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Article

Between Soviet Legacy and Bologna Ambitions: Barriers to Music Education Integration in Central Asia

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Abstract

This paper examines why music higher education across five Central Asian states—Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan—resists the regional integration that general higher education has begun to pursue. We compare degree structures, accreditation systems, and curriculum models at each country's national conservatory, and we analyse national education laws alongside international agreements to trace the roots of divergence. The analytical lens combines institutional isomorphism—a framework that explains how organisations copy, comply with, or professionally absorb external models—with the concept of regional education space as a deliberate governance project. The evidence reveals a pattern we call the conservatory paradox: every government simultaneously pushes its conservatory toward Bologna-compatible degree formats and charges the same institution with safeguarding nationally distinct oral music traditions that UNESCO has inscribed on its heritage lists. This dual mandate opens a persistent gap between what formal structures describe and what classrooms actually deliver. Rather than full harmonisation, we propose a three-level coordination framework—mutual trust through accreditation without curriculum uniformity, joint heritage projects anchored in shared traditions such as Shashmaqom, and short-term mobility windows that bypass the credit-transfer bottleneck.

Keywords: music higher education; Central Asia; educational integration; institutional isomorphism; intangible cultural heritage; quality assurance; Bologna Process

1. Introduction

Central Asia's musical traditions rank among the world's richest. UNESCO's Representative List now carries at least twenty music-related items from the region: the Shashmaqom classical system that Uzbekistan and Tajikistan share (inscribed 2003), the Kazakh dombra kuy (2014), the art of akyns—Kyrgyz oral-epic performers (2003), and Turkmenistan's dutar craftsmanship and singing tradition (2021), among others [1]. Yet the institutions charged with teaching, researching, and transmitting these traditions operate in near-complete isolation from one another. A Kurmangazy Conservatory graduate in Almaty cannot transfer a single credit to the State Conservatory in Tashkent. A Tajik falak singer holds a diploma that carries no guaranteed recognition in Bishkek. The paradox is sharp: five countries that once shared a single Soviet conservatory model have, in three decades, built five mutually incompatible regulatory architectures around their music education sectors.

General higher education tells a different story. Kazakhstan joined the European Higher Education Area (EHEA) in 2010 and restructured its degrees around the Bologna three-cycle model. A 2023 World Bank report covering over 430 universities and 1.8 million students explicitly urged the five states to deepen regional cooperation as a route to quality improvement [2]. In November 2025, all five countries signed an agreement to recognise each other's university diplomas—a

landmark political step [22]. The EU-funded TuCAHEA project (2012–2015) assembled representatives from every state to draft shared competence descriptions in eight subject areas and sketch a Central Asian qualifications framework [4]. Music was not among those eight areas. Performing arts were absent entirely.

This omission is not accidental. Music curricula carry national identity content that governments treat as non-negotiable. Traditional instruments, oral transmission chains, and performance repertoires differ across borders in ways that resist the “learning outcomes” and “competence frameworks” on which Bologna-style reform depends. A dombra student does not acquire discrete competences semester by semester; she absorbs a tradition through years of immersion with a master teacher. That pedagogical reality sits uneasily with modular, credit-bearing structures.

Existing scholarship splits into two separate conversations that rarely meet. Ethnomusicologists—Frolova-Walker [6], Levin, Sultanova, Djumaev—dissect Central Asian musical traditions but seldom engage with education governance. Higher-education analysts—Anafinova [3], Bischof [5], Isaacs [4]—map Bologna adoption and quality assurance reforms but treat the arts sector as peripheral. No published study bridges these two fields through a management lens to ask: what specific governance barriers prevent cross-border coordination in music education, and why do those barriers prove so resistant?

We address that gap. The analysis applies institutional isomorphism—a theory that traces how organisations converge through external pressure, imitation of successful peers, or shared professional norms [9]—to a domain where cultural specificity directly collides with standardisation pressure. We supplement this with the concept of regional education space as a governance construct that must be built, not merely declared [10,11]. The paper compares degree structures, credit systems, accreditation regimes, and curriculum models at the five national conservatories; identifies the structural tensions that block coordination; and proposes a three-level framework calibrated to the distinctive features of arts education.

