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## Kazakhstan's Proactive Measures in Addressing the Aral Sea Crisis as a Platform for Enhanced International Representation and Media Engagement

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### Abstract

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, the countries of Central Asia faced new challenges, including the gradual disappearance of the Aral Sea rooted in the Soviet era. This near disappearance serves as a symbol of the region's victimisation, as the Soviets diverted the waters of what was once the fourth largest lake in the world to irrigate cotton fields and boost agricultural output. Once spanning 68,000 square kilometres, the sea has shrunk by 90%. Being a key player in Central Asia, Kazakhstan has taken the lead in regional efforts to find solutions to this critical environmental, social, and economic disaster. As a young state striving for recognition, Kazakhstan has come under close attention, implementing various initiatives, including the construction of the first sand dam in the Berg Strait and the Kokaral Dam, the signing of the Almaty Agreement, the establishment of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) and the organisation of EXPO 2017.

The paper attempts to explain Kazakhstan's efforts in resolving the crisis in the Aral Sea and its impact on its international representation and media engagement. The findings indicate that Kazakhstan's environmental actions may potentially support not only the restoration of local ecology but also strengthen the country's image as an important regional player in sustainable development. This paper addresses environmental diplomacy in the context of strategic action for countries seeking better positions globally while seeking solutions for pressing ecological problems.

**Keywords:** Kazakhstan, Aral Sea crisis, environmental diplomacy, international representation, media engagement

### Introduction

The Aral Sea was the fourth largest lake in the world, but it has shrunk to just 10 percent of its former size due to the large-scale withdrawal of water from the Syr Darya and Amu Darya rivers for irrigation. Situated between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, the Aral Sea's rapid decline since the 1960s has had a profound impact on local ecosystems, economies, and public health. This crisis completely deteriorated the fishing industry, agricultural output shrunk, and shipping came to a halt as desiccation set in. This situation has significantly worsened the health consequences, as toxic air and water have led to respiratory diseases, kidney diseases, and widespread diseases such as typhoid fever and hepatitis (Micklin, 2004). After the fall of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) in 1991, Central Asian states realised the necessity to cooperate in order to adapt to climate change and be able to conserve water supplies (Joshi & Kumari, 2019). The efforts to address these issues are underway, but full restoration is impossible, though partial rehabilitation may restore some ecological and economic functions.

In line with these efforts, as a newly established state, Kazakhstan strived to improve the country's international image in order to promote the development of economic, political, and social

spheres. The formation of a positive image was an important factor contributing to increasing the investment attractiveness of the state. Environmental diplomacy plays a key part in forming the status of the state (Gazizov, 2017). Thus, the country's dynamic cooperation in understanding cross-border natural issues contributes to reinforcing its expertise in global governance and enhancing territorial participation. The government has given priority to expanding its representation in the international arena and has put this on the agenda of its foreign policy. In 2006, it established a special agency, the International Information Committee of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which is responsible for execution and control capacities on fortifying the positive image of the state in political, financial, social, humanitarian, and other aspects (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d.). This information and image work became an essential part of a state's soft power to strengthen existing positive trends and create new ones.

In the context of the Aral Sea crisis, Kazakhstan's government presented itself as a "regional leader" in Central Asia, seeking to demonstrate its willingness to take voluntary measures, in particular in matters related to the Aral Sea. The key point of Kazakhstan's efforts is the effective restoration of the sea, especially through the construction of a dam in the Northern Aral Sea region in cooperation with the World Bank (Saltybaev, 2018). These activities have not only restored local fisheries but, moreover, improved the well-being and living conditions of approximately one million people in the region. Kazakhstan's activities in the field of environmental management have been universally recognised, and prominent figures have highly appreciated this (O'Neill & Primiano, 2023).

The purpose of the research is to analyse the international reputation of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the global media with emphasis on its attempts to solve the issue of the Aral Sea. The study is carried out to identify shifts in the perception of Kazakhstan by foreign traditional media throughout its attempts to counter the environmental crisis, and identify how its attempts affected the tone of representation of the nation by the world media. Findings of this study can be used to prepare recommendations for the development of the foreign policy of Kazakhstan, namely through the foreign media channel, which is capable of improving the image of the country positively. It is worth noting that this work is original, as it fills the gap in the literature, which investigates the world media portrayal of Kazakhstan in the context of solving the problem of the Aral Sea, which was not previously covered by the research.

