



From possible conflict to wartime cooperation

Laying the foundations of regional cooperation in the Caspian Sea
(2002–2018)

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Summary

This research paper uses snapshots of media coverage in the Caspian states to explore the state-led region-building efforts around the Caspian Sea from 2002–2018. Counter to the dominant conflict thesis in the literature, the findings suggest that the five states have moved towards more comprehensive political and economic cooperation. Relations have gradually been anchored in an understanding of the Caspian Sea as a shared space with multiple interlinkages and dependencies, even describing it as a “sea of peace and friendship”. This depiction is maintained by the Caspian states, also after the Sea became an arena and lifeline for Russia’s war against Ukraine after February 2022. This paper provides background and analysis of the developing regional cooperation and explores in the conclusion how this cooperation has gained new salience in Russia’s response to the sanction regime.

- A total of 307 statements from 939 news articles have been analysed to map which actors speak about the Caspian Sea, which issues they articulate and analyse the co-occurrence of actors and issues in Caspian politics over time.
- The analysis identifies a total of 146 unique actors speaking for the Caspian, primarily representatives of the central government in the littoral states, but also experts and business representatives. The important role of the executive branch of power is not a surprise given the Summit focus and the politics of these 5 states, but other actors are represented, and one key finding is that the role of non-executive branch actors increases over time.
- The most discussed issues in Caspian cooperation have also changed over time. Environment and energy were key issues in the 2000s. Energy has over time become relatively less central, and new issues have emerged, suggesting that the Caspian has become a space for a range of policy areas. Trade and transport have become relatively more important.
- Contrary to the dominant conflict thesis in much of the academic literature, the media snapshots around the Caspian Summits show that cooperation between the Caspian states have developed over time to include more actors and policy areas. We see a gradual move from more nationalistic and conflictual approaches to the Caspian towards a more collective approach emphasising both the challenges and the opportunities associated with the shared ecosystem of the Caspian. Even given the sampling of national media coverage, the analysis shows a tendency towards a more “regional” scaling of the Caspian, offering limited voice to outside actors and privileging certain policies over others (economic development over environmental issues for example).
- Understanding this gradual development of regional politics and relations is important to improve our interpretation of the situation in the region today, especially after Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine 24 February 2022, which has given the Caspian Sea a more central position. Russia has used the Caspian Sea to launch missiles towards Ukraine and it has become a key transport route, including for drones and other military equipment from Iran, directly fuelling the war and avoiding the sanctions-regime.
- Russia and Iran represent the biggest nodes in the discourse network presented in this paper. The relationship between the two now seems stronger than ever, and this dyadic relationship is important for regional developments. Their joint activities and usage of the Caspian Sea may represent challenges to the regional cooperation, as viewed from the other littoral states, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. Yet, there is little to no debate in public about this and these states also benefit in different ways from the developments in the region.

Introduction

The Caspian Sea has gained increasing attention in light of Russia's responses to the sanction regime enacted after its invasion of Ukraine in February 2022. The Caspian Sea – largely ignored by Western actors since a period of attention in the 1990s focused on energy transit routes and sources - is now often described as a “sanctions-evading paradise”, a key route for transporting goods and weapons to Russia, through and with the neighbouring states. The Russia-Iran relationship is described as closer than ever (Grajewski, 2024).

To understand why the Caspian has become a “sea of peace and friendship” that lends itself for Russia's strategic uses today, and not a conflict hotspot, we need to systematically study what is going on in the region. This paper offers a systematic and longitudinal mapping of the state-led region building efforts around the Caspian through snapshots of national media coverage in the five states in the month of the five Caspian summits (2002, 2007, 2010, 2014 and 2018).¹ The media data was collected and analysed to do the following: 1) to identify actors/voices that are “speaking for” the Caspian and the issues they speak about; 2) to describe and map relations between these actors and their topics in order to see the structure of the Caspian policy field and how this has changed over time (Wilson Rowe 2018; Wilson Rowe 2021). This novel approach also contributes to strengthening the methodological toolbox for studying not only the Caspian, but regional politics more generally. Thomas Ambrosio has pointed to the “(...) proliferation of largely descriptive analyses. While these studies have provided important insights into the relationship, they are often insufficient to show its actual structure, beyond macro-level linkages, such as arms sales or bilateral trade.” (Ambrosio 2017, 112). This weakness is also valid for some of the Caspian literature. Agha Bayramov (2020a, 15) has argued that Caspian analyses often contain a “mixture of unreliable information and evidence to support its geopolitical arguments”. By bringing the five Caspian states together in actor-topic networks, we not only see change and continuity, similarity and difference between the national discourses on the Caspian, but we can use this as a prism studying policy issues and actor configurations within, across and beyond the five Caspian states.

The paper first provides background on Caspian regional cooperation as context for the study. The next section explains the methodology of the study before the analysis is presented and discussed. The paper then offers visualisations of the co-occurrence of actors and issues over time, inspired by more recent work employing discourse network analysis (Leifeld 2017). This allows for consideration in tandem of how actors and core ideas interact in shaping the Caspian as a complex policy field. It concludes with a discussion of the findings from 2002-2018 and how these spark new questions, also of acute policy relevance today, as well as avenues for further research.

1 The five summits are the 1st Caspian Summit in Ashgabat, Turkmenistan in 2002. 2nd in Teheran, Iran, in 2007. 3rd in Baku, Azerbaijan in 2010. 4th in Astrakhan, Russia in 2014 and the 5th in Aktau, Kazakhstan in 2018. A 6th Caspian Summit took place in Ashgabat 29 June 2022, but the media coverage of this has not been included in this analysis.