2. Materials and Methods

We adopted a Comparative Institutional Analysis design, selecting all five Central Asian states on three grounds: a shared Soviet-era origin in music education, divergent post-independence integration trajectories, and the presence of nationally distinct musical traditions inscribed on UNESCO’s lists [1]. The unit of analysis is the principal music higher-education institution in each country: Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory [13], State Conservatory of Uzbekistan [14], Kyrgyz National Conservatory, Tajik National Conservatory, and Turkmen National Conservatory (Maya Kuliyeva).

Two theoretical frameworks guide the analysis. The first is institutional isomorphism as formulated by DiMaggio and Powell [9], which identifies three convergence mechanisms: coercive (regulatory mandates from external bodies), mimetic (copying of models perceived as successful under uncertainty), and normative (shared professional training and socialisation). We use this triad to explain why some conservatories adopted Bologna structures while others did not, and why adoption does not guarantee operational convergence. The second framework is the concept of regional education space—a deliberate governance project, as Marginson [10] and Barkholt [11] describe it, requiring quality assurance agencies, qualifications frameworks, and credit transfer systems that take sustained political negotiation to build. Elken [12] adds that such standardisation functions as policy coordination: it creates common reference points that cut transaction costs without dictating curriculum content.

Data derive from three source categories. Official regulatory documents include the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on Education No. 179 (2023) [17] and Kazakhstan’s Education Law No. 319-III (2007). Quantitative indicators—education expenditure as a share of GDP, tertiary gross enrolment ratios, and institutional counts—come from the World Bank Education Statistics Database [18]. Institutional data on conservatory degree structures, faculty composition, accreditation status, and international network membership draw on official websites [13,14], the AEC member registry [15], the EQAR database [16], and the Aga Khan Development Network [19]. UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage lists [1] supply the heritage-inscription data.

We structured the comparison around five criteria: (1) degree format and credit system, (2) existence and type of music-specific accreditation, (3) share of curriculum allocated to national traditional music versus Western classical training, (4) participation in international quality assurance and professional networks, and (5) the legal framework linking heritage preservation to educational mandates. These criteria allow us to isolate the governance mechanisms that either enable or obstruct cross-border coordination at the programme level, not merely at the level of diploma titles.

3. Results

3.1. *How Institutional Isomorphism Shapes—And Distorts—Music Education across the Region*

DiMaggio and Powell [9] showed that organisations within a field tend to converge in structure through three distinct pressures. Coercive isomorphism operates when an external authority—a government, a supranational body, a funding condition—compels adoption of specific forms. Mimetic isomorphism kicks in under uncertainty: organisations copy peers they perceive as successful. Normative isomorphism spreads through shared professional training, so that staff who studied under the same system carry similar practices into new contexts. All three mechanisms are active in Central Asian music education. They do not, however, push in the same direction.

Kazakhstan illustrates coercive isomorphism most clearly. Its 2010 accession to the EHEA triggered a cascade of regulatory requirements across all higher-education institutions, conservatories included [3]. Kurmangazy restructured into a three-cycle degree system, adopted ECTS-compatible credits, obtained accreditation from MusiQuE—a European agency that evaluates music programmes specifically—in 2019, and joined the Association Européenne des Conservatoires (AEC) in 2020 [13,15,16]. These moves were not spontaneous; they responded to the structural pressure that EHEA membership created.

Mimetic isomorphism surfaces in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, where governments established quality assurance agencies that resemble European counterparts in name and organisational chart but lack the specialised criteria music education demands—jury-based performance assessment, evaluation of improvisation skills, recognition of one-to-one master-apprentice instruction as a legitimate credit-bearing format. Bischof [5] documented this pattern in Moldova, Russia, and Kazakhstan: post-Soviet states adopt Bologna’s institutional shell without transplanting its operational substance. Seyfried et al. [20] confirmed the same decoupling in German universities, where quality management structures converged formally but diverged in daily practice. In conservatories, the gap is wider still. A Tashkent Conservatory degree may list “learning outcomes” on paper, yet the actual teaching revolves around a master teacher, a memorised repertoire, and a jury examination—none of which the formal document captures.