The study started with a literature review that presents Kazakhstan's primary activities within the field of natural disasters, such as the reclamation of the Aral Sea, the development of the Kokaral dam and the creation of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS). It endeavoured to discuss Kazakhstan's activities in settling the emergency within the Aral Sea and its effect on its universal representation and participation. The literature review demonstrated that Kazakhstan has built up itself as a driving player within the field of water strategy in Central Asia, encouraging the conclusion of key ascension with neighbouring nations on the utilisation of transboundary waterways. Understandings were made together with the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan on the impartial dissemination of water assets of the Shu, Talas, and Syr Darya streams. In expansion, Kazakhstan is arranging with China the joint administration of more than 20 transboundary streams, counting Ili and Irtysh (Ualikhanova, 2024). In recent years, the government has increased the volume of incoming water from the Syr Darya, which has led to significant sea level rise. By the end of 2024, the volume of water in the Northern Aral Sea region increased by 42% (to 27 billion m<sup>3</sup>), and the water surface area increased by 111 square kilometres compared to 2022. These achievements were made possible thanks to the systematic management of water resources and new agreements with neighbouring states on the redistribution of runoff in the off-season ("Revival of the Aral Sea", 2025). The effect of these steps on the universal recognition of Kazakhstan and its part in territorial and worldwide understandings is at that point

analysed. These factors are essential in shaping Kazakhstan's status. Based on this, the literature review analysed Kazakhstan's key initiatives to address the Aral Sea crisis that are important in the representation in international traditional media. The main research question is formulated as follows: How have Kazakhstan's initiatives in addressing the Aral Sea crisis been portrayed in foreign traditional media? This question aimed to investigate how Kazakhstan's efforts to mitigate the crisis affect its standing on the international stage and promote collaborative approaches to environmental challenges in the region. The research hypothesis posited that Kazakhstan's measures in addressing the Aral Sea crisis functioned as a strategic platform to elevate its representation in foreign media. Next, the Methodology part gave point-by-point data about the research process, including the approach to selecting sources and criteria for analysis. In specific, the method of selecting foreign media sources is depicted, as well as the strategies utilised to conduct high-quality substance investigation. The Analysis and discussion section looked at the hypothesis of the study and answered a key question on how Kazakhstan's activities to solve the issue of the Aral Sea influence its representation. Most subjects raised in outside media are examined, as well as their effect on the recognition of Kazakhstan as a dynamic member in the region. The paper concluded with a discussion of the outcomes, restrictions, and proposals for future research that may develop an understanding of the part of Kazakhstan's natural strategy in forming its worldwide picture.

## Literature review

### *Water resource tensions in Central Asia*

While water resource tensions remain in Central Asia due to competing needs and ineffective management, diplomacy helps mitigate the risk of conflict. In the study by Bernauer and Siegfried (2012) on how the collapse of the USSR led to ongoing disputes over water allocation between Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan, the focus was on how these tensions arose from competing needs for irrigation (downstream) and hydropower (upstream) (p. 231). Central Asian political leaders respond to criticism about the environment's state, but very often, there are arguments in politics over the impossibility of working out ecological brakes. Additionally, climate change is expected to worsen these tensions by altering the seasonality of river flows, particularly in Uzbekistan (Bernauer & Siegfried, 2012, p. 235). While water management institutions like the Interstate Commission for Water Coordination (ICWC) exist, they have been largely ineffective, which leaves room for further diplomatic engagement. The authors find that despite these challenges, the risk of climate-induced militarised conflict is low in the short to medium term (Bernauer & Siegfried, 2012, p. 236). While the article gives good insights into water conflicts and climate change impacts in Central Asia, it does not go deep into what specific proactive measures Kazakhstan has taken so far to address the crisis in the Aral Sea. This omission creates a space to discuss Kazakhstan's diplomatic and policy-driven efforts to reduce tensions related to water.

Similarly, Dehshiri & Hekmatara (2019) assume that water can create tensions among nations but because of this, militarised conflicts should not be expected, provided that the countries continue diplomatic efforts (p. 749). Although the paper gives a clear emphasis on the significance of regional cooperation and recommendations for water diplomacy, it has not clearly explained what the tangible outcomes of the initiatives of Kazakhstan are, such as restoration projects or leadership in environmental diplomacy. Kazakhstan's specific strategies are not fully explored in this context, which limits the understanding of Kazakhstan's contribution to the Aral Sea crisis.

### *Challenges and effectiveness of the regional cooperation on the Aral Sea Crisis*

Central Asian governments have established cooperative initiatives to address the Aral Sea crisis, which are limited by either an emphasis on short-term political expediency or the lack of multi-dimensional analysis regarding the results about the crisis in the Aral Sea. Most studies focused on what was done but not on the effectiveness of these actions. In 1993, Central Asian states established the Interstate Council on the Problems of the Aral Sea Basin (ICAS). A major purpose of the new organisation was to facilitate assistance from the World Bank and other international donors as well as assume responsibility for various Aral Sea Basin assistance programs. The presidents also created an International Fund for the Aral Sea (IFAS) with the responsibility to collect revenue from each basin state for financing rehabilitation efforts. Further, Micklin (2004) discusses projects and programs such as the construction of the Kokaral dam, and the CAMP4ASB (Climate Adaptation and Mitigation Program for the Aral Sea Basin) (p. 100). However, the lack of information on insights into their outcomes or the effectiveness of regional cooperation prevents a thorough understanding of how such projects and programs help to mitigate water-related conflicts (Joshi & Kumari, 2019, p. 34). Micklin's chapter is informative on the historical background and environmental and social impacts of the crisis in the Aral Sea, but it does not stress continuous participation of Kazakhstan in ecological restoration work, or its effort to link these actions with its international image. Such a perspective is important for an evaluation of the country's diplomatic positioning.

