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REGIONAL IDENTITY AS AN INSTITUTIONAL PROCESS: COMPARING THE NORDIC REGION AND CENTRAL ASIA

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ABOUT ARTICLE

Key words: regional identity, comparative regionalism, Nordic cooperation, Central Asia, constructivism, security community, historical institutionalism, consultative diplomacy.

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Abstract: The article examines how regional identity develops through institutions and repeated cooperation in the Nordic region and Central Asia. The aim is to explain how institutions turn cultural affinity and material interdependence into durable expectations of cooperation and to identify which elements of the Nordic experience are relevant for Central Asia. The study uses a structured, focused comparison that combines constructivism, security-community theory and historical institutionalism within a comparative-regionalism framework. The analysis follows five dimensions: historical narratives, societal connectivity, institutional density, functional interdependence and the external geopolitical environment. Nordic cooperation shows how consensus, administrative continuity, mobility and social rights connect cultural affinity with everyday practice. In Central Asia, post-1991 state-building shaped the early stage of cooperation, while the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State launched in 2018 strengthened regional ownership of the agenda. The comparison identifies a conditional mechanism through which reliable cooperation generates trust and shared expectations that legitimise further institutional development. The author proposes directions for administrative continuity, transparency, mobility and functional cooperation in Central Asia, with national sovereignty retained as a governing principle.

MINTAQAVIY IDENTIKLIK INSTITUTSIONAL JARAYON SIFATIDA: SHIMOLIY YEVROPA VA MARKAZIY OSIYONING QIYOSIY TAHLILI

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MAQOLA HAQIDA

Kalit so‘zlar: mintaqaviy identiklik, qiyosiy mintaqashunoslik, Shimoliy Yevropa hamkorligi, Markaziy Osiyo, konstruktivizm, xavfsizlik hamjamiyati, tarixiy institutsionalizm, maslahatlashuv diplomatiyasi.

Annotatsiya: Maqolada Shimoliy Yevropa va Markaziy Osiyoda mintaqaviy identiklikning institutlar va muntazam hamkorlik orqali shakllanishi qiyosiy o‘rganiladi. Maqsad institutlar madaniy yaqinlik va moddiy o‘zaro bog‘liqlikni hamkorlikka oid barqaror kutilmalarga qanday aylantirishini tushuntirish hamda Shimoliy Yevropa tajribasining Markaziy Osiyo uchun ahamiyatli jihatlarini aniqlashdan iborat. Tadqiqotda konstruktivizm, xavfsizlik hamjamiyati nazariyasi va tarixiy institutsionalizmni qiyosiy mintaqashunoslik doirasida birlashtiruvchi tizimli, yo‘naltirilgan qiyoslash usuli qo‘llangan. Tahlil tarixiy narrativlar, jamiyatlararo aloqalar, institutsional zichlik, funksional o‘zaro bog‘liqlik va tashqi geosiyosiy muhit mezonlari bo‘yicha olib borilgan. Shimoliy Yevropa tajribasi konsensus, boshqaruvning izchilligi, aholi mobilligi va ijtimoiy huquqlar madaniy yaqinlikni kundalik amaliyot bilan bog‘lashini ko‘rsatadi. Markaziy Osiyoda hamkorlikning dastlabki bosqichi 1991-yildan keyingi davlat qurilishi bilan belgilangan, 2018-yilda boshlangan davlat rahbarlarining Maslahat uchrashuvlari esa mintaqaviy kun tartibini mustaqil shakllantirish imkoniyatini kuchaytirgan. Qiyoslash ishonchli hamkorlik o‘zaro ishonch va umumiy kutilmalarni yuzaga keltirib, keyingi institutsional rivojlanishni qonuniylashtirishi mumkinligini ko‘rsatadi. Muallif suverenitetni asosiy tamoyil sifatida saqlagan holda Markaziy Osiyoda boshqaruv izchilligi, shaffoflik, mobillik va funksional hamkorlikni rivojlantirish yo‘nalishlarini taklif etadi.

РЕГИОНАЛЬНАЯ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ КАК ИНСТИТУЦИОНАЛЬНЫЙ ПРОЦЕСС: СРАВНЕНИЕ СЕВЕРНОЙ ЕВРОПЫ И ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

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О СТАТЬЕ

Ключевые слова: региональная идентичность, сравнительный регионализм, северное сотрудничество, Центральная Азия, конструктивизм, сообщество безопасности, исторический институционализм, консультативная дипломатия.

