

## Mediating Power: Media Frames and the Representation of China–Central Asia Relations in Kyrgyzstan

Zhanara **Akmatbekova**\*

*Institute of Journalism and Communication  
Jusup Balasagyn Kyrgyz National University, Kyrgyz Republic*

Aina **Duishekeeva**\*\*

*Institute of Journalism and Communication  
Jusup Balasagyn Kyrgyz National University, Kyrgyz Republic*

Mehmet **Albayrak**\*\*\*

*Institute of Social Sciences  
Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University, Kyrgyz Republic*

**Liu Tongtong**\*\*\*\*

*College of Journalism and Communication  
Luoyang Normal University, People's Republic of China*

Zheng **Xi**\*\*\*\*\*

*College of Humanities and Social Sciences  
Luoyang Institute of Technology, People's Republic of China*

### Abstract

The study aims to address Sino-Central Asian political and diplomatic cooperation through the prism of quantitative analysis of information presented in the newspaper Evening Bishkek (Вечерний Бишкек). The main methods used were statistical, which was employed to address various indicators of media consumption in the region, and framing analysis, which formulated the specifics of information presentation in Kyrgyz media resources. The study determined that after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the emergence of new independent republics, the situation on the continent began to change and transform rapidly. New mechanisms and

vectors of interaction, communications and scenarios for strengthening interstate contacts began to emerge. However, many aspects have remained unchanged, such as the cooperation between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Central Asian countries. Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan continued to strengthen cooperation in their newly independent status, expanding the areas of mutually beneficial relations. At the turn of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, the mass media began to play a key role in shaping the information agenda. The newspaper Evening Bishkek, which is one of the most popular news sources for Kyrgyz residents, has a diverse approach to covering the specifics of China's cooperation with the countries of the region. The results of the analysis of the information on the issue under study for the first six months of 2023 show that this publication presents news in a very diverse way, with most of it devoted to political, diplomatic and military aspects of cooperation. The study results can be used as a practical basis for developing strategies and roadmaps for shaping foreign policy.

**Keywords:** *International Cooperation, Multilateral Projects, Information Agenda, News Reports, Interaction Strategies*

## 1. Introduction

Political cooperation and diplomatic contacts are the fundamental principles of developing harmonious interstate relations, and this factor became especially relevant at the end of the twentieth century, during the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the creation of new republics on its territory. In the first decades of the 21st century, the mass media was central in shaping the necessary conditions for the processes of state formation and strengthening international relations, not only transforming the agenda but also influencing public opinion. The study of international cooperation and the reflection of its results in media resources is a key and highly relevant issue for discussion at all levels of national and international governance. The way the most popular media outlets present the situation in the political and diplomatic arena determines not only the future of these relations but also the development of states in general.

Addressing the dynamics of the development of interstate contacts at all levels in the vast majority of countries, as well as the presence of many difficulties, obstacles and hidden threats that occur in connection with the formation of transparent and trusting relations between countries, the issues of correct information policy regarding the results of international events are highly important in the third millennium. The responsibility for the news agenda lies entirely with the media, which, with the support of responsible government officials and by carefully monitoring and analysing the situation, must adequately and professionally convey the essence and meaning of foreign policy events. This issue is especially relevant for Central Asia, a region that is at the intersection of the strategic interests of many of the world's leading countries, and the activities of media resources there should be honest, free and open to criticism. Therefore, it is crucial to carefully consider the specifics of the news broadcasting of a local information source to analyse its activities and principles of content creation in the field of political and diplomatic relations.

The initial half of 2023 was characterized by a multifaceted global economic landscape, with trade and investment activity witnessing moderate development. According to the WTO, world merchandise trade volume declined by 1.2 per cent in 2023, although commercial services trade increased by 9 per cent (World Trade Organization, 2024). Geopolitical concerns, particularly the conflict in Ukraine, and increasing global protectionism have affected this sluggish growth. Notwithstanding the global recession, commerce between China and Central Asian nations has shown significant expansion. During the initial half of 2023, China's exports to Central Asia totalled roughly \$26.4 billion, while imports approached almost USD13.5 billion (Burke, 2023). This increase signifies a fortifying economic partnership between China and Central Asia. The initial half of 2023 offers a distinctive and pertinent timeframe for investigation concerning commerce and investment between China and Central Asia. The divergent trends – global trade stagnation and regional growth – provide significant insights into how particular geopolitical and economic links may affect trade patterns, even in the face of overarching economic difficulties.

According to Paramonov (2023), the globalisation context for the development of cooperation between Central Asian countries and major international players, primarily the People's Republic of China (PRC), lies in the formation of a well-functioning and strictly controlled infrastructure of political, economic and military interaction on the continent. Chinese strategy of expanding influence in the West includes, in addition to direct influence on European states, an indirect “offensive” through Central Asian countries, and according to Tabynbayev et al. (2023), Kyrgyzstan is one of the key players among these countries. China's public diplomacy, which is characterised by “soft” influence with a strong cultural dimension, according to Burcu and Boni (2022), indicates Beijing's intentions to be present in all spheres of another state's life, and this is especially true for the national information policy concerning China. At the same time, there was no in-depth analysis of China's foreign policy in Central Asia in comparison with similar activities of other states, such as Russia and the United States.

Framing analysis as a method of identifying specific features and peculiarities of material presentation in textual data sets is most often applied in the study of news reports, which, according to the findings of Obi et al. (2021), is quite effective and practical, especially when considering a relatively short period. To create an ideologically “correct” information message, many countries utilise the power of the media by establishing good and mutually beneficial relationships with them and according to Qi (2023), in the third millennium, social media and mobile applications have become a tool for shaping public sentiment. However, the works of these experts did not address the situation of the local population's disagreement with some aspects of Chinese expansion.

The analysis of cooperation between Central Asian states in the sphere of interstate and interagency cooperation is best done by studying news reports in the most widely circulated information resources, among which local sources play a major role in the formation of a particular image of the partner country, which Dadakhonov (2024) called a key advantage over foreign media. The media landscape of Kyrgyzstan is a dynamic and flexible system that strives to adapt to global challenges and follow global trends. According to Toralieva and

Dragomir (2019), traditional print media are the most prominent in the field of information and news agenda in the context of cooperation of the state as an individual unit and within the region, whilst according to Alymbaeva and Alimakhunov (2021) those are digital resources and materials, whereas according to Duishonbaeva et al. (2021) use mobile and online applications. However, the aspect of combining these tools in political and diplomatic information activities was not addressed.

The study aims to examine the specifics of cooperation between China and Central Asian countries by analysing the specifics of the presentation of information on this issue in the media, namely of the newspaper Evening Bishkek.

