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Hydropolitics in Central Asia: An analysis of Official and Media Discourses in Kazakhstan and
Kyrgyzstan, 2010-2023

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Abstract

The following study analyzes the hydropolitics between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan through official and media discourses during the four cases spanning the period of 2010-2023. The issue of water resources in Central Asia is highly relevant due to the growing challenges of climate change, poor water management, increasing population, and lack of cooperation in the water sector. The study examines the interesting water relations and power dynamics between downstream Kazakhstan and upstream Kyrgyzstan.

The paper uses a qualitative research approach based on discourse analysis. The analysis reveals common narratives of “agriculture-as-a-main-concern” and “good-relations” used in both discourses. Firstly, showing that the main water issue in hydropolitics between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is agriculture, framing water being used only for irrigation purposes. Secondly, despite the tensions on the water basis, states attempt to avoid politicization of the water and maintain good relations with each other. Moreover, the study shows non-state-centered characteristics of Kazakh-Kyrgyz hydropolitics, incorporating the role of individuals; local citizens. As well as shows the wide range of non-water related issues, such as agriculture, food security, economic interactions, border issues and social discontent. Additionally, the study reveals the power dynamics through hydropolitics, showing that Kyrgyzstan uses water as a leverage, while Kazakhstan imposes the border restrictions to pressure Kyrgyzstan.

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Introduction

The Central Asian (CA) region has complex water dynamics between upstream Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and downstream Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan. The region's two main rivers — the Syr Darya and the Amu Darya — form the foundation of the region's water resources (see Appendix A). Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan share the Shu and Talas Rivers, which originate from the Syr Darya river. This paper aims to analyze hydropolitics between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which has increasing relevance due to the pressing issue of water shortage and the potential for water conflicts in the region, exacerbated by climate change. Hydropolitics, or water politics refers to interactions between states on transboundary water resources (The Geneva Water Hub, 2021). The central research question of the paper is: How was hydropolitics manifested through official and media discourses of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the period of 2010-2023?

Kazakhstan, a downstream country rich in natural resources, importantly in terms of hydrocarbons and uranium, is largely characterized by desert and semi-desert arid regions with an uneven distribution of its water resources (Ministry of Energy, 2016). Consequently, Kazakhstan is heavily dependent on water resources from its neighbors. The country has approximately 100 km³ surface water resources, with 56 km³ generated within its own territory and the remaining 44 km³ sourced from transboundary rivers shared with China, Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan (Tumenev, 2009). In the southern part of the country, where the Shu-Talas river basin is located, regular irrigation is well used for the growth of water-intensive crops such as rice, beets, and cotton. This creates an issue of intensive and non-rational development of irrigated agriculture that consumes 70-90% of all water supply. Other problems in Kazakhstan's water sector, such as old infrastructure, equipment wear, and technical problems,

have led to decreased water quality, problems with access to clean drinking water, pollution, salinization of irrigated areas, and the rapid development of desertification processes (Tumenev, 2009).

In contrast, Kyrgyzstan, is an upstream, mountainous, with water resources almost entirely formed within its own territory (Water Resources Service, 2022). However, it lacks energy sources, has a smaller economy, and less territory compared to Kazakhstan. According to the Water Resources Service (n.d.), four percent of Kyrgyzstan's territory is covered with glaciers, which are the main source of water in the region. Consequently, Kyrgyzstan contains 45% of all Central Asian glaciers, contributing to 40% of the water supply in the region and 60% in Tajikistan (Tologonov, 2022). As in Kazakhstan, approximately 90% of Kyrgyzstan's water is consumed for agriculture, with the remainder allocated to industry and the population (Water Resources Service, n.d.). Tologonov (2022) identifies the main water-related problems in Kyrgyzstan as irrigation issues, the impact of climate change, poor infrastructure, inadequate management, and weak regional cooperation. These common issues highlight the shared challenges between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the water sector.

Nevertheless, even having similar problems in the water sector, countries have different viewpoints on water resources. Kazakh official discourse presents water scarcity and pollution as the main water threats, emphasizing that water resources are a common regional property. In contrast, water-rich Kyrgyzstan compared to its downstream neighbors does not have vast amounts of hydrocarbons such as oil and gas. Therefore, the Kyrgyz state actively promotes the discourse of water resources as a national asset or treasure that can be sold as a commodity, a narrative that has developed since the collapse of the USSR and treats water as a resource of economic value (Kraak, 2012).

The motivation for this study was understanding of the pressing issues of climate change and potential water crises that may affect regional and national security and stability, as well as last year's drought in Zhambyl in Kazakhstan. However, this study has several limitations typical of undergraduate research, such as restricted access to comprehensive sources, particularly those in Kyrgyz, due to limited availability of Internet resources and databases, use of sources only in Russian, time constraints and the limited scope of an undergraduate study. Importantly, there is an imbalance in the knowledge of the two countries, having a better understanding of the Kazakh context, there is a lack in comprehensive exploration of Kyrgyz official discourses. Methodology of the study is qualitative type research with use of discourse analysis. Resources were obtained from the open access on Kazakh and Kyrgyz governmental and media sites in Russian. For the discourse analysis part, sources in Russian in Bibliography were romanized according to the Library of Congress's romanization table for coherent citation. Additionally, the term "oblast" was used to refer to the specific administrative regions in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to ensure precise geographical identification. The results show that states use "agriculture-as-a-main-concern", "good-relations" narratives. Additionally, Kazakh-Kyrgyz hydropolitics shows a different range of non-water related issues, as well as reveals the power dynamics between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

This study is organized as follows. First, a literature review will offer a brief overview of existing research on hydropolitics in Central Asia, focusing on the dynamics between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Second, the methodology section will outline the research design and data collection of this study. Third, the discussion part will focus on four case studies that explore the manifestation of hydropolitics through official and media discourses. Finally, the

conclusion will shortly summarize the key findings and suggest potential directions for future research.

