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Yao Mengqi , [Cheng Junru](#)*, Kambarova Zhumagul Ularbaevna

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Article

Between the Silk Road and the Bologna Process: Music Education as a Lens for Competing Integration Models in Central Asia

Yao Mengqi ¹ and Cheng Junru ^{2,*} Kambarova Zhumagul Ularbaevna ³

¹ Zhumadian Preschool Education College

² Kyrgyz Economic University Named After M. Ryskulbekov

³ Research Institute of Innovation Economy named after Sh. Musakozhoev

* Correspondence: jimmycheng521@gmail.com; Tel.: +86-15699993218

Abstract

The present study investigates the governance of music higher education in Central Asia by examining two competing external integration frameworks that currently operate in the region: the European Bologna Process and China's Belt and Road Initiative. The empirical focus is placed on five Central Asian states, namely Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. The research draws on the theory of policy borrowing and lending as formulated by G. Steiner-Khamsi, the concept of soft power in educational cooperation, and the theory of regional education space as developed by S. Marginson, with the aim of analysing how these two frameworks act upon Central Asian music education institutions through different mechanisms and produce different effects. Documentary evidence is collected from national education laws, institutional reports from principal conservatories in the region, programme descriptions from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music's Belt and Road Art Talent Training Programme, Aga Khan Music Programme publications, diplomatic agreements from the 2023 China-Central Asia Summit, and statistical data from the World Bank and UNESCO. The analysis brings to light that the Bologna Process acts on Central Asian music education through structural standardisation, which requires the adoption of compatible degree formats, credit systems, and accreditation mechanisms, while China's Belt and Road Initiative operates through relational exchange, which offers talent training programmes, bilateral institutional partnerships, and cultural diplomacy events that do not require structural convergence. The paper puts forward the concept of dual integration pressure to describe the condition in which music education institutions must respond to both frameworks at the same time, and identifies a structural incompatibility between the multilateral norm convergence logic of the Bologna model and the bilateral relationship logic of the Chinese model. The findings point to the fact that music education, as a domain where cultural specificity and institutional standardisation exist in direct tension, makes visible a governance problem that remains hidden in other fields of higher education cooperation in Central Asia. A complementary engagement framework is proposed that identifies conditions under which the two models can operate without mutual interference and suggests that Chinese cooperation can address gaps in heritage documentation, traditional instrument exchange, and performance-based mobility that Bologna-oriented reforms are structurally unable to fill.

Keywords: music higher education; Central Asia; Belt and Road Initiative; Bologna Process; policy borrowing; soft power; educational integration; dual integration pressure

1. Introduction

The Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory in Almaty holds two certificates on its walls that represent two different visions of what music education should be. One is the MusiQuE accreditation certificate, renewed in 2023, which confirms that the conservatory meets European

standards for music higher education quality assurance [1]. The other is a memorandum of cooperation with the Shanghai Conservatory of Music, signed in the context of the Belt and Road Initiative, which establishes a framework for student exchange, joint performances, and collaborative research on Silk Road musical traditions. The two documents hang in the same building, but they belong to different governance worlds. The first connects the conservatory to a European network built on structural compatibility—shared degree formats, credit systems, and quality assurance standards. The second connects it to a Chinese network built on relational exchange—joint activities, cultural events, and bilateral agreements that operate independently of structural harmonisation.

The present paper sets out to examine what happens when these two governance worlds meet inside the music education institutions of Central Asia.

Research on higher education in the region has documented the structural barriers to regional integration—the divergent degree systems, the absence of mutual recognition mechanisms, and the gap between formal Bologna adoption and actual institutional practice [2–4]. Research on music education specifically has identified the tension between standardisation and heritage preservation, which takes a particular form in conservatories that must simultaneously adopt Bologna-compatible frameworks and transmit oral traditions inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage lists [5,6]. What remains unexamined is the role of China as an external actor in Central Asian music education—not as a bilateral partner to individual countries, which has been addressed in comparative studies, but as a source of a fundamentally different integration logic that operates alongside and in tension with the European model.

