. These developments form part of the broader geopolitical context in which India–Nepal border management takes place, but they do not remove the practical interdependence created by shared river systems.

Security concerns have nevertheless led to greater regulation of the open border. India identifies terrorism, criminal activity, and smuggling as challenges and has expanded border roads, Border Out Posts, and Integrated Check Posts (Government of India 2025). Three Integrated Check Posts are currently operational and additional posts are under development. Yet for citizens of India and Nepal, everyday movement remains comparatively open. This mobility, together with long-standing cultural and social ties, is important for community-based flood warning because information can travel through relationships that already connect settlements, families, traders, and local authorities across the boundary.

Community-Based Flood Early-Warning Cooperation

Formal bilateral mechanisms provide an important background, but some of the most immediately useful flood-warning practices have emerged through cooperation among research institutions, civil-society organizations, and local communities. In 2013, the International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD) and partner organizations piloted a Community-Based Flood Early-Warning System (CBFEWS) in northeastern India. The approach was subsequently adapted to transboundary settings along the India–Nepal border (ICIMOD 2019; Shukla and Mall 2018). Early cross-border applications included communities in Nepal's Mahottari district and downstream areas in Bihar, and the model has since been replicated in additional locations.

The technical design is deliberately simple. A transmitter is installed near a river and linked to a flood sensor that detects rising water levels. When a locally defined critical level is reached, the system transmits a wireless signal to a receiver located in a nearby house or community facility. The warning can then be disseminated by mobile phone to local authorities, relevant agencies, and vulnerable settlements downstream. Crucially, critical thresholds are calibrated with local participation rather than imposed solely by outside experts. In this sense, the technology works because it is embedded in local knowledge and community organization (UNFCCC 2023a).

The cross-border value of the system lies in the geography of the rivers. Upstream communities may observe dangerous changes before downstream communities experience them. Sharing that information converts a hydrological asymmetry into a cooperative advantage. Community networks of family, kinship, and marriage provide channels through which warnings can be relayed rapidly, while civil-society organizations and local authorities help maintain equipment, organize training, and coordinate responses. The resulting arrangement is neither purely informal nor purely governmental: it links formal disaster-management structures with social networks that already span the border.

Experience from Nepal and northern India suggests that these systems can reduce the time between detection and local response, which is

particularly important during flash floods and rapidly rising monsoon rivers (Loy 2017; Pyakurel 2023; UNDRR 2021). Recent initiatives have also shown that municipalities can cooperate in financing and sustaining community-based warning systems, while work in north Bihar emphasizes the importance of building them jointly with local residents (Shakya and Sanyal 2024; Shreshtha and Thapa 2026). Nepal's broader investment in early-warning services and the development of regional flash-flood warning mechanisms indicate that the approach is becoming increasingly institutionalized (The Daily Star 2020; WMO 2025).

Limits and Prospects

The main limitation is coverage. CBFEWS remains active only in selected locations and has not yet become a continuous warning network along the entire border. Local systems also require maintenance, reliable communication, trusted intermediaries, and sustained participation. Expansion therefore cannot be reduced to installing additional sensors. The institutional challenge is to scale up without losing the local knowledge and social relationships that make warnings credible and actionable. Experience in Nepal's flood-prone Terai also suggests that community-based systems can help mobilize resources when local institutions are able to demonstrate their practical value (Sukla 2020).

A second limitation is political. The open border can come under pressure when security concerns or wider geopolitical disagreements intensify. Such pressures may complicate communication across the boundary, especially when informal networks are viewed primarily through a security lens. Flood warning nevertheless illustrates why maintaining cross-border channels matters even under strained political conditions. Water does not stop at the border, and the time-sensitive character of flood risk gives upstream and downstream communities a direct interest in preserving rapid information exchange.

Conclusion

Flood-warning cooperation between India and Nepal demonstrates a functional form of cross-border cooperation built around a recurring shared

risk. Formal bilateral water-management institutions are important, but the most immediate warning function is often performed through a hybrid arrangement that combines inexpensive technology, civil-society support, local authorities, and pre-existing cross-border social networks. The Community-Based Flood Early-Warning System is effective precisely because technical detection and social communication are integrated: sensors generate information, while trusted local channels turn that information into action.

The case therefore suggests two broader lessons. First, open borders do not automatically produce cooperation, but they can provide social infrastructure that makes practical coordination easier. Second, scaling up successful local mechanisms requires more than formal institutionalization; it requires preserving community participation, locally calibrated knowledge, and the ability of actors on both sides to communicate quickly. In this sense, flood warning offers a clear example of how cross-border cooperation can emerge from everyday necessity and remain useful even when the wider political environment is uncertain.

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15. Afghanistan's Koshtepa Canal Project as a Catalyst for Climate Migration in the Downstream Amu Darya River: The Case of Khorezm Region and the Republic of Karakalpakstan

Kodirjon Eshonkulov

Abstract

The Koshtepa Canal, under construction in Afghanistan, marks a turning point in the hydro-political landscape of Central Asia, threatening to alter the water dynamics of the Amu Darya basin. While macro-level studies have concentrated on interstate water diplomacy, the local socio-ecological consequences remain understudied. This chapter examines how the most vulnerable downstream zones of Uzbekistan – the Khorezm region and the Republic of Karakalpakstan – are exposed to climate migration as a result of intensifying water scarcity. Located at the terminus of the Amu Darya delta, these regions already exhibit accelerated ecological degradation characterized by water scarcity, severe soil salinization, and a sharp decline in arable land. Using a mixed-methods approach linking hydrological risk projections with demographic data, the chapter examines how the structural collapse of agriculture is acting as a driver of forced displacement, and how the canal's eventual completion is likely to compound trends already underway. It further addresses the governance problem posed by the absence of formalized institutional arrangements between the current authorities of Uzbekistan and Afghanistan for managing transboundary environmental shocks, and closes with policy recommendations designed to build climate resilience, diversify local livelihoods, and integrate

ecological-migration data into national development planning for Khorezm and Karakalpakstan.

Introduction

The Amu Darya River used to flow into the Aral Sea before its shrinkage over the last five decades. The Khorezm region and the Republic of Karakalpakstan are both located in the delta of the Amu Darya River at the periphery of the former Aral Sea coast. Both were formerly intensive cotton- and rice-producing regions by Soviet design and have suffered the consequences of the Aral Sea drawdown, the salt seepage from the exposed seabed, and the water diversions from the Amu Darya and other rivers. Despite that, the out-migration of inhabitants from the region has been a persistent phenomenon for decades, with over half a million people having left Karakalpakstan alone since 2000 (UzStat, as cited in Rahimova et al. 2024). Thus, the purpose of this chapter is to assess the likely impacts of the Koshtepa Canal, still under construction, on the fragile ecosystem of the Amu Darya delta and the downstream populations in the Khorezm region and the Republic of Karakalpakstan. The findings of this chapter demonstrate that the canal under construction is an additional stressor for the local climate and a possible driver of large-scale internal migration.

The chapter begins by reviewing the conceptual framework and the literature on the relationship between environmental degradation and migration patterns. The next section describes the anticipated hydrological changes associated with the Koshtepa Canal construction project. After that, the chapter discusses the environmental history of the Amu Darya delta and provides data on the local salinity levels and arable land trends. The mixed-methods analysis is presented in the following section, which evaluates the correlation between hydrological changes in the delta and internal migration rates in the region. The chapter then proceeds to discuss the current governance practices in the basin and the projected adaptation strategies for the populations of the Khorezm region and the Republic of Karakalpakstan.

Conceptual Framework: Environmental Degradation and Migration

The environmental migration literature explores the ways in which environmental change affects human migration patterns. A number of studies demonstrate that migration is only one of the multiple adaptive responses to hydrological and ecological disruptions affecting rural populations. More specifically, environmental studies distinguish between short- and long-term migration as coping mechanisms used by climate-sensitive communities to adapt to gradual or sudden changes in the local environment. Salinization and long-term water scarcity, in particular, have been shown to contribute to both temporary and permanent migration as an adaptive strategy in the affected regions (Mirzabaev et al., as cited in Rahimova et al. 2024). The chapter focuses on the slow-onset environmental change impact on local populations in the Amu Darya delta.

The environmental change risk associated with the Koshtepa Canal construction fits within the theoretical framework of water security and hydro-hegemony. Afghanistan's location outside of the 1992 Almaty agreement and the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination system means that the country is not bound by any specific usage quotas or regulations in the Amu Darya basin. Consequently, the Koshtepa project, which is set to divert billions of cubic meters of water from the Amu Darya River yearly, does not factor into the existing quota system, has no established dispute resolution mechanisms, and lacks third-party oversight. This lack of accountability measures is discussed in detail in the following section.

The Koshtepa Canal: The Upstream Diversion

The construction of the Koshtepa Canal began in 2022 after the Taliban takeover and is set to finish in 2028, diverting water from the Amu Darya River to northwestern and central Afghanistan. The 285-km canal will irrigate approximately 550,000 ha of agricultural land in Balkh, Jowzjan, and Faryab Provinces (Asia Plus 2026). Experts suggest that the canal will likely reduce downstream water supplies by between 6% and 17%, or 6–10 billion cubic meters (bcm) per year, depending on the source. The highest

estimate has been reported by the Asian Water Development Initiative, which cites 20.5 bcm as a design capacity (Asia Plus 2026), whereas the lowest design capacity suggested by other experts is 6 bcm withdrawal annually (Crosslin 2025). Either way, the reduction in the water supply to the Amu Darya delta is set to exacerbate the existing challenges with salt seepage and water scarcity in the region.

Ecological and Agricultural Outlook: The Downstream Impact

The Amu Darya delta has been experiencing water scarcity issues for years, which has severely impacted the agricultural sector. Over 16,000 km of irrigation canals have been built in the Khorezm region using the water from the Amu Darya River. The region's shallow groundwater has deteriorated as a result of the seepage from the canals and has caused the salt content of the soil to increase (Ibrakhimov, Park, and Vlek 2007, as cited on cawater-info.net). Over 50% of the irrigated land in the Khorezm region was affected by salinity as early as the 1980s, with the percentage projected to rise in the 2020s (Toshpulatov et al. 2022). On a larger scale, the basin's total irrigated area has decreased by approximately 10% due to salinization and water shortages over the last decade, down to 3.4 million ha (White et al., as cited in Toshpulatov et al. 2022). Salt seepage and water scarcity have impacted the Republic of Karakalpakstan even more severely due to the regional agro-industrial development and the exposure to the salt from the Aral Sea.

The shrinking of the Aral Sea has resulted in the exposure of the seabed, which led to the increased salt content of the soil and water in the region. Dust storms carry salt from the former sea to the neighboring territories, rendering them barren and infertile. Similar to Khorezm, the Republic of Karakalpakstan suffers from water scarcity and the inability to sustain its agricultural sector due to salinity levels (The Royal Society for Asian Affairs 2024; Georgetown Journal of International Affairs 2020). The ecological and agricultural outlook for the territories of the Khorezm region and the Republic of Karakalpakstan is bleak, with the water scarcity and salt

seepage from the Aral Sea and the additional water use by Afghanistan threatening to render the area unfit for human habitation.

Mixed-Methods Analysis: Migration Trends and Climate Change

The analysis of the migration trends in the region serves as a mixed-methods component of this study. According to UzStat data, over 500,000 people have migrated from Karakalpakstan since 2000 alone, with the out-migration rates being among the highest in the Republic of Uzbekistan (Asia Plus 2026). On a larger scale, the World Bank Groundswell report suggests that climate change could displace nearly 2.4 million people internally in Central Asia by 2050, with water scarcity and agricultural loss being the leading causes of the migration (Clement et al., as cited in Rahimova et al. 2024). In that report, Central Asia, alongside Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, is identified as one of the potential climate migrant-producing regions. The patterns of climate migration in Khorezm and Karakalpakstan fit within the described trends, with the populations being gradually driven away from the region.

Since the out-migration from these areas has been taking place over a prolonged period, it is reasonable to characterize it as slow-onset climate migration. Internal migration within Uzbekistan has been identified as one of the adaptive response mechanisms used by residents of the Amu Darya delta to the environmental changes taking place in their region. The gradual shifts in temperature and precipitation patterns have affected the agricultural output, which in turn has caused a decrease in the rural population due to the loss of economic opportunity. With the added pressure of water use by Afghanistan, the out-migration rates are projected to accelerate, with a significant proportion of the population likely to turn to temporary or permanent migration as a means of adaptation. As the salt seepage, water scarcity, and the impact of the Aral Sea continue to affect the region, the entire population will be under pressure to leave, with subsistence farming and small-scale agriculture being the first to suffer.

Governance Outlook and Adaptation Strategies

One of the key governance issues associated with the projected water use by Afghanistan is the lack of institutional mechanisms designed to manage the transboundary impacts on the downstream countries. While the Koshtepa Canal construction has taken place under the Taliban government, a new agreement was signed between Tashkent and Kabul in May 2025 to formalize the management practices of the Amu Darya River ("O'zbekiston-Afg'oniston amudaryo suv havzasini birgalikda boshqarish haqida shart-niyazga kelishib oldi", 2025). However, neither the agreement nor other interstate conventions address the issue of transboundary water use in sufficient detail, providing only a general framework of collaboration without specifying the quotas or any dispute resolution mechanisms. Additionally, these agreements do not establish any environmental oversight mechanisms for the populations living in the Amu Darya delta.

As a result, the populations of the Amu Darya delta are currently unable to obtain timely information on the water use in the upstream region and have no institutional mechanisms available to them to address the situation. The domestic governance practices within the Republic of Uzbekistan are also inadequate, as the state fails to take into account the potential climate migration patterns within the Amu Darya basin. Overall, the lack of political and institutional mechanisms makes the populations of Khorezm and Karakalpakstan particularly vulnerable to the water use practices of Afghanistan.

Policy Recommendations

First, the Republic of Uzbekistan must integrate the ecological considerations in the Amu Darya basin into the national development strategy. The policies designed to adapt to the environmental challenges in the delta should include both the sustainability of local livelihoods and the internal migration rates fueled by the environmental degradation. Specifically, the Uzbek government may want to use the international data on soil salinity, water use, and internal migration trends in concert with the local observations to inform the regional development strategy for the Khorezm region and the Republic of Karakalpakstan. Second, the Uzbek

government should provide support to the adaptation strategies of the populations living in the Amu Darya delta who have been significantly affected by the salt seepage and water scarcity.

The government may want to consider diversifying the economies of the affected areas and encourage the populations to transition from agriculture to other industries in order to reduce their vulnerability to the environmental challenges in the region. Third, independent monitoring of the Koshtepa Canal construction and water use should be conducted on a regular basis and incorporated into the national contingency planning by Uzbekistan. Given the lack of reliable data on the water use in Afghanistan, it is essential that Tashkent has sufficient oversight of the situation and is aware of the potential risks associated with the canal. Fourth, the Republic of Uzbekistan should develop an expanded strategy for cooperation with Afghanistan to address the security concerns in the Amu Darya basin. Additionally, the local populations in the delta should be informed of the projected changes in water availability to help them prepare for any potential disruptions.

Conclusion

The projections and the findings of this chapter demonstrate that the populations of the Khorezm region and the Republic of Karakalpakstan are highly vulnerable to the additional water use by Afghanistan. The salt seepage and water scarcity in the Amu Darya delta have already contributed to a steady decline in the rural population due to the degradation of the agricultural sector. The addition of the Koshtepa Canal, which is projected to divert between 6% and 17% of the river's flow, will accelerate the deterioration of the environment and contribute to internal migration and displacement. The main policy recommendation of this chapter is to address both the internal migration patterns and the environmental sustainability within the Amu Darya basin.

The populations of the Khorezm region and the Republic of Karakalpakstan are currently highly vulnerable due to the limited water resources and salt seepage in the area. The addition of the Koshtepa Canal presents an additional source of stress for the local populations. As a result,

the internal migration rates are likely to rise as people seek to relocate to other areas and countries to avoid the environmental degradation of the region. The current governance practices within Uzbekistan and the lack of formal mechanisms of cooperation with Afghanistan fail to account for the projected migration patterns in the delta. The populations of the Amu Darya delta will continue to bear the costs of the water use practices in upstream Afghanistan.

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Part V. Functional Cooperation: Mobility, Health, Connectivity, and Cross-Border Risk

16. Regional Integration in the Context of COVID-19: IGAD and the Management of Displacement Crisis

Ibrahim Kone

Abstract

Most studies have demonstrated that COVID-19 has hindered regional integration due to nationalism. The border-closing policy was the way for states to protect citizens against the virus's rapid spread. As a result, the free circulation of people and goods became difficult. However, our study demonstrates that COVID-19, in an appropriate contingency frame, can be an asset to regional integration. The refugee group is taken as the unit of analysis, demonstrating that the IGAD region has seen advancement in cross-border mobility. This advancement is reflected in the establishment of a protocol on persons' free movement in November 2020, which it had struggled to establish since its creation in 1996. Our chapter uses the constructivist theory of peace to explain why the Intergovernmental Authority on Development has implemented a protocol for people movement, enhancing the integration process during COVID-19. Therefore, COVID-19 is a catalyst for explaining the causal relationship between human rights protection and regional integration. Our study reveals that the objective conditions developed by liberal democracy cannot stand alone to enhance regional integration. A need for a normative community is a precondition for enhancing regional integration and ensuring human rights protection elsewhere.

Introduction

Regional integration appears to be the appropriate way to remove barriers between states by creating a shared space maintained by rules. However, integrating states into large unions remains no easy task. Many scholars are asking whether the integration is by force or not. Therefore, a catalyst factor is needed to explain such phenomena. In interpreting regional economic integration, scholars attribute a successful regional integration to the domestic economic factor or political motivation of each state involved in a

regional integration building. The process of regional integration did not take place in every region simultaneously. Therefore, most attention is paid to the European Economic Community (EEC) as the regional integration model, although numerous questions remain on European integration (Nye 1965, 870). However, those studies focus on how domestic issues participate in the building process of regional integration. Thus, the domestic political bargaining and economic structure are some issues that scholars explored.

The rapid growth of economic regionalism in the aftermath of the Cold War raised many questions. Some scholars argued that this rapid boom would drive conflict and protectionism, whereas others thought it would be the way to promote openness economically and privilege the multilateral system. This uncertainty prompted some scholars to explore the regional integration process's political factors (Mansfield and Milner 1999). Therefore, the distinction of regional integration's economic form depends on the formation and spread of preferential trading arrangements (PTAs), influencing the state's regional integration preference (Fishlow and Haggard 1992). However, regional integration can also depend on the regional integration arrangement (RIA). It is due to regional organizations' involvement in solving conflict. Therefore the RIA became a determinant factor for a regional economic institution (Haftel 2007) that is more plausible when studying the different regional organizations in Africa. In 2010, there were approximately 40 intergovernmental regional organizations worldwide with security on their agenda (Diehl 2005; Tavares 2010).

However, the recent appearance of COVID-19 as a pandemic has hindered regional integration. The rise of nationalism replaced the open border policy that states gave up for efficient regional integration. As the most successful regional integration, the EU saw its member states adopting the closing border policy to diminish the virus's spread. Some other regional organizations like ECOWAS adopted the same policy. As a result, the free circulation of people and goods became challenging to manage. COVID-19 was then invoked as a catalyst for states to adopt the closed-door policy. The world economy was shrinking. This outbreak of COVID-

19 brought a new challenge to the collective action problem reflected in different regional organizations. Despite this turbulence, the Intergovernmental Authority on Development (IGAD), constituted of eight states (Sudan, South Sudan, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Djibouti, Somalia, Uganda, and Kenya), has progressed to achieve greater regional integration by establishing a protocol on the free movement of people and transhumance in November 2020 (Barigaba 2020). This Protocol is intended to advance cross-border mobility, hence improving the regional economic integration and development. Indeed, the IGAD organization, founded in 1986, had a simple objective. It was to challenge the drought and desertification problem faced by its member states. However, due to the intense tension among its member states and the civil war in Somalia, IGAD saw its agenda involving peace settlement and conflict management (Best and Christiansen 2014, 408).

The realization of its first objective could not be fulfilled unless there was a peaceful and secure environment. Although the promotion of free movement and goods was on its agenda since 1996 (IGAD 1996, art. 8), IGAD struggled for more than 20 years to establish a protocol for people's free movement and transhumance. This delay can be summarized as its inefficiency in resolving different conflicts between its member states. The rivalry among IGAD's member states is the key to delaying the integration process. For instance, the clash between Ethiopia and Somalia involving Kenya, the Sudan–Uganda proxy war and the war between Ethiopia and Eritrea are some clashes characterizing the IGAD region, forcing them to deal solely with bilateral agreements. IGAD is judged not to be an organ of regional integration by ignoring the public sphere to political leaders' advantage. The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea can well illustrate this assumption. Eritrea accused IGAD of being an Ethiopian puppet until Eritrea suspended its membership in April 2007. However, IGAD is the only way for that region to address different challenges the member states face. The region suffered from problems that could be addressed only through regional integration or collective action (Bereketeab n.d., 175). Scholars specializing in regional studies should not be surprised that

conflict and war are persistent and continual international political problems.

These rampant conflicts and political instabilities led IGAD members to deal within the framework of bilateral agreements. Therefore, it posed the problem of collective action. Hence, those conflicts and natural disasters led to refugees and displacement crises in IGAD. As a result, the IGAD region counted more than 4.2 million refugees and approximately 8.2 million internally displaced persons in 2020. Furthermore, the outbreak of COVID-19 as a pandemic exacerbated a crisis that member states were struggling to resolve. However, when other regional organizations faced implementing the closed-door policy by states, IGAD realized a spectacular advancement in its integration policy by adopting a free movement protocol that would lead to a standard border policy in the coming years. Given this collective action problem, we have asked the following question: why has IGAD been able to establish a protocol of free movement during COVID-19?

We admit that the establishment of the Protocol happened during the COVID-19 pandemic. It has been an essential asset to manage the displacement crisis. Hence, the population movement in IGAD is the determinant factor in its regional integration process. Our study aims to analyze the collective action problem in crisis management. Hence, explaining COVID-19 as a catalyst factor will be our specific goal. Our chapter will be divided into the following sections: Methodology, Theoretical framework, Findings, and Conclusion.

Methodology

Qualitative research has been done in order to answer our research question. Thus, an explanatory model has been followed. Our chapter used secondary data (books, articles, journals, reports, conference papers, and official websites). Process tracing is used to show the cause and mechanism and then derive the conclusion. The advantage of the data collection was that it provided a rigorous qualitative analysis.

The purpose of our research is to explain the effect of COVID-19 on the process of regional integration. COVID-19 is seen as a catalyst factor for regional integration. It is plausible that most of the literature reviews on

regional integration focus on domestic factors as catalyst elements. However, our research tried to evaluate the effect of a systemic factor on the regional integration process. Hence, COVID-19 is treated as an intervening variable. The causal relationship between our two variables, the displacement crisis and the Protocol of free movement, is explained by COVID-19.

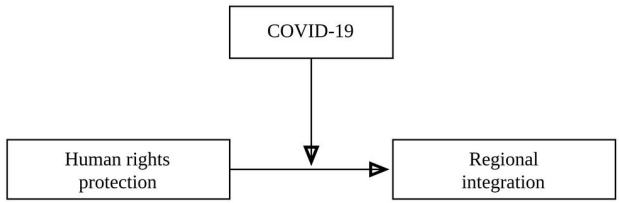


Fig. 1. Explaining variables

In our study, the population movement is the independent variable causing regional integration, taken in our study as the dependent variable. However, this causal relation is bounded by an intervening variable: COVID-19.

The nature of our chapter highlights the “refugees” in the IGAD region as the unit of analysis. The spread of refugees across the states composing the IGAD organization results from the different conflicts. Moreover, environmental change is also a cause of some of those movements. Therefore, the collected data target refugees in the IGAD region. The data cover the years 1996 to 2019. However, the same group of people are analyzed during the COVID-19 period and its implications for the regional integration process. Furthermore, a trend study has been done to see the evolution and change within the refugee group. In other words, the change within the refugee group before and during the COVID-19 pandemic is analyzed. The main goal is to understand the causal relationship between our dependent and independent variables. The United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) are our data’s primary providers.

The Peace of Westphalia divided religion from the state’s administration, leading to the supremacy of the nation-state as a collective organization. States until today are deemed to guarantee the rights of their

citizens. However, the recent rise of supra-governmental organizations tries to promote that right on a large scale. They struggle to ensure that each individual's rights are guaranteed by the respective states, enhancing human welfare legally. That is more plausible if some states fail to assure the fundamental human rights of their citizens (Haddad 2008, 47–69). The international umbrella on protection is aimed to fulfill that duty even though states have become unable to assure their citizens' rights. That is to say, once the state fails to assure its citizens' rights, an alternative international organization can stand and fill the gap.

People running from the religious crisis in 1648 combined with nation-state formation created a new concept of "asylum" emerging from Europe. The different great tragedies that the world has encountered (the collapse of the European empires, the First World War, and the Second World War) participated in giving the ongoing form of today's "global refugee regime." Hence, a right is given to people fleeing situations where their fundamental rights are not given. They have the right to seek international protection and asylum (Loescher 2001). The creation of the refugee regime is intended to provide fundamental rights to citizens via an alternative even though their state of origin is unwilling to provide them. Our sources describe refugees as people recognized as refugees under the 1951 Convention on the Status of Refugees or its 1967 Protocol. Moreover, in the 1969 Organization of African Unity Convention Governing the Specific Aspects of Refugee Problems in Africa, people were recognized as refugees according to the UNHCR statute, granted refugee-like humanitarian status, and provided temporary protection. Asylum seekers can be defined as people who have not yet received a decision or are registered as asylum seekers.

However, the refugee regime convention did not consider some new phenomena that can be classified as new driving forces of the refugee regime, especially in developing countries. For example, states' democratic fragility, environmental change, natural disaster, drought, and food insecurity are some driving forces that the 1951 convention does not cover. People crossing borders are categorized as "voluntary economic migrants" or 1951 convention refugees (Richmond 1993).

Environmental change is among the newest driving forces of displacement. The migration became a new pattern of this climate issue. A new name has been given to displaced people due to environmental change by policymakers and academics: "climate change refugee or environmentally displaced people." However, according to the FAO, food insecurity is a new force of displacement due to extreme poverty. More than one billion people suffer from malnutrition, causing a severe health crisis. International protection rarely involves people categorized in this group. Solely, "people's civil and political rights" are considered part of the international refugees. Hence, economic and social status are left aside (Price 2009).

Nevertheless, the human rights law makes no distinction between the other form of refugee status and food insecurity (Foster 2009). Fleeing for security or liberty reasons should not be separated from the absence of bare subsistence. "Rights without which it is impossible to enjoy any other rights" (Shue 1980; Shacknove 1985). State fragility is an essential indicator of the factors (environmental change, food insecurity) influencing the refugee regime. A strong government is likely to have a solid domestic policy and hence find a solution to those problems. However, a weak state with lousy governance would cause an increase in the refugee movement. Designating a state as "fragile" or "failed" depends on the political view. Moreover, it always refers to the European standard: democracy (Patrick 2011, 19–21).

Data Sources

The country of asylum is defined as the country where an asylum claim was filed and granted. The data has been published by the World Bank – World Bank Indicators. However, the data publisher's source is the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) statistical database. It is available at. There have always been problems in collecting accurate data on refugees. The registration of a refugee's status is voluntary. Therefore, due to ignorance of its importance, many refugees do not register. Moreover, there is a problem of exaggeration brought by different administrative records. Sometimes, they tend to overestimate the number of

refugees. Moreover, the lack of centralization of the registries brings a problem of having accurate, centralized data because of the data stagnation at the local level, and therefore they are omitted.

The determinants of refugees include migrants. Refugees are defined in the data as people who have crossed an international border to find a better life. They can end up in a sanctuary and benefit from refugee status. However, three known organs are providers of refugee data: the UNHCR field offices, NGOs, and governmental agencies; moreover, the data on refugees include other sources: estimation and surveys. Furthermore, the years 2007–2011 include another category of refugees. However, we can describe it in nature. It includes people outside their country's territory of origin but facing potential risks equivalent to refugees'. Therefore, their refugee status has not been defined.

Furthermore, we define asylum seekers as people who have applied for refugee or asylum status and have not yet received approval of their application. Internally displaced people, sometimes confused with refugees, are not included in our study precisely because this category of people remains under their government's security umbrella. However, the reason for leaving their country is similar to the refugees'.

Theoretical Framework

The study of international integration has been called the 'pre-paradigm of science' development by Thomas Kuhn (Caporaso 1971, 228). It describes the international integration's scientific study (see Kuhn 1962). Moreover, Nye emphasized the disaggregation of any concept related to the international integration issue (see Nye 1968). The literature of different theories on international integration attempts to solve the collective action issue; therefore, our chapter studied the IGAD protocol of free movement in the framework of intersubjectivity.

Intersubjectivity in the social domain seems to be an essential condition for peacebuilding according to the constructivist theory of liberal democratic peace. Timo Kivimaki demonstrates that the normative community matters more than objective conditions for a regional-level peacebuilding process. However, it does not show how liberalism fails with

its objective factors as a source of peace. Nevertheless, it shows that intersubjectivity can be a real asset for regional peacebuilding among non-democratic states. Therefore, it is the essential element of the constructivist theory of peace. However, it plays an essential role in the liberal democracy states' peaceful relation process (Peceny 1997). Liberalism's assumption on peacebuilding remains on the state's commitment to objective conditions. That is more likely to be believed because democratic norms in liberal states' foreign policy decision-making process are likely to reflect the will of the citizens hence modeling any government to go to war. A war between democratic states would be against the objective conditions of liberal democracy. The constructivists showed that the liberal democratic thesis on peacebuilding could be accurate somehow due to citizens and leaders of democratic states acknowledging those objective conditions as absolute truth. Also, the champion of liberal democracy has a material interest in doing it (Peceny 1997, 428).