Background

The end of the Soviet Union shifted the Caspian Sea from a bilateral issue between Iran and the Soviet Union to a cross-border ecosystem shared by now five littoral states. Since then, representatives of the five states have negotiated the Caspian's legal status and delimitation of the Sea. In August 2018, after 25 years of negotiations, the presidents of the five Caspian states – Azerbaijan, Iran, Kazakhstan, Russia and Turkmenistan – signed the Convention on the Legal Status of the Caspian Sea (CLCS) at the 5th Caspian Summit in Aktau, Kazakhstan. Defying widespread perceptions of the region as a potential “conflict hotspot”, the 2018 summit marked the (preliminary) end to peaceful negotiations and diplomatic efforts since the end of the Soviet Union. The CLCS is a comprehensive agreement that covers a range of issues including regional security, environmental protection, as well as the exploration and development of resources such as hydrocarbons and fishing in the Caspian Sea. However, the crucial issue of delimitation of the seabed remains to be solved (CLCS 2018, see also Pietkiewicz 2021). We would expect that the unresolved legal issue would loom over, create tensions, and possibly conflicts also in other potential policy fields in the Caspian. Indeed, this is what the literature on the Caspian region has also been telling us. The Caspian Sea has, as the wider region, often been studied primarily through a geopolitical lens and portrayed as an arena for the “New Great Game”. The main reason for this has been the competition for energy resources, primarily seen from the perspective of competing great powers (USA, China, Turkey) and the dominant Caspian powers (Russia and Iran) (German 2014; Bayramov 2020a; Grajewski 2020).

However, what we see is that the Caspian states have signalled and initiated cooperation in a wide range of fields despite the unresolved fundamental legal status and the attractive energy resources. Since the early 1990s, the Caspian littoral states have worked along two primary tracks. First, already in 2003, the Caspian states agreed on the Tehran Convention outlining some issues related to the environmental governance of the Caspian Sea (Tehran Convention 2003). The Convention was ratified in 2006 and followed by 6 Conferences of the Parties between 2007 and 2018, resulting in 4 additional protocols.²

The second track has been the negotiation process on the legal status of the Caspian Sea. An ad-hoc working group met 52 times before the CLCS was signed in 2018, with the negotiations also resulting in two security agreements on security cooperation (2010) and combatting terrorism (2018). Whereas in the first track, international organisations have been key facilitators, the second process has seen the participation by the Caspian states only (Janusz-Pawletta 2021; Bayramov 2019, 2020b). As of November 2024, the 2018 CLCS been ratified by the parliaments in four countries, but not yet in Iran, with few updates on the ratification process since August 2021. Despite this, state officials continue to meet regularly to discuss different issues and have established a new “regular ministerial dialogue”, gathering in Moscow in early December 2023. Two Caspian Economic Fora have been in organised since 2018, with a third planned for Teheran in 2024, and the foreign ministers discussed the establishment of a “Caspian Council” at the recent meeting in Moscow (TASS, 2023).

Despite these sustained and seemingly successful diplomatic efforts, the academic literature on the

2 The protocols include: Protocol Concerning Regional Preparedness (2011), Protocol for the Protection of the Caspian Sea against Pollution from land-based sources and activities (2012), Protocol for the Conservation of Biological Diversity (2014) and Protocol on Environmental Impact Assessment (2018).

Caspian Sea has so far paid scant attention to cooperation and more complex regional governance. The notion of a “new great game” and potential conflict remains important both in academic and media publications (Smith Stegen and Kuszniir 2015; Escobar 2021). The development in the Caspian Sea region has most often been interpreted as a “Caspian Great Game”, defined as “part of a competition between regional (Iran, Russia, Turkey) and external powers (China, European Union, United States).” (Bayramov 2020a, 2-3; Blank 1999). Analyses of the Caspian space have emphasised competition for access to hydrocarbons and prospects for conflict between the littoral states and outside actors (Stokes 2007). The politics and positions of the littoral states, in particular the Russia-Iran dyad, and their relations with outside actors have been at the heart of many analyses (Blum 2000; German 2014; Grajewski 2020).

Even accounts that discuss the role of other actors often resort to the point that power in the Caspian resides primarily with the five littoral states, and that it is unevenly distributed among them, with Russia as the most powerful and the Russia-Iran relationship as decisive for the regional politics (German 2014; Orazgaliyev and Araral 2019). Literature on the other Caspian states, like Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan tend to focus on their multivector foreign policies (in the Turkmenistani case: neutrality) and whether they are mere pawns or actual players in the New Great Game (Anceschi 2017; Isamyilov 2014; İpek 2007). In recent years, the New Great Game literature has been effectively criticised by scholars such as for two main limitations: First, the privileging of great powers and external actors in shaping politics and developments in the Caspian (Bayramov 2020a; Buranelli 2020; Teles Fazendeiro 2021; Zakhirova 2012). Second, the emphasis on points of tension and conflict as the main driver for politics (Teles Fazendeiro 2021; Heathershaw and Megoran 2011; Dadabaev 2021).

Despite widespread conflict predictions and narratives, the Caspian region has largely been stable and peaceful.³ In fact, the Caspian states have regularly met to discuss and negotiate, solving issues and forming relations. Not only the states, but a wide range of governmental and non-governmental actors from and beyond the littoral states take part in different Caspian projects and policies (Bayramov 2020a, 16-17; Contessi 2016). Since the early 1990s, Caspian regional processes have taken place in a context of strong interest from multinational companies seeking access to the hydrocarbons of the Caspian, as well as international organisations like the World Bank and UNDP financing and working in the region since 1992 (Bayramov 2020b; Beaumont and Wilson Rowe 2022; Weinthal 2002). These and other international organisations form (part of) networks in the Caspian region and “(...) their [IOs, my insertion] preferences, both political and economic, and networks affect the capacity, opportunity and will of governments (e.g., ministries, parliaments and presidents) to cooperate” (Bayramov 2020b, 502, emphasis added). Whereas the academic literature and media tend to describe and treat authoritarian states as monolithic, unitary actors, Bayramov (2019, 2020a, 2020b) has done important work in criticising the state-centric approach and opening up the black box of Caspian politics, demonstrating that international organisations and businesses have played important roles in shaping the region since the 1990s. This paper builds on this and other important work exploring further how policy processes can be conceptualised as networks of different actors or stakeholders with specific policy interests such as business, security, environment or political also in illiberal contexts (Koch and Tynkkynen 2021).