The distinction matters because China's engagement with Central Asian education has expanded rapidly since the establishment of the China-Central Asia Summit mechanism in 2023. The Xi'an Summit declaration committed all six countries to expanded cooperation in education, culture, and people-to-people exchange, with specific provisions for scholarship programmes, joint cultural events, and the establishment of an Education Exchange Cooperation Centre [7]. The Shanghai Conservatory of Music has operated a Belt and Road Art Talent Training Programme since 2018, offering annual courses in traditional Chinese and Silk Road instruments to students from BRI partner countries [8]. Thirteen Confucius Institutes operate across the five Central Asian states, with cultural activities that include music and performing arts [9]. These activities constitute a pattern of engagement that differs in its governance logic from the Bologna-driven reform that has been the primary framework for understanding higher education integration in the region.

The purpose of the present study is to analyse how two competing external integration frameworks—the European Bologna Process and China's Belt and Road Initiative—shape music higher education governance in Central Asia, and to identify the structural tensions that arise when both frameworks operate simultaneously on the same institutional field. The objectives are as follows: to apply theories of policy borrowing, soft power, and regional education space to the analysis of external influence on Central Asian music education; to document and compare the mechanisms through which the Bologna model and the Chinese BRI model engage with music education institutions in the region; to introduce and characterise the concept of dual integration pressure; and to propose a framework for complementary engagement that identifies the conditions under which the two models can coexist without mutual interference.

2. Theoretical Framework

2.1. Policy Borrowing and Lending in Music Education

The theoretical framework draws on three interrelated bodies of scholarship. The first is the theory of policy borrowing and lending in education, as formulated by G. Steiner-Khamsi [10], who showed that cross-national policy transfer is not a neutral process of adopting best practices but a politically contingent act in which references to external models serve domestic purposes. Steiner-Khamsi [10] put forward the concept of externalization to describe how domestic policy actors invoke international standards or foreign examples to legitimate reforms that face local resistance, and

showed that policy borrowing accelerates during periods of heightened political contestation. D. Phillips and K. Ochs [11] proposed a four-stage model of policy borrowing—cross-national attraction, decision, implementation, and internalisation—that provides an analytical sequence for tracking how external educational models enter and are transformed by local contexts.

In the context of Central Asian music education, two external models compete for the role of reference point. The Bologna Process, which Kazakhstan joined in 2010 and which the other four Central Asian states engage with at varying levels of commitment, represents what Phillips and Ochs [11] called "imposed" borrowing at one extreme and "voluntary" adoption at the other. China's Belt and Road Initiative represents a different type of external engagement—not the imposition or voluntary adoption of structural standards, but the creation of bilateral relationships through which cultural and educational activities flow without requiring structural compatibility. The distinction between structural borrowing and relational exchange has not been applied to music education in Central Asia, and the present paper proposes that music education, because of its cultural specificity and resistance to standardisation, makes this distinction visible in ways that other fields do not.

2.2. Soft Power and Educational Cooperation

The second strand draws on the concept of soft power as formulated by J. S. Nye [12], who defined it as the ability to shape the preferences of others through attraction rather than coercion or payment. In the field of educational cooperation, soft power operates through scholarship programmes, cultural exchange activities, institutional partnerships, and the establishment of educational centres abroad. Sun [9] examined how China's Confucius Institutes function as instruments of cultural soft power, providing language instruction and cultural programming that create familiarity with Chinese culture among foreign publics. The analysis showed that while the CI model is effective in creating positive exposure, its capacity to translate cultural familiarity into deep educational cooperation depends on the extent to which host country institutions perceive the partnership as reciprocal rather than one-directional.

The concept of soft power in educational cooperation requires modification when applied to music education. Music carries identity-bearing content that is not present in language instruction or technical training. A Chinese programme that teaches erhu performance to Central Asian students is not simply transferring a skill—it is introducing a musical tradition that exists in a particular relationship to the Silk Road heritage that both China and Central Asia claim. The present study treats China's music education engagement with Central Asia not as a straightforward exercise of soft power but as a form of what W.-C. Ho [13] called "glocalization" in music education—a process in which global and local cultural elements interact, producing hybrid outcomes that neither the sender nor the receiver fully controls.