Furthermore, the constructivists found that although there are objective conditions, the liberal democratic peacebuilding model does not arise. They demonstrate that intersubjectivity is more accurate than objectivity in regional peacebuilding. Therefore, it is a challenger to the liberal democracy objectivity on peacebuilding.

Our research admitted that intersubjectivity is the precondition for a regional integration process rather than objective conditions. The liberal assumption of objective conditions facilitating regional integration fails to explain free movement protocol in the IGAD region. Since 1996, IGAD has struggled to establish a free movement protocol among its member states, dealing solely with the bilateral agreements. Although they had an objective condition summarized by establishing people's free movement and transhumance in the region, IGAD failed to establish this necessary Protocol in regional integration. The non-existence of a normative community can explain that failure. IGAD's member states were busy with nationalistic policies. That can explain the different wars between its member states, creating many refugees. However, COVID-19 led to the concretization of a protocol on people's free movement and transhumance. Even though the pandemic is a non-objective condition to regional

integration, it played the role of catalyst. Hence, it brought about the formation of a normative community. The pandemic's impact on refugees' livelihoods dispersed among IGAD's member states played a crucial role. COVID-19, seen as a catalyst factor, is a new variable that we attempt to incorporate as a condition for intersubjectivity formation.

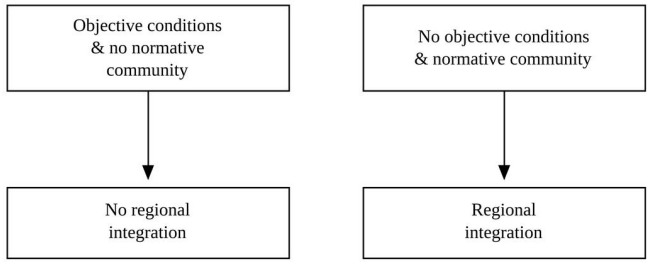


Fig. 2. Explaining the puzzle

Findings

Beforehand, we must acknowledge that the notion of the refugee is under the umbrella of population movement. Migration plays a significant role across humanity. Our current world reflects different migrations that have taken place across time. Hence, it is a prominent part of the international agenda. Its impact on current international affairs raises the concern of states' security. Refugee crisis management is a big concern for states unwilling to deal with such turmoil in a regional organization's frame. Indeed the further turmoil, uncertainties, and instability encouraged people to take action and seek a better life. The post-Cold War period explains this phenomenon through the wave of people fleeing the East to Western Europe. The International Organization for Migration (IOM) has noticed a significant increase in the number of migrants worldwide, from 70 million in the 1960s to 214 million in 2010. Moreover, the UNHCR noted millions of displaced people and refugees in the same year (Bali 2013, 521).

Human Rights Protection and the Failure of Regional Integration

The IGAD region, counting approximately 8.1 million internally displaced people and 4.2 million refugees, is a zone of violent interstate conflicts. Refugees in IGAD result from those forms of violence. Moreover, some issues are related to the impact of climate change. Despite creating an organ in 2000, IGAD still struggles to manage or even stabilize its region from its member states' different rampant conflicts. Its principles highlight the "peaceful settlement of inter and intra-state conflicts through dialogue-Maintenance of regional peace, stability and security" (IGAD 1996, art. 7). However, IGAD has been unable to develop protocols to avoid violent conflicts and maintain peace and stability among its member states (Apuuli 2004). The deal with peace and security in IGAD is amended and endorsed by its member states to mandate the IGAD Secretariat (IGAD 2007, art. 2). The Conflict Early Warning and Response Mechanism (CEWARN) establishment has successfully solved minor conflicts (Apuuli 2004). However, significant conflicts have got the better of that organ. The war between Ethiopia and Eritrea or the conflict between Eritrea and Djibouti in 2008, conflict in Darfur, Northern Uganda, and eastern Ethiopia showed the limit of IGAD (Woodward 2010; Healy 2009). The success of the CEWARN lies in its ability to solve some minor nomadic movements and religious conflicts. Moreover, the objectives declared by the CEWARN were accompanied by a normative community. Hence, the number of refugees from 1996 to 2019 has significantly increased, and its management was left to individual states.

Table 1. Different interstate conflicts between IGAD members. Source: Author.

Conflict parties	**Location**	**Causes**
Ethiopia–Somalia	Ogaden 1977–1978	Somali invasion of Ethiopia
Ethiopia–Eritrea	Borders 1998–2000	Border conflict
Eritrea–Djibouti	Borders June 10–13,	Border conflict

	2008	
Kenya–Uganda	Lake Victoria 2008–2009	Water, fish, and possibly crude oil
Kenya–Ethiopia	2010	Water conflict
Kenya–South Sudan	Abyei state 2011	Oil

Table 2. Refugee population by country or territory of asylum in the IGAD region. Source: World Bank website.

States	**1996**	**2019**	**Absolute change**	**Relative change**
Djibouti	25080	19639	-7528	-30%
Eritrea	2105	199	-1906	-90%
Ethiopia	390528	733123	342595	87.72%
Kenya	223640	438899	215259	96.25%
Somalia	700	17882	17182	2454%
South Sudan	-	298309	298309	100%
Sudan	393874	1055489	661615	167%
Uganda	264294	1359458	1095164	414%

The refugee population in the IGAD region is categorized as international migrations, whether involuntary or forced. In the IGAD region, that crisis results from ethnic clashes and interstate wars. However, some natural disasters are the causes of such movement. The journey of black African Sudanese leaving their homes because of the crisis in Darfur enters the frame of forced migration. The political instability and drought caused people moving from Somalia to Kenya to enter the involuntary

migration frame. That movement highlights the creation of large-scale refugees running from famine. However, its management is still left to individual states though they are from the same regional organization.

In the international system, the state is defined in terms of sovereignty. The state remains the leading actor. That is to say that the state has the control and jurisdiction power over its territory. One of these characteristics is the state's ability to control people entering and exiting its territory. The state's implementation of border controls and policies is due to its willingness to regulate people who may enter or not. It also determines the time and condition of stay. The state has the absolute right to decide who will enter its territory as immigrants or not. The state makes decisions on this issue based on different criteria. The refugee movement seems to put some limitations on the state's practice. The 1951 convention on refugees' status obligates signatory member states to give protection and asylum to people threatened in their country regarding religion, political orientation, race, and nationality. Therefore, the refugee is a human being and needs to be protected if necessary (Goodwin-Gill 1983, 1).

The convention reminds states not to send back any asylum seeker to their country of origin, where their life is threatened as long as their refugee status is under consideration. However, these practices cannot assure refugee status. The state is still sovereign in the international arena. Hence, it reserves the right to give refugee status to whomever it wants. Nonetheless, the international convention guarantees a certain level of the treatment of refugees that has been endorsed by all member states signatory of the convention – recognizing an asylum seeker as a refugee is still a political decision depending on the relations between the state of origin and the host state (Bali 2013, 525).

COVID-19 and the Formation of a Normative Community

Many states' cross-border policy also included a restriction on asylum seekers of refugee status to stop the pandemic even though the UNHCR has been clear on the possibility to deal with both (protect and seek rapid asylum process). The pandemic brought new challenges to people's livelihood, and the protection of refugees was left behind. At the

pandemic's peak, approximately 168 states closed their borders either totally or partially. Ninety states so far have made no exception for asylum seekers. Some states went beyond and sent asylum seekers, including children, back to their origin country. Moreover, Trigg said some states have been reticent to receive their citizens during the pandemic (UNHCR 2020). That is to say, nationalism has prevailed over international norms, at least for a certain period.

Infectious diseases and the new forms of ancient variants have reemerged quickly in recent years. The spread of COVID-19 threatens people under states' protection, raising a security concern. Left behind by this security threat, Western States have had many deaths from COVID-19. Moreover, it got more attention, like in the U.S. and other parts of the globe. Its "human-to-human transmission" contributed to its rapid spread across the globe. In today's era of globalization, the world's connectivity was the vector contributing to its success. It has caused social disorder and challenged the state's function. Many citizens lost hope in their state due to the inefficient management of the pandemic. It gave rise to many protests across the world. Hence, the destabilization of solid states like the U.S. and certain weak states like Mali was the next step (see Price-Smith 2009). The state's inefficacy in curbing the number of cases leads its citizens to despair. Hence, they are more likely to introduce violence because they judge that they have nothing to lose.

Moreover, an epidemic on a large scale like COVID-19 contributes to the decline of the global economy. Different governments' high spending to control the pandemic contributes to diminishing production with the lack of workers. The reduction of investment occurs due to the market's high risk and uncertainty (see McInnes 2013, 327).

However, liberal theorists suggest that the open door policy with a preference for "doux commerce" among citizens of different nations would lead to peace among democratic countries (Doyle 1983); moreover, it would help solve collective action problems. This thesis does not work in the context of COVID-19. The pandemic brought states a new closing border policy, making it hard for asylum seekers to cross borders. However, the response of IGAD vis-à-vis the impact that COVID-19 could have on the

refugee issue has been regional. In March 2020, the first case of COVID-19 appeared in the Horn of Africa. Drastic measures were taken in the IGAD region and other states. In its statement, IGAD highlights the necessity to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic within a regional framework. The IGAD has judged the individual response through closed-border policies as inadequate to defeat COVID-19. Regional coordination was indeed the proposed solution. In the "IGAD heads of state and government declaration on the coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic" (IGAD 2020a), emphasis was placed on the risk of exacerbating the different ongoing conflicts in the region. Moreover, the issue of the refugee in IGAD is a crucial matter. Dealing with the first wave of the desert locust invasion, member states of IGAD were not safe from an unprecedented famine outbreak (see FAO n.d.). Furthermore, the management of COVID-19 led to the drastic intervention of states stepping into the informal economy, which many refugees depend on, therefore, endangering this vulnerable group's survival.

The vulnerability of humanity during the pandemic endangers more refugees and displaced people. International organizations and regional organizations helped target regions with many refugees and displaced people. They provided personal protective equipment (PPE) and other equipment to assist targeted governments (with a high level of refugee groups) fighting against the pandemic. A 60-million-euro package has been allocated to IGAD by the European Union. This package is destined in general for vulnerable groups. Internally displaced people, refugees, and asylum seekers were the social stratum to be considered in that donation (IGAD 2020b). Moreover, a free movement and transhumance protocol was adopted in the IGAD region in November 2020, financed by the "E.U. emergency trust fund for Africa."

States' responsibility for protecting their citizens led to a temporary closure of their borders and limited the impact of the COVID-19. However, asylum seekers also have the right to seek international protection according to the 1951 convention on refugee status. Therefore, the principle of nonrefoulement that most states agreed on as customary international law norms should bring an exception to states' closed-door policies (UNHCR n.d.). The material support received by IGAD helped develop a normative

community in the fight against COVID-19. Of the eight member states of IGAD, one did not impose any border restriction related to COVID-19. Four countries imposed restrictions on access to their territory but with an exception for asylum seekers. One country denied access to its territory, and two countries have pending data, so the access to the territory is unknown.

Table 3. Geographic distribution of IGAD member states by access to territory. Source: UNHCR website (https://data2.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/127?sv=44&geo=0).

No COVID-related restrictions imposed	**Countries where restrictions on access to territory apply with exceptions for asylum-seekers**	**Countries where access to territory is denied**	**Countries where access to territory data is pending**
Djibouti	South Sudan, Ethiopia, Somalia, Uganda	Eritrea	Kenya, Sudan

Conclusion

Regional integration is a long process with a combination of many patterns. Although COVID-19 has negatively impacted the world, our study demonstrated that it had been beneficial to a certain extent. The IGAD, to undertake a protocol of free movement and transhumance within its member states, had to wait for the impact of COVID-19 to form a normative community. Therefore, COVID-19 is taken as the catalyst factor within the process of regional integration. IGAD, since its creation in 1996, had its objective conditions to enhance the Protocol of free movement and transhumance in the region. The lack of a normative community, seen through different wars and rampant conflict, within its member states hindered the process. The COVID-19 pandemic brought a new level of common ground that IGAD's member states explored to find common

ground: the refugee crisis. The high level of refugees in the IGAD region combined with the locust invasion could have drastic consequences for states struggling to tackle COVID-19. Table 3 shows the openness of borders for asylum seekers. Therefore, it attests that COVID-19 was the catalyst to see intersubjectivity working within the IGAD organization. A simple fact may explain Eritrea's border closure: the number of refugees decreased significantly in that country, according to Table 2.

Moreover, the study agrees with the constructivist theory of liberal democracy as analyzed by Timo Kivimaki. However, our study integrates a condition under which intersubjectivity is likely to work. Applying that theory in the IGAD's regional integration process extends the theory to a new level. The chapter argues that there is no normative community without a material interest. The material gains are a source of motivation for leaders to embrace a normative community. Hence, the liberal democratic conditions alone are not enough for regional integration. That can be illustrated by the different wars between IGAD's members (see Table 1).

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Data Deposition

The data supporting this study’s findings are available in the World Bank and COVID-19 platforms at https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SM.POP.REFG and https://data2.unhcr.org/en/dataviz/127?sv=44&geo=0. These data were derived from the UNHCR Operational Data Portal and World Bank refugee-by-country-or-territory-of-asylum data.

17. Public Health in the Russia–Kazakhstan Borderland: Regional Tuberculosis Incidence Dynamics, Mortality Patterns, and Spatial Autocorrelation, 2019–2024

Nikolai Grudtsyn and Anatoly Chistobaev

Abstract

Tuberculosis remains an important public health challenge in the Russia–Kazakhstan borderland, where adjacent regions often display different epidemiological trajectories despite geographic proximity. This study examines regional TB incidence from 2019 to 2024, compares incidence and mortality patterns in 2022, and tests for global spatial autocorrelation across 19 border-adjacent regions in Kazakhstan and Russia. We combined regional incidence data for the full study period with mortality data comparable across both countries, but only for 2022, which constrained the incidence–mortality typology to that year. The analysis shows that Kazakhstan's border regions consistently had higher reported TB incidence than neighboring Russian regions, while several Russian regions exhibited larger cumulative declines over time. However, Moran's I remained close to zero and statistically non-significant in all years, indicating that the observed differences did not form a stable global spatial cluster. Overall, the findings suggest a territorially heterogeneous cross-border public health pattern rather than a single contiguous epidemiological hotspot.

Introduction

The Russia–Kazakhstan borderland is a strategically important region for analyzing cross-border public health because it combines high levels of

human mobility, long-standing economic ties, and persistent asymmetries in healthcare access. Stretching for roughly 7,600 km, the border connects regions that are geographically adjacent yet embedded in different health-system arrangements. In such settings, health outcomes are shaped not only by national policies but also by the practical geography of care: where services are located and whether people can access them across borders.

Public health geography shows that access to care depends on the relationship between population needs and service supply (Gatrell and Elliott 2015). In borderlands, this takes on an institutional dimension, as the spatial organization of healthcare and cross-border patient mobility are heavily shaped by administrative barriers and regional infrastructure (Chistobaev et al. 2024). The two countries share bilateral instruments for sanitary-epidemiological collaboration, but the functional cross-border healthcare space remains limited. Russia and Kazakhstan do not appear to have a publicly identified bilateral agreement specifically dedicated to tuberculosis control. The relevant legal context is instead provided by broader arrangements on sanitary and epidemiological welfare and healthcare cooperation (Government of the Russian Federation and Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan n.d.). These instruments provide a general basis for cooperation in infectious disease prevention, surveillance, information exchange, and joint professional or scientific activities. At the same time, the extent to which they are translated into TB-specific referral, treatment continuity, and follow-up mechanisms at the border-regional level requires separate investigation.

Routine treatment, patient referral, and sub-national coordination often remain weakly institutionalized. The COVID-19 pandemic made this gap visible, revealing limited capacity for synchronized health governance during emergencies and serving as a transformative shock that abruptly halted cross-border patient flows and routine healthcare access (Grudtsyn 2024). This logic applies equally to TB, which requires timely detection and continuity of care for mobile populations.

Against this background, TB provides a useful lens for examining cross-border public health capacity (World Health Organization 2024), especially since regional public health outcomes require integral evaluation of

complex socio-demographic and institutional factors (Chistobaev et al. 2022; Bozhkov et al. 2023). The burden of TB has declined unevenly across the post-Soviet space, and comparative evidence shows that Kazakhstan and Russia have not followed identical mortality trajectories (Yeraliyeva et al. 2023). Post-Soviet mortality research has repeatedly shown that health outcomes in the region are highly sensitive to structural and institutional change (Stuckler et al. 2009; Brainerd 2021). Furthermore, the literature emphasizes that TB control depends heavily on the distribution of social protection and the ability to retain socio-economically vulnerable patients in care (Hargreaves et al. 2011; Nidoi et al. 2021). In the Eurasian context, these vulnerabilities are often compounded by specific institutional settings, such as the penal system, which historically acts as a significant reservoir for TB and multidrug-resistant strains (Droznin et al. 2017; Testov et al. 2022; Mikhaylova et al. 2024). In borderlands, high mobility and administrative barriers can amplify these underlying social risks, making routine care harder to deliver consistently.

While a systematic review of respiratory diseases in Central Asia and Russia shows substantial concern about TB (Tabyshova et al. 2020), available studies tend to be country-specific or clinical. In Kazakhstan, studies show a strong decline in TB incidence alongside persistent inequalities in mortality. Conversely, spatial studies of TB in border-adjacent Russian regions document declining incidence but a growing burden of drug resistance (Shartova et al. 2023). This suggests that cross-border proximity can coincide with very different epidemiological profiles.

What remains insufficiently understood is whether the Russia–Kazakhstan borderland functions as a coherent epidemiological space or as a set of adjacent but institutionally separated regional systems. Existing studies rarely connect epidemiological patterns to the institutional question of cross-border coordination. To address this gap, this study asks whether the observed differences represent a stable cross-border epidemiological structure or a fragmented pattern of regional outliers. Specifically, the study sets three objectives:

1. To compare the temporal dynamics of regional TB incidence across the borderland from 2019 to 2024.

2. To create a spatial typology of regional TB burden combining incidence and mortality data for 2022.
3. To test for global spatial autocorrelation to determine if adjacent regions form a coherent borderwide epidemiological hotspot.

Materials and methods

Study Design and Area

This study employs a comparative borderland design to examine tuberculosis patterns across 19 adjacent first-level administrative regions forming the Russia–Kazakhstan border zone. The temporal scope covers the period from 2019 to 2024.

Tyumen Oblast was analyzed as a single regional unit, excluding the autonomous okrugs that are administratively associated with it. The inclusion of the Samara region is justified by the presence of the Mashtakovo border checkpoint, a major Russia–Kazakhstan crossing point in the wider regional transport system.

All data management, spatial analysis, and graphical output were produced in Jupyter Notebook (version 6.5.4; Python 3.10.9) using pandas, numpy, seaborn, matplotlib, geopandas, libpysal, esda, statsmodels, and math, which supported the integration of descriptive analysis, spatial statistics, and visualization within a single analytical workflow.

Data Sources

The dataset was assembled from official regional TB indicators. Data for Kazakhstan were retrieved from the Bureau of National Statistics (Bureau of National Statistics of Kazakhstan 2025), and data for the Russian Federation were extracted from Rosstat's statistics (Rosstat 2025). Annual regional TB incidence data were available for both countries for the full study period, 2019 – 2024. In Kazakhstan, regional mortality statistics by major causes of death, including tuberculosis, were available through 2025. In the Russian Federation, comparable centrally published regional mortality data by cause of death were available only through 2022. Therefore, 2022 – the last year for which regional TB mortality indicators

could be compared across both countries – was selected for the mortality mapping and incidence–mortality typology. These analyses are cross-sectional and descriptive and should not be interpreted as evidence of longitudinal mortality trends.

Although both countries report official regional indicators, differences in death certification, notification practices, case-detection intensity, and statistical reporting may affect cross-country comparability. The incidence/mortality typology is therefore used to identify broad descriptive contrasts rather than to provide a direct measure of treatment effectiveness or health-system performance.

Analytical Strategy and Typology

Because the primary objective is to characterize spatial and temporal patterns rather than to estimate causal effects, the analytical strategy relies on descriptive epidemiology and cartographic comparison. Temporal dynamics were visualized using heatmaps to compare between-country and within-country variations over time, supplemented by plots of average year-to-year and cumulative percentage changes (2019–2024). To assess the structural relationship between burden and severity, a typology of regional TB burden was created using median splits of the 2022 incidence and mortality data. This yielded four analytical quadrants: high incidence/high mortality, high incidence/low mortality, low incidence/high mortality, and low incidence/low mortality.

Spatial Autocorrelation Analysis

To evaluate spatial dependence, global Moran's I was calculated for annual TB incidence across the 19-region system. The spatial weight matrix was based on regional adjacency (first-order contiguity), testing whether neighboring regions exhibit similar incidence levels more often than expected by chance. Spatial weights were defined using a binary first-order contiguity matrix: $w_{ij}=1$ when two study regions shared a common administrative boundary and $w_{ij}=0$ otherwise. The diagonal elements were set to zero, and the matrix was row-standardized before calculating Moran's I. For each year, the observed Moran's I was evaluated against its expected

value under spatial randomness using z-scores and p-values. This exploratory approach determines whether the borderland functions as a coherent spatial field or is dominated by localized contrasts. However, the interpretation of global Moran's I remains cautious: given the small sample size (n=19) and the intersection of two different national reporting regimes, a non-significant global statistic does not preclude the existence of sharp local disparities.

Results

Temporal Dynamics and Post-Pandemic Recovery Trajectories

The comparative analysis reveals a stable cross-border asymmetry in tuberculosis incidence between Kazakhstan and Russia throughout the study period. Across the heatmap (Fig. 1), Kazakhstani border regions consistently occupy the upper part of the incidence distribution. In contrast, most Russian border regions remain at substantially lower levels, with the notable exception of the Kurgan Region and, to a lesser extent, the Republic of Altai. This pattern indicates that the borderland is not epidemiologically homogeneous despite geographic continuity and long-standing cross-border interaction.

The temporal pattern is marked by a broad, synchronous decline in registered incidence between 2019 and 2020 in all regions across both countries, followed by a partial rebound in 2021–2022 and more divergent trajectories thereafter. Analytically, this universal drop in 2020 strongly reflects the disruptive impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on TB surveillance (Ledesma et al. 2023). While COVID-19 undoubtedly increased overall mortality among vulnerable patient groups, this sharp decline in registered incidence is unlikely to indicate a sudden reduction in true TB transmission. Rather, it may indicate a diagnostic gap associated with reduced active case-finding, suspension of routine screening, and the repurposing of healthcare infrastructure during the initial pandemic lockdowns, a phenomenon widely documented in global TB reporting.

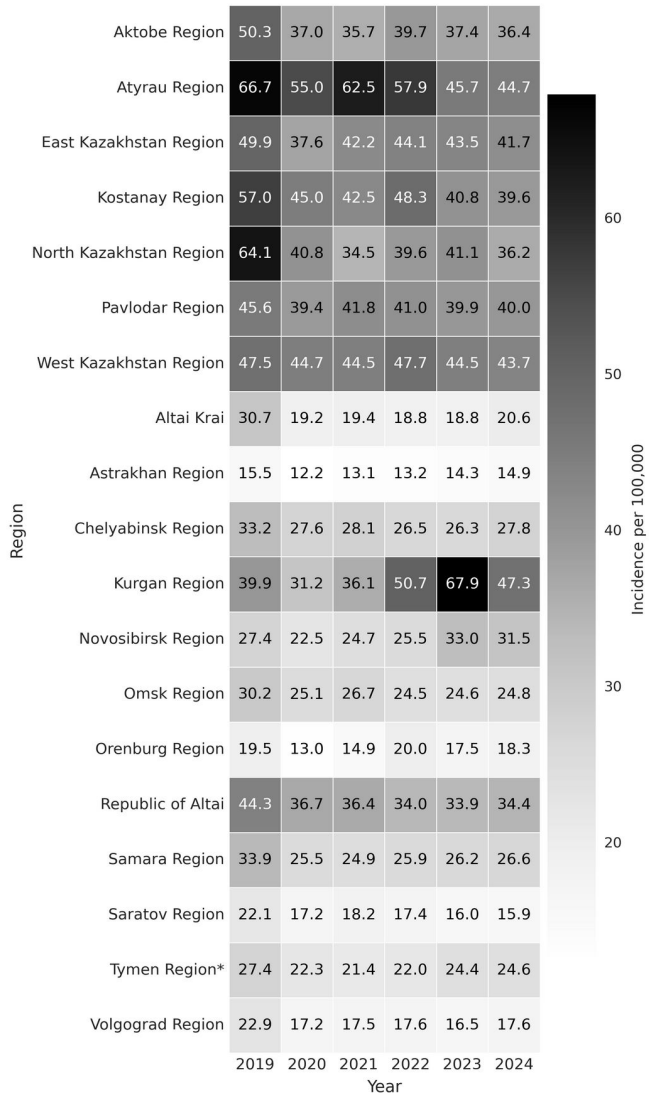


Figure 1. TB incidence dynamics by region, 2019–2024

The average year-to-year change plot (Fig. 2, left panel) shows broadly similar post-2020 trajectories in the borderland regions of both countries, with some divergence in the timing and shape of recovery. In Russia, average incidence growth remained moderately positive at approximately 4.7–4.8% per year during 2021–2023, then leveled off in 2024. This may suggest a slower normalization of TB detection following the pandemic. In Kazakhstan, the trajectory was more uneven: after a modest increase in 2021 (+1.1%), incidence rose more sharply in 2022 (+6.0%), followed by negative year-to-year changes in 2023 and 2024. This pattern is consistent with a more pronounced short-term adjustment followed by a faster return to a downward reported-incidence trend.

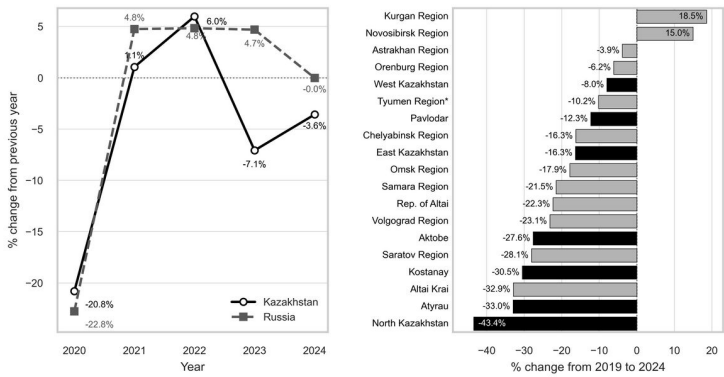


Figure 2. Average year-to-year TB incidence change and regional TB incidence change, 2019–2024

The difference in cumulative trajectories is reflected in the 2019–2024 regional change plot (Figure 2, right panel). Because several Kazakhstani border regions started from comparatively higher incidence levels, larger cumulative declines there may partly reflect a higher baseline burden as well as subsequent changes over the study period. Even so, most Kazakhstani regions showed substantial cumulative reductions in TB incidence over the six-year period, with North Kazakhstan (-43.4%), Atyrau (-33.0%), and Kostanay (-30.5%) leading the decline. The Russian border

regions present a more mixed picture: while several regions, such as Altai Krai (-32.8%), also recorded strong cumulative declines, others showed much smaller declines, including Orenburg Region (-6.2%) and Astrakhan Region (-3.9%). Two regions, Kurgan (+18.5%) and Novosibirsk (+15.0%), showed net increases over the period. Overall, the figure suggests that Kazakhstan and Russia followed different cumulative incidence trajectories, with the Russian side showing greater heterogeneity across regions.

Spatial Distribution of Incidence and Mortality Risks (2022)

The cartographic comparison for 2022 (Fig. 3) confirms a clear cross-border contrast in incidence. Kazakhstani border regions are concentrated in the mid-to-high incidence range, with particularly elevated levels in Atyrau, West Kazakhstan, Kostanay, and East Kazakhstan. On the Russian side, most regions remain in lower-incidence categories. The result shows again that the Kurgan Region stands out as a major exception, with incidence values comparable to or exceeding those of several Kazakhstani regions. This produces a spatial pattern of sharp cross-border discontinuity rather than a smooth epidemiological gradient.

The mortality map reveals a different geography. Within this 2022 snapshot, several Russian regions display relatively high mortality despite moderate or even low incidence, including Kurgan, Altai Krai, Novosibirsk, Astrakhan, and Orenburg. By contrast, the Kazakhstani regions are more often characterized by a high incidence combined with lower mortality. This contrast suggests that incidence and mortality do not fully overlap spatially and may reflect differences in case detection, treatment effectiveness, or the broader organization of care.

