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**SOCIAL FACTORS OF INTEGRATION PROCESSES
IN CENTRAL ASIA**

Abstract: This article examines the social aspects of integration processes in the Central Asian region. In contrast to the traditional emphasis on economic and geopolitical indicators, the author focuses on the "human dimension" of integration. Factors such as shared historical and cultural heritage, migration flows, educational cooperation, and the role of civil society are analyzed. The paper emphasizes that the sustainability of interstate relations in the region directly depends on the degree of social cohesion and the formation of a common humanitarian space. The main social barriers are identified and ways to overcome them are proposed within the framework of the concept of "regionalism from below."

Key words: Central Asia, social integration, humanitarian cooperation, migration, identity, regional security, cultural dialogue.

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**СОЦИАЛЬНЫЕ ФАКТОРЫ ИНТЕГРАЦИОННЫХ ПРОЦЕССОВ
В ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ**

Аннотация: В данной статье рассматриваются социальные аспекты интеграционных процессов в регионе Центральной Азии. В отличие от традиционного акцента на экономические и геополитические показатели, автор фокусируется на «человеческом измерении» интеграции.

Анализируются такие факторы, как общность историко-культурного наследия, миграционные потоки, образовательное сотрудничество и роль гражданского общества. В работе подчеркивается, что устойчивость межгосударственных связей в регионе напрямую зависит от степени социальной сплоченности и формирования общего гуманитарного пространства. Выявлены основные барьеры социального характера и предложены пути их преодоления в рамках концепции «регионализма снизу».

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, социальная интеграция, гуманитарное сотрудничество, миграция, идентичность, региональная безопасность, культурный диалог.

Introduction. Regional integration processes in Central Asia are currently undergoing a qualitative transformation. While in previous decades, the primary efforts of the region's states (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) focused on border demarcation and national security, the current agenda increasingly includes issues of deep social interaction.

The relevance of studying social factors stems from the fact that any economic integration model remains unstable unless it is supported by the population and does not address specific social problems. Central Asia is a region with a shared historical past, similar cultural codes, and close family ties, which creates a unique foundation for the development of "human-centered" integration.

1. Cultural and civilizational commonality as the foundation of integration. Social integration in Central Asia rests on a powerful layer of shared identity. This applies not only to religious commonality (Sunni Islam), but also to cultural and everyday traditions that developed over centuries along the Great Silk Road.

According to research, "sociocultural proximity is a key catalyst for trust in interstate relations" [1]. The region continues to experience the phenomenon of "people-to-people diplomacy," whereby border communities maintain ties despite political differences. A key factor is the preservation of Russian as a lingua franca, facilitating professional and academic mobility within regional initiatives.

2. Migration processes and their role in social cohesion.

Migration in Central Asia is a complex socioeconomic factor. On the one hand, it creates certain challenges for national economies, and on the other, it forms cross-border social networks.

Labor migration within the region (especially towards Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan) contributes to the equalization of consumption standards and the exchange of professional experience. As S. Kasenova notes, "migration flows create natural channels of integration, forcing governments to harmonize labor legislation and social guarantees for foreign citizens" [2]. Social protection for migrants is becoming a point of convergence for the interests of all countries in the region, forcing them to engage in dialogue at the level of relevant agencies.

Labor migration is traditionally viewed as a purely economic phenomenon, but its social implications for integration are much deeper. Over the past decade, in addition to the traditional migration vector to the Russian Federation, a powerful internal migration hub has emerged in the region, with Kazakhstan serving as the main center of attraction, and in recent years, dynamically developing Uzbekistan has also emerged [3]. Migration contributes to the formation of a unified sociocultural space. Citizens of the region's countries, working and studying in neighboring countries, create stable horizontal ties, business networks, and cross-border families. This reduces xenophobia and fosters a common regional identity.

To illustrate these processes, statistical data reflecting the structure and dynamics of migration flows within the region are provided below.

Table 1.