On the contrary, Weinthal (2001) mentions that although Central Asian states aim to solve security threats, their domestic priorities often give preference to politically expedient measures rather than meaningful environmental reforms (p. 55). Leaders prefer to grow cotton monoculture rather than water-saving crops, which resulted in an environmental protection solution that is politically expedient in the short term but ineffective in the long term. This challenges whether Central Asian countries can improve their positions in the world. Moreover, external actors endorsed these decisions because they prioritised maintaining social and political stability (Weinthal, 2001, pp. 71-72). However, there is limited focus on how individual states, such as Kazakhstan, have sought to address the Aral Sea crisis within a global context. More precisely, there is a lack of understanding of how Kazakhstan has used international platforms and partnerships in balancing its economic dependencies, like cotton production, with the urgent need for environmental reforms. Hakala et al. (2024) talk about key issues for territorial participation in water assets in Central Asia. The creators note that vague borders and competition for assets, particularly in locales such as the Ferghana Valley, lead to clashes between nations (Hakala et al., 2024). Political issues such as debasement and authoritarianism complicate the circumstance and ruin participation. Issues related to unlawful exchange and organised wrongdoing that increment flimsiness are moreover highlighted. They also emphasise that the uneven dissemination of water assets and powerless coordination at the state level make boundaries to viable administration of water assets within the locale (Hakala et al., 2024).

These articles basically focused on the natural and political results inside the locale but did not investigate the worldwide media accounts and their impact on Kazakhstan's universal picture. This gap in understanding the depiction of Kazakhstan's part within the crisis on the global stage, especially within the setting of outside conventional media, clears out a vital viewpoint of the country's political and natural endeavours unexplored.

### *International cooperation in the Aral Sea Basin management*

International organisations have played a decisive role in promoting cooperation among the Central Asian states in the Aral Sea basin. Micklin (2004) provides an overview of this. International aid donors have played a critical role in promoting cooperation in transnational water management in

the Aral Sea basin, with the World Bank being a key player (Micklin, 2004, p. 107). The World Bank took part in the formulation of the Aral Sea Basin Assistance Programme (ASBP) targeted rehabilitation, strategic planning, and institutional development, while its budget grew from \$250 million to \$470 million. The program initiated the Interstate Council on the Problems of the Aral Sea Basin and the International Fund for the Aral Sea, with subsequent projects such as the Water and Environmental Management Project further reinforcing regional commitments (Micklin, 2004, p. 108). USAID also played an active role, financing projects connected with the improvement of drinking water supplies and regional water management policies, whereas the Water Resources Management and Agricultural Production in the Central Asian Republics (WARMAP) project of the European Union (EU) supported the elaboration of methodologies for water use and management for the five Central Asian republics (Micklin, 2004, p. 108). The UN and its structures, such as UNESCO and UNICEF, have provided financial support for ecological research, health programs, and sustainable development in the region (Micklin, 2004, p. 110). NATO participation includes sponsorship of research workshops and the development of an overall GIS for the Amu Darya delta to assist in decision-making concerning land and water management (Micklin, 2004, p. 111).

At last, Hakala et al. (2024) highlight struggle variables and variables contributing to peace within the administration of transboundary water assets, with the assistance of the IFAS. It moreover proposes changes to move forward the viability of IFAS and gives data on activities such as the United Nations Multi-Partner Human Security Trust Fund for the Aral Sea Region. The hole within the writing lies within the restricted thought about how Kazakhstan's diplomatic endeavours inside this system are secured within the global media. In spite of the fact that the ponders of Miklin (2004) and Hakala et al. (2023) dissect the part of universal organisations, they don't consider how Kazakhstan's activities are displayed in remote media.