The objectives of the study were to form a general idea of the quality of cooperation between China and Central Asian states; summarise global positive trends and negative aspects of China-Kyrgyzstan cooperation; analyse the specifics and create a holistic picture of the quality and tone of content in the Kyrgyz media on China's cooperation with the countries of the region, in particular, on the example of the electronic publication Evening Bishkek.

## **2. Materials and Methods**

During this study, quantitative data was presented through the analysis of many specific features of the topic under consideration, as well as by selecting data according to specified criteria, which ultimately formed the sample of the research paper. To determine the reasons for the emergence of cooperation between China and Central Asian countries, the main trends and dynamics of cooperation between these states were considered—both within the framework of bilateral interaction and based on various projects (Chinese megaprojects are back in fashion in the poorest countries of Central Asia (Ricklton, 2024), China and Central Asia paint a new picture of the future of international relations: global Times editorial (China, Central Asia..., 2024) based on the Central Asia platform. During preparation for this study, the purpose, the subject of the work, the main stages of its development, the factors influencing the dynamics of processes

within its boundaries, as well as the initial data for evaluation were determined, the period was set, and a specific sample was formed as preliminary material.

Based on the quantitative indicators obtained, the intensity and frequency of use of certain keywords in different periods, as well as in the overall period under study, were analysed. Practical recommendations were formulated and presented – both for news content developers and responsible government agencies – accounting for the developments in the sector and increasing the intensity of joint activities between the media and the state. As the main scientific approach of this work, a specific mechanism of framework evaluation of text arrays was used to identify the most striking features and descriptions. In the context of the framework analysis of text arrays, there are 7 stages of framing analysis of news information presented in the media (see Table 1).

**Table 1.** Stages of the framing analysis of news items presented in the media

Stage	Basic principle	Correspondence in the study
1	Select a specific source of information (electronic publication, print media resource, social media channel, or group)	The electronic resource selected is the newspaper Evening Bishkek
2	Determine the time frame – the specific period that will be considered in the research paper	The timeframe of the study has been determined – January-June 2023
3	Sample – a certain part, volume, or number of units that make up the general object of research	The sample is textual materials only
4	Outline the unit of research – the keyword/phrase or keywords/phrases to be searched	The research units are outlined: “China”, “People’s Republic of China”, “PRC”, “Kyrgyzstan”, “Kazakhstan”, “Uzbekistan”, “Tajikistan”, “Turkmenistan”, “Central Asia” and their derivatives
5	Define the criteria for the analysis – for example, positive, negative, or neutral effect, qualitative and quantitative changes, total amount, percentage, etc.	The criteria for analysis are outlined: number of mentions of keywords (in headlines and context – if not mentioned in the headlines), area/direction of the news item, and description of the news (positive, negative, neutral).
6	Conduct a semantic analysis of the test arrays – examine the headings, subheadings, and main text for linguistic errors, incorrect word combinations, etc. (qualitative analysis)	Not performed, as the purpose of the study is quantitative analysis
7	Summarise news data – identify the scope of the data set in terms of novelty, relevance to the consumer (qualitative analysis).	Not performed, as the purpose of the study is quantitative analysis.

The following materials were also selected, analysed and used: legal acts (Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 106 “On Television and Radio Broadcasting” (2008), Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 247 “On the Public Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation of the Kyrgyz Republic” (2011), Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 33 “On the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation of the Kyrgyz Republic” (2022)). The official documents of international organisations and institutions (Central Asia Media..., 2018); statistical arrays (Population growth (annual percentage)–Europe and Central Asia, World Bank (2023), World Press Freedom Index (2024)), China reports robust trade growth with Central Asian states (2024) were reviewed. In addition, information and reference data were analysed (Muratbekova, 2023; Ricklton, 2024). The study examines the period from January to June 2023, which might not adequately represent long-term trends or frame changes that could happen because of big political events, diplomatic progress, or changing foreign policy goals.

### **3. Results**

#### **3.1 International relations and information resources in the 21st century**

The collapse of the USSR and the subsequent transformation processes on the continent had a serious impact on all states without exception. However, the most intense impact was felt by the young independent republics, namely the countries of Central Asia, where interstate relations were among the strongest among all the members of the Union. Since the Central Asian financial, socio-economic, and general well-being were very high and confident during their existence within the USSR, to minimise the risks of large losses, the leaders of these countries began to look for ways to maintain balance in the international arena, establishing new ties and strengthening existing ones (Haerpfer and Kizilova, 2020; Nicolai, 2023). The latter includes the region's long-standing cooperation with China, which is characterised by a variety of directions, uneven intensity, and dynamic changes depending on the state.

An unprecedented increase in the popularity of the media at the beginning of the third millennium was observed in the context of obtaining new data, news, and reports on certain events in the country, region and the world (Nicolai, 2023). New information and communication tools (the Internet, social media, mobile applications, etc.) allow people to find the content they need instantly and consume it without any intermediaries. For this reason, as well as the growing influence of the media on the formation of the news agenda in a particular state, such phenomena as infringement of journalists' rights, excessive censorship, or, conversely, propaganda (in favour of the ruling party) have become widespread. Freedom of speech and thought, as well as minimal obstacles to the activities of reporters, are signs of a democratic society, which, along with other factors (economic growth, political systems, etc.), create conditions for the civilisational development of each state (see Table 2).

**Table 2.** Top countries in terms of press freedom (according to the Press Freedom Index) for 2013, 2018, 2020, 2023, and 2024

Country	Place in the ranking				
	2024 (total score*)	2023	2020	2018	2013
Norway	1 (91.89)	1 (95.18)	1 (92.16)	1 (92.37)	3 (93.48)
Denmark	2 (89.6)	3 (89.48)	3 (91.87)	9 (86.01)	6 (92.92)
Sweden	3 (88.32)	4 (88.15)	4 (90.75)	2 (91.69)	10 (90.77)
Netherlands	4 (87.73)	6 (87)	5 (90.04)	3 (89.99)	2 (93.52)
Finland	5 (86.56)	5 (87.94)	2 (92.07)	4 (89.74)	1 (93.62)
Estonia	6 (86.44)	8 (85.31)	14 (87.39)	12 (85.92)	11 (90.74)
Portugal	7 (85.9)	9 (84.6)	10 (88.17)	14 (85.83)	28 (83.25)
Ireland	8 (85.59)	2 (89.91)	13 (87.4)	16 (85.41)	15 (89.94)
Switzerland	9 (84.01)	12 (84.4)	8 (89.38)	5 (88.73)	14 (90.06)
Germany	10 (83.84)	21 (81.91)	11 (87.84)	15 (85.61)	17 (89.76)
Kyrgyzstan	120 (49.11)	122 (49.91)	82 (69.81)	98 (69)	106 (67.8)
Kazakhstan	142 (41.11)	134 (45.87)	157 (45.89)	158 (45.59)	160 (44.92)
Uzbekistan	148 (37.27)	137 (45.73)	156 (46.93)	165 (39.16)	164 (39.61)
Tajikistan	155 (33.31)	153 (39.06)	161 (44.66)	149 (49.94)	123 (64.29)
China	172 (23.36)	179 (22.97)	177 (21.52)	176 (21.71)	173 (26.93)
Turkmenistan	175 (22.01)	176 (25.82)	179 (14.56)	178 (15.8)	177 (20.86)

**Note:** \*The overall score is calculated on the basis of such indicators as pluralism of opinions in the media, media independence, level of society development, legislative framework, transparency of state mechanisms, information infrastructure, crime rate, etc.