1. Literature review

This chapter offers a literature review in three broad topic areas: water issues in the Central Asian region, bilateral water regulations between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and the discourse on water in Central Asia.

1.1. Water issues in Central Asia

This subsection of literature review covers the common issues in the region's water sector from the Soviet era to the present. Water relations between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have their roots in the Soviet period, when the central government established a water-energy nexus, dividing water and energy resources (coal, gas, fuels) between states during summer-winter periods according to exchange agreements (Kraak, 2012). This arrangement is reflected in the 1983 agreements that divided the Shu-Talas water resources during the vegetation period. However, this water-energy nexus ended after the dissolution of the USSR, as market reforms led to the discontinuation of exchange of water-energy between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Moreover, since the disintegration of the Soviet Union, both states have reported that water management in Central Asia has deteriorated, indicating that they have struggled to agree on satisfying mutual needs under current conditions. Kraak (2012) characterizes the post-Soviet situation by noting that domestic river basins became international in the CA region. However, although the Soviet approach to water management in the region aimed to serve people (Kraak,

2012; Zinzani & Menga, 2017), it led to ecological disasters like the Aral Sea catastrophe due to excessive water usage for agriculture. Thus, it can be argued that neither during the Soviet period nor in the present time have the Central Asian governments been able to develop and implement efficient and thoughtful measures and regulations for water resources.

Nowadays, poor water management, old infrastructure, high levels of corruption, and lack of coordination in water policies are common issues both domestically and regionally. Many scholars (Berndtsson et al., 2022; Medetov et al., 2018; Karatayev et al., 2017) agree that poor and “dysfunctional” water management undermines efforts to improve water policies, distribution, and irrigation. These issues may be the legacy of Soviet water policies combined with the outdated Soviet infrastructure. Meanwhile, international funding does not directly improve the situation due to corruption and bureaucratic obstacles within the Central Asian states (Berndtsson et al., 2022). At the local level, bureaucracy and public distrust in regulatory frameworks further hinders the process (Wegerich et al., 2015).

Additionally, the lack of trust (Karatayev et al., 2017) and competition (Pohl et al., 2017) over water resources contribute to inefficient usage between downstream and upstream countries. The increasing level of competition may lead to regional conflicts over water (Pohl et al., 2017). Zakhirova (2013) attributes this to the power asymmetry in the region, where differing economic conditions create uneven positions between countries. Moreover, Zhupankhan et al. (2017) argue the autocratic nature of Central Asian regimes interferes with regional cooperation, as Central Asian leaders mostly focus on maintaining their power. Dalbaeva (2018) supports this by highlighting the politicization of water, even creating a situation of weaponizing water.

Another issue is the lack of proper mechanisms for policy implementation in existing interstate cooperation (Medetov et al., 2018). Domestically, there is a weak regulatory

framework, as even Kazakhstan's Water Code itself is "poorly framed" (Medetov et al., 2018). Climate change and increasing population pressures further complicate water management (Pohl et al., 2017; Karatayev et al., 2017; Zhupankhan, 2017 et al). Nevertheless, the absence of coordinated water policies between states, poor water management, and old Soviet infrastructure still remain the main challenges. Besides, competition, distrust, and prioritization of national interests lead to inefficient water usage between downstream and upstream countries. In other words, most scholars agree on the need for regional cooperation and a more proactive approach to address water issues, a need that is also evident in the hydrogeopolitics between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

1.2. Bilateral water regulation

The subsection gives a brief overview of the bilateral legal framework between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan regarding water relations. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan regulate their water relations through the Agreement on the Use of Water Management Facilities for Interstate Use on the Chu and Talas Rivers, signed on January 21, 2000, in Astana. President Tokayev has praised this agreement as exemplary for other states (Akorda, 2021). Tumenov (2009) agrees, noting that Shu-Talas agreement is considered a successful example of water negotiations, emphasizing water quality, regional bodies, and the responsibilities of each party.

The legal basis for water resource allocation between the two countries is rooted in regulations signed in 1983. The Regulation on the Division of Flow in the Talas River allocates 50% of water resources to each state, managed by the Kirov reservoir (*Polozhenie o delenii stoka v r. Talas*, 1983). The Regulation on the Division of Flow in the Chu River allocates 42% of water resources to the Kazakh side and 58% to the Kyrgyz side, managed by Orto-Tokoy

reservoir (*Polozhenie o delenii stoka r.Chu*, 1983). The Bilateral Commission on the Use of Water Resources structures for Interstate Use, operational since 2006, oversees the management of the Shu and Talas rivers (Respublika Kazakhstan, n.d.). The overall interstate management body in Central Asia overseeing water resources is the Interstate Coordination Water Commission (ICWC), with executive bodies for the “Amu Darya” and “Syr Darya” Basins Water Management Associations. These frameworks demonstrate the bilateral and regional measures to regulate water resources following the countries’ independence.

1.3. Discourse on water in Central Asia

As mentioned above, common problems in the water sector have been analyzed by scholars for some time. However, there are fewer scholarly studies that examine how these water issues are framed by official and media discourse. This subsection reviews existing scholarship regarding the discourse on water in Central Asia.