2.3. Regional Education Space and Multi-Scalar Governance

The third strand draws on S. Marginson's [14] theory of space and scale in higher education, which showed that higher education operates simultaneously at global, national, and local scales, with intermediate scales including pan-national regions. Marginson [14] showed that regional education spaces do not emerge organically but require deliberate institutional construction—quality assurance agencies, qualifications frameworks, credit transfer mechanisms, and political commitment to sustained coordination. K. Barkholt [15] confirmed that the European Higher Education Area, which the Bologna Process created, achieved its regional coherence through decades of political negotiation and institutional development that cannot be replicated simply by adopting the same structural tools in a different region.

In Central Asia, two different regional education spaces are being constructed simultaneously, operating on different scales and through different mechanisms. The Bologna-oriented space, represented by the TuCAHEA project (2012–2015) and Kazakhstan's full membership in the EHEA, aims to create structural compatibility among national systems through shared qualifications frameworks and quality assurance standards [4]. The China-oriented space, represented by the BRI

education framework and the China-Central Asia Summit mechanisms, aims to create connectivity through bilateral partnerships, talent training programmes, and cultural exchange events that do not depend on structural compatibility [7]. Music education sits at the intersection of these two spaces, and its institutional actors must navigate both simultaneously.

3. Materials and Methods

The study uses comparative documentary analysis to examine the mechanisms through which two external frameworks—the European Bologna Process and China's Belt and Road Initiative—engage with music higher education in the five Central Asian states. The comparison is structured around the institutional characteristics of the principal conservatories in the region, the regulatory and policy frameworks governing each external engagement model, and the specific programmes and activities through which each model operates in the domain of music education.

The documentary sources comprise four categories. The first category consists of national education laws and regulatory documents, including the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic on Education No. 179 (2023), the Education Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 319-III (2007, amended), and the presidential decree on higher education development in Uzbekistan (2019). The second category consists of institutional documents from the principal music higher education institutions in the region—the Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory, the State Conservatory of Uzbekistan, and the Kyrgyz National Conservatory—including publicly available programme descriptions, accreditation reports, and partnership agreements. The third category consists of documents related to China's educational engagement with Central Asia, including the Xi'an Declaration of the 2023 China-Central Asia Summit, programme descriptions from the Shanghai Conservatory of Music's Belt and Road Art Talent Training Programme (2018–2025), and reports on Confucius Institute activities in the five Central Asian states. The fourth category consists of publications and reports from the Aga Khan Music Programme, which operates curriculum development centres and music schools in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan and represents a third external actor distinct from both the Bologna and BRI frameworks.

Statistical data on education expenditure, tertiary enrolment rates, and student mobility are drawn from the World Bank Education Statistics Database [16]. Data on intangible cultural heritage inscriptions related to music are drawn from UNESCO's official lists [17]. Data on the number and distribution of Confucius Institutes are drawn from official reports of the Chinese International Education Foundation.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. The first stage maps the Bologna-oriented engagement with Central Asian music education, documenting the degree structures, credit systems, and accreditation mechanisms that have been adopted or are under development. The second stage maps China's BRI-oriented engagement with Central Asian music education, documenting the specific programmes, partnerships, and activities through which Chinese institutions interact with Central Asian conservatories and cultural organisations. The third stage compares the two engagement models across five dimensions: governance logic, institutional mechanism, curricular impact, heritage implications, and mobility effects.

4. Results

4.1. *The Bologna Framework and Music Education in Central Asia*

The engagement of the Bologna Process with music higher education in Central Asia follows a pattern of uneven adoption that reflects the broader divergence in reform trajectories across the five states. Kazakhstan represents the most advanced case. The Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory adopted the three-cycle degree structure (Bachelor-Master-PhD) with ECTS-compatible credit allocation and obtained international music-specific accreditation from MusiQuE, the European quality assurance agency for music higher education, in 2019 with renewal through 2029 [1]. The conservatory became an active member of the Association Européenne des

Conservatoires (AEC) in 2020, gaining access to the European network of music higher education institutions and its associated mobility and quality assurance frameworks [18]. As of 2024, the conservatory reported 1,197 enrolled students—1,094 at the bachelor level, 91 at the master level, and 12 at the doctoral level [19].