#### *Kazakhstan's role in international environmental governance*

Kazakhstan is positioning itself as a regional leader in environmental restoration to raise its international status while overcoming the contradiction of its ambition for an economically strong future based on fossil fuel with its commitment to sustainable development and environmental justice. O'Neill and Primiano (2023) argue that since independence, Kazakhstan has been actively seeking to enhance its international status along three dimensions: international security, democratic development, and ecological challenges (p. 81). It also places itself as one of the key players in regional diplomacy, which is underlined by its chairmanship in such organisations as the OSCE and hosting events like EXPO 2017. A very important aspect enclosed within the policy of Kazakhstan is environmental justice. In light of ecological catastrophes following Soviet politics, which have totally or partly destroyed big parts of the Aral Sea, Kazakhstan tries to be very active in this direction. Kazakhstan, through its role in the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea, has led regional efforts to combat the Aral Sea environmental disaster and has made significant progress in restoring parts of this critical ecosystem with its neighbours since 1993 (O'Neill & Primiano, 2023, p. 90). Zhanalieva (2020) notes that international donor organisations enhance the bargaining power of downstream states, allowing Kazakhstan to secure World Bank financing for the Kokaral dam (pp. 65-66). Thanks to this, it was possible to successfully revive the northern part of the Aral Sea, which is a significant achievement for Kazakhstan (O'Neill & Primiano, 2023, p. 90). Not only did it help restore local fisheries and economies but also garnered positive recognition from international organisations and the global media, reinforcing Kazakhstan's image as a regional leader in environmental restoration (O'Neill & Primiano, 2023, p. 91).

However, Kazakhstan has also been criticised for its environmental initiatives due to the contradiction between its economic ambitions and environmental sustainability. Although it positions

itself as a “champion” of green policies such as the Green Economy Concept and compliance with European Union environmental standards, the country continues to prioritise fossil fuel exports as its main economic driver (O’Neill & Primiano, 2023, p. 83). The authors support the view that environmental initiatives in Kazakhstan have an enhancing effect on its international status but provide limited evidence on how these actions contribute to long-term ecological sustainability. The lack of strong data weakens the argument and leaves room to investigate substantive contributions versus symbolic efforts by Kazakhstan.

#### *Gap in Existing Literature*

Some studies (e.g., Micklin, 2004) cover the effectiveness of regional cooperation but stop short of linking these initiatives to Kazakhstan’s international reputation. While Micklin (2004) and O’Neil & Primiano (2023) focus on bilateral and multilateral cooperation and Kazakhstan’s role in addressing the Aral Sea crisis, they often show these initiatives as uncontested successes and fail to link Kazakhstan’s initiatives addressing the Aral Sea crisis with its international representation and role in fostering cross-border collaboration. This research examined their implications for Kazakhstan’s international representation.

There are also conflicting views on Kazakhstan’s motivations for its actions in this crisis. While Zhanalieva (2020) notes that Kazakhstan did a good job in solving this crisis and improved its status (p. 76), O’Neil & Primiano (2023) have the opposite view by criticising the country for prioritising its economic ambitions over environmental problems and being the world’s 4th fossil-fuel exporter (p. 83).

## **Methodology**

To answer the research question and test hypothesis, the researcher conducted a qualitative case study based on content analysis to investigate Kazakhstan’s environmental initiatives surrounding the Aral Sea crisis. The study aimed to understand how Kazakhstan’s actions influence its international representation and foster cross-border collaboration. For this purpose, research papers and foreign online newspapers were collected.

The choice of foreign newspapers was based on several factors, such as a wide international audience and a high reputation for independence and objectivity. According to ratings such as Media Bias/Fact Check, these publications occupy high positions in the field of trust and influence the international perception of events (Media Bias Fact Check, 2025). These resources actively cover environmental issues and provide different perspectives, which are important for a comprehensive understanding of how the international community perceives Kazakhstan’s environmental policy.

The time period covered was from January 1, 2018, to February 10, 2025. This time period was selected because it included several significant events in Kazakhstan. The 2019 resignation of Nursultan Nazarbayev and the 2019 and 2022 presidential races marked changes in Kazakhstan’s environmental approach, influencing the reporting of the nation’s activities in settling natural challenges by foreign media (Zhiltsov & Zonn, 2019). COVID-19 widespread moreover influenced endeavours for universal participation, as a few sources expressed that environmental projects were delayed due to financial issues (Haruna et al., 2022). The IFAS administration by Kazakhstan (2023-2026) has drawn noteworthy media attention. Natural emergencies in 2023, counting large-scale fires, and the 2024 floods also influenced media coverage with a few sources covering Kazakhstan’s dynamic reaction, whereas others emphasised systemic issues (Newtimes.kz, 2025). The units of analysis were the articles that contained one of the following words: “Aral Sea,” “Kazakhstan,” “environmental initiatives,” “IFAS,” “international cooperation”.

The analysis focused on Kazakhstan’s several important initiatives to address the Aral Sea crisis,

including the construction of the first sand dam in the Berg Strait and the Kokaral Dam, the signing of the Almaty Agreement, the establishment of the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS) and the organisation of EXPO 2017. These initiatives were analysed alongside relevant academic articles, policy documents, and media narratives to provide a comprehensive understanding of Kazakhstan's environmental diplomacy. The content analysis will involve systematically examining selected documents to identify patterns and themes related to Kazakhstan's environmental actions. A diverse range of sources were selected and categorised based on key themes such as diplomacy, international collaboration, environmental leadership, and public perception. Each document was reviewed for relevant content that aligns with the research question. The researcher analysed keywords associated with Kazakhstan's environmental initiatives to understand how these actions are framed about international cooperation and representation.