3 Apart from some incidents at sea (see e.g. Lee 2005) as well as more generally strained bilateral relations such as between Azerbaijan and Iran (RFE/RL 2021).

Data and Methods

To potentially capture broader networks in Caspian regional governance, this report first analyses the contours of the discourse around the Caspian Sea (who speaks and on which topics) and then turns to a discourse network analysis approach. This discourse network method is based in literature showing that networks of actors can be mapped and analysed by identifying discursive coalitions on a specific policy issue, providing us with new knowledge about how policy is developed and legitimised (Fergie et al 2018). Discourse network analysis is often based on media analysis (Leifeld 2017, Fergie et al 2018, Lapesa et al 2020). The analysis in this research paper relies on statements about the Caspian collected during a systematic analysis of selected newspapers in the five Caspian states between 2002 and 2018. The longitudinal approach is especially important because regional cooperation develops over time and may not be adequately reflected in snapshots based on more cooperative or contentious events (see e.g. Lee 2005).

Using media as a source of data in the Caspian context

There are several arguments for doing media analysis, also in authoritarian states.⁴ First, media analysis can be useful to study policy development and legitimation since also authoritarian leaders rely on and legitimise their policies to the public. The goal of this analysis is not to assess whether the media landscape in the Caspian is pluralist, but to employ the findings of some earlier studies to increase the opportunity to get an overview of “voices for the Caspian” through a carefully selected and carried out media analysis (Heinrich and Pleines 2018; see also Tynkkynen and Tynkkynen 2018 and Koch and Tynkkynen 2021). At the same time, this case study of sources and opinions of the Caspian contributes to the debate about the role of mass media in authoritarian states as it covers to what extent voices not belonging to the ruling elite in these countries are represented at all, which voices are, and also to what extent different opinions/positions on the Caspian are discussed in the media (Heinrich and Pleines 2018, 103–104, see also Heinrich and Pleines 2015). Second, since media outlets publish regularly, news articles provide a source of longitudinal, systematic empirical data, of which there are few in the Caspian region. Finally, although these news articles cannot be expected to represent a wide range of actors, perhaps particularly political opposition, they allow for casting the net wider than, for example, a study limited to official documents.

This paper’s empirical analysis thus draws primarily on newspaper articles that mentioned the Caspian Sea in the month of the five Caspian summits (2002, 2007, 2010, 2014 and 2018).⁵ Two

4 The choice to use media representations to get at who and what matters in the Caspian necessitates a discussion of the role of mass media in authoritarian regimes (Freedman and Schafer 2011; Walker and Orttung 2014). Studies of the media situation in the Caspian states show there is limited pluralism, extensive government- or state media control with and or repression of more independent media (Heinrich and Pleines 2018). While the media landscape is dominated by state-controlled TV, there is more pluralism in other media types. Although Internet and social media have become increasingly important now, it made more sense to work systematically with print media since we were interested in capturing change/continuity from the first summit in 2002 till the last in 2018.

5 This time frame was selected to capture statements both in advance of and immediately after the high-level meetings, covering both policy input and reactions from different stakeholders. It was unfortunately not possible to access the newspaper archives from 2002 for Turkmenistan and Iran. However, since change over time was deemed important also for the states in which there are media sources for all the five years, I stuck to the decision to start from the first Caspian summit in 2002

media outlets in each Caspian state were selected: one official, one described as more independent.⁶ It is important to note that this has changed significantly over time and whereas there were more independent media outlets in Russia, Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan in the 2000s, independent media has since become very restricted. In the case of Turkmenistan, there are no independent media outlets except for those working in exile. In Iran, the media landscape is pluralist in the sense that different media outlets relate to different political actors, thus representing different views.

A full overview of media outlets with information about language, nationality and number of articles is displayed in table 1 on the next page.

6 Relevant articles were selected with the help of the search function in Integrum and/or on the media outlet's website. The Integrum database has an extensive and comprehensive collection of media outlets from Russia and Eurasia, covering the period back to the 1990s. The database contains Russian- and English-language documents. Some internet sites were also checked using their own online archives in addition to via Integrum. In Integrum, as well as in online searches of specific media sites, the search function was used to delimit the number of texts. The relevant search terms were "Caspi*" in English and "каспий*" in Russian. All relevant texts were downloaded and saved as Word files. As a result, the full corpus for analysis is available in Word format. All documents were then imported into NVivo for coding. All articles with any meaningful reference to the Caspian Sea were included in the text sample. If the reference was very marginal and did not relate to the issue of Caspian politics or economics, the respective article was not included in the analytical sample. The total number of articles sampled is 939.

Media outlet	Country	Language	Media type	2002			2007			2010			2014			2018			
				Sampled art.	Actor	Topic	Statements	Sampled art.	Actor	Topic	Statements	Sampled art.	Actor	Topic	Statements	Sampled art.	Actor	Topic	Statements
Vremya	KAZ	RUS	Online media	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	1	
Nezavisimaya gazeta	RUS	RUS	Newspaper	29	9	4	10	24	6	2	6	13	8	4	12	11	10	5	
Kazakhstanskaya Pravda	KAZ	RUS	Newspaper	27	5	3	9	33	7	2	7	24	4	4	10	38	0	0	
Kommersant	RUS	RUS	Newspaper	26	7	2	6	28	5	2	5	8	7	6	14	18	2	1	
Ekho Baku	AZ	RUS	Online media	8	9	4	9	25	16	4	19	43	6	4	6	49	1	1	
Rossiiskaya gazeta	RUS	RUS	Newspaper					43	1	1	4	9	3	2	4	13	7	6	
Day.az	AZ	RUS	Online					54	4	3	6	66	5	6	11	155	0	0	
Turkmeninform	TUR	RUS	Online									10	2	5	5	3	1	2	
Turkmenistan Today	TUR	ENG	Newspaper																
Tehran Times	IRAN	ENG	Newspaper																
Iran Daily	IRAN	ENG	Online																
Bakinskiy Rabochii	AZ	RUS	Newspaper																
TOTAL				91	31	31	35	208	39	47	47	174	36	63	290	24	32	176	82
Total sampled articles	939																		
Total # statements	307																		
Total unique actors pr year	(Nvivo)				27				37				25						55
Total unique topics pr year	(Nvivo)					7			6				13			11			12

Table 1. Overview of media outlets

Compilation of Caspian media database

Based on a reading of the 939 sampled articles in NVivo, I identified actors that speak for the Caspian. For the discourse network analysis, “statements” have been used as the unit of analysis. In the text corpus, we have coded extracts from the newspaper texts which featured direct quotes and/or reported speech from named actors. This was categorised according to which actor voiced the statement and the topic/issue that the statement related to. If the statement had a strongly voiced sentiment about Caspian politics as either cooperative or conflictual, this was also coded. The actors were coded at nationality, sector (central government, local government, media, academia, business, civil society, international organisation) and sex.