Normative isomorphism persists as a Soviet residue. Senior faculty at all five conservatories trained in Moscow or Leningrad during the Soviet period [6]. They carry shared assumptions about how individual lessons should run, how repertoire should be sequenced, and how performance juries should evaluate students. This shared baseline once guaranteed cross-border coherence. It is now eroding as these faculty retire and are replaced by nationally trained successors with no common reference point. No new normative anchor has emerged to take its place.

Marginson [10] demonstrated that a regional education space does not materialise on its own; it requires purpose-built infrastructure—quality assurance agencies, qualifications frameworks, credit-transfer protocols—sembled through years of political negotiation. Barkholt [11] reinforced this point by showing that the Bologna Process itself was a voluntary coordination project, not a top-down decree. In Central Asia, TuCAHEA (2012–2015) was the closest attempt: it brought all five states together, produced competence descriptions in eight subject areas, and secured a ministerial communiqué [4]. Music and performing arts were excluded. That exclusion reveals a governance blind spot: the specific needs of cultural education—where curriculum content carries national identity weight—were never placed on the regional coordination agenda.

Table 1. Institutional profile of music higher education across the five Central Asian states.

Indicator	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan
Conservatory (est.)	Kurmangazy (1944)	State Conservatory (1936)	Kyrgyz Nat. Conservatory	Tajik Nat. Conservatory (2009)	Turkmen Nat. Conservatory (1992)
Degree model	Bologna 3-cycle + ECTS	3-cycle, national credit hours	Dual-track: Bologna + Soviet	Under development	Soviet-era retained
Int'l music accreditation	MusiQuE (2019–2029)	None	None	None	None
AEC member	Yes (2020)	No	No	No	No
Students (2024)	1,197 (1,094 BA + 91 MA + 12 PhD)	Not publicly reported	Not publicly reported	Not publicly reported	Not publicly reported
Key UNESCO ICH items	Dombra kuy (2014); Aitysh (2015); Orteke (2022)	Shashmaqom (2003); Katta Ashula (2009); Bakhshi (2021)	Art of Akyns (2003); Manas (2013); Aitysh (2015)	Shashmaqom (2003); Falak (2021)	Gorogly (2015); Dutar (2021)
Education spend (% GDP)	4.46% (2022)	5.47% (2023)	6.8% (2023)	5.4% (2023)	2.7% (2023)
Tertiary enrolment	56.5% (2023)	45.8% (2023)	56.0% (2023)	31.1% (2017)	15.6% (2020)

Source: compiled from [1,13,14,15,16,18,19].

Two patterns stand out. Kazakhstan has embedded its conservatory within the European quality-assurance architecture—MusiQuE accreditation, AEC membership, 76 partner institutions across 33 countries—while every other conservatory in the region operates without any international music-specific evaluation. This asymmetry is not merely quantitative. It means that Kazakhstan's Kurmangazy Conservatory speaks the same institutional language as conservatories in Vienna or Helsinki, while its Tashkent or Bishkek counterpart lacks the vocabulary—and the external validation—to participate in that conversation. The second pattern is that education spending alone does not predict integration. Kyrgyzstan allocates 6.8% of GDP to education—the region's highest share—yet its conservatory has neither international accreditation nor consistent credit-transfer practices even domestically.

3.2. From One Soviet Model to Five Incompatible Systems

The Soviet Union ran a single, centrally planned music-education pipeline across its Central Asian republics. Children's music schools fed into secondary music colleges, which in turn fed into conservatories modelled on the Moscow and Leningrad prototypes [6]. Curricula were prescribed from the centre. Diplomas were recognised everywhere. Russian and Ukrainian musicians staffed conservatories across the region as a matter of routine. The Uzbek State Conservatory opened in 1936 as the region's first; Kazakhstan's Kurmangazy followed in 1944. This system had a dual character. Western classical training—piano technique, solfège, harmony, orchestration—served as the prestige backbone. Alongside it, each republic's conservatory housed departments of “national” instruments, formalising oral traditions into written notation under Stalin's nationalities formula: “national in form, socialist in content” [6]. Whatever its ideological motivations, this architecture produced genuine cross-border integration in music education.