A literature review on the analysis of discourse by Central Asian states on water reveals a limited amount of such works. Dharmaputra (2018) discusses the low level of cooperation in Central Asia regarding the water issues through an analysis of the discourse of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. As shown in this case study, Kazakhstan tends to securitize water resource problems in its official discourse, while Uzbekistan shifts focus to infrastructure development and tourism. This indicates that water is differently depicted even among downstream countries, reflecting different national interests in water resources of the CA region. In another example, Kraak (2012) discusses differing approaches between upstream Kyrgyzstan and downstream Uzbekistan on the Syr Darya river. Kyrgyzstan attempts to distance itself from the past Soviet discourse of viewing water as a common resource, instead claiming that water has economic

values and should be charged for. Meanwhile, Uzbekistan, whose GDP relies on the production of cotton and rice, maintains in its discourse that water is a common good, viewing Kyrgyzstan's attempts to charge for water as "greedy" behavior (Kraak, 2012). Given that Kazakhstan is also a downstream country, this paper reveals similar dynamics between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Moreover, Zinzani & Menga (2017) discuss the power gap between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in the water sector, favoring Kazakhstan, which uses bargaining and material power that result in uneven water distribution. Overall, there is little research specifically focusing on Central Asian hydropolitics through discourse analysis. Therefore, this study aims to contribute to existing scholarship on water relations between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan through discourse analysis.

2. Conceptual framework

As water relations between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are the main focus of this study, the conceptual framework of hydropolitics is well-suited for the analysis. The hydropolitics does not have a common, unified and established definition, as it emerged in the late 20th century, mixing politics, geography, and sociology (Geneva Water Hub, 2021). However, given the importance of water resources and increasing ecological issues, hydropolitics has become a highly relevant field today. As mentioned earlier, hydropolitics refers to water politics, implying interactions between states over transboundary water resources. The Geneva Water Hub (2021) states that most scholars agree that hydropolitics is inherently transboundary, requiring interactions between state and non-state actors. Furthermore, it is widely accepted that hydropolitics is not solely state-centered, as non-state actors, including international organizations and individuals, also play significant roles (Turton & Henwood, 2002; Geneva

Water Hub, 2021). Turton & Henwood (2002) emphasize that hydropolitics operates on multiple scales, affecting individuals locally and extending to international and interstate levels. Hydropolitics also encompasses a range of issues beyond water, including connections to food security, ecosystems, and gender, highlighting its interdisciplinary nature (Turton & Henwood, 2002). In this study, I demonstrate that water issues between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan impact both populations through agriculture and influence bilateral relations at the state level.

The range of issues in hydropolitics between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan raises problems of water scarcity, agriculture sector, water pollution, and ecology. Moreover, De Stefano et al. (2017) argue that factors such as water allocation and availability, climate change, the level of democracy, transboundary water agreements and treaties, relationship between downstream-upstream countries, and trade can lead to tensions in hydropolitics. According to their study, Central Asia has a high risk of water-related armed conflicts, particularly in the Syr Darya and Amu Darya basins and the Fergana Valley). This highlights the acute relevance of studying hydropolitics between the CA states, such as Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Notably, Ezbakhe & Bréthaut (2021), in their analysis of the Rogun dam dispute between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan on the Amu Darya river basin, concluded that hydropolitics is displayed through material constructions (e.g., the Rogun dam) and institutional forms (e.g., agreements, memoranda, international organizations).

Despite this, Bréthaut et al. (2022) assert that hydropolitics still remains politics that includes information, data, treaties, institutions and any other interstate actions and agreements on water basins. This also includes alternative data, such as discourse, to understand how hydropolitics is constructed and practiced between states and interconnected with non-water interactions. Bréthaut et al. (2022) also discuss that hydropolitics can imply that transboundary

water resources may be both sources of conflict and cooperation, influenced by riparian states' construction of water dams and other water diversions. Most importantly, they claim that discourse in hydropolitics reveals power relations over transboundary water resources. This idea is particularly applicable to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, where water relations are affected by power dynamics.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the power interplays between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan through discourse on transboundary water issues concerning the Shu and Talas rivers. The concept of hydropolitics is thus applicable for analyzing the water issues between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, especially given the interdependent nature of water resources in the Central Asian region.

3. Methodology

Research design of the paper is discourse analysis of Kazakh and Kyrgyz officials and media discourse of four water issues during 2010-2023. The four cases were chosen as major water tension events that show the wide range of issues of hydropolitics. The object of analysis is the Kazakh and Kyrgyz official state and media discourse. Discourse represents an approach on analysis of how the social world is constructed through language (Holzscheiter, 2013). Therefore, in the case of Kazakh-Kyrgyz hydropolitics, discourse analysis explores how water relations are being constructed and framed by the language. The paper is the case study case of hydropolitics in CA by exploring Kazakh-Kyrgyz bilateral relations in four concrete events in the period of 2010-2023, in order to understand the problem of transboundary rivers and how discourse shapes the water issues period. The countries were chosen in order to investigate water dynamics of downstream and upstream states. The research has a qualitative type of

methodology, collecting and analyzing non-numerical data. For data collection primary and secondary data were used that could be obtained through Internet based research through open access. Data was collected from government official sites, government agencies statements and commentaries, Kazakh and Kyrgyz media, articles on news sites, official interviews and press-conferences.

The period of 2010-2023 was chosen as it represents the main crisis period between states that vary water issues of micro, medium and big scale range. It also shows the change, if any, and continuity of official discourse regarding transboundary rivers. Moreover, periods present different global, region, domestic and political changes and challenges. The start from 2010 was chosen as it shows the development of news and government portals on the Internet, allowing access to a large number of media and official statements on the topic of water resources. While ending with 2023, the paper covers the recent big scale transboundary water issue in Kazakhstan that resulted in a large amount of discourse.

