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Identity in a Country in Transit: External Projections vs Internal Conceptions of the Caspian Macroregion from the Perspective of Kazakhstan

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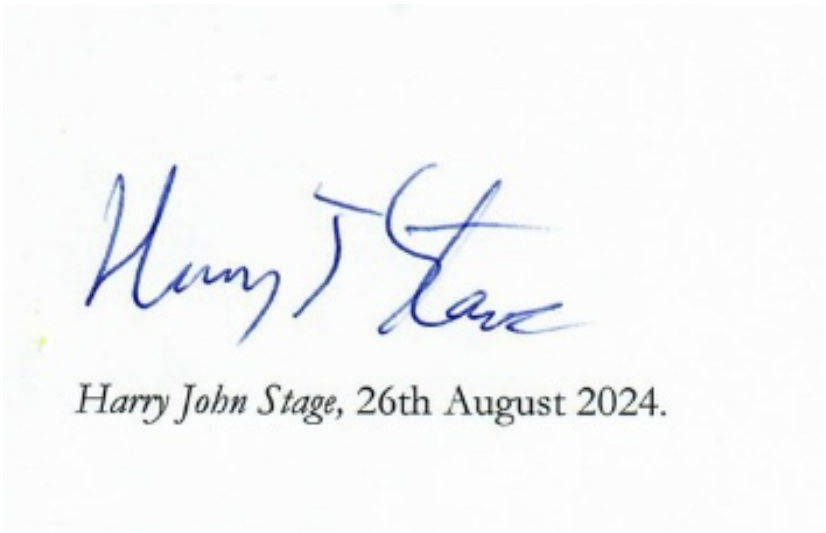

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Abstract:

English-language political discourse on relations of states surrounding the Caspian Sea is increasingly constructed through geopolitical language, rooted in contestation, conflict and instability in international political discourse. This thesis critically examines the 'Caspian Region', a term first politicised in US foreign policy strategic discourse, to understand how this space is understood from the perspective of those who live and work there. This research is premised on the basis that the Caspian Region, like all political norms and societal structures, is socially constructed. The author rejects the normative view that regions and boundaries are permanent or immovable. Therefore, the Constructivist School of IR provides the intellectual backdrop to the inquiry. Critic Geopolitics and Neoregionalism augment this field to critically analyse the conventional world map and gain the ontological perspective required to encapsulate organic processes of region-building within a certain space. Using identity as an 'eye-opener', the author seeks to determine the importance of the spatial element of the foreign policy priorities of Kazakhstan and how individuals locate this. To do so, 16 academics, foreign policy analysts, and strategists from or based in Kazakhstan have been interviewed.

This research finds that the external construction of a 'Caspian Region' is not matched within a leading state of the area concerned. The reasons for this are found in political, cultural and spatial relationships and processes. Kazakhstan does not see the Caspian Region as a profitable project. The political will required to undertake structural changes is lacking. Following centuries of Imperial Russian then Soviet political, economic and cultural superiority imposed on Kazakhstan, in the period since independence 1991 the country and its citizens have been in renegotiating what it means to be Kazakh. A process hastened by Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Most Kazakhs are hesitant to engage in further cooperation in a Russia-dominated political project, underpinned by multivectorism -- Kazakhstan's central foreign policy doctrine that seeks to balance regional superpowers – which supersedes relations with one pole at the expense of another. Kazakhstan's regional priorities instead like in the concept of Central Asian/Eurasian states, not influenced by regional powers Russian and Iran. What the US sees as contestable space continues to be Russia's backyard. Local ideational forces inhibit the state's ability to act in tandem with the regional superpower to develop a regional project. The contestation over key concepts used in popular political discourses leads the author to propose a novel framework for studying this space in International Relations, contributing to the decolonization of Central & East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies discourse. The author argues that the political culture of Kazakhstan and systems of (pan) national identification locate

region building priorities for Kazakhstan in Central Asia, rather than the 'Caspian Region'.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, Caspian Region, geopolitics, culture, identity, distance, geography, Constructivism, New Regionalism.

Streszczenie:

Anglojęzyczny dyskurs polityczny na temat stosunków państw otaczających Morze Kaspijskie jest coraz częściej konstruowany za pomocą języka geopolitycznego, zakorzenionego w sporach, konfliktach i niestabilności w międzynarodowym dyskursie politycznym. Ta teza krytycznie analizuje "Region kaspijski", termin po raz pierwszy upolityczniony w strategii polityki zagranicznej USA, aby zrozumieć, jak ta przestrzeń jest rozumiana z perspektywy tych, którzy tam mieszkają i pracują. Badania te opierają się na założeniu, że Region Morza Kaspijskiego, podobnie jak wszystkie normy polityczne i struktury społeczne, jest skonstruowany społecznie. Autor odrzuca normatywny pogląd, że regiony i granice są trwałe lub nieruchome. Dlatego Konstruktywistyczna Szkoła IR Zapewnia intelektualne tło dla śledztwa. Geopolityka i Neoregionalizm poszerzają tę dziedzinę, aby krytycznie przeanalizować konwencjonalną mapę świata i uzyskać perspektywę ontologiczną wymaganą do uchwycenia organicznych procesów budowania regionu w określonej przestrzeni. Wykorzystując tożsamość jako "otwierającą Oczy", autor próbuje określić znaczenie przestrzennego elementu priorytetów polityki zagranicznej Kazachstanu i sposób, w jaki jednostki go lokalizują. W tym celu przeprowadzono wywiady z 16 badaczami, analitykami polityki zagranicznej i strategami z Kazachstanu lub z siedzibą w Kazachstanie.

Badanie to wykazało, że zewnętrzna struktura" regionu Morza Kaspijskiego " nie jest dopasowana do wiodącego stanu tego obszaru. Przyczyny tego znajdują się w relacjach i procesach politycznych, kulturowych i przestrzennych. Kazachstan nie postrzega regionu Morza Kaspijskiego jako realnego projektu. Brakuje woli politycznej do podejmowania zmian strukturalnych. Po wiekach imperialnej Rosyjskiej, a następnie sowieckiej supremacji politycznej, gospodarczej i kulturowej narzuconej Kazachstanowi, w okresie od uzyskania niepodległości w 1991 r.kraj i

jego obywatele renegocjowali, co to znaczy być Kazachstanem. Proces ten został przyspieszony przez inwazję Rosji na Ukrainę na pełną skalę. Większość Kazachów waha się przed dalszą współpracą w zdominowanym przez Rosję projekcie politycznym opartym na multivectorism-centralnej doktrynie polityki zagranicznej Kazachstanu, która ma na celu zrównoważenie regionalnych supermocarstw-która zastępuje stosunki z jednym Polakiem kosztem drugiego. Zamiast tego regionalne priorytety Kazachstanu przypominają koncepcję państw Azji Środkowej/Eurazji, na które nie mają wpływu regionalne potęgi Rosji i Iranu. To, co USA postrzegają jako obszar sporny, nadal jest podwórkiem Rosji. Lokalne siły ideologiczne hamują zdolność państwa do działania w tandemie z regionalnym supermocarstwem w celu opracowania Regionalnego projektu. Kontrowersje wokół kluczowych pojęć stosowanych w popularnych dyskursach politycznych skłaniają autora do zaproponowania nowatorskich RAM badania tej przestrzeni w stosunkach międzynarodowych, przyczyniając się do dekolonizacji dyskursu studiów środkowoeuropejskich, rosyjskich i Euroazjatyckich. Autor twierdzi, że kultura polityczna Kazachstanu i krajowe systemy identyfikacji (pan) lokalizują priorytety budowy regionu dla Kazachstanu w Azji Środkowej, a nie "regionu Kaspijskiego".

Słowa kluczowe: Kazachstan, Region kaspijski, geopolityka, kultura, tożsamość, dystans, Geografia, konstruktywizm, Nowy Regionalizm.

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This thesis would not be possible without the insights of the sixteen interviewees who willingly volunteered their time without incentive or reward to provide excellent insight into the political and societal changes presently taking place in Kazakhstan. These interviews have been supplemented by scores of informal conversations across Kazakhstan and Central Asia with people too numerous to thank. The people of Kazakhstan and wider region have provided me with some of the most enjoyable academic and personal discussions and experiences to date. To turn this passion into a subject of study has been truly rewarding. To that end, I must thank all my lecturers and peers from Dundee and Angus College, the University of St Andrews, and more recently on the IMCEERES programme in Tartu, Glasgow, Krakow and Almaty for their insights and passion on such a broad array of subjects, areas and issues, each as inspiring as the next.

The presented paper is the culmination of seven years of study at home and abroad, since leaving the hospitality sector in 2017 to undertake higher education. This journey has been made possible by the unwavering support of my mum, dad, sisters and grampa, who each in their own way provide comfort and reassurance no matter the time or distance. Also, thanks to Des for the little prods along the way. Finally, Jessica. Thank you for sacrificing some of our precious holiday time together in Kazakhstan for me to conduct interviews and collect perspectives on Central Asia. The support you provide is invaluable.

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As per the advice of University of Glasgow Ethics Committee the approved Ethical Application document required to conduct interviews has been submitted as a separate file to maintain anonymity in marking. Resultingly, the author's details have been removed from the forms in Appendices B, C & D.

INTRODUCTION

Since studying the captivating undergraduate module 'Geopolitics of Energy in the Caspian Sea Region' with Dr. Matteo Fumagalli at the University of St Andrews in 2022, this author has increasingly questioned what brings to life and sustains regions in the geopolitical imagination. The concept of a 'Caspian Region' has become a staple of International Relations (IR) discourse in the last thirty years. While the term has existed since the late 19th Century (Griffis, 1897 p.58), it was first politicised in 1994 through US foreign policy and strategy documents (Shamsdoulatabadi, 2009). This politically constructed space encompasses at least the five states that share the Caspian Sea coastline-- Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Russia, Turkmenistan and Iran, the littoral five (L5). Meanwhile, academic, political and media literature frequently discuss the concept of a 'Greater Caspian Region'[1] as a site of contestation using geopolitical language and themes[2].

Conventional discourse portrays this as a world region where the US has attempted since the early 1990s to promote democracy, human rights and civil society to varying degrees of success, while contesting the influence of Moscow and Beijing. Since independence, the 'post-Soviet states' -- Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and regional power Russia -- have been seen as peripheral actors in international politics in the normative Western view. Russia continues to frame this space as being in its 'backyard', a view propagated by Western media outlets. Central

[1] The US think tank Caspian Policy Center calls for Washington to conduct greater strategic cooperation with the 'Greater Caspian Region', comprised of the five post-Soviet 'Stans' – Kazakhstan Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan – alongside the three states of the South Caucasus – Armenia, Azerbaijan and Georgia – that formerly comprised the USSR's southern flank (Hoagland, 2021a).

[2], Chufrin, G. (2001), *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region* and Bayaramov, A. (2021) 'Conflict, cooperation or competition in the Caspian Sea region: A critical review of the New Great Game paradigm', *Caucasus Survey,* Vol. 9, No. 1, pp.1-20, emphasise the continuity of this framing over the last two decades.

Asian academics reject this framing and stress the inaccuracy of external media's framing of regional politics and society, particularly considering the decolonialisation of 'Russian Studies' discourse: "Nevertheless, many in the West are in no hurry to recognize this trend, including news media like Reuters, Deutsche Welle, Wall Street Journal and Time, who recently called the region "Russia's backyard"" [3]. Yet the 'Caspian Region' continues to be viewed through a colonial Russian-centric lens, a structural effect of colonial power that remains present in contemporary regional politics.

A 2011 PONARS Eurasia report questioned 'whether the Caspian Sea area will evolve into a cohesive region or fray under the influence of a broader array of external forces' (Makarychev, 2011, p.1). Some academics portray the area as functioning as 'a bridge between Central Asia and Europe while contributing to the stability and prosperity of the region' (Baglaminda & Rolü, 2022, p.419). Following Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine such framings of the Caspian's strategic and economic role have received increased relevance as international actors seek to reconstitute the geopolitical world map. Kazakhstan has an increasing role to play in the Western push to find alternative sources of energy and transport routes connecting Europe and Asia that bypass Russia, while Central Asia's mineral and natural resource wealth becomes part of global diversification strategies. In 2023 the Iranian Foreign Minister raised the pressing need to form a single Caspian cooperation organisation, that must be formally structured: 'To turn the Caspian Sea into a symbol of friendship, progress and development, we need to strengthen' (Abdollahian, 2023).

Guided by International Relations fields of Constructivism, Neoregionalism and Critical Geopolitics, this study builds a theoretical model to uncover processes of region building. The

[3] "Однако многие на Западе не спешат признавать эту тенденцию, в том числе такие новостные медиа, как Reuters, Deutsche Welle, Wall Street Journal и Time, которые недавно назвали регион "задним двором России"" Имамова, Н. (2023)

history of intellectual thought guiding this study is deeply entwined with the course of events that created the situation in which five governments (L5), rather than two (USSR & Iran), came to manage the Caspian Sea. Changes in the international system stemming from Gorbachev's reforms brought new actors, issues and areas of global politics into view. Theoretical models developed in the mid 1980s to early 1990s during Perestroika and the collapse of the USSR sought to explain such tumultuous changes in the international system - often placing contemporary problems in relation to political and historical processes. Structural changes led authors to discuss the primacy of the region in the study of global affairs[4]. Although Sylvan (1991, p,267) argues that the assigning of dates to intellectual movements is arbitrary, there was undoubtedly a demonstrable change in world politics and its study throughout this period caused by systemic shocks in the international system.

In three decades since independence there is no regional organisation (RO) in relation to the 'Caspian Region', nor does there seem to be any spirit of cooperation or fostering mutual trust and engagement, as shown by the prolonged process of defining the legal status of the Caspian Sea. As analysts increasingly write about the need for external actors to strengthen cooperation with this 'region', the idea that policy makers are referring to a well-defined space appears more concrete. Western political discourse assumes a level of integration and community building in this space. Scant attention has thus far been paid to what the 'Caspian Region' means from the perspective of those who live in the states concerned, while there is little consensus over its substance or function externally.

This thesis, highlighting a gap in the literature that must be examined, investigates how Kazakhstan understands the 'Caspian Region' through analysis of social and discursive practices

[4] For more see Hurrell (1995) "Explaining the resurgence of regionalism in world politics', Review of International Studies, Vol. 21, pp. 331-358.

of a sample of its academics and foreign policy experts. The external projection of regional affairs, most prevalent in contemporary Western literature, will be first analysed before examining how such a projection relates to the internal Kazakh conception of regional political strategy and society. The goal is to the local processes of interaction taking place among actors within the Caspian states, using identity as an 'eye-opener' (Berenskötter, 2011) as actors contextualise the spatiality of politics in their internal construction and (re)negotiation of identity. This research is premised on the view that political norms, discourses and practices are socially constructed. Since 'identities both generate and shape interests' (Jepperson, Wendt & Katzenstein, 1996, p.60), this research is important for the analysis of Kazakhstan's present and future priorities in regional and international politics.

The central research question guiding this topic is 'How does the external construction of a region relate to the internal conception?' Sub-questions to develop this inquiry include: Is there a sense of common community existing in this space? What are the main currents that unite and divide these states and populations? Where is this space located in Kazakhstan's political and cultural imagination? What substantiates the Caspian Region as a unified or unifying geopolitical space? Where does the regional identity fit in amongst national, religious, pan national and the host of other identities individuals may possess?

An exploratory single case study is used to examine what the region means to academics and foreign policy experts in Kazakhstan. Sixteen semi-structured elite interviews have been conducted using a reflexive interview approach to the case study, asking 'how' and 'why' questions to gain deep insight. In analysis of the data, in vivo (verbatim) coding will be used with Thematic Content

Analysis (TCA) to build key themes and concepts to contextualise the external and internal perspective.

The structure of this study is as follows. In Chapter 1 – the literature review analyses the contributions and blind spots of the three theoretical enterprises before discussing relevant academic literature relating to the process of region building and identity. Chapter 2, the background section, is divided into two parts. The first outlines the construction of 'the Caspian Region' in contemporary Western political literature while the second provides context to modern Kazakhstan. In Chapter 3 the study's research methods, and suitability of such methods, will be discussed. Chapter 4 discusses the research findings under the central themes of culture and identity. The final Chapter, 5, discusses the refinement of concepts in view of the previous findings to propose a novel conceptual framework to sharpen analysis and depoliticise future discourse on this space. It then analyses the data in relation to perspectives discussed in the opening chapters, and concludes with a discussion of future implications of the research. The concluding section finds that the Caspian Region as constructed in western foreign policy does not reflect how the space is conceptualised within Kazakhstan. The future for Kazakhstan's regional building process from above and below lie in the 'Central Asia' community.

CHAPTER 1: LITERATURE REVIEW & THEORETICAL/ CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

The aim of this thesis is to understand how the external construction of a region relates to the internal. To build a theoretical position that encapsulates such dynamics, one turns to the established academic literature produced on regions and identity. Two types of theoretical perspectives are available to political scientists to guide and shape research -- problem-solving and critical. These primary decisions of research design are not neutral since 'theory is always *for* someone and *for* some purpose' (Cox, 1981, pp.128-130). Positivists take the world as given, believing their research to have no distortive effect on objects under analysis. In this view, they are only concerned with using theory to improve certain aspects of international society, such as rectifying the function of institutions or solving the problem of conflict, typically producing certain laws or hypotheses.

In IR literature, the rationalist perspective as it relates to identity posits that actors' identities are given a-priori and do not determine action, a position conflicting with that of constructivists and poststructuralists who maintain that identities are situated at the heart of domestic and international interests and are in a constant process of interaction with other actors (Bucher & Jasper, 2017, p.394). Since rationalist accounts of International Relations stress that identities do not contribute to the structuring of regional relations, to understand how identity is evolving in response to geopolitical events, and how the construction of identity determines regional political integration, theories like Neorealism and Liberal Institutionalism will be inadequate in their

ontological assumptions for a study into the ongoing process of building a common regional community.

Reflectivist, post-positivist or critical scholars likewise start with a given problem, but rather than seeking to solve a particular aspect, theorists embracing such epistemologies question historical processes of change, social issues, power relations and how the existing order came into being (Cox, 1981, pp.129-130). It is this critical perspective that is of interest here. The 'region' under investigation was politically conceptualised in US strategic documents, and must be contextualised as part of a larger process.

Critically investigating how regions are constructed, one creates a theory rooted in post-positivism, drawing on insights and methods from IR schools Constructivism, Critical Geopolitics and Neoregionalism. This composite theoretical approach is in continuation with the tradition of Snyder (2004, p.55), who argued that 'each theory offers a filter for looking at a complicated picture… the theories act as a powerful check on each other. Deployed effectively, they reveal the weaknesses in arguments that can lead to misguided policies'. This permits one to craft a theory that captures the most salient issues.