In total, 307 statements made by 146 unique actors, relating to 12 broadly defined topics, were coded. All the actors who have spoken about the Caspian in the media sample were defined as cases in Nvivo. Attributes including nationality, sector and gender were coded for all the registered cases. The paper does not intend to measure any effects different actors may have on Caspian politics, but is primarily concentrated on grasping the national media discourses on Caspian politics and mapping who is given or represented as a voice in the media over time and in the different states. Following initial coding, inconsistencies in coding were discussed and resolved with the project team and some topics were incorporated into others.

Discourse network analysis

Network analysis is more frequently used in assumed more complex and open contexts (Hafner-Burton, Kahler and Montgomery 2009; Seabrooke and Henriksen 2017). This research paper tests the reach of a method frequently used in Western contexts to come to grips with cooperative and conflictual dynamics in regional and or global contexts on a case of a non-western and authoritarian/illiberal context. Whereas I agree that network data often may require a certain level of openness to access data about participation, the limited usage may also reflect a more problematic assumption that these non-Western/non-democratic contexts are simple and one-dimensional and do not have any form of participatory politics beyond the official level.

Discourse Network Analysis argues that policy debates among elite actors (e.g., interest groups, legislators, government agencies etc) in text data such as newspaper articles can be analysed as temporal, dynamic networks: “Political discourse is a network phenomenon because the statements actors contribute to the discourse are dependent on each other in interesting ways, both temporally and cross-sectionally” (Leifeld 2017, 1). The network consists of nodes (actors speaking) and topics, and the links between the two reflect the connection between topics and actors.

The actor/topic linkages identified in the media articles were imported to R to map actors and topics visually. First, I mapped the Caspian discourse networks and show the interconnectedness of actors and issues that they address in their statements. Second, we visualise the discourse network at five different points in time to identify change or continuity over time in the co-occurrence of actors and issues. This results in a bipartite network, in which the nodes are actors and topics and the edges are the links between actors and topics. Edges represent not only the existence of a link but also its strength as the number of statements/links. Figures below show actors as circles and topics as squares, which are linked by edges that indicate the number of times they are affiliated. The colours

of the circles show their nationality.

Another important limitation is that the analysis shows affiliation networks – meaning similarity and difference between actors/issues, but it is not able to gauge whether these different actors influence policy decisions in their respective state or if they have any form of direct ties with “like-minded” actors in the other states. This remains a topic of further research and the aim here has been to provide nuance and analytical rigor to explore authoritarian regionalism. In terms of data collection limitations, there are only official media sources used in Turkmenistan case. In Iran, the media outlets selected are in English language and in the other states, media outlets publish primarily in Russian and not in the local language.

From conflict to cooperation in the Caspian Sea

The next part presents and discusses some of the findings from the analysis of the media database. The first section presents an overview of the actors represented in the sample, their nationality and sector and how these changes over time. The second section discusses which topics are apparent in the media discourses and how this varies across the states and over time. Finally, the third section combines the two in a joint analysis showing the co-occurrence of actors and topics and how this develops over time. This section discusses who speaks about what and analyses these relations as snapshots of discursive networks around the Caspian presidential summits.

Key actors in Caspian politics

Table 2. Overview of actors speaking in the media sample

Year	2002	2007	2010	2014	2018
Total actors coded	31	39	36	24	82
Unique actors coded	26	37	25	23	55
Nationality of actors speaking (%)	AZ (30%) RU (27%) KAZ (23%) IRAN (4%) OTH (15%)	AZ (38%) KAZ (16%) RU (16%) OTH (16%) IRAN (5%) TUR (2,7%)	AZ (28%) KAZ (24%) RUS (24%) IRAN (8%) TUR (8%) OTH (8%)	RUS (52%) AZ (17%) IRAN (9%) KAZ (9%) TUR (4%) OTH (4%)	RUS (38%) IRAN (20%) OTH (18%) AZ (7%) KAZ (7%) TUR (2%)
Sector of actor speaking (%)	Central gov (62%) Business (23%) Academia (15%)	Central gov (57%) Academia (22%) Business(19%) Local gov (2,7%)	Central gov (52%) Academia (32%) Business (12%) Other (4%)	Academia (39%) Central gov (39%) Local gov (9%) Business (4%) Media (4%)	Central gov (45%) Academia (16%) Business (15%) Local gov (7%) Military (7%) Media (5%) Int org (2%) Other (2%)

As the table above summarises, the data shows an increasing number of unique actors speaking over time from 26 in 2002 to 55 in 2018. As the Caspian cooperation develops over time, the number of sectors actors represent increase. This development takes place at the same time as we see a more restrictive media environment in several of these states, which could perhaps have indicated the opposite - a more limited media representation. In addition to state representatives (central, local gov and military), academia is significantly represented throughout the period.

Representatives of international businesses and organisations are, despite their engagement and interest in the region, not prominently featured in the media discourse. As we see from the table, there is a significant number of actors speaking that are from other states than the Caspian 5. In 2002 and 2007, these are primarily found in the energy coverage and more specifically in media reports on pipelines. Business representatives tend to be from non-littoral states, reflecting the interest of multinational companies in the region’s hydrocarbon resources. In 2018, however, these are mainly international representatives commenting on the Caspian Convention signed at the Summit. In this analysis, all nationalities except for the Caspian five have been coded as OTHER. For future research, it would be interesting to do a more detailed analysis of which countries these other actors represent.