4. Discourse analysis

4.1. Background information

Before starting the discourse analysis, it is important to provide the concrete technical information of water facilities of the two states for better navigation. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan share the transboundary Shu River, which supplies Kazakhstan's Zhambyl and Turkestan oblasts; Kyrgyzstan's Naryn, Issyk-Kul and Chui oblasts; and Talas river, which flows through Kazakhstan's Zhambyl and Turkestan oblasts, as well as Kyrgyzstan's Talas oblast. In Kazakhstan, water is stored in the Tasotkel reservoir (with a design filling capacity of 620 million m³) and the Teris-Ashchybulak reservoir (159 million m³), both located in Zhambyl

oblast. Despite these reservoirs, Zhambyl oblast is 80% dependent on the water supplied from Kyrgyzstan, leading the Kazakh government to frequently raise the issue of constructing additional small and medium-scale reservoirs in the oblast (Vishnichenko, 2024).

On the Kyrgyz side, water is stored and supplied to Kazakhstan from the Toktogul reservoir (11 billion m³), the largest in the country and the entire region, located near Bishkek (Water Resources Service, 2022). This reservoir is used for both irrigation and energy purposes, as it houses the Toktogul hydroelectric station. Other significant water storage facilities are the Kirov reservoir (550 million m³) near Taraz city and the Orto-Tokoy Reservoir (470 million m³) near Issyk-Kul lake (CA Water Info, n.d.) (see Appendix B).

The analysis of Kazakh official discourse reveals that the Kazakh official discourse identifies water deficit, problems with access to and quality of drinking water, and rising ecological issues as the main concerns for the state's water security. However, as discussed further in the paper, the discourse of Kazakh-Kyrgyz hydropolitics, particularly in the agrarian Zhambyl oblast, rather shows that agriculture is the primary concern. This is evident through the dominant "agriculture-as-a-main-concern" narrative present in all four cases from both sides. Another common narrative visible in both states' discourses is that of brotherly/good-neighbor relations, emphasizing that despite tensions over water, both states tend to secure bilateral relations due their mutual understanding of their mutual interdependence. Other distinctive narratives on both sides are autonomy of citizens, ecology, technical/material, water dependency, adherence to commitments, and power dynamics.

4.2. 2010: Border closing after the Revolution

The first case highlights the agricultural and technical/material narratives used in both Kazakh and Kyrgyz discourses. It illustrates the power dynamics between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, revealing that Kyrgyzstan, as an upstream riparian country, leverages its advantageous position by using water to pressure Kazakhstan.

In April 2010, following the second revolution in Kyrgyzstan that led to the resignation of Bakiyev and the establishment of Otunbayeva's provisional government, Kazakhstan closed its border with Kyrgyzstan on April 7th to prevent the spread of social unrest (Kosenov, 2010). The border closure lasted for over 40 days, resulting in significant economic losses and even fatalities in Kyrgyzstan (Bukeeva, 2010). In response, Kyrgyzstan stopped water supply to Kazakhstan, justifying it as necessary repair procedures, to pressure Kazakhstan into reopening the border, however (Bekeeva, 2010; *Podacha vody*, 2010; Moskovka, 2010). As a result, some border checkpoints were reopened within a few days (Moskovka, 2010).

Kazakh media widely used the agricultural as a concern narrative, emphasizing that the water supplied from Kyrgyzstan was mainly for irrigation, or “*вода для полива*” (Kosenov, 2010; *Podacha vody*, 2010; Bukeeva, 2010; Bekeeva, 2010). Through this narrative, Kazakh discourse focused on the damage to crops caused by the interruption of the water supply (Bukeeva, 2010). The media listed specific types of harvests that could be damaged by the water shortage (Kosenov, 2010), creating an image that Kyrgyzstan's actions in stopping the water supply were harming agriculture, and, consequently, the food security of Kazakhstan. This also shows how hydropolitics is interconnected to non-water issues, such as agriculture. Moreover, Kazakh official and media discourses framed the water as being used solely for irrigation, thereby avoiding discussions on the impact of water on infrastructure and socio-economic

factors. This narrative adopted a blaming tone, claiming that Kyrgyzstan stopped the water supply without any prior warnings (Kosenov, 2010; *Podacha vody*, 2010; Bekeeva, 2010). In contrast, Kyrgyz official discourse describes the closure of borders by Kazakhstan after the Revolution as a blockade (Moskovka, 2010).

Another interesting aspect seen in the discourses of both states is the display of hydropolitics through material constructions, as pointed out by Ezbakhe & Bréthaut (2021). For instance, by providing technical details to the public and explaining in the media that water is supplied and discharged from the Kirov reservoir located on the Kyrgyz side, the frequent mentions emphasize the location of these facilities, implying Kyrgyz control over these resources. At the same time, the detailed explanation of technical aspects serves another function: by offering more technical detail to the public, both sides aim to provide accurate information to depoliticise the issue (*Podacha vody*, 2010).