Uzbekistan has adopted a three-cycle degree structure in its national framework, but the State Conservatory of Uzbekistan operates within a nationally defined system that does not use ECTS credits and has not obtained international accreditation from any music-specific agency. The conservatory maintains six faculties and places particular emphasis on the preservation and transmission of Shashmaqom, the classical musical tradition shared with Tajikistan and inscribed on UNESCO's Intangible Cultural Heritage list in 2003 [17]. The governance of the conservatory is oriented toward national cultural policy objectives rather than alignment with European standards, which reflects a deliberate prioritisation of heritage preservation over international structural compatibility.

Kyrgyzstan occupies an intermediate position. The Kyrgyz National Conservatory formally adopted the two-cycle degree structure (Bachelor-Master) while retaining elements of the Soviet-era specialist programme, creating a dual-track system that exists on paper but generates confusion in cross-border recognition. The ECTS credit system has been formally adopted but is inconsistently applied, with individual departments interpreting credit allocation according to different standards. The conservatory has not obtained international accreditation and is not a member of AEC or any other European music education network.

Tajikistan and Turkmenistan represent the least integrated cases. The Tajik National Conservatory, established in 2009 as the newest institution in the group, has a five-faculty structure but operates a degree system that is still under development and does not correspond to the Bologna three-cycle format. Turkmenistan has retained Soviet-era institutional structures with minimal engagement in international higher education reform processes, and the Turkmen National Conservatory named after Maya Kuliyeva operates within a system that is largely closed to external quality assurance or accreditation.

The TuCAHEA project (Tuning Central Asia for Higher Education Area, 2012–2015), which represented the most sustained attempt at Bologna-style regional integration in Central Asia, did not include music or performing arts among its eight subject areas, which covered education, environmental engineering, economics, history, information and communication technologies, jurisprudence, medicine, and tourism [4]. The exclusion of music education from this regional framework means that there has been no systematic attempt to develop shared competence descriptions, learning outcomes, or qualifications frameworks for music higher education at the Central Asian regional level within the Bologna paradigm.

Table 1 presents the current state of Bologna-oriented integration in music higher education across the five states.

Table 1. Bologna Process engagement in Central Asian music higher education (as of 2024).

Indicator	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan
Degree structure	Three-cycle (BA-Three-cycle MA-PhD)	Three-cycle (national)	Dual-track (BA-Under MA + specialist)	Under development	Soviet-era retained
Credit system	ECTS-compatible	National credit hours	ECTS formal, inconsistent	Not developed	Soviet-era
Music-specific accreditation	MusiQuE (2019, renewed 2023)	None	None	None	None
AEC membership	Active (since 2020)	No	No	No	No
TuCAHEA participation	Yes (music included)	Yes (music included)	Yes (music included)	Yes (music included)	Observer

Source: compiled based on Kurmangazy Kazakh National Conservatory [19], AEC [18], EQAR [1], Isaacs [4].

The table shows that the Bologna framework has produced substantive engagement in one country—Kazakhstan—and varying degrees of formal adoption without operational implementation in the remaining four. In all five cases, music education has been excluded from the specific instruments designed to build a Central Asian higher education area.

4.2. *China's Belt and Road Framework and Music Education in Central Asia*

China's engagement with Central Asian music education operates through a set of mechanisms that differ fundamentally from the Bologna approach. Where the Bologna model requires structural convergence—the adoption of compatible degree formats, credit systems, and quality assurance standards—the Chinese model operates through bilateral relationships, specific programmes, and cultural exchange events that do not depend on structural compatibility between the participating institutions.