1.1: Constructivism

Constructivism reconfigured the study and practice of global politics. In tackling the academic hegemony and naturalised assumptions of (Neo) Realism and Liberalism, constructivists facilitated a post-positivist turn in IR. Adler posits that Constructivism 'occupies the middle

ground' in the conflict between rationalist and critical perspectives, maintaining that the notion this school belongs to the same reflectivist camp as critical scholars is mistaken (Adler, 1997, pp.319-320). To Wendt, constructivism offers 'a philosophically principled middle way' (Wendt, 1999, p.2). Traditional constructivists sought to prove to rationalists that this middle perspective was 'scientific'. However, the field has since evolved and this 'thin' constructivism is not the only accepted form. Moreover, Constructivism underpins many contemporary critical theories and concepts.

Social structures have three elements: 'shared knowledge, material resources, and practices' (Wendt, 1995, p.73). This is the lens through which regional political community will be examined. Two principles of Constructivism are widely accepted: '(1) that the structures of human association are determined primarily by shared ideas rather than material forces, and (2) that the identities and interests of purposive actors are constructed by these shared ideas rather than given by nature' (Wendt, 1999, p.1). Constructivism provides the theoretical underpinning to develop a framework that captures the evolution of identity in relation to ongoing political and social processes. Constructivist theorists range from thick to thin, and from causal analysis associated with the mainstream of IR theory to the radical, postmodern frameworks, encompassing a 'spectrum from positivist-leaning to post-positivist positions' (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p.5-11). For all its strengths, constructivism draws criticism from other major fields of IR for its perceived weaknesses. Poststructuralists and other critical scholars critique constructivism for its lack of motivation to properly examine related historical and political discourses, while positivists disprove the lack of 'scientific rigour'.

1.2: Critical Geopolitics

This thesis is concerned with the spatiality of politics and how hegemonic actors frame discussions to establish norms in global affairs. Critical geopolitics 'is a problematizing theoretical enterprise that places existing structures of power and knowledge in question' and 'critiques the superficial and self-interested ways in which orthodox geopolitics 'reads the world political map' by projecting its own cultural and political assumptions upon it while concealing these very assumptions.' (Ó Tuathail, 2008, pp. 107-108). Rather than subscribing to geographical determinism like classical geopolitics, critical geopolitics 'understands geography in international politics as socially constructed and bound to larger questions regarding identity/difference, for instance' (Maiso, 2015, p.223). In regions outside of Europe, one continues to find that projections of the European world view are superimposed onto diverse geographies and cultures existing within such spaces.

O'Tuathail & Agnew maintain that geopolitics 'should be critically re-conceptualised as a discursive practice by which intellectuals of statecraft 'spatialize' international politics in such a way as to represent it as a 'world' characterised by particular types of places, peoples and dramas', to the benefit of 'core powers and hegemonic states' (1992, p.192). Critical geopolitics rejects assumptions that any region or label on a world map is natural, rather they are established through political discussions.

The contradiction stemming from external projections and internal conceptions is a recurring problem in regional studies, seen in the 'Middle East'[5] where there is an external desire to conceptualise this area as a region even though the states involved locally have not moved towards more cohesion due to diverse political aims and recurring tensions on the ground (Farrell, Hettne and Van Langenhove, 2005). Contemporary political geography involved a sustained interest in how geographical representations and practices (from the labels given to world regions and their ranking in strategic hierarchies through notions of containment and domino effects to shifting patterns of trade and investment flows) influence elite and popular approaches to world politics (Agnew, 2000, p.93).

One main theme confronting studies of the states surrounding the Black Sea is 'the way in which outsiders come to conceive of particular territorial zones as regions. What is the relationship between how outsiders perceive regional boundaries and the way the inhabitants of those zones understand themselves and their immediate neighbors?' (King, 2004, p.17). Analysis of these territorial zones commonly considered to be well-defined global regions emphasises that one must question IR norms. An important concept here is territoriality: 'the attempt by an individual or group to affect, influence, or control people, phenomena, and relationships, by delimiting. and asserting control over a geographic area' (Sack, 1986, p.19). Political geography is compatible with new regionalism because 'whereas geographers once viewed regions as spaces of ahistorical physical and/or cultural homogeneity, the new regionalism posits that regions are the product of political, economic, and social discourses and practices that are inscribed within multi-scalar and contingent territorial frameworks' (Charron & Diener, 2015, p.15).

[5] As part of the ongoing decolonisation of academia, this term has come under increasing scrutiny and is being replaced by SWANA (South West Asia & North Africa). Forthwith, this essay utilises the post-colonial concept.

It is in analysis of social discourse and practices that one seeks to assess the construction of regions. In the classic geopolitical perspective and much of the normative understanding of global affairs, world regions are accepted facts of international relations, portrayed as being carved out of stone, intransient components of the international system: 'The geography with its natural space factors is often considered objective in the tradition of the realistic school of international relations from which normative compulsions are driven to act, which are circumscribed using the terms geopolitics and geostrategy' (Fard, 2021, p.29). Critical Geopolitics questions this. A recurring criticism of Critical Geopolitics is that it is inherently political. However, critiques such as these serve to uphold the norms of powerful actors.

1.3: New Regionalism

In the literature of Political Science and International Relations, a region is described by Joseph Nye as 'a limited number of states linked together by a geographical relationship and by a degree of mutual interdependence' (1971), and by Karl Deutsch as 'a group of countries markedly interdependent over a wide range of different dimensions' (De Lombaerde, Baert & Felicio, 2012). These authors were writing from the period of classic regionalism, a top-down, Eurocentric integration model centred on trade and tariffs. Conversely, the new regional perspective encompasses a wider range of issues and areas of cooperation, including energy, agriculture, procurement, norms, intellectual property rights, environmental and social issues (Estevadeordal, Fouquin & Vodusek, 2007, pp. 5-6).

This new model is more spontaneous taking into consideration issues and actors not traditionally thought to have been actors in IR, often emerging 'from below and from within the region itself, and more in accordance with its peculiarities and problems' (Hettne, & Söderbaum, 1998, p.2). As populations and societies evolved out of the post-Cold War order, embracing new technologies, perspectives and cultures, Neoregionalism as an academic field developed in this period to explain and analyse the contemporary less-rigid political world. A key goal of contemporary regional studies is to bridge the gap between 'globalism' and 'localism' (Hettne & Södderbaum, 2000). Generally, neoregionalists disregard the view that the European model of regionalisation that became the EU is the standard for other regions globally to attain. The field is committed to embracing a plurality of ideas and conceptions of how regions are made and re-made in relation to ongoing processes and events to produce analyses for further study and engagement with regional actors. An important distinction has been made in the literature:

'Regionalism refers to a programme, an ideology, to a situation where there exists a clear idea of a region, a set of goals and values associated with a specific project that an identifiable group of actors wish to realize. Regionalization, on the other hand, is the actual process of increasing exchange, contact and coordination and so on within a given region.' (Hveem, 2000a, in Soderbaum and Shaw, 2003, p.83).

This thesis inquires how the external projection of a regional project relates to the ongoing social and political processes within the given area. To examine how, if at all, the internal and external views align. Regionalism will be studied in the literature to examine the top-down perspective of the process of region formation conducted by elites and professionals to understand the shape of formal regional integration. It is the regionalization perspective that will be of greater pertinence in the methodology chapter.

Söderbaum (2003, p.4) stresses that one may 'speak of new regionalism in a spatial sense, referring to a region, a real emerging region, that did not previously experience genuine regionalization or in which it was imposed from outside, more or less as a simple copy of the European integration model'. It is this emerging region that is of interest. How do the citizens of a given region bring this to life? Boas, Marchand & Shaw, (2003, p.209) argue that 'regionalisms are, after all, about social practice; nothing more, nothing less'. Hettne draws on Wendt by contending that 'in the constructivist approach regions come to life as we talk and think about them' (2003, p.27). Regions and regional identities are constructed and reshaped in relation to ongoing processes and events. Regional identities are not understood as being in competition with national ones, since identity is not a zero-sum game (Slocum, 2005, p.148).

Regional blocs have formed predominantly to provide cohesion to political, economic and security policies for a group of states. Contemporary debates on regionalism are not so much about the benefits of integration but are more focused on the appropriateness of regionalism for different parts of the world, hastening globalisation and 'the breakdown of bipolarity that governed global security between 1945 and 1990' (Mistry, 2003, p.119). For all the debate over the role of regional integration as a 'stumbling block' or 'building block' in the modern global economy, few developed frameworks exist to understand the role that politics of identity play in the formulation of regional integration (Montoya & Lanucara, 2021). This is where a gap in the literature appears that must be resolved.

In a world controlled by superpowers, 'the nation-state becomes too 'small' and weak to govern foreign economic relations. Regions therefore become the optimal alternative, partly because they are placed in the intersection between global and nation-state institutions that attempt to cope

with these processes (cf. Hettne, Chapter 2)' (Soderbaum & Shaw, 2003, p.85). The states of the 'regions' share common characteristics and are expected to unite as a response to greater pressures. This expectation must be examined to understand how perceived external threats are understood.

Regions 'achieve their boundaries, symbolisms and institutions in the process of institutionalisation' (Paasi, 2009, p.123). For regions still emerging, this ongoing process takes many shapes. Institutionalisation can be strong or weak, thick or thin. Kees Terlouw (2012) distinguishes between deep-rooted historically based 'thick' regional identities and 'thin' alternatives which are transitory and centred on economic competitiveness. Paasi (2011, pp.12-13) stresses that 'identity can be respectively conceptualized analytically as consisting of two elements: the identity of the region and the identity or regional consciousness of the people living in the region or outside of it'. In this process of region building states as actors learn from one another through the gradual internalization of collective norms which are integral to collective identities (Went 1999: chs. 6 and 7) (Berenskötter, 2011, p.3603).

Discussing sub-state regions in Ukraine, Gnatiuk & Melnychuk (2019, p.175) write that 'historical regions remain the most common basis for the formation or promotion of regional identities in Europe. However, regions and regional identities are in the process of constant formation and can change significantly in line with new conditions.' In this thesis, the conception of a changing regional identity in response to new conditions will be applied to the macro-region.

Much of the contemporary literature on macro-regional strategies has been developed within the context of Europeanisation projects (Cugusi & Stocchiero, p.3). Macro-regional strategies come to life as neighbouring states seek to resolve issues particularly salient to that geographical space, 'in-between issues' that cannot be solved by sovereign states alone, but that are not deemed important enough by the wider international community (Dühr, 2011, p.1). The Baltic Sea Region grew from a Nordic core to induce a new phase of integration across military, social, political, and ecological spheres, expedited by the need to counter Russian aggression in Europe after Putin launched the full-scale invasion of Ukraine post-February 2022, 'which confirmed Russia as the regional exception' (Wood, 2024, p.10). Since then, there has been a demonstrable shift in the geopolitical identity of the Baltic Sea region. Following the accession of Finland and Sweden to NATO in response to heightened Russian aggression, an image has been constructed in the public imagination of the Baltic Sea as a 'NATO lake'. In the last three decades four formerly socialist and two non-aligned states sharing a body of water with Russia have transformed that area from a geopolitically contested space to a bedrock of Euro-Atlantic liberal democracy.

Meanwhile, the Globalizing IR approach urges the existing scholarship to look beyond the European model of regionalism and consider diverging responses to a different set of interests (Acharya, 2016). In Euro-Atlantic academic literature the expectation is that a regionalism programme will develop along a linear path to form a cohesive political bloc. This must be examined. Along with the idea that macro-regions are created on strictly economic grounds which is problematic as diverse (geo)political, historical and social factors, alongside the relationship between nature and society, must be contextualised to evaluate the limits of a regional project (Hampl, 2010) (Anděl, Bičik & Bláha, 2018).

1.4: Identity

Identity is a core concept in Constructivist studies. Actors of global politics at all levels from politicians and elites to ordinary citizens renegotiate and socially construct their identity in relation to themselves, their surroundings and others. Wendt contends that 'actors acquire identities' that are not singular, states can have multiple identities existing simultaneously that are built on commonly held theories 'which constitute the structure of the social world' and are then defined in relation to ongoing events and situations (1992, pp.397-398). Identities are not set, fixed or predetermined. Rituals and practices can enhance or undermine identity claims, 'that is, what one "is" (or wants to be) is sustained by what one "does" (Berenskötter, 2011, p.3601). Therefore, the evolution of identity is contingent upon the ongoing practices of the actor (Wendt, 1992, p.413).

The concept of identity is leaned on to examine the ways in which one relates to their environment. Fearon contends that "social" and "personal" identity are linked. The former is a social category demarcated by certain attributes, while the latter is made up of characteristics 'that a person takes a special pride in or views as socially consequential but more-or-less unchangeable' (Fearon, 1999, p.2). While agreeing that the social and personal are linked, his conception of the role of identity is misguided. To say that this is 'more-or-less unchangeable' denies the agency of humans to choose to realign their values throughout the later stages of their lives in response to structures and circumstances.

Individual identity 'is always a matter of social and spiritual location' (Smith, 1999, p.59). It is through social practice and intellectual labour that humans construct places (Evans, 1981, p.179). Place identity according to Proshanksy is a 'potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas and related feelings about specific physical settings, as well as types of settings' (1978, p.60). This place identity is important for the evolving process of identification. Identity reconfigures as built and natural places go through changes in the modern era because of forces of globalisation and environmental factors.

Butcher and Jasper propose a method that seeks to analyse the processes of identification as opposed to 'searching for identity' while arguing against the commonly held constructivist view that action is informed by identities, instead contending that 'sets of identifications are temporarily and incompletely stabilized in decision-making and do not precede or inform action' (2017, p.391). This thesis' model takes from Butcher & Jasper the importance of understanding and analysing the processes of identification, while disagreeing with their position that identity does not inform action. Political identity of a certain group can only be established within said group, only 'we' the group's members are the ones 'who engage in private exchange and public debate about how to determinate those values and to modify them when circumstances have changed and require a change of consciousness' (Cerruti & Rudolph, 2001, p.4). Changes in societal structures, discourses and patterns of interaction shape the evolving image of self and the nation.

Most studies into identity fall into two camps: the first focuses on the relationship between social structures and identity whilst the second takes as its primary concern the process of self-verification at the individual level (Stryker & Burke, 2000, p.284). This research is concerned with the former position. The social structures considered are language policies, economic trading relations, educational links, and the fields of foreign and security policies.

From the perspective of social identity theory Stets & Burke posit that 'the self is reflexive in that it can take itself as an object and can categorize, classify, or name itself in particular ways in relation to other social categories or classifications' (2000, p.224). Conceptualisation of one's specific situation along with capacity for memory and consciousness merge with physical and social structures to create a personal social context, producing a dynamic interaction that fuses one's identity (Breakwell, 1986) (Qazimi, 2014, p.250). In understanding identity construction as it relates to social, political and economic issues in Europe, Slocum introduces Positioning Theory. He analyses the construction of meaning in societal discourse through the relationship between 'the building blocks of meaning', consisting of 'storylines, actors with positions, and illocutionary (or social) forces – the positioning triad' (Slocum, 2005, p.147). These are what will be examined.

What identity means is still unclear in the literature; therefore this research focuses on the acts of identification to gain an understanding of the process of formation. It is not so much the identity of an individual this thesis seeks to capture, rather, how the interests, values, spiritual and place location of elites affect social and political trends.

Rationalist conceptions of identity view 'the world of international relations in utilitarian terms: an atomistic universe of self-regarding units whose identity is assumed given and fixed, and who are responsive largely if not solely to material interests that are stipulated by assumption' (Ruggie, 1998: 3). Positivists 'assume interests exist rather than explain how interests occur' (Higgott, 1998, p.50). Since it is the process of formation that is of importance, rather than assumption, the post-positivist constructivist perspective is preferred. This author does not assume that the identity of global actors is fixed, rather they are constructed and negotiated in relation to ongoing processes and events.

Alongside identity, core concepts for many constructivist studies include structure, agency and interests (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p.22). In the long-standing debate between structure and agency permeating social sciences disciplines, as it relates to identity, for constructivists the question is one of the relationship between 'individual identity and the constraints of social structure' (Huddy, 2001, p.127). Constructivists understand structure and agency to b 'mutually constituted', with the view that individual actors and groups can both change, as well as be changed by, the world they occupy (Klotz & Lynch, 2007, p.3). Berenskötter makes the strong argument that positivist, 'scientific' methods of discovery are not always beneficial, especially when we take such a concept as identity under inquiry: 'thus, instead of trying to grasp it as a variable the concept of identity is perhaps better understood as an "eye opener", which reshuffles the way we think and tell stories about international politics' (2011, p.3607). This thesis rejects the positivist position that 'science' is only attainable through IVs, DVs and hypotheses.

In sum, the model at hand takes from the literature 5 core components:

1) Central to the ontology is the constructivist concept of identity.
2) Geography is socially constructed.
3) The new regionalist perspective that includes local organic processes of integration along with diverse actors and themes in the region building process.
4) Humans build their identity in relation to place.
5) The identity of a group or place is only established by the 'we' group, not externally.

CHAPTER 2: BACKGROUND

2.1: 'The Caspian Region'

The unit encompassing the body of states surrounding the Caspian Sea is known by several similar terms—the 'Caspian Sea Region'[6], 'Caspian Region'[7], 'Greater Caspian Region'[8], whereas the term the 'Caspian Macro Region' is preferred in Russian literature[9]. Each moniker seeks to describe a geopolitically contested site of international politics. To clarify; the 'Caspian Region' does not entail geographic proximity to the Caspian Sea, i.e. domestic coastal regions are not of concern. Rather, this is a macro-region -- states as collective units make up this region. The area is non-democratic and is simultaneously portrayed as being both at the fringes and crossroads of global affairs, situated between Russia, China, Turkey and Europe. Henceforth, the term 'Caspian Region' will be applied in place of these various terms.

The 'Caspian Region' is also the original term as introduced by the US State Department (Pushkareva, 2021). Matthew Bryza, former US ambassador to Azerbaijan argues that the "'Greater Caspian region,' the area stretching from India to the Black and Mediterranean Seas with the Caspian Sea at the center, needs to come into sharper focus" (2020). From 1994 to present, American interest in and knowledge production on the Caspian Region has increased with time.