The 2022 typology of regional TB burden makes this distinction more explicit (Fig. 4). Most Kazakhstani regions fall into the high-incidence/low-mortality quadrant, indicating a heavy disease burden but comparatively lower death rates within the observed year. East Kazakhstan and North Kazakhstan are positioned closer to the high-incidence/high-mortality field. At the same time, Aktobe, Pavlodar, Kostanay, West Kazakhstan, and Atyrau remain in the high-incidence/low-mortality group. On the Russian side, several regions cluster in the low-incidence/high-mortality quadrant,

including Altai Krai, Novosibirsk, Astrakhan, Orenburg, and Tyumen, while Saratov and Volgograd remain in the low-incidence/low-mortality quadrant. Kurgan Region appears as the most epidemiologically unfavorable Russian case, combining high incidence with high mortality. The typology therefore reinforces the interpretation that the two sides of the borderland differ not only in degree of burden but also in the structure of the incidence–mortality relationship. This structural difference is critical for cross-border public health evaluation. The observed combination of relatively high reported incidence and lower mortality in several Kazakhstani regions may be consistent with earlier case detection, differences in the composition of registered cases, or differences in reporting practices. Conversely, the pattern of lower reported incidence and relatively higher mortality in some Russian regions may be associated with later diagnosis, more severe clinical profiles, unequal access to specialized care, or differences in mortality registration. However, the present aggregate regional data do not allow these mechanisms to be tested directly. The anomalous position of the Kurgan Region (high incidence/high mortality) breaks the national trend and highlights it as a localized epidemiological hotspot requiring targeted intervention.

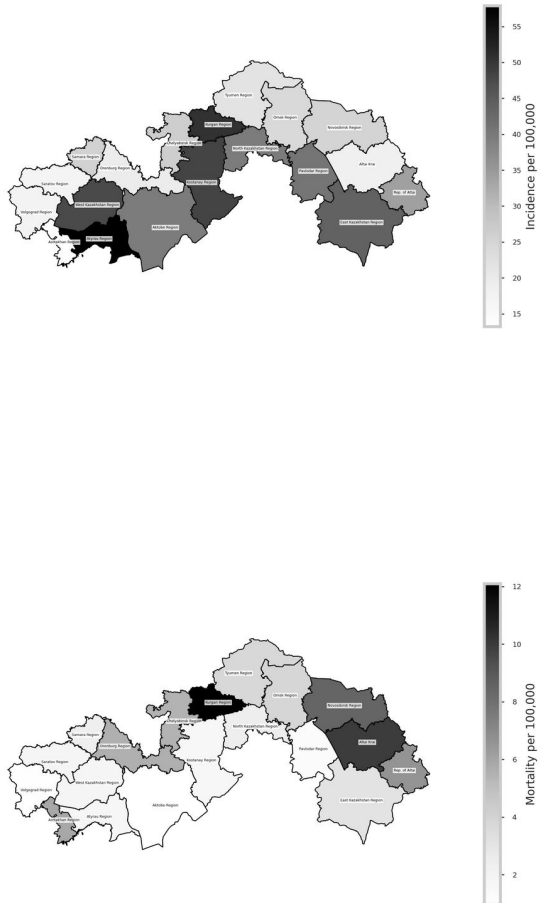


Figure 3. Tuberculosis incidence and mortality in the Russia–Kazakhstan borderland, 2022

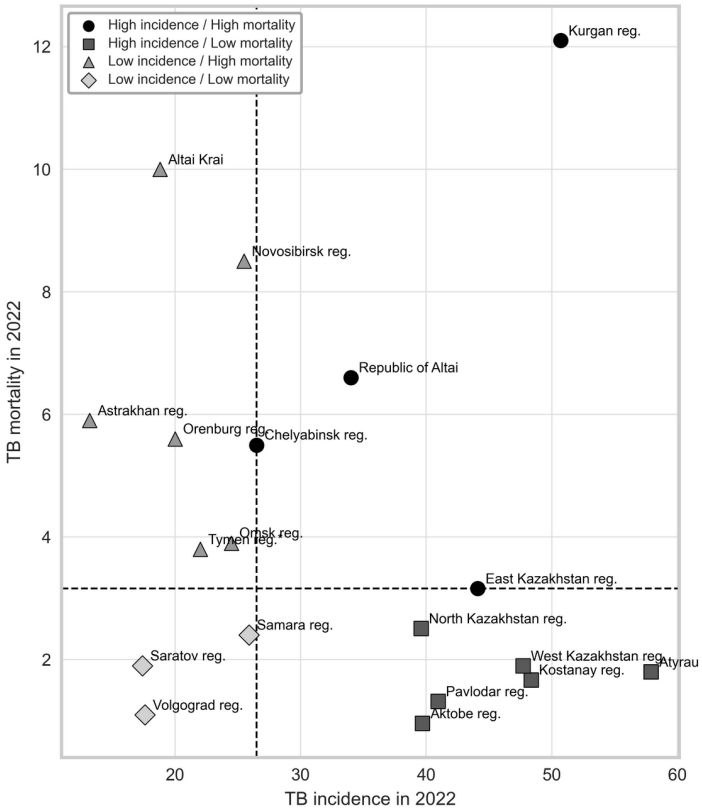


Figure 4. Descriptive median-based typology of regional TB incidence and mortality, 2022

Spatial autocorrelation analysis

The global spatial autocorrelation analysis does not support the presence of a stable borderwide cluster of similar incidence values (Table 1). Moran's I is close to zero in every year from 2019 to 2024, ranging from -0.0347 in 2021 to 0.0534 in 2019, and all p-values remain well above conventional significance thresholds. The expected value is -0.0556 for the 19-region system, and the observed values differ only slightly from this benchmark.

This indicates that neighboring regions were not significantly more similar to one another than would be expected under spatial randomness.

Table 1. Global Moran's I for TB incidence, 2019–2024

Year	Moran's I	Expected I	z-score	p-value	Regions
2019	0.053	-0.056	0.734	0.463	19
2020	-0.019	-0.056	0.245	0.807	19
2021	-0.035	-0.056	0.141	0.888	19
2022	-0.002	-0.056	0.360	0.719	19
2023	0.003	-0.056	0.395	0.693	19
2024	0.001	-0.056	0.381	0.703	19

More specifically, the results suggest that the Russia–Kazakhstan borderland exhibits pronounced cross-border inequality, but no statistically significant global clustering. The visual pattern of contrast is real, but it does not translate into a coherent positive spatial autocorrelation structure. In substantive terms, this means that the borderland should be interpreted less as a single epidemiological hotspot and more as a territorially heterogeneous zone structured by national differences, regional outliers, and uneven temporal trajectories.

Local Moran's I was calculated for each year from 2019 to 2024 to examine the possible presence of local clusters and spatial outliers. At the unadjusted significance level, isolated local signals were observed for the Aktobe Region over three years and for the West Kazakhstan Region over two years. However, none of these results remained statistically significant after false discovery rate correction for multiple local tests within each year or across the full set of regional-year tests. Therefore, the analysis does not provide robust evidence of persistent local clusters or spatial outliers in reported TB incidence across the study area at the regional level.

Discussion

The results show that tuberculosis in the Russia–Kazakhstan borderland is structured by a pronounced but uneven spatial divide rather than by a single shared epidemiological field. Kazakhstan consistently has a higher incidence burden, while Russia shows a more mixed pattern, with several

low-incidence regions but also several mortality outliers. This suggests that geographic proximity across the border does not produce epidemiological convergence. Instead, the border continues to function as an institutional and health-system boundary rather than a neutral line of adjacency.

The incidence and mortality patterns also indicate that burden and severity are not distributed in the same way across the borderland. In tuberculosis research, spatial heterogeneity is common, and visible clustering does not necessarily imply recent transmission or a single causal mechanism. In this case, higher incidence in Kazakhstan and relatively higher mortality in several Russian regions point to differences in detection, treatment continuity, care retention, and broader service organization. These differences should be interpreted as system-level hypotheses rather than direct empirical proof, because the available data do not include patient-level outcomes, treatment adherence, drug resistance, diagnostic delay, or healthcare access indicators.

A central interpretation is that the observed regional disparities reflect different functional components of public health systems operating across the borderland. A high incidence and comparatively lower mortality in much of Kazakhstan may indicate more effective detection and earlier treatment relative to the burden. By contrast, low incidence with relatively higher mortality in several Russian regions may reflect delayed diagnosis, more severe case composition, weaker continuity of care, or unequal access to specialist services. The Kurgan Region is especially important because it combines high incidence and high mortality, making it a priority area for further investigation.

The absence of significant global spatial autocorrelation is also important. It shows that the borderland does not form a single coherent cluster of TB risk, even though the maps display sharp contrasts between neighboring territories. Rather, the region should be understood as a mosaic of local situations shaped by administrative capacity, service availability, mobility patterns, and national health-system differences.

At the same time, regional analysis inevitably generalizes over micro-geographical concentrations of risk. TB burden is often shaped by small-scale settings such as prisons, shelters, dormitories, and other overcrowded

or socially marginalized environments, where transmission dynamics may differ sharply from the surrounding region. The same applies to vulnerable populations, including prisoners, migrants, homeless individuals, and socially excluded groups, whose local conditions can produce distinct micro-geographies of TB that are not visible at the regional scale. Therefore, the absence of a significant regional cluster does not exclude important localized foci of transmission or care fragmentation.

Methodologically, the study demonstrates the value of combining temporal trend analysis, cartographic typology, and global spatial autocorrelation in borderland epidemiology. This framework helps distinguish visually apparent spatial contrast from statistically coherent clustering. For public health practice, this implies that responses should be designed at the regional level rather than as a uniform borderwide strategy, with priority given to intensified case detection, improved referral and continuity of care, and closer monitoring in high-burden and mortality-outlier areas. In this setting, a permanent Russia–Kazakhstan tuberculosis working group could provide a practical platform for shared surveillance, harmonized reporting, and patient referral pathways. A targeted pilot approach in the most affected border regions would also be more appropriate than a uniform frontier-wide intervention, given the heterogeneous spatial pattern identified in this study.

Several limitations should be acknowledged. First, the study relies on reported regional surveillance indicators, and differences in diagnostic coverage, notification practices, and statistical reporting may affect comparability between countries. Second, the analysis uses aggregate regional data and cannot assess individual-level determinants of TB outcomes, including diagnostic delay, treatment adherence, drug resistance, HIV co-infection, socioeconomic conditions, or incarceration history. Third, the mortality analysis is cross-sectional and limited to 2022, so it cannot establish temporal relationships between incidence and mortality. Fourth, the spatial analysis uses a single contiguity-based definition of proximity and may not detect local clusters or functional connections based on mobility and referral networks. Finally, the descriptive de This suggests that geographic proximity asign identifies patterns and contrasts but does not

allow causal inference about the effects of healthcare governance, service accessibility, or cross-border mobility.

Conclusion

This study identifies persistent differences in reported TB incidence across the Russia–Kazakhstan borderland between 2019 and 2024, together with heterogeneous regional trajectories after the COVID-19 disruption. Global Moran's I did not reveal statistically significant positive spatial autocorrelation under the specified regional adjacency matrix, indicating that the observed contrast does not reflect a borderland-wide global cluster of similar incidence values.

These findings support a view of the borderland as a territorially heterogeneous setting rather than as a uniform epidemiological zone. They do not, however, establish the causal roles of cross-border mobility, healthcare access, surveillance practices, or institutional coordination. Future research should combine harmonized surveillance data with indicators of healthcare capacity, accessibility, migration and mobility, diagnostic delay, treatment outcomes, and drug resistance. Such an approach would allow the mechanisms underlying the observed regional contrasts to be assessed more directly.

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18. Caspian Connectivity: Port Identity and Cross-Border Cooperation in Aktau, Kazakhstan

Nurdaulet Zharmukhan

Abstract

This study examines how Aktau, Kazakhstan's principal Caspian port city, is discursively constructed around a regional identity that underpins cross-border cooperation in the Caspian Sea basin. One of the few Kazakhstani cities whose external relations are constituted primarily through water rather than land borders, Aktau's status as a port city is framed by Kazakhstani officials, media, and planning documents in ways that naturalize cross-border cooperation as a given, and what this dominant discourse can and cannot tell us about how Aktau's institutions and residents actually understand cross-border cooperation. Using regional news coverage, official speeches, and government planning documents concerning the Middle Corridor and Caspian cooperation initiatives, the chapter treats recurring terms such as 'logistics hub' and 'bridge' not merely as economic descriptors but as identity-building devices that render Aktau's character as a cross-border connector as inherent. The chapter argues that such identity narratives and connectivity framings act, at the level of elite and institutional discourse, as substitutes or precursors to formal cooperation precisely where cross-border institutions are thin and political frameworks underdeveloped; whether this discourse is in turn accepted, contested, or reinterpreted by the population is a separate empirical question this study cannot answer and flags a priority for future research. As a non-European

case, Aktau extends cross-border cooperation scholarship, which has been dominated by studies of the EU's internal borderlands, into the post-Soviet, multipolar setting of the Caspian Sea.

Introduction

Port cities occupy an unusual place in the study of borders. Unlike land-border towns, whose cross-border relations are shaped by a fixed, often heavily administered line, port cities such as Aktau relate to their neighbors across open water, with the boundary both legally defined and practically diffuse. Aktau, on Kazakhstan's Mangystau coast, is the country's main outlet to the Caspian Sea and, since the 2010s, an increasingly prominent node on the TITR, popularly known as the Middle Corridor, linking China and Central Asia to the South Caucasus, Turkey, and Europe while bypassing Russian territory (Geopolitical Monitor, 2025). The port also has a distinct political-legal weight: in Aktau, in August 2018, the five Caspian littoral states signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea after 22 years of negotiation, formally resolving the sea's status and opening the way for new transport and pipeline projects (Bayramov, 2020). This dual character as an economic gateway under construction and the symbolic site of the region's foundational legal settlement makes Aktau a productive case for asking how port identity is constructed and how this identity feeds into cross-border cooperation. The central research question is: how is Aktau's location and function as a port city framed by Kazakhstani officials, media, and planning documents, and what work does this framing plausibly do in a setting where formal cross-border institutions are thin? The chapter examines how Aktau is represented in regional media, speeches, and planning documents, with attention to language surrounding the Middle Corridor and Caspian cooperation. It argues that repeated framings of Aktau as a 'logistics hub' and a 'bridge' operate both as economic branding and as identity claims, naturalizing cross-border cooperation, in public discourse, as something Aktau simply is. Where formal cross-border institutions in the Caspian basin are comparatively weak, such narratives plausibly serve as a substitute or precursor for institutionalized cooperation, doing some of the integrative work that treaties, agencies, and governance bodies do

elsewhere. This is an argument about the discourse produced by elites and institutions; it is not, and cannot, on the present evidence, a claim about whether Aktau residents have internalized or accepted this framing, since establishing this would require interviews or survey data this study does not have. The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the study within border studies and CBC literature, focusing on the discursive and constructivist turn in this field. Section 3 provides context on Aktau, the Middle Corridor, and Caspian cooperation. Section 4 outlines the methodology. Section 5 presents the discourse analysis, divided around the two dominant framings identified in the sources: the port as a logistics hub and the port as bridge. Section 6 discusses implications for CBC theory beyond the European context, and Section 7 concludes.

Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

From border-as-line to bordering-as-process

Border studies in the past three decades has shifted from treating borders as fixed territorial lines separating sovereign jurisdictions towards understanding them as social, cultural, and political processes, a move known as the "bordering" turn (Newman, 2006; Kolossov & Scott, 2013). Borders are continuously produced and reproduced through everyday practices, institutions, and discourse, rather than simply existing as the physical residue of past political settlements (Van Houtum & Van Naerssen, 2002). Malcolm Anderson's (1996) earlier formulation that frontiers are both institutions and processes whose meaning varies across historical periods and societies anticipated this shift and serves as a useful reminder that a border's significance is never self-evident; it must be actively constructed and sustained by the actors invoking it. This processual understanding is crucial to the present study. Aktau's border is not just a land line but the maritime edge of the Caspian Sea, which until 2018 had itself a legally unsettled status. The economic meaning of this edge as a route rather than a barrier is actively constructed in real time, through infrastructure and public discourse. Studying such a border therefore requires attention to not just formal agreements but the narratives that make

a still-developing infrastructure corridor feel like a natural channel of connection to its residents.

Cross-border cooperation as discursive institutionalism

A second strand of literature examines CBC specifically, largely drawing on the European experience of Euroregions and EU-funded territorial cooperation programs (Perkmann, 2003). This literature has tended to explain CBC through formal institutional variables, funding regimes, administrative compatibility, and legal frameworks. More recent work, however, has argued that ideas and discourse play an independent, causal role in shaping cooperation, a position known as discursive institutionalism (Schmidt, 2008). From this perspective, the way in which cooperation is talked about by political leaders, media, and planning documents is not just a reflection of underlying institutional arrangements but is an active ingredient in producing them: discourse can create the sense of a shared regional interest that makes formal cooperation politically possible or can substitute for such cooperation where formal channels are absent or fragile. This chapter adopts the discursive-institutionalist position as its theoretical anchor, while extending it to a non-European context. Existing CBC scholarship has been criticized for its over-concentration on EU internal borderlands, leaving cooperation dynamics in other regions largely under-theorized (Kolossov & Scott, 2013). The Caspian, five littoral states with divergent political systems, no shared supranational body comparable to the EU and a legal status resolved only in 2018, offers a case where discourse plausibly carries more of the integrative weight than in Europe, precisely because of the thinness of formal institutions. Region-building, identity, and connectivity narratives A third relevant strand concerns region-building: the process by which a spatial entity, whether a cross-border region, a corridor, or a city acquires a shared identity through repeated narration in media, planning, and political speech (Paasi, 1998). Regions, in this view, do not pre-exist their representation; they are, in part, called into being through the vocabularies used to describe them. Connectivity narratives, terms like ‘hub,’ ‘gateway,’ ‘bridge,’ and ‘corridor’, are a recognizable genre of region-building language across Eurasia’s infrastructure boom, where cities and states compete to position themselves as indispensable nodes in

transcontinental trade. This chapter treats these terms in the case of Aktau not as mere economic description but as identity claims: to call Aktau a ‘logistics hub’ or a ‘bridge’ is to assign the city, and by extension its residents and institutions, a role defined by openness, connection, and outwardness, which frames cross-border cooperation as consistent with, rather than a departure from, local identity.

Case Context: Aktau, the Middle Corridor and Caspian Cooperation

Aktau is the administrative center of Mangystau Region in western Kazakhstan and hosts the Aktau International Sea Trade Port, the country’s largest maritime facility and a core node of the TITR (Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2026). Kazakhstani officials have repeatedly framed Mangystau as strategically positioned to provide Central Asian cargo with a fast route to the markets of the Caucasus, Turkey, and Europe (Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2026). Since the early 2020s, container traffic through the TITR has grown sharply. Officials report that container transit through Kazakh Caspian ports increased nearly fourfold between 2022 and 2025 and Kazakhstan set a target of raising annual container volumes from roughly 80,000 to 300,000 twenty-foot equivalent units by 2029, with a reduction in transit times along the corridor (Caspian Post, 2026a; Caspian Post, 2026b). This growth has been accompanied by substantial infrastructure development, including a first-stage container hub at Aktau port, dredging and land-reclamation works expanding port territory, a joint venture with China’s Lianyungang Port Group, and Kazakhstan’s 2024–2028 maritime infrastructure plan covering both Aktau and the neighboring Kuryk port (Times of Central Asia, 2024; Times of Central Asia, 2025; Astana Times, 2026). These are not merely engineering projects; they are consistently narrated in Kazakhstani official and media discourse as evidence of the country, and therefore the port of Aktau, becoming a Eurasian logistics hub. Alongside this economic narrative, there is a distinct political-legal one. Aktau was the site of the 2018 signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea, which ended more than two decades of dispute among Azerbaijan, Iran,

Kazakhstan, Russia, and Turkmenistan over the sea's legal character and opened space for new transport and pipeline cooperation (Bayramov, 2020). Unlike the EU's cross-border regions, which operate within an overarching supranational legal order, Caspian cooperation rests on a relatively thin multilateral architecture: the 2018 Convention, periodic five-state summits, and a patchwork of bilateral agreements, with no standing cross-border institution equivalent to a Euroregion secretariat or joint development authority. It is against this institutionally sparse backdrop that discursive framings of Aktau as hub and bridge take on particular significance.

Methodology

The study uses qualitative discourse analysis to examine how Aktau is represented across three source types: (i) regional and national news coverage of the Middle Corridor and Caspian cooperation, (ii) official speeches and statements by Kazakhstani government figures and their regional counterparts, and (iii) government planning documents, including strategic and infrastructure development plans referencing Aktau and Mangystau Region. Consistent with the aforementioned discursive-institutionalist and region-building frameworks, the analysis does not take these texts as neutral reporting of economic fact but as the sites in which the meaning of Aktau's border position is actively constructed. The corpus covers the period from August 2018 to August 2026. The start date corresponds to the signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea in Aktau, marking the city's first acquired sustained visibility as a symbol of Caspian-wide cooperation and a natural anchor for periodization, since it marks the legal precondition for the subsequent expansion of cross-border transport initiatives. The end date corresponds to the present study. Within this eight-year window, the analysis pays special attention to two sub-periods where discourse density around Aktau increases markedly: 2018, around the signing of the Convention, and 2024–2026, coinciding with the acceleration of Middle Corridor container-hub investment, the Kazakhstan-China port joint venture, and Kazakhstan's 2024–2028 maritime infrastructure plan. This periodization allows the analysis to track whether the identity narratives associated with Aktau (as

an anchor of Caspian cooperation in 2018 and logistics hub and bridge in the more recent infrastructure-driven coverage) have remained stable or changed in emphasis over time, rather than treating the discourse as a single undifferentiated snapshot. Sources were read for recurring lexical items and framing devices associated with Aktau's identity and its function in cross-border relations, with particular attention to two terms that recur across the corpus: 'logistics hub' and 'bridge'. For each occurrence, the analysis considers the surrounding rhetorical context, whether the term is used descriptively, aspirationally, or as part of a broader claim about regional belonging, and whether it is attributed to economic function, geographic position, or cultural-historical connection. The analysis distinguishes, where the sources allow it, between framings originating from central government and national media (which tend to speak in terms of national strategy) and framings attentive to the local, Mangystau-specific register (which more often evoke the region's lived experience of coastal, cross-water contact). This approach has clear limitations, discussed further in Section 7: it relies on secondary and published material rather than an original, systematically sampled corpus of primary-source news archives, speech transcripts, and planning documents, and it does not include interviews or surveys capturing how ordinary residents of Aktau, themselves, understand the port's identity. The findings below should accordingly be read as an interpretive account of the dominant public discourse rather than a claim about lived popular opinion, which would require a dedicated survey or ethnographic component to establish with confidence.

Findings and Discussion

"Logistics hub": economic framing as identity claim

The term 'logistics hub', or close variants such as 'transport and logistics hub' and 'key transit corridor', appears with striking regularity in both official statements and media coverage of Aktau. Kazakhstani officials describe the country's ambition to become a hub linking Asia and Europe and frame port expansion at Aktau explicitly in these terms (Astana Times, 2026; Caspian Post, 2026b). What is notable is how consistently this economic vocabulary is paired with claims about national and regional

character: Aktau's status as a hub is not presented as one possible outcome of investment decisions, but as the fulfillment of a role the city and region were always suited to play, given their coastal position. The Mangystau region has been described by national leadership as strategically positioned by virtue of its geography to provide swift and reliable outlets for Central Asian cargo (Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2026). This kind of statement does two things at once. Descriptively, it reports a transport-planning judgement about comparative advantage. Performatively, it assigns Aktau, and by extension the people and institutions of Mangystau, an identity built around openness and outward function: the city is not merely a place that contains a port, but a place whose purpose is connection. Read through a discursive-institutionalist lens, this repeated pairing of economic function and regional character does explanatory work that the thin formal cross-border institutions of the Caspian cannot: it supplies local and national audiences with a ready rationale for why cooperation with Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and other Caspian partners is appropriate, without the need for a bespoke governance body to make that claim.

"Bridge": connectivity as relational identity

Where 'logistics hub' foregrounds Aktau's internal capacity, consuming, processing, and forwarding cargo, the second recurring term, 'bridge', foregrounds relationality: Aktau is framed not as an endpoint but as a connective tissue between China, Central Asia, the Caucasus, and Europe (Geopolitical Monitor, 2025). This framing is reinforced by descriptions of the Middle Corridor's full route, from Chinese rail hubs through Kazakhstan's overland network to Aktau and Kuryk, and onward by sea, where Aktau is consistently presented as the pivot point where the land transport becomes maritime transport (Geopolitical Monitor, 2025). The bridge metaphor carries identity content that 'hub' framing does not: a bridge implies two sides being joined, positioning Aktau, and Kazakhstan more broadly, as belonging to both a Central Asian and a wider Eurasian, even European-facing, community at once. This dual belonging is consistent with the region-building literature's observation that connectivity narratives often serve to locate a place within multiple, overlapping regional imaginaries simultaneously (Paasi, 1998). For Aktau, being narrated as a

bridge allows the city's identity to be articulated as inherently cross-border, such that participating in Caspian cooperation initiatives, container-hub joint ventures with Chinese partners, dredging projects backed by UAE and Chinese investment, and coordination with Azerbaijan's and Turkmenistan's ports, appears not a departure from local identity but its expression.

Identity narratives as catalysts where institutions are thin

An alternative discursive-institutionalist claim that this chapter's analysis supports is that these framings do not merely describe an existing, institutionally secured cooperation; in the Caspian context, they substitute for some of what institutions would otherwise provide. Unlike the EU's cross-border regions, where Euroregions, joint secretariats, and supranational funding programs furnish durable, non-discursive channels for cooperation, the Caspian basin's formal architecture remains comparatively minimal. The five littoral states operate on periodic summits and the 2018 Convention rather than a standing cross-border authority (Bayramov, 2020), and Kazakhstan's port partnerships (with China's Lianyungang Port Group, the UAE's AD Ports Group, and various national logistics operators) are structured as individual commercial joint ventures rather than components of a general cross-border governance framework (Times of Central Asia, 2024; EU Reporter, 2026). In this institutionally sparse setting, the hub and bridge narratives arguably do more integrative work, at the level of elite and public discourse, than they would have in a European borderland already saturated with formal cooperation mechanisms. By repeatedly presenting cross-border connection as consistent with, rather than external to, Aktau's identity, the narratives lower the perceived novelty and risk of specific cooperation initiatives in line with how officials, media, and planning texts justify them: each new joint venture or dredging contract can be framed as another instance of what Aktau already is rather than a new commitment requiring separate justification. This supports the chapter's central argument that identity narratives and connectivity framings function, within official and public discourse, as apparent catalysts of cooperation precisely when formal cross-border institutions and political frameworks are not yet fully developed,

filling an integrative role that treaties and joint agencies play in more institutionally dense regions. The point rests on the consistency and repetition of the discourse itself, not on evidence of its psychological or political effect on any particular audience; repetition across many independent sources indicates that a framing has become the default way of talking about Aktau, but it does not by itself demonstrate that the framing has persuaded anyone or changed anyone's behavior. Confirming an actual causal or persuasive effect on residents, investors, or foreign counterparts would require a separate research design capable of tracing belief or behavior back to exposure to this discourse.

Divergent registers: national strategy versus local experience

A further pattern worth noting is the difference in register between national-level and locally inflected sources. National officials and international trade media speak of Aktau in strategic, macroeconomic terms: tonnage, TEU capacity, transit-time targets, investment figures (Caspian Post, 2026b). Sources with a more regional, Mangystau-specific orientation are more likely to invoke the coastal, maritime character of daily life in Aktau as itself a form of connection to the neighbor littoral states, treating cross-Caspian contact as a lived and historically continuous feature of the region rather than a recent policy achievement. This divergence suggests that the identity work performed by "hub" and "bridge" framings is pitched at two levels simultaneously within the discourse itself: nationally, it legitimizes large infrastructure spending and foreign partnership by tying it to strategic necessity; locally, it is framed in terms that present cross-border orientation as simply part of what it means to be a Caspian port city. The sources allow us to say that regional and national texts converge on the same underlying framing despite addressing different registers; whether the texts' convergence corresponds to a convergence in how regional institutions and the local population actually understand cross-border cooperation is not something text sources alone can establish, and is treated as a hypothesis for future interview-based research.

Discussion

A Non-European Contribution to Cross-Border Cooperation Scholarship

Cross-border cooperation scholarship has developed largely around the European experience, where supranational legal order, funding instruments, and decades of Euroregion practice have produced comparatively institution-heavy accounts of cooperation (Perkmann, 2003). The Aktau case suggests that in settings without this institutional density (post-Soviet Central Asia and the Caspian basin being a clear example), discourse and identity narrative may hold proportionally greater explanatory weight in accounting for why and how cross-border cooperation proceeds. This does not mean formal institutions are irrelevant to the Caspian case: the 2018 Convention was a necessary legal precondition for expanded cooperation, and ongoing negotiation over pipeline routes and maritime delimitation remains institutionally mediated (Bayramov, 2020). Rather, it means that discourse and formal institution-building should be understood as running alongside and reinforcing one another, with discourse doing a comparatively larger share of the work. This has implications for how CBC theory might be generalized beyond Europe. Future comparative work could examine other non-European port cities or transit nodes along Africa's coasts, in Southeast Asia, or elsewhere in the former Soviet space to test whether the relationship identified here, between institutional thinness and the intensified importance of connectivity and identity narrative, holds more broadly or whether Aktau's specific combination of a recent legal settlement (the 2018 Convention) and active infrastructure boom (the Middle Corridor) make it a distinctive rather than representative case.