**Source:** World Press Freedom Index (2024).

Before starting to study the specifics of China's cooperation with Central Asian countries, it is necessary to clearly define the essence and meaning of the main concepts and terms of the issue under study. Traditionally, the Central Asian region includes such countries as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan (Păduraru and Voicu, 2020). Sometimes Azerbaijan is included in these countries (due to its partial territorial location in the region), but it will not be considered in this paper.

The essence of such a research method as framing analysis, or framework analysis, is to study the specifics and peculiarities of how an individual, society or other object perceives and understands a particular situation or action (process) in general (Samsudin, 2019; Parveen and Showkat, 2020). This method as a phenomenon was first described by the Canadian sociologist E. Goffman in the book "Frame analysis: An essay on the organisation of experience", published in 1974 as part of the socio-political research (D'Angelo et al., 2019).

Framing analysis is most often used in assessing the impact of a news story or information message on the public (Erbaş, 2022; Al-Rawi et al., 2023; Linström and Marais, 2012). The priority in the activities of media resources is to define certain frameworks, vectors and directions in their activities, and this, in turn, depends on a variety of objective and subjective factors, such as the point of view of the owner of the news source (whoever determines the general orientation of the resource), the material and technical base of the editorial office, the personal qualities of the reporter or journalist (personal and professional), and the national regulatory framework (which acts as a deterrent mechanism), as well as the characteristics of the key audience (age, gender, nationality, religion, sexual orientation, political views, etc.), the level of awareness of local news (about one's city, neighbourhood), the overall trust in a particular media resource among the population, and other (Andersson, 2021; Wong et al., 2023).

### 3.2 Cooperation between China and Central Asia at the beginning of the third millennium

China, similarly to the vast majority of large states on the continent and in the world (for example, the United States), was wary of the prospect of the collapse of the USSR and the emergence of many new republics with a population of millions, unpredictable political processes, economic transformations and, as a result, mass migration from there (Clarke, 2020; Zheng, 2023). However, Beijing soon realised the advantages of cooperation with individual countries in the region, which allowed China to manoeuvre and choose the most optimal ways and options for interaction with each republic, which was virtually impossible in the Soviet Union.

In the 20s of the 21st century, China and the Central Asian republics developed very strong and promising cooperation in various sectors of industry, economy, etc., even though there was a significant difference in many indicators of these countries (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Comparison of the main indicators of Central Asian countries and China as of the end of 2023

Area, km <sup>2</sup>	Population, persons	Form of government	Main religion	GDP*, billion USD	GDP* per capita, USD
<i>Kyrgyzstan</i>					
200.105	7.161,910	Presidential republic	Islam (predominantly Sunni)	48.054	6.790
<i>Kazakhstan</i>					
2.724,902	20.075,271	Presidential republic	Islam (70%) and Christianity (26%)	693.415	34.534
<i>Tajikistan</i>					
143.100	10.535,493**	Presidential republic	Islam (predominantly Sunni)	59.415	5.832

**Table 3** (Continued).

Area, km <sup>2</sup>	Population, persons	Form of government	Main religion	GDP*, billion USD	GDP* per capita, USD
<b>Turkmenistan</b>					
491.210	6.377,776**	Presidential republic under an authoritarian regime	Islam (predominantly Sunni)	126.132***	19.938***
<b>Uzbekistan</b>					
447.400	37.139,008	Presidential republic	Islam (predominantly Sunni)	401.838	10.936
<b>China</b>					
9.596,961	1.409,670.000***	One-party socialist republic under an authoritarian system	Officially atheist; major religions include Buddhism, Taoism, Islam, and Christianity	35.291**	25.015**

**Note:** \*Gross Domestic Product; \*\*United Nations Projection; \*\*\*Data as of 2022.

**Source:** Yazdani (2020), Ali et al. (2021), Berdiyev and Can (2020), Amusan (2021), Bharti (2022).

China and Central Asian countries cooperate in several areas, in particular, in the field of strategic partnership in general, in the context of common culture, traditions and history, in the direction of investment and financial dialogue, as well as at the level of bilateral contacts (mainly within the framework of the Chinese initiative “Belt and Road”). In 2023 alone, trade between Beijing and the region totalled about 90 billion USD (more than a third higher than in 2022) (China reports robust..., 2024).

Although China's economic influence in Central Asia has markedly increased, Russia maintains considerable influence through historical, political, and security avenues. In 2023, China displaced Russia as the predominant commercial partner for the majority of Central Asian nations (Freeman et al., 2023). Nevertheless, Russia maintains robust connections through the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) and the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO).

In contrast to China's infrastructure- and investment-centric strategy, Russia's involvement in the area is mostly centered on energy commerce, remittances, and initiatives for political integration. Furthermore, Russia's position as a security guarantee, especially in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, persists in influencing regional power relations. Historically, Russia has had robust political, economic, and cultural connections with Central Asian nations, mostly owing to a common history and established institutional frameworks such as the EAEU and the CSTO. Recent developments show a shift in the regional balance of power, with China's economic influence rising considerably.

The increase in the trade volume between China and the five Central Asian countries is ascribed to China's proactive economic strategies, encompassing significant investments and infrastructural endeavours under the BRI, which have surpassed Russian economic attempts in the region. Notwithstanding this economic transition, Russia maintains significant influence in Central Asia via security collaboration and cultural connections (Kendall-Taylor et al., 2024). The CSTO is fundamental to regional security, with Russia assuming a prominent role in military cooperation and defence strategies. The extensive prevalence of the Russian language and media guarantees enduring cultural ties.

Due to positive trends in diplomatic interactions between the responsible representatives of all the countries participating in this regional cooperation, many infrastructure projects are being implemented in Central Asia: construction of a solar power plant in Kapshagai and technological upgrades at the Shymkent Oil Refinery (Kazakhstan), construction of the Dushanbe Thermal Power Plant (Tajikistan), and development of a specialised facility for various sports events in Uzbekistan, etc. (China, Central Asia..., 2024).