Аннотация: В статье рассматривается формирование региональной идентичности через институты и регулярное сотрудничество в Северной Европе и Центральной Азии. Цель исследования – объяснить, каким образом институты превращают культурную близость и материальную взаимозависимость в устойчивые ожидания сотрудничества, и определить, какие элементы северного опыта значимы для Центральной Азии. Использован метод структурированного сфокусированного сравнения, объединяющий конструктивизм, теорию сообществ безопасности и исторический институционализм в рамках сравнительного регионализма. Анализ проводится по пяти измерениям: исторические нарративы, связи между обществами, институциональная плотность, функциональная взаимозависимость и внешняя геополитическая среда. Опыт Северной Европы показывает, как консенсус, преемственность управления, мобильность населения и социальные права связывают культурную близость с повседневной практикой. В Центральной Азии ранний этап сотрудничества определялся государственным строительством после 1991 г., а Консультативные встречи глав государств, начатые в 2018 г., укрепили региональную самостоятельность в формировании повестки. Сравнение выявляет условный механизм, при котором надёжное сотрудничество порождает доверие и общие ожидания, легитимирующие дальнейшее институциональное развитие. Автор предлагает направления укрепления административной преемственности, прозрачности, мобильности и функционального сотрудничества в Центральной Азии при сохранении

национального суверенитета как основополагающего принципа.

Introduction. Regional identity becomes politically consequential when shared belonging influences how states and societies organise cooperation. Geography and historical memory provide resources for this process, yet they do not explain why some regional relationships become predictable while others remain sensitive to changing political priorities. The analytical problem concerns the mechanisms through which cultural references and common interests acquire institutional continuity. This article understands regional identity as a historically contingent relationship between recognised membership, repeated interaction and expectations concerning the legitimate conduct of regional partners.

The Nordic region and Central Asia offer a comparison of distinct institutional trajectories. Denmark, Finland, Iceland, Norway and Sweden developed extensive cooperation without establishing a supranational federation. Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan share connected histories and infrastructural systems, and since 2018 they have been building a regular format of regional dialogue. Comparative regionalism requires such differences to be explained in their own political and historical settings; institutional resemblance to European arrangements cannot serve as the sole criterion for evaluating other regions [1].

The aim of the article is to explain how institutions convert cultural affinity and material interdependence into durable expectations of cooperation, and to draw from the Nordic experience conclusions that are relevant to the current stage of Central Asian cooperation. Three research questions guide the analysis: 1) through which mechanisms did Nordic cooperation acquire continuity and social reach; 2) which conditions shaped the trajectory of Central Asian cooperation after 1991 and after 2018; 3) which elements of the Nordic experience can be adapted to Central Asia while preserving national sovereignty. *The novelty* of the study lies in a conditional account of how five dimensions – historical narratives, societal connectivity, institutional density, functional interdependence and the external geopolitical environment – interact, and in the distinction between regional identity declared by political leaders and belonging experienced through everyday practices.

Literature review. Constructivism provides the starting point for understanding identity as a product of interaction. Wendt explains how shared understandings shape interests and alter the relationship between self and other; applied to regional cooperation, this perspective directs attention to changes in expectations rather than treating national preferences as permanently fixed [2]. Neumann’s region-building approach specifies the political work involved: regions acquire

meaning through naming, historical interpretation, institutional representation and practices that establish who belongs to a shared space [3].

Security-community scholarship connects shared identity with dependable expectations of peaceful change. Adler and Barnett emphasise learning, transactions, mutual responsiveness and trust as processes through which cooperation becomes normal political conduct [4]. Historical institutionalism adds a temporal explanation: established procedures preserve experience and structure later choices, while incremental change can redirect institutions without dismantling them. Mahoney and Thelen's framework therefore helps distinguish institutional continuity from the mere survival of organisational names [5].

Nordic historical scholarship questions explanations based on uninterrupted cultural unity. Hilson reconstructs a region shaped by national political development, social reform and changing relations among neighbouring states, which allows welfare arrangements, mobility and administrative cooperation to be examined as historically produced practices [6]. Its comparative value lies in explaining how national consolidation and regional cooperation became compatible. It also cautions against assuming that a recognisable Nordic identity implies uniform institutions or the absence of disagreement.