In contrast, Kyrgyz media shortly described the situation, referring to and retelling the Kazakh media's accounts (Aalyev, 2010). Kyrgyz official discourse, however, emphasized a narrative of good-neighborliness and positive relationship with Kazakhstan. President Otunbaeva described the relationship with Kazakhstan as “close and brotherly” and “traditionally good” (Moskovka, 2010). This also revealed a power dynamics between the two states: “We are grateful to the government of Kazakhstan, President Nursultan Nazarbayev, for making such a strong-willed political decision to open three border checkpoints out of the existing eight” (*мы благодарны правительству Казахстана, президенту Нурсултану НАЗАРБАЕВУ за то, что было принято такое волевое политическое решение об открытии трех пропускных пограничных пунктов из существующих восьми*) (Moskovka, 2010). The narrative of good relationship was also reflected through Kyrgyz officials' agreement with the discourse of Kazakh

officials (Moskovka, 2010) regarding the closure of the border for security reasons (Kosenov, 2010). Hence, it could be seen that Kyrgyz official discourse was trying to avoid potential conflicts arising from the stoppage of the water supply by focusing on a positive relationship with Kazakhstan.

This 2010 case illustrates the interesting power dynamics in Kazakh-Kyrgyz hydropolitics. When Kazakhstan used border restrictions to express concern and possibly discontent with political changes in neighboring Kyrgyzstan, the latter used water as a tool to pressure Kazakhstan to reopen the border. However, official Bishkek was also very cautious regarding Kazakhstan, as evident in its narrative that emphasized good neighborliness, which implies the power gap between the two.

4.3. 2013: Border delimitation and demarcation issue

This case also uses previously discussed “agriculture-as-a-main-concern” and “good-neighborliness” narratives but introduces a unique element by incorporating the narrative of citizen autonomy in water relations. In this instance, water was stopped by Kyrgyz villagers in *Kok-Sai* near the border with Kazakhstan. On July 7, 2013, these citizens blocked the interstate water utility “*Bystrotok*”, justifying their actions by alleging that Kyrgyz government had illegally transferred land to Kazakhstan. Among their social and political demands, the villagers called for the return of the land to Kyrgyzstan and for the border to be determined by the riverbed. The situation created tensions between the governments, involving diplomatic missions and even the prime ministers. As a result, the water supply was resumed after ten days, on July 17.

As in the first case, the agriculture-as-a-concern narrative was widely used in both Kazakh official and media discourses, focusing on irrigation water and potential damage to the harvest (Kosenov, 2013; V Kyrgyzstane, 2013; Lakhanuly, 2013; *Glavy Pravitel'stv*, 2013; *SROCHNO: V*, 2013). Additionally, the Kazakh official stance, represented by the Kazakh Embassy in Kyrgyzstan, used this narrative to securitize the situation, claiming that the stoppage of water supply not only damaged Kazakh crops but also affected Kyrgyz villagers located downstream from the channel (*SROCHNO: V*, 2013). By using these narratives, the Kazakh side raised food and agriculture security issues, revealing the broad range of concerns inherent in hydropolitics.

Moreover, Kazakh official discourse employed the narrative of adherence to commitments and good-neighborliness to signal to the Kyrgyz side the discontent and the necessity to resolve the issue. The Kazakh Embassy in Kyrgyzstan stated that: “the current situation at the interstate water utility “*Bystrotok*” does not correspond to the spirit of the Treaty of Eternal Friendship ... dated April 8, 1997, as well as the Treaty on Allied Relations ... dated December 25, 2003.” (*SROCHNO: V*, 2013). By referring to specific agreements and describing the water stoppage as the “current situation”, Kazakh officials tried to maintain a neutral tone while conveying their concerns. Additionally, the Kazakh official discourse described the actions of the Kyrgyz villagers as “illegal” (*SROCHNO: V*, 2013), using a blaming tone and emphasizing that these actions contradicted existing agreements on water resources between the two countries.

As a result of the conflict, Kazakh officials began to use the narrative of achieving water independence from Kyrgyzstan by reconstructing the channel to bypass the Kyrgys section (*RK perestroit*, 2013). Moreover, this case presented another unique feature: Kazakh officials openly acknowledged using border restrictions as a way to pressure Kyrgyzstan in water relations. They stated: “We were ready to take tough and adequate measures, including restricting the import and

transit of goods through our territory” (*Мы были готовы принять жесткие адекватные меры, вплоть до ограничения ввоза и транзита товаров через нашу территорию*) (*RK perestroit*, 2013).

However, a different and new narrative emerged in both Kazakh and Kyrgyz discourses: the autonomy of citizens in managing water resources, a concept not used in other cases. Firstly, it shows how hydropolitics is influenced not only by the state but also by individuals, in this case, ordinary citizens. This highlights that water politics can be driven by citizens who can affect water and even border relations between states. Secondly, this case shows how hydropolitics includes issues not related but interconnected with water, such as border delimitation and demarcation. Kazakh media discourse used the narrative of the autonomy of Kyrgyz villagers to shift focus by blaming the citizens, not the government, while also framing the Kyrgyz government’s inability to resolve the issue. Kazakh media claimed that: “The government of Kyrgyzstan cannot force local residents to open water to Kazakhstan” (*Правительство Кыргызстана не может заставить местных жителей открыть воду в Казахстан*) (Kosenov, 2013). Meanwhile, Kyrgyz discourse used this narrative to shift responsibility for stopping the water to the villagers rather than solving the underlying problems that led to this tension (Niyazova, 2013). Notably, both Kazakh and Kyrgyz discourses used a common blaming tone towards the citizens of *Kok-Sai* for stopping the water supply (Kosenov, 2013; Niyazova, 2013; *RK perestroit*, 2013; Vybornova, 2013; *SROCHNO: V*, 2013; Gruzdov, 2013). The unified stance of the two states can be explained by the highly sensitive political context of the situation: the implementation of the border settlement results. Both governments were keen to avoid any challenges to these results. Importantly, the Kyrgyz side needed to demonstrate its commitment and adherence to the newly established border agreements.