## **Case study: Kazakhstan's proactive measures for the Aral Sea**

Kazakhstan has sought to enhance its international standing while addressing domestic economic limitations and environmental disasters inherited from the Soviet era, particularly the gradual drying of the Aral Sea. The country's environmental measures are driven by a pragmatic foreign policy positioning Kazakhstan as a regional leader and a significant international actor in global sustainable development. This approach aligns with the directives of Strategy 2050, highlighting Kazakhstan's increasing role in world affairs and its commitment to establishing a sustainable international presence and a positive global image (O'Neill & Primiano, 2023). The government aims to be recognised not only for tackling domestic environmental issues but also for its cooperation and leadership on regional and global environmental challenges. Consequently, the government takes environmental actions that are positively perceived by Western states, thereby enhancing Kazakhstan's representation as a key player in climate change and environmental initiatives in the region (O'Neill & Primiano, 2023).

As a downstream country, Kazakhstan became one of the most responsible actors in the Aral Sea Crisis (Zhanalieva, 2020). It takes a responsible approach to programs to improve the ecological state of the sea and strives for long-term solutions for the region. In this process, international organisations such as the International Fund for Saving the Aral Sea (IFAS), the European Union, the Asian Development Bank, and the World Bank play a significant role, with which about 300 projects have been implemented for a total of \$8.5 billion (Aitkhozha, 2017, as cited in Nechayeva, 2017). It is important to note that collaboration with international organisations may assist not only in the achievement of domestic goals but also acts as a channel for newer states to improve their international status and credibility (O'Neill & Primiano, 2023).

Kazakhstan's success in restoring the Aral, relative to its neighbours, has been notable. Efforts began in 1992 when residents constructed the first sand-filled dam in the Berg Strait, raising the water level in the Small Aral Sea by 1 metre. However, the construction of the dam from poor materials led to its complete destruction by 1999 (Saltybaev, 2018). In response to this, Kazakhstan requested a loan from the World Bank in 2005. The 13-kilometre-long Kokaral Dam was constructed with a bank loan of \$64.5 million, although the government of Kazakhstan covered the remaining \$21.5 million. As a result, water levels in the Small Aral Sea rose to 42 metres (Saltybaev, 2018).

In 1992, in Almaty, Kazakhstan, the ministers of Central Asian states met and signed the document "Cooperation in joint management, use and Protection of Transboundary water resources", which was later referred to as the Almaty Agreement. It resulted in the creation of the Interstate Commission for Water (ICWC) but was dissolved in 1997 (Zhanalieva, 2020). Following that, the Interstate Council on the Problems of the Aral Sea Basin (ICAS) was established in March 1993

(Micklin, 2002, as cited in Micklin, 2004). Further emphasising its commitment, Kazakhstan's former president, Nursultan Nazarbayev, initiated the formation of the IFAS in 1993 with other Central Asian leaders (Idrissov, 2013, as cited in O'Neill & Primiano, 2023). Because of its strategic geographical position and economy based on water resources, Kazakhstan plays an important role in the IFAS. Thus, the country presents itself as an active promoter of sustainable water distribution and preservation of the Aral Sea ecosystem, underpinning its diplomatic weight at the Central Asian level (Zhanalieva, 2020). Moreover, Kazakhstan attracts international donors to solve ecological problems and strengthen its leading positions in the region in water policy (Zhanalieva, 2020).

The country's efforts included supporting local communities, in particular, through the renovation of the fishing industry. Some fish-processing plants and hatcheries, such as the Atamekenrybprom, have been built by the government to support local fishing (Aitkhozha, 2017, as cited in Nechayeva, 2017). Over 5,000 relocated to work in its revitalised fishing industry, which increased 8.8 times between 2000 and 2011. This serves as a relevant teaching moment for countries faced with a similar ecological catastrophe (Aitkhozha, 2017, as cited in Nechayeva, 2017).

Kazakhstan became the IFAS chairman in 2024. According to Zauresh Alimbetova, acting executive director of the IFAS, the first priority project to be implemented under Kazakhstan's current chairmanship is the World Bank's North Aral Development and Restoration Project, which will lead to the restoration of the Saryshyganak Bay and, subsequently, allow the Aral Sea to reach Aral (Zhakibayeva, 2024). Kazakhstan has put forward a number of strategic options to achieve this goal, thus emphasising its commitment to finding new solutions. This unwavering commitment allows Kazakhstan to not only actively address the most pressing environmental issues related to the Aral Sea crisis, but also further strengthen its relationship with the World Bank (Zhakibayeva, 2024).