An important event in the political and diplomatic cooperation between China and the Central Asian states was the summit in Xi'an (China) on 18-19 May 2023 and the signing of the Xi'an Declaration (Muratbekova, 2023). The event was the first official meeting of this scale between representatives of all countries of the region and China in the China+C5 format after the end of coronavirus restrictions. During the sessions, participants agreed on the need to continue to maintain strong strategic relations and develop and strengthen cooperation in

the face of growing potential threats on the continent and amid a rapidly changing global geopolitical landscape. The next summit is scheduled for early 2025 and should continue the implementation of Beijing's long-term strategies for cooperation with Central Asian states, both within the region and in a bilateral format.

In the wake of a differential approach to foreign policy relations with Central Asian states, Beijing officially established interstate dialogue with Kyrgyzstan in 1992 by signing the Treaty on Diplomatic Relations between the countries (Amusan, 2021). China's investments in the republic are growing every year, and the number of promising projects is increasing (for example, the launch of the Datka-Kemin power line for 400 million USD, the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project for more than 4 billion USD, etc.) (Ricklton, 2024). The public opinion of both countries, which in turn is shaped by the media, is central to the implementation of these projects. The culture of media consumption in Central Asian countries differs (due to age, different living conditions, the level of financial security of the population, etc.), but the media is central in shaping the information agenda and creating a holistic picture of political and diplomatic events.

The media environment in Kyrgyzstan, as in all Central Asian states, began to take shape shortly after its independence, but this process was extremely slow at first (Dadakhonov, 2024; Alymbaeva and Alimakhunov, 2021). Amidst the creation of state media, private information resources also emerged on a massive scale, but were criticised by the official authorities. It was only at the beginning of the 21st century that the formation of media resources in the republic accelerated. This is mainly due to the massive flow of information from the East (primarily from China (Melnikovová, 2020; Kurambayev and Freedman, 2019)), but also due to the strong influence of Western media resources, which are becoming increasingly attractive to citizens of the region (e.g., in 2018, the U.S. Agency for International Development presented the Central Asia Media Program (2018) to help to create the most transparent and innovative media space in Central Asia, one that meets the needs of the most active citizens of the region).

The legal framework for news broadcasting in Kyrgyzstan includes, inter alia, Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No.106 “On Television and Radio Broadcasting” (2008) – on the development of information infrastructure and news system in the state, Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 247 “On the Public Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation of the Kyrgyz Republic” (2011) – on the strategy for the Kyrgyz media sphere to join the regional and global system, Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 33 “On the National Television and Radio Broadcasting Corporation of the Kyrgyz Republic” (2022) – on the creation (previously) and functioning of a single information space on the territory of the Republic, etc. In general, the situation in the field of news broadcasting and information policy in Kyrgyzstan remains identical to other countries in the region. There is a confrontation between public and private media for votes and attention.

Central Asia comprises countries with varying levels of natural resource availability, significantly influencing their economic structures and political relations, particularly with China. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are considered resource-rich due to their substantial reserves of oil and natural gas, respectively. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, however, are resource-poor, devoid of significant hydrocarbon deposits, and reliant mostly on agriculture and remittances. The economic inequalities among these nations impact their diplomatic objectives, trade reliance, and reactions to Chinese influence. Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan hold substantial deposits of oil and natural gas, establishing them as significant energy suppliers to China. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, devoid of significant hydrocarbon resources, depend more on infrastructural development and economic aid from Beijing.

China's engagement strategy in the region exemplifies these disparities. China prioritises securing energy imports from resource-abundant nations, like Turkmenistan, to support its growing economy. In 2023, Turkmenistan supplied around 32-33 billion cubic meters of natural gas to China, positioning itself as a vital contributor to China's energy diversification efforts (Łoskot-Strachota and Adam Michalski, 2024). Conversely, in resource-scarce countries, such as Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, China's involvement emphasises infrastructure development and financial assistance. These nations are integral to China's Belt

and Road Initiative (BRI), including significant investments in transportation and energy infrastructure aimed at enhancing regional connectivity. The China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project illustrates China's commitment to improving economic corridors in the region (Daye, 2024). This unique method underscores China's strategic aims: securing energy resources from affluent nations while fostering economic growth and stability in less developed countries to create a conducive environment for commerce and investment.

Kyrgyz media mostly emphasises China's participation with these nations through the lens of bilateral economic cooperation, especially the Belt and Road Initiative. The degree to which each nation benefits from or sees China's influence varies considerably. Kazakhstan, being resource-abundant, has adopted a more equitable strategy, utilising its economic power to secure advantageous conditions for trade and infrastructural initiatives (Çelik and Jayawickrama, 2024). Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, lacking in resources, exhibit a heightened reliance on Chinese loans and investments, raising apprehensions over debt sustainability that occasionally emerge in media discussions. The absence of critical analysis in Evening Bishkek about these financial linkages indicates a potential constraint in how media narratives influence public perception of China's presence in the area.

Turkmenistan exemplifies a distinctive situation owing to its diplomatic seclusion and its choice to stay away from multilateral entities like the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. In contrast to its Central Asian counterparts, Turkmenistan's foreign policy is defined by neutrality, resulting in a more limited interaction with China that primarily emphasizes energy exports. Kyrgyzstan's connection with China encompasses not just economic collaboration but also extensive diplomatic and geopolitical aspects, a topic often emphasised in Evening Bishkek.

### **3.3 Results of the study of news content in the newspaper Evening Bishkek**

Media outlets in Kyrgyzstan have substantial obstacles in reporting and interpreting foreign relations owing to escalating censorship and

political coercion. The implementation of restrictive legislation has enabled authorities to obstruct websites and regulate material without court supervision (Lim and Bradshaw, 2023). The legislation has been employed to suppress independent journalism, as seen by the obstruction of Azattyk Media's websites in October 2022 after they reported on border disputes. The government's increasing control over media is further demonstrated by legislative measures that centralize executive authority and enforce strict rules on non-governmental groups and media entities. These measures have resulted in heightened self-censorship among journalists, as they contend with the dangers of legal consequences and harassment (American Bar Association, 2024). The apprehension and confinement of journalists connected to investigative entities such as Temirov Live highlight the hazardous conditions for anyone involved in critical journalism.

This atmosphere of restriction significantly influences the portrayal of international relations in Kyrgyz media. Journalists, deterred by the prospect of disciplinary measures, may eschew critical analysis or accept narratives that conform to official governmental stances. The compulsion to comply may result in uniform reporting, constraining varied viewpoints and critical discussion on global issues. Thus, the public's comprehension of international relations is influenced by a media environment that suppresses independent thinking and marginalizes alternative perspectives.