Central Asian studies locate cooperation within post-Soviet state formation. Cummings examines the transformation of political and economic institutions in the region after independence [7]. Allison shows how regional structures in the first post-Soviet decade served primarily as instruments of security management for newly independent states, which explains the gap between formal organisations and implementation [8]. Bohr connects regional structures with geopolitical continuities and competing approaches to regional order [9]. Costa Buranelli proposes interpreting Central Asian relations through the concept of regional order, bringing diplomacy, sovereignty and locally meaningful practices into the analysis; this approach accommodates cooperation and negotiation even where supranational integration is not on the agenda [10].

The literature thus presents a common problem across the cases: the relationship between institutional form and substantive interaction. At the same time, comparisons of the Nordic region and Central Asia remain rare, and existing studies seldom separate the institutional achievements of cooperation from public identification with the region. The present article addresses this gap by examining how political commitments reach administrative networks and societal actors.

Methodology. The study employs a structured, focused comparison and qualitative interpretation of institutional development. Following George and Bennett, the same theoretically relevant questions are applied to both cases while their historical differences are retained [11]. The cases share connected societies, sovereign states and exposure to stronger external powers. They differ in political systems, economic capacity, geopolitical setting and the timing of state

consolidation. These differences permit a comparison of mechanisms without treating the cases as equivalent observations or as successive stages of a single developmental path.

The five dimensions are examined through identifiable practices. Historical narratives concern representations of a shared past and recognition of internal diversity. Societal connectivity concerns mobility and educational, cultural and professional relationships. Institutional density is assessed through the regularity of contact, administrative continuity and follow-up procedures. Functional interdependence concerns common policy problems and the distribution of the costs and benefits of cooperation. The external dimension concerns the compatibility of regional arrangements with wider diplomatic, economic and security relationships. No numerical index is assigned to these dimensions.

The source base combines academic monographs and articles with official documents: the Helsinki Treaty of 1962, materials of the Nordic Council and the decisions of the Consultative Meetings of the Heads of State of Central Asia. The analysis separates formal commitments, documented arrangements and the author's comparative interpretations. The Central Asian case retains the five republics as its geographical core, while changes in the participation of the consultative format are considered separately. *Limitations.* The study does not measure mass identification through representative surveys; its conclusions identify plausible institutional mechanisms and do not establish an exclusive causal effect on public attitudes. Recommendations are presented as implications of the comparison and remain subject to implementation and empirical assessment.

Results. *The Nordic trajectory.* The Nordic case demonstrates the importance of historical sequence. Dynastic rivalry, shifting unions and competing nationalisms preceded modern cooperation. The Kalmar Union and nineteenth-century Scandinavianism supplied symbolic references, but contemporary regional institutions developed among states whose sovereignty was already consolidated. This sequence reduced the likelihood that cooperation would be interpreted as a challenge to statehood: national autonomy became a foundation on which shared procedures could accumulate.

Institutional development proceeded through limited, incremental arrangements. The Nordic Council, established in 1952, created a parliamentary arena; the Nordic Council of Ministers added intergovernmental coordination in 1971. Between them, the Helsinki Treaty of 1962 established a framework spanning legal, cultural, social, economic and transport cooperation and connected institutional coordination with the practical treatment of citizens and cross-border activities [12]. National implementation remained central, allowing cooperation to deepen without a centralised authority replacing member governments.

The chronology of Nordic cooperation also shows how practical arrangements preceded declarations of common identity. The common Nordic labour market was introduced in 1954, and passport-free travel between the Nordic states was established in the 1950s; both arrangements were in place before the Helsinki Treaty codified the principles of cooperation [12; 13]. Later agreements on social security, education and the recognition of qualifications extended the same logic. Citizens therefore encountered the region first through concrete rights – the possibility to work, study or receive benefits in a neighbouring country – and only then through symbolic statements about Nordic community.

Mobility gave this architecture a societal basis. Labour-market and passport arrangements, educational cooperation and social-security coordination made the region relevant to employment, study and family life. Strang's account shows how such arrangements coexist with changing national and European contexts [13]. Partial mutual intelligibility of Danish, Norwegian and Swedish facilitates some exchanges, while Finnish, Icelandic, Sámi and other languages require organised accommodation; translation, cultural funding and professional networks make internal diversity compatible with regional contact.