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[6] Chufrin, G. (2001) *The Security of the Caspian Sea Region,* Oxford: Oxford University Press
[7] Weitz, R. (2020) 'Continuity and Change in US Policies towards the Caspian Region', Middle East Institute [online].
[8] Hoagland, R. E. (2023) 'A Tectonic Shift in The Greater Caspian Region', Caspian Policy Center [online].
[9] Davydova, Y. A., Kargapolova, V. E., Simonenko, M. A. & Lezhebokov, A. A. (2022) 'Cooperation between Russia and Kazakhstan in Ensuring Integrated Security in the Caspian Macro Region', *Journal of Frontier Studies,* No. 3.

Before attracting the attention of US foreign policy thinkers, the Caspian Sea, from the late Romanov period to the dissolution of the Soviet Union at the end of 1991, has been to a large extent the political domain of Russia. During the Soviet era, 'the question of a boundary or national sovereignty in the Caspian Sea with Iran was never broached' (DoS, 1978, p.5). Rather, fishing agreements signed in 1935 and 1940 served until 1991 (Ivy, 2002). Post-1991 the Caspian Sea became the maritime border of five states, not two, each possessing contrasting strategies for resource management, posing a 'legislative black hole in governance and delimitation' (Karbuz, 2016, p62). The first signal of regional cooperation came in 1992 when Iran proposed an environmental protection initiative through creating a regional organisation of the L5 states. The political will for this project, however, gave way to the desire to extract and export the Caspian Basin's natural resources (Blum, 2002).

Following the Soviet collapse, states suddenly had opportunity, if not impetus, to seek new relations in political and economic spheres (Klots & Lynch, 2007, p.23). Yet forging alternative paths in the spheres of politics, economics and society after being in a structurally subservient position in relation to Moscow proved challenging. Many former socialist states remained connected to the new regional hegemon—Russia—in more ways than desired. Russia sought to maintain control in its 'near abroad'— a concept demarcating the 'post-Soviet' states encompassing its southern and eastern flanks, often involved in discussions about 'ethnic Russians' (Sencerman, 2016, p.41). This has salience today, seen in Putin's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and the ongoing presence of Russian soldiers in Transnistria in Moldova, and in Abkhazia and South Ossetia in Georgia. The 'near-abroad' and 'post-soviet' space are both

contested concepts that tie politics, economics and society in Central Asia to Russia, yet continue to be applied in study of this area.

Responding to the 'unipolar moment' confirming American hegemony, international elites created cross-border political, economic and security organisations to counterbalance this newly unmatched American power in these areas. Writing in the early post-Cold War period, Samuel Huntington (1996) proposed that the world's division into distinct spheres of cultural identity would shape contemporary global politics, in place of Cold War ideology. Huntingtonian fault lines run through the Caspian where the cultural world of Russian Orthodoxy intersects with Islam. As shown in Map A below, Huntington categorises Kazakhstan as belonging to the Orthodox culture while Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Iran belong to the Islamic (1996, p.27).

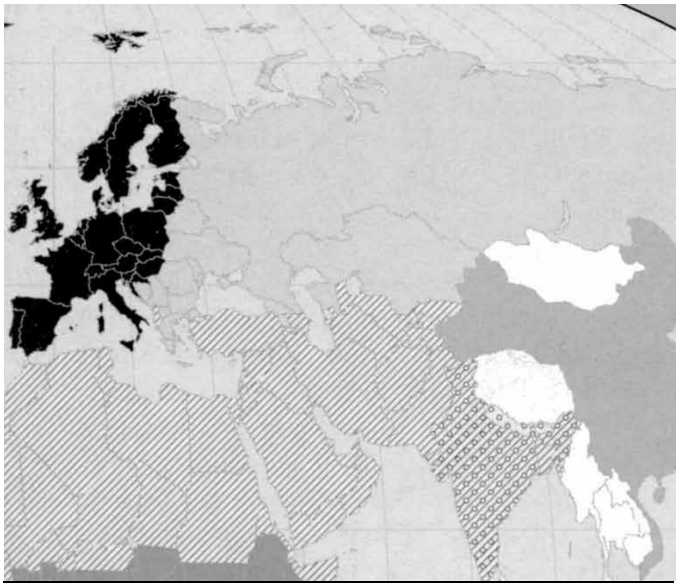
While Huntington's division of the world is analytically weak, of salience for this study is the presumed cultural and political proximity between Russia and Kazakhstan. In Hungtongton's Russian-oriented depiction, Kazakhstan is the only Muslim state categorised as Orthodox. Analysing the region from this perspective would posit that cooperation and a shared identity between the Caspian littoral states is unattainable due to the clash between Orthodox and Islamic cultures. Religious identity is an important factor in the area, but of the two regional superpowers, Iran and Russia, the three middle-sized Muslim-majority states remain closer to the latter than the former. A recurring critique from the Global South is that Huntington's rhetoric 'can serve to legitimize the mistakes of western foreign policy by diverting attention from real issues to imaginary ones' (Amirhoesseini, 2013, p.43). This approach negates local politics by making sweeping arguments to predict global affairs.

In Saul Cohen's geopolitical map, the area surrounding the Caspian Sea falls under 'Central Asia', while a 'geopolitical regional boundary' line separates Iran from Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan as the Persian state comes under the 'Middle East Shatterbelt' while the latter two are collectively in 'Central Asia' (Cohen, 2010, p.164). The shatterbelt concept describes the point of the map – Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan – where US hegemony is unattainable, subsequently highlighting that the world is not unipolar. Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan are portrayed as a 'gateway region', while Russia is the leader of the 'Eurasian Continental Realm'. Cohen is reproducing this construction of the political climate around the Caspian Sea as an essentially contested space bordering a world region that the US cannot control, emphasising the geopolitical and strategic importance of the Caspian Region from the American perspective. While the Huntington and Cohen maps differ as to where their fault lines lie, from both the cultural and geopolitical perspectives the authors agree that the Caspian Sea is a place where in the contemporary political imagination division, contestation and conflict feature prominently.

2.2: Maps

Key

Black- Western
Grey- Orthodox
Striped- Islamic



Map A. Samuel Huntington's Civilisational World Map[10].

The Caspian Sea is located at the centre of this map. Note Kazakhstan belonging to Orthodox culture with Russia rather than the Islamic civilisation alongside the three remaining Muslim-majority Caspian states.

[10] Huntington, S. (1996)

In the Critical Geopolitics perspective, this map highlights what O'Tuathail & Agnew (1992, p.192) called the representation of 'a 'world' characterised by particular types of places, peoples and dramas'.

Map B. Saul Cohen 2010[11]

The failure to build regional consensus is typified in the signing of the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea in August 2018, the culmination of a process lasting over 20 years. The states were divided over whether to define the Caspian as a border lake, an enclosed sea in accordance with UN convention, or a border sea in which all states are sovereign (Bayramov, 2021, pp.506-507). The status of the Caspian Sea was deliberated during the 52nd ad hoc working group (Bayramov, 2021, p.508). Each state is granted 25 nautical miles for fishing and for mineral and energy exploration, while only the navies of the L5 states can be present on the Sea in the 'special legal status' settled in 2018 (Whitney, 2018). The agreement was made possible by the two regional superpowers, as Moscow and Tehran 'felt compelled to drop some of their red lines in recognition of changing regional geopolitics' though it left important issues like the delineation of the seabed to be agreed upon (IISS, 2018). In such a resource wealthy area these disputes are not unimportant.

[11] Cohen, S. (2010)

Khrapov believes that the main threats facing the Caspian macrocregion 'can be divided into three generalized blocks: political, economic and cultural'[12] (2022, p.26). While the northern states of Russia, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan have been able to reach maritime geographic consensus, the southern section continues to be a site of conflict as Turkmenistan, Iran and Azerbaijan are embroiled in a decades long dispute driven by realist self-interest arising from 'the convergence of economic interests, geopolitics, and cultural distance' (Orazgaliyev & Araral, 2019, p.962). Analysing the Caspian area from a realist perspective, instability in politics, communications, economy, social issues and military affairs of the (relatively) new states in global politics has created a fragile region in which cooperation is not an achievable outcome, from an environmentalism perspective it is believed that local cooperation will be sacrificed to energy politics of larger powers (Shamsdoulatabadi, 2009).

Such conflicts cast doubt on the construction of the 'Caspian Region' as a unifying region due to the geopolitical bent of interactions. However, Skripnikova & Taghon (2022) contend that 'by creating regional environmental institutions, the Caspian is being constructed as macro-region rather than an arbitrary collection of states'. Moving from the geopolitical perspective to functionalist, this perspective on regional affairs accounts for a broader range of actors (Mitrany, 1996). Bayramov (2001) argues that interaction in detached spheres of cooperation can lead to interaction in more challenging areas by creating positive mutual outcomes.

Cultural and educational L5 institutions exist, namely educational and cultural like the Association of Universities of the Caspian States. This project, established in 1996, includes fifty educational

[12] 'можно условно разделить на три обобщенных блока: политические, экономические, культурныеугрозы'

institutions from the five littoral Caspian states, 'aimed at solving problems in the field of Education, Culture and ecology of the Caspian region, implementing joint international projects, exchanging students and teachers, retraining and advanced training of specialists' (Atyrau University, 2020). However, there is no functioning L5 political, economic or security institution at present. In March of this year (2024) a 'Dialogue of Ambassadors of Central Asia and the Caspian Region' was held in Germany consisting of Central Asian ambassadors plus the representative of Azerbaijan (RTMFA, 2024). This is a broader forum than purely a Caspian organisation and is comprised of post-Soviet Turkic states plus ethnically Persian Tajikistan without Russia and Iran. There is the Organisation of Turkic States (OTS), which includes the three mid-power littoral states of Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan but excludes the two regional superpowers. This project is orchestrated from Ankara to increase Turkish influence in the greater Eurasian space while unsettling Russia's hegemony.

Russian foreign policy considers the states of Central Asia and the Caucasus that surround the Caspian as the 'near abroad'. Some analysts contend that Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 marked 'the end of the near abroad' (de Waal, 2024). This is part of the larger change in political and societal priorities presently unfolding in Kazakhstan. To understand the milieux informing Kazakhstan's present strategies and foreign policies, one must first contextualise the country's path to sovereignty.

2.3: Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan is a relatively young state in the system of international politics, becoming independent at the end of 1991 and taking its seat at the UN in March 1992 (Arystanbekova, 2017). The lineage of Kazakh statehood does, however, far preceds the collapse of the Soviet Union. In 2015 the country celebrated 550 years of statehood, in reference to the Khanate of Cassackia, a largely nomadic kingdom situated between Tashkent and Siberia (TAT, 2015). This nomadic rule was underpinned by the 'zhuz' system, which separated nomadic groups into three main clans Senior, Middle and Junior. Between 1731 and 1742 all three zhuz 'formally of their own free will but in fact in an unequal position in negotiating the accession, were forced to join the protectorate of the Russian Empire, which certainly had an impact on the nature of future relations between the nomads and the state authorities of Russia' (Shalekenov, 2013, p.282). In the early 19th Century Russian elites sought to civilise the nomadic Kazakhs following claims 'of unmitigated barbarism and violence, lawlessness and restlessness, ignorance, superstition and fanaticism' (Palat, 1988, pp.161-162).

In 1924 the boundaries for what is now the Republic of Kazakhstan were established with the Soviet Union. A problem facing both Tsarist and Soviet elites in their quest for control over peripheral populations in Central Asia was 'the conflict between a desire for progress and Westernization and the need to maintain at all costs the supremacy and security of the state' (Dunn & Dunn, 1967, p.148). This colonialist conundrum puzzled Moscow apparatchiks as they worried that educating Kazakhs in their native language would fuel a rise of nationalism and threaten the socialist project.

Imperial conquest and Soviet control inverted the process of identity construction in Kazakhstan. This backdrop of the 'backward Kazakh' was contrasted with the 'novyi chelovek'[13] – 'new man' -- an ideal Soviet citizen whose identity and purpose was centred upon active participation in the Marxist-Leninist project. In this construction 'ethnic' identities were inherently negative while Russian chauvinism remained prevalent. The normative view has been of strong 'cultural proximity' and 'historic connection'[14] between Kazakhstan and Russia, reflected in Huntington's map. Russia enjoyed a superior 'big brother' status over peripheral nations to such an extent that aspiring families would have their children enter Russian language schools, marry into Russian families and work in senior, responsible positions after becoming 'trusted by the old regime' (Kolsto, p.55). In the 1990s Kazakh academics decried youth who would study in Russian schools and marry into Russian families who were 'then trusted by the old regime' (Shalekenov, 1996).

In 1995 only 46% of people in Kazakhstan identified as Kazakh with the rest being comprised of Eastern Slavs all thoroughly Russified and socialised in the Soviet system, leading to what Kolsto defined as a bi- rather than multi- cultural society (1998, p.52). In 1996 it was deemed that Kazakhstan 'does not exhibit any positive ideas, significant aims, or common dreams capable of uniting and rousing all Kazakhstanians', except one: 'the Kazakhskaya idea' (Nysanbaev & Abdirov, 1996). Thus, the idea of one unified Kazakh people that cut across ethnic and zhuz divides was promoted to build the reborn nation around the central figure of former Kazakh President and Father of the Nation Nursultan Nazarbayev.

[13] 'новый человек'.
[14] I apostrophise these phrases due to the need to redress the politically constructed and Russian-centric view Kazakhstan and Russia are fraternal nations.

The post-Soviet millennial birth group of Kazakhstan has come to be known as the 'Nazarbayev Generation'. Long term, understanding this generation will be crucial to producing knowledge on Kazakhstan's future position as 51% of the Kazakh population is under 29 (Laruelle, 2021, pp.194-196). In 2024 the Kazakh-Slavic demographic relationship has been redressed. Kazakhs outweigh Slavs demographically while the long-standing Russian-imposed hierarchy is being challenged as young people lead the resurgence of the Kazakh nation. Having reaped the benefits of cultural superiority for so many decades, in post-independence Kazakhstan many ethnic Russians complain about being second-class citizens (Narrotum, 2006, p.67).

Following the end of the Cold War, the idea of Kazakhstan being a Turkic nation was promoted by the Nazarbayev under the Organisation of Turkic States. Many ethnic Russians fear integration between Kazakhstan and Turkey- Russia's regional geopolitical competitor. Nazarbayev's campaign to replace the Cyrillic alphabet with Latin was part of a larger campaign to assert Kazakh statehood supported in writing the national language in a script more befitting of a Turkish language. These changes are negatively reported upon through the lens of heightened Kazakh nationalism in Russian language media to stoke unrest among Kazakhstan's large ethnic-Russian population (Kumenov, 2024). Yet both Kazakh and Russian are recognised as state languages, ensuring that all residents are protected from linguistic discrimination.

Russian academics in Astrakhan, an oblast on the Caspian shoreline, believe that in the period of independence post-Soviet states, particularly Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, have built their national identity through constructing a 'kultura otmeni'[15] (cancel culture) in opposition to all things Soviet and Russian (Khlyshcheva. & Tiknonova, 2023, pp.107-108). This Russian-centric

[15] 'культура отмены'

hypothesis shows the continued Russian-imperial thinking in Kazakh society. Changing villages, cities and streets from Russian and Soviet names to Kazakh does not need to be understood as anti-Russian and can rather be understood through a pro-Kazakh sovereignty lens. Nazarbayev weighed in on this debate criticising the renaming of areas in Kazakhstan, emboldening Russian nationalists after such pro-Russian sentiment from the father of the modern Kazakh nation, although analysts stress this response was made under pressure from Moscow (Kolsto, p.58).

Astana increasingly seeks to adopt a pragmatic approach to international relations without favouring one partner, evident in the country's long-standing multivector foreign policy aiming to balance relations with Russia, China, the US and Turkey in a manner that permits co-operation without alignment. Kazakhstan sees itself as a state with the agency and political power to shape international relations. In conducting the Astana Talks, a mechanism proposed by Nazarbayev to foster discussion and achieve peace in Syria between Turkey, Russia and Iran, the Kazakh Government positioned itself as a regional powerbroker. Between 2017 and 2023 the Kazakh Government sought to reduce 'interstate friction' among three powers in the greater Caspian region (Mohamad, 2023).

Conflict in Ukraine has similarly provided new challenges and opportunities for Caspian states. Russia's increasing political isolation in the West has provided the opportunity for Kazakhstan to grow into its statehood as Russia becomes a less credible partner. This is reflected in economic capability with Kazakhstan possessing the largest GDP per capita of the L5 states, overtaking Russia this year (IMF, 2024). Post- February 2022 increased attention to the political economy of the Caspian Sea area through discussion and development of the 'Middle Corridor' transiting goods from China to Europe bypassing Russia and long sea routes. Kazakhstan strongly supports

this initiative, working with international partners to develop a container hub in Aktau that will improve logistics and transportation at the heart of this developing middle corridor and 'eliminate bottlenecks that impede intraregional trade' (Tokayev, 2023). One witnesses an increase in material resources across this space in global diversification strategies.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The practice and rules of methods both describe and produce the world we occupy (Law, 2004, p.5). 'Methodology' encapsulates three facets- the orientation of the researcher, issues relating to conceptualisation, and 'techniques of collecting, organizing and presenting data' (Leiserson, 1953, p.559). Where positivist scholars conceptualise the world as being 'already there', post-positivists stress that 'reality' can only be understood 'through the constitutive lens of the research process' while challenging 'dominant understandings of science and knowledge production' (Rönnblom, 2012, pp.121-124). Post-positivists reject the objectivity of reality, maintaining that each person's environment is individual and contingent upon their personal experiences (Wildemuth, 1993, p.450). This research is situated in the post-positivist position. Investigating the Western-constructed political norm of a 'Caspian Region', it would not make theoretical nor practical sense to employ positivist epistemology.

This qualitative study takes a form that is mostly narrative, 'in a style that is organized more or less around the research process itself, identifying purpose, theoretical frameworks, methods, and results' (Bradley, 1993, p.447). Interpretative research methods are useful for asking 'what is happening here?' (Erickson, 1986, p.121). An important component of interpretative research is to '"see the whole" while acknowledging individual perspectives' (McDaniel, 2006, p.93). Inductive reasoning will 'proceed on the basis of many observations gathered from experience to derive a general principle' (Thomas, 2013, p. 122). This general principle can then be further tested in future studies to gain a more comprehensive understanding of region building in this space. An inductive approach to coding and data analysis compliments neoregionalist studies, stemming from region and data.