Before conducting a framing analysis of the issue under study, namely, the formation of a conceptual framework for the reaction of the Kyrgyz media to the dynamics of cooperation between China and the countries of Central Asia, the relevant information resources were selected and analysed. The electronic newspaper Evening Bishkek, which is among the top 10 most popular news outlets in the country, was chosen as the best object of research (Dos Santos, 2024). In addition to its publications, the newspaper reports news from national and international sources. In addition to traditional reviews, the newspaper

also offers analytical materials, interviews with politicians and public figures, expert assessments of various events, etc.

Evening Bishkek has always been one of Kyrgyzstan's leading Russian-language newspapers, achieving a maximum circulation of 45,000 copies, predominantly concentrated in Bishkek (International Research & Exchanges Board, 2024). The publication has maintained a tense relationship with political leaders. A significant ownership conflict in 2015 was perceived as politically motivated, allegedly influenced by then-President Almazbek Atambayev following the newspaper's critical position towards his administration. Evening Bishkek has occasionally exhibited independence; however, it has also had phases of alignment with authorities, highlighting the difficulties of journalistic freedom in Kyrgyzstan.

The scope of the study includes publications in the newspaper for the period January-June 2023, and a total of 166 articles by various authors were analysed. The framing analysis was carried out exclusively on textual materials. The evaluation of photo and video images was not applied. The media space in Kyrgyzstan includes state-owned, public (currently non-existent), and private media. Evening Bishkek is a private Russian-language publication).

After carefully studying all the text news printed in the newspaper Evening Bishkek in the period from January to June 2023 on the topic of cooperation between China and Central Asian countries, some peculiarities and trends in the presentation of material on the topic were identified.

Initially, it is worth noting that during the period under review, all the analysed keywords, namely, "China", "People's Republic of China", "PRC", "Central Asia", "Kyrgyzstan", "Kazakhstan", "Uzbekistan", "Tajikistan", "Turkmenistan" and their derivatives were mentioned in every month (except for some cases). These dynamics indicate that the topic of Sino-Central Asian relations (primarily China and Kyrgyzstan)

was key to the agenda in the first half of 2023 in Evening Bishkek (see Table 4).

**Table 4.** Frequency of keywords on the topic of cooperation between China and Central Asian countries in the period from January to June 2013 in the newspaper Evening Bishkek

Evaluation criterion	Number of mentions						Total
Keywords	"China", "People's Republic of China", "PRC"*, "Chinese"						96
Period	January	February	March	April	May	June	
Title	7	4	6	7	18	4	
Context**	7	3	9	4	13	14	
Keywords	"Kyrgyzstan", "Kyrgyz"						96
Period	January	February	March	April	May	June	
Title	4	3	9	4	10	9	
Context**	8	4	10	5	16	14	
Keywords	"Kazakhstan", "Kazakh"						15
Period	January	February	March	April	May	June	
Title	1	0	1	0	0	0	
Context**	2	2	0	4	4	1	
Keywords	"Uzbekistan", "Uzbek"						31
Period	January	February	March	April	May	June	
Title	4	1	3	1	0	1	
Context**	6	2	3	1	4	5	
Keywords	"Tajikistan", "Tajik"						8
Period	January	February	March	April	May	June	
Title	0	0	0	1	0	1	
Context**	1	1	1	1	1	1	
Keywords	"Turkmenistan", "Turkmen"						4
Period	January	February	March	April	May	June	
Title	0	0	0	0	0	0	
Context**	1	1	0	0	1	1	
Keywords	"Central Asia", "Central Asian"						44
Period	January	February	March	April	May	June	
Title	1	2	1	1	5	3	
Context**	6	0	4	3	11	7	

**Note:** \*In all cases where "China" is mentioned, "PRC" is also present; \*\*The number of articles where the contextual word is mentioned, if it is not specified in the title.

Regarding the nature of the news and the emotional tone in which events related to a particular subject are presented, it is worth noting that, as well as the frequency of keyword mentions in general and the distribution of positive content, news about Kyrgyzstan, China, and Central Asia is leading, which cannot be said about the other countries (see Table 5).

**Table 5.** Genre ratio of publications of the newspaper Vecherniy Bishkek on the theme “China” for January 2022 – December 2022

Country	Positive	Negative	Neutral	Total
China	39	8	49	96
Central Asia	20	3	21	44
Kyrgyzstan	49	6	41	96
Kazakhstan	4	3	8	15
Uzbekistan	18	0	13	31
Tajikistan	4	2	2	8
Turkmenistan	2	0	2	4

**Source:** compiled by the authors of this study.

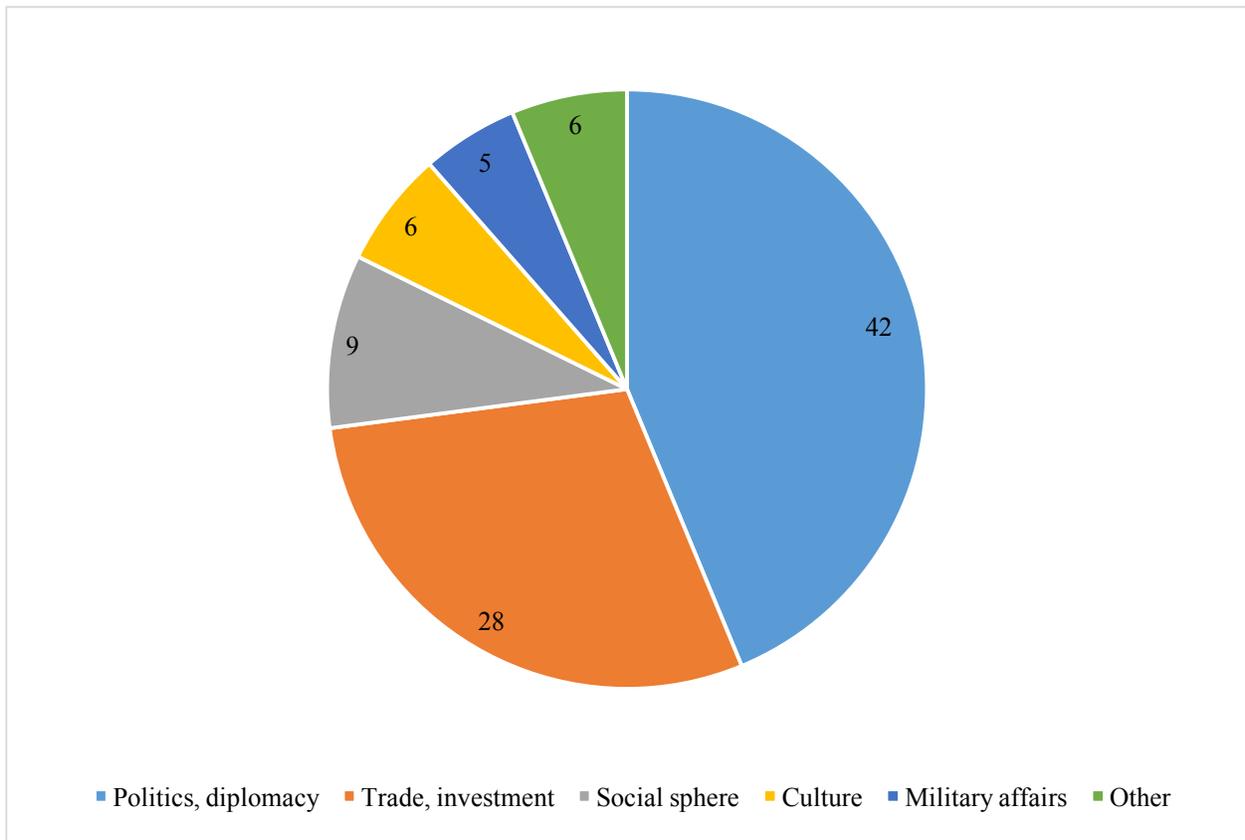
Regarding news categories, the most numerous are reports in the context of politics and diplomatic relations, with a significant advantage over other categories (trade, culture, social sphere, etc.).