Conclusion

This chapter has argued that Aktau's regional identity as a Caspian port city is actively constructed, by both official and public discourse, via recurring discursive framings (particularly, 'logistics hub' and 'bridge') which are found both in regional news, speeches and planning documents relating to the Middle Corridor and Caspian cooperation. These framings perform

double duty as economic description and as identity claims, positing cross-border cooperation as naturally extending what Aktau is/was, in how it is talked about by officials, news and planning texts, rather than as requiring separate policy justification. In a region where formal cross-border institutions are somewhat underdeveloped compared to the European Union's borderlands, these sorts of narratives likely act as catalysts for cooperation at an elite and institutional level, performing an integrative role analogous to that performed by dense institutional frameworks elsewhere. As a cross-border cooperation practice from outside Europe, and outside the land-border context which dominates the CBC literature, Aktau offers a useful counterpoint in which to test and extend existing theory. It is important to be precise about what this evidence does and does not show. Finding that such 'hub' and 'bridge' framings are found consistently across independent sources shows that this is the dominant discourse generated by Kazakhstani elites, media and institutions; it does not show that such a discourse has been accepted, believed or enacted by members of Aktau's population, its port industry workers, or regional officials, or that it is the mechanism by which cooperation decisions get made. Repetition across many sources is evidence of shared framing, but not of persuasive strength or audience reception, which are different empirical claims requiring different evidence. I am using, in this analysis, interpretive methods based on published secondary material, primarily comprising news reports, speeches and planning documents; this analysis should be extended, in further research, to a systematically-sampled corpus of news articles and speech transcripts, and crucially to interviews or survey research with Aktau residents, port workers and regional officials. Only such fieldwork could demonstrate whether, and to what extent, the elite and institutional discourse identified here is actually shared, contested or reinterpreted by those whom it claims to represent. Until that research is completed, this chapter's claims should be read as referring to the construction and consistency of a public discourse, rather than to their psychological or political reception.

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19. Transboundary Radiological Risks Across Borders: Nuclear Energy Development in Central Asia

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Abstract

Nuclear power plants are governed primarily through national institutions; however, radionuclides released during a severe nuclear accident may travel hundreds or even thousands of kilometers across political borders, with potential consequences for public health, communities, environments, and economies in multiple countries. This chapter examines this governance mismatch from the perspectives of border studies and transboundary radiological risk governance. Drawing on a qualitative analysis of major nuclear power plant accidents, international nuclear emergency instruments, the Espoo Convention's transboundary environmental impact assessment regime, and recent nuclear energy developments in Central Asia, it identifies a gap between formal international and national commitments and practical operational cooperation among neighboring states and border regions. The chapter argues that international notification and assistance mechanisms are indispensable but insufficient. Effective transboundary preparedness also requires shared radiation monitoring, coordinated response protocols, joint emergency exercises, multilingual public communication, and advance arrangements for consultation and post-accident coordination. It therefore proposes a multilevel framework connecting national regulators, subnational authorities, technical institutions, and border communities. This framework treats regional cooperation as a preventive and structural component of transboundary

radiological emergency governance. Its purpose is to help ensure that cross-border radiological preparedness develops alongside nuclear infrastructure – before an emergency tests interstate relations under conditions of uncertainty, political tension, economic loss, and public disruption.

Introduction

Nuclear power plants are planned, operated, and regulated primarily within national jurisdictions; however, the potential consequences of a severe accident are not territorially confined. Once radionuclides are released into the atmosphere, their transport and deposition are shaped by wind, precipitation, topography, and the physical and chemical properties of the released material rather than by political boundaries (IAEA 2015b). The Chernobyl accident demonstrated this transboundary potential: substantial contamination occurred in areas now within Belarus, Ukraine, and the Russian Federation, while radionuclides from the accident were detected throughout Europe (UNSCEAR 2011). Atmospheric modeling further illustrates the geographical scale of the problem. Lelieveld et al. (2012) estimated that, following a hypothetical major reactor accident, more than 90% of released caesium-137 would, on average, be transported beyond 50 kilometers and approximately 50% beyond 1,000 kilometers before deposition. A severe nuclear accident must therefore be understood simultaneously as a technological emergency, a public-health event, an environmental problem, a source of economic disruption, and a potential test of relations between states and neighboring border regions.

This territorial mismatch matters because sovereign borders allocate regulatory authority, whereas atmospheric dispersion distributes potential consequences. The state hosting a nuclear power plant controls its operation, maintainning, emergency decisions, and much of the initial information concerning an accident. A neighboring state may nevertheless need to implement sheltering or evacuation measures, restrict contaminated food, protect water supplies, monitor radiation, provide medical care, regulate cross-border movement, communicate uncertain risks, and support affected communities and livelihoods. Transboundary radiological risk therefore encompasses not only the physical movement of radionuclides but

also cross-border differences in protective decisions and their potential effects on public health, social stability, economic activity, and interstate relations. These risks are intensified when neighboring states use incompatible monitoring methods or protective-action criteria, institutional responsibilities are unclear, emergency coordination has not been tested, or information is delayed (IAEA 2015a).

This chapter asks: To what extent do existing international nuclear-governance instruments address the operational needs of neighboring states and border regions, and what additional mechanisms are required for transboundary radiological preparedness in Central Asia? It argues that international instruments establish an essential legal foundation for notification, assistance, environmental assessment, and certain aspects of civil liability (IAEA 1986a, 1986b, 2020; UNECE 1991), but do not automatically create durable coordinated operational relationships across borders. The chapter's principal contribution is a fivepillar regional framework connecting national obligations with borderland practice: (1) joint transboundary risk assessment and the establishment of a permanent cross-border coordination body comprising regulators, emergency authorities, technical experts, and representatives of border-region governments from participating countries; (2) interoperable radiation monitoring and data exchange; (3) coordinated emergency protocols and joint exercises; (4) multilingual public communication and participation; and (5) advance arrangements for post-accident coordination and dispute prevention.

Methodologically, the chapter employs qualitative institutional and policy analysis. It treats Chernobyl as a diagnostic historical case, examines binding international conventions and authoritative international guidance, and applies insights from cross-border-cooperation and risk-governance scholarship to current nuclear-energy development in Central Asia (Brunet-Jailly, 2022; Renn, 2008). It does not estimate the probability of an accident or model contamination from a particular nuclear facility. Its more limited purpose is to identify the governance functions and institutional relationships that should be established before a transboundary emergency occurs.

Past Major Radiation Accident and Risks of Borderland Problem

Although civilian nuclear power has experienced several serious reactor accidents, none provides a close precedent for managing a severe radiological emergency across the borders of independent neighboring states. The 1979 Three Mile Island accident produced only small off-site releases and no substantial transboundary consequences (U.S. Nuclear Regulatory Commission, 2024). The 2011 Fukushima Daiichi accident released radioactive material into the atmosphere and Pacific Ocean, generating international concerns over marine contamination, food safety, and trade; nevertheless, its principal protective measures and socioeconomic effects remained concentrated within Japan (UNSCEAR 2021). Chernobyl caused extensive contamination in present-day Belarus, Ukraine, and the Russian Federation, with radionuclides detected across the Northern Hemisphere (UNSCEAR 2011). At the time, however, these territories were Soviet republics, and the response was administered within a common political system. Historical experience therefore offers limited guidance on how independent neighboring states would

manage conflicting measurements, protective measures, economic losses, responsibility, and compensation following a major transboundary release. This lack of precedent should not be confused with an absence of risk. Transboundary nuclear emergencies are lowprobability but potentially high-consequence events whose effects extend beyond the physical dispersion of radionuclides. Chernobyl demonstrates how such an accident can magnify pre-existing economic and political vulnerabilities. The disaster imposed substantial recovery and resettlement costs, disrupted the lives of millions, and weakened public confidence in Soviet institutions and official information. Two decades later, Mikhail Gorbachev described Chernobyl as “perhaps the real cause” of the Soviet Union’s collapse, arguing that it accelerated glasnost, exposed institutional failures, and placed further pressure on the Soviet economy (Gorbachev, 2006). This interpretation remains contested: the Soviet collapse had multiple economic, political, and national causes, and Chernobyl should therefore be understood as an aggravating factor rather than a singular explanation.

Fukushima illustrates the burden that a major nuclear accident can impose even on an economically and institutionally strong state. Japan's government estimated the combined costs of decommissioning, compensation, decontamination, and interim storage at approximately ¥22 trillion (approx. 200 billion US dollar), while recovery and decommissioning remain continuing commitments (Agency for Natural Resources and Energy, 2017). The accident also produced effects beyond Japan's domestic economy. Around 40 states introduced radiological screening of passengers, food, or goods from Japan, and restrictions on Japanese food and fishery products contributed to export losses and reputational damage (IAEA 2015). Some measures persisted for years and generated diplomatic friction and a formal World Trade Organization dispute between Japan and the Republic of Korea (WTO 2019). The subsequent management and discharge of ALPS-treated water also attracted sustained international scrutiny, requiring extensive monitoring and review by the IAEA. Together, Chernobyl and Fukushima demonstrate that nuclear accidents can generate prolonged fiscal liabilities, undermine public trust, disrupt trade, and expose a state to international regulatory and diplomatic pressure. Such consequences could contribute to broader political destabilization where fiscal capacity, institutional resilience, and public confidence are already weak (Mahul & Gurenko, 2006). Cross-border cooperation is not produced solely through agreements between national governments; it also depends on vertical coordination among levels of government and horizontal networks connecting organizations across a boundary (Brunet-Jailly, 2022). Applied to radiological risk, this means that ministries and regulators remain indispensable, but they cannot substitute for functioning relationships among regional administrations, emergency services, hospitals, laboratories, municipalities, and local media. IAEA emergency-preparedness requirements similarly emphasize coordination among national, regional, local, and operating organizations (IAEA 2015). Border regions are therefore not merely peripheral recipients of national policy. They may be the first places where inconsistent warnings, disrupted trade, population movement, and competing risk narratives become visible. Cooperation can be divided into three phases. Before an accident, it

concerns siting, environmental assessment, baseline monitoring, emergency planning, exercises, and public participation (UNECE, 1991; IAEA, 2015). During an accident, it concerns rapid notification, interpretation of monitoring data, protective-action decisions, medical coordination, and public communication (IAEA 2015, 2020). After an accident, it concerns long-term monitoring, remediation, health surveillance, compensation claims, trade restrictions, recovery, and dispute management (IAEA 2018). Existing international instruments address important elements of each phase, but they do not by themselves guarantee operational continuity across all three.

Chernobyl: Transboundary Contamination and the Potential for Interstate Disputes

The 1986 accident at the Chernobyl Nuclear Power Plant, then located in the Ukrainian Soviet Socialist Republic, remains the clearest historical demonstration that severe radioactive contamination can extend across political boundaries. The heaviest deposition occurred in areas now belonging to Belarus, Ukraine, and the Russian Federation, although radionuclides were detected throughout Europe at much lower levels (UNSCEAR 2011). The geographical distribution of contamination was highly uneven. Radioactive material was released over approximately 10 days, during which changing wind patterns carried successive plumes in different directions, while precipitation substantially increased local deposition (UNSCEAR 1988). Chernobyl therefore demonstrated both the distance and spatial asymmetry of nuclear fallout: a territory need not be adjacent to a reactor to experience measurable contamination, while neighboring localities may receive markedly different levels of deposition. Chernobyl also exposed major deficiencies in international notification and information exchange. Soviet authorities did not initially provide sufficient information to potentially affected states, and elevated radiation levels detected in Sweden alerted the international community to the accident. In its immediate aftermath, the IAEA developed the Convention on Early Notification of a Nuclear Accident and the Convention on Assistance in the

Case of a Nuclear Accident or Radiological Emergency, both of which were adopted in September 1986 (IAEA 1986a, 1986b). The

accident also intensified legal debate concerning prevention, state responsibility, reparation, and the adequacy of international law governing transboundary nuclear harm (Malone, 1987). The political context nevertheless limits Chernobyl's value as a precedent for contemporary interstate risk governance. In April 1986, Belarus, Russia, and Ukraine were constituent republics of the Soviet Union rather than sovereign states with separate regulators, emergency-response systems, and compensation regimes. Decisions concerning evacuation, remediation, information disclosure, and resource allocation were therefore administered primarily through central Soviet institutions. The accident did not require the three most affected republics to negotiate, as independent states, the attribution of responsibility or compensation for cross-border harm. Although radioactive fallout reached sovereign states outside the Soviet Union and raised possible claims under international law, it did not produce a comprehensive interstate compensation process (Malone, 1987). This distinction does not imply that Chernobyl was politically uncomplicated or that its later governance was free from conflict. Rather, the case provides limited guidance on how independent neighboring states would negotiate monitoring evidence, protective measures, responsibility, compensation, and public communication during an unfolding emergency. Its principal lesson for this study is institutional: when reliable information and effective response coordination are absent, uncertainty and political tension can extend well beyond the radiological hazard. A future cross-border accident could strain diplomatic relations and impose substantial economic burdens even where radiation doses remain limited. Inconsistent measurements, divergent food or trade restrictions, delayed notification, and perceptions of concealment may undermine public trust and generate social, political, and economic consequences disproportionate to the measured exposure.

What Existing International Instruments Provide – and What They Do Not

Notification, Assistance, and Emergency Preparedness

The Convention on Early Notification of a Nuclear Accident applies when an accident involving specified nuclear facilities or activities results, or may result, in an international transboundary release that could be of radiological safety significance to another state. The state exercising jurisdiction or control over the relevant facility or activity must notify potentially affected states and the IAEA without delay and provide available information concerning the nature, time, location, and radiological characteristics of the release (IAEA 1986a). The Convention on Assistance in the Case of a Nuclear Accident or Radiological Emergency complements this mechanism by establishing procedures through which a state may request assistance from other states or the IAEA and coordinate the assistance provided (IAEA 1986b). Together, the conventions addressed a fundamental weakness exposed by Chernobyl by creating formal channels for rapid information exchange and international support. The IAEA's General Safety Requirements Part 7 develops this framework at the operational level. It calls for designated notification points, arrangements for communicating with potentially affected states, procedures for requesting and providing assistance, and timely responses to information received from another state or the IAEA (IAEA 2015). Unlike the two conventions, however, the IAEA safety requirements are not themselves treaties; their practical effect depends on their incorporation into national law, regulation, and emergency arrangements. These instruments establish an essential legal and procedural foundation, but they do not by themselves harmonize monitoring methods, emergency preparedness, warning thresholds, evacuation criteria, medical protocols, food restrictions, or public communication. Nor do they ensure that regional authorities, laboratories, hospitals, emergency services, and border municipalities know their counterparts or have exercised decisions together. Notification may transmit information about an emergency without producing a shared interpretation and coordinated immidiate response. International notification and assistance are therefore necessary,

but they are not equivalent to operational preparedness in neighboring border regions.

Transboundary Environmental Assessment

The Convention on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context – the Espoo Convention – addresses the preventive stage of risk governance. It requires a party of origin to assess proposed activities that are likely to cause significant adverse transboundary impacts, notify potentially affected parties, provide relevant environmental documentation, conduct consultations, and enable public participation before a final authorization decision is made (UNECE, 1991). Nuclear power stations and other nuclear reactors are expressly included in Appendix I, although research installations whose maximum continuous thermal power does not exceed one kilowatt are excluded. UNECE's good-practice recommendations for nuclear-energy activities further emphasize early notification, adequate assessment of accident scenarios and alternatives, access to comprehensible documentation, and continuing communication between the states concerned (UNECE, 2017).

The Revised Guidelines on Environmental Impact Assessment in a Transboundary Context for Central Asian Countries translate these principles into a regional procedural framework (UNECE, 2019). Developed in cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan, the Guidelines respond to inconsistencies between national environmental-assessment systems and the procedures established by the Espoo Convention. They are recommendatory rather than legally binding, but they offer a common sequence for screening proposed activities, identifying affected states, issuing formal notification, determining the scope of the assessment, preparing and transmitting documentation, organizing public participation, conducting interstate consultations, communicating the final decision, and undertaking post-project monitoring. Applied to nuclear development, these procedures could enable neighboring states to examine accident scenarios, atmospheric and waterborne pathways, emergency-planning assumptions, baseline environmental conditions, and potential effects on agriculture, water supplies, and border communities before construction or authorization. The

Central Asian context nevertheless reveals a significant implementation gap. As of 2026, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are parties to the Espoo Convention, whereas Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan are not (UNECE, 2026). The 2019 Guidelines were deliberately designed for use by all five countries, including as a reference for aligning national legislation and developing bilateral or regional practice. However, their application by non-parties depends on domestic law, project-specific arrangements, bilateral agreements, or voluntary cooperation. Differences in national procedures, institutional responsibilities, languages, documentation requirements, and opportunities for public participation may therefore continue to complicate a regional assessment. Transboundary environmental assessment can identify affected populations, reasonable alternatives, monitoring needs, emergency assumptions, and uncertainties before authorization. It can also provide a legitimate forum in which neighboring governments and affected communities raise concerns before political positions harden. Its principal weakness is therefore not conceptual but institutional. An assessment may become a one-time exchange of documents unless it is connected to continuing environmental monitoring, emergency planning, data-sharing arrangements, and periodic review throughout the facility's operating life.

Liability and Compensation

International nuclear-liability instruments generally concentrate liability on the operator of a nuclear installation, impose liability without requiring proof of fault, require insurance or other financial security, and assign exclusive jurisdiction to the courts of a designated state – normally the state in which the nuclear incident occurs (IAEA 2020). The principal instruments include the Paris Convention and Brussels Supplementary Convention, the Vienna Convention and its 1997 Protocol, the Joint Protocol linking the Paris and Vienna systems, and the Convention on Supplementary Compensation for Nuclear Damage. These instruments share important principles but do not form a fully universal or uniform regime. Their application depends on treaty participation, the relationships among the relevant states, and implementation through national legislation. Liability regimes are important for legal certainty and the treatment of

transboundary victims, but they operate principally after nuclear damage has occurred. They cannot replace advance agreement on how states will compare measurements, establish causal connections, document economic losses, preserve evidence, process claims, or communicate eligibility and procedural rights to affected communities. Differences in treaty participation or domestic definitions of compensable damage may create uncertainty over jurisdiction, available funds, limitation periods, and whether particular environmental or economic losses are covered. For Central Asia, a regional liability assessment should therefore be completed before a nuclear power plant begins operation. Such an assessment should map each state's treaty obligations and domestic legislation, identify the competent courts and authorities, compare definitions of nuclear damage, determine applicable financial-security requirements, and clarify procedures available to persons and businesses in neighboring states. This preparatory work would not resolve every future claim, but it would expose legal gaps before an emergency requires governments and affected populations to navigate them under conditions of urgency and political tension.

A Five-Pillar Framework for Central Asia

Regional preparedness is becoming more urgent as nuclear-energy programs advance in Central Asia. In April 2026, Kazakhstan approved its Strategy for the Development of the Nuclear Industry through 2050, which provides for at least three nuclear power plants by mid-century (Agency of the Republic of Kazakhstan for Atomic Energy, 2026). In June 2026, Uzbekistan formally launched construction of the first unit of its integrated nuclear power plant in the Jizzakh region (Government of Uzbekistan, 2026). These developments do not imply that an accident is expected, but they demonstrate that cross-border governance should develop alongside nuclear infrastructure. The following framework connects international obligations with the operational needs of neighboring states and border regions.

Joint Risk Assessment and a Permanent Coordination Body

Potentially affected states should receive sufficient information about planning, construction and operation of NPP to examine accident scenarios,

atmospheric and waterborne pathways, population distribution, shared water resources, food-chain exposure, and emergency-planning assumptions. Joint baseline studies of radiation, water, soil, and agricultural products would provide an agreed reference for interpreting later measurements. These activities would extend the preventive principles of the Espoo Convention and the UNECE Central Asian Guidelines (UNECE, 1991, 2019). Participating states should also establish a permanent coordination body comprising regulators, emergencymanagement and public-health authorities, technical experts, and representatives of border-region governments. It would not replace national regulators or licensing authorities. Its functions would include maintaining contact points, coordinating assessments and technical working groups, organizing exercises, and reviewing implementation. A multilateral memorandum of understanding, a small secretariat, and a rotating chair could provide continuity while preserving national authority. The IAEA and UNECE could participate as technical advisers or observers.

Interoperable Radiation Monitoring and Data Exchange

The second pillar is a regional system for comparable and timely radiation monitoring. States should agree on measurement units, calibration, sampling methods, detection capabilities, metadata, quality assurance, and reporting formats. The system could connect national laboratories, fixed stations, mobile monitoring teams, meteorological services, and foodand water-safety agencies. Baseline information should be exchanged under normal conditions, while real-time or near-real-time readings should be available through secure and redundant channels during an emergency. Protocols should distinguish preliminary readings from validated results and specify how uncertainties and corrections are communicated. Existing IAEA systems for urgent information and monitoring-data exchange provide a technical foundation (IAEA 2026a). Regular proficiency tests and laboratory comparisons would identify discrepancies before an emergency. The IAEA’s ALMERA network offers an established model based on standardized methods and interlaboratory testing (IAEA 2026b). Validated results should also be available to the public through accessible maps and

explanations so that technically incomparable measurements are not mistaken for concealment or political manipulation.

Coordinated Emergency Protocols and Joint Exercises

Neighboring states should develop coordinated emergency protocols and conduct regular joint exercises. Coordination does not require identical national laws; it requires advance understanding of emergency classifications, protective-action criteria, decision-making authority, contact points, and procedures for requesting assistance. Protocols should cover evacuation and sheltering, medical coordination, cross-border population movement, food and water restrictions, customs procedures, and the deployment of personnel and equipment. Exercises should progress from annual notification and tabletop exercises to periodic field exercises involving laboratories, hospitals, border services, local authorities, and public-information officers. Scenarios should test communications failure, uncertain source terms, contradictory readings, cross-border movement, hospital demand, contaminated food, and misinformation. Each exercise should result in assigned corrective actions, deadlines, and subsequent verification by the permanent coordination body. IAEA standards and the Convention Exercise program provide relevant models (IAEA 2015).

Multilingual Public Communication and Participation

Public communication should be treated as a safety function. Authorities should establish procedures for timely and coordinated briefings while retaining responsibility for explaining national decisions. Messages should distinguish what has been measured, what remains uncertain, what protective action is recommended, and when information will be updated. Differences between national recommendations should be explained rather than concealed.

Communication plans should use the languages spoken in potentially affected border communities and combine television, radio, mobile alerts, health facilities, local authorities, and community organizations. They should also address rumors and misleading information. IAEA guidance identifies timeliness, factual accuracy, clarity, openness, and coordination as essential characteristics of emergency communication (IAEA 2020).

Participation should begin before plant operation. Border communities, health professionals, scientific institutions, agricultural organizations, and civil-society representatives should be able to comment on transboundary assessments, emergency plans, monitoring arrangements, and communication materials. Such participation can reveal practical problems – including inaccessible evacuation routes, language barriers, or distrust of particular information channels – that may be overlooked by central authorities.

Advance Post-Accident Coordination and Dispute Prevention

States should agree in advance on arrangements for recovery and dispute prevention. These should cover the preservation of monitoring and operational records, joint environmental sampling, laboratory validation, chain-ofcustody procedures, long-term monitoring, and the review of food, trade, and travel restrictions. Applicable liability instruments and national compensation laws should also be mapped, including definitions of compensable damage, competent courts, financial-security requirements, and procedures for claimants in neighboring states. Technical disagreements should first be referred to an expert group operating under the permanent coordination body. Unresolved matters could then proceed to consultations among national authorities and, if necessary, diplomatic or other mutually accepted dispute-settlement procedures. This process would not predetermine legal responsibility. Its purpose would be to establish a credible evidentiary record and prevent disagreements over measurements or protective measures from escalating into wider interstate conflict. Implementation may proceed in stages. An initial memorandum could establish the coordination body, contact points, and data-sharing rules. A second stage could introduce joint baseline studies, laboratory comparisons, communication protocols, and annual tabletop exercises. A mature arrangement could add field exercises, liability mapping, independent review, performance indicators, and periodic public reporting. Its central contribution would be a permanent, regionally owned structure connecting national obligations with the institutions and communities that would manage a cross-border emergency.

Benefits, Limits, and Critical Implications

The proposed framework offers three benefits. First, it reduces decision time by resolving institutional questions before a crisis. Second, it improves credibility because shared methods make it harder for divergent readings to be dismissed as political manipulation. Third, it makes nuclear governance more inclusive by recognizing border authorities and communities as participants rather than passive recipients of national decisions. These are practical contributions to both safety and regional security. The framework also has limits and costs. States may resist sharing sensitive facility information; monitoring interoperability requires sustained investment; exercises can reveal weaknesses that institutions prefer not to publicize; and synchronized communication may be difficult when governments adopt different precautionary standards. Cooperation must therefore protect legitimate security information without using secrecy to avoid environmental consultation. It should also preserve national authority while making the consequences of national decisions visible to neighbors. A further limitation of this study is that it offers an institutional design rather than an empirical evaluation of existing bilateral readiness. Interviews with regulators, emergency officials, local governments, and border communities would be needed to assess current capabilities and political feasibility. Future research could compare Central Asian arrangements with established regional systems and test the proposed pillars through scenario-based workshops. The present paper's contribution is more foundational: it specifies what a border-sensitive radiological cooperation framework should do and why global legal instruments alone cannot perform those functions.

Conclusion

Nuclear power plants are national installations with potentially transboundary consequences. Chernobyl showed that radioactive deposition can extend across multiple territories, while also illustrating the limits of using a disaster within a former federal state to anticipate disputes among independent neighbors. Post-Chernobyl conventions substantially improved international notification and assistance, and the Espoo regime provides a

preventive basis for transboundary assessment and consultation. Nevertheless, legal commitments between central governments do not automatically produce interoperable monitoring, compatible protective decisions, practical cooperation, trusted communication, or working relationships in border regions.

For Central Asia, the appropriate response is neither alarmism nor postponement until an emergency occurs. Regional preparedness should develop in parallel with nuclear infrastructure. A five-pillar framework – continuous transboundary assessment, interoperable monitoring, compatible emergency protocols, multilingual public communication, and advance post-accident arrangements – would connect international obligations to the places where cross-border consequences would actually be managed. Its broader implication is that sovereignty is strengthened, not weakened, when states cooperate in advance to manage radiological risks that none can contain alone.

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Part VI. Borderlands in Bilateral and State Frameworks

20. Weaving the Borderland Back into Bilateral Relations: The Case of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan

Ekaterina Mikhailova

Abstract

Since the rapprochement in Uzbek–Turkmen relations in the mid-2000s, the two countries have not rushed to engage their shared borderland in cooperative activities. Rapprochement clearly began in the capital cities rather than at the border. Gradually, however, the Uzbek–Turkmen borderland has become increasingly involved in bilateral interactions and plans, especially in the cultural and economic spheres. The chapter traces the development of joint cross-border activities and projects in the borderland with a particular focus on two recent flagship initiatives: the production of the first Uzbek–Turkmen film, *Maxtumquli Firog'iy* (2024), and organization of the biennial Uzbek–Turkmen interregional forums, launched in 2022. By doing so, the chapter shows how, over the past two decades, the role assigned to the Uzbek–Turkmen borderland has shifted from sporadic to regular involvement (though highly localized), and how one-off public displays of friendship have given way to more specialized cooperation formats.

Introduction

After Shavkat Mirziyoyev's rise to power in Uzbekistan in 2016, bilateral and cross-border relations of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are regularly presented as "eternal friendship", and the two nations are portrayed as "fraternal people". Yet, such portrayal conveniently omits the recent past: in early independence years, 1991–2006, during the rule of Turkmenistan's first president Saparmyrat Nyýazow, bilateral and cross-border relations of the two countries were deteriorating and reached an all-time low in early 2000s after the supposed assassination attempt of Nyýazow when military vehicles were accumulating at the Uzbek–Turkmen border ready to fight if the situation escalated further (Mikhailova and Horák, 2026). To use the typology of Oscar Martinez (1994), in 2002–2006, the Uzbek–Turkmen

borderland became alienated with borderland population suffering from ripped up social, economic and cultural ties, lost cross-border connectivity and targeted discrimination.

The reload of bilateral relations has been a slow process. The first steps towards it occurred at the intergovernmental level when in late 2004 presidents of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan had the first telephone call after the conflict and then a meeting. However, normalization on the cross-border level was not on the agenda until much later. This chapter examines to what extent and in what ways the Uzbek–Turkmen borderland has been brough back into bilateral dialogue and collaboration.

Before we proceed with an overview of joint cross-border activities and projects in the borderland, let us recapitulate why meaningful engagement of the borderland in bilateral relations is essential for sustaining a peaceful stable neighborhood in general and for Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan in particular. On the general level, cross-border relations enable exchange of goods, labor, capital and information among border regions and thus broaden their market area allowing for their reconnection with a hinterland truncated by a state border (Van Houtum, 1998). Besides, cross-border interactions can be instrumental for practical problem-solving on either side of the border (Mikhailova, 2018). From an environmental perspective, cross-border cooperation can help alleviate the harmful effects of borders on ecosystems, including habitat destruction, threats to endangered species, and the intensified impacts of natural disasters (Enríquez, 2026).

In the context of the Uzbek–Turkmen borderland (Fig. 1), one important reason to prioritize inclusion of the borderland in bilateral cooperation is a high population density in the border regions. According to official statistics[18], in 2022, the Uzbek side of the borderland (in this study taken within the limits[19] of the Republic of Karakalpakstan, the Bukhara and

[18]Note that statistical data from both countries (particularly in Turkmenistan) is highly unreliable and appears to be exaggerated.