The most direct mechanism of engagement is the Belt and Road Art Talent Training Programme operated by the Shanghai Conservatory of Music in cooperation with the Shanghai Theatre Academy. Established in 2018 and supported by the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission, the programme offers annual courses of three to four weeks in traditional Chinese ethnic instruments and Silk Road musical traditions to students from Belt and Road Initiative partner countries [8]. The 2024 programme enrolled 38 students from nine countries, with 15 receiving full scholarships covering tuition, accommodation, and activities. The programme curriculum includes individual instrument instruction, ensemble workshops, lectures on Chinese music history and aesthetics, field visits to cultural institutions, and a culminating concert in which participants perform both Chinese and international repertoire [20]. The programme's framing around the Silk Road concept creates a shared cultural reference that encompasses both Chinese and Central Asian musical traditions, positioning the cooperation not as a one-directional transfer of Chinese culture but as a joint exploration of shared heritage.

The second mechanism operates through the Confucius Institute network. As of 2024, thirteen Confucius Institutes operate in the five Central Asian states: five in Kazakhstan, four in Kyrgyzstan, two in Tajikistan, and two in Uzbekistan, together with twenty-four Confucius Classrooms serving over 18,000 students [7]. While the primary function of Confucius Institutes is Chinese language instruction, the cultural programming component includes traditional music performance, instrument demonstrations, and participation in local cultural events. The cultural content delivered through Confucius Institutes creates a form of musical contact that exists outside the formal higher education system but generates familiarity with Chinese musical traditions among Central Asian audiences and, in some cases, among students who later pursue formal music studies.

The third mechanism consists of bilateral institutional agreements and high-level diplomatic commitments. The 2023 Xi'an China-Central Asia Summit declaration included specific provisions for expanded cooperation in education, culture, and people-to-people exchange. The summit established the intention to create an Education Exchange Cooperation Centre and committed to scholarship programmes, joint cultural events, and the Year of Culture and Art of the Peoples of Central Asia and China [7]. These commitments were reinforced at the Fifth China-Central Asia Foreign Ministers' Meeting in Chengdu in December 2024, which included expanded cooperation in higher education and cultural exchange among its priorities. The 2025 Astana Summit further announced 3,000 training opportunities over two years and pledged to establish additional cultural centres and university branches in Central Asia.

The fourth mechanism is the Luban Workshop programme, which China established in Dushanbe in November 2022 as the first in the region, subsequently opening similar workshops in the other four Central Asian states. While Luban Workshops focus primarily on vocational and technical training, the model illustrates China's approach to educational cooperation—creating specific institutional platforms that operate bilaterally, outside existing national regulatory frameworks, and that do not require the host country to modify its domestic educational structure.

Table 2 presents the mechanisms of China's engagement with Central Asian music and cultural education.

Table 2. China's BRI-oriented engagement with Central Asian music and cultural education.

Mechanism	Operational Since	Scale	Focus	Structural Requirement
Belt and Road Art Talent Training Programme	2018	Annual cohort, ~38,000 students (2024)	Traditional instruments, Road music	Silk Road None—bilateral programme
Confucius Institutes	2004 onwards	13 institutes, 24 classrooms, 18,000+ students	Language + cultural programming	None—outside formal HE
China-Central Asia Summit framework	2023	Government-to-government	Education centre, scholarships, exchange	Diplomatic commitment
Luban Workshops	2022	5 workshops (one per country)	Vocational training model	None—bilateral platforms
Bilateral university agreements	Ongoing	Institutional level	Student exchange, joint research	Negotiated per institution

Source: compiled based on Shanghai Conservatory of Music [8,20], Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the PRC [7], Sun [9].

The table makes apparent that none of the Chinese engagement mechanisms require Central Asian music education institutions to modify their domestic degree structures, credit systems, or accreditation frameworks. The cooperation operates through relational channels that bypass the structural barriers identified in the Bologna integration literature.

4.3. Comparative Analysis: Two Models, Different Logics

The comparison of the Bologna and BRI engagement models brings to light a structural asymmetry in their governance logics that has direct consequences for music education institutions in Central Asia.