Nonetheless, as this case has demonstrated, issues not always directly related to water may significantly influence hydropolitics. Moreover, ordinary people may also play a role in these dynamics. acknowledges the influence of social and domestic factors affecting water relations. Therefore, these aspects cannot be ignored if efficient water politics are to be achieved between states.

4.4. 2017: Personal quarrel between Nazarbayev and Atambayev

The third case shows how personal relations between heads of states can affect hydropolitics. The quarrel between Kazakh president Nazarbayev and Kyrgyz president Atambayev in 2017 began when Nazarbayev met with Kyrgyz presidential candidate Omurbek Babanov, a businessman with close ties to Kazakh business, during the election race in Kyrgyzstan. This meeting was perceived as favoritism towards a specific candidate, prompting Atambayev to accuse Nazarbayev of interfering in Kyrgyzstan's internal affairs. Atambayev's criticism escalated, leading Kazakhstan to impose administrative barriers and border restrictions, which some claimed were revenge for Atambayev's statements. The strained relations resulted in an exchange of harsh diplomatic notes and statements between official representatives (*Bishkek "nedoumevaet"*, 2017), and finally led to threats from Atambayev to cut off the water supply along the Shu and Talas Rivers, reminding of the 2010 case (Aibek kyzy, 2017).

This case highlights power dynamics and the narrative of water dependence. It is significant as it shows a shift in Kyrgyz discourse, openly admitting the use of water as leverage and viewing Kazakh border restrictions as a blockade. Atambayev admitted that Kyrgyzstan uses water to pressure Kazakhstan: "When I turned off the water for two days, they immediately reopened the borders. There are 2.5 months left until spring" (*Когда я на 2 дня вырубил воду -*

сразу открыли границы. До весны осталось 2,5 месяца) (*Press-konferentsiia*, 2017). He also described the border closure as a “blockade”: “Kazakhstan put us under blockade”, “these six years are two blockades (referring to 2010 case)” (*Press-konferentsiia*, 2017). This created a Kyrgyz narrative of Kazakhstan’s water dependency.

In response, Kazakh discourse emphasized water as a shared resource and adherence to commitments. Both Kazakh media and official discourses used a narrative of water being a shared resource (*O sbrose*, 2017): “There is no provision for water to be sold” (*Нет такого положения, чтобы воду продавали.*), “We share the water, there is no charge for it” (*Мы делим воду, никакой платы за нее нет*) (*O sbrose*, 2017). To support this narrative, both media and official sources referred to the Agreements of 1983, 2001 and international agreements on use of transboundary rivers, thereby reinforcing the adherence to the commitments narrative (*Ministr Myrzakhmetov*, 2017; *O sbrose*, 2017). This demonstrates the continuity of Kazakh discourse treating water as a common regional priority.

While Kyrgyz discourse used a narrative of uneven distribution of water (*Podolskaya*, 2017; *Beishenbek kyzy*, 2017), claiming that “Almost 90 percent of its volume is spent on the needs of Kazakhstan” (*Почти 90 процентов его объема тратится на нужды Казахстана*) (*Kostenko*, 2017), it also highlighted Kazakhstan’s water dependency (*Kostenko*, 2017). This shows that Kyrgyzstan recognizes Kazakhstan’s dependence on water and uses this leverage to pressure Kazakhstan, revealing an interesting power dynamic where not only Kazakhstan can put pressure on smaller Kyrgyzstan.

Additionally, Kazakh and Kyrgyz media tended to politicize the quarrel involving water resources (*Kostenko*, 2017; *Podolskaya*, 2017; *Beishenbek kyzy*, 2017; *Mamashuly*, 2017). Although official representatives from both sides abstained from open confrontation, they

claimed that the worsened Kazakh-Kyrgyz relations, repairs at the Kirov reservoir, and border restrictions were not connected (*O sbrose*, 2017; Kostenko, 2017). Nevertheless, a subtle narrative of good relations and neighborliness remained visible even through the tense relations. Kazakh officials (*O sbrose*, 2017) claimed that water from the Kirov reservoir would be released gradually: “They will drain gradually, they are not enemies” (*Спускать они будут постепенно, не враги же*) (*Kazakhstan gotov*, 2017), emphasizing that despite the tension and personal quarrels, maintaining good relations between the states is a priority.

Notably, both Kazakh and Kyrgyz discourses in this case used a third-party narrative by referring to external parties. Kazakh officials acknowledged “some dependence” (*Ministr Myrzakhmetov*, 2017) on water resources supplied from Kyrgyzstan, but at the same time highlighted Uzbekistan’s dependence on water supplied from Kyrgyzstan as well: “then this will also affect the interests of Uzbekistan” (*то это затронет также и интересы Узбекистана*) (*Ministr Myrzakhmetov*, 2017). On the other hand, the Kyrgyz official discourse refers to another party, Russia. As Atambayev stated: “I recently spoke with my friend, President of Great Russia Putin. I said, if you need this, the EAEU, then you can no longer calmly watch as it falls apart.” (*Я недавно разговаривал со своим другом, президентом Великой России Путиным. Я сказал, если вам это надо, ЕАЭС, то вам больше нельзя наблюдать спокойно, как его разваливают*) (*Press-konferentsiia*, 2017). He also emphasized that resolving the conflict between Astana and Bishkek was needed for Russia. This shows that in the hydropolitics between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, both discourses attempted to use power dynamics by involving other states, suggesting that some hydropolitical conflicts can have broader regional implications. Additionally, Atambayev’s statements demonstrate how hydropolitics intersects

with non-water related issues, such as economic interactions within the Eurasian Economic Union.