Azerbaijani and Russian actors dominate in the 2000s, but in 2018, it is Russian and Iranian actors speaking. Russian actors tend to be speaking not just in Russian media, but also cited in the media of the other states. This may be seen to reflect Russia's more hegemonic role in the region (Allison 2004; Kubicek 2009; Aris and Snetkov 2020). It could also be the fact that Russia has been among the "most active players in the field of authoritarian regionalism" (Libman and Obydenkova 2018, 162). The increase of Iranian actors in the 2018 sample may reflect how other media also covered the controversial domestic debates in Iran about the 2018 Convention, which was also reported on in the other states. There is some variation across the states. In Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan, the political elite is more broadly represented, and also business and international actors are in the sample. As have been argued in other studies, experts have a voice on different issues and policies, in particular in Russia and Azerbaijan in this sample (Blum 2000, Wilson Rowe 2013).

Representatives of the central governments dominate the media samples in all five years. The findings thus support previous studies pointing to the key role of the presidents, and the executive branch of power in these states. This is also natural given the selection of media articles around the Caspian summits, in which the presidents meet. In the case of Turkmenistan, few other actors are represented in the data. In three of the five media snapshots, the president Gurbanguly Berdimukhammedov, is the only Turkmenistani actor reported as speaking about Caspian issues.

Official documents and some media reports show that representatives of for example Kazakhstani and Russian regions adjacent to the Caspian Sea often participate in the official delegations to the Caspian summits. One example is in the August 2020 Caspian Economic Forum in Awaza, Turkmenistan, which brought together not only the governments of the five littoral countries but also representatives of the Russian federal republics Astrakhan, Dagestan and Kalmykia. President of Kalmykia Khasikov said that the growing importance of the Caspian had convinced him Kalmykia needs to play an expanded role by developing its own port to allow for the transshipment of goods. Moreover, he promised to start allowing training for Turkmen and other students in the region at Kalmykian universities (MFA Turkmenistan 2019). Such more localised initiatives and efforts get little attention in a media landscape dominated by representatives of the central government. Whereas adjacency to the Caspian Sea may be thought to be important, not just at the international level, but also within the littoral states, there is surprisingly little representation of the regional and local perspectives in the national media discourses. In 2000, Douglas Blum argued that there were contradicting Caspian policies between central, federal and local authorities in Russia, questioning analyses of Russia as one unified, monolithic actor.

An examination of this argument today would require going deeper into the statements and perhaps combining with regional/local media, but from the overview above, we can see that local/regional government is represented in a much smaller role than the central. This also includes a more human perspective focusing on the local politics and businesses of fisheries and agriculture, which is not found at all in the sample (Dubuisson 2022). The same goes for civil society, which was, perhaps not unexpectedly, not at all present in the national media discourses. The sector category of "other" captures for example, citizens interviewed. This is interesting, and contrary to some of Douglas Blum's findings of how local activists, regional governors, international organisations and businesses were involved in knowledge production and policymaking on the Caspian in the 1990s in Russia (Blum 2000).

Figure 1. Actors with sector and nationality (2018)