Independence in 1991 destroyed the connective tissue. The central curriculum authority vanished. Russian-speaking faculty left or retired. Funding collapsed—every state suffered severe economic contraction in the 1990s, and education budgets were cut early and deep [21]. What survived was the institutional shell: the conservatory buildings, the departmental labels, and the

pedagogical habits of remaining staff. What disappeared was everything that had made the system interoperable: the shared diploma, the common syllabus, the routine movement of people.

Each state then steered its conservatory toward national objectives. Kazakhstan pivoted to Europe: Bologna accession in 2010, MusiQuE accreditation in 2019, AEC membership in 2020 [13]. Uzbekistan expanded massively —from roughly 70 higher-education institutions to 222 by 2024— but channelled its conservatory toward a heritage-first mission, positioning Shashmaqom preservation and bakhshi training as state priorities [14]. Kyrgyzstan adopted a dual-track system: Bologna-format degrees coexist with Soviet-era specialist diplomas, and ECTS credits appear on paper but diploma supplements are rarely issued. The Aga Khan Music Programme stepped into the gap, running a Centre Ustatshakirt in Bishkek and bringing music instruction to 80 schools in seven regions, reaching over 7,000 students [19]. Tajikistan established its conservatory only in 2009— decades behind the others—and relies on the Aga Khan Music Initiative’s Khunar Centre and its “Meros” pilot curriculum in 30 schools to build grassroots capacity [19]. Turkmenistan’s conservatory, created by presidential decree in 1992 and tightly state-controlled, has not adopted any Bologna reforms; its tertiary enrolment rate of 15.6% and education spending of 2.7% of GDP are the region’s lowest [18]. Within a decade of independence, five administratively identical systems had become structurally incompatible.

3.3. *Five Governance Barriers and the Conservatory Paradox*

The comparison exposes five categories of barriers. Each operates at a different level of the governance architecture, and their combined weight makes the standard Bologna integration template unworkable for music education.

Structural divergence is the most visible obstacle. Kazakhstan runs ECTS; Uzbekistan runs national credit hours; Kyrgyzstan straddles both; Tajikistan is still building its framework; Turkmenistan has not reformed. No conversion mechanism exists. A Tashkent Conservatory student who seeks a master’s place at Kurmangazy cannot translate her Uzbek credits into ECTS equivalents for music courses. The five-state diploma-recognition agreement of November 2025 [22] covers university qualifications at the general level but says nothing about programme-level credit transfer in specialised fields. TuCAHEA covered eight subject areas; music was not among them. The AEC counts one Central Asian member. MusiQuE has accredited one institution in the region. There is, in short, no regional coordinating body for arts higher education.

The conservatory paradox sits at the core. Every Central Asian government pursues two agendas that collide inside the conservatory. Agenda one is higher-education modernisation: outcome-based curricula, modular course structures, portable credentials—the Bologna toolkit. Under this logic, a music degree should be describable as a set of defined competences, measurable outcomes, and transferable credits. Agenda two is heritage preservation: each state has inscribed traditional music on UNESCO’s lists, binding itself to safeguard those practices through education. Shashmaqom in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, dombra kuy in Kazakhstan, the art of akyns in Kyrgyzstan, dutar in Turkmenistan—these are not elective additions. They are treated as essential channels for transmitting national identity. The clash is pedagogical. Transmitting an oral music tradition demands prolonged immersion with a master teacher, memorisation of large repertoires, and improvisation skills built over years. That process resists segmentation into semester-length, credit-bearing modules. Kurmangazy illustrates the resulting gap: its formal structure is Bologna-compatible, but its Traditional Music Faculty still operates on master-apprentice lines. The degree looks European on paper. The classroom remains Central Asian in practice.