Trust also depends on the quality of institutions. Rothstein and Uslaner link generalised trust with equality and fair public administration, challenging explanations that attribute it solely to inherited culture [14]. The comparative implication is conditional: procedures that people experience as fair can support confidence beyond individual encounters. A mobility agreement may increase contact, yet unpredictable administration can weaken its effects. Institutional accessibility therefore matters alongside the number of agreements or the frequency of official meetings.

An external Nordic image subsequently developed around welfare, equality and peace. Browning demonstrates how such representations simplify a more varied political history [15]. Regional identity consequently remains open to debate, including over the inclusion of Sámi and Greenlandic communities. The Nordic external setting also illustrates cooperation through overlapping affiliations: national relationships with European integration and transatlantic security structures historically differed, yet regional arrangements remained useful because they could operate within these wider networks. Institutional compatibility proved more important than identical external memberships.

The Central Asian trajectory. Central Asia presents a different sequence. Turkic and Persianate interaction, Islamic scholarship, nomadic and sedentary exchange, imperial incorporation and Soviet administration provide connected histories. Independence in 1991 made language policy, historical self-understanding and border arrangements central to state-building, and regional connections developed alongside the consolidation of national identities. Their

political significance depended on how governments reconciled national legitimacy with recognition of a shared regional space.

In the 1990s and 2000s, regional agreements were often easier to sign than to embed in stable administrative routines. The priority of building new statehood, the limited number of agencies responsible for regional commitments and the overlapping membership of states in several Eurasian organisations reduced accumulated experience and complicated the ownership of common projects [8; 9]. These conditions explain how substantial interdependence could coexist with relatively thin mechanisms for resolving recurring practical problems.

External engagement adds opportunities as well as constraints. Russia retains close security, linguistic, migration and economic relationships with the region; China has expanded trade, energy cooperation and infrastructure finance; other partners have developed programmes in the “Central Asia plus” format. Cooley demonstrates that external influence is mediated by the priorities and bargaining strategies of Central Asian governments [16]. Multi-vector diplomacy therefore expresses agency, and regional consultation can improve coordination among national strategies while preserving the ability to engage several partners.

Material interdependence makes this coordination consequential. Landlocked economies depend on transit; water and energy systems cross borders; environmental pressures affect several states simultaneously. Pomfret’s economic analysis explains the interaction of transport connections, national policy choices and structural differences across the region [17]. New infrastructure may expand exchange, but its regional effects depend on access, technical standards and the distribution of benefits.

Renewed diplomacy after 2016 and the first Consultative Meeting of the Heads of State of Central Asia in Astana in 2018 initiated a new trajectory. Regular consultation strengthened regional ownership of the agenda and created a forum in which sovereign governments coordinate directly. Costa Buranelli identifies local norms and institutional practices that sustain this emerging order [18]. Its significance lies in making cooperation a recurrent expectation. The consultative format also shows that institutional reach and geographical identity need separate treatment: at the Seventh Consultative Meeting in Tashkent in November 2025, Azerbaijan became a full participant in the format [19]. This creates opportunities for interregional connections without changing the five-state geographical core used in this study.

The format has acquired a stable rhythm. After the first meeting in Astana in 2018, the heads of state met in Tashkent (2019), Avaza (2021), Cholpon-Ata (2022), Dushanbe (2023), Astana (2024) and again in Tashkent (2025). Rotation of the venue among the participating states, joint statements on transport, water, energy and education, and the gradual addition of sectoral meetings of ministers indicate a transition from declarations towards a more regular institutional

practice [18; 19]. The next step, discussed below, concerns the continuity of this practice between summits.

Table 1 summarises the comparison. Its central distinction concerns the depth and social reach of institutional practice: Nordic cooperation accumulated across parliamentary, ministerial and administrative networks, with mobility connecting it to everyday life, while Central Asian consultation has renewed political coordination and is now developing its sectoral and societal foundations.