[19]Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya viloyats, two southern regions of Uzbekistan with high population density and total population of 6.1 mln in 2022, also border Turkmenistan, yet their population mostly is located further away from the Uzbek–Turkmen border and cross-border ties are not

Khorezm *viloyats* [regions]) had a population of 5.8 million people, while the Turkmen side of the borderland (within the limits of the Dashoguz and Lebap *welaýats* [regions]) was home for nearly 3 million people (O'zbekiston Respublikasi Milliy statistika qo'mitasi, 2026; Türkmenistanyň Statistika baradaky döwlet komiteti, 2022). High population density means high economic and socio-cultural potential. Each side of the border presents an attractive market for selling goods and services for enterprises across the border and a vibrant social environment for cultural exchange.

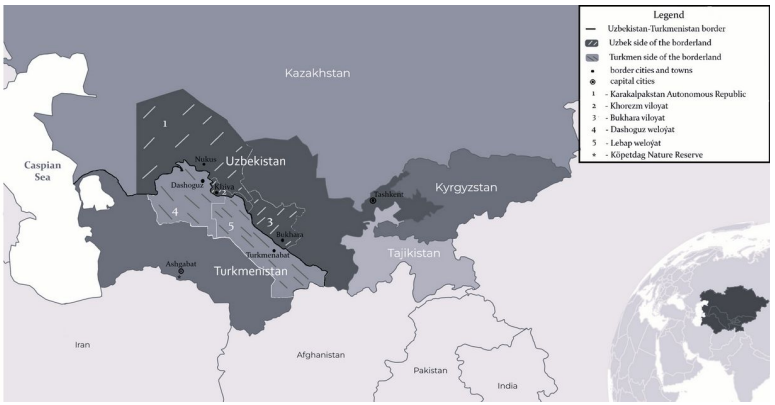


Figure 1. Map of the Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan borderland. Map design by Ekaterina Mikhailova and Hynek Müller.

Linguistic fluidity is another factor that makes the Uzbek–Turkmen borderland especially well-suited for economic synergies and cultural cooperation. While Uzbek and Turkmen languages belong to two different groups of Turkic languages – Turkmen is an Oghuz language and standard Uzbek is a Karluk language – the Uzbek-speaking population of the borderland speaks an Uzbek dialect collectively called the Khorezmian dialect, *Xorezm shevasi*, which has strong Oghuz influence and is mutually understandable with Turkmen language.

that strong. For this reason, these two regions are not discussed in the article and their population is not included in the total number of inhabitants of the Uzbek side of the borderland.

Given that both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan have a significant share of co-ethnics living in a neighboring state, maintaining an open border that is easy to cross is crucial for maintaining family and kinship ties. Over 640,000 ethnic Uzbeks live in Turkmenistan (with around 625,000 or nearly 98% residing at the borderland) (Türkmenistanyň Statistika baradaky döwlet komiteti, 2022). According to preliminary data of 2026 census of Uzbekistan, around 195,000 Turkmen live in the country (Tukhsinov, 2026), however, no statistics is available regarding their regional distribution. Based on a network of regional offices of the Turkmen Cultural Centre of Uzbekistan, one could guess that Turkmen minority in Uzbekistan is more spread out and lives in proximity of places where such offices were opened up in 2000s-2010s: in Turtkul and Nukus in the Republic of Karakalpakstan, in Gaibu village in Khorezm viloyat, in Karshi in Surkhandarya viloyat, in Termez in Kashkadarya viloyat, in Akkurgan in Tashkent viloyat and in Tashkent.

Finally, over centuries the contemporary territory of Uzbek–Turkmen borderland has been a place of the Uzbek traditional pilgrimage (*ziyorat*). More precisely, Uzbek pilgrims have several sites of particular religious importance on the contemporary Turkmen side of the border such as *Üç Yüz Altmyş Avliya* (360 Saints) and the grave of Sufi mystic Najmeddin Kubra in Konye-Urgench, to mention just a few (see more in Atanova 2019). Porous borders and cross-border mobility is a prerequisite for maintaining such religious traditions.

Rapprochement between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan: View from Capital Cities and the Uzbek-Turkmen Borderland

A “thaw” at the Uzbekistan–Turkmenistan intergovernmental level unfolded gradually and pragmatically, primarily in the capital cities rather than in the borderland. One circumstance that facilitated the normalization of bilateral relations was the Turkmenistan-China gas pipeline project, signed by China and Turkmenistan in 2006 (Horák, 2015). The project envisaged connecting Turkmenistan with China through Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, offering vital economic agreements and the possibility of economic diversification to all participating Central Asian states –

especially Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, whose economies had, by that time, been run in a largely autarchic manner for more than a decade. In 2009, a new Turkmenistan embassy was opened in Tashkent, seven years after the closure of the previous embassy. The new embassy occupied a purpose-built building, whose foundation stone had been symbolically laid during the state visit of Turkmenistan's President Berdymukhamedov to Uzbekistan in spring 2008 (Umarov, 2009).

With Shavkat Mirziyoyev's arrival to power in 2016, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan became interested in rapprochement beyond presidential meetings and formal agreements, extending it to the broader public through public diplomacy. In 2016, Tashkent hosted the first Days of Turkmen Culture, followed by the Days of Turkmen Cinema. In 2017, a twinning agreement was concluded between Ashgabat and Tashkent. Each city received a token of this twinning in the form of a park named after its counterpart: Ashgabat City Park opened in Tashkent in 2018 and became one of the largest and most modern parks in the Uzbek capital. Four years later, Tashkent City Park opened in Ashgabat; in 2023, it served as a venue for celebrations marking the thirtieth anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.

In 2017, the two states engaged in toponymic gifting: one of Tashkent's main streets was named after Makhtumkuli Fragi[20], the classic of Turkmen literature, while a street in Turkmenabat, the regional center of Lebap welaýat, was named after Islam Karimov, Uzbekistan's first president. However, these reciprocal diplomatic gestures, which saturated the symbolic landscapes of both countries with references to each other's culture and history, did not end with parks and street names; monuments were also added to public spaces. In Tashkent, a bas-relief of Makhtumkuli Fragi, created by Jasvant Annazarov, a sculptor from Khorezm, was unveiled. In Turkmenabat, a monument to Karimov was erected. The

[20]Throughout this article, the poet's name is rendered in standard transliteration as Makhtumkuli Fragi. The Uzbek spelling, Maxtumquli Firog'iy, is retained when referring to the eponymous film, as it is the film's official title.

contrast between the figures selected for memorialization is difficult to overlook[21].

The first major event hosted in the borderland was the 2010 Festival of Friendship between Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan, held in the border city of Dashoguz, which has an Uzbek-majority population. However, news reports from the festival suggest that it was a staged event, with local people either forced to participate or, conversely, excluded from it (Horák, 2015). A more open event celebrating Uzbek culture in Turkmenistan took place in Dashoguz only seven years later, in 2017.

Crucially, new institutions have been established in the borderland. In 2017, a faculty for training primary-school teachers of Turkmen was opened at the Ajiniyaz Nukus State Pedagogical Institute in Karakalpakstan. In 2018, the House of Uzbek–Turkmen Friendship with a museum reflecting the centuries-old ties between the Uzbek and Turkmen peoples and a library opened in Gaibu village, Khorezm viloyat, with the presidents of both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan participating in the opening ceremony (Fig. 2). In 2023, the National Museum of Turkmen Carpets and the *SD Turkmen Haly* Carpet Weaving Centre opened in Bukhara, while a tourist information center opened at the Shavat-Dashoguz border checkpoint. In 2025, the Shavat-Dashoguz joint visa-free border trade zone was launched. It is difficult to overlook that all of these institutions are located on the Uzbek side of the border or within the border zone. They therefore remain out of reach for most of the population on the Turkmen side, except for those who work in the border zone or possess the documents required to enter it or cross the border.

[21]Yet it should be said that Ashgabat already has a street named after Alisher Navoi, the founder of the Uzbek literary language, as well as a Soviet-era monument to the poet.



Figure 2. House of the Uzbek–Turkmen Friendship in Gaibu village with a monument to Makhtumkuli Fragi in front of it, Urgench District, Khorezm. Source: Mikhailova Ekaterina, 2023.

By early 2020s, the Uzbek–Turkmen borderland has assumed an increasingly prominent, albeit piecemeal, role in bilateral interactions, particularly in cultural and economic spheres. The following two sections provide an overview of two flagship cooperation initiatives of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan that have engaged with the borderland in different ways: the production of the first Turkmen-Uzbek film, *Maxtumquli Firog'iy* (2024), and organization of the biennial Uzbek–Turkmen interregional forums, launched in 2022.

Engaging the Borderland through Culture: Production of the film Maxtumquli Firog'iy (2024)

To set the ground for examining the joint film production, let us bring in some crucial context. First of all, over the last two centuries, Makhtumkuli Fragi has become "a highly iconic and unifying national figure" as well as a spiritual and artistic authority for Turkmen people (Taylor, 2017, 322). It is

therefore not surprising that it was Makhtumkuli whom the International Organisation of Turkic Culture (TURKSOY) chose to celebrate as a cornerstone of Turkmen literature when they launched a series of thematic years each dedicated to one Turkic cultural figure from each of Turkic states. Thus, 2014 and 2024 were declared years of Makhtumkuli to celebrate the 290th and 300th anniversaries of poet's birthday. Analysing the grand state-sponsored celebrations held in 2014 in Turkmenistan and beyond, Taylor (2017) concludes that numerous public cultural activities of various forms came to life not merely from the top-down governmental decision but from synergies of various stakeholders who saw "a potential in aligning their work with a theme as broad, as widely appreciated" as Makhtumkuli's anniversary.

Crucially, while there were numerous events held abroad in 2014 (often with Turkmenistan's involvement), seemingly Uzbekistan was one of the few former Soviet republics that only vaguely participated in the celebrations. Notably, Taylor's study (2017) does not mention Uzbekistan at all. Based on news reports, it seems a handful of thematic events, however, took place in Uzbekistan. In 2013, a presentation of newly translated works of Makhtumkuli Fragi to Uzbek took place in Khiva. In 2014, a conference marking the anniversary of Makhtumkuli was held in Bukhara. Besides, a book *Makhtumkuli in Karakalpakstan* was translated from Uzbek to Turkmen and its author Uzbek writer Kurambay Matrizaev was awarded with a medal by Turkmenistan's then President Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov during the festive year.

Knowing this context, it is striking to see how differently Uzbekistan treated 300th anniversary of Makhtumkuli when numerous thematic events were held all over the country. Arguably, Uzbekistan's political elite saw an opportunity to tap into symbolic capital of the poet whose ideas, notably living a virtuous life, was instrumental both for enlightening the domestic audience and for strengthening the good-neighborly relations with Turkmenistan.

The idea of making a film about Makhtumkuli Fragi was made public in late February 2024 in the Presidential decree "On the widespread celebration of the 300th anniversary of the great Turkmen poet and thinker

Makhtumkuli Fragi" signed by Uzbekistan's President Shavkat Mirziyoyev (O'zbekiston Respublikasi Adliya, 2024). The mode of film production, "in collaboration with filmmakers from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan under a government commission", was defined in the same decree.

The endorsement at the top-level and state funding allowed film production to progress fast. Based on news reports, it appears that the entire process from casting to post-production took about six months – very short time given the bilateral format of the film venture. In March, Uzbek and Turkmen filmmakers agreed on collaboration at a Turkmen media forum. By April casting was carried out in both countries. "Uzbekfilm" produced decorations and costumes. In June-July, filming took place in Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan. In mid-November, the film premiered in Ashgabat and Tashkent (where Turkmen minority of Uzbekistan were specially invited to attend).

The plotline of the film encompasses several themes, including strong friendship, respect for one's father, a thirst for knowledge, the fight against injustice and vice, the unfulfilled dream of marriage with the person one loves, the tragedy of losing a child, attempts at conspiracy, betrayal and remorse. Poems by Makhtumkuli are recited throughout the film. On several occasions, main protagonists, including Makhtumkuli himself, directly refer to fraternal bonds between the Uzbek and Turkmen peoples and their need to fight for independence. The opening credits of the film feature the inscriptions: 'This film was produced with the support of the Presidents of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan' and 'This film is dedicated to the eternal friendship between the peoples of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan'. The action takes place in three recognizable locations – cities of Bukhara and Khiva as well as the desert in the foothills of the Köpetdag Mountains in Turkmenistan. Recognisable cultural landmarks (the Ark Citadel of Bukhara, the old town of Khiva) and natural beauty spots (the Köpetdag Nature Reserve) serve as additional characters, powerfully situating the story of Makhtumkuli within national imaginaries of both countries.

The film has received great publicity. It has been promoted both internationally and regionally in Central Asia and in the Commonwealth of Independent States. The geography of the first major international

screenings is highly symbolic. After screenings in Ashgabat and Tashkent, the film was shown in Almaty (Kazakhstan) in November 2024, in New York (USA) in January 2025, in İzmir (Türkiye) and London (UK) in May 2025 and in Astrakhan (Russia) in August 2025.

The film and its crew received several awards. Within a year since release, the film was named 'Best Feature Film' at the 4th 'Korkut Ata' International Film Festival in Ashgabat and at the Oltin Khumo Uzbek National Film Festival and received an "Audience Choice Award" at the Eurasian Creative Guild Film Festival in London. Besides, the Uzbek film director Muzaffar Erkinov and the Turkmen actor Ahmed Amandurdiev playing the role of Makhtumkuli Fragi received special awards from the Turkmenistan's President Serdar Berdimuhamedow.

The film "*Maxtumquli Firog'iy*" is significant not only due to being a new milestone in cultural cooperation between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan but also as it opened a new chapter in Uzbekistan's cultural diplomacy. Three months after officially instigating the first Uzbek-Turkmen film collaboration, Mirziyoyev announced a strategic program "Living History" spanning 2024–2030 and aiming to (co-)produce a series of historical feature films covering a vast period of 25 centuries from late Iron Age to the recent past with a task to "showcase our [Uzbek] history to the whole world and foster our people's national pride" (President of Uzbekistan, 2024).

Through filming in Khiva and Bukhara, the border region between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan has been incorporated into film production. The borderland has not only served as a filming location, but has also been presented as a historic crossroads of interaction between Uzbek and Turkmen cultures. Such a portrayal undoubtedly opens new prospects for involving the border population in day-to-day cross-border exchanges, mirroring the historical exchanges depicted on screen and those recalled by the region's older residents, who lived through the late Soviet era, characterized by open interrepublic borders and virtually unlimited local cross-border mobility.

Engaging the Borderland through Commerce: Organization of Biennial Uzbek-Turkmen Interregional Forums

Uzbek–Turkmen historical interconnections and the heritage of the two nations' age-old coexistence in their shared borderland have become increasingly visible not only through film but also through economic partnership. Four examples illustrate this process at different scales: an individual entrepreneur, a joint Uzbek–Turkmen company, and a large investment project.

In Bukhara's Old Town, a historic building known as the *Turkman* Madrasah – so called in commemoration of its initiator and first owner, a Turkmen merchant from Chardzhou (renamed as Turkmenabat in 1999) – had been left to decay in plain sight for more than four decades. The structure dates to 1905 and has since served as a madrasah, a temporary refuge for evacuees from other parts of the USSR during the Second World War, and housing for Bukhara residents, before being abandoned in the 1970s (Dzhangirov, 2019). In 2019, a local Turkmen businessman began reconstructing the old madrasah. In 2026, the building opened to guests as a boutique hotel.

Another example of the promotion of Turkmen culture in Bukhara is *SD Turkmen Haly*, a joint Uzbek–Turkmen enterprise that produces and promotes traditional Turkmen carpets and handicrafts and operates the previously mentioned Museum of Turkmen Carpets. This emphasis on Turkmen carpets in Bukhara is not coincidental. For centuries, Turkmen carpets entered European markets under the label of "Bukhara carpets," after the city in which they were sold.

The final example is only a few months old. In summer 2026, a new large-scale cultural and tourism project, *Little Turkmenistan*, combining Turkmen carpet-weaving, ethnography, and cuisine, has been discussed in Bukhara by entrepreneurs, tourism developers, and international investors (Takyk, 2026). Clearly, on the Uzbek side of the borderland, shared heritage – such as the centuries-old presence of Turkmen carpets in Bukhara's bazaars – is understood in terms of its potential contribution to tourism.

Importantly, the increased visibility of the intertwined Turkmen-Uzbek heritage in the tourism sector at the borderland is not limited to the Bukhara

region, it also takes place in other border regions of Uzbekistan too. For instance, in the Khorezm region, the 17th-century mud fortress Ulli Hovli, meaning “Big yard”, was restored as part of a regional development program for 2013–2015 (Fig. 3). The fortress was built by the Khan of Khiva “as a military camp for brave Turkmens who at that time lived between Khiva and Urgench and protected trade caravans passing through this territory from enemy raids” (Uzbekistan National PR-center, nd). In early 2020s, Ulli Hovli functions as a multifaceted tourist complex. It includes a photography exhibition, a contemporary art gallery, craft and culinary workshops, an old mill, and a camel corral. It also frequently hosts special cultural programs for visitors, including folklore and artistic performances, traditional games, and competitions such as kurash, a form of Central Asian wrestling.



Figure 3. Ulli Hovli Fortress with an information plaque highlighting the structure’s historical connection to one of the Turkmen tribes. Urgench District, Khorezm, 2023. Source: photographs and collage by Mikhailova Ekaterina.

From an institutional point of view, the most significant recent initiative involving the Uzbek–Turkmen borderland has been the launch of

interregional Uzbek–Turkmen forums. The first forum took place in Bukhara in 2022 and was attended by heads of ministries and state agencies, mayors, chambers of commerce, commercial banks, industry associations, and other businesses from different regions of the two countries. The forum included B2G and B2B events, allowing for direct exchanges among participants. Bukhara regional government was a co-organizer of the forum.

The opening of border trade zones was identified as a top priority for the near future. As noted earlier, the first such border trade zone was launched in 2025, three years after the first interregional forum. However, it is important to note that the idea of border trade zones and border trade complexes is not new. It had already been on the negotiating table during the first decade of the two states' independence, with the last discussions taking place in 2002, shortly before the political crisis in bilateral relations of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan erupted.

The second interregional forum was held in Turkmenabat in 2024, alongside an exhibition of Uzbek goods, *Made in Uzbekistan*, covering a range of economic sectors, from the mining and metallurgical industry to the production of household appliances and food products. Earlier that year, an exhibition of Turkmen goods was held in Tashkent. The second forum brought together businesspeople, representatives of regional authorities, and members of the financial sector from both states. Uzbek companies and authorities proposed expanding cooperation in such areas as electrical engineering, agricultural machinery, and the automobile industry.

Several instruments intended to facilitate economic cooperation and cross-border trade, which have been discussed at the interregional forums, are yet to be implemented. These include organizing regular reciprocal visits by regional leaders and business delegations, as well as establishing permanent working groups between particular regions.

Overall, Uzbek–Turkmen economic cooperation is clearly on the rise. Between 2017 and 2023, trade turnover between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan increased more than fivefold, peaking at $1.94 billion in 2023. Energy constitutes a large share of this trade: Uzbekistan purchases Turkmen electricity directly and, more recently, natural gas (CentralAsia.News, 2024). More than 200 enterprises with Turkmen capital

operated in Uzbekistan in 2022. Cross-border trade nevertheless remains marginal to bilateral economic relations. However, institutional support through the interregional forums, together with the establishment of the first border trade zone, may eventually alter this in the future.

Concluding remarks

Bilateral relations between neighboring states that do not encourage cross-border cooperation, or maintain it at a minimal level, can hardly be considered profoundly cordial. Engaging the borderland in intergovernmental dialogue on a broad range of issues – from environmental and economic to cultural and educational – is necessary to ensure sustainable, long-term good-neighborly relations. Cross-border trade and cultural exchange are particularly important resources for boosting borderland economies on both sides of the border and creating opportunities for improved livelihoods among borderland populations.

For the rhetoric of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan as fraternal nations to be consistent with realities on the ground, the regular involvement of the borderland in bilateral relations is essential. As this chapter has shown, the role assigned to the Uzbek–Turkmen borderland has changed over the two decades since the death of Turkmenistan's first President, Nyýazow. During 2006–2016, the borderland was mostly treated as a venue for one-off public displays of friendship or, in the case of the Turkmen side of the border, for overtly staged ceremonial events without genuine voluntary engagement by borderlanders. Following Shavkat Mirziyoyev's arrival to power in Uzbekistan, the repertoire of roles played by the borderland has gradually broadened – albeit in an occasional rather than sustained manner. The borderland has come to serve as a symbol of the two nations' historical coexistence, as a repository of heritage encompassing Uzbek–Turkmen cultural exchange – as in the case of the joint film production – and, periodically, as a co-organizer of bilateral initiatives, as in the case of the biennial interregional forums.

While further strengthening cross-border cooperation is proclaimed to be desirable by both Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, progress towards this goal has admittedly been slow. One reason may be that the Uzbek–Turkmen

borderland holds different significance for the two states. Although the Uzbek side of the borderland is almost twice as populous as the Turkmen side – 5.8 million inhabitants versus 3 million, respectively, in 2022 – the population of the border area constitutes a significantly higher share of Turkmenistan's total population than of Uzbekistan's: 42.5 %, compared with 16.6 %[22]. Given the disproportionate demographic weight of the Uzbek–Turkmen borderland for Turkmenistan as well as the fact that the Uzbek minority constitutes one fifth of the population on the Turkmen side of the borderland, the Turkmen leadership may be more apprehensive about opening it up to more substantial and regular cross-border exchange with Uzbekistan. As a result, the potential afforded by the Uzbek–Turkmen borderland's high population density, road connectivity, and lack of impassable terrain remains underutilized (Golunov and Bitabar, 2025, 75). As long as the border remains a filter and a barrier rather than a bridge, the promise of eternal friendship and strategic partnership will remain unfulfilled.

The case study presented here, which examines the partial, localized, and irregular involvement of the Uzbek–Turkmen borderland in bilateral relations between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, allows for the formulation of several general recommendations applicable both in Central Asia and in other regions worldwide. It is highly advisable to engage ethnic and religious minorities living in borderlands in cross-border and intergovernmental dialogue, as they constitute an essential part of often diverse borderland populations. This would enable interstate and cross-border dialogue to become more grounded in borderland realities.

Where a borderland is home to an ethnic minority that shares the ethnicity of the titular nation of a neighboring state, it is advisable to include its members in bilateral events, as they may be particularly receptive to initiatives aimed at improving good-neighborly relations. Moreover, owing to their deep knowledge of both cultures, such minorities may be a valuable source of ideas regarding promising new areas and formats of cooperation.

[22]In 2022, Uzbekistan had 35.2 million inhabitants and was more than five times as populous as Turkmenistan, with its 7 million inhabitants.

When establishing institutions in the borderland, authorities overseeing this process should ensure that such institutions are located on both sides of the border or have clear mechanisms for reaching communities on the other side – for example, through regular business missions or joint projects. Finally, just as the development of good-neighborly relations is unthinkable without cross-border cooperation, strategic partnership is incompatible with erasing periods of recent interstate conflict from public memory. Personal experiences of such conflicts, particularly where they involved violence, persist even when they are suppressed and will sooner or later resurface. It is important to acknowledge this legacy and engage with it, for example by recognizing past misunderstandings, wrongdoing, and the mistreatment of borderland populations. Addressing the difficult past rather than avoiding it makes it possible to build a solid foundation for lasting, peaceful, good-neighborly relations.

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21. Georgian-Azerbaijani Relations since 2003: Ethnic Georgian Communities in Cross-Border Territories as Actors of Bilateral Cooperation

Giorgi Pareshishvili

Abstract

This chapter examines the dynamics of Georgian–Azerbaijani bilateral relations since the Rose Revolution of 2003, with particular attention to the role of ethnic Georgian communities residing in cross-border territories of Azerbaijan – most notably the historic region of Saingilo (Zaqatala, Balakan, and Gakh districts) – as potential actors of cross-border cooperation. While Georgian–Azerbaijani relations have generally been characterized by pragmatic partnership, shared energy and transport infrastructure interests, and mutual commitment to Euro-Atlantic integration, the position of ethnic Georgian minorities in Azerbaijan has remained a structurally underexplored dimension of this bilateral framework.

Drawing on the comparative study of cross-border cooperation beyond the European context, this chapter argues that ethnic Georgian communities occupy an ambiguous position: they constitute a natural social bridge across the Georgian–Azerbaijani border, yet their potential as actors of institutionalized cross-border cooperation remains largely unrealized. This gap is attributed to a combination of factors, including centralized governance models on both sides, limited legal frameworks for cross-border regional engagement, underdeveloped civil society infrastructure in border

territories, and the subordination of minority issues to broader diplomatic considerations.

The chapter further analyzes how post-2003 political transformations in Georgia – and subsequent shifts in foreign policy priorities – have shaped Tbilisi's approach to its co-ethnics in Azerbaijan, with implications for cross-border community relations. By applying a broad definition of cross-border cooperation, the study highlights both the structural constraints and the unrealized potential of ethnic Georgian communities as meaningful participants in Georgian–Azerbaijani bilateral cooperation.

Introduction

The South Caucasus occupies a position of disproportionate geopolitical significance relative to its size, functioning simultaneously as a corridor between the Caspian and Black Sea basins, a contested periphery of Russian influence, and an emerging node in the Middle Corridor connecting China, Central Asia, and Europe. Within this space, Georgian–Azerbaijani relations stand out as one of the region's most durable bilateral partnerships. Since the two countries established diplomatic relations in 1992 and signed a treaty of friendship and cooperation in 1993, their cooperation has been consistently framed around shared strategic interests: the protection of territorial sovereignty against separatism, the transit of Caspian hydrocarbons to Western markets, and, more recently, the development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, or Middle Corridor (Brady, 2025).

This partnership acquired new momentum after Georgia's 2003 Rose Revolution, which reoriented Tbilisi's foreign policy decisively toward Euro-Atlantic integration and intensified the country's search for economic and infrastructural partners capable of reducing its dependency on Russia. The post-revolutionary Georgian state actively cultivated Azerbaijan as a strategic partner in this reorientation, a relationship subsequently reinforced through the Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline, the Baku–Tbilisi-Erzurum gas pipeline, the Baku–Tbilisi-Kars railway, and, most recently, a 20-year electricity supply and transit agreement (Brady, 2025).

Yet this well-documented narrative of energy and transport partnership largely omits a demographic and cultural dimension of the bilateral relationship: the presence, in northwestern Azerbaijan, of ethnic Georgian communities historically rooted in the region known as Saingilo. Comprising the Zaqatala, Balakan, and Gakh (Qakh) districts, Saingilo is home to the Ingiloy Georgians, a religiously bifurcated population of Orthodox Christian and Sunni Muslim Georgians whose ancestors were separated from Georgia proper by the 1922 Soviet administrative delimitation (Aivazishvili-Gehne, 2025). This community occupies a structurally ambiguous position: ethnically and linguistically tied to Georgia, but constitutionally embedded as citizens of Azerbaijan, subject to Baku's minority and citizenship policy rather than to Tbilisi's jurisdiction.

This chapter asks a comparatively narrow but analytically significant question: to what extent have ethnic Georgian communities in Azerbaijan's border territories functioned, or could plausibly function, as actors of institutionalized cross-border cooperation between the two states? The chapter argues that despite constituting a natural social bridge across the Georgian–Azerbaijani border, the Ingiloy community's potential as a cross-border cooperation actor remains largely unrealized, owing to a combination of centralized governance structures, thin legal frameworks for sub-state cross-border engagement, underdeveloped civil society infrastructure in the border districts, and the persistent subordination of minority-related questions to the two states' broader strategic partnership. The analysis proceeds through a qualitative, document-based approach that synthesizes the anthropological and border-studies literature on the Ingiloy community, official and journalistic sources on Georgian–Azerbaijani relations, and the comparative CBC literature that has, in the past several years, begun to move beyond its traditionally Eurocentric theoretical foundations.

Theoretical Framework and Methodological Approach

The dominant body of cross-border cooperation scholarship has developed almost exclusively out of the European experience, where CBC has been shaped by a distinctive configuration of favorable conditions: sustained

political backing for regional integration, democratic governance permitting horizontal cross-border interaction, dedicated legal instruments such as the Council of Europe's Madrid Outline Convention, and generously funded programs such as INTERREG (Golunov, 2025). As Golunov (2025) argues, this configuration is the global exception rather than the rule; in most world regions, cross-border cooperation instead unfolds under conditions of political centralization, strict state control over formal and informal cross-border exchange, limited financial resources, and border economies that operate substantially through informal channels largely invisible to Eurocentric CBC frameworks. Golunov and Bitabar (2025) develop a parallel argument with specific reference to Central Asia, showing that cross-border cooperation in authoritarian and semi-authoritarian settings can nonetheless develop around narrowly technical, depoliticized issue areas even where the broader political environment is unfavourable to horizontal regionalism. Brunet-Jailly (2022) similarly calls for a genuinely global, comparative overview of CBC that treats the European model as one case among many rather than as a normative benchmark.

This body of work provides the conceptual starting point for the present analysis, since the Georgian–Azerbaijani border shares several of the structural features that Golunov (2025) identifies as characteristic of non-European CBC settings: two comparatively centralized states, an underdeveloped legal architecture for sub-state or municipal cross-border engagement, and a bilateral relationship whose institutional energy is overwhelmingly directed toward high-level energy, transport, and security cooperation rather than toward decentralized, community-level exchange.