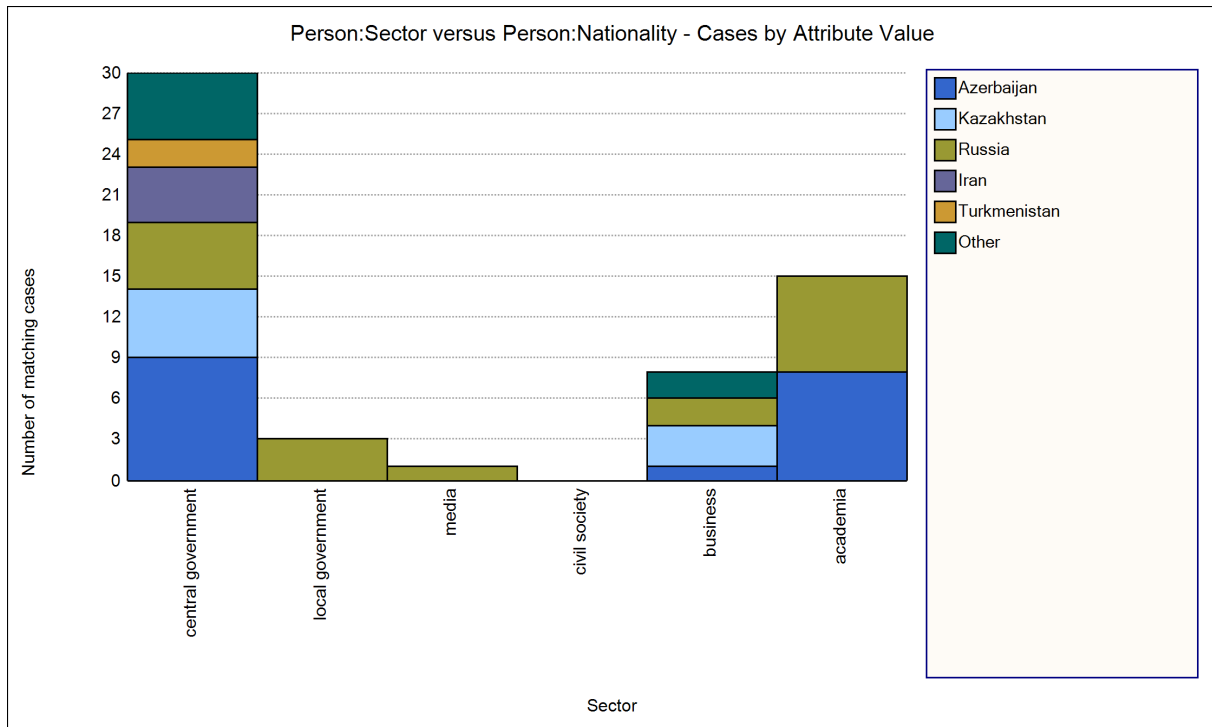
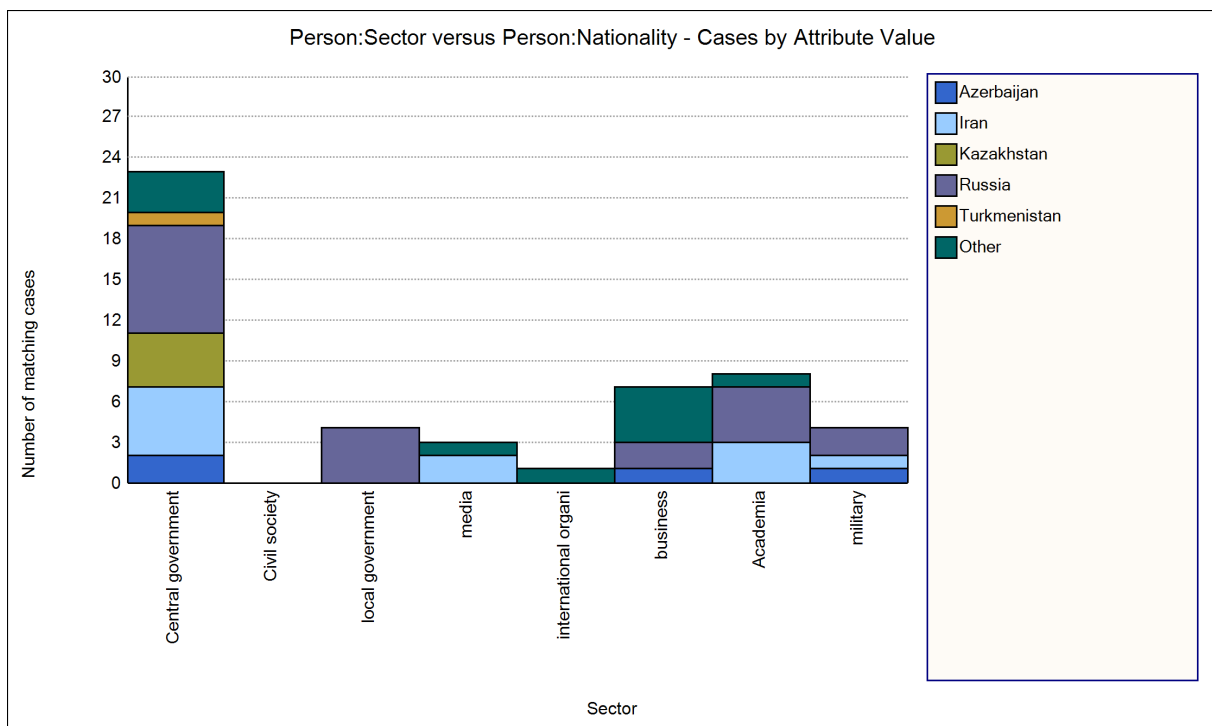


Figure 2. Actors with sector and nationality (2007)



Interestingly, given the crucial role international organisations have played in facilitating and implementing Caspian environmental cooperation, but also the role of international energy companies in the development of Caspian resources, these are not given much voice in the media coverage around the Caspian Summits. As Beaumont and Wilson Rowe (2022) find in their study of the official documents of the Caspian 5 in the period from 1997-2017, there are few mentions of the IOs, which in other accounts have been described as important in the facilitation and implementation of the Tehran Convention (Bayramov 2020b). This is an interesting issue for further studies, in particular regarding Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan, where international linkages often are highlighted also in national media as a source of legitimation (Matveeva 2009).

Key issues in Caspian politics

This section discusses which policy issues occur in the media reports about the Caspian in the different Caspian states and whether and how these change over time. As Leifeld (2017, 4) argues “(...) discussion topics come and go over time, effectively leading to a temporal clustering of statements.” This section provides a topical analysis of the media coverage in the five states, including what could be more contentious issues. This overview also allows for some (cautious) discussions of potential differences and similarities between states and sectors across the 5 states.

Figure 3. Topics with nationality (2018)