The Bologna model operates through multilateral norm convergence. Its mechanism is the creation of shared structural standards—degree formats, credit systems, quality assurance criteria—that enable cross-border recognition by making national systems commensurable. The model assumes that integration requires compatibility, that compatibility requires standardisation, and that standardisation can be achieved through voluntary adoption of shared frameworks. In music education, this logic encounters a specific difficulty: the Bologna standards were developed for fields in which knowledge can be modularised, assessed through written examination, and documented in learning outcome statements. Oral music traditions, which constitute the cultural core of Central Asian conservatory education, resist modularisation because their transmission depends on embodied, relational, and context-dependent knowledge that cannot be adequately represented in the format that Bologna-compatible curricula require [6,21]. The result, as documented in the research on Central Asian music education governance, is a pattern of formal adoption without operational implementation—what Bischof [3] called "decoupling"—in which institutions produce documents that conform to Bologna standards while their actual teaching practices retain their pre-reform character.

The Chinese BRI model operates through bilateral relational exchange. Its mechanism is the creation of specific programmes, events, and partnerships that generate connectivity between Chinese and Central Asian institutions without requiring structural compatibility. The model does not assume that integration requires standardisation; instead, it assumes that cooperation can proceed through shared activities—joint performances, talent training, cultural exchange—that create mutual understanding and build institutional relationships. In music education, this logic

encounters a different set of possibilities: because the cooperation does not require Central Asian conservatories to modify their degree structures or curriculum formats, it can engage directly with the content of musical traditions—the instruments, the repertoire, the performance practices—rather than with the governance architecture that surrounds them.

The asymmetry between the two models produces what this paper terms dual integration pressure—a condition in which Central Asian music education institutions face simultaneous demands from two external frameworks that operate on incompatible logics. The Bologna framework asks institutions to make their structures compatible with European standards, which requires formal documentation, modular curriculum design, and outcome-based assessment. The BRI framework asks institutions to participate in bilateral programmes and cultural exchanges that do not require structural modification but that create dependencies on a different external partner and orient institutional attention toward a different set of international relationships.

Table 3 summarises the structural comparison between the two models.

Table 3. Comparison of Bologna and BRI engagement models in Central Asian music education.

Dimension	Bologna Model	BRI Model
Governance logic	Multilateral norm convergence	Bilateral relational exchange
Primary mechanism	Structural standardisation (degrees, credits, QA)	Programme-based cooperation (training, exchange)
Requirement for participation	Adoption of compatible institutional structures	Bilateral agreement, no structural modification
Curricular impact	Formal: modular design, learning outcomes, ECTS	Minimal: content exchange without format change
Heritage implications	Tension with oral traditions due to codification	Compatible with heritage through performance
Mobility effect	Credit-based recognition (if compatible)	(if programme-specific mobility (scholarships))
Institutional example	MusiQuE accreditation of Kurmangazy	Shanghai Conservatory BRI Programme
Gap identified	Music excluded from TuCAHEA	No systematic framework; annual renewal

Source: author's analysis based on documentary evidence.

The table makes clear that neither model provides a complete framework for music education integration in Central Asia. The Bologna model offers structural coherence but creates tension with the heritage preservation function of conservatories. The BRI model offers heritage-compatible cooperation but lacks institutional permanence and systematic governance.

4.4. The Aga Khan Music Programme as a Third Model

The analysis would be incomplete without consideration of a third external actor that operates in the same institutional space but on a different logic from both the Bologna and BRI frameworks. The Aga Khan Music Programme (AKMP), launched in 2000 by the Aga Khan Trust for Culture, has operated music curriculum development centres and schools in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan for over two decades [22].

In Kyrgyzstan, the AKMP's partner organisation Centre Ustatshakirt operates the Umtul (Aspiration) programme, which provides primary school students with instruction on the komuz (the Kyrgyz stringed instrument) in 80 schools across all seven regions, serving over 7,000 students. The complementary Muzchyarak programme offers professional development seminars for music teachers. In Tajikistan, the Khunar Centre in Khujand operates a master-apprentice training programme in traditional instruments and worked with the National Conservatory and the Ministry of Education to develop "Meros," a pilot secondary school curriculum active in 30 schools nationwide.