3.1 Justifications for Single Case Study

Supporting this study into the 'Caspian Region' is the case study, an apt method in the exploration of 'new areas and issues where little theory is available or measurement is unclear' (Stake, 2010). The case study 'is best defined as an in-depth study of a single unit (a relatively bounded phenomenon)' (Gerring, 2004, p. 341). Yin (1984) posits three categories of case study—exploratory, descriptive, and explanatory. This thesis conforms to the first: 'One can prefer to adopt case study as a research method while finding the answer for the questions such as "how" and "why"' (Yin, 1994). In-depth explanations are garnered from single case studies, and, if rigorously replicated, can present research outcomes comparable to those of quantitative studies (Zainal, 2003) (Channaveer & Baikady, 2022, p.318). One must ask whether there is continuity or discontinuity (breakthrough) between the cases, where boundaries exist of the chosen case, how broad or narrow the field should be, what should be studied and how one should conduct this process (Dumez, 2015, p.47).

This approach is not the only option available to answer research questions in a space comprised of five sovereign states. A comparative study would permit one to compare the similarities and differences in societal thinking across two or more L5 states. This would have enabled the author to gain a broader understanding of regional trends. However, it is the potential of the single case study to generate deep findings that makes it particularly valuable for the research at hand. The reasons are also political.

Of the L5 states, Turkmenistan's long-standing policy of isolationism negates its role in regional cooperation. Lessons learned from the Turkmenistan case would likely be only relevant for that country; Iran is also isolationist with its external focus on SWANA and the only L5 state yet to ratify the Caspian Convention of 2018; while Russian priorities do not revolve around the Caspian, rather Moscow is focused on being a global power than regional. A former US ambassador to Kazakhstan argues that American policy for the 'Strategic Caspian Region' should be more visible and directed towards Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan (Hoagland, 2021b).

Strong insight could be generated from Azerbaijan. Baku is the largest city and port on the Caspian Sea while the country's infrastructure projects place it on the crossroads of modern Eurasian geopolitics by connecting the middle and north-south corridors between Europe and Asia. However, many in Azerbaijan consider the Caspian Sea to be the dividing line between Europe and Asia. Also, Nagorno-Karabakh has overshadowed cooperation with the state for some Western actors. Regarding Kazakhstan, Astana is responsible the largest share of the sea's coastline and basin's hydrocarbons, having been viewed as a credible partner for international cooperation with Central Asia since the first international corporations engaged with the region in the 1990s. Kazakhstan's is the most 'free' of the L5, though political and personal autonomy is limited (Freedom House, 2024). Issues can be broached more openly than in the remaining littoral states. Trying to achieve non-partisan results from Iran, Russia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan could misinform the research at this early stage.

3.2: Data Collection

The 'relatively bounded phenomena', the Caspian Region, will be analysed from the perspective of Kazakh academics and foreign policy experts. 16 semi-structured interviews have been conducted in locations across Kazakhstan and online via Zoom. A semi-structured interview permits for probing and gives the respondent considerable freedom to expand on a given question (Huitt and Peabody, 1969, pp. 28-29). Due to the teaching and working schedules of two participants, written rather than oral responses were delivered being more constricted but providing strong insight[16]. Each participant has been asked ten questions, with the interview process taking between thirty to forty minutes. Political science literature advises that asking eight to ten questions in thirty to sixty minutes is the optimal approach for interview specialists (Peabody et al, 1990, pp.452-453).

Semi-structured interviews provide a middle ground between free-flowing conversations that permit little hypothesis testing, and structured interviews with closed questions exist at the opposite end of the spectrum, facilitating a researcher to use their knowledge in shaping the interview while permitting the respondent to inform the research (Leech, 2002b, pp.665-668). David Riesman, a formative author on the methodology of the interview, argued that one must 'understand the interplay between interview practice in social research and the wider cultural, social, and, in some cases, organizational contexts within which the interview is embedded' (Lee, 2008, pp.285-229). Questions are replicated for each participant, with all but one being open-ended. The final question being deductive, respondents were asked to rank from one to five which identity they found to be most relevant for modern Kazakhstan. Although numbering analysis and research

[16] Interview numbers 10 & 15.

results is generally presumed to be a quantitative method of research, scales are used rather frequently in qualitative works through nominal and ordinal analysis (Buckley, 2004, p.387).

In standardised interviewing the discussion is guided by the interviewer who seeks answers only within the confines of the proposed boundaries, while in elite interviewing an investigator will seek to be taught by the expert what the exact situation is, according to their world view and professional experience (Dexter, 1970, pp.6-7). MPs, decision makers and people in leadership roles, are commonly considered to be participants of 'elite interviews', however, the concept also includes those who are experts in their given field and is not confined to one's socioeconomic position (Leech, 2002a, p.663). Targeting busy people with packed schedules in the academic, business or policy spheres leads to nonresponses. In small-n surveys one is not dependent on every potential interviewee saying 'yes', though one must remain cognisant of non-response bias (Goldstein, 2002, p.272). Open-ended questions with more flexibility for discussion are useful when less is known on the subject of interest, and people with a high degree of education 'do not like being put in the straightjacket of close-ended questions. They prefer to articulate their views, explaining why they think what they think' (Aberbach & Rockman, 2002, p.674).

Collecting data through elite interviewing is a targeted process. Political scientists/analysts and sociologists have been primarily targeted. This permits balance between the societal lens and the policy priorities of the Kazakh government as understood from the perspective of the academic community. Each participant involved with this study either is from, or works in a professional capacity within, Kazakhstan. The youngest participant is thirty years old, and the oldest is sixty-five.

One must be able to find participants to make the research proposal achievable. This author studied in Almaty in 2019, and maintained communication with several academics in Kazakhstan. Margot Ely stressed that trustworthiness is a crucial component for qualitative researchers so that procedures are fairly executed, closely represent the experiences of participants and continuously check one's biases (1991, p.93). Trustworthiness and rapport facilitated the snowball sampling method for this project. Due to the researcher's location half of the respondents are from Almaty, the rest made up by citizens across Kazakhstan. Running in tandem with the process of snowball sampling, the author selected participants through the social media platform Linkedin. In seeking Kazakh academics and foreign policy experts, and through employing reflexivity, the author is mitigating the projection of bias in the findings and analysis. Through the participation of a small number of Kazakhs this thesis does not aim to achieve a representative sample of the larger population, however, a gender balance was attained[17].

3.3: Data Analysis

The period of saturation is when the same words and phrases become repeated, generally expected after 6-12 interviews, after moving to the analysis stage (Jugessur, 2022, p.33). This point was reached upon completion of 16 interviews, whereupon in vivo coding was used since it has applicability in the sphere of 'cultural-special episodes' including research into cultural identities

[17] A Table of Participants including the profession, gender and location of interviewees along with the length of each interview can be found in Appendix A.

(Manning, 2017). Following the completion of interviews and during coding one must take analytical memos to assist in the drawing up of themes and concepts in preparation of the final argument (Lukenchuk, 2017, p.112). Coding is essential to retrieve the most salient issues from a transcript that permits an author to assemble various pieces of the data together, creating 'readily analysable units' (Miles et al., 2014, p. 73). These 'readily analysable units' will become the main concepts and themes guiding the analysis, 'this approach is exploratory and data-driven; it allows the researcher to remain open to new ideas and themes that may emerge from the data' (Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006).

The process of in vivo coding follows seven stages to turn the raw data into major themes and concepts: '1. The collected qualitative raw data 2. Meaningful Quotes paragraphs Extraction 3. First order codes development 4. Refinement into Second order Codes, Subcode 5. First output, Major categories 6. Refinement into Themes /concepts 7. Theory formulation, Most impacting Theme' (Jugessur, 2022, p.34). This is inductive coding, a ground-up approach that uses its codes from the data before 'drawing conclusions or interpretations from the data…' (Schwandt, 2015, p.57). This is not to be mistaken for Nvivo coding software, a data handling platform that assists researchers visualise and map data. The author considered using this software in the research design decision-making process, but opted to analyse and categorise the data independently to remain connected with the data. A Thematic Content Analysis (TCA) approach allows the author to construct key themes that assist in answering the research questions, and is appropriate for research in the constructivist perspective (Naeem, Ozuem, Howell & Ranfagni, 2023, p.5). Researchers use TCA to construct a conceptual model of their findings through a series of steps, including keyword and quotation selection, coding, theming, interpretation, and model development (Naeem et al, 2023, p.2). Again, methodological choices are not neutral since 'the philosophical underpinnings of thematic analysis are crucial and that different philosophical and theoretical approaches to

knowledge construction can lead to different procedures for conducting thematic analysis' (Braun and Clarke, 2019, p.81). This method enhances the consistency and replicability of the findings, enabling clear connections between the data, interpretation, and final conclusions while mitigating bias.

3.4: Ethical Considerations

Researchers must avoid letting their own preconceptions interfere with the identification of key themes (Morse & Mitcham, 2002; Patton, 2015). A core component of post-positivist research is to be aware of the situatedness, bias, limitations and 'blind spots' of one's positionality and work. The researcher is not detached from the research and will inflict personal biases onto the project, in part through conducting the interviews in English. Although respondents have ensured that they are comfortable discussing the topic primarily in a second language. Some key phrases and concepts are discussed in Russian where the participants are unable to translate a phrase or concept in English.

Although coming from Western educational system, this thesis strives to move past Western thinking that imposes the knowledge of one place directly on another. It rejects the assumption that what holds true in one part of the world is necessarily applicable in another. Academic researchers must unbiasedly represent knowledge while acting as a transitory device for knowledge without being in any way patronising (Aleaz, 2012, p.76). This author seeks to confront the problem of academic extractivism[18] by offering all participants the right to be named or pseudonymised

[18] Dr. Leyla Sayfutdinova, Senior Lecturer in Critical Area Studies at the University of Glasgow and ethics supervisor for this project encouraged the author to consider this concept.

without any effect on their data in the analysis process. Self-conscious scholars have long since argued that researchers should not prescribe value to cases; but that this ultimately creates an apologia for ruling class and power structures and that 'it is ridiculous to be completely neutral' (Verma, 1955, p.120).

Presently, the concept of 'post-Soviet' is contested as part of decolonisation within 'Russian studies' discourse. Although thirty years have passed, and Soviet and Russian structures remain durable across this area, this thesis examines the validity of this concept in examining the 'Caspian Region'. At times the terms participants and interviewees are used interchangeably, along with 'Kazakhs…' when consensus is shared. This is a turn of phrase, rather than the reduction of 19 million voices to 16 participants.

3.5: Limitations

The three main limitations to be discussed are therefore found in the data collection, scope of inquiry and choice of methods. First, the Kazakh perspective is limited by its focus. It is the identities, preferences and political strategies of the 50% of Kazakhs under 30 that will define the long-term foreign policy and regional priorities of Kazakhstan. However, the author decided not to focus on this 'Nazarbayev Generation' due to the desire to capture present expert knowledge rather than future assessments. This single case study is supported by data from a small-n (16 participants) sample and is not representative of Kazakh society. Experts were interviewed, irrespective of age, class or location.

The second limitation is found in the interplay between theory and method. Selecting strands from Critical Geopolitics to build the theoretical framework is often accompanied by the method of Critical Discourse Analysis. Subsequently, from a more critical perspective this thesis is limited by its lack of serious engagement with the construction of power through language. However, Thematic Content Analysis is more appropriate for the case at hand because it is the patterns of societal thinking that are of interest here.

Before turning to the findings, potential drawbacks to the interview method must be considered, in particular questions over reliability and trustworthiness of sources. Respondents possess bias, but through the collation of 16 interviews one can draw comparisons and analyse the wider Kazakh perspective. Holloway and Jefferson (2000, p.3). succinctly raise a critical point: 'Who are we to note now any better than the participants when it is after all, their lives? If we are prepared to disagree, modify, select and interpret what they tell us, is this not an example of the kind of power that we as researchers have that should be kept in check by being faithful to the voices of those we are researching?' As this question is related to regional identity from the perspective of a national group, it can only be answered by people who both live in and are from Kazakhstan.

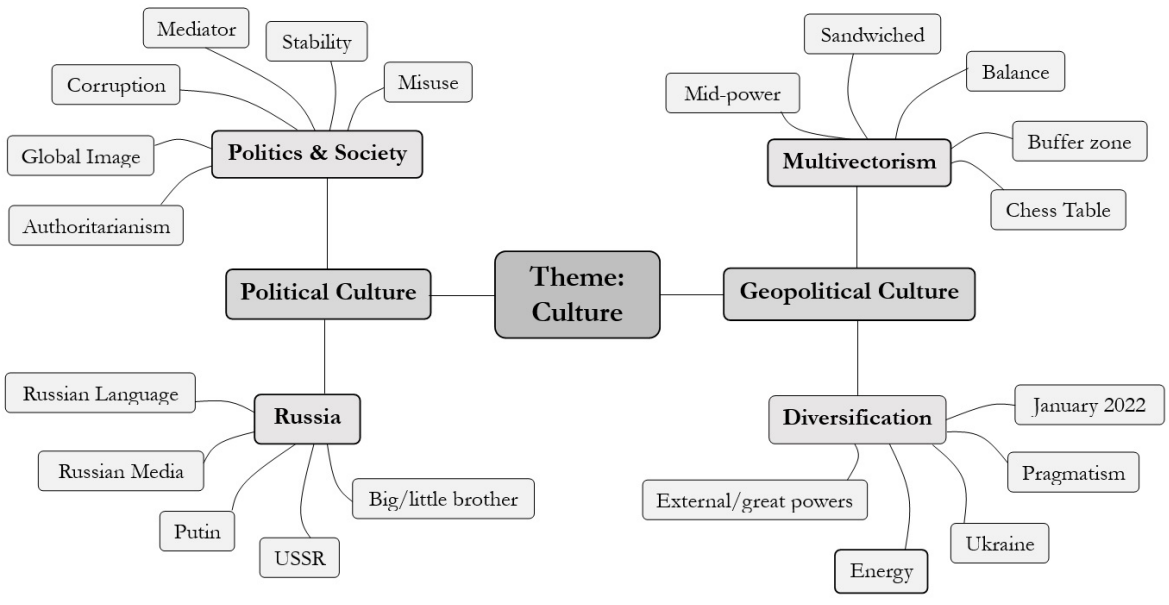
CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

In seeking to uncover how the geopolitically constructed 'Caspian Region' exists in the minds of Kazakh academics and foreign policy experts, the central research question guiding this topic has been 'How does the external construction of a region relate to the internal conception?' Sub-questions to develop this inquiry include: Is there a sense of common community existing in this space? What are the main currents that unite and divide these states and populations? Where is this space located in Kazakhstan's political and cultural imagination? What substantiates the Caspian Region as a unified or unifying geopolitical space? Where does the regional identity fit in amongst national, religious, pan national and the host of other identities individuals may possess?

From the interviews 160 first order codes have been extracted. This equated to ten codes per interview but was not analysed as such. The earlier interviews provided dozens of inputs, whereas interviews 13-16 averaged two per interview because many keywords, codes, phrases and themes had already been discussed. While these final few interviews continued to offer value for the study, the author considered that the point of saturation had been attained as most information being shared was becoming repetitive. Through the analysis process, using in vivo coding and Thematic Content Analysis, 160 first-order codes were refined to create 25 second order codes, before drawing the guiding themes from the analysed data. An example coding chart has been included below where one can visualize the progression from verbatim inputs, to second order codes, before creating the subthemes and themes.

Upon completion of 16 interviews the idea that identities and interests in Kazakhstan are going through a period of societal transformation is confirmed. However, the central finding is that there is no unified, or unifying, idea of a Caspian community existing amongst academics and foreign policy experts in Kazakhstan, while the 'Caspian Region' concept is not of great importance for Kazakhstan's external strategy. Discussion of the Caspian Region's primacy in western IR is not matched in Kazakhstan. These findings will be analysed through the theme of culture, supported by political and geopolitical subthemes, along with second core theme of identity. Collectively, these subthemes explain why the 'Caspian Region' as a political construct receives little attention in contemporary Kazakh discourse. Central concepts supporting and visible across the subthemes are power, distance, interests, transformation and spatiality. The 'post-Soviet' concept was pronounced throughout the interviews, and will be discussed in Chapter 5. These codes underpin why the Kazakh perspective of this area contrasts the Western framing to such a large extent. Their relation to a core theme is first analysed through Kazakhstan's political culture.

Figure A: Example Code Chart



4.1(Geo) Political Culture

The data stresses that examining processes of community building must interrogate the local political conditions within which integration dynamics have the capacity to occur. Kazakhstan has a top-heavy undemocratic model because former President Nazarbayev chose to grow the economy while freezing the political system, meanwhile, current President "Tokayev is step by step improving democracy, not across Central Asia but in Kazakhstan a little"[19]. The contemporary political structure is to a large degree a relic of the Soviet era, "considering that those Central Asian leaders are still from the system, former members of the party. Even with change of president in Kazakhstan if we look very closely see old system people… this adherence to old Soviet system way of doing politics is still there"[20]. Kazakhstan's path to sovereignty, creation of national values and identity contrasts the lineage of most European nations whose negotiation of power and identity in relation to the state has been ongoing for centuries[21]. Moreover, corruption and misuse abound, making people lack commitment to government projects and campaigns.

While maintaining many trappings of the authoritarian Soviet system, the key modification of political culture in Kazakhstan is the emphasis on sovereignty. Participants emphasise the need to demonstrate their independence in an authoritarian neighbourhood: "We don't need to be pro or anti- Russia, same with China. We need to be pro Kazakh. Our need is to continue stability and

[19] Interview number 1 - 'Kazakhstan has a low political culture because Soviet Union created here a republic system, we did not create the system from ourselves, it was a top heavy creation'
[20] Interview number 16.
[21] Interview number 1.

not be involved in any conflicts"[22]. Core strands of political and societal thinking in contemporary Kazakhstan are succinctly captured by Dr Axamal Issaliyeva:

"Thanks to efforts of diplomats we [are] accurately manoeuvring and achieving highest results, not engaging in conflict, not choosing one partner, find common direction, 30 years later finally beginning of independence see some progress, took so long, so many problems, became more complicated water, resources etc. Necessity to find common solutions, need to integrate, Central Asian integration. In some spiritual sense"[23].

The process of transformation presently at hand in Kazakhstan is reflected in the political culture: "Ukrainian war has affected more the move in civil society away from Russia more than January[24], seeing what going on now, trying to learn Kazakh identity"[25]. A regional political science expert informed that: "Increased demand for Kazakh language and culture can be traced back to this event. Here almost universal consensus on what is happening, very sad with discourse on human rights. It is happening in the eyes of everyone. This image is created here that Kazakhstan is in the west"[26].