A second, complementary theoretical lens is supplied by Rogers Brubaker's (1995, 1996) concept of the "triadic nexus" linking a national minority, the nationalizing state in which it resides, and an external national homeland with which it shares ethnic or cultural kinship. Brubaker's framework, developed originally with reference to interwar and post-Soviet Central and Eastern Europe, treats each of the three elements not as a fixed, given entity but as a political field that is continuously constructed, asserted, and contested. A state becomes an external "homeland" for a kin minority only through political action – when political elites define the minority as

belonging, in some sense, to the homeland state, assert that its condition must be monitored, and take concrete action to protect or promote its interests (Kemp, cited in Brubaker's own formulation, 1995). Applied to the Georgian case, this framework helps to explain why the Ingiloy Georgians of Saingilo have not become a salient object of homeland-state activism in the way that, for example, Hungarian minorities in neighboring states became objects of Budapest's kin-state policy: Georgia's political elite has, for reasons elaborated below, been comparatively reluctant to activate a homeland stance toward its ethnic kin in Azerbaijan, preferring instead to keep minority questions subordinate to the higher-order strategic partnership with Baku.

Methodologically, the chapter adopts a qualitative, document-based comparative case study design. It draws on three categories of source material: (1) the anthropological and historical literature on the Ingiloy Georgian community, principally the work of Aivazishvili-Gehne (2013, 2025), which is based on extended ethnographic fieldwork in Saingilo; (2) policy-oriented and journalistic accounts of Georgian–Azerbaijani bilateral relations, including analyses published by regional think tanks and news outlets; and (3) the comparative theoretical literature on cross-border cooperation and kin-state politics. This triangulation allows the chapter to situate a demographically small and, in the existing literature, comparatively under-researched community within both the specific bilateral relationship and the broader global CBC debate.

Historical and Demographic Background: The Ingiloy Georgians of Saingilo

Saingilo – a term coined in the nineteenth century to designate the historically Georgian districts of Zaqatala, Balakan, and Gakh (Qakh) – was once a province of the Kakheti kingdom and, before that, part of the medieval Georgian province of Hereti. The territory was administratively transferred to Soviet Azerbaijan in 1922 under a delimitation decision associated with Joseph Stalin, then Soviet People's Commissar of Nationalities, a decision that permanently separated the region's ethnic Georgian population from the rest of Georgia (Aivazishvili-Gehne, 2025).

The Ingiloy Georgians – who refer to themselves natively as Heretians (Georgian: ჰერები, herebi) – are today estimated at somewhere between 11,000 and 15,000 people, concentrated in the Zaqatala district town of Aliabad and in a scattering of villages across Balakan and Gakh. The community is religiously bifurcated in a manner that is itself analytically significant: those in the Gakh district have remained predominantly Georgian Orthodox Christian, while those in Zaqatala and Balakan converted to Sunni Islam over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, a division that continues to structure both self-identification and external perception of the group (Aivazishvili-Gehne, 2013, 2025). As Aivazishvili-Gehne's (2025) ethnographic research demonstrates, the categories through which Ingiloys understand and present their own identity are neither fixed nor externally imposed but are negotiated continuously across overlapping and sometimes competing axes of language, religion, and citizenship – a finding that itself has direct implications for how readily the community can be enlisted as a unitary actor in any cross-border cooperation framework.

Contemporary journalistic accounts corroborate the picture of a community whose relationship to both the Georgian and Azerbaijani states remains ambiguous and, in important respects, unresolved. Reporting by the regional outlet JAMnews has documented that the gradual movement of Georgians in northern Azerbaijan toward Georgia, and their consequent detachment from public life in Azerbaijan, has historically not been treated by Baku as a policy problem requiring redress (JAMnews, 2022). The same reporting notes that Azerbaijani officials have periodically brought Georgian government representatives to villages such as Alibeyli to demonstrate that neither language nor culture is under threat there – a form of managed diplomatic reassurance that nonetheless leaves the community's structural position largely unaddressed (JAMnews, 2022). On the Georgian side, the issue has occasionally surfaced in parliamentary debate: in 2020, the chairwoman of the Georgian parliament's Committee on Education and Culture called for Georgians living in Azerbaijan to enjoy rights equivalent to those extended to the substantial ethnic Azerbaijani community resident in Georgia's Kvemo Kartli region, itself the country's largest ethnic

minority at over 220,000 people according to the 2014 census (JAMnews, 2020). The proposal drew a critical response from Georgia's ombudsperson's office, which characterized the framing as potentially discriminatory – an episode that illustrates how difficult it has proven, even domestically, to construct the Ingiloy question as a legitimate and uncontroversial object of Georgian state policy.

This demographic and historical background is essential to the chapter's central argument. The Ingiloy community possesses precisely the attributes that, in principle, should make it well suited to a cross-border cooperation role: linguistic and cultural continuity with the neighboring state, physical proximity to the border, and a lived, everyday familiarity with both Georgian and Azerbaijani institutional environments. Yet, as the following sections demonstrate, none of these attributes has translated into an institutionalized cross-border cooperation function.

Georgian-Azerbaijani Relations since 2003: From Rose Revolution to Strategic Partnership

The Rose Revolution of November 2003, which brought Mikheil Saakashvili to power following disputed parliamentary elections and Eduard Shevardnadze's resignation, is widely regarded as a watershed moment in Georgia's post-Soviet trajectory (Rose Revolution, as documented in RFE/RL, 2023). Domestically, the new government pursued rapid state-building reforms, anti-corruption measures, and an aggressive liberalization agenda; internationally, it committed Georgia unambiguously to NATO and EU membership aspirations, a reorientation that necessarily reshaped Tbilisi's regional partnerships (RFE/RL, 2023).

Within this reoriented foreign policy, Azerbaijan assumed a role of particular strategic importance. Unlike Armenia, with which Georgia's relations have been complicated by the presence of a large ethnic Armenian minority and unresolved historical sensitivities, and unlike Russia, from which Georgia sought active disengagement following the 2008 war, Azerbaijan offered Tbilisi a partner that combined economic complementarity with a shared, if not identical, interest in reducing structural dependence on Russia within the region's balance of power. The

bilateral relationship rests on three mutually reinforcing pillars: energy transit, transport connectivity, and a loosely coordinated approach to sovereignty and territorial integrity, given that both states have faced separatist conflicts on their territories in which Russia has played a documented role – Georgia in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, Azerbaijan (until 2020) in Nagorno-Karabakh (Brady, 2025).

The energy dimension of the partnership has been particularly consequential. The Baku–Tbilisi–Ceyhan oil pipeline and the Baku–Tbilisi-Erzurum (South Caucasus) gas pipeline, both completed in the mid-2000s, transformed Georgia into an indispensable transit corridor for Azerbaijani hydrocarbons bound for Turkish and European markets, while simultaneously reducing both countries' dependence on Russian-controlled export infrastructure (Brady, 2025). This cooperation has deepened rather than plateaued in subsequent years: in 2026, the two governments signed a 20-year agreement on electricity supply and transit, explicitly framed by both sides as reinforcing mutual trust and strengthening coordination on regional infrastructure projects along the Middle Corridor (JAMnews, 2026a). Azerbaijani and Georgian officials have consistently characterized the relationship in terms of "friendship, good-neighbourliness, and strategic partnership," language reiterated at the presidential level during a 2026 meeting between Presidents Ilham Aliyev and Mikheil Kavelashvili in Tbilisi (Interfax, 2026).

Transport connectivity has followed a parallel trajectory. The Baku–Tbilisi-Kars railway, together with the modernization of Georgian Black Sea port infrastructure, positions the two countries as central nodes in the Middle Corridor linking China and Central Asia to Europe – a role that has acquired additional urgency since 2022 as Western trade routes have sought alternatives to transit through Russia (Caspianpost, 2025; Brady, 2025). Both governments have signed successive packages of energy and transport agreements, most recently during Georgian Prime Minister Irakli Kobakhidze's 2026 visit to Baku, covering gas supply, electricity transit, oil pipeline operations, and railway connectivity (Anewz, 2026).

Security cooperation, while never formalized into a mutual defense treaty, has similarly deepened. During the 2008 Russo-Georgian war,

Azerbaijan provided Georgia with emergency gas supplies and financial support, and facilitated the rerouting of international air traffic after Georgia lost control of parts of its airspace (Brady, 2025). More recently, the two states have expanded cooperation on counter-terrorism, border security, and, together with Turkey, a loose trilateral framework that links Georgia's Euro-Atlantic aspirations with Azerbaijan's more explicitly non-aligned foreign policy posture (Brady, 2025).

What is notable, for the purposes of this chapter, is the near-total absence of ethnic or minority-community dimensions from this otherwise extensive and well-institutionalized bilateral agenda. Official communiqués, strategic partnership declarations, and infrastructure agreements make no substantive reference to the Ingiloy Georgian community or to any mechanism for cross-border engagement between Georgian communities on either side of the border. The bilateral relationship, in other words, has been constructed almost entirely as an inter-state relationship of high-level strategic and economic cooperation, with civil-society- or community-level cross-border cooperation occupying, at best, a marginal position.

Structural Constraints on the Cross-Border Role of Ethnic Georgian Communities

Following Golunov's (2025) comparative framework, at least four structural factors help to explain why the Ingiloy Georgian community has not developed into an institutionalized actor of cross-border cooperation, despite its evident potential as a social bridge.

First, both Georgia and Azerbaijan retain comparatively centralized models of territorial governance, in which sub-national or municipal authorities possess limited independent capacity to initiate or sustain cross-border partnerships. Where European CBC has typically been driven by regional or municipal actors operating within a multi-level governance architecture underpinned by instruments such as the European Groupings of Territorial Cooperation, no equivalent sub-state institutional layer exists on the Georgian–Azerbaijani border. Decisions concerning the border districts of Saingilo, whether pertaining to infrastructure, education, or minority cultural policy, are made overwhelmingly at the level of the central

Azerbaijani state, with local administrative bodies possessing negligible autonomous initiative capacity (Golunov, 2025).

Second, the legal architecture that in the European context underpins CBC – treaties such as the Council of Europe's Madrid Outline Convention, dedicated funding instruments, and formal mechanisms for municipal twinning or cross-border consortia – has no meaningful equivalent in the South Caucasus. Georgia and Azerbaijan have signed numerous bilateral agreements on energy, transport, and security, but none of these establishes a legal framework through which the Ingiloy community, or Georgian civil society more broadly, could formally engage counterparts across the border on cultural, educational, or developmental initiatives. In the absence of such a framework, any cross-border engagement that does occur – church visits, cultural exchanges, occasional educational support – remains ad hoc, informal, and dependent on personal or ecclesiastical networks rather than institutionalized procedure.

Third, civil society infrastructure within Saingilo itself remains comparatively underdeveloped. Aivazishvili-Gehne's (2025) ethnographic research suggests that the Ingiloy community's internal organization is fragmented along religious and generational lines, and that individuals or families perceived as maintaining a pronounced "pro-Georgian" orientation have, at points, faced informal social suspicion or been characterized locally as politically suspect (Aivazishvili-Gehne, 2025). Such dynamics constrain the emergence of the kind of confident, externally engaged community organizations that, in European border regions, typically serve as the operational vehicles of cross-border cooperation – diaspora associations, cultural foundations, or municipal partnership committees.

Fourth, and arguably most decisively, minority-related questions have been consistently subordinated to the two states' broader strategic partnership. Because the Georgian–Azerbaijani relationship is valued by both Tbilisi and Baku primarily for its energy, transport, and security dividends, neither government has strong incentives to elevate a comparatively small and politically delicate minority question to a position of diplomatic salience. Raising the position of ethnic Georgians in Azerbaijan risks being read in Baku as an implicit criticism of Azerbaijani

minority policy, or as inviting reciprocal Azerbaijani scrutiny of the considerably larger ethnic Azerbaijani community in Georgia's Kvemo Kartli region; conversely, Azerbaijan's periodic reassurances to Georgian officials that Ingiloy language and culture face no threat function as a form of diplomatic risk management rather than substantive policy engagement (JAMnews, 2022). The result, consistent with Brubaker's (1995) observation that a kin-state's activism toward co-ethnics abroad is a matter of political construction rather than automatic obligation, is that Georgia has not constructed itself as an active "homeland" for the Ingiloy community in the way that some post-socialist states have done for their diasporic kin elsewhere.

Tbilisi's Compatriot Policy and the Post-2003 Reorientation

Georgia's legal and institutional framework for engaging its diaspora and co-ethnic populations abroad developed substantially in the post-Rose Revolution period, culminating in the 2011 Law of Georgia on Compatriots Residing Abroad and Diaspora Organisations. The law defines a "compatriot residing abroad" broadly, as either a Georgian citizen living long-term in another state or a citizen of another state who is of Georgian origin or whose native language belongs to the Georgian-Caucasian language group, and establishes a register of diaspora organizations along with a system of honorary representatives tasked with coordinating relations between Georgia and its diaspora communities (Government of Georgia, 2011). On paper, this framework would appear to encompass the Ingiloy Georgians of Saingilo. In practice, however, Georgia's diaspora policy architecture has been oriented overwhelmingly toward the much larger and more politically salient communities of ethnic Georgians and Georgian citizens in Russia, Greece, Ukraine, the European Union, and the United States – populations whose remittances constitute a significant share of Georgia's GDP – rather than toward the historic, pre-Soviet diaspora communities in Turkey, Iran, and Azerbaijan (Civil.ge, 2017; Prague Process, n.d.).

This asymmetry reflects a broader post-2003 pattern in Georgian foreign policy, in which the overriding priority accorded to Euro-Atlantic

integration, and subsequently to managing relations with a small set of pivotal regional partners, left comparatively little institutional bandwidth for the cultivation of kin-community diplomacy toward smaller, historically rooted minority populations such as the Ingiloys. Where the state minister's office on diaspora issues, created in the Saakashvili period, actively organized diaspora forums and engagement programs aimed at mobilizing Georgian communities in Western states for investment, tourism, and public diplomacy purposes, no comparable institutional effort has been directed at Saingilo. The relative institutional neglect of the Ingiloy case is consistent with the broader argument advanced above: Georgia's kin-state posture toward its ethnic Georgian population in Azerbaijan has remained largely passive, shaped less by an active political construction of Saingilo as a legitimate object of homeland concern than by a calculation that raising the issue could complicate a bilateral relationship whose principal value lies elsewhere.

Discussion: The Unrealized Potential of a Social Bridge

The preceding analysis suggests that the Ingiloy Georgian community's position within Georgian–Azerbaijani relations is best understood not as an absence of potential but as a case of structurally unrealized potential. The community possesses precisely the attributes that comparative CBC scholarship identifies as conducive to a cross-border cooperation role: linguistic and cultural continuity with the neighboring state, a settled and historically rooted presence in the border zone, and lived familiarity with the institutional and social environment of both countries. What is absent is not the sociological substrate for cross-border cooperation but the institutional architecture that would be required to convert that substrate into an operational cooperation mechanism.

Applying Golunov and Bitabar's (2025) observation regarding Central Asian cross-border cooperation under conditions of political centralization, a plausible pathway for the Ingiloy case would involve narrowly technical, depoliticized initiatives rather than an ambitious minority-rights or kin-state agenda that would likely provoke diplomatic friction. Cultural heritage preservation – the restoration and joint stewardship of Georgian Orthodox

churches in Saingilo, several of which remain in a state of disrepair (Georgia Today, n.d.) – offers one plausible low-politics entry point, since heritage preservation can be framed as a shared cultural asset rather than as an assertion of Georgian political claims over Azerbaijani territory or citizens. Educational cooperation, including support for Georgian-language instruction within the existing Azerbaijani educational system, represents a second plausible avenue, provided it is pursued through bilateral educational cooperation channels rather than through unilateral Georgian initiative. Ecclesiastical diplomacy, coordinated through the Georgian Orthodox Church's existing relationships with Georgian communities and religious sites in the region, constitutes a third channel that has historically proven less diplomatically sensitive than explicitly state-led minority engagement.

At the same time, the analysis cautions against overstating the Ingiloy community's readiness to serve as a unitary cross-border actor. As Aivazishvili-Gehne's (2025) ethnographic findings make clear, the community's internal religious bifurcation between Orthodox Christian and Sunni Muslim Ingiloys, together with the varying degrees of linguistic assimilation and the political sensitivities surrounding overtly "pro-Georgian" identification within Azerbaijan, mean that any cross-border cooperation initiative would need to be calibrated to a genuinely heterogeneous community rather than treated as a homogeneous ethnic bloc awaiting external mobilization. This internal complexity is itself consistent with Brubaker's (1995, 1996) broader theoretical point that national minorities are not pre-given, bounded groups but fields of internally contested identity claims – a caution that applies with particular force to a community whose self-understanding has been shaped by nearly a century of separation from the putative homeland state.

Finally, the broader geopolitical environment of the past several years – intensified Middle Corridor investment, the 2026 20-year Georgian–Azerbaijani electricity agreement, and the deepening of trilateral cooperation with Turkey – suggests that the strategic value both states attach to their partnership is unlikely to diminish in the near term (JAMnews, 2026a; Interfax, 2026). This creates, paradoxically, both a

constraint and an opportunity: a constraint, because minority questions will likely continue to be subordinated to higher-order strategic considerations; and an opportunity, because the depth and stability of the overall bilateral relationship could, in principle, provide sufficient diplomatic trust to accommodate modest, carefully framed community-level initiatives that neither government would be inclined to permit within a more adversarial bilateral context.

Conclusion

This chapter has examined the position of ethnic Georgian communities in Azerbaijan's cross-border territories, with particular attention to the historic Saingilo region, as potential actors of institutionalized cross-border cooperation within the broader framework of Georgian–Azerbaijani bilateral relations since the 2003 Rose Revolution. Drawing on comparative cross-border cooperation scholarship that has increasingly moved beyond its Eurocentric theoretical origins (Golunov, 2025; Golunov & Bitabar, 2025; Brunet-Jailly, 2022) and on Brubaker's (1995, 1996) triadic nexus framework for analyzing kin-minority relations, the chapter has argued that the Ingiloy Georgian community occupies a structurally ambiguous position: it constitutes a natural social bridge across the Georgian–Azerbaijani border by virtue of shared language, culture, and historical origin, yet its potential as a cross-border cooperation actor remains largely unrealized.

This gap is best explained not by an absence of community-level capacity or willingness but by four interlocking structural constraints: centralized governance models in both states that leave little room for sub-national cross-border initiative; the absence of a dedicated legal framework for cross-border regional engagement of the kind that has underpinned European CBC; underdeveloped civil society infrastructure within Saingilo itself; and the persistent subordination of minority-related questions to the two states' overriding strategic partnership in energy, transport, and security. Georgia's own post-2003 diaspora and compatriot policy, while formally broad enough to encompass the Ingiloy community, has in practice prioritized larger and more politically salient diaspora populations in

Western states, leaving Tbilisi's posture toward its historic co-ethnics in Azerbaijan comparatively passive.

The chapter's findings carry implications both for the specific Georgian–Azerbaijani case and for the broader comparative study of cross-border minority communities in non-European settings. They suggest that the presence of a culturally proximate cross-border community does not, by itself, generate institutionalized cross-border cooperation; such cooperation requires a supportive legal and institutional architecture that, in centralized and strategically cautious bilateral relationships such as this one, is unlikely to emerge without deliberate, carefully calibrated policy initiative. Future research would benefit from close, field-based engagement with Saingilo's Georgian communities themselves, in order to establish more precisely which forms of cross-border engagement – cultural, educational, ecclesiastical, or economic – would be regarded by the community as both desirable and diplomatically viable, and from comparative analysis of how other post-Soviet states have, or have not, constructed active kin-state postures toward their own cross-border co-ethnic populations.

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22. Exploring the Discursive Construction of the Altai Region across Qazaq, Chinese, and Russian Official Discourses

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Abstract

The cross-border region of Altai remains understudied in the academic literature. While the states that share a border across Altai – China, Mongolia, Qazaqstan, and Russia – emphasize the narrative of regional cooperation, calling Altai a "common home," how they construct and "imagine" the region has not yet been addressed. This chapter examines how China, Qazaqstan, and Russia discursively construct the Altai region, drawing on a thematic analysis of official sources. It identifies several themes, such as Altai as an "eastern frontier," a "capital of winter tourism," and "a shared heritage," etc. each aligning with the respective state's broader national interests and political agenda. Finally, the chapter offers recommendations based on this preliminary analysis and the author's interpretation.

Introduction

Altai is a transnational mountainous region that lies between four sovereign states: Qazaqstan, the PRC, Mongolia, and the Russian Federation. After the Soviet Union's disintegration and the political turbulence that followed, these states began building a basis for cross-border cooperation across Altai. The Greater Altai Initiative was first launched in 1998 among the subnational administrative units of Altai Krai and the Altai Republic of

Russia, the East Qazaqstan region of Qazaqstan, the XUAR of China, and the Bayan-Ölgii and Khovd provinces (*aimags*) of Mongolia. The two principal platforms of regional cooperation today are the "Our Common Home – Altai" International Coordinating Council (ICC-Altai) and the Trans-Altai Dialogue, which President Toqayev of Qazaqstan initiated in 2025. Although these platforms have received considerable media coverage in recent years, a research gap remains regarding how the states themselves view and imagine the region in their practical geopolitical discourses. Thus, this chapter undertakes a qualitative analysis of the official sources of three bordering states of China, Qazaqstan, and Russia to explore how they construct Altai in their respective discursive strategies.

Following the changes in regional political architecture of the 1990s, the Altai region emerged as a point of interaction among four sovereign states of Eurasia. The first attempt to institutionalize cross-border cooperation was the Greater Altai Initiative, which grew out of the 1998 ecological conference in XUAR, China, and its Altai Declaration (Pinnick, 2005). This loosely structured framework, established as a platform for ecological cooperation, later came to encompass trade and economic cooperation with the establishment of the ICC-Altai in 2003 (Ivanov & Rotanova, 2019; Pinnick, 2005). While the ICC-Altai initially comprised representatives from the legislatures of the bordering administrative entities, it later expanded to include executive bodies as well, signaling the growing importance of regional cooperation (Pinnick, 2005; Vinokurov & Krasnoyarova, 2023).

Vinokurov and Krasnoyarova (2023) point out that although Altai lies on the periphery of every border-sharing state, it occupies the center of broader Eurasia (p. 212). Despite deficiencies in both hard and soft infrastructure between the countries, ongoing integration efforts show some positive dynamics, particularly on the Chinese side. China in particular has invested heavily in connecting Xinjiang not only to inner China but also to the region's bordering states (Vinokurov & Krasnoyarova, 2023). Qu (2025) further emphasizes Altai's role in China's Belt and Road Initiative as a bridge between East and West, and argues that China's push in tourism and beyond, both in its part of Altai and further afield, reflects the state's

attempt to territorialize its westernmost region, historically populated by non-Han ethnicities. The discursive strategies that the other states apply to Altai, however, remain unexamined. Although this chapter does not adopt the territorialization framework used by Qu (2025), it seeks to shed light on how China, Qazaqstan, and Russia "imagine" Altai and construct it in their official discourse.

The chapter's concept of geopolitical imagination draws on the theoretical lens of critical geopolitics (Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). Scholars in this tradition argue that states' geopolitical visions are not determined by fixed geographical facts but are discursively constructed by actors who write and speak about space (Ó Tuathail, 1996; Ó Tuathail & Agnew, 1992). Among the three types of geopolitical discourse – formal, practical, and popular – that shape a state's spatial imagination, this chapter analyzes practical geopolitical discourse, which is produced by state officials and institutions in the everyday conduct of foreign policy (Ó Tuathail et al., 2006).

Methods and Data

The chapter uses qualitative thematic analysis to identify prevailing themes across the official discourses of three states (China, Qazaqstan, and Russia). Mongolia is excluded from the study because of linguistic constraints. The data are drawn from three state institution websites: for Qazaqstan and Russia, the websites of the presidents; for the PRC, the English-language website of the State Council. Table 1 presents descriptive statistics for the corpus. In total, the dataset comprises 140 observations across China (32), Qazaqstan (33), and Russia (75), published between 2001 and 2026 and collected in July–August 2026. The date ranges vary by source: Kremlin materials are concentrated in a shorter and more recent period but appear far more frequently, while Aqorda materials span a longer period at lower density. The Chinese dataset contains no items from 2026. We retrieved documents using the keyword *Altai/Altay* and screened them before inclusion to ensure they addressed the Altai region rather than mentioning the term incidentally. The analysis then followed the conventional steps of

familiarization with the data, manual inductive coding, review, theme development, and report production (Terry et al., 2017).

Table 1. Dataset of Observations

State	*Official website*	*Number of observations*	*Date range*
China	Official website of the State Council, PRC (State Council)	32	2014–2025
Qazaqstan	Official website of the President of the Republic of Qazaqstan (Aqorda)	33	2001–2026
Russia	Official website of the President of the Russian Federation (Kremlin)	75	2019–2026
Total		140	

Note. Observations were retrieved using the keyword *Altai/Altay* and screened for topical relevance. Chinese sources were retrieved from the English-language edition of the State Council website. Data were collected in July–August 2026.

Findings

Qazaq Discourse: "Altai as an Eastern Frontier of Nationhood and a Shared Heritage"

Qazaq official narratives on Altai are dominated by two themes. First, Altai is depicted as the eastern frontier of Qazaq nationhood and statehood, marking the edge of the "great steppe" that stretches "from *Altai* to Atyrau, from Arqa to Alatau" (Aqorda, 2011). This narrative was more prevalent in early state discourse under the first president of the Republic, Nursultan Nazarbayev, and is closely linked to the concept of "eternal nationhood" (*Mängilik El*) that he coined. In 2013, Nazarbayev articulated seven treasures of independent Qazaqstan, the first of which was eternal nationhood, extending across the four frontiers noted above, including Altai (Aqorda, 2013). The following year, the ethnographic motor expedition "My Nation. From the Caspian Sea to Altai," which brought together 20 youth representatives, was launched and received by the first president (Aqorda, 2014).

Qazaq discourse also does not claim exclusive ownership of Altai; instead, it emphasizes its importance to many surrounding nations,

including its role as a homeland for Turkic nations. In this sense, Altai is not only a national or even continental heritage but one of global importance (Aqorda, 2017a). It is the "golden cradle of all Turkic nations" (*Tutas turkinin altyn besigi*) because these are the lands where the Turkic world first originated, giving rise to a new era on the Great Steppe (Aqorda, 2017b, 2018). Altai also appears in the context of cooperation with other countries: with Korea, through reference to the shared Altaic heritage of the Qazaq and Korean languages, and with Mongolia, through the prospect of a joint tourism cluster (Aqorda, 2019, 2024). More recently, Altai's Turkic identity is also being enhanced with the launch of the international conference series titled "Altai – cradle of the Turks." As will be shown later, Russia also increasingly emphasizes this academic initiative in the region. The next International Conference on the same theme is claimed to take place in September 2026 (Aqorda, 2026a). Furthermore, Qazaq President Toqayev's Trans-Altai Dialogue initiative at the Summit of the SCO in Tianjin, China, in 2025 has also dominated recent focus on the Altai Region (Aqorda, 2025). Toqayev called for greater impetus for cross-border cooperation among the four states surrounding Altai to use the region's development potential more effectively. Currently, Qazaq discourse mentions the Trans-Altai Dialogue alongside the ICC-Altai, as seen in the recent joint statement by the Qazaq and Russian presidents (Aqorda, 2026b).

Overall, Qazaq discourse reflects the country's multivector foreign policy, which seeks to involve a wide range of actors in the region's development. The narratives readily invoke Altai as a point of reference when discussing shared heritage with states across Eurasia and beyond. Tourism and Altai's natural resources also appear, but these topics do not dominate the discourse in the way the two themes above do.

Chinese Discourse: "Connecting Altai as a Capital of Snow and Winter Tourism"

Chinese sources emphasize Altai's increasing connectivity to other parts of China and link it primarily to the region's growing tourist appeal. The Afuzhun Railway (Altay–Fuyun–Zhundong), which connects Altay city to other parts of Xinjiang, and the Altay–Hemu Highway are presented as

contributing to increased travel to the region (State Council, 2020, 2024a). At the same time, official discourse constructs Altai's identity as the "Snow Capital of China" (State Council, 2023a). The region is also described as the "birthplace of skiing," based on ancient skis and poles reportedly found there (State Council, 2022). Accordingly, China promotes Altai as a major domestic tourism destination. The dataset shows a predominant focus on the region's developing and flourishing winter tourism. The chapter titled "Turning ice and snow into gold" presents Altai as becoming China's leading skiing destination, reporting 4.89 million tourist visits in the 2023–2024 snow season alone (State Council, 2025a).

Altai has also featured prominently on Chinese television as the setting of the 2024 drama series To the Wonder (我的阿勒泰, Wo de Aleitai, "My Altay"), which helped position the region as an appealing destination for Chinese viewers (State Council, 2024b). In response to rising visitor numbers, airlines have increased flights between Altay in Xinjiang and Beijing and other cities in inner China (State Council, 2025b). Taken together, these narratives align with Qu's (2025) argument that China uses tourism to reterritorialize Altai and Xinjiang more broadly. Discourse on multilateral, or even bilateral, cooperation around Altai is, by contrast, minimal, though this cannot be taken as evidence of its absence from broader government discourse, since the present analysis draws on a single source. Only a few articles mention Altai's growing connectivity with Qazaqstan, which benefits from the visa-free regime the two countries have introduced, and the Takixken road port in Altai, a key node in the China–Mongolia–Russia economic corridor (State Council, 2024c, 2025c).