4.5. 2023: Zhambyl Drought

During the recent drought period in summer in 2023, both Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan experienced water scarcity due to high temperature that affected the agricultural sector and led to economic cost. In July, during unusually high temperatures in the southern agrarian region, the Kazakh Ministry of Agriculture signed an agreement with Kyrgyzstan to increase water supply, in order to save the harvest. These measures could lead to water shortage in August as it was warned by Kyrgyz side. According to Kazakh officials, these measures saved about 99% of the harvest (*Informatsiia k*, 2023) and were required to not lose the greater amount of harvest in July. As a result, drought in Zhambyl oblast in August started, leading to crop loss, social discontent, a state of emergency, resulting in Kazakhstan imposing border restrictions to Kyrgyzstan. This case resulted in a great amount of discourse from both sides, using usual agriculture, good relations, adherence to commitments, water dependency of Kazakhstan narratives but also in the first time ecology and water shortage narratives. While overall, Kazakh discourse had a blaming tone towards Kyrgyzstan accusing it for the water shortage, Kyrgyz side had a justifying tone in response to accusations. Kazakh discourse used “agriculture-as-a-main-concern” narrative, to create a blaming tone towards Kyrgyzstan in Kazakh media (Isabekova, 2023; Bassarova, 2023; Ulitin, 2023; Yampolskaya, 2023; Bolysbek, 2023). While both Kazakh and Kyrgyz media tended to connect the water shortage and border restrictions (Bassarova, 2023; *Tokaev poruchil*, 2023), in contrast Kazakh and Kyrgyz officials were trying to avoid politicization of the water shortage.

Both Kazakh and Kyrgyz officials were using the “agriculture-as-a-main-concern” narrative combined with the water shortage narrative. Official discourse described it through words choice: “low water” (*маловодье*) and “low water inflow” (*низкая приточность*) (*Kak raspredeliaetsia*, 2023; *V Kazakhstane*, 2023; *Informatsiia k*, 2023; *V Minsel'khoze*, 2023). Kazakh media, describing the water shortage, used highly emotional language: “acute water shortage”, “critical water situation”, “serious shortage of irrigation water”, “actually does not receive a drop from the neighboring republic” (Bassarova, 2023; *Voda iz*, 2023; Ulitin, 2023). While the official Kazakhs discourse was also implying the fault of Kyrgyzstan in the water shortage in Zhambyl oblast (*O vodokhoziaistvennoi*, 2023).

Kyrgyz official discourse, beside emphasizing that the Kazakh side knew the possible consequences of overusing the limit in July, also used the water shortage narrative: “but there is no water. If there was, we would give it. We also need a lot of water, but if there is no water, what should we do now?” (*но воды же нет. Была бы - мы бы дали. Нам тоже много воды надо, но если нет воды, что теперь делать?*) (*Kak raspredeliaetsia*, 2023). That discourse was used to show the effect of hydropolitics on agriculture and food security, resulting in social discontent. While, Kazakh official discourse had a more reserved tone, admitting to signing the document in order to lower the tension between two states on a water basis (*Zhambylskim fermeram*, 2023). Kyrgyz discourse was also focusing on “agriculture-as-a-main-concern” narrative in reference to Kyrgyz farmers suffering from the water shortage as well (*Pochemu Kyrgyzstan*, 2023). Moreover, officials and media emphasized that Kyrgyz side fulfilled its commitments referring to the agreement that was signed in July (*Kak raspredeliaetsia*, 2023), in response to blaming tone and social discontent that was spread in Kazakh media space. Notable Kyrgyz discourse also have a narrative of water being giving to Kazakhstan: “There is no

drainage of water to Kazakhstan, we do not drain it” (*никакого слива воды в Казахстан нет, мы ее не сливаем*) (*Iz Orto-Tokoiskogo*, 2023). This is the result of long-lasting social discontent of Kyrgyz villagers which themselves experience water shortage during the vegetation period, so they suspect water given for free to Kazakhstan (Titova & Tokoeva, 2021). Therefore, it shows that the hydropolitics discourse also covers domestic issues of the state, targeting a domestic audience. The subsequent closing of the Kazakh border was discussed by Kyrgyz side as a blockade and resulted in Kyrgyz media to connect the water and border issues (*Kyrgyzskii akademik*, 2023).

Notably, in this case both sides started to use the ecology narrative (*Prodavat' ili*, 2023; *Informatsiia k*, 2023; *Iz-za nekhvatki*, 2023) to show how global warming could be the reason for the water shortage and possible tension between states on water resources. The ecology narrative was further visible in the annual address to the nation by Tokayev, reflecting the Kazakh official discourse in water security (Tokayev, 2023). Moreover, the drought resulted in creation of a new Ministry of Water Resources and Irrigation (Tokayev, 2023). It shows that hydropolitics in the recent ecological crisis is now being interconnected to global warming. Despite the tension with water and borders, the overall narrative of good-neighborhood and brotherhood is still visible even in this drought period (*Glava gosudarstva*, 2023).

Thus, the case shows the effect of climate change on hydropolitics between states, that led to the drought period. While also showing the way of Kazakhstan to use border restrictions to “punish” Kyrgyzstan for water shortage. This represents the power dynamics of their bilateral relations.

Conclusion

In the conclusion could be seen that the discourse analysis shows that hydropolitics of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan is closely related to agriculture. This also shows that hydropolitics raises non-water related issues such as food security, economic consequences, border issues and social discontent. Kazakh-Kyrgyz hydropolitics is also characterized by a non-centred approach, as a local population, as in the second case of 2013, plays a significant role in water relations of states. As well as personal relations of officials, as in 2017 case, may also affect the hydropolitics between states. Additionally the cases showed an increase in issues of climate change that results in water shortage and drought through using “ecology narrative”.