Division in political culture is pronounced in the generational divide. A participant stressed the Kazakh youth overwhelmingly "want to be a unique country, not an additional little brother"[27]. Before adding that "Young people don't know the term little brother", in the context of Kazakh-

[22] Interview number 14.
[23] Interview number 2.
[24] This is in reference to the January 2022 energy-related protests and subsequent CSTO intervention.
[25] Interview number 3.
[26] Interview number 11.
[27] Interview number 4.

Russian relations, emphasising the societal transformation across cross thirty years. The youth are more "self-confident" in the eyes of older generations, who, although it is engaged in conflict, continue to "have a strong connection to Russia due to the long history of Russian and Soviet domination in the country"[28].

Enforced communist ideology has been displaced by the pragmatism now at the core of Kazakh regional and foreign policy[29]. Kazakhstan does not want to commit to one pole of power, particularly since the formerly strong economics and soft power of Russia has dissipated as Kazakhstan embraces a global outlook[30]. Globalisation impacts society in two opposing ways: "on one side we have people feeling the effects, becoming more cosmopolitan. On the other side identity, is becoming stronger with Kazakh identity, but outward looking"[31].

The geopolitical or strategic environment is a strong determinant of a state's political culture. The discourse produced in the interviews relating to the geopolitical lens of relations in the 'Caspian Region' was voluminous, mirroring the discourse produced on the external side. Impartiality in this space is challenging: "I realize, however, that it is difficult for Kazakhstan to remain neutral with countries such as Russia and Iran, in view of Russia's war in Ukraine and Iran's attacks against Israel as well as other complex issues related to the political regimes of those countries"[32]. This embodies Kazakhstan's role in international relations, dealing cooperatively with external potential adversary regional powers, visions of grand strategy on the global 'chess table'[33].

[28] Interview number 10.
[29] Interview number 7.
[30] Interview number 1.
[31] Interview number 4.
[32] Interview number 10.
[33] Interview number 1.

Issues of energy security and diversification are particularly important for a state with an economic model based on the stable flow of resources to international markets: "Kashagan in the northern Caspian Sea, is Kazakhstan's largest known oil field. In that sense, the Caspian connection determines the entire future of Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan did play, is playing and will continue to play a huge economic and political role in the region"[34]. Caspian energy diversification threatens Moscow: "of course Russia is not willing to lose this grip of controlling the export routes"[35]. Russia's overreach in and around the Caspian Sea is longstanding, as evidenced in its previous successful attempt to block the development of a trans-Caspian pipeline between Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, and in its more recent attempts to forestall the advancement of the middle corridor in its freight and digital forms[36].

The incentive for Kazakhstan to diversify from Russia through the Caspian Region model is not feasible in present political conditions. Only one participant explicitly discussed the space concerned as a 'functional region'[37]. In the previously cited academic literature one pair of authors attempt to move the frame of discussion from the geopolitical to the functional. The participant of this interview made clear such a view exists, but it is marginal in comparison to the Western geopolitical lens. January 2022 and February 2022[38] confirmed the need for multivectorism, Kazakhstan's "destiny"[39], because the "War had so many points that influenced our national identity, policy, international image…"[40].

[34] Interview number 10.
[35] Interview number 16.
[36] Interview number 12.
[37] Interview number 12.
[38] Interview number 7.
[39] Interview number 1.
[40] Interview number 6.

Kazakhstan's place within this space is key: "US with Kazakhstan created the form of regional relations, Kazakhstan is the key for the region, countries can't do anything without Kazakhstan"[41]. Breaking away from Russia and accessing the Caspian Region for external powers will remain challenging: "I think that the historical connection of Kazakhstan with Russia (as well as with Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan), the large number of ethnic Russians in our country and our strategic geographical position and economic interactions will always keep Kazakhstan in the area of Russia's influence"[42].

In this space "Russia's role is very important here, it's the strongest voice Russia has in terms of Caspian Sea issues". Seeking to create deep political institutions and foster a regional sense of community with Russia defies mutivectorism and diversification from the overbearing neighbouring state. The geopolitical lens of local discourse is evidenced by the fact foreign strategy experts maintain that one "Can speak to Russia only with power" [43]. The lack of environmental cooperation stems from the realist interests of concerned actors, primarily in the energy sector. This impacts the societal relationship with the space: "I feel sad because of ecological problems of Caspian, Syr Darya, big water resource problems, challenging question for us maybe for whole world but harder for us because we depend on this water, agriculture depends on water, it is a basic need. Economically we depend a lot on the water"[44]. A sociologist outlines the main currents well:

"Caspian Sea has two meanings- first we know it's located in the west, zapad, of the country, this region- Aktau, Mangystau, Atyrau are the breadwinners of Kazakhstan, resources are valuable under land and sea, we have funding money to implement different policies, infrastructure etc. So

[41] Interview number 1.
[42] Interview number 10.
[43] Interview number 1.
[44] Interview number 9.

the first meaning valuable source of goods for our satisfactory well-being. The second meaning, our government tried to turn this region in to a touristic place, I haven't been in the west, but I want to go as a tourist to see the Caspian Sea"[45]. Most participants discussed the fact they had not seen the Caspian Sea.

The central lens through which participants view their relationship with the Caspian Sea is economic: "So this image of resources, energy, oil and gas economics is much more than the beauty- the birds, the sea, the water and everything gets understood as very much part of the economic space"[46]. The capacity to build a community of states in this area is negated because of problems related to the Caspian Region, visible in the economic, political and social levels. First: "oil and gas reserves. Second, the bordering countries constantly argue about the ownership of the resources and the fair division of fossil fuel potential. Third, the Caspian Sea faces serious environmental problems such as its rising sea level, degradation due to extensive oil exploration, pollution, and many other issues"[47]. Collectively, "the Caspian has a bit of a negative connotation due to the cruel exploitation of its oil resources and all the damaging effect this has had on the environment"[48]. When participant 15 turned the discussion towards the Aral Sea, they did so evoking an image of the one of the worst human-made ecological disasters to date.

"As a unique sea as all resources, role of oil and gas, resource basin for tourism but of secondary importance"[49].. The Caspian Sea is a "treasure, we are proud we have such a strong resource"[50]. This hydro resource is particularly valuable since "we are landlocked state, no exit via the sea,

[45] Interview number 9.
[46] Interview number 7.
[47] Interview number 10.
[48] Interview number 10.
[49] Interview number 3.
[50] Interview number 4.

have only one big water, not an ocean an internal water, that's why its especially important, proud"[51].

The economic connection poses a negative connotation relating to national trauma. One IR expert believed that "the importance of the Caspian Sea for the country's economy cannot be overestimated. This has always been the case; during the famine in Kazakhstan from 1929 to 1933, the rich fish resources of the Caspian served as salvation for the inhabitants of the western regions".[52] Two other participants discussed trauma and the 1930s famines, but only the participant from the geographic Caspian region has a deep connection with the space.

Sociologically, "from cultural perspectives, one of biggest countries world, take into account the distance between regions, we are a common nation but not in the cultural perspective"[53]. Distance is a central theme underlining discussions: "In society generally [the relationship] is more geographic, because it doesn't have any deep meaning in Kazaks society as can appreciate the state is huge for those in eastern Kazakhstan, some may not even know the Caspian Sea exists in the first place"[54]. This view is brought to life by Participant 4: "If you ask about emotions, people who live by the sea have different emotions, will tell about their lives, sing, tell poems, for me growing up in Almaty, far from the Caspian, first meeting with Caspian when I was 30 for work, surprised that we have such a big water…"[55]. While participants agreed that Caspian affairs should be conducted on a mutual basis[56], this has not facilitated the creation of a common community.

[51] Interview number 4.
[52] Interview number 15.
[53] Interview number 2.
[54] Interview number 13.
[55] Interview number 4.
[56] Interview number 2.

From this two issues connect that impede Kazakhstan's willingness to become an active participant in the construction of a 'Caspian Region' of any meaningful structure and power. First, such a region includes one power in the L5 (Russia), one that could be considered part of the 'Greater Caspian Region' (Turkey), and one that has no credible claim to be considered a participant in such a region (China). Committing to further integration with Russian and possibly Turkey in this sphere would unsettle Kazakhstan's long-standing commitment to balancing regional powers, its multivector foreign policy. This policy seeks to promote peaceful interaction since increasing regional tensions mean that "more conflict, less space for multivectorism"[57]. Foreign policy rooted in peace and balancing regional powers overrides the desire to form strong regional partnership with one power.

4.2 (Pan) National Identity

Following centuries of political and cultural repression by the various forms of an expansionist Russia, national identity in Kazakhstan is impacted negatively by the lack of democratic community, and by national traumas:

"This rise of national identity, there is a trans generation theory according to traumas in our collective memory, according to this when first generation in 30s had some trauma, next generation didn't speak about it but have some fears, 3rd and 4th generation can see the rise of national identity produced in symbolism and language, can see the rise of national identity based on symbols from

[57] Interview number 8.

ethnos, clothes can see more trad Kazakh things and the rise of language. Good time for Kazakhstan"[58].

Many Kazakh symbols tie the nation to the Turkic group. The concept of Pan-Turkism has come under increasing attention throughout Kazakhstan's process of national identification. One participant explained that there are "three identifications for Kazakhstan citizens: Muslim, Turkic and Tribe [Zhuz]"[59]. The first two have been discussed, while the third is a domestic system of familial practice that continues to influence Kazakh politics and society, as discussed in the background section. The reconnection of Kazakhstan with the Turkic world upon independence was instant, "immediately the first country which approved independence, 1992 Turkish President came to Kazakhstan, he brought 11 students the started to learn Kazakh culture, lots of changes after that Kazakhs went to Turkish schools"[60]. Through these cultural and political interactions, Turkey acts as Kazakhstan's "gate west"[61], and adopts a big brother approach in rhetoric and action[62].

A sociologist believes that Kazakhstan strengthen its national profile on the basis of Turkey's development, whose clan system gave way to a strong nationalist political culture[63]. This view underpins how Turkey's development across diverse spheres acts as a model for Kazakhstan and Turkic nations. Although:

[58] Interview number 6.
[59] Interview number 1.
[60] Interview number 1.
[61] Interview number 1.
[62] Interview number 3.
[63] Interview number 4.

"We know in the beginning of 1990s when 15 former Soviet Republics appeared as separate countries, Turkey was happy to welcome the Turkic states of Central Asia… Kazakhstan not really engaging with Turkey so much, staying quite focused on pragmatism. Turkey has played a pivotal role in Kazakhstan's foreign policy, I would say that the Russia role has been the strongest in terms of soft and hard power"[64].

No longer a Russified nation, Kazakhstan is marking its sovereignty with support of the Turkic world. The cultural links with Turkey have a pronounced political tone. As this cultural element has become geopolitical: "Turkey would be our balancer against Russia"[65]. Turkey is an important model for development, in political, cultural and economic spheres: "To be strong enough culturally, ideologically… one part of that relies on identity and sometimes Turkic identify, common things with Turkey maybe more than with Central Asian, maybe Turkey politically has stronger position in geopolitical context that is why we maybe associate ourselves more with Turkey than Central Asian countries"[66].

Although pan-Turkism is of importance, this direction should not define Kazakh politics: "Analysing OTS do not see much economic development in this sphere, mostly based on culture and history, should not be ideological, should be pragmatic…"[67]. Yet this pragmatism can create geopolitical consequences. While Turkey is "a guarantor for independence, before Erdogan said he would like to defend independence for Kazakhstan… Russia is more a threat to the Turkic world"[68]. Looking to another Turkic state for development, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan's coastal

[64] Interview number 16.
[65] Interview number 12.
[66] Interview number 9.
[67] Interview number 6.
[68] Interview number 3.

regions are not a great source of pride: "Several years ago in Azerbaijan, they are our neighbour, excited how country developed, how Caspian beach developed, so many exciting modern buildings, industry, this moment I thought it's a pity our part has not developed like Azerbaijan"[69]. The Azerbaijan- Kazakhstan bond is strengthening in recent years. In relation to the body of water that unites them, there is no nationwide consensus that the Caspian Sea holds any substantial value in Kazakhstan's contemporary consciousness.

Most Kazakhs possess a lack of cultural, historic and geographic proximity to the geographic Caspian Region: "In my subjective view I do not feel any attachment or relation with those countries close territorially, historical or culturally"[70]. In the Kazakh imagination it is "Usually [the] steppe, the Caspian [is] not on first place"[71]. The steppe being all across Kazakhstan makes it easier to locate in public consciousness than the distance Caspian Sea.

Pan-Turkism impacts the pragmatic approach to Kazakh politics: "Azerbaijan shares an ethnicity- also turned to Kazakhstan… after 2nd Karabakh War started to give some context with Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries. Tried to create platform on the Turkic level to build relations"[72]. This is supported by the perspective of one Astana-based Central Asia studies expert on the Kazakh position of conflict in the Caucasus between Azerbaijan and Armenia runs counter to expectations. While Kazakhstan is a member of the Collective Security and Treaty Organization (CSTO) alongside latter, the country has leant its support to the former[73]. The factors for this could be to encourage a positive trading relation, the fact both states belong to

[69] Interview number 4.
[70] Interview number 5
[71] Interview number 3.
[72] Interview number 8.
[73] Interview number 12.

the 'Turkic world' or in due to a regional bias[74]. Of particular interest in this view of Kazakh foreign policy is the perceived flexibility with which Astana approaches international affairs. Through this is evidenced the perceived aligning of Kazakhstan's political, (pan)national and strategic interests along with the fusion of politics and culture

Although Turkmenistan borders Kazakhstan's west on the Caspian Sea coast, there is a large degree of self-imposed political and cultural distance. The long-standing isolationist government in neighbouring Turkmenistan inhibits neighbourly contact. One academic tied this directly to the larger issue under examination by contending that the isolationism of Turkmenistan has "affected our regional identity"[75]. Iran and Turkmenistan were mentioned by most interviewees, but it was for their lack of involvement, cultural proximity, knowledge, exchange that they were mentioned. The 'post-Soviet' concept provides here useful analytical purchase to understand how some participants view contemporary politics in distinguishing Iran from the remaining L5 states. One Professor had "No attachment with Iran, maybe a little to Azerbaijan or Turkmenistan"[76]. The slight increase in attachment felt by this participant towards the latter two is not because they are Turkic nations, rather they were part of Soviet Union. This participant stressed the unimportance of this Turkic element in modern Kazakhstan and that it had no value, running contrary to the prevailing sentiment. While limited, this view indicates no society is a monolith. Any sense of common regional identity surrounding the Caspian is located in the pan-Turkic element. Although some participants have rejected the value of this factor, most see Kazakhstan as part of a greater pan-national project.

[74] Ibid.
[75] Interview number 4.
[76] Interview number 3.

One of the tenets of identity in contemporary Kazakhstan, Islam, is a core component of the revived Turkic world. However, it is not, independently, a unifying factor for the four Muslim-majority L5 states: "Against the backdrop of Islamic religion in all those countries, Iran stands out since most of its population are Shia Muslims. In contrast, in Kazakhstan, as well as in Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, people are mostly Sunni Muslims"[77]. While "Muslims are culturally close to Iran but we don't talk about Iran at all"[78]. This poses a challenge for regional community building because it "is another place I have no idea but some historical links and an ancient nation but other than that it says nothing"[79]. Iran is "a completely different story"[80]. This Persian world is, to some participants, "a different civilisation"[81].

This differing religious identity "has affected political relations"[82]. The distance of Iran from the remaining L5 states greatly impacts the potential for regional cohesion and the creation of common value: "The Caspian region could only be economic, Iran too different, Russia has world view, we have regional view. The three Turkic states all create relations, Iran and Russia something different. Iran only one, can create trading relations..."[83]. This specialist highlights that of the two regional powers, Iran is the best hope at uniting the states in a non-Russian dominated project.

The construction of common values and priorities around the Caspian today are still impacted by the Soviet legacy: "With Iran, the attachment is not as immediate as with some other areas since it

[77] Interview number 10.
[78] Interview number 9.
[79] Interview number 12.
[80] Interview number 13.
[81] Interview number 2.
[82] Interview number 1.
[83] Interview number 1.

is geographically further away and isn't part of the Soviet legacy. Kazakhs also do not feel as culturally connected to Iran"[84]. Seventy years on political domination fostered more durable links than Islam. The construction of common values and priorities around the Caspian today are still impacted by the Soviet legacy, seventy years on political domination fostered more durable links than Islam. While the 'post-Soviet' concept provides here useful analytical purchase to understand how the theme of distance impacts the development of a 'Caspian Region', political discourse in Kazakhstan makes clear of the need to develop new conceptual frameworks for study this space.

[84] Interview number 10.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

5.1: Conceptual Framework

From the findings, two interrelated conceptual terms examined to provide topical analysis on this space, the 'Caspian Region' and 'post-Soviet' concepts. Codes relating to the first include 'opportunity', 'potential', 'lack of will', 'optimism', 'Afghanistan', 'projection', 'failure', 'no substance', 'never materialised'. The second encompasses 'nostalgia', 'language', 'post-colonial', 'offence'.

Built around the Caspian Sea is the idea of the 'Caspian Region'. A central line of this thesis' investigation examines how external discussion produced on this space relates to the internal.
The extent of external discourse on the opportunities and challenges facing states surrounding the Caspian Sea, and the geopolitical importance of this space, is not matched in Kazakhstan: "During my lifetime, I don't recall that the importance of the Caspian region has undergone any significant changes"[85].

The earlier literature review discussed the politicisation and increasing popularity of the 'Caspian Region' concept, as the meaning of the term changed in popular discourse. This change in linguistic norms and heightened (geo)political chatter has not penetrated Kazakh academic society. This is

[85] Interview number 15.

further exemplified by one scholar stressing that he "hadn't come across such discourse", in relation to discussions within Kazakhstan and Central Asia about a '(Greater) Caspian Region'[86]. This unexpected response makes clear that the Caspian Region as constructed through external analysis is a Western concept with little practical value for political scientists in Kazakhstan.

The author sought to inquire how this Caspian region concept was understood from the local expert perspective. Only half of the participants were willing to accept "very narrow view"[87] as comprised of strictly the L5 states, maintaining that "only participants of the Caspian Sea system can be considered"[88]. One expert initiated discussion by contending that "Main point would be that when it comes to geographical terms, to a certain extent can talk and in economic terms with all this economic activity between countries, but when it comes to a political region I don't think this exists"[89]. Interest in the Caspian potential is burgeoning in response to February 2022: "I sense, status of the Caspian Sea is rising, especially because a few countries are interested in this transit area – China, Iran, euro countries etc, BRI"[90]. However, this interest does not facilitate a programme of regionalism.