Demographic profile and migration potential of Central Asian countries [4]

| Country | Population (millions) | Share of population under 30 (%) | Main vector of external migration | Attractiveness index for internal migrants |
|------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------|-----------------------------------|--|
| Kazakhstan | 20.2 | ~41% | Russia, EU, South Korea | High (host country) |
| Kyrgyzstan | 7.1 | ~53% | Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey | Average (donor country) |
| Tajikistan | 10.3 | ~58% | Russia, | Low (donor country) |

| | | | | |
|---------------------|------|------|--|----------------------|
| | | | Kazakhstan, UAE | |
| Turkmenistan | 6.5 | ~46% | Turkey, Russia, UAE | Low (closed profile) |
| Uzbekistan | 37.5 | ~55% | Russia, Kazakhstan, South Korea, EU | Growing (donor/host) |

Source: Compiled by the author based on summarized data from national statistical agencies and UNDP reports for the period 2024–2025.

As can be seen from Table 1, a large proportion of the young population is concentrated in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which in turn leads to large volumes of labor migration.

Table 2.

Dynamics of Intra-Regional Labor Migration in Central Asia (Estimated Number of Work Permits and Registrations) [5]

| Migration Flow Direction | Year 2020 (persons) | Year 2022 (persons) | Year 2024 (persons) | Trend / Prospect (2025–2026) |
|--------------------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|--|
| From Kyrgyzstan to Kazakhstan | 35,000 | 48,000 | 55,000 | Steady growth (EAEU facilitation factor) |
| From Tajikistan to Kazakhstan | 12,000 | 22,000 | 31,000 | Accelerated growth rate |
| From Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan | 120,000 | 185,000 | 210,000 | Consistently high intensity |
| From Tajikistan to Uzbekistan | 2,000 | 7,000 | 15,000 | Emerging upward trend |

Source: Adapted from World Bank regional labor market assessments (2025) and statistical reports from the migration services of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan.

An analysis of Table 2 shows that Kazakhstan's economy is a key absorber of the region's surplus labor force. However, a key trend for 2024–2026 is Uzbekistan's transformation from a purely donor country to a country that partially hosts specialists and workers from neighboring Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, driven

by a large-scale construction and industrial boom in major Uzbek cities (Tashkent and Samarkand).

3. Education and Youth Policy: A Look to the Future. Central Asia is a region with a predominantly young population (the median age is approximately 28 years). This creates a "demographic dividend," which can only be realized through educational integration.

The creation of a common educational space, mutual recognition of diplomas, and increasing quotas for students from neighboring countries are key social factors. "The development of a regional intellectual elite with experience studying at universities in neighboring countries removes psychological barriers and stereotypes accumulated over years of isolationism" [6]. Academic exchange programs between Tashkent, Almaty, and Bishkek lay the foundation for long-term cooperation.

4. Social Barriers and Challenges to Integration. Despite the presence of positive factors, a number of social challenges hinder integration:

1. Income Gap: Significant differences in quality of life between countries in the region provoke social tensions and uncontrolled migration. 2. Environmental risks: The Aral Sea and water resource distribution issues are extremely pressing for the population and can fuel interethnic tensions in border areas [7].

3. Information disunity: The lack of unified media projects means that residents of the region are often better informed about global events than about their neighbors.

5. The role of civil society in "regionalism from below" processes. Modern integration cannot be solely a project of political elites. Social factors include the activity of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), business associations, and expert communities. The development of tourism within the region ("Go Uzbekistan," "Visit Kazakhstan") facilitates increased personal contacts between citizens, which in turn generates public demand for the lifting of visa and customs restrictions.

Conclusion.

Integration processes in Central Asia have entered a phase where social factors are beginning to play no less a role than gas exports or railway construction. Social integration must proceed by creating uniform standards in healthcare, education, and the protection of citizens' rights.

The region's future depends on transforming Central Asia into a space of "common destiny," where social mobility and cultural exchange are perceived as a natural norm. The primary development vector should be strengthening trust between peoples through expanding humanitarian contacts and jointly addressing social problems in border areas.

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