The AKMP also supported the Academy of Maqom in Dushanbe (2003–2015), which trained elite musicians in Shashmaqom performance [22].

The AKMP model differs from both the Bologna and BRI models in that it operates at the curriculum content level rather than the structural governance level, it is focused on heritage preservation and transmission rather than cross-border recognition or bilateral relationship-building, and it is sustained through philanthropic funding rather than government policy or diplomatic agreement. The AKMP's work shows that effective external engagement with Central Asian music education does not require either structural standardisation or bilateral diplomatic frameworks—it can proceed through direct support for the pedagogical practices that conservatories and schools actually use to transmit musical knowledge.

T. Levin, S. Daukeyeva, and E. Köchümkulova [23] documented the breadth of Central Asian musical traditions in the first comprehensive English-language textbook on the subject, a publication that emerged from the AKMP's collaboration with the University of Central Asia. The textbook's approach—presenting Central Asian music through a lens of cultural pluralism and regional interconnection rather than national classification—offers a model for how music education materials can support regional understanding without requiring institutional harmonisation.

5. Discussion

The findings bring to light a governance problem in Central Asian music education that is not adequately described by either the Bologna integration literature or the emerging literature on BRI educational cooperation. The problem is not simply that regional integration has failed—it is that two different conceptions of what integration means are operating simultaneously on the same institutional field, each with its own logic, its own instruments, and its own blind spots.

The Bologna conception treats integration as structural compatibility. Its instruments—degree frameworks, credit systems, quality assurance mechanisms—are designed to make national systems commensurable so that qualifications can be recognised across borders. When this conception is applied to music education in Central Asia, it encounters the conservatory paradox identified in prior research: the same institutions that are asked to standardise their structures are mandated to preserve nationally distinct musical traditions that resist standardisation. The result is decoupling—formal compliance with international standards alongside continued operation of traditional pedagogical practices that the standards cannot represent.

The BRI conception treats integration as connectivity. Its instruments—talent training programmes, cultural exchange events, bilateral agreements—are designed to create relationships between institutions and individuals without requiring structural modification. When this conception is applied to music education in Central Asia, it encounters a different problem: the cooperation produces valuable exchanges but does not create institutional infrastructure that would survive the withdrawal of Chinese support. The Shanghai Conservatory's BRI programme is renewed annually; its continuation depends on the Shanghai Municipal Education Commission's funding decisions and the diplomatic relationship between China and the host countries. This creates what might be called relational dependency—a form of cooperation that is productive while it operates but that does not build the self-sustaining institutional mechanisms that long-term integration requires.

The AKMP model offers a partial resolution to both problems. By working at the curriculum content level rather than the structural or diplomatic level, the AKMP has shown that external engagement can support music education without creating either standardisation pressure or relational dependency. The Umtul programme in Kyrgyzstan and the Meros curriculum in Tajikistan operate through local partner organisations and are designed to be integrated into national education systems, reducing the risk of dependency on continued external funding. The limitation of the AKMP model is its scale—it operates in two countries, focuses primarily on primary and secondary education, and does not address the higher education governance challenges that the Bologna and BRI models engage with.

The concept of dual integration pressure, as introduced in this paper, captures the specific condition that arises when the three models operate simultaneously. A Central Asian conservatory that is pursuing Bologna-compatible accreditation must invest institutional resources in documenting its programmes in the format that European quality assurance agencies require—learning outcomes, ECTS credit allocations, modular course descriptions. The same conservatory, if it participates in the BRI talent training programme, must invest institutional resources in bilateral exchange activities—hosting visiting Chinese musicians, preparing students for participation in Chinese-funded programmes, maintaining diplomatic relationships with Chinese partner institutions. The same conservatory, if it works with the AKMP, must invest institutional resources in curriculum development for traditional music transmission—designing pedagogical materials, training teachers, documenting oral traditions. Each of these activities serves a different external partner, follows a different logic, and produces a different type of institutional outcome. The question is whether the three can be made complementary rather than competitive.