The lack of a community, cultural, academic or security, feeds into the construction of a space that is contested, both internally and externally. This geopolitical thinking was salient in the interviews: "Yes, there is the Caspian Summit, and yes, there are a number of think tanks that unite these five countries into one region within their studies. However, I haven't yet observed a real sense of a

[86] Interview number 11.
[87] Interview number 6.
[88] Interview number 5.
[89] Interview number 12.
[90] Interview number 6.

Caspian community"[91]. This point is exemplified by the penultimate participant: "Despite the fact that Kazakhstan has multilateral and interconnected relations with the other four Caspian littoral countries. And despite the fact that these relations cover various spheres and are of significant importance for all five countries. I don't observe a Caspian community in this region"[92]. Providing an insight into future regional politics, close integration with L5 states is not desirable:

"I think that Caspian as a region for Kazakhstan, definitely we'll be working with these countries have no other choice, but Caspian region talk is a bit artificial. Central Asia has disagreements, but when it comes to Caspian a number of those disagreements increase. Caspian as a political-economic region is quite difficult, Iran, different to Turkmenistan etc, in current form Russia is very different"[93].

The direction of regional political discourse within Kazakhstan is not moving towards the Caspian: "Usually we talk at all conferences about Central Asia, for me personally it [Caspian region] has no substance behind it"[94]. The lack of substance is readily apparent: "We don't have an institute for Caspian studies, we used to have some in Aktau but they are not active now, there was some conferences around 2019 to the agreement of convention"[95]. Another academic discussed the lack of substance: "References to what they called the Caspian Region, there was some solidarity and much contact between countries of Central Asia and the Caspian region with Azerbaijan and Georgians etc. Then could see more connection, more commonality, now more divided, Central Asia is the focus, for me this Caspian has kind of rumbled"[96]. Whereas Kazakhstan can "take role as leader of central Asia, a natural position because oil and gas. Our advantage, mining too, we

[91] Interview number 15.
[92] Interview number 15.
[93] Interview number 12.
[94] Interview number 3.
[95] Interview number 8.
[96] Interview number 11.

should start from these developed sectors to achieve"[97]. Therefore, the Caspian is just one area of interest for Kazakhs, and a marginal sector at that.

One participant spoke explicitly of a Greater Region including Georgia, Uzbekistan and Turkey[98]. In a similar vein one stressed the Caspian Region consists of the L5 plus Turkey[99]. Two participants believed that the Caspian Region should be understood through the lens of the Turkic world[100]. Excluding Georgia, there is a degree of consensus that that future of a 'Greater Caspian Region' will be found in pan-Turkism. Opposingly, however, one political scientist critically discussed the colonial Euro-centric lens through which analysts discuss Kazakhstan:

"When you try to expand to greater Caspian Sea, why we don't talk about greater Europe, with central Asia why is this greater necessary, with Central Asia they talk about Afghanistan, Xinjiang. Culturally and historically, maybe yes definitely all countries in the region and beyond are interconnected. When it comes to politics, what is the point in including Uzbekistan in a 'Greater Region'? Often these concepts come from external powers, they want the region to fit their interests. It is happening now with Afghanistan, they want to do the same in Central Asia. I don't like this"[101].

The construction of Kazakh's foreign policy in relation to external powers is not beneficial for Kazakhstan. Seeking to create a firmer conceptualisation of what the Caspian Region means, in this country, the self-interested motives of American foreign policy become clear: "Americans conceptualize it in a broader sense- also include Uzbekistan, Turkey, Caucasus other Central

[97] Interview number 1.
[98] Interview number 4.
[99] Interview number 16.
[100] Interview numbers 1 & 11.
[101] Interview number 12.

Asian states, maybe even the Gulf States because of broader implications with landlines & railroads"[102]. This external desire to construct the Caspian Region is part of larger strategy. "In the region, other senses of community prevail, such as Turkic, Muslim and more recently, Central Asian, but not Caspian"[103]. Rather than functioning as a contained unit in international politics, the "Caspian gives us chances to get to terms and access to other regions"[104]. Furthermore two participants refuted the existence of any standalone region here[105], highlighting the lack of substance behind a 'Caspian Region'.

Much previous academic literature discussed the 'Caspian Region' in relation to the 'post-Soviet space'. In continuation with the decolonisation of academic Russian studies, the author strove to avoid the reproduction of hegemonic concepts. To this end, the 'post-Soviet' concept was examined for applicability to analyse the 'Caspian Region' for this and any similar future research within the field. This research confirms the contestation of both terms. Participant responses ranged from neutral to indignant. Although the concept is contentious, it continues to have value for understanding society and political events in the 'Caspian Region'[106]. From the perspective of regional and legal studies the term is useful for comparative analysis due to shared characteristics and history of the states concerned[107]. The term is valid to some because Kazakhstan's renegotiation of identity is ongoing: "All of us [Kazakhs] are living in post-Soviet space, the process of transformation is still not finished because we don't know in which way our society is moving. Our population, public opinion, who are we, what kind of society?".[108] However, these

[102] Interview number 8.
[103] Interview number 15.
[104] Interview number 2.
[105] Interview number 13 & 14.
[106] Interviews number 10 & 13.
[107] Interview number 13.
[108] Interview number 15.

choices are limited by the authoritarian neighbourhood in which Kazakhstan exists[109]. This highlights how shared political histories impact contemporary society in this world area.

In discussions about the 'Caspian Region', the most practical value of the post-Soviet concept is to demarcate Iran from the remaining four former Soviet states. This is exemplified by Sultan Akimbekov, Director of the Institute of Asian Studies, Almaty: "Iran we don't understand because it is a religious country- we are a post-Soviet country not religious, religion is developing but not for the majority of the population… Iran is too far from us mentally, we don't understand them"[110]. Simply put, some Kazakhs "feel nothing because [Iran was] not part of USSR"[111].

The inter-generational divide is captured by participant 3 who summarises the societal view well: "if you ask youth they are more involved in our identity, future, they want to develop our country, older people grew up in former USSR [their Soviet] identity still strong, I feel people from former Soviet states closer, for new generation [has daughters (21 & 23)] for them is random countries"[112]. This shows the extent to which Kazakhstan's youth exist in a globalised, rather than regional or Russia-oriented, world. However this is not clear-cut, as the youngest participant (c.30) discussed the commonality felt among citizens of other former Soviet states due to the position of Russian and lingua-franca and the multitude of commonalities and shared experiences[113].

[109] Interview number 1.
[110] Interview number 14.
[111] Interview number 4.
[112] Interview number 4.
[113] Interview number 8.

Although to some, the 'post-Soviet' concept continues to possess practical value in societal and academic spheres. Writing from an external perspective, one must remain cognisant of the cultural effects of reproducing certain colonial ideas. Particularly since a large number of Kazakh academics tie the concept directly to larger political discourses in maintaining that "the post-Soviet concept is dead. I feel some post-imperial offence, in colonisation we lost our Central Asian identity"[114]. The debate is timely within Kazakhstan: "Something that still continues, for example exists some kind of post-Soviet mentality a little. So the people are changed, but not so dramatically… that's why for some period of time we can still use this word like post-Soviet. But I think not all our researchers or other will agree with me".[115] That the "term has less negative connotations than post-colonial"[116], is bcoming increasingly debated. More commonly, the opposing view is reified by participant 12: "these countries [are] trying to decolonise the field, by calling them post-Soviet we are linking them back to past with Russia, [the term is] personally and analytically invalid"[117]. Debate over the auditability of the 'post-Soviet' concept' takes place at the heart of contemporary Kazakh political culture.

The large degree of interpersonal and academic debate witnessed over the applicability of this concept means that further discussion can only be carried out within Kazakhstan. External authors and practitioners of international politics must not further entrench contested concepts. Alongside 'post-Soviet', the concept of a 'Caspian Region' is contested. Furthermore, the flexibility with which this concept is expanded upon to include actors not considered by Kazakh academics to be participants in any political system leads the author to build a novel conceptual framework to study this area.

[114] Interview number 2.
[115] Interview number 7.
[116] Interview number 5.
[117] Interview number 12.

5.1.1 Proposing a Novel Concept

Due to the negative value ascribed to the '(Greater) Caspian Region' and 'post-Soviet' concept by some Kazakh academics, and in seeking to uphold ethics while practising reflexivity and transmitting knowledge in an unbiased manner, one must approach the research considering the impact concepts have on further study and political strategy. Therefore, throughout the remainder of the analysis and concluding sections, the terms 'post-Soviet' and 'Caspian Region' will be used only in the verbatim quotations of participants.

Rather, in study of this space, to suitably evoke the political, historical and social processes that distinguish Iran from the four formerly Soviet states, the author proposes the novel concept of the KART/KARTI states – Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Russian & Turkmenistan, or Kazakhstan, Azerbaijan, Russian, Turkmenistan and Iran. The KARTI states were formerly referred to as the L5, while KART replaces the remaining 'post-Soviet' 4. This distinction provides a neutral terminology for discussion, as the findings show that some participants continue to place value in the academic and daily applicability of the 'post-Soviet' concept, particularly in the four former states from Iran. Fittingly, while KARTI includes Iran -- Karti is also a village in Iran.

A conceptual strength of the KART(I) framework through which to study affairs of countries bordering the Caspian Sea is that Iran can be included, or not, without evoking the Soviet past contributing to imperial knowledge construction by defining states based on their position as former subjects of a communist empire.

Barring changes in alphabet and pronunciation, KARTI would likewise work in Kazakh and Russian, permitting this conceptual framework to be used in non-English language studies on related issues.

Employing Google Scholar there exists no previous discussion of the KARTI states in English-language discourse, while Google Trends uncovers popularity of the word in Hindi. Therefore, one proceeds on basis that this concept is novel for the discussion and analysis of politics and society in states bordering the Caspian Sea in English language. In opposition to the conventional geopolitical map-making which divides the world into areas with easily definable stories, the KARTI concept is unburdened by politicisation. An alternative conceptualisation could have been the North Caspian 4, but this could hypothetically be a curious distinction for the millions of Iranians who reside north of the Turkmenistan capital, Ashgabat.

Henceforth, discussing this area and referring to the KART/KARTI states does not imply any attempt at region building, either internally or externally. This has two timely benefits. Initially, the term contributes directly to the decolonisation of Central & East European, Russian and Eurasian studies' discourse by providing a neutral concept that does not tie states to hegemonic actors. It de-politicises discussion on this space by referencing the states as sovereign actors with no value judgement while relating to contemporary academic and social trends. Secondly, advancing such a concept contributes to the greater decolonisation discourse as is the case with present academic and societal campaigns to employ the term SWANA in place of the colonial-era British-centric 'Middle East', or MENA. A useful future analytical distinction arises from this framework -- The KARTI states act on pragmatic basis in the fields of energy and security while balancing larger

neighbourhood powers. Simultaneously, Kazakhstan can also anchor its regional building strategies in relation to Central Asia, a concept that all participants were comfortable using to describe their state or themselves. Application of the KART(I) framework removes two contentious concepts from political discourses while providing the ability for succinct analytical distinction relating to relevant issues.

5.2: Analysis

This research builds on three theoretical traditions by utilising established insights to study contemporary phenomena. In the Constructivist view, one witnesses the societal renegotiation of identity in relation to ongoing events and processes. From the Critical Geopolitics perspective, local academics recognise the external politicisation of the 'Caspian Region' by hegemonic core states. In the Neoregionalist tradition, acquiring into regional integration dynamics from within the case reveals a lack of spontaneous, organic community building processes. Through the critical perspective, one can legitimately question such borders and spaces while utilising neoregionalism to uncover processes of regionalisation from the local, organic perspective within a given space.

Viewing the findings in relation to the Constructivist position outlined by Wendt on page 17, one interrogates how the three common elements found across social structures exist in relation to the 'Caspian Region'[118]. The first element, shared knowledge, is to a large degree muted among

[118] 'Shared knowledge, material resources, and practices' (1995, p.73).

KARTI states. The reasons for this can be analysed in relation to the political context of Kazakhstan and its neighbouring states. The authoritarian political cultures that embrace isolationism in pursuit of power do not permit for cross-border cultural exchange. This is exacerbated by the recurring theme of distance. The isolationism creates cultural distance between two Turkic states. With Iran the opposite holds true. It is the already existing cultural Turkic/ Persian divide that is deemed, by some participants, to negate regional community building. Emerging inductively from the data is the uniformity in agreement shared among participants that Iran does not feature across social or political discourses in contemporary Kazakhstan. The authoritarian and isolationist political governments in Turkmenistan, Iran and increasingly Russia negate the promotion of a social structure in this first sphere.

The second element of Wendt's model through which to study social structures, material resources, is the lens through which the social structure of the 'Caspian Region' receives most attention. This is because of the development of the Middle Corridor and wider global diversification and import/export strategies. Kazakhstan will commit to the development of infrastructure to support trade, but will not expend resources in this space to develop a political community. Heightened discussions about a spike in material resources being allocated for the extraction and export of Caspian resources are a consequence of Russia's invasion of Ukraine. Analysts must embody a level of restraint when tying potential economic diversification routes to the creation of regional communities. The difficulty faced by external actors to affect economic and political strategy in this area highlights the negative impact of Russia. Russia is losing material and soft influence in Europe as a result of its war in Ukraine. This does not, however, transpire for the KARTI states where structural economic and infrastructure legacies means that material resources remain overwhelming in the hands of Russia.

With the third element, practices, in mind, Wendt argued that 'Social structure exists only in process' (1995, p.74). The process of both regionalism and regionalisation are not being promoted through social practice within Kazakhstan. The regionalisation practice, taking place organically from within the region, unfolds in the direction of the 'Turkic world', closely connected with Central Asia. In this field the process is not necessarily top-heavy. Rather, because of the cultural and pan-national connections, the process of community building takes place organically. The process of regionalism, within the region, has been attempted. The lack of any structural bloc highlights the failure of that process. The practice of region building was developing during the process of signing the Convention on the Caspian Sea, completed in 2018. Stalling since then, the political processes were not upheld by practice. This strengthens arguments cited by authors in the literature review that Caspian cooperation would, most likely, be a secondary theme because of the realist interests of governments and international actors Shamsdoulatabadi (2009), cited on page 39.

These findings do support the recent argument of Skripnikova & Taghon (2022), who argued that the creation of environmental institutions is transforming this space into a macro—region[119]. The concept of regionalism through environmentalism has been a central tenet of internal regional political discourse since the first proposal by Iran in 1992. However, this optimistic argument has been repeatedly made without any tangible sings of the KARTI states working to achieve this.

[119] Cited on page 43 of this thesis.

Of particular interest and importance for future political engagement is the lack of discourse being produced at present in Kazakhstan about the 'Caspian Region'. One must note that while Kazakh experts are, overall, willing to accept a minimalist Caspian Region compromised of the L5 states, the larger Greater Caspian Region as a concept is highly contested, even causing personal offence. Discussing the Caspian Region as a concept drew responses ranging from rejection of the existence of any such concept to dissatisfaction with the Western construction of this (geo)political area.

The main division existing in Kazakhstan's political culture is the relevance of the 'post-Soviet' concept. This is deeply interwoven with the personal identity of citizens and the foreign policy priorities of Kazakhstan. This is a key factor in burgeoning discussions on this space. The previous political discourse about Russia's 'backyard' relates to the ranging arguments discussed in this thesis over the applicability of the 'post-Soviet' and 'Caspian Region' concepts. In this the findings correlate with contemporary political movements, as participants likewise took umbrage at the external framing of regional politics.

From the Critical Geopolitics perspective, there is a quote of particular salience that questions the analytical benefit of studying international politics through the lens of a Greater Caspian Region? There is not one, as this approach applies Western normative thinking to an area possessing different political cultures, strategies, any political will for integration. Such statements as these where one makes linkages with the literature of Critical Geopolitics. As with the Black Sea and 'Middle East', the Euro-Atlantic understanding of an existing macro-region is projected onto the states surrounding the Caspian Sea. The space is categorised as such in Western foreign policy documents despite the lack of local commitment to forming a political region due to being impeded by conflicting ideology and strategy. That the 'Caspian Region' is a 'bit artificial' highlights the strength of applying a Critical Geopolitics perspective to study this space and these

questions. That this accepted component of Western IR discourse has not received primacy in its concerned area highlights the divergence between external projections and internal conceptions. Practitioners and academics must be cognisant not to artificially create a region when there is not one, while interrogating why regions are constructed and for what ends.

The Baltic Sea Region, boasting some of the strongest democracies globally, has contained Russia on a strategic level to create a democratic regional culture, whereas the previous two spaces do not, while these spaces are repeatedly constructed as identifiable regions on the conventional world map. This poses questions relating to the development of macro-regions in spaces where democracy is not well established, and Russian influence remains high. This is not a comparative study. However, these cases highlight how formerly Soviet-colonised states reshape the identity of geopolitical regions through community building in opposition to adversarial powers. There is no such positive democratic political culture existing within this area.

Viewing the findings in the context of the literature, the divergence between external constructions and internal conceptions of the 'Caspian Region' is pronounced. Western discourse promoting the idea of a political community under construction by the KARTI states in the last 30 years is accelerating, but this is not matched in a key state within the supposed region. These results show that the 'Caspian Region' exists less in practice than was imagined in the minds of western foreign policy decision makers. The results from the interviews show that any sense of commonality felt between L5 states existed in relation to limited links from the Soviet past, linguistic-cultural links with Russia or from a sense of Turkic identity with Azerbaijan and to a limited extent with Turkmenistan. As Kazakhstan seeks to redefine its meaning and purpose in world politics, the 'Caspian Region'[120] does not feature. Furthermore, three participants pushed back on the idea of

[120] As constructed in western political and academic literature.

any sort of region existing in the first place[121]. Participants from the littoral regions of Kazakhstan feel an affinity with their home, but there is no common understanding or contestation surrounding a '(Greater) Caspian Region'. There can be some validity found in discussing a strictly L5 region, but expanding these discussion to incorporate 'Greater' visions are geopolitical conjuring's of external foreign policy strategists and analysts.

This thesis seeks to establish, in line with Hettne (2002), whether people are bringing this space that is constructed in US foreign policy as a 'region' to life in Kazakhstan through social practice. An observation arising is that while hegemonic actors form concepts that have lasting impact of normative understandings of world politics, these do not necessarily punctuate discourses of the places they seek to describe and analyse. Studying the data in relation to the question posed in 2011 in a PONARS Eurasia report quoted on Page 1[122], over the last decade the 'Caspian Sea area' is no closer to forming a cohesive region, nor has the report author's alternative scenario unfolded. Rather while Russia is capable of projecting enough power to influence regional politics, the KARTI states will not seek to create a political community with one of several geopolitical poles.