Russian Discourse: "Russian yet Turkic Altai – Tourism Potential of Altai"

Russian discourse covers a wider range of themes than the other two cases. The main topics revolve around the "Russianness" and socio-economic condition of Russian Altai, but also address its Turkic heritage and its distinctive tourism potential. As noted above, Russia has two "Altais": Altai Krai and the Altai Republic. Many narratives focus on the well-being and development of these two regions on the periphery of the Russian Federation. This implied concern of the center for the periphery

accompanies an emphasis on Altai's identity as a "pearl" of Russia, on the Altai people's "voluntary accession" to Russia, and even on anxieties about the declining number of ethnic Russians in the regions, Altai among them (Kremlin, 2019a, 2021a, 2026). Altai's Russian identity is thus continuously reproduced. At the same time, the discourse also highlights Altai's cultural and, more recently, Turkic identities. President Putin's characterization of the Altai language as the basis of all modern Turkic languages, together with his remarks to the international conference "Mountainous Altai – Cradle of the Turks" that the languages, traditions, and lives of Turkic peoples form part of Russia's heritage as a civilizational state, indicate an attempt to assert discursive authority over the Turkic element (Kremlin, 2019b, 2024a).

Russian discourse also positions Altai as an emerging but not yet fully realized tourism destination. Although it does not assign Altai the winter sports or skiing role that Chinese discourse does, the narratives emphasize rising visitor numbers, tourism infrastructure, and connectivity with inner Russia. They repeatedly highlight tourism as a key sector for the region's development, alongside agriculture. The discourse also presents the "Golden Ring of Altai" initiative with neighboring countries, as well as Russia's own "Foothills of Altai" tourism cluster (Kremlin, 2019c, 2021b). As a result, the number of tourists traveling to Altai is reported to have doubled (Kremlin, 2024b).

Discourse on multilateral cooperation in the Altai region is likewise minimal in the Russian case. References to existing cooperation focus on Qazaq–Russian bilateral efforts and omit the roles of China and Mongolia. This may reflect the strategic importance Qazaqstan holds for its northern neighbor, whereas Sino-Russian cooperation in the region may be constrained by competition taking precedence over cooperation.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The Altai region is a distinctive point of interaction where the interests of four Eurasian states collide. The intensity of development and impetus varies across borders, yet the language of cross-border cooperation endures. Examining the official discourses of the three states shows how each

country constructs its geopolitical imagination of Altai. Qazaqstan situates Altai as a constitutive part and frontier of its nationhood while recognizing the plurality of parties that share the region's heritage. China takes a more pragmatic approach, assigning Altai a unique touristic destination identity that would serve to better connect the westernmost part of the big country to Inner China. Finally, Russia attempts to stitch together Altai's "Russianness" and Turkic identity while also developing the discourse of domestic tourism in Altai. Relying on the preliminary qualitative analysis of the data and discourses, the chapter seeks to offer the following recommendations for further enhancing cross-border cooperation across Altai

1. Ecological conservation in Altai must be central to institutionalizing and strengthening cross-border cooperation. All three discourses share and recognize the importance of this eco-agenda. Altai, the "pearl" of Russia, a globally important heritage for Qazaqstan, and China's winter tourism capital, makes environmental conservation a neutral yet constructive basis for cross-border cooperation.
2. Academic research cooperation must be aligned between the countries, as developing common narratives about the region's history and development becomes central to further enhancing cooperation. Radically different and heterogeneous discourses may fuel competing claims about the region's identity and unhealthy cross-border competition. Although the countries will not share the exact same discourse about the region, discursive cooperation can strengthen goodwill among all parties.
3. We observe that integration language is not a priority in the region, as countries are trying to further "nationalize" the region and better connect it to their inner regions (e.g., Russia, China). Thus, the TransAltai Dialogue platform, where central governments are represented directly rather than ICC-Altai, which is cooperation among subnational administrative units, might be desirable to help parties feel more comfortable discussing cross-border cooperation in the first place.

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Part VII. Strategic Competition, Technology, and the Limits of Cooperation

23. A Crisis for Eurasian Border-Crossing under Cold War 2.0: Lessons from the Japan–Russia and Japan–Korea Borderlands

Akihiro Iwashita

Introduction: The Emerging Fault Lines of Global Order

The two ongoing wars in Eurasia, in Ukraine and the Middle East, are leading to new fault lines globally, with these wars creating new "friend-enemy" distinctions among countries worldwide. However, the orientation of these is not necessarily consistent across the two conflicts. While the former battleground pits the West against Russia in a conflict which is largely irrelevant to most of Asia and Africa, the latter is a reflection of a US and Israeli unilateralism that operates without reference to the rest of the world.

As we navigate this complex environment reminiscent of a "Cold War 2.0," the international community faces unprecedented layers of structural transformation. The traditional paradigms of globalization are being rapidly reconfigured by securitization, geo-political rivalry, and a resurgence of hard power politics. Yet, the impact of these seismic shifts is experienced unevenly across different regions, creating a mosaic of friction points and adaptive spaces.

This global disorder is further compounded by the erosion of international law and institutional frameworks. Major powers increasingly invoke selective principles of sovereignty while bypassing multilateral organizations, turning regional spaces into testing grounds for great power competition. Consequently, understanding the contemporary global crisis requires moving beyond abstract geopolitical generalities and examining how structural transformations are felt directly at the margins of nation-states – within the fragile and dynamic spaces of international borders. The re-emergence of bloc politics threatens to permanently fracture the delicate web of global interdependence, making it imperative to re-evaluate how regional actors and border communities sustain their daily existence under

the shadow of overarching systemic confrontation. Without attentive observation of these localized margins, political analysts risk misinterpreting the actual resilience and adaptive capacity of international society against systemic shocks.

The Varying Impacts on Cross-Border Movements

The results for the cross-border movements of people and goods have been varied and complex.

- As a result of the Russo-Ukrainian war, the increasing interdependence of Russia and China is reflected directly at the border between them.
- Meanwhile, countries such as Turkey and Mongolia have further developed as spaces contiguous to both Russia and the West, acting as vital bridges and economic conduits. Crucially, Central Asian states – particularly Kazakhstan – exemplify this pragmatic resilience. By maintaining multi-vector diplomacy, they function as indispensable Eurasian hubs that actively resist binary divisions and sustain vital regional connectivity.
- Concurrently, aggressive policies in the Middle East have drastically impacted maritime border-crossing, most notable in the crisis surrounding the closure of the Straits of Hormuz.

The upshot of these developments is a further accentuating of the importance of the “friend-enemy” distinction for global politics. National borders are no longer merely administrative lines; they have become ideological and economic battlegrounds where the pressures of global confrontation are acutely felt. Whether through land borders strained by sanctions or maritime routes choked by regional conflict, the fundamental freedom of movement is under severe pressure.

As traditional trade routes fracture and security restrictions tighten, local economies that rely on open transit face immediate stagnation. The militarization of borders reinforces the binary logic of confrontation, discouraging cross-border dialogue and stifling the organic people-to-people exchanges that historically served as buffers against diplomatic hostility. Furthermore, the systematic weaponization of economic ties

transforms routine commerce into a high-stakes geopolitical gamble, leaving vulnerable border populations to bear the brunt of macroeconomic volatility and diplomatic severance. This dynamic demonstrates that state-level hostility directly undermines the socioeconomic stability of peripheral communities that depend on cross-border permeability.

The Vulnerability of Footings and Practical Resilience

In reflecting upon these global disruptions, we are reminded that geo-political shifts are mirrored by localized vulnerabilities. Just as structural fissures in international relations expose the fragility of global supply chains, local communities often face their own profound vulnerabilities – whether through geopolitical tensions or physical shocks, such as natural disasters that test the resilience of regional infrastructure.

When regional spaces face physical or political tremors, the abstract concepts of international politics must translate into tangible, pragmatic strategies. Relying solely on great power alignments or rigid ideological blocs leaves local economies and border regions exposed. Therefore, building resilience requires acknowledging our shared vulnerabilities and fostering practical, ground-level connections that transcend high-level political hostility.

Local populations residing near geopolitical fault lines often bear the heaviest costs of national-level posturing. Recognizing these localized vulnerabilities allows border studies to reframe security not as an exercise in military exclusion, but as a commitment to maintaining the infrastructural, economic, and human lifelines that sustain communities through systemic crises. True resilience is not found in the height of walls or the strictness of sanctions, but in the adaptability of local networks and the maintenance of reciprocal trust across dividing lines. When physical and political shocks coincide, the necessity of maintaining open communication channels becomes blindingly apparent for survival.

Case Study 1:
The Japan-Russia Borderlands and Northern Frontier

To understand how these global tensions manifest on the ground, we can examine the specific case of Japan's northern borderlands involving Nemuro, Wakkanai, and Russia. From the perspective of Tokyo's official foreign policy, Russia's actions constitute a violation of international legal norms regarding state sovereignty and territorial integrity. Yet, Russia remains a permanent neighbor, creating unique local dynamics.

- *Local Concerns and Impacts:* Borderland cities like Nemuro and Wakkanai are far more concerned with Russia than other parts of Japan. Local surveys show that roughly 80% in Nemuro and 70% in Wakkanai feel the conflict in Ukraine has impacted their regions, with over 90% noting it severely harms peace treaty prospects. Despite 80% holding Russia responsible for the war, some citizens in Nemuro desire neutrality or hope Japan can act as an intermediary.
- *Historical Precedents of Cooperation:* Even without a peace treaty in the post-Cold War period, critical borderland regimes flourished. These included the Non-Passport and Non-Visa Entry Regime between Nemuro and the Northern Territories (started in 1992), fishery agreements like the Kaigara Island Kelp Fishery (since 1963) and Safe Fishery Operations (since 1998), as well as short-visit border tourism between Wakkanai and Sakhalin.
- *The Human Dilemma:* The first generation of former islanders, now averaging over 90 years old, is rapidly disappearing. They face a poignant dilemma between sympathy for Ukraine and a fading hope for grave visits. Although newer generations lack the intense historical passion for returning territories, the geographical reality of a northern neighbor remains.

These northern realities demonstrate that geographical proximity imposes practical necessities that override rigid diplomatic standoffs. Maintaining channels of dialogue and economic coexistence in the north provides a vital blueprint for regional survival when state-to-state relations hit an impasse, proving that neighborly interdependence survives even when

state-level diplomacy freezes. This persistent local commitment underscores that while national governments engage in prolonged diplomatic standoffs, border populations must sustain practical modes of co-existence to endure.

Case Study 2: The Kyushu Borderland Perspective and New Japan-Korea Relations

Moving from the northern frontier to the southern gateway of Kyushu, a parallel perspective on borderland resilience and regional cooperation emerges. While historical and territorial disputes – such as wartime labor issues, comfort women, and territorial disagreements – continue to create political landmines, regions like Kumamoto are pioneering a pragmatic path forward.

- *Beyond Historical Landmines:* Rather than being trapped by deadlocked political disputes or freezing dialogue, regional advancements – catalyzed by industrial integration and manufacturing investments such as TSMC, which, while navigating its own geo-political complexities, serves here as a powerful catalyst for a functional, symbiotic network of industry and human capital across East Asia – demonstrate the power of building practical "bypasses" through supply chain resilience and joint human resource training programs.
- *Overcoming Past Enmities with Realism:* Just as local communities face physical vulnerabilities, such as natural disasters and seismic shocks tested during academic and civic exchanges in Kyushu, regional actors recognize that peace and stability cannot wait for comprehensive diplomatic settlements. By establishing interdependent economic and technological foundations, the Kyushu borderland actively counters the rigid "friend-enemy" logic of great power politics.

The southern gateway illustrates that regional actors can generate productive economic and human networks that bypass national-level friction, proving that active cross-border engagement is both possible and mutually beneficial even amid historical grievances. By prioritizing mutual

technological and economic needs, borderlands like Kyushu show that cooperation can flourish independently of nationalist rhetoric, serving as an operational model for peaceful regional development.

However, we must remain realistic: these economic and technological "bypasses" are not a silver bullet. When state-level political hostility or historical landmines reach a critical boiling point, functional cooperation can face severe headwinds or external pressure. Acknowledging these structural limitations is precisely why borderland resilience cannot rely solely on commercial optimism; it requires continuous, quiet perseverance and a pragmatic defense of everyday human connections against the volatile tides of state-level nationalism. Furthermore, sustaining these local "bypasses" necessitates proactive, multi-level governance; borderland actors must maintain continuous policy dialogues with their central governments to prevent localized functional cooperation from being easily overridden by overarching national security agendas.

The Role of Border Studies and Middle-Small Powers

How should the border studies community respond to the new and complicated challenges that result? This chapter offers suggestions for conflict mitigation and resolution from the perspective of normative collaboration between middle and small powers.

Border studies must actively contribute to debunking myths of an emerging "new order" of great power dominance. Instead of accepting a world carved up by spheres of influence or binary "friend-enemy" logic, scholars and practitioners must assert the necessity of sustaining border-crossing and cross-border engagement.

To achieve this, middle and small powers – as well as borderland regions like those in northern Japan and Kyushu – must cultivate functional "bypasses" or alternative networks. Even as geopolitical tensions rise, maintaining human mobility, cooperative supply chains, and localized dialogues prevents total systemic decoupling.

Middle and small powers possess a shared interest in preventing great powers from unilaterally rewriting international rules. By fostering horizontal networks of cooperation, these actors can insulate regional

stability from the volatile shifts of major power rivalries. Border studies provides the analytical tools required to map these alternative circuits of interaction, demonstrating that global stability relies heavily on the diplomatic agency of non-great powers. Through sustained cross-border collaboration, smaller states can successfully dilute the polarizing effects of major power competition.

Conclusion:
Towards Multi-Polar Autonomy and Sustainable Engagement

Ultimately, navigating the complexities of Cold War 2.0 requires rejecting fatalistic resignation to great power conflict. As demonstrated by the resilience and historical precedents of the Japan–Russia borderlands and the pragmatic economic-technological bridges built from Kyushu toward neighboring regions, maintaining local connections despite national-level friction is vital.

Whether confronting the fading institutional regimes of the northern frontier or pioneering dynamic technological networks in the southern gateway, borderlands reveal that local survival depends on adaptability rather than ideological conformity. These two contrasting experiences – one wrestling with the bitter legacy of unresolved territorial disputes and the other seizing new opportunities through economic integration – ultimately converge on a single truth: peripheral regions must act as shock absorbers against the binary logic dictated by major capitals.

By fostering normative cooperation among middle and small powers, and by protecting the integrity of cross-border interactions, regions across Eurasia and beyond can chart a path toward sustainable stability. The future of global order depends not on the reinforcement of walls and divisions, but on our collective capacity to keep borders open, functional, and humane.

Only through sustained local engagement, respect for geographical realities, and the active resistance of binary geopolitical categories can the international community hope to overcome the systemic fractures of the current era and construct a durable, peaceful framework for the future. Embracing these borderland perspectives offers an essential pathway toward a multi-polar, inclusive, and cooperative international system that

safeguards human mobility and regional prosperity against future geopolitical tremors.

24. Cooperation for Competition: China's Satellite Strategy and Beyond

Chisako T. Masuo

Introduction

Why is it difficult to develop borderlands? The basic unit of modern international system is a nation-state. However, borderlands are often located far from one's capital and not prioritized in the allocation of national resources. Furthermore, they often have small populations, slow information flows, insufficient infrastructure, and unstable public order. Therefore, many government tend to consider they cannot afford engaging in borderland development – let alone cross-border cooperation – until they make progress in nation-building processes to certain extent. However, environmental changes caused by global warming – and the natural disasters resulting from them – are presenting these countries with the difficult challenge of governing their borderlands.

China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 in Kazakhstan, and has since developed various physical foundations aimed at strengthening connectivity among participating nations. One such initiative is the Digital Silk Road. It aims to connect regions around the world – including developing countries – through information networks, thereby promoting their modernization, informatization, and overall integration. In particular, the use of satellite networks is considered extremely effective for modernizing regions where it is difficult to build terrestrial infrastructure.

China has been establishing its satellite networks with the BeiDou System (BDS) as its core. BDS is a Chinese version on GPS that can be

used for positioning and navigation. Chinese networks are also equipped with diverse functions including remote sensing, communication, and space-based internet. (Masuo 2022, 27–42) This technology can potentially connect borderlands with capitals as well as other countries instantly, and significantly reshape the conditions of development and security for those involved.

This chapter is organized as follows. First, it reviews how China has advanced the internationalization of its satellite network. Next, it provides an overview of how cooperation between China and the Central Asian countries has progressed and analyzes China's objectives. Finally, using the case of flood that occurred between China and Nepal on August 26, 2026, this chapter identifies current problem one needs to consider upon adapting the Chinese technology.

Internationalization of Chinese Satellite Network

China has a long history of space exploration. During the Mao Zedong era, despite the nation's limited economic resources, China successfully developed the "Two Bombs and One Satellite" (atomic and hydrogen bombs, rockets, and artificial satellites). After the launch of the reform and opening-up policy, the scientists who contributed to this achievement were inspired by the U.S. "Star Wars" program in 1980s. In March 1986, they wrote a letter to Deng Xiaoping, who later agreed to start a high-tech research and development initiative known as the "863 Program." After the Tiananmen Square incident in June 1989, U.S.-China relations – which had been good until then – became strained, and the United States and other Western nations imposed political and economic sanctions on China. Reportedly, the U.S.'s extensive use of GPS-guided missiles during the 1991 Gulf War came as a major shock to Chinese politicians and military officials. China began serious development of the BDS in 1994, starting to provide its services in regions surrounding China by 2012 and worldwide by 2020.

China also sought to develop new infrastructure for human society in space by leveraging a network of remote sensing and communications satellites in conjunction with the BDS. In October 2015, it approved "The

National Civil Space Infrastructure Mid- and Long-Term Development Program (2015–2025).” As part of this program, China decided to build a constellation of remote sensing and communications satellites by 2025 and to develop bib-data-sharing system within the authority. Furthermore, it set a goal of launching new services and industries by seamlessly integrating land and maritime information using data collected with these space and information technologies. (Masuo 2022, 30–33) From that point onward, research institutes and universities with close ties to the Chinese government actively carried studies on how to utilize the geospatial information collected by satellites, aiming to modernize industries such as agriculture, fisheries, manufacturing, mining, and transportation, as well as to strengthen governance in areas such as law enforcement, public safety, disaster prevention, and environmental protection.

On the other hand, China has long been interested in international cooperation in space domain. In 1992, China, together with Pakistan and Thailand, launched the Asia-Pacific Multilateral Cooperation in Space Technology and Applications (AP-MCSTA). In 2001, the AP-MCSTA secretariat was established in China. This was followed in 2005 by the signing of the Convention of Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization (APSCO) with five more countries. Based on this agreement, the APSCO was formally launched in December 2008. The member states include China, Bangladesh, Iran, Mongolia, Pakistan, Peru, Thailand, and Türkiye.

APSCO’s stated goals include promoting joint research in space science and technology, joint satellite development, the application of space technology, human resource development, technology transfer, and the development of the space industry among member nations. In other words, from the outset, the organization aimed not only to advance related technologies but also to foster a shared ecosystem among members by sharing satellite data and capacity building processes, and developing the social application system.

The 2020 APSCO report stated that China had provided member states with “more than 400,000 scenes of satellite images”; granted full scholarships to 63 doctoral and 215 master’s degree students to help them earn their degrees with the cooperation of China Scholarship Council

(CSC); and, co-hosted the Conference on Space Law and Policy with the United Nations in Istanbul in September 2019. It also stated that China pledged to launch the Joint Small Multi-Mission Satellite (SMMS) Constellation, comprising at least 11 satellites, to be utilized for Earth observation, disaster monitoring, communications, and remote sensing. (Asia-Pacific Space Cooperation Organization 2020) In other words, China has started using the APSCO as a platform for the multilateral construction and operation of space infrastructure by then.

In China, all geographic planning related to China's sphere (territory, jurisdictional waters, and the areas above and below them) was integrated into the National Spatial Planning framework in 2021 when the country started 14th Five-Year Plan. As a result, in addition to the existing BDS, China began utilizing remote sensing data for national governance in a full scale. The China's Space Program: A 2021 Perspective released in January 2022 stated that the country's basic policies on international exchanges and cooperation include, "(s)trengthening international space cooperation that is based on common goals and serves the Belt and Road Initiative, and ensuring that the space industry benefits the Initiative's participating countries, especially developing countries," and supporting the APSCO "to play an important role, and giving weight to cooperation under the BRICS and Group 20 mechanisms and within the framework of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization." (State Council Information Office of the People's Republic of China 2022)

Building on the maturity of related technologies, China established the ASEAN-China Satellite Remote Sensing Application Center (ACSAC) in Beijing in November 2022. The ACSAC aimed to facilitate the sharing of satellite data for agriculture, disaster prevention and mitigation, marine management, natural resource monitoring, and urban construction. (Dong et al. 2023) In July 2023, China established the China-Africa Cooperation Center on Satellite Remote Sensing Application (CACSA) and began providing similar satellite data cooperation to African countries. (Space in Africa 2025)

China has developed a variety of satellites and related application technologies under the state-led initiatives. Nearly simultaneously with their

deployment, China began exporting these technologies to developing countries in an effort to integrate those nations into its own technological system.

China-Central Asia Cooperation

This section aims to review China's efforts to promote satellite cooperation with Central Asian countries and examine the features of these efforts.

It is widely known that President Xi Jinping proposed the construction of the BRI in Kazakhstan in September 2013. China had been operating the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) together with Russia and the four Central Asian countries. Since Russia's takeover of Crimea in 2014 and the subsequent Western sanctions imposed on Moscow, discussions on deepening economic cooperation had frequently taken place within the SCO, which previously focused primarily on security cooperation.

Since cooperation on satellites overlaps significantly with the construction of the Digital Silk Road, its promotion within the SCO would be quite natural. However, looking back at cooperation between China and the Central Asian nations, a key turning point was the China–Central Asia Summit held in Xi'an in May 2023. During his keynote speech for its opening, Xi encouraged that Central Asian nations participate in China's "Belt and Road" special cooperation initiatives – which include space information technology – to address issues such as national governance and natural disasters. (Xi 2023) In June 2025, two years later, the second summit held in Astana emphasized the commitment of Central Asia and China to jointly address issues related to climate change and environmental protection in mountainous regions and glaciers. The technical foundation for this was the data gathered by China's remote sensing satellites.

This contrast is noteworthy. Russia wields significant influence within the SCO, and China also cooperates with it on satellite projects. However, they primarily focused on positioning satellites. Russia's system equivalent to the GPS is called GLONASS. In January 2014, the two countries established the Russia–China Committee on Major Strategic Cooperation Projects in Satellite Navigation within the framework of the China–Russia

Prime Ministers' Regular Consultation Mechanism. (China National Space Administration 2018) They also signed the "Joint Statement on the Compatibility of Beidou and GLONASS" in May the following year. (Pollpeter et al. 2023, 28) In 2018, they concluded a cooperation agreement on the peaceful use of the two systems. (China National Space Administration 2018) They agreed each country to establish three ground stations in the other's territory in 2021, followed by the cooperation agreement on time interoperability in 2022. (BeiDou Satellite Navigation System 2022) Through these process, the two countries' positioning satellite systems have established a mutually complementary relationship that can be potentially used for joint military operations. Nevertheless, China has refrained from proposing remote sensing satellite cooperation to the SCO as a whole – including Russia – and is instead directly approaching the Central Asian countries to discuss practical applications.

Remote sensing satellites help monitor the state of the natural environment, making them useful for combating global warming and managing national land resources. Interestingly, among China's remote sensing satellite ground stations, both the Miyun Ground Station, built in 1986, and the Kashi Ground Station, built in 2008, were designed to cover the Central Asian countries. (Aerospace Information Research Institute n.d.) They were suitable to be the foundation for cooperation between China and the Central Asian countries.

In July 2025, Kazakhstan and China announced that they would build a ground satellite station for the X-band frequency on the campus of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University in Almaty, together with Hainan Satellite Data and Application Research Center and Northwestern Polytechnical University. (Times of Central Asia 2025) In June 2026, during the 9th China-Eurasia Expo held in Urumuqi, Beijing launched the "Tianwu Constellation" comprised of five remote-sensing satellites. It aimed continuous, all-weather monitoring of glaciers, rivers, lakes, geological deformation and arable land across Xinjiang and the Central Asia by using the data shared by China. The signing ceremony was attended by the scientists from Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. (Chinese Academy of Sciences 2026)

Simultaneously, China was also moving for the joint development of satellite-related technology. In August 2026, China and Uzbekistan launched the hyperspectral satellite "Samarkand-2028" developed by the two countries. It aimed to support applications in agriculture, environmental monitoring, water resource management and natural disaster response. The satellite reportedly carried an Uzbek-developed AI module for onboard data processing, reducing the volume of data transmitted to ground stations while increasing the speed and efficiency of image analysis.

Given the above, Chinese satellite cooperation with Central Asian countries differs from both the simple connection of positioning system and the export of satellites. Rather, it appears that China is seeking to inviting these countries into its own geospatial ecosystem by opening up its remote-sensing satellite network – centered on Xinjiang – to Central Asian nations and sharing new governance models that rely on the satellite data.

Satellite technology is used not only for scientific and social purposes but also for security and military ends. While every country aspires to develop its own capabilities, the high costs involved often compel it to rely on a major power that possesses the foundational technologies. As a result, the major power can maintain significant and sustained influence over the smaller one into the future. Whether the major power will consistently provide the data and technology to a smaller nation as promised, and whether it will use this dependency as a political or economic weapon against the small, are extremely significant concerns for the latter. Then, the question is: To what extent can we expect China to behave as a "benevolent major power"?

Implications from the China–Nepal Border Flood Case

On August 26, 2026, a glacier collapse occurred in the border region between China and Nepal, triggering severe flooding. This incident provides a good opportunity to examine the status of satellite cooperation between China and other countries. Similarly to the case in Central Asia, China and Nepal have maintained a certain level of cooperation regarding the management of glaciers over the Himalayan mountains.

Global warming had increased the likelihood of similar disasters occurring around the mountains and highland plains. The data collected by the Chinese satellite system was expected to be shared with Nepalese authorities. As part of the Second Qinghai-Tibet Plateau Scientific Expedition, the research teams including the Institute of Tibetan Plateau Research at the Chinese Academy of Sciences, has announced an automated monitoring and early warning system (EWS) for Cirenmaco, a glacial lake on the border between China and Nepal in November 2025. (People's Daily Overseas Edition 2025)

However, when a glacial lake on the Purepu Glacier, separate from Cirenmaco, collapsed and caused floodwaters to flow as far as the vicinity of Rasuwagadhi in Nepal on July 8, 2025, the Chinese EWS did not function as this lake was not registered in the existing glacial lake inventory. Subsequently, the Nepal side requested China to share the real-time data on the status of cross-border environmental conditions. However, at a meeting on May 27, 2026, the Chinese representative avoided reaching a related agreement, arguing they lacked the authority to do so. In mid-August, China's World Meteorological Center sent an email to the Nepalese side warning of potential landslides and flash floods. However, this was merely general meteorological information and did not indicate a glacial collapse. Consequently, the major disaster on August 26 occurred without China providing real-time observational data to Nepal. (Reuters 2026) It is highly likely that even the Chinese side was unable to make an adequate forecast regarding this event.

Examining the above from the perspective of the smaller country raises the following concerns. First, even after recognizing the smaller country's urgent needs, China has remained quite reluctant to share real-time data. In China, where weather forecasts and information on the natural environment have traditionally been treated as military secrets, this is not so unusual. Second, there is a disconnect between China's public claims and its actual capabilities. As mentioned, the Chinese EWS platform covered only a small portion of the vast glaciers spanning the China–Nepal border, but there are many other high-risk areas. While China has been proclaiming to the

international community that the capabilities of its satellites is reaching to the unprecedented level, the reality may not be so easy.

Conclusion

The Xi Jinping administration regards long-term competition with the United States as China's foremost strategic challenge. To gain an advantage in this competition, Beijing has promoted the provision of international public goods and sought to project the image of a benevolent major power to developing countries. For their part, many developing countries are attracted by the prospect of gaining access to satellite networks that they cannot develop independently, as well as to new models of governance enabled by satellite-derived data. By capitalizing on these demands and presenting such cooperation as a "win-win" arrangement, China seeks to draw developing countries into its sphere of influence.

This chapter has argued that China is advancing satellite cooperation with both Russia and the Central Asian states while strategically decoupling these relationships from one another. Cooperation between China and Russia has progressed significantly in the field of satellite positioning, where the two countries have even pursued time synchronization between their respective systems to facilitate joint military operations. At the same time, China has promoted a different form of cooperation with many developing countries, including those in Central Asia, by offering remote-sensing satellite technologies and encouraging the adoption of governance models that rely on the satellite-based data. Several Central Asian countries, particularly Uzbekistan, have responded positively to these initiatives and have begun participating in the development of governance ecosystems shaped by Chinese technological standards and practices.

Recent flood disasters involving China and Nepal, however, raise important questions regarding both the reliability of China's real-time information sharing and the actual effectiveness of the technologies that Beijing promotes. It cannot be ruled out that China's engagement with developing countries serves, at least in part, to lock them into technological dependence on Chinese systems. Should these countries eventually become

fully dependent on Chinese technologies, China's incentives to provide timely and comprehensive information may diminish further.