**Table 6.** News dynamics by category for the keywords “Kyrgyzstan”, “Kazakhstan”, “Uzbekistan”, “Tajikistan”, “Turkmenistan”, and their derivatives

Country	Scope						Total
	Politics, diplomacy	Trade, investment	Social sphere	Culture	Military affairs	Other	
Kyrgyzstan	44	27	4	10	5	6	96
Kazakhstan	8	5	0	0	1	1	15
Uzbekistan	19	9	0	1	2	0	31
Tajikistan	6	1	0	0	1	0	8
Turkmenistan	3	1	0	0	0	0	4

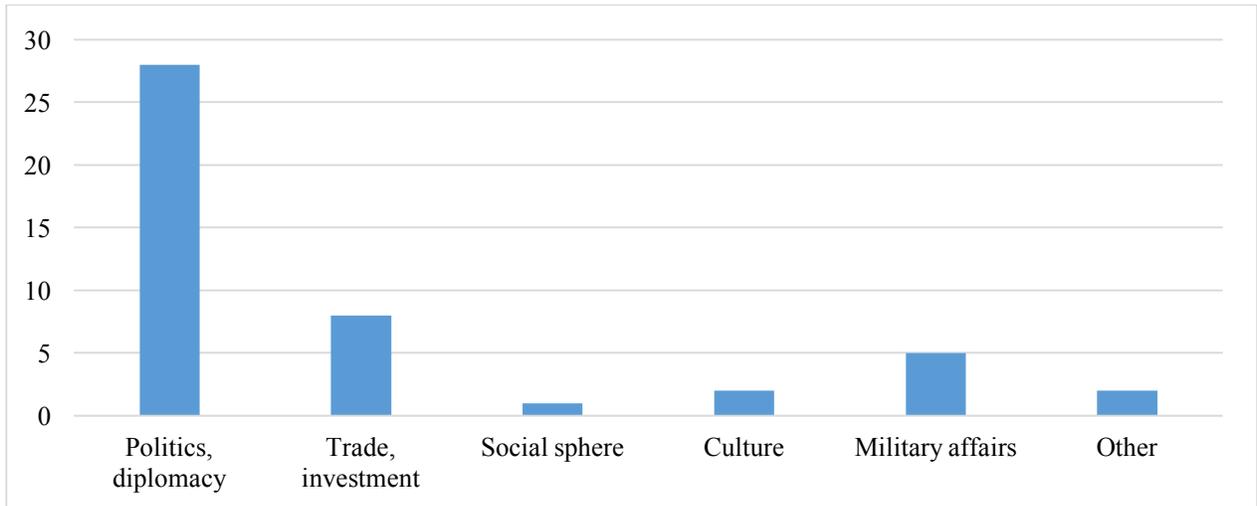
A similar conclusion can be drawn for the keywords “China”, “PRC”, and “People’s Republic of China” and their derivatives (Figure 1).

**Figure 1.** News dynamics by category for the keywords “China”, “PRC”, “People’s Republic of China”, and their derivatives



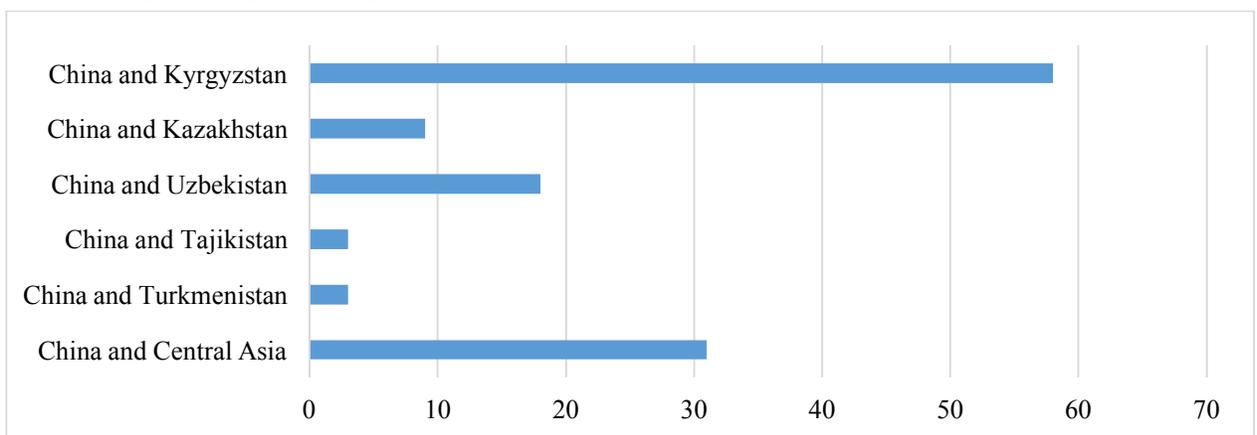
“Central Asia” and its derivatives are most often mentioned in one category, to the detriment of other sectors of the region's social and economic life (Figure 2).