## Analysis and Discussion

The international community has recognised Kazakhstan's leadership in mitigating the Aral Sea crisis, thereby building its global image and diplomatic relations. Leaders of international organisations and some media representations have positively commented on Kazakhstan's actions and recognised a country as a leader in the Aral Sea crisis. In 2008, the World Bank's President Robert Zoellick called Former President Nazarbayev a visionary, using Kazakhstan's environmental efforts as an example of life-changing change in the region (Golovnina, 2008, as cited in O'Neill & Primiano, 2023). In addition, in 2022, USAID hailed Kazakhstan as a "regional leader in integrated water resource management" due to its contributions toward sustainable practices and water conservation within Central Asia. The EXPO 2017 showed the environmental feats of Kazakhstan, which was reported in *Forbes* as an important moment when Kazakhstan sealed its international role (Rapoza, 2017, as cited in O'Neill & Primiano, 2023).

In 2018, the BBC, a British public service broadcaster, called Kazakhstan "the country that brought a sea back to life" (Chen, 2018). The article provided a brief comparative analysis of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan policies, interviewing local people. The result of the analysis was that Kazakhstan had more positive outcomes in comparison with its neighbour (Chen, 2018). In the 1990s both of them were moving towards similar results. However, the situation changed after the intervention of the World Bank, which allocated 87 million dollars (66 million pounds) to Kazakhstan for the implementation of the rescue project (Chen, 2018). As part of the project, a 12-kilometre dam was erected, blocking the narrow strait between the Northern and Southern Aral Seas, which reduced water losses in the southern part. Additionally, the system of water channels of the Syr Darya River, originating in the Tian Shan



Mountains, was modernised, which contributed to an increase in the water flow into the Northern Aral Sea. According to BBC, the Northern Aral Sea in Kazakhstan is undergoing a renaissance – both water and economic activity have returned to the region (Chen, 2018). In 2006, the total volume of fish caught reached 1,360 tons, the bulk of which was flounder. By 2016, with the return of freshwater species such as walleye, bream, rapeseed and catfish, the Aral Fish Inspection recorded an increase in catch to 7,106 tons (Chen, 2018). A comparison of Kazakhstan's efforts with those of Uzbekistan was later used as an addition to showing Kazakhstan's successes. The article highlights that, while in Uzbekistan, the World Bank has also implemented several projects to restore existing reservoirs around the Southern Aral Sea, such as Lake Sudochoye. However, the results were not as successful as in Kazakhstan because of Uzbekistan's high demand for water resources. A significant part of the Amu Darya River is used for irrigation of agricultural land because Uzbekistan's economy depends on cotton production. From 1930 to 1990, more than two-thirds of the cotton produced in the Soviet Union was supplied by Uzbekistan, which also remains the fifth largest cotton exporter in the world after the United States, India, Brazil and Australia. This leaves insufficient water to replenish the Southern Aral Sea, which has practically disappeared, and local residents are suffering from deteriorating air quality (Chen, 2018).

A French state-owned publicly funded international news television network, France 24, presented Kazakhstan's actions within a broader regional and historical context, focusing on its collaboration with the World Bank (France, 2016; France 24, 2025). According to the Ministry of Water Resources of Kazakhstan, since 2008, the volume of water in the northern part of the Aral Sea has increased by 42%, reaching 27 billion cubic metres (France 24, 2025).

Alongside BBC and France 24, the EU Reporter, a Brussels-based news website, also presented Kazakhstan's role in the restoration of the Aral Sea (EU Reporter, n.d.; Stevens, 2024). In the article, Stevens (2024) highlights Kazakhstan's leadership, innovation, and sustainable development measures. The active strategies and methods of sustainable management of water resources made it possible to reverse a serious environmental disaster (Stevens, 2024). The Kokaral dam project, modernization of irrigation systems and regional agreements on the sharing of water resources, Kazakhstan's work with the Central Asia Regional Environmental Centre are also used as an example of the country's leadership in this matter. Unlike the BBC and France 24, the EU Reporter looks at the situation on a broader global scale, positioning Kazakhstan as a model for international efforts to restore the environment. The article considers Kazakhstan as an example of other countries facing similar environmental crises, which further strengthens Kazakhstan's image as a responsible and innovative global player (Stevens, 2024).

This research paper focused on the proactive role of Kazakhstan in resolving the crisis of the Aral Sea and its effects on the improvement of the country's international position and the development of regional cooperation. In the introduction, the following research questions were provided: whether proactive measures of Kazakhstan in addressing the Aral Sea crisis enhance its international representation and cooperation. Made content analysis indicates that, in the case of the crisis of the Aral Sea, Kazakhstan's government's approach has improved its standing in the international community. It has successfully positioned itself as an environmental governance leader, addressing the most local ecological challenges while simultaneously strengthening its diplomatic profile. The growing recognition of Kazakhstan's environmental initiatives by major international media outlets, including the BBC, France 24, and the EU Reporter, demonstrates the media's role in shaping Kazakhstan's reputation worldwide. As a result, Kazakhstan is seen not only as a leader in environmental restoration in the region but also as a developing diplomatic force in global efforts to ensure sustainable development. Such media coverage strengthens Kazakhstan's position in international relations, proving that an active environmental policy can strengthen the country's soft power and global influence. This is aligned with the fact that environmentalism can be a key factor in shaping national identity and

international relations (O'Neill & Primiano, 2023). Specifically, Kazakhstan's investments in rehabilitation projects, such as the Kokaral Dam, have brought about a marked improvement in local ecosystems and livelihoods, reinforcing its image of being a responsible regional player dedicated to sustainable development.