The analysis suggests that complementary engagement is possible under specific conditions. The first condition is functional differentiation—the recognition that the three models address different aspects of the music education governance problem and need not compete for the same institutional space. The Bologna model is appropriate for structural governance—degree recognition, quality assurance, credit transfer—in cases where Central Asian states choose to align with European standards. The BRI model is appropriate for content-based cooperation—joint performances, instrument exchange, cultural dialogue—that does not require structural alignment. The AKMP model is appropriate for pedagogical development—curriculum design, teacher training, heritage documentation—that operates at the level of classroom practice.

The second condition is institutional capacity. Complementary engagement requires that conservatories have sufficient administrative and academic resources to participate in multiple external frameworks without any one framework consuming all available institutional attention. The data on institutional scale in the region suggests that this condition is not currently met in most cases. Only the Kurmangazy Conservatory in Kazakhstan, with its 1,197 students, four faculties, and existing international partnerships, has the institutional mass to engage meaningfully with multiple external frameworks. The smaller conservatories in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan face a practical constraint: they must choose which external engagement to prioritise because they lack the resources to pursue all three simultaneously.

The third condition is political alignment. Complementary engagement requires that the governments of the five Central Asian states perceive the Bologna and BRI frameworks as compatible rather than competing. The current geopolitical situation creates pressures that work against this perception. The European Higher Education Area and the Belt and Road Initiative represent different geopolitical alignments, and the decision to invest institutional resources in one framework rather than the other carries political implications that extend beyond education policy. S. Anafinova [24] showed that Kazakhstan's engagement with the Bologna Process follows a pattern of norm localisation in which domestic political considerations determine the extent and form of policy borrowing from European models. The same dynamic operates in reverse: engagement with the BRI framework is shaped by domestic calculations about the political benefits and costs of deepening cooperation with China.

6. Conclusions

The study set out to analyse how two competing external integration frameworks shape music higher education governance in Central Asia. The analysis shows that the Bologna Process and China's Belt and Road Initiative operate on structurally different governance logics—multilateral norm convergence and bilateral relational exchange, respectively—and that these logics produce different effects on music education institutions that are already managing the tension between educational standardisation and cultural heritage preservation.

The concept of dual integration pressure, introduced in this paper, describes the condition in which music education institutions must respond to both frameworks simultaneously. The analysis makes apparent that this condition is not merely an inconvenience but a governance problem with substantive consequences: institutional resources are divided among competing external demands, each external framework creates its own set of institutional dependencies, and the absence of coordination between the two frameworks means that alignment with one does not advance and may hinder alignment with the other.

The proposed complementary engagement framework rests on three conditions: functional differentiation between the structural, content-based, and pedagogical dimensions of music education cooperation; sufficient institutional capacity to participate in multiple frameworks; and political alignment that permits simultaneous engagement with European and Chinese partners. The analysis suggests that these conditions are partially met in Kazakhstan, minimally met in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, and not yet met in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan.

The findings carry implications for two audiences. For policymakers in Central Asian states, the analysis suggests that music education governance requires specific attention that it has not received within either the Bologna or BRI frameworks. The exclusion of music from the TuCAHEA project and the absence of a systematic BRI framework for arts education cooperation both represent missed opportunities that future policy should address. For Chinese policymakers and educational institutions engaged in BRI cooperation, the analysis suggests that the sustainability of music education cooperation depends on moving beyond annual programme cycles toward institutional mechanisms that can operate independently of external funding and diplomatic fluctuations. The Shanghai Conservatory's programme, in its current form, produces valuable exchanges but does not create the permanent institutional linkages that would give the cooperation lasting effect.

Music education in Central Asia, because it sits at the intersection of cultural identity, institutional governance, and international cooperation, makes visible problems that remain hidden when higher education integration is examined through purely structural or purely diplomatic lenses. The competing presence of European and Chinese engagement frameworks in this field is not a temporary condition but a structural feature of the geopolitical environment in which Central Asian education operates. Understanding how these frameworks interact—and under what conditions they can operate as complements rather than competitors—is a task that requires sustained attention from researchers, policymakers, and institutional leaders in all three spaces: European, Chinese, and Central Asian.

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