**Figure 2.** News dynamics by category for the keyword “Central Asia” and its derivatives



The dynamics of a newspaper's news policy cannot be thoroughly assessed without analysing keywords in conjunction with each other. The following pairs were used in the study: “China” and “Kyrgyzstan”; “China” and “Central Asia”, etc. (including derivatives of all keywords) (Figure 3).

**Figure 3.** Frequency of references in news reports to Chinese relations with other countries and Central Asia



After analysing the news policy of the electronic newspaper Evening Bishkek in January-June 2023 in the context of information coverage of China's cooperation with Central Asian countries, certain conclusions can be drawn.

During the period considered in this paper, the most frequently encountered messages contained the keywords "China", "People's Republic of China", "PRC", "Kyrgyzstan", and "Central Asia" and their derivatives. The rest are much less frequent, which may indicate that the newspaper's journalists are fully focused on the events of Sino-Kyrgyz cooperation, within the framework of bilateral dialogue, rather than within regional projects. As for the nature of the news presented in the media outlet, news with a positive tone (about Kyrgyzstan, China and Central Asia) significantly prevailed, with the same number of neutral news regarding these subjects, and very few negative news. At the same time, the coverage of events in other countries is negative and neutral. This picture confirms the previous conclusion and indicates an excessive focus on the China-Kyrgyzstan interaction.

Regarding the Central Asian states individually, news in the category of politics and diplomatic relations is in the first place in terms of quantity, far ahead of the rest (e.g., economy, social sphere). The same is true for the region as a whole – the social sphere, military affairs, etc., are insufficiently studied. In China, the situation is similar, but investment and trade are also key to the newspaper's news flow. Based on the quantitative indicators of information where China is mentioned in conjunction with other countries, the clear advantage is given to reports containing "China" and "Kyrgyzstan" (including their derivatives), and then "China" and "Central Asia" (including their derivatives).

In summary, it is possible to conclude that Evening Bishkek is active and intensive in informing the public about China-Central Asia relations. However, there is a visible bias towards Kyrgyzstan as a separate state (with little regard for its regional location) and its contacts with Beijing. This situation, in general, confirms the thesis that China is intensifying its activities towards a differentiated approach to building foreign policy strategies and building roadmaps for cooperation with certain countries individually.

Having studied the specifics of cooperation between China and Central Asian countries on the example of the presentation of information about it in the electronic newspaper Evening Bishkek, and having identified the main trends in this process, several practical recommendations can be formulated to improve the media in Kyrgyzstan.

Creators of news content should focus more on attracting more young people under the age of 40, who are the most socially active group. For this purpose, broadcasting on various social networks (Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Telegram, etc.) will be effective. It is necessary to cover not only urban residents but also those living in remote regions, as well as categories of citizens who speak a local language (dialect) and do not have a university degree. Starting an information channel in the language of the community or locality is the appropriate solution, initiating activities by providing only the most important news in the local language. In this regard, it is necessary to continue to develop such a unique local broadcasting format as community media in the regions. It is advisable to actively resume the activities of the Internet radio station of the National Television and Radio Company "Dostuk", which reflects the diversity of culture and language of the ethnic groups living in Kyrgyzstan.

In addition, it makes sense to consider the fuller integration of Kyrgyz media into the regional news broadcasting system, on an equal footing, with the same language periods. For this purpose, it is important to harmonise the information infrastructure and improve the legislative framework. It is important to regularly improve the professional skills of journalists and reporters working in various media. To this end, the best way is to organise numerous webinars, seminars, workshops, and master classes to train media professionals, as well as conferences and roundtables to share experiences (including international ones) and learn new skills and techniques in information activities. This strategy is the most effective in terms of improving the professional qualities of journalists.

It is also recommended that government officials and employees of official bodies, to improve the level and quality of interaction with the country's information resources, provide all possible assistance to local media to establish strong mutually beneficial relations and to ensure that they truthfully and

successfully inform the population about Kyrgyzstan's internal and external affairs. The Republic has potentially successful foundations for the development of the media space on its territory, thanks to the mobility of the population and its average age, as well as the return to the principles of transparency and openness in local media broadcasting. In addition, it monitors global trends in the media broadcasting sector through the prism of unifying national legislation and bringing it in line with the norms and standards of the world's leading countries.

#### 4. Discussions

Having examined the key features of cooperation between China and Central Asian countries through the prism of summarising the specifics of news coverage of this cooperation in the media, in the electronic newspaper Evening Bishkek, some factors have been identified. This topic is highly relevant and is being discussed at all levels of national, regional, and international cooperation – both in Beijing and in the countries of the region. The key role of the media in this cooperation is one of the basic elements and integral components of a successful intergovernmental dialogue.

The paper noted that media resources in all countries of the world are crucial in the context of shaping the news and information agenda, which, in turn, is used by the authorities, both for the benefit of national development and to create negative consequences. This idea is similar to Andersson's (2021) reflections that media propaganda can be used both in favour of transforming public opinion for the development of a process or phenomenon and to the detriment of the population to create certain "necessary" moods and thoughts. However, the author did not consider the situation when society does not trust local media, especially those run by the state.

The analysis of how the foreign policy orientations of the Central Asian countries have changed and what reasons and grounds gave rise to the transformation of these orientations was carried out in the context of the study of the overall dynamics of the political life of the region's states in the post-Soviet period. Haerperfer and Kizilova (2020), who also considered the early 1990s to be

the most active period in the history of the Central Asian republics, suggested that, due to fears of disrupting the usual ties and contacts established during the Soviet era, it was not beneficial for Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan and neighbouring countries to radically change external vectors of cooperation at the turn of the millennium. However, experts did not address the fact that, due to the dramatic changes that began on the continent in the 21st century, the region was forced to transform and change rapidly to meet new circumstances.

The peculiarities of media outlets in Central Asian countries demonstrate a differentiated approach to the coverage of news stories related to the situation in the country and the region, as well as beyond, which was presented in the paper in the context of assessing the nature of news coverage on various topics. The problems of ethics, correct and truthful presentation of material in media resources were also considered by Kurambayev and Freedman (2019), who believed that conclusions about the professionalism of certain information sources can only be drawn based on their adherence to the principles of freedom of speech and transparency in the news agenda.

The paper points out that the key feature of China's foreign policy strategy is an exclusive approach to a particular state – a potential partner – namely, how this state can be useful and what help and assistance it can receive from it in the framework of China's large-scale projects and initiatives aimed at improving its financial and economic performance and expanding to the West. Clarke (2020) shared a similar point, emphasising that immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Beijing did not see Central Asian countries as promising allies, but its approach soon changed when the Communist Party appreciated all the positive aspects of cooperation with each state in the region. At the same time, the benefits of China's cooperation within the framework of regional projects were not touched upon by the author.