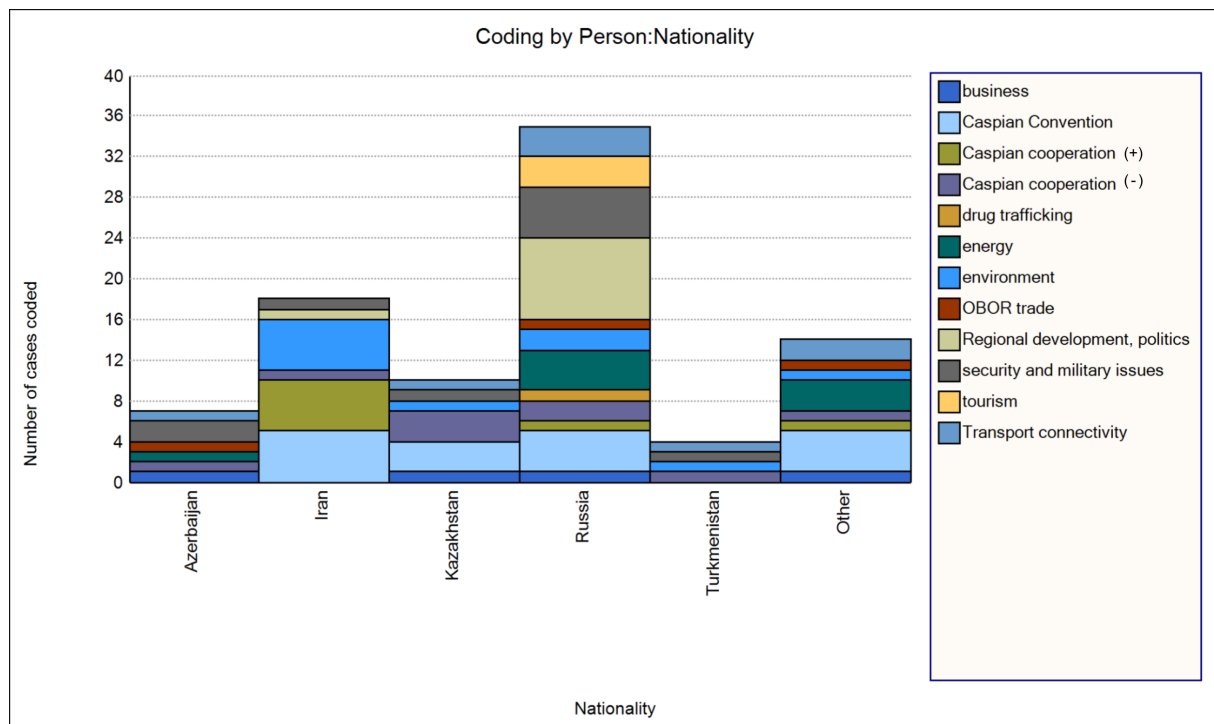
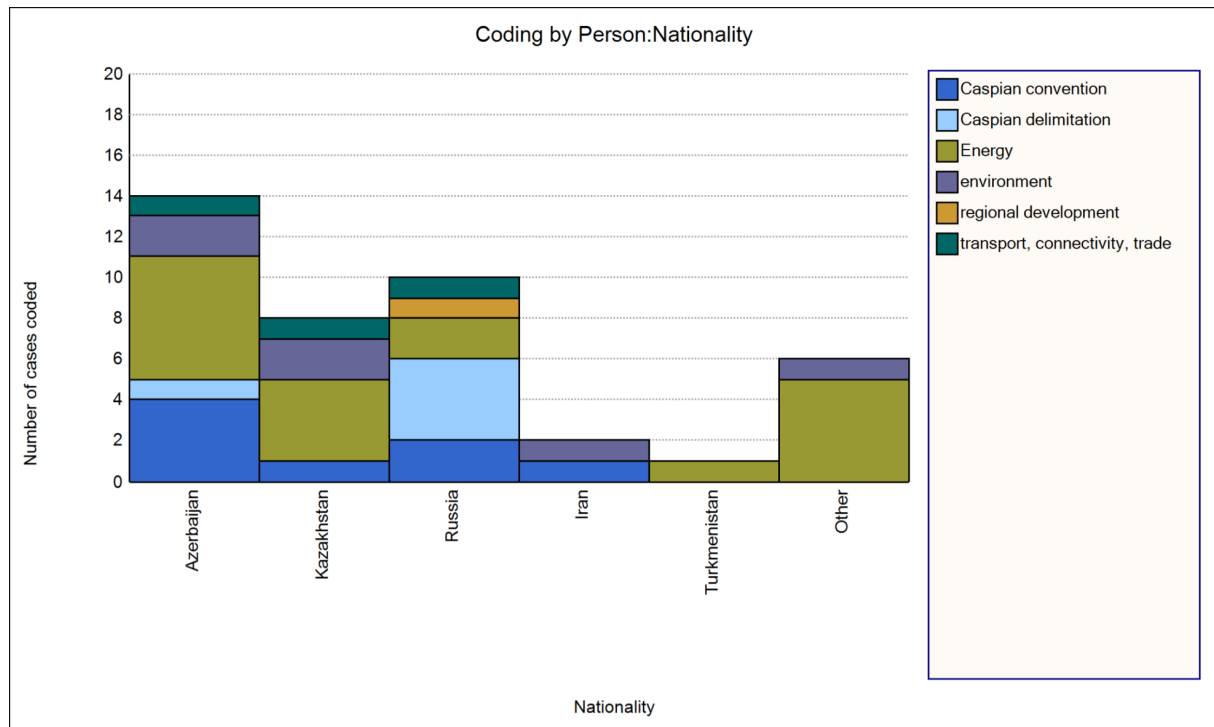


Figure 4. Topics with nationality (2007)



As we see from the 2007 vs 2018 comparison above, there has been a general broadening of the scope of Caspian politics, from energy being relatively the most important policy issue in the 2000s to a much broader agenda during the Summits today including topics such as trade, connectivity and tourism. This can be seen as a result of the Caspian states having established regular meetings at the different political and bureaucratic levels and supports Bayramov’s 2020b) argument that what started as an environmental cooperation has been widened to include other issues.

However, despite how the initial environmental cooperation led to interaction and trust further facilitating cooperation on security (2010) and ultimately the 2018 Convention, environmental issues are not extensively covered in the media in the five states. Although the CLCS (2018) and the Tehran Convention (2003) are anchored in the shared ecosystem of the Caspian Sea, perspectives on the Caspian Sea as an ecosystem do not feature frequently in the media discourses. The 2003 Convention mentions the ecosystem explicitly 7 times in the document. In general, in the media sample, few actors speak “for” the Caspian, they rather speak “about”. Environmental issues, and the Caspian environmental cooperation are given some more media attention in Iran and Azerbaijan (primarily representatives from the ministries of environment/ecology). One reason for this could be that environment is not an issue at the presidential summits, which have focused more on the legal status, security issues and natural resource development.

Related to this, analysing the most important topics, it is interesting to note the reduced attention towards energy over time. This was a crucial topic in the 1990s and 2000s, for the US, but also the European Union (EU) (Blank 1999, Guliyev 2019). The change could be related to the lack of energy

investments after 2014, due to dropping oil prices or reflecting that “energy reserves in the Caspian are much less important than many political analyses have implied” (Bayramov 2019, 14). More “outside” actors are speaking about energy, and Iranian actors speak very little about energy in comparison with the four post-Soviet states. Although energy does not disappear entirely, a lot of other topics become more prominent in the media discourses over time. It is important to note that in this analysis, we have not separated between traditional energy sources and renewable energy. The challenges of the green transition for the Caspian states are getting increased attention, also directly in relation to the Sea, and it would be interesting to recode the data more granularly to see if there is a shift towards renewable energy in more recent years. After February 2022, the energy dimension of the Caspian has gotten renewed international attention with Azerbaijan and the EU signing a deal potentially doubling the supply of gas in July 2022.