The accreditation deficit compounds the problem. Only Kurmangazy holds international music-specific accreditation (MusiQuE) and national accreditation (IAAR). No other Central Asian conservatory has been evaluated by any body that understands what music education specifically requires: jury assessment, performance as the primary output, the legitimacy of one-to-one instruction. National accreditation systems in Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan apply generic higher-education criteria that miss these features. Turkmenistan lacks an independent accreditation system altogether. Without mutual trust in quality assurance, diploma recognition stays symbolic. A

Kazakh university or employer still has no reliable way to judge whether a Tajik conservatory graduate's training matches Kurmangazy's.

Funding asymmetry deepens the divide. Kazakhstan's 4.46% education-to-GDP ratio, applied to the region's largest economy, yields far more absolute spending per institution than Kyrgyzstan's 6.8% of a much smaller GDP or Turkmenistan's 2.7%. Kurmangazy maintains 76 international partnerships; Tajikistan's conservatory is still recruiting faculty. Even if structural barriers disappeared overnight, institutions operating at such different capacity levels could not integrate in practice. This creates a classic collective-action trap: the strongest player (Kazakhstan) gains the least from coordination with weaker partners, and the weakest players (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan) lack the resources to participate in any mechanism that might be established.

Geopolitical fragmentation scatters the reference frames. Kazakhstan's conservatory looks toward Europe (Bologna, AEC, MusiQuE). Russia's 2022 exit from the Bologna Process triggered discussion in Kyrgyzstan about pivoting to a "Eurasian educational model." The Shanghai Cooperation Organisation University network encompasses 128 institutions and has floated proposals for an SCO credit system to rival ECTS. The Aga Khan Foundation anchors music-education partnerships in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. No single external force pulls all five states in the same direction—unlike general higher education, where the World Bank and the EU have provided at least some coordinating gravity.

Table 2. Governance barriers to music education integration: level, mechanism, and effect.

Barrier	Governance Level	Core Mechanism	Effect on Cross-Border Coordination
Structural divergence	Regulatory	Incompatible degree cycles and credit systems (ECTS vs. national hours vs. Soviet-era)	No credit transfer; programme-level recognition impossible
Conservatory paradox	Pedagogical / Policy	Dual mandate: Bologna standardisation + UNESCO heritage preservation	Formal structures converge; actual teaching diverges; comparability is superficial
Accreditation deficit	Institutional	One internationally accredited conservatory; generic national criteria miss music-specific needs	No mutual trust in quality; diploma recognition stays political
Funding asymmetry	Financial	GDP and spending gaps produce vastly different institutional capacities	Collective-action trap; strongest player gains least from integration
Geopolitical scatter	Strategic	European, Russian, Chinese (SCO), and NGO reference frames compete	No common external anchor to align the five systems

Source: compiled by the author from institutional data, policy documents, and World Bank indicators [1,13–19,22].

The five barriers reinforce each other. Structural divergence prevents credit transfer; the accreditation deficit prevents trust; the conservatory paradox prevents curriculum convergence; funding asymmetry prevents capacity alignment; geopolitical scatter prevents a shared reference frame. In general higher education, the Bologna logic separates structural comparability from curricular autonomy—countries harmonise degree formats without harmonising course content. In

music education, that separation collapses. The pedagogical methods used to transmit oral traditions are not incidental content choices; they are the substance of the education itself. Standardising the container does not standardise what happens inside it.

4. Discussion

The standard Bologna integration template assumes that structural harmonisation and substantive diversity can coexist. For general higher education, that assumption holds: countries align degree formats and credit systems while retaining freedom over what they teach. Our analysis shows that music education breaks this assumption. When governments mandate the preservation of oral traditions that demand years of master-apprentice immersion, they embed cultural specificity not just in the curriculum but in the pedagogical method itself. The method is the content.