The idea of the Caspian Region, Greater or not, has been so widely accepted and reproduced in English language political discourse that the validity or social compatibility of this term has yet to be thoroughly researched. The strength of employing a Critical Geopolitics perspective is evidenced by findings relating to the opposition participants expressed to the methods hegemonic external actors use to define regional politics. Running concurrently is the lack to which this concept has penetrated Kazakh academic society to any meaningful degree. This thesis highlights

[121] Interview number 3, 6 & 13.
[122] 'whether the Caspian Sea area will evolve into a cohesive region or fray under the influence of a broader array of external forces' (Makarychev, 2011, p.1).

the need to interrogate such social and political dynamics, to produce meaningful political engagement in place of following conventions of external actors.

Regions are not a predetermined fact of global politics. Rather, they are created for certain political ends. However, a Caspian community is not being constructed with any concerted political will, nor at the societal level is there mutual exchange or commonality between the remaining L5. The findings show that when analysts discuss engagement and cooperation with the 'Caspian Region' they begin on the false assumption that there is something there to work with of value to Kazakhstan. The US frames the 'Caspian Region' as a geopolitical space from which to weaken Russia and, to a lesser extent, China. But in Kazakhstan, at least, even though Russia's global and regional status is in decline, any discussion of this regional idea still features Russia heavily. So, there is this duality at play- for the West, asserting (geo)political influence in the 'Caspian Region' provides the opportunity to weaken adversaries, while for the Caspian states, Russia remains a centre of power across diverse sectors.

Kazakhstan's commitment to balancing powers through the core foreign policy position of multivectorism means that the priorities of the present regime do not include closer political engagement with Russia. Geopolitics impacts region building. Unlike in the Baltic Sea Region where post-February 2022 Russia has been a neighbourhood outlier, no such process has taken place in the Caspian Sea area. The geopolitical culture does not support a Caspian Region. Responding to the spatialization of world politics, the projection of political and cultural assumptions onto this space has not been received to any extent internally.

Through the lens of Neoregionalism, the distinction between the programme of regionalism and process of regionalisation made by Hveem (2000) and Soderbaum & Shaw (2003), cited on page

20, is useful in analysing political and social currents in this area. As Kazakhstan seeks to find a common community through which to tackle shared threats and mitigate the influence of neighbourhood authoritarian powers, a programme of regionalism under the Central Asia concept is more appealing. Examining a process of regionalisation among people and states bordering the Caspian, is, through this method, not observable. The limited extent to which regionalism or regionalisation processes are at present unfolding indicate that the 'Caspian Region' is not a priority for Kazakh elites or society.

This lack of political autonomy over the years and low political culture affects region building in the Caspian Sea area, impeding the spontaneous, organic process of integration analysable in the Neoregionalist view as discussed by Hettne and Soderbaum (1998). Central Asia is likewise a highly authoritarian neighbourhood, but the political problems are not so immediate because of the sense of cultural community. Exchange is, therefore, unfolding on the basis of a Central Asian or Eurasian region, underpinned by pan-Turkism. While pan-national thinking underpins the Central Asia model, no such claim can be made of a cultural community underpinning the 'Caspian Region'. At this point one turns to the investigation of identity in relation to place, where this Turkish element influences the direction of the development of an incipient 'Caspian Region'.

This section puts forth key findings that contextualise how the relationship with space of Kazakh society is a determinant on (lack of) development of a (geo) political region. This spatial connection involves key concepts including distance and ecology. Despite the centrality of the Caspian Sea and the potential of the 'Caspian Region', Kazkahs do not locate this space as part of any process of identification. This is not unexpected. Yet, using identity as an 'eye-opener' to examine the location

of space and place was beneficial. Smith (1999) & Proshanksy (1978) discussed identity construction in relation to places and processes. It is not unexpected that participants relationship with space is a major theme in examining how the Caspian Region is understood from the perspective of Kazakhs. Being both "a treasure and a trauma"[123], the Caspian Sea does not hold positive value across Kazakh society. In the specialisation of a social and political world, the attachment is instead with the idea of Central Asia.

The disappointment palpable in the lack of development, is evidence in relation to ecological and environmental concerns. This sector provided the initial opportunity for regional cooperation. Participants from across Kazakhstan discussed the Caspian Sea and Region as part of Western Kazakhstan. Cultural symbols relating to the Caspian Region hold little national value, and the theme of distance impacts the development of a Caspian regional community. The lack of proximity culturally or geographically with a number of L5 states and populations makes regionalism and regionalisation projects more challenging. The distance impeding regional integration across societal levels is both geographic and cultural.

Due to the lack of personal interaction most participants had with the Caspian Region there was little connection. Perceived distance connecting most Kazakhs to the geographic or political 'Caspian Region' impedes community building. The extent to which external actors produce knowledge claims on regional affairs is met with awareness and scepticism of the external politicisation. As a touristic destination this is not attractive. High costs, unfavourable weather and lack of development make this unattractive. There is nothing to draw people there as part of the Kazakh, Turkic or regional symbolism or history. Two participants from cities on the Caspian

[123] Interview number 4.

discussed issues of sustainability, local customs and traditions more than scholars not raised in geographic proximity to the Sea[124]. Insights from the participants connected by birth or residence to the Sea show that while Kazakh society collectively is aware of the ecological impacts degradation of the maritime environment, only participants residing in proximity approached these questions through the lens of sustainability rather than economic catastrophe. The approach to good management of the Sea is, to a large degree, defined by one's personal relationship with this resource. Environmental cooperation has not played an important role in regional cooperation, the spill over into other fields of cooperative interaction remains low while escaping the widely constructed geopolitical lens remains challenging.

Contextualising these findings in relation to the visions of world order depicted on the civilisational and geopolitical maps by Huntington and Cohen discussed in the Background Chapter, any revised version of the *Clash of Civilisations* map would fail to convincingly argue that Kazakhstan belongs to the Orthodox Russian cultural world. Civilisation, does not dictate politics among the states concerned here. That Iran is a "different civilisation"[125]shows how the rigid division into religo-cultural spheres had little value studying the KARTI states. However, one finding lending weight to the Huntington worldview is the support several participants placed on the pan-Turkic element of contemporary Kazakhstan's direction. Of course multivectorism receives primacy, but in negotiating identity without Muscovite influence a cultural model of development underpinned by ideas of a pan-Turkic civilisation are receiving Primacy. This is caveated by a suggestion made in the literature view that is now confirmed: The Muslim majority Kazakh state continues to be situated closer to Russia than Iran.

[124] Interview number 8 & 15.
[125] Interview number 2, page 76.

There is no political, ethnic, national or pan-national substance binding people to the project of, and sustaining the idea of, a 'Caspian Region'. There is a limited view that the development of the Caspian Region depends on the promotion of the Turkic sphere, yet this remains a distant prospect. Although the governments of countries bordering the Caspian have made repeated commitments to fostering mutual relations in the last 30 years[126], the political reality does not match the sentiment. The Caspian Sea is the world's greatest inland body of water, providing ample opportunity for both cooperation and conflict among the L5 states. While the latter outcome has, however, been the more frequent, a milestone in Caspian cooperation was achieved with the completion of the Convention on the Caspian Sea in 2018. Yet conflicts over maritime resources and diverging strategies persist.

While some participants view Iran as the best hope for uniting the states in a non-Russian dominated project, and the Iranian President had previously called for greater structural cooperation within the Caspian, the distance between the Persian state and remaining KART states is too great to foster any meaningful attempt at regionalism or regionalisation. All the political and cultural reasons above make this possibility unlikely. So a politically-led trading-based Caspian Region will not develop. Rather, without Iran and Russia, it will develop in a Central Asian region, providing Kazakhstan and the other Central Asian states match political sentiment with action.

The practical value of any form of 'Caspian Region' exists in two spheres, promotion of pan-Turkic interconnection and the development of the transcontinental Middle Corridor, along with

[126] Since the first Iranian statement in this sphere in 1992 to present.

its associated infrastructure networks that support the present diversification of trade routes from Asia to Europe post- February 2022. With the exception of Kazakhstan's relationship with Azerbaijan, at the political and societal levels there is more that divides the states of the Caspian than unites. This is why external attempts to engage with Kazakhstan through regionalism programmes must be located from the perspective of Central Asia-- where Russia's 'strong voice' in Caspian Sea Region issues is excludable.

The focal point of this region, the Sea, has been a site of opportunity, conflict and cooperation for the L5 and external actors. The material resources are in place, the political momentum will be a sustained project. One examines the rest. This authoritarian legacy propagated by an aging Soviet-era political elite inhibits actors capacity to act spontaneously. Although Kazakhstan has a strengthening regional profile, the country continues to be viewed through the lens of Russia and the FSU. Renegotiation of identity has at its core questions over the current and historic relationship with Russia. This societal view impedes closer political relations.

From being a 'junior brother', Kazakhs have turned into the leading ethnos, demographically stronger indigenous nation. In seeking a larger community of regional states to tackle issues of commonality the Caspian Region is not at the forefront of Kazakh political or social thinking. Rather, the concept of Central Asia, and to a lesser extent Eurasia, appears much more popular in (geo) political profile of modern Kazakhstan. As attempts at regional organisation have faltered, and opportunity subsides in place of conflict, the concept of a political community of Caspian states has faltered. With the Central Asia concept there is more space for Kazakhstan to embrace more of a leadership role. The centre of the Caspian region- the sea – is far away from most Kazakhs, however, Central Asia is a closer concept and more relatable. Central importance of the

Caspian Region is the middle corridor, an economic project. While analysts discuss the middle corridor as a new Silk Road, this is not a factor in the Kazakh national imagination. Central Asia is a Gateway Region as discussed by Cohen, but not for geopolitical positioning, rather, for trade and global connectivity. This corresponds with the literature.

The Central Asia project, meanwhile, is not dominated by a superpower. Kazakhstan has the potential to fulfil such a role here, at least in the view of Kazakh elites. When authors discuss the need for smaller states to form regional blocs to mitigate pressure of larger powers, this will not take place in the form of a 'Caspian Region' as imagined by Western commentators. Rather, the concept of a Central Asian regional community is a more attractive vision for Kazakhstan. The reasons for this are both cultural and geopolitical. This regional concept is underpinned culturally by pan-Turkism supported by Organisation of Turkic States. In this sphere lies more durable prospects for positive integration, rather than the external desire to create a region.

Thus, Central Asia is an appealing concept for regional strategy that does not include any overbearing state. In such a regional community, Kazakhstan, as the most developed, though not most populous state would likely seek to occupy a leadership role. Such a position in a regional community would reaffirm Kazakhstan's sovereignty as it further fulfils its role as a sovereign actor capable of exerting influence. The political and cultural reasons above make the possibility of a structurally organised political Caspian Region unlikely to develop. Rather, it will develop in a Central Asian region, providing other states can match Kazakh input. The main currents of societal thinking towards the Caspian Region are best understood through the lens of unfulfilled potential and contestation.

The construction of a regional identity based on common value and interests is unobtainable in this space due to the political, cultural and geographic distance from one state to another, the overbearing historical and contemporary role of Russia and the legacy of the Soviet Union, namely authoritarianism and isolationism. Main population centres of Almaty and Shymkent are located to the centre of Central Asia with close links physically, economically and culturally to Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, both Turkic states. As all Central Asian states except Tajikistan are Turkic, this project goes better with the Turkish, non-Russian oriented cultural-political profile. The exchange between Kazakh population centres and Turkmenistan, Iran and Azerbaijan is limited compared with the states of Central Asia. Russia is of course the exception, but this is decreasing. This imperially constructed lens has only come to be contested across broad sectors of society in the last two years as Kazakhstan reconfigures in relation to Russia following Putin's invasion of Ukraine. KARTI states may seek to counter Russian power, but, unlike in the linear path of European regionalism this is not evidenced in the creation of a political 'Caspian Region'. While the scope of discourse produced internally relating to the 'Caspian Region' matches the external, the volume with which it is produced does not.

5.3: Lessons and Scope for Future Research

Due to the fact the KART/KARTI concept was developed during the analysis stage upon completion of the interviews, testing its suitability for analysis and use in regional political discourse would provide an interesting component to further research within this field. This

could be conducted both within Kazakhstan and its neighbouring Caspian states, should political conditions permit the required level of access in the isolationist states. If deemed applicable, use of the KART(I) concept in discussions over common threats and opportunities will remove or negate the power of Russia propagated through linguistic terms while rejecting the normative assumptions of US & Western foreign policy writers through removing the 'post-Soviet' and 'Greater Caspian Region' from contemporary political discourses.

This thesis interrogated a knowledge gap existing between how the Caspian Region is externally constructed in Western political-academic literature, and how this framing relates to the internal conception of this space. Heightened geopolitical discourse recently produced running concurrently debate over future integration in this space makes this research timely. The central finding, that the 'Caspian Region' is not of value for Kazakhstan does not mean that this attitude is universal across Caspian capitals. Internally, within Kazakhstan and the region, there is scope for expanding upon this work. From a policy-making perspective, one could interrogate the reasons why the Caspian community stagnated. Participants discussed a previous period when actors at different levels sought to foster a regional community. The failure of this campaign would make an interesting study.

Potential reasons could include the formalisation of the Caspian Sea process, or that the attempt to create a region mirrored external discourse but was unsustainable due to a lack of organic or political will. This would provide value to the literature of neoregionalism by analysing how Kazakhstan's political culture may have impacted the failed regionalism programme. One cannot assume that the lack of political and societal importance placed on the construction of a Caspian Region from the Kazakh perspective will be found in any other four. Further research from the

Azerbajani perspective would be expected to produce more results than a Turkmen study. Examining the imbalance between Iran's pro-region building discourse and lack of concerted action or ratification of the Convention would strengthen analysis on this space.

Through the strategic documents of United States foreign policy the Caspian Region as a concept became politicised. In establishing that the American-led politicisation of the Caspian Region is contested by regional political experts. Future study into the construction of the US project in the last three decades could be conducted from a range of perspectives, both within the remaining L5 states and from the perspective of American regional strategy. A critical finding for the future of study of, and interaction with, states surrounding the Caspian is the extent to which external attempts to construct the Caspian Region were met with a degree of offence and scepticism. Rising from the explicit offense shown towards external knowledge production relating to region building around the Caspian, an intriguing future line of inquiry rooted in Critical Discourse Analysis of US foreign policy documents would provide deeper insight into why this politicisation of this space has taken place. Such a research project could interrogate the reasons for the concerted western campaign to politicise this region.

At the time of preparing the final drafts of this thesis, a Memorandum of Understanding was signed by Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan to export renewable energy to the EU, as post February- 2022, 'the countries of Central Asia and the Caucasus hope to leverage their wealth of natural resources and advantageous geography to transform the Caspian Sea region into a major hub for satisfying Europe's energy needs' (Sukhankin, 2024). This news supports a core argument composed of two points relating to the future of the Caspian Region: Its future lies in the development of the Middle Corridor and the cooperation of Turkic states. Here one notices three

smaller, Turkic, states working with a larger external power in the absence of the participation of regional powers. What makes this relevant to this study is that the first Russian language article cited in this recent article, from the Kazakh Government webpage, does not mention the term 'Caspian Region' but the English language article aimed at a Western audience is entitled 'Transformation of Caspian Sea Region Into Energy Hub Gaining Momentum', and refers to Uzbekistan as a key part of the Caspian Sea Region. This external campaign to foster discourse on a '(Greater) Caspian Region) is continuing at present. Deeper analysis of the applicability of terms and visions external actors possess within this space through research of domestic actors would improve political strategy.

Using the concept of identity to guide this study confused some participants. The author established that the central aim was not to uncover a 'thick' macroregional identity in relation to the Caspian Sea. Rather, using the concept as an "eye-opener" through which to study international politics. This approach has provided key to understand how people locate space, place and ongoing processes in the construction of (political) identity. Connected to the investigation into identity is discussion on the clan system.

Although proposed Interview questions did not enquire into the 'Zhuz' system, the clan continues to be of importance for the identification of Kazakhs, although participants note that this is declining with urbanisation, globalisation and a rise in nationalism. Many Kazakhs are unable to perform familial and cultural rituals once prevalent in the practice of [127]. While this

[127] Interview number 7.

form of societal structure does not relate to the 'Caspian Region', discussion of such a (geo) political space evoke, to some, thoughts of the junior zhuz living in proximity to the Caspian Sea. The gap in the literature is pronounced in the context of related IR literature. Authors when writing on politics, economics and society take the moniker 'Caspian region' as given, subsequently shaping policies around engagement while the existence of this unit is difficult to discern. This topic, challenging the conventional wisdom of an existing Caspian Region, is both of practical value for engagement with the states concerned and is topical in contemporary academic literature. The model developed in this thesis can be used by future researchers to examine local political integration processes in relation to external knowledge production.

CONCLUSIONS

The guiding aim of this thesis has been to examine how the 'Caspian Region' is understood and analysed from the perspective of Kazakh academics and foreign policy experts. Using a conception of identity that is socially constructed, evolves in relation to structures, people and processes, exists in relation to other identities and is an 'eye-opener' into international politics, to examine regional political processes. In sum, there are three reasons why the Caspian Region as a political community does not receive primacy from the perspective of Kazakhstan. First, the political culture rooted in authoritarian sovereignty and contestation over the central Caspian resource and area of concern – the Sea – impedes rather than facilitates cooperation. Secondly, and connected to the political culture, is the hesitancy with which Kazakh society approaches further cooperation with Russia. This stems from the present adherence to multivectored foreign policy and the present ongoing renegotiation of Kazakh identity in relation to inter-generational Russian rule. The third impeding factor is that the association many Kazakhs have with the 'Caspian Region', both real and politically constructed, is of negative value. There is no redeeming characteristic or cultural signifier of national importance -- except, of course, joint

ownership of the world's largest inland sea. However, even this comes with dispute and ecological crises.

From a theoretical perspective, rationalists do not account for identity as a changing force that determines action. Therefore, Constructivism is the primary meta-theoretical position used to encapsulate the importance of identity, signals and social factors. Identity, like the creation of macro-regions, is socially constructed in relation to personal and political circumstances, it continues to develop after adolescence and has the capacity to change through one's life and can mutate as the physical places one resides in change. Neither macro-regions nor identity are fixed. National and substate or macro identities are not in conflict with one another. They exist at different levels and of varying importance.