Furthermore, the analysis reveals several key patterns. First, Kazakhstan's proactive measures have resulted in increased international collaboration. The successful recovery of the Northern Aral Sea has drawn the attention of international organisations, such as the World Bank and various UN agencies, which have provided financial support for ongoing projects. This illustrates ways in which Kazakhstan is using international partnerships to strengthen its environmental initiatives (Bernauer & Siegfried, 2012). Second, Kazakhstan's alignment of its environmental policy with broader foreign policy goals demonstrates a strategic view of diplomacy. Strategy 2050 emphasises its ambitions to become a pivotal player in global sustainable development, reflecting a commitment to addressing historical environmental injustices inherited from Soviet policies. This dual reliance on domestic ecological restoration and international representation underlines the interconnectedness of environmental governance and foreign policy.

However, an unexpected conclusion was found regarding the tension between Kazakhstan's economic ambitions and its dedication to sustainable development. Despite the significant progress made in restoring the Aral Sea, there remains a tension between promoting environmentally sustainable practices and continuing to export fossil fuels. This finding suggests that while Kazakhstan seeks to enhance its international reputation through environmental initiatives, underlying economic motivations may hinder comprehensive sustainability efforts. The significance of this tension lies in its potential to undermine long-term ecological goals if not addressed within national economic planning (O'Neill & Primiano, 2023; Micklin, 2004).

Despite these positive findings, several limitations must be acknowledged. One notable weakness is the dependence on foreign finances by international organisations which could bring up a question of sustainability in terms of Kazakhstan's environmental efforts. Moreover, political interests influence decision-making, meaning short-term policies for ecosystem restoration rather than long-term ones. Then there is the fact that Kazakhstan is one of the leading fossil fuel providers in the world. The variables involved could affect the overall validity of the findings because some might not have been taken into consideration in this present study (O'Neill & Primiano, 2023; Micklin, 2004).

In analysing the research question, "How have Kazakhstan's initiatives in addressing the Aral Sea crisis been portrayed in foreign traditional media?" the speculation that natural activities of Kazakhstan have had a positive effect on its image and conciliatory relations within the locale is backed by the findings. International organisations, such as the World Bank and United Nations, alongside USAID and worldwide media, such as BBC, France 24, and the EU Reporter, have all frequently ascribed Kazakhstan for environmental administration and maintainable improvement authority. The Kokaral Dam venture, coupled with modernization in water system frameworks, altogether reestablished the Northern Aral Sea and moved forward nearby environments. The support of international organisations and the positive attitude of the media are all evidence of Kazakhstan's growing positive image. This gives validity to the view that Kazakhstan's environmental arrangement has effectively situated the nation as a territorial frontrunner in participation and worldwide natural administration.

Moreover, the findings highlight the pressures between Kazakhstan's natural desire and financial interface. In spite of Kazakhstan's victory with the revival of the Aral Sea, its status as a noteworthy exporter of fossil powers puts an address check on the long-term achievability of its natural drive. Its economic interest in the diligent exportation of fossil fuels has the inclination to weaken Kazakhstan's common commitment to environmental sustainability. This creates a complication within the

discretionary position of Kazakhstan, whereby financial interfaces are likely to urge within the way of total achievement of its natural objectives. Thus, whereas the speculation is by and large affirmed, these basic strains recommend that the reasonability of Kazakhstan's natural arrangement may be compromised by its broader economic ambitions.

The study confirms that Kazakhstan's dynamic natural measures have generally enhanced its international recognition, which has been viewed as a sign of economic progress and a responsible territorial leader. There are financial issues that could potentially limit the long-term success of these natural measures, particularly the assumed reliance on fossil fuels. The research also presents complexities that need to be investigated beforehand, even though the theory is highly supported.

## Conclusions

This paper explored Kazakhstan's efforts to address the crisis in the Aral Sea and its implications for international representation and media engagement. The ability to showcase successful environmental initiatives enhances Kazakhstan's bargaining power in global negotiations and positions it as a leader in regional environmental governance. Considering the scarce literature at the intersection of these variables, findings indicate proactive behaviour may be related to an increase in the international standing of Kazakhstan and the development of international collaboration on global environmental issues. A solution to the Aral Sea crisis seems to potentially enhance the country's prestige and position in the international arena. These findings contribute to a broader understanding of how environmental governance can serve as a tool for enhancing national identity and international relations.