Bischof [5] documented how post-Soviet states adopt Bologna's institutional shell while retaining Soviet operational practices—a pattern he calls “decoupling.” Our findings sharpen that diagnosis. In conservatories, decoupling is not a transitional pathology that will resolve as reform matures. It is a structural feature, because the heritage-preservation mandate actively requires the institution to maintain practices that the standardisation mandate asks it to replace. Ho [7] and Law and Ho [8] showed that East Asian music-education systems responded to globalisation by creating hybrid curricula—international frameworks holding national content. Central Asian conservatories have done something comparable at the institutional level, but without the cross-border coordination mechanisms that would let these hybrid systems recognise each other.

The conservatory paradox extends DiMaggio and Powell's [9] framework in a direction the original theory did not anticipate. Their three isomorphism mechanisms predict either convergence or resistance. What we observe is neither. Coercive isomorphism (Bologna mandates) pushes conservatories toward standardised degree shells. Heritage-preservation mandates (UNESCO inscriptions, national cultural policy) push the same institutions toward pedagogical practices that resist standardisation. Normative isomorphism (shared Soviet training) once held everything together but is eroding as the generation trained in Moscow retires. The result is structural ambiguity: institutions look alike in degree format while differing in what they actually teach and how they teach it.

A realistic coordination framework should therefore operate at three levels, each calibrated to what is achievable given the conservatory paradox.

Mutual recognition without harmonisation. Rather than aligning music curricula through shared learning outcomes—an approach that the conservatory paradox renders superficial—the five states could agree to trust each other's accreditation judgements. Kurmangazy's MusiQuE accreditation offers a benchmark. Supporting other conservatories in obtaining comparable international evaluation—without requiring identical outcomes—would build recognition on quality assurance rather than on curriculum uniformity.

Shared heritage projects. The Shashmaqom already links Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Aitysh connects Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. These cross-border musical traditions could anchor joint research programmes, collaborative festivals, and shared master-class circuits—building integration through musical practice rather than through administrative paperwork.

Targeted mobility windows. Full credit-transfer compatibility is unrealistic in the short term. A more modest goal would be semester-long exchanges, summer schools, and collaborative performance projects that let students and teachers experience other traditions without requiring full degree recognition. The Aga Khan Music Programme's work in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan [19] already demonstrates this model at the school level; scaling it to the conservatory level is a natural step.

This three-level approach does not try to resolve the conservatory paradox. It accepts the paradox as a permanent feature of music education governance in the region and works around it, seeking connection without demanding uniformity.

5. Conclusions

Five Central Asian states inherited one Soviet conservatory model and turned it into five incompatible systems. This paper identified the governance mechanisms behind that divergence: coercive isomorphism pulled Kazakhstan toward Bologna; mimetic isomorphism led others to copy European institutional forms without their substance; normative isomorphism from shared Soviet training is eroding with no replacement. The result is a region where music qualifications cannot cross borders.

The central finding is the conservatory paradox. Governments simultaneously push their conservatories toward Bologna-compatible degree structures and charge them with safeguarding nationally distinct oral traditions that UNESCO has inscribed on its heritage lists. These two mandates collide inside the same institution, producing a gap between formal structures and pedagogical reality that standard integration models cannot close. Strategies that ignore this paradox—by imposing uniform frameworks on culturally specific content—will generate the kind of formal compliance without substantive change that Bischof [5] identified across post-Soviet education reform more broadly.

We proposed a three-level coordination framework: mutual trust through accreditation without curriculum uniformity, joint heritage projects anchored in shared traditions, and short-term mobility windows that bypass the credit-transfer bottleneck. Whether this framework gains traction depends on political will and on whether the five states create institutional mechanisms specifically for arts education governance. The current arrangement—in which general higher-education policy sets the agenda and music education is expected to follow—has demonstrably failed.

Central Asian music is one tradition with five national stewards. The governance challenge is to honour both the unity and the diversity of that tradition. The conservatory paradox we identified here is not unique to music or to Central Asia; it emerges wherever regional integration encounters education sectors whose core function is the preservation of culturally specific knowledge. That makes the findings relevant beyond the five states examined.

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