The element of visual, sound, and audio impact on a person in the process of learning certain information contributes to its quick perception and increases the effectiveness of the introduction of a particular thought or idea (if necessary). This is relevant for news content. Framing analysis, which was used in this paper, as a way of framework evaluation of text data sets in news sources, according to

Parveen and Showkat (2020), is considered to be one of the most accurate and practical tools for forming an idea of the impact of a particular data set on a certain circle of people, and this approach can be used in terms of planning an information strategy in the state.

The framework assessment of information presented in the news media about political and foreign economic events is the most applicable mechanism for studying public sentiment and the broadcasting policy of certain media resources, both state and public. Samsudin (2019) also supported such an idea, explaining that the simpler and more concise the message sounds, the easier it is for a person to perceive it and the quicker it will be possible to create perceptions of events in certain areas.

The media in Kyrgyzstan are, by their nature, quite dependent on the central government, which controls all areas of media activity and monitors their information policy – a situation that does not allow such resources to develop freely and fully fulfil their professional duties. Analysing the state news sources of the country, it is worth noting that because of the strong influence of the supreme leadership and the tangible financial dependence, the information agenda is as convenient as possible for the authorities. The same opinion was expressed by Al-Rawi et al. (2023), considering the situation in this area in the twenty-first century and ways to overcome it so that the media's information activities are as transparent and honest as possible. However, the authors made little mention of the small number of public sources that are trying to stay afloat and inform citizens about the true situation in the country.

At the end of the twentieth century, Kyrgyzstan was one of the most politically and economically unstable states in the post-Soviet space, and its prospects for overcoming the crisis were very negative. However, to protect its territory from potential threats from the East (terrorism, extremism, radical movements, etc.), China considered Kyrgyzstan as its main ally in countering these threats and sought to strengthen its position in the international arena. In a similar vein, Dos Santos (2024) reflected on the fact that the number of joint projects and initiatives between China and Kyrgyzstan in various sectors of industry is one of the largest in the region.

In the process of analysing the specifics of cooperation in Central Asia between such players as China, as well as Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan, several circumstances were highlighted through the reflection of this cooperation in the newspaper Evening Bishkek. The conditions and pace of comprehensive development in the third millennium allow participants in interstate dialogue to use all available tools to improve the quality of cooperation. The media sphere is an important platform for such activities, as well as for analysing the results and developments. The peculiarity of the method used in this paper is that it contributed to a full assessment of the quality and quantitative potential of news coverage of cooperation between Beijing and Central Asian states within a narrow time frame, which made it possible to obtain relevant results.

## 5. Conclusions

Evaluating the history of cooperation between China and the Central Asian countries (Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) in the context of political and diplomatic interaction, it is possible to state that this process has evolved from cold formal maintenance of some communication at the highest levels to a strategic partnership in many bilateral and multilateral projects within the framework of initiatives and programmes developed by Beijing. Considering the prospects of its political and economic expansion to the West, China has calculated the possibilities and options for such advancement and concluded that cooperation with Central Asian states – both individually and through joint multilateral projects – is an extremely profitable and effective strategy.

The media is central in shaping the news agenda in political and diplomatic contacts between China and the countries of the region, and it is also important to note their desire to cover as much data as possible for broadcast to the public. The electronic newspaper Evening Bishkek, as one of the most popular news resources in Kyrgyzstan, serves as an effective and efficient source of information

on China-Central Asia cooperation. However, there are still some clear preferences in terms of informing certain subjects of the area under study.

In the framework of the framing analysis of cooperation between China and Central Asian states in the context of the information presented in the newspaper for the first half of 2023, it is possible to state that since the resource is Kyrgyz, the news agenda overwhelmingly consists of information on China, Kyrgyzstan and their contacts in political, diplomatic and – less often – trade and investment activities.

The nature of the news on China-Kyrgyzstan relations has a positive context, which virtually excludes negative news, while neutral reports are sufficient, on a par with positive information. Notably, this implication is not far-fetched or deliberately created – cooperation between Beijing and Bishkek tends to strengthen and intensify ties at all levels of interaction, especially in the sectors of investment, construction, education, and new technologies, which is a sign of Kyrgyzstan's entry into a new, higher level in the international arena.

A limitation of the study was the difficulty of finding publications on certain countries in the newspaper Evening Bishkek due to the absence of their names in the headlines of news reports.

To examine the topic of China's foreign policy dialogue with Central Asian states in more detail and to record the specifics of this interaction, it would be advisable for future research to study Beijing's cooperation with the countries of the region under sanctions restrictions in such areas as construction and trade, and in the context of continuing research based on framing analysis, to study other news resources with a larger audience.

## Notes

\* **Zhanara Akmatbekova** is a PhD and Associate Professor at the Institute of Journalism and Communication, Jusup Balasagyn Kyrgyz National University. She specializes in international relations, political framing, and China-Central Asia diplomacy. Her research focuses on political communication, strategic narratives, and foreign policy analysis. *Email:* <[z\\_akmatbekova@outlook.com](mailto:z_akmatbekova@outlook.com)>.

\*\* **Aina Duishekeeva** (corresponding author) is a PhD and Associate Professor at the Institute of Journalism and Communication, Jusup Balasagyn Kyrgyz National University. She is an expert in geopolitics, diplomatic strategies, and media framing in international affairs. Her work explores how Central Asian political narratives shape diplomatic engagements with other countries. *Email: <[ainaduishekeeva412@gmail.com](mailto:ainaduishekeeva412@gmail.com)>*.

\*\*\* **Mehmet Albayrak** is a Doctoral Student at the Institute of Social Sciences, Kyrgyz-Turkish Manas University. He is conducting research on China's foreign policy in Central Asia, with a focus on economic influence, security cooperation, and soft power strategies. His studies examine how diplomatic discourse is framed in official statements and media coverage. *Email: <[albayrak-meh@hotmail.com](mailto:albayrak-meh@hotmail.com)>*.

\*\*\*\* **Liu Tongtong** is a PhD and researcher at the College of Journalism and Communication, Luoyang Normal University. He specializes in political communication and discourse analysis in China-Central Asia relations. His works explore the impact of media narratives on public perception and policy decisions in the region. *Email: <[liu-tongtong@outlook.com](mailto:liu-tongtong@outlook.com)>*.

\*\*\*\*\* **Zheng Xi** is a Doctoral Student at the College of Humanities and Social Sciences, Luoyang Institute of Technology. The researcher focuses on regional security and diplomatic framing in Central Asian international relations. Researcher's work examines the intersection of political narratives, diplomatic negotiations, and economic cooperation with China. *Email: <[xi\\_zheng3@hotmail.com](mailto:xi_zheng3@hotmail.com)>*.

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