Given these risks, a hedging strategy remains a practical option for developing countries seeking both technological advancement and strategic autonomy. Such a strategy would involve maintaining satellite cooperation with countries other than China while simultaneously participating in Chinese technological initiatives and preserving leverage in relations with Beijing. At the same time, it is important to recognize that technological competition is ultimately linked to broader choices regarding political systems. Chinese technological architectures are generally designed within a framework that assumes extensive state control over information and therefore tend to be more compatible with authoritarian forms of governance. By contrast, technological systems developed in democratic countries are typically designed in ways that better reflect and support democratic institutions and values. The choice of technological systems adopted by governments may therefore shape the future trajectory of their societies. For this reason, the political implications of technological choices deserve close attention from policymakers and citizens alike.

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25. Algorithmic Borders and Human Solidarities: AI, Surveillance, and Cross-Border Interaction in Conflict Zones

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Abstract

Borders across the conflict-prone regions of West Asia are no longer defined solely by fences, guards, and checkpoints. Increasingly, they are constituted through data: biometric registries, facial recognition cameras, predictive risk scores, and drone feeds that sort and restrict human movement long before a person reaches a physical line on a map. This chapter examines what may be called "algorithmic borders" as they operate across four borderlands: Iraq–Syria, Palestine–Israel, Türkiye–Syria, and Afghanistan–Iran, asking what these technologies do to the people who live with and move through them. Drawing on the concept of digital coloniality, the chapter argues that AI-enabled border governance does not merely modernize security; it reproduces older hierarchies of race, nationality, and dispossession under a newer, more technocratic vocabulary of efficiency and risk. At the same time, the chapter resists a purely deterministic reading of technology. Diaspora networks, religious communities, and humanitarian organizations continue to sustain cross-border relationships that surveillance infrastructures were partly designed to disrupt. Using a comparative, document-based qualitative methodology that draws on policy texts, human rights reporting, and secondary academic literature, the chapter traces both the discriminatory effects of algorithmic bordering and the durability of human solidarity within it. It concludes that border governance in conflict

zones needs a framework that takes digital rights and human dignity as seriously as it currently takes security.

Introduction

Borders have never been merely lines on a map. They are political instruments, saturated with histories of violence, negotiation, and control. What has changed, quietly but rapidly, is the machinery through which that control is now exercised. Across the conflict-affected regions of West Asia, a person's ability to cross a frontier increasingly depends less on a soldier's judgement at a checkpoint and more on how a database has already classified them before they arrive. Facial recognition cameras log a face before its owner reaches the gate. Predictive systems flag a name as high-risk on the basis of patterns learned elsewhere. Biometric registries convert an iris or a fingerprint into the very condition of eligibility for food, shelter, or safe passage. This is the territory this chapter sets out to map – not the physical borderline itself, but the algorithmic scaffolding increasingly built around it.

This shift matters precisely because it is rarely as visible as a wall or a checkpoint. A wall can be photographed, protested, even climbed. An algorithm cannot. Yet its consequences are no less concrete. Refugees fleeing the Syrian conflict, Palestinians navigating Israeli military checkpoints in Hebron, and Afghans queuing for iris verification along the Pakistani and Iranian frontiers all encounter, in different registers, a form of governance that sorts populations through data long before it ever processes them as people.

This chapter takes both halves of that encounter seriously. On one side sits the apparatus of algorithmic bordering – facial recognition, biometric registration, predictive analytics, and aerial surveillance – framed by states and international agencies alike as neutral tools of security and administrative efficiency. On the other side sit the people who, despite this apparatus, continue to build and sustain relationships across borders through diaspora networks, religious solidarity, and humanitarian organizing. The argument advanced here is twofold. First, algorithmic border governance in West Asia is not a neutral upgrade of older security practices; it tends to

reproduce and deepen existing hierarchies of power along lines that scholars have described as digital coloniality (Couldry & Mejias, 2019; Quijano, 2000). Second, and just as importantly, these technologies have not succeeded in fully foreclosing human connection across borders; solidarity persists, adapts, and at times actively resists the surveillance architecture built around it.

The chapter proceeds as follows. Section 2 situates the discussion within the growing literature on biometric and algorithmic borders and digital coloniality. Section 3 sets out the theoretical framework, and Section 4 the comparative, document-based methodology. Sections 5 and 6 examine four borderlands in turn – Iraq–Syria, Palestine–Israel, Türkiye–Syria, and Afghanistan–Iran – before Section 7 turns to the cross-border solidarities that persist alongside surveillance. The chapter closes with a discussion of what a more accountable border governance regime might look like.

Literature Review

From Biometric to Algorithmic Borders

The scholarly foundation for thinking about borders as data infrastructures owes much to Louise Amoore's long-running work on biometrics and security. In an early and now widely cited study, Amoore (2006) described how post-9/11 border regimes had begun treating the mobile body itself as a form of biometric data storage, to be read, verified, and risk-scored at the point of crossing. Her later work traced how this logic evolved from statistical probability toward what she called algorithmic possibility, in which security decisions are made not on the basis of what a person has done but on speculative correlations drawn from vast, often opaque, datasets (Amoore, 2013). By the time of Cloud Ethics, Amoore (2020) was arguing that algorithms have become active participants in defining the very boundaries of political categories, what a border crossing, an election, or a protest is even allowed to look like. This trajectory, from biometric to algorithmic bordering, provides the conceptual spine of the present paper: borders are no longer simply defended, they are computed.

Complementing this theoretical lineage, policy-oriented research has mapped the sheer range of technologies now deployed at frontiers. The

Migration Policy Institute, for instance, has cataloged systems that assess travelers' facial micro-expressions, biometric fingerprint and face databases, and machine-vision tools able to distinguish humans from wildlife along remote stretches of border (Migration Policy Institute, 2022). What unites these tools is a shared premise: that human mobility can and should be pre-emptively sorted by machines before human officials ever intervene.

Digital Coloniality and Global Power Hierarchies

If Amoore's work explains the mechanics of algorithmic bordering, the concept of digital or data coloniality helps explain its politics. Couldry and Mejias (2019) argue that contemporary data extraction should be read as a direct historical successor to territorial colonialism: where colonial powers once appropriated land, labor, and natural resources, today's technology corporations and states appropriate the granular data of everyday life, converting human experience into a raw material for profit and governance. In their later, more polemical account, Couldry and Mejias (2024) describe this as a new "data grab" that concentrates power in the Global North (and, increasingly, in China) while extracting value from populations often in the Global South or in occupied and displaced communities who have little say in how their data is used. This framework draws explicitly on Anibal Quijano's (2000) earlier account of the coloniality of power, which held that the racial and hierarchical logics of colonialism did not end with formal decolonization but persisted in new institutional forms. Applied to border governance, digital coloniality suggests that AI systems are not just technically imperfect; they are politically patterned, tending to subject already-marginalized populations – refugees, stateless people, and residents of occupied territory – to more intense and more invasive forms of data capture than is applied to citizens of the states doing the capturing.

Human Rights Critiques of Migration Technology

A parallel body of work, more grounded in fieldwork and legal analysis, has documented the human consequences of this data capture. Petra Molnar's research, conducted across Greece, Belgium, Kenya, Jordan, Türkiye, and elsewhere, was among the first to systematically interview people directly

affected by migration technologies; her Technological Testing Grounds report, based on more than 40 conversations with refugees and people on the move, found that AI-driven migration management frequently renders decision-making more arbitrary, more invasive, and harder to challenge rather than fairer (Molnar, 2020). Her subsequent book extends this argument into a global account of border technology, describing how migrants themselves become the unconsenting test subjects of experimental systems whose failures are rarely acknowledged by the agencies that deploy them (Molnar, 2024). Earlier legal scholarship by Molnar and Gill (2018) had already shown, in the Canadian context, how automated decision-making in immigration and refugee systems could obscure accountability precisely because affected individuals could not see, let alone contest, the logic behind a given determination.

This human rights literature intersects with a growing technical literature on algorithmic bias. Buolamwini and Gebru's (2018) Gender Shades audit of three commercial facial-analysis systems found that darker-skinned women were misclassified at rates of up to 34.7 percent, compared with a maximum error rate of just 0.8 percent for lighter-skinned men. The disparity, later confirmed by follow-up audits (Raji & Buolamwini, 2019), matters well beyond the commercial contexts in which it was first measured: facial recognition systems built on skewed training data carry that skew with them wherever they are deployed, including onto border cameras scanning the faces of predominantly non-white, non-Western populations. Read together, the coloniality literature and the bias literature point to the same underlying claim examined empirically in this chapter that algorithmic borders do not distribute error or intrusion evenly, but along lines that map closely onto existing global hierarchies of race, religion, and displacement.

Theoretical Framework

This chapter combines Amoore's account of algorithmic bordering with the digital coloniality framework of Couldry and Mejias, read through Quijano's coloniality of power. Three propositions follow from this synthesis, and each is tested against the case material below. First,

algorithmic borders extend the logic of the biometric border by making risk itself computable and pre-emptive, so that a person can be denied movement on the basis of a probabilistic score rather than a documented act. Second, the infrastructures that make this possible – for example, biometric registries, facial recognition databases, and drone feeds – are not politically neutral; they are built, funded, and trained overwhelmingly by actors in the Global North (or by regional powers exercising control over occupied or displaced populations), and they tend to encode the priorities and blind spots of their builders. Third, and central to this chapter's second argument, coloniality is never absolute: colonized and surveilled populations have historically found ways to sustain autonomous relationships and networks that formal control structures cannot fully see or capture, and there is no reason to expect algorithmic bordering to be any different. The chapter therefore treats digital coloniality not as a totalizing condition but as a contested terrain, in keeping with a substantial tradition in peace and conflict studies that insists on documenting agency and resistance alongside structural violence.

Methodology

This chapter adopts a qualitative, comparative case study design, appropriate to a topic where primary access to affected populations and to the technical internals of deployed systems is heavily restricted by security, legal, and ethical constraints. Four borderlands were purposively selected: Iraq–Syria, Palestine–Israel, Türkiye–Syria, and Afghanistan–Iran, on the grounds that each represents a distinct configuration of conflict, displacement, and border technology within West Asia, allowing comparison across occupation (Palestine–Israel), protracted civil conflict and mass displacement (Iraq–Syria and Türkiye–Syria), and cyclical, state-facilitated return migration (Afghanistan–Iran).

Data collection relied on document analysis of three overlapping source types: (i) reports and briefings produced by international organizations and humanitarian agencies, including UNHCR's published material on its Biometric Identity Management System and Population Registration and Identity Management EcoSystem; (ii) investigative and monitoring reports

produced by human rights organizations and civil society groups, most centrally Amnesty International's Automated Apartheid report and Mozilla- and EDRi-funded research by Petra Molnar; and (iii) peer-reviewed academic literature spanning political geography, migration studies, science and technology studies, and border ethnography. Where possible, findings from investigative journalism were cross-checked against at least one additional independent source before being incorporated into the analysis.

Documents were read thematically for evidence relating to three questions: what technologies are deployed and by whom; what effects, intended or otherwise, are documented for affected populations; and what forms of adaptation, resistance, or cross-border connection are recorded alongside these effects. This is not a study that claims statistical generalisability. It is, instead, an interpretive synthesis intended to surface patterns across cases that might otherwise be studied only in isolation from one another. The approach has clear limitations. It relies on secondary sources rather than original fieldwork or interviews with affected communities, which means the analysis is necessarily mediated by the framing choices of the organizations that produced the underlying reports. The technologies under discussion also evolve quickly, and some of the specific systems named here will likely be superseded, renamed, or reconfigured by the time this chapter is read. Finally, language constraints mean that Arabic-, Turkish-, Persian-, and Hebrew-language primary sources were consulted only where English-language translations or summaries were available, which may have limited access to some local perspectives, particularly those of border residents and affected communities themselves.

Findings: Algorithmic Bordering Across Four Borderlands

Iraq–Syria:
Biometric Registration and the Bureaucracy of Survival

As displacement from Syria's civil war intensified after 2011, UNHCR extended biometric registration to the hundreds of Syrians arriving daily into Iraq, using iris scanning to verify the identities of mostly women, children, and older people crossing from northeast Syria (Biometric Update,

2019). This was not a stand-alone emergency measure but part of a much larger architecture: UNHCR's Biometric Identity Management System, embedded within its broader Population Registration and Identity Management EcoSystem, held fingerprint and iris data for 15.7 million people by the end of 2023, up from 8.8 million in 2019 (UNHCR, 2020, 2023, as cited in Cambridge University Press, 2024). Framed by the agency as a safeguard against duplicate claims and identity fraud, and as a tool to speed the delivery of cash assistance and food aid, biometric registration nonetheless makes access to survival itself conditional on submission to a database over which displaced people have essentially no control, no right of correction, and, in practice, very limited ability to consent or refuse.

Palestine–Israel: Facial Recognition and the Automation of Control

The clearest documented instance of algorithmic bordering used to entrench, rather than merely manage, a population's confinement comes from the occupied West Bank. Amnesty International's investigation Automated Apartheid found that the Israeli military has, since 2022, deployed a facial recognition system known as Red Wolf at checkpoints in the H2 area of Hebron, scanning Palestinians' faces and checking them against a database built exclusively from Palestinian biometric profiles; if a face does not already appear in the database, the individual is enrolled without consent, and may be denied passage altogether (Amnesty International, 2023). Red Wolf sits alongside two related systems, Blue Wolf and Wolf Pack, the former an app that lets soldiers photograph Palestinians on the street and instantly retrieve or add to their stored profiles. Reporting by the Washington Post, cited in subsequent coverage, found that soldiers had been incentivized with rewards, including additional time off, for the volume of photographs collected, with the practice informally nicknamed by some soldiers a "Facebook for Palestinians" (Middle East Eye, 2023). The system is explicitly asymmetric by design: Palestinians in Hebron's H2 zone must pass through camera-equipped checkpoints that Israeli settlers in the same area are not required to use (Amnesty International, 2023). Here the coloniality argument requires no theoretical extension; the database itself is built, in Amnesty's own

description, from the biometric data of one national group alone, applied to control that group's movement in territory it does not govern.

Türkiye–Syria: The Smart Wall and the Militarization of the Frontier

Turkey's response to mass displacement from Syria illustrates a different configuration: physical fortification layered with an increasingly automated sensing apparatus. Construction of a border wall began in earnest after 2013, accompanied by thermal-imaging cameras mounted on steel watchtowers, drone patrols, and minefield-backed fencing (Washington Times, 2017; Gulf News, n.d.). The scale of associated demographic change was considerable: the border town of Kilis, for example, grew from a population of roughly 90,000 before the war to around 230,000, with Syrians eventually outnumbering Turkish residents (Washington Times, 2017). Since then, Ankara has continued to invest heavily in what state media describe as a domestically produced Smart Border Security System (Anadolu Agency, n.d.), supplemented by aerostat surveillance balloons capable of scanning several square miles of terrain (Defense News, 2021) and, more recently, unmanned ground vehicles equipped with drone-relay communications for continuous day-and-night monitoring (Daily Sabah, 2024).

Importantly, ethnographic research complicates any simple narrative of technological success. Arslan, Can, and Wilson (2021), drawing on fieldwork in Hatay, found that the wall reinforced the Turkish state's claim of territorial sovereignty but did not function as an effective security measure for border residents or refugees; if anything, it was associated with a significant increase in migrant smuggling, as movement was displaced into more clandestine and more dangerous channels rather than eliminated. This finding is instructive for the chapter's broader argument: algorithmic and infrastructural bordering can intensify surveillance and control without delivering the security outcomes used to justify it, while still reshaping who is able to move, and how.

Afghanistan–Iran: Iris Scans and the Governance of Return

UNHCR's biometric programs had their origin in precisely this borderland corridor. In 2002, the agency began collecting iris scans from Afghan refugees returning from Pakistan, later extending eligibility requirements to include registration for refugees returning via Iran as well; more than 380,000 Afghans returned that year alone, including roughly 130,000 from Iran (UNHCR, n.d.-a). Three dedicated Iris Verification Centres were established in Pakistan's border regions, and the minimum age for mandatory scanning was subsequently lowered from 12 to 6, a change UNHCR justified as a means of preventing adults from repeatedly "renting" children to claim assistance multiple times (Statewatch, 2003; Wikipedia, n.d.). The program has since evolved into the wider Biometric Identity Management System, and more recent iterations, such as the Forcibly Returned Afghans Enrolment program, have used biometric verification to deliver cash support to tens of thousands of Afghans turned back at neighboring borders for lack of documentation (Biometric Update, 2024). What is notable across two decades of this program is the durability of its underlying logic: biometric enrollment, justified in each iteration as protective and anti-fraud, remains a precondition for assistance that a returning refugee has, in practice, no meaningful way to decline.

Discussion: Discrimination, Coloniality, and the Limits of Technological Security

Read across these four borderlands, a consistent pattern emerges that supports the chapter's first proposition. In each case, biometric or algorithmic infrastructure is applied overwhelmingly, and in some cases exclusively, to already-displaced, occupied, or otherwise subordinated populations, while the states and institutions deploying the technology remain largely outside its reach. Red Wolf's database, by Amnesty's own account, contains only Palestinian biometric profiles (Amnesty International, 2023); UNHCR's iris and fingerprint systems exist because Afghan and Syrian refugees, not the citizens of host states, are required to

prove their identities repeatedly in order to receive assistance (UNHCR, n.d.-a; Biometric Update, 2019). This asymmetry is precisely what Couldry and Mejias (2019, 2024) mean by data colonialism: the population being datafied is not the population deciding how, or why, that data will be used.

The technical bias literature deepens this reading. If commercial facial recognition systems already misclassify darker-skinned individuals at error rates approaching 35 percent, as Buolamwini and Gebru (2018) demonstrated, then deploying such systems along frontiers crossed disproportionately by non-white, non-Western populations does not merely risk occasional error; it risks a systematically higher rate of wrongful flagging, delay, and exclusion for exactly the groups a security architecture claims to be protecting or assessing fairly. Whether this bias is present in Red Wolf, in UNHCR's biometric platforms, or in Turkiye's aerostat and drone systems specifically cannot be confirmed from the sources available for this chapter, since none of the agencies involved has published independent accuracy audits disaggregated by ethnicity or skin tone. That absence of published auditing is itself a finding: opacity is not incidental to algorithmic bordering, it is close to structural.

At the same time, the Hatay ethnography (Arslan, Can, & Wilson, 2021) is a useful corrective against treating these systems as simply effective instruments of control. Increased surveillance and fortification along the Türkiye–Syria frontier coincided with an increase in smuggling rather than its elimination, suggesting that algorithmic and infrastructural bordering frequently displaces risk rather than removing it pushing movement into channels that are more dangerous and less visible, and therefore less accountable, rather than making borders more secure in any straightforward sense. This is consistent with a broader critique, advanced by Molnar (2020, 2024), that expensive border technologies are regularly adopted and expanded with little independent evaluation of whether they achieve their stated security aims, even as their human costs continue to accumulate.

Human Solidarities: Persistence and Adaptation Across Surveilled Borders

The second half of this chapter's argument is that none of the systems described above has succeeded in closing down cross-border human connection, even where that has clearly been among their intended effects. Diaspora networks offer the clearest evidence of this persistence. Studies of the Syrian diaspora document how dispersed Syrians, in Turkiye, Lebanon, and across Europe, mobilized quickly after 2011 to found NGOs, charities, and informal associations that channel humanitarian assistance to internally displaced people and refugees inside and outside Syria, drawing on precisely the kind of deep local knowledge and trust that formal humanitarian agencies often lack (Al-Ashmar, 2022). Van Hear's (2014) foundational account of refugee transnationalism goes further, suggesting that sustained transnational ties among refugees and diaspora communities can themselves function as a form of durable solution to displacement, not merely a stop-gap while formal solutions are pending.

More recent comparative research reinforces this picture. Gamlen and Chakma (2025), drawing on case studies that include Afghanistan, identify diaspora humanitarianism as a distinct mode of crisis response characterized by rapid mobilization, deep emotional commitment, and direct access to affected communities that mainstream humanitarian actors frequently cannot replicate, even though diaspora efforts remain comparatively under-resourced and are not always neutral in the way formal humanitarian principles require. Remittances sent through informal as well as formal channels, direct communication with people on the ground during active crises, and rapid coordination through social media are recurring features of this diaspora humanitarianism (Gamlen & Chakma, 2025), and each depends on exactly the kind of cross-border movement of money, information, and trust that algorithmic bordering seeks, at least in part, to monitor and restrict.

This is not to romanticize resistance or to suggest that surveillance is without cost. People interviewed for Molnar's research describe surveillance's psychological toll directly: a woman held in a Greek refugee camp described the constant presence of guards and scanners at every gate

as a source of persistent anxiety, an account that illustrates how algorithmic bordering is experienced as continuous exposure rather than as a single, discrete encounter (The New Humanitarian, 2022). Yet the same research also documents the inventive, low-technology countermeasures that people on the move continue to develop in response informal information-sharing networks about which routes or checkpoints are currently monitored, mutual aid arrangements that route around formal registration requirements, and reliance on trusted intermediaries rather than official channels wherever possible. Taken together, this evidence supports a reading of algorithmic borders not as an unbroken wall of control but as a contested and unevenly enforced terrain, on which both domination and solidarity continue to be actively produced.

Conclusion and Policy Implications

This chapter has argued that algorithmic borders across West Asia's conflict zones cannot be understood simply as a technical upgrade to older forms of border security. Read through the lens of digital coloniality, systems such as Red Wolf in the occupied West Bank, UNHCR's biometric identity infrastructure spanning Iraq, Syria, and the Afghanistan–Pakistan–Iran corridor, and Türkiye's increasingly automated frontier with Syria share a common structural feature: they subject already-displaced or occupied populations to intensive, largely non-consensual data capture, administered by institutions the affected populations have little power to hold accountable. The available evidence on algorithmic bias in facial recognition suggests, moreover, that this exposure is unlikely to be evenly or fairly distributed, even where no agency-specific audit yet confirms the precise scale of the disparity in any single system discussed here.

At the same time, this chapter has resisted a purely deterministic account of what these technologies accomplish. The Hatay case shows that fortification and surveillance can coincide with, rather than eliminate, exactly the movement they are meant to control. The Syrian diaspora and comparative diaspora-humanitarianism literature show that cross-border solidarity persists and adapts alongside, and sometimes directly around, surveillance infrastructure. For scholars and practitioners in peace and

conflict studies, the implication is that border governance debates need to hold both halves of this picture at once: acknowledging the real and disproportionate harms of unaccountable algorithmic bordering, without treating displaced and occupied populations solely as passive subjects of that harm.

Several practical implications follow. First, independent, disaggregated accuracy auditing of the kind pioneered by Buolamwini and Gebru (2018) for commercial systems should be a mandatory precondition before any biometric or facial recognition system is deployed at a border or checkpoint, with results published rather than treated as proprietary. Second, humanitarian and international agencies that collect biometric data from refugees should be held to enforceable standards of consent, data minimization, and the right to have data corrected or deleted, standards that currently fall well short of those applied to citizens of the states funding these agencies. Third, policy discussions of border security should formally incorporate independent field research, of the kind conducted by Molnar (2020, 2024) and by Arslan, Can, and Wilson (2021), so that claims about the security benefits of surveillance infrastructure are tested against, rather than assumed ahead of, their documented social and human effects. Border governance that takes digital rights and human dignity as seriously as it currently takes security is not a utopian aspiration; it is, on the evidence assembled here, an overdue correction to a system that has for too long treated the people most exposed to its errors as the last people entitled to know how it works.

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Conclusion

Sergei Golunov

This edited volume covers a broad range of cases, geographically – from Europe and North America to Latin America, East Africa, the Caucasus, and Central, South, Southeast, East, and West Asia – and thematically, encompassing the functional and institutional dimensions of CBC, grassroots interaction, the influence of high politics, the construction of meanings, and the effects of control practices. Its aim is not to identify a universal model of successful CBC or to assess every case against such a model, but to examine how CBC operates as a set of mechanisms for managing the consequences of territorial division under diverse local conditions and with due attention to those conditions. In other words, effectiveness is best assessed by how actors use the opportunities actually available to them in a given context.

The cases compared in this volume suggest that cooperation and bordering are not necessarily opposites. It would be naïve to expect CBC to represent a linear movement toward the erasure or weakening of borders, which remain consequential even where cooperation is intensive. Rather, CBC tends to adapt borders to more cooperative forms of interaction by creating more effective mechanisms for cross-border communication, rendering borders more conducive to cooperation, and reducing selected barriers. At the same time, borders are interpreted and represented differently by different actors. Representations of borders as barriers, interfaces, resources, or shared spaces can themselves facilitate or constrain CBC, while actors differ substantially in their capacity to produce and legitimize such meanings.

The findings presented in this volume show that neither the existence of cross-border institutions nor well-developed infrastructure by themselves guarantees effective CBC. Effective outcomes arise from combinations of these and other components, including a favorable high-politics environment, developed infrastructure, effective organizational coordination, dense social ties, mutual trust, sufficient capacities on both sides, procedural compatibility, and the temporal synchronization of joint

activities. Weakness in any one of these components can constrain effectiveness even when the others are well developed. Nor does the adoption of European or other externally developed institutional arrangements and models of cooperation guarantee effectiveness. Selective adaptation to local conditions appears more promising than wholesale replication.

This volume contributes to addressing a gap in conventional CBC scholarship, which has paid insufficient attention to informal cross-border interactions as part of CBC. Several chapters highlight informal cross-border mechanisms that do not operate in parallel with formal ones but interact closely with them. The divide between the formal and the informal is therefore conditional to a considerable extent: the two domains continually reproduce and transform one another. Formal regulation may push interactions that are routine under softer border regimes into the informal sphere, whereas a relaxation of the regime may, conversely, facilitate their formalization. Informal networks can not only compensate for institutional gaps but also turn opportunities created by formal rules into functioning practices of cooperation by providing information flows, trust, access, and practical coordination. Successful everyday practices, in turn, may eventually acquire institutional form. Informality, however, should not be idealized: it can stabilize cross-border contacts, but it can also generate risks and costs of its own for actors directly or indirectly involved in such interactions.

The chapters on shared waters and transboundary environmental risks show that cross-border problems can stimulate cooperation even when they are simultaneously sources of tension. In particular, local water-sharing arrangements and flood-warning networks can improve short-term resilience and practical coordination. It should be borne in mind, however, that such cooperation does not by itself resolve problems such as inequalities, governance gaps, or longer-term structural risks.

With regard to the functional dimension of CBC, the chapters show that functional breadth does not necessarily correspond to the degree of institutionalization or to overall effectiveness. Even where CBC institutions are few in number, weakly autonomous, and limited in their activity, CBC

may perform a wide range of functions. In Central Asia, for example, one can identify almost the same set of functions as in Europe, even though its institutional organization differs markedly. Functional needs arise in specific contexts and may therefore vary. The same functions may be performed by different actors and with varying degrees of effectiveness. The existence of a developed institutional system does not in itself ensure effective performance, and the functions of established institutions may change over time in line with the interests of the actors behind them and their shifting perceptions of agenda priorities. In other words, CBC capacity and CBC functionality are not the same thing: well-developed institutions and infrastructure may perform their functions poorly, whereas a relatively sparse institutional system may nevertheless sustain a broad functional repertoire.

The volume also raises the issue of how high politics affects CBC – an issue that is less acute in the context of classic European cooperation but can be decisive elsewhere. The chapters in Part VI suggest that generally favorable bilateral relations do not automatically translate into intensive CBC. Much depends on whether state frameworks provide room for subnational authorities and local communities to become meaningful participants in cross-border interaction or, at a minimum, whether central governments treat borderlands as a substantive focus of their policies.

Limited political willingness to cooperate on even one side can seriously undermine CBC, though not necessarily eliminate it altogether. Good interstate relations may not only facilitate CBC but also selectively privilege particular formats, thereby narrowing its scope: profit-making activities, water management, communications, and logistics may find ample room, while societal ties and local-level relations receive much less support. At the same time, favorable high-politics conditions should by no means be treated as a panacea. They create a conducive environment for cooperation but do not predetermine its content or effectiveness once the factors discussed above come into play. Nor does an unfavorable high-politics environment necessarily mean the death or dormancy of cross-border cooperation. Rather, it may select among different forms of CBC, with the most resilient sometimes surviving even highly adverse conditions, including hostility and

armed conflict. Institutionalized forms are more easily blocked, while some everyday and informal ties may persist and adapt.

Technology represents another dimension of the relationship between power and CBC. Digital and satellite infrastructures can expand connectivity and practical capacities for cross-border interaction, but they can also create new dependencies, strengthen surveillance, and become instruments of strategic competition. Their impact on CBC therefore depends not only on technological capabilities as such, but also on who controls the relevant infrastructure and data and who has access to them.

Against this background, making CBC studies genuinely global will likely require more than simply expanding their empirical geography beyond Europe while retaining a conceptual framework in which European – and, to some extent, North American – experience continues to serve implicitly as the norm and benchmark for CBC. Instead, deeply institutionalized European CBC should be treated as one historically specific configuration. Its experience is of exceptional value to CBC research, but it should not be regarded as a universal standard irrespective of the conditions under which CBC develops in other regions. In particular, the full replication of European arrangements is unlikely to be feasible under unfavorable high-politics conditions, centralized hierarchical governance, and limited financial and other capacities. A more global program of comparative CBC research could instead proceed from comparisons of specific conditions and of the actors, practices, and configurations that adapt to them with varying degrees of success. Comparative research and the policy recommendations for lesson-drawing that follow from it remain unquestionably valuable, but they should be cautious about highlighting apparently similar phenomena in isolation from their contexts.

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