The lack of complete data inhibits making any conclusive judgments regarding the impact of these programs on the image of Kazakhstan. Further research is needed to investigate this relationship in much greater detail, which should focus on the long-term implications of Kazakhstan's environmental policies for regional stability and cooperation, as climate change continues to intensify tensions in Central Asia over water resources. Academics can delve deeper into these dynamics to find more insight in their analyses of the relationship between environmental governance and geopolitics in the region. Better insight into how environment-related initiatives strengthen a nation's international image has much to teach not only Kazakhstan but also other countries grappling with similar environmental challenges.

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## **Арал теңізі дағдарысын шешудегі Қазақстанның белсенді шаралары: халықаралық өкілдік пен бұқаралық ақпарат құралдарының қатысуын арттыру алаңы ретінде**

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### **Аңдатпа**

КСРО ыдырағаннан кейін, Орталық Азия елдері Кеңес одағынан бері келе жатқан Арал теңізінің тартылуы сынды түрлі жаңа қиындықтарға тап бола бастады. Толықтай жойылып бара жатқан Арал теңізі қазіргі таңда өңірдің виктимизациясының символына айналды. Себебі Кеңес одағы кезеңінде әлем бойынша төртінші орын алатын Арал теңізінің суын мақтқ алқаптарын суыру, ауыл шаруашылығын дамыту мақсаттарында қолданған. 26 000 шаршы миль аумақты алып жатқан Арал теңізі қазіргі таңда 90%-ға дейін тартылды. Арал теңізіне байланысты экологиялық, әлеуметтік, экономикалық өзекті мәселені шешуге бағытталған өңірлік бастамаларда Қазақстан белсенді рөл атқарады. Әлемдік аренада танылуға ұмытылатын жас мемлекет ретінде, Қазақстан Арал теңізінің дағдарысын шешу мақсатына бағытталған жобаларының арқасында әлем назарын аударуда. Солардың қатарында Берг бұғазында алғашқы құм бөгетін салу және Көк-Арал плотинасын тұрғызу, Алматы келісіміне қол қою, Аралды құтқару жөніндегі халықаралық қорды (АҚХҚ) құру, сонымен қатар ЭКСПО-2017 көрмесін ұйымдастыру сияқты іс-шаралар бар.

Бұл мақалада Қазақстанның Арал теңізі дағдарысын шешуге бағытталған әрекеттері,

олардың халықаралық аренадағы ел имиджіне және бұқаралық ақпарат құралдарымен өзара байланысына әсері қарастырылады. Алынған нәтижелер Қазақстанның экологиялық шаралары жергілікті экожүйенің қалпына келуіне ғана емес, сондай-ақ елдің тұрақты дамып, өңірлік беделін нығайтуға ықпал етуінің ықтималдығын көрсетеді. Бұл мақалада экологиялық дипломатия жаһандық деңгейде жоғары позицияларға ұмтылатын және өзекті экологиялық мәселелердің шешімін табуды көздейтін елдер үшін стратегиялық іс-қимылдар контекстінде қарастырылады.

**Кілт сөздер:** Қазақстан, Арал теңізі дағдарысы, экологиялық дипломатия, халықаралық өкілдік, медианың қатысуы

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## **Активные меры Казахстана по преодолению кризиса Аральского моря в качестве платформы для расширения международного представительства и вовлечения средств массовой информации (СМИ)**

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### **Аннотация**

После распада СССР страны Центральной Азии столкнулись с новыми вызовами, включая постепенное исчезновение Аральского моря, уходящее корнями в советскую эпоху. Это почти исчезнувшее озеро служит символом виктимизации региона, поскольку советские власти направили воды из некогда четвертого по величине озера в мире на орошение хлопковых полей и увеличение сельскохозяйственного производства. Площадь моря, некогда занимавшего 26 000 квадратных миль, сократилась на 90%. Казахстан играет одну из ведущих ролей в региональных усилиях по поиску решений этой критической экологической, социальной и экономической катастрофы. Как молодое государство, стремящееся к признанию, Казахстан находится под пристальным вниманием, реализуя различные инициативы, в том числе строительство первой песчаной дамбы в проливе Берг и плотины Кок-Арал, подписание Алматинского соглашения, создание Международного фонда спасения Арала (МФСА) и создание организация выставки ЭКСПО-2017.

В статье предпринята попытка объяснить усилия Казахстана по урегулированию кризиса на Аральском море и их влияние на его международное представительство и взаимодействие со СМИ. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о том, что природоохранные меры Казахстана потенциально могут способствовать не только восстановлению местной экологии, но и укреплению имиджа страны как важного регионального игрока в области устойчивого развития. В данной статье рассматривается экологическая дипломатия в контексте стратегических действий для стран, стремящихся занять более высокие позиции на глобальном уровне и найти решения насущных экологических проблем.

**Ключевые слова:** Казахстан, кризис Аральского моря, экологическая дипломатия, международное представительство, взаимодействие со СМИ