While energy as a policy area fades in the media sample, there is increasing talk about the economic prospects of regional cooperation, also in Iran (Grajewski 2020). Investments in trade and infrastructure development, such as ports, railroads and other “connectivity” measures have risen high on the agenda. Russia’s Caspian Development strategy from 2017 and Iran’s crucial role in facilitating Russian exports to the South Asian markets (also India’s investments in this) are some of the examples of this in addition to the more well-known North-South Transport Corridor, and of course China’s Belt and Road Initiative (Cheremeteff, Shvarts, Simobov, Broekhoven, Tracy and Khmeleva 2021). The focus is on benefits of economic cooperation, and not clearly signalling any Caspian identity being developed. At the same time, economic and infrastructural cooperation is linked to the Caspian being represented as a space of cooperation. In the media discourses, framings of conflict were more prominent in the 2000s than in the 2010s. There is reduced talk of conflict, competition, energy and security in the 2010s and more descriptions of the Caspian as a “Sea of Peace”, friendliness and good neighbourliness.

It is also important to note that by 2018 Russia has the greatest number of actors speaking and engages in most topics when they speak about the Caspian, demonstrating Russia’s ambition to take leadership in regional developments, perhaps especially after 2014.

Actor-topic networks in Caspian politics

This next part will visualise the Caspian media discourse as affiliation networks, showing which actors talk about the same topics in five snapshots between 2002 and 2018. The analysis allows for more detailed empirical investigation of for example discourses of conflict or cooperation in the Caspian. By linking the topics/frames of the Caspian explicitly with the actors representing those frames we can get closer to the “discursive coalitions”. In a discourse coalition, actors share storylines/narratives to shape public discourse and influence policy decisions. In this paper, this analysis and visualisations provide a snapshot of who speaks about what and how issues overlap according to nationality.

Figure 5 shows the results of the network analysis for 2007 and 2018. Circles are the actors speaking and the squares are the topic they speak about. The colour of the circle shows the nationality of the speaker (AZ = yellow, IR= green, KAZ= light blue, RUS= red, TUR= violet, OTHER= grey). A thicker edge/link entails that the actor has spoken about that topic more than one time.

Figure 5. Caspian media network 2007

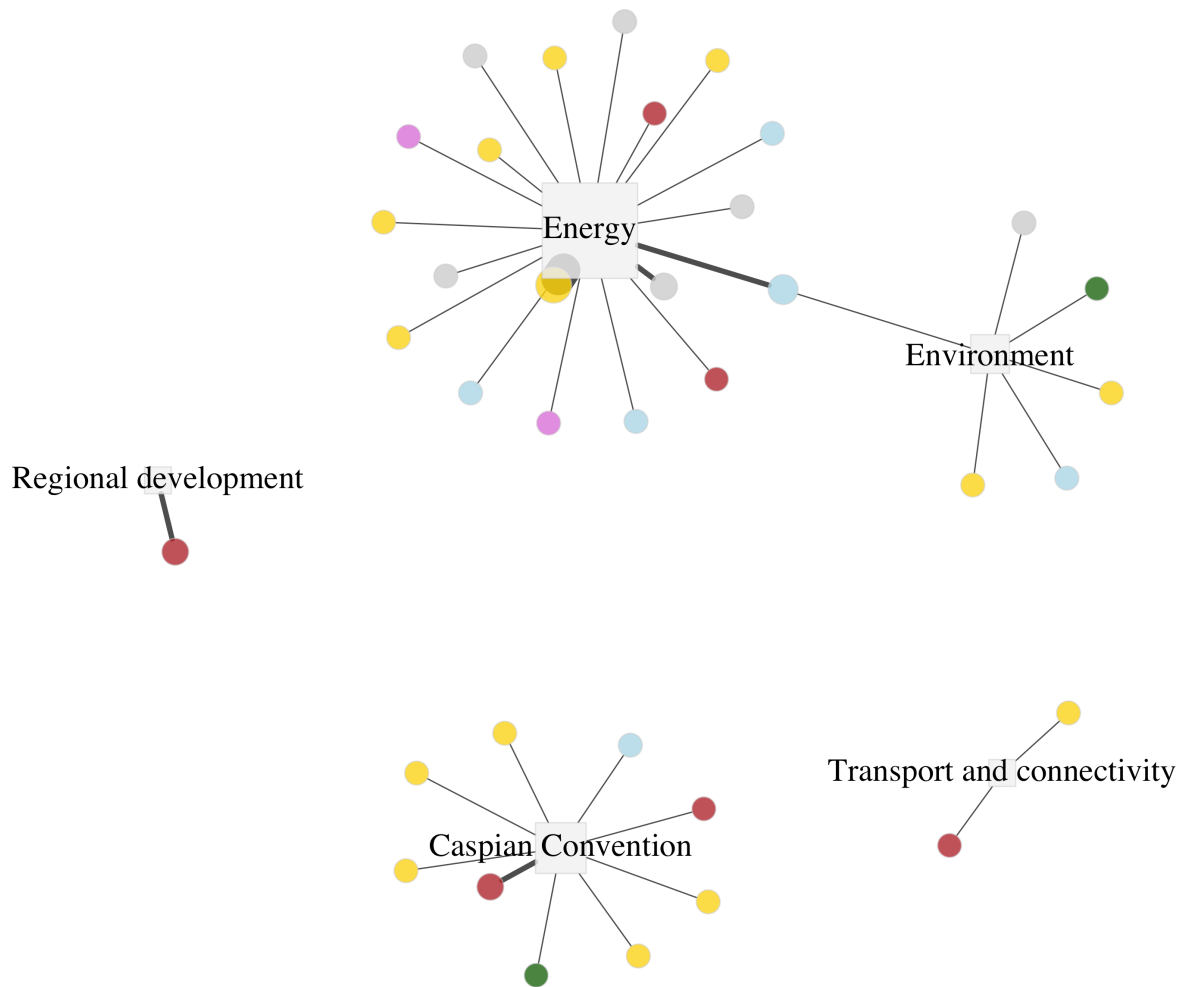