Moreover, the analysis showed the way power interplay between states through the hydropolitics. States tend to use their geographical positions and resources as a leverage to pressure each other in critical situations. It shows that it is not only Kazakhstan, being a more powerful state, is using its geographical location and dependency of Kyrgyzstan from the border of Kazakhstan, to put the administrative barrier as leverage to pressure Kyrgyzstan, or “punish” it. But also relatively smaller Kyrgyzstan uses its water resources and dependency of downstream Kazakhstan from transboundary rivers, to pressure it to open the borders. This leads to the politicization of water resources affecting hydropolitics between states. Therefore, the analysis shows the clear lack of cooperation between states but rather the competition through “agriculture-as-a-main-concern” narrative for the water resources.

Most importantly these crises show lack of regulations or interstate bodies to resolve water issues between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Despite four crises in 13 years, from micro to macro conflicts on the water basis still not a crisis mitigation framework or interstate body were created. However, the increasing global climate challenges (global warming, glaciers melting,

pollution) will worsen the situation and threaten stability in the region, lead to more severe crises with water shortage and even escalate into military conflict between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan.

Thus, perspectives for further research could be developing a deeper investigation of the Kyrgyz water discourse through library research, as well as extending the study to Uzbekistan, another downstream country.

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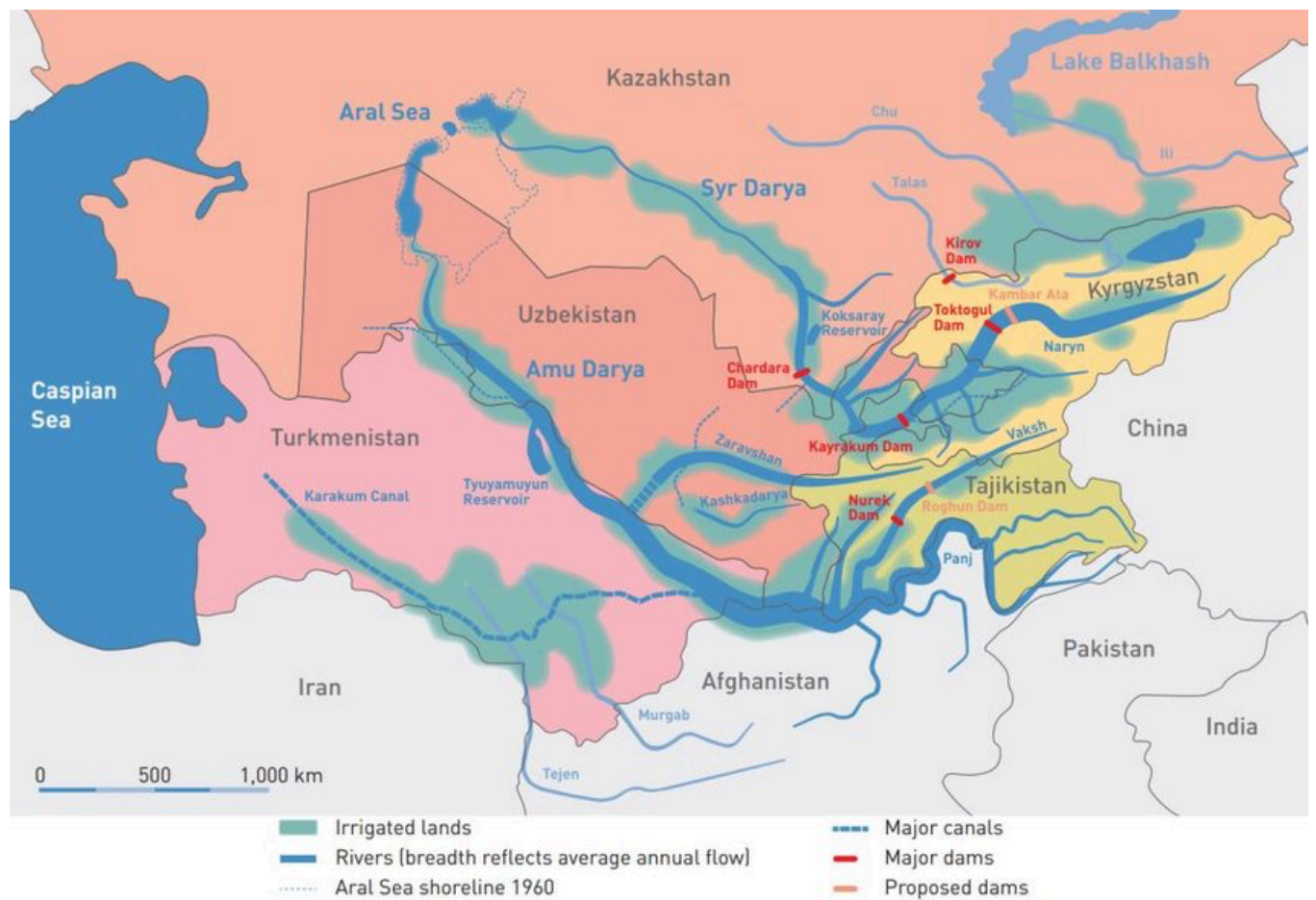
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Appendix A

Map of water resources in Central Asia



Source: Zoï Environment Network. (2018). Water resource use in Central Asia. [Map].

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Appendix B

Map of Shu and Talas Rivers



Source: Philip Rekasevich. (2003). Map of Shu and Talas Rivers. [Map].

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