One sees the ongoing construction of identity through Kazakh youth who are changing the state, while strengthening national sovereignty. The Nazarbayev Generation is Kazakh, the soft and economic power of Russia is subsiding. The process of renegotiation of identity in Kazakhstan has been ongoing since independence, but geopolitical events in January and February of 2022 served as catalysts in the need to assert Kazakh statehood. National identity has been at the centre of this evolving renegotiation of what it means to be Kazakh. The national culture of modern Kazakhstan is emboldened by two factors- the large youth population not having lived under the Soviet Union, and increasing autonomy from Russia across diverse spheres hastened by geopolitical events. The Turkic world poses a level of support in Kazakhstan's de-Russification. This ongoing process makes Kazakhstan hesitant to promote a Caspian Region with Russia.

Russia was mentioned by all particiapnts. This need to maintain political, and increasingly, cultural distance from Russia highlights that society is moving from its power but the grip has not subsided. Unlike codes mentioned extensively across participants, (e.g. Russia, post-Soviet, energy and multivectorism) keywords Turkmenistan and Iran were discussed by most but in relation to their lack of presence and negation of potential for regional community building. This ties to the central theme of distance. The analysis demonstrates how political and cultural distance, and with geographic, impede the formation of a regional community. The distance is also apparent within Kazakhstan's political culture: citizens are too removed from organic sources of power to facilitate an environment of spontaneous acts of regionalisation. The lack of societal interest towards constructing a 'Caspian Region' is explainable in the (geo) political culture and (pan) national identities of contemporary Kazakhstan.

This study into the process of transformation in Kazakhstan at this present moment captures a society in change across all generations. The 'Caspian Region', as imagined in western political discourse, does not play a role in this. As with the introduction to political dictionaries and initial discussions on the 'Caspian Region', political 'buzz' in this space is generated externally. The New Regionalist perspective considers in its ontology more areas of cooperation than classic regionalism, which was the confine of states and focused on trade and economic relations. Since Neoregionalism embodies a broad range of epistemological and ontological positions, due to the nature of this study it is the post-positivist perspectives that serve this researches aims and methods. This critical investigation to uncover what really exists in a given geographical space is supported by Critical Geopolitics, a framework that takes this type of investigation as its starting point. Overall, for a study of this type we must use critical perspectives rather than the problem-solving branch of theory as described by Cox to understand if a certain regional identity exists and, if so, how such an identity comes into being.

The themes are comprised of culture, identity and spatiality. Kazakhstan has spent a large amount of time trying to assert its sovereignty. Therefore this is something it does not want to cede, especially to competing neighbours. The links that did unite much of the Caspian Region and the former Soviet Union are diminishing because younger generations "just see random countries". The L5 states of the Caspian Region are too divided to form any structural political community within the present social and political conditions. Attempts at creating regional institutions have failed. Moreover, the participants stress that there is no Caspian community. The community in terms of (geo) politics, culture and society is in Central Asia. This space is Russia and Iran free, also geographically and culturally closer. Spatialising political and societal approaches to future priorities, the idea of Central Asia carries more weight than the Caspian concept. The only deep attachments to the Caspian idea can be found in those who have spent time in the littoral regions. The Central Asia regional concept can be brought to life by symbols, institutions and common language. The Turkic Central Asian world provides an opportunity to create political partnerships on an equal footing, while in the 'Caspian Region' participants are increasingly aware of Russia's "strong voice".

Connected to the individual and societal relationships with space is the more formal strategic-level political thinking on space and the struggle for command thereof – geopolitics. The campaign over thirty years by US foreign policy makers and thinkers to construct a geopolitical space has not materialised from the perspective of one of the states which is key to such a desired project. Russian influence is still too strong and a negative impact. States who want to introduce infrastructure projects to diversify their energy exports are still impeded by Russia. The L5 minus Russia cannot act carte blanche even in their sectors of the Caspian Sea, making integration for the smaller states in this region challenging. Three of the L5 are Turkic states but they have not

built on this to form any form of Caspian community. Any attempt to make a community in this space has to come from Azerbaijan or Kazakhstan, as Turkmenistan voluntarily rules itself out, and Iran is uninterested to a large degree, despite the statements of political elites and marginal view in Kazakhstan that the trading future of the KARTI states would depend on Iran. The inherent weaknesses of the Caspian project are laid clear when one participant believed integration must come from Iran, a state that could be a political leader, but has not embodied that role leaving the remaining states to view it as peripheral.

Upon analysis of the key arguments, Kazakh academics are divided on the validity, applicability and use of 'post-Soviet' term to accurately study the 'Caspian Region', The KART/KARTI states distinction permits for succinct analysis of this space without employing the dated 'post-Soviet' concept or the contested '(Greater) Caspian Region' approach. KARTI relates to Critical Geopolitics and New Regionalism by moving regional politics away from Moscow's direct sphere through application of a politically neutral concept. This creates more agency for Kazakhstan to act as a leader in the preferred Central Asia regional construct. The KART(I) concept does not imply external value judgement.

Russia, and all its various inputs, plays a large role in political and (pan) national cultures that detract priority from the 'Caspian Region'. In other geopolitical macro-regions several key population and cultural hubs are situated in proximity to the sea. This is not the case from the Kazakh perspective. Unlike the Baltic Sea where within the geopolitical region there exists common interests, values, and there are successes as Russian is being contested. This has not happened here, there is no positive geopolitical framing, no positive environmental framing, the only positive framing is economic. In the new regionalist perspective regions form through a mix of bottom up and top-

down processes. The Caspian is missing this bottom-up aspect in region-building. The region's authoritarian climate make spontaneous, organic action challenging. Kazakhstan has spent several centuries under the political and economic control of Russia. Looking to reassert Kazakhstan's place in regional and world politics the Turkic and Central Asian symbols of identification offer alternative cultural and political models of development.

Insights gleaned in this research about the geopolitical nature of discussion here match the literature, but diverge in understanding what it means for Kazakh society. This area is not one in which external powers will win or lose strategic games, rather pragmatism will rule and Kazakhstan will seek to maximise its own interests rather than pooling sovereignty with regional powers. Participants agree that there is contestation, but it is between KARTI states rather than a being on pawn on the global chess table.

This thesis is focused on the Caspian microregion. Therefore, it did not seek to examine domestic identities and social practices. However, the negative value ascribed to the clan residing in Western Kazakhstan made people hesitant to promote this sphere as part of any identity. These social facts may not realistic, but they are accepted as part of Kazakh social discourse. The marginal importance of cultural, historical and political factors, and framing of it as Russia's space locates Kazakhstan's regional priorities in the concept of Central Asia, not the Caspian Region. Lack of interaction with and knowledge about Caspian 'regional' states within the area facilitates an impasse at the political and societal levels. Free of the direct impact of hegemonic states and underpinned by pan-Turkism, Central Asia is the future regional direction of Kazakh foreign policy.

Although the Perestroika era brought new ways of studying global politics along with analysis of new regions and changing conceptions of what political scientists consider important for study,

because of historic Russian domination throughout the last century the position of Kazakhstan and its population has, in the orthodox view, been understood in relation to Russia. Kazakh decision makers are hesitant to foster a political strategy that reverses this diversification trend.

Examination into the 'Caspian Region' as a (geo) political concept highlights a large degree of consensus that the idea of a 'Greater Caspian Region' has little to no practical value for study in Kazakhstan and the wider geographic area. Furthermore, limited conceptions of the L5 as (potential) members of a political commun did not hold weight for Kazakh academics and foreign policy experts. Participants discussed the lack of substance behind this geopolitical construct. Some interviewees tied the '(Greater) Caspian Region' concept directly to the aim of US foreign policy decision makers to try to define this space.

Even more contested is the 'post-Soviet' concept. This research shows that participants do continue to place value on this term, however, most tie it to deeper socio-political issues that have no analytical or conceptual strength in the present era. Therefore, the conceptual framework of the KART(I) states permits one to discuss this space without promoting the Western idea of an existing (geo) political regional community while permitting the conceptual flexibility to discuss issues relating to the four formerly Soviet states without Iran in lieu of the contested colonial concept. This both contributes to decolonization of the field and locates future discussion on a neutral basis during a period when (geo) political culture and (pan) national identity are in a process of transformation in Kazakhstan.

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Appendix A: Table of Participants

Interview Number	Profession	Gender	Location	Interview Length (minutes)	Anonymised
1	Chairman (International Business)	Male	Astana	75	No
2	Dean of School (Social Sciences)	Female	Astana	45	No
3	Political Scientist	Female	Almaty	20	Yes
4	Sociologist	Female	Almaty	30	No
5	Sociologist/ Former Gov. Analyst	Female	Almaty	35	Yes
6	Political Scientist	Female	Astana	30	No
7	Sociologist	Female	Almaty	45	No
8	Political Analyst	Male	Aktau	35	No
9	Sociologist	Female	Astana	30	No
10	Writer/ Former Gov. Advisor	Female	Astana	Written Response	Either
11	Political Scientist	Male	Astana	40	Yes
12	Political Scientist	Male	Astana	35	Yes
13	Regional Legal Scholar	Male	North Kazakhstan	35	Either
14	Institute Director (Regional Studies)	Male	Almaty	35	….
15	Political Scientist	Male	Atyrau	Written Response	Either
16	Political Scientist	Male	West Kazakhstan	40	Yes

Appendix B: Plain Language Statement

University of Glasgow

College of Social Sciences

Plain Language Statement

Regional Identity in the Caspian Area: A Kazakh Perspective

Researcher: [Anonymised]

Supervisors: Professor Zdzislaw Mach, Jagiellonian University Krakow

Dr Heiko Paabo, Universtiy of Tartu

Dr Leyla Sayfutdinova, University of Glasgow

Purpose:

Research undertaken in fulfilment of IntM. Central & East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies, and Mgr. European Studies, together these two degrees comprise the Erasmus Mundus International Master in Central & East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies. The culmination of which is a 25,000 dissertation that I am inviting you to participate in. Data may be used for further academic articles and conference papers.

1) **You are being invited to take part in a research study.**

Before you decide it is important for you to understand why the research is being done and what it will involve. Please take time to read the following information

carefully and discuss it with others if you wish. Ask us if there is anything that is not clear or if you would like more information. Take time to decide whether or not you wish to take part. Thank you for reading this.

2) What is the purpose of the study?

This study is being conducted with the aim of understanding if a Caspian regional identity exists and contextualising such an identity in relation to other dominant identities in the region.

3) Why have I been chosen?

You are an academic or professional with an established career in Kazakhstan. Your position as a researcher in the region means that you have knowledge and insights on this geographical space. Being from Kazakhstan you can provide relevant insights into regional identity. I will interview twenty participants throughout this project. 10 participants are being recruited from KIMEP University and the Kazakh National Women's Teacher Training University. The other 10 will be professionals who have experience dealing with regional issues. These participants will be recruited through the first ten academic participants.

4) Do I have to take part?

No, this is a voluntary project.

5) What will happen to me if I take part?

I will interview you for up to one-hour, prospective interview questions have been attached. This will be a confidential conversation between you, the participant, and me, the interviewer. You have the right to withdraw from this research at any point in the process. Your contribution will remain confidential, and will not be used in any way related to the project if this goes against your wishes. The interview will take place either at a public venue suitable for you or online via a platform like Zoom or Teams. In either situation, the conversation will be transcribed by me for later reference and the data kept for up to one year, before being securely destroyed.

6) Will my taking part in this study be kept confidential?

Please note that assurances on confidentiality will be strictly adhered to unless evidence of wrongdoing or potential harm is uncovered. In such cases the University may be obliged to contact relevant statutory bodies/agencies. All information which is collected about you during the course of the research will be kept strictly confidential. You will be identified by an ID number and any information about you will have your name and address removed so that you cannot be recognised from it. Unless you would like to be deanonymized, which can be done through written request. There are limits to confidentiality due to use of the snowball sampling message. However, you can be sure I will not discuss your responses with the person who suggested your expertise, nor will I discuss your responses with anyone that may follow you in the interview process. Should a participant choose to be anonymous, I will only mention the broad field in which they work so that they cannot be identified. Due to the fact I am recruiting from two universities and colleagues will recommend one another there is a chance that some participants may recognise the type of answers given. If this is a problem, you can <u>withdraw at any time.</u>

7) What will happen to the results of the research study?

They will be analysed and published in my MA thesis. The results will be publicly available in the University of Tartu library with your input anonymised. The results

may be used for future journal articles or conference papers, with the data being kept for up to one year upon completing the project in September 2024. Personal data will be destroyed by 30/09/2024.

8) Who is organising and funding the research? (If relevant)

This is a joint project between four universities as part of the Erasmus Mundus International Master in Central & East European, Russian and Eurasian Studies. The universities involved are: the University of Tartu, Estonia; University of Glasgow, Scotland; Jagiellonian University in Krakow, Poland; and KIMEP in Almaty, Kazakhstan. I have received Erasmus MUNDUS funding for this two-year programme and to conduct research primarily in Almaty.

9) **Who has reviewed the study?**

The project has been reviewed by the School of Social and Political Sciences Ethics Forum.

10) Contact for Further Information

Zdzislaw Mach: zdzislaw.mach@uj.edu.pl

Heiko Pääbo: Heiko.Paabo@ut.ee

Dr Leyla Sayfutdinova email: Leyla.Sayfutdinova@glasgow.ac.uk

If you have any concerns regarding the conduct of this research project, you can contact the University of Glasgow Ethics Officer Professor Gerda Reith, contactable at: Gerda.Reith@glasgow.ac.uk, or (+44) 01413303849.

Proposed Interview Questions

• What does the Caspian Sea mean to Kazakh society?

• Does this have a reference point in political discourse?

• What countries to you comprise the Caspian region?

• Do you feel an attachment with the other four littoral states?

• What emotions and sentiments does the thought of the Caspian evoke?

• Does the term post-Soviet space have any value today?

• How has the meaning of the Caspian and surrounding region evolved in your lifetime?

• What role does Kazakhstan play in the shaping of a Caspian region?

• How should Kazakhstan construct its relations with neighbouring states? Is this regional element important?

• In your opinion, how have geopolitical events in the region havd an impact on the region and the neighbourhood?

- How would you rate the importance of each of these supranational identities?

Ranking each macro-identity from 1 (least important) to 5 (most important).

  - Turkic, Central Asian, Muslim, post-Soviet or Caspian?

Appendix C: Privacy Notice

PRIVACY NOTICE

Privacy Notice for Participation in Research Project: Identity in the 'Caspian Region', by [Anonymised]

Your Personal Data

The University of Glasgow will be what's known as the 'Data Controller' of your personal data processed in relation to your participation in the research project 'Identity in the 'Caspian Region''. This privacy notice will explain how The University of Glasgow will process your personal data.

Why we need it

We are collecting basic personal data such as your name and contact details in order to conduct our research. We need your name and contact details to conduct interviews, and potentially follow up on any results you provide during the interview. We only collect data that we need for the research project and your details will be anonymised and referred to in a code known only to the author. Should you opt to, we will provide full credit to you in the research if this is preferred to anonymity.

Due to the fact I am using a small pool of 20 participants, responders may know each other which could limit confidentiality. This will be mitigated by not discussing responses with anyone other than the participant (you).

Please see accompanying **Participant Information Sheet**,

Legal basis for processing your data

We must have a legal basis for processing all personal data. As this processing is for Academic Research, we will be relying upon **Task in the Public Interest** in order to process the basic personal data that you provide. For any special categories data collected we will be processing this on the basis that it is **necessary for archiving purposes, scientific or historical research purposes or statistical purposes**

Alongside this, in order to fulfil our ethical obligations, we will ask for your **Consent** to take part in the study Please see accompanying **Consent Form**.

What we do with it and who we share it with

All the personal data you submit is processed by: [Anonymised] as researcher and Leyla Sayfutdinova, Heiko Paabo and Zdzisław Mach as supervisors.

In addition, security measures are in place to ensure that your personal data remains safe: All data will be stored on a secure folder on my Macbook with professional encryption. Please consult the **Consent form** and **Participant Information Sheet** which accompanies this notice.

We will provide you with a full copy of the findings and results upon completion of the project and ask your permission before sharing any data with other interested researchers.

What are your rights?*
GDPR provides that individuals have certain rights including: to request access to, copies of and rectification or erasure of personal data and to object to processing. In addition, data subjects may also have the right to restrict the processing of the personal data and to data portability. You can request access to the information we process about you at any time.

If at any point you believe that the information we process relating to you is incorrect, you can request to see this information and may in some instances request to have it restricted, corrected, or erased. You may also have the right to object to the processing of data and the right to data portability.

Please note that as we are processing your personal data for research purposes, the ability to exercise these rights may vary as there are potentially applicable research exemptions under the GDPR and the Data Protection Act 2018. For more information on these exemptions, please see UofG Research with personal and special categories of data.

If you wish to exercise any of these rights, please submit your request via the webform or contact dp@gla.ac.uk

Complaints
If you wish to raise a complaint on how we have handled your personal data, you can contact the University Data Protection Officer who will investigate the matter.
Our Data Protection Officer can be contacted at dataprotectionofficer@glasgow.ac.uk

If you are not satisfied with our response or believe we are not processing your personal data in accordance with the law, you can complain to the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO) https://ico.org.uk/

Who has ethically reviewed the project?

This project has been ethically approved via the College of Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee or relevant School Ethics Forum in the College.

How long do we keep it for?

Your **personal** data will be retained by the University only for as long as is necessary for processing and no longer than the period of ethical approval- until September 2024. After this time, personal data will be securely deleted.

Your **research** data will be retained for a period of ten years in line with the University of Glasgow Guidelines. Specific details in relation to research data storage are provided on the Participant Information Sheet and Consent Form which accompany this notice.

End of Privacy Notice _____

Appendix D: Consent Form

Consent Form

Title of Project: 'Identity in the 'Caspian Region''

Name of Researcher: Anonymised

Supervisors: Leyla Sayfutdinova, Heiko Paabo, Zdzisław Mach

I confirm that I have read and understood the Participant Information Sheet for the above study and have had the opportunity to ask questions.

☐

I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without giving any reason.

☐

I want to be pseudonymized / I want to be identified by my real name (delete as applicable)

☐

I acknowledge that there will be no effect on my employment arising from my participation or non-participation in this research.

☐

All names and other material likely to identify individuals will be anonymised should they so desire

☐

The material will be treated as confidential and kept in secure storage at all times.

☐

The material will be retained in secure storage for use in future academic research for a period of up to one year upon completion of the project.

☐

The material may be used in future publications, both print and online.

☐

I acknowledge the provision of a Privacy Notice in relation to this research project.

☐

I consent / do not consent (delete as applicable) to interviews being audio-recorded.

☐

I agree / do not agree (delete as applicable) to take part in the above study.

Name of Participant …… Signature ……

Date ……

Name of Researcher [Anonymised] Signature ……

Date 14/02/2024.