Table 1. Comparative dimensions of regional identity in the Nordic region and Central Asia

Dimension	Nordic region	Central Asia	Implication
Historical narratives	Plural memory alongside consolidated national identities	Connected histories interpreted through post-1991 nation-building	Shared history requires inclusive interpretation
Institutions	Parliamentary, ministerial and administrative continuity	Summit-level consultation since 2018 and developing sectoral coordination	Continuity reduces uncertainty
Societal ties	Established mobility, educational and labour networks	Dense informal ties; institutional support is expanding	Usable opportunities strengthen belonging
Functional ties	Cooperation embedded in services, welfare and mobility	Shared transport, water, energy and ecological systems	Fair implementation can generate trust
External setting	Overlapping European and transatlantic frameworks	Multi-vector relations with several major partners	Regional ownership supports open regionalism
Identity trajectory	Layered community sustained through practice	Emerging cooperation compatible with sovereignty	Assessment requires historical context

Discussion. The comparison identifies a conditional cycle. A shared agenda enables repeated contact; reliable implementation produces benefits and professional relationships; these experiences strengthen expectations of future cooperation, which in turn increase the legitimacy of additional commitments. The cycle can also slow down: declarations that are not followed by implementation generate scepticism, and benefits concentrated among a narrow group leave wider identification unchanged. The identity effects of cooperation therefore depend on institutional reliability and the social distribution of opportunities.

The main task of the current stage of Central Asian cooperation is the movement from presidential agreement to administrative and societal continuity. Ministries need shared records, clear responsibilities and reliable channels for resolving technical questions. Universities, businesses, municipalities and professional associations need accessible opportunities to

participate; their involvement sustains relationships between summits. Water and energy cooperation illustrates the distinction between recognising a common problem and organising a common response: joint monitoring, predictable communication and agreed procedures for reviewing commitments make differences of interest manageable. Regional identity, in this interpretation, gives such questions a shared political setting; it does not replace negotiated procedures.

Transferring Nordic lessons requires adaptation. Acharya's account of norm localisation explains how external ideas gain relevance when actors reconstruct them through existing beliefs and practices [20]. For Central Asia, incremental commitments can preserve sovereign control while creating dependable procedures. Customs interoperability, transport information, disaster response and recognition of education offer areas for practical coordination, whereas more sensitive issues may require flexible consultation; progress in one field need not depend on agreement in every other. On this basis, the author proposes the directions summarised in Table 2.

Table 2. Directions for strengthening the institutional basis of Central Asian cooperation (author's proposal)

Direction	Possible instruments	Criteria for assessment
Administrative continuity	A compact coordination mechanism linking national focal points; preservation of institutional records between summits	Share of agreed activities with a responsible agency and deadline
Transparency	Annual public report on implementation; a shared digital platform with agreements and transport information	Availability and regular updating of information
Mobility and education	Joint degree programmes, recognition of qualifications, youth and professional exchanges	Participation, recognition and continuity of exchanges
Functional cooperation	Joint water monitoring, seasonal energy coordination, emergency communication	Use of shared data and timeliness of information exchange
Shared history	Joint archives and translation projects that present connected histories alongside national narratives	Number of joint publications and their use in education
Evaluation	Published baselines, methods and limitations for each programme	Comparability of assessments over time

Evaluation should distinguish institutional activity from outcomes. Holding a meeting or launching a website establishes that an activity occurred; it does not demonstrate improved access or confidence. The criteria in Table 2 are therefore proposed as possible indicators rather than

reports of measured achievements. Societal participation would require sustained support rather than occasional events, and programmes should take account of differences in administrative and financial capacity so that participation remains accessible to all five states. Future research should test these mechanisms through surveys, interviews, network analysis and sectoral studies; identification with the region may vary with age, language, occupation and mobility, and the direction of causality between identification and cooperation remains an empirical question.

Conclusion. The comparison provides answers to the research questions. First, Nordic cooperation acquired continuity through consensus, incremental institution-building, administrative implementation at the national level and mobility arrangements that made regional rights usable in everyday life; its durability reflects the repeated management of political differences as well as cultural affinity. The case remains historically specific, which limits its value as a model for direct replication.

Second, Central Asia follows a distinct trajectory shaped by post-independence state-building, interdependence in transport, water and energy and multi-vector external relations. The Consultative Meetings initiated in 2018 strengthened direct dialogue and regional ownership of the agenda and turned cooperation into a regular expectation. Third, the elements of the Nordic experience that are most relevant for Central Asia are not specific institutions but principles: continuity of administration between summits, accessible opportunities for citizens and organisations, transparent implementation and gradual expansion of cooperation in areas of tangible common benefit, with national sovereignty retained as a governing principle.

The principal theoretical conclusion is conditional and recursive. Institutions structure interaction and expectations, and identification with a shared region can subsequently support further cooperation; neither outcome is automatic. Central Asian regional development should therefore be assessed through continuity and public relevance, with attention to sovereignty, the diversity of national paths and the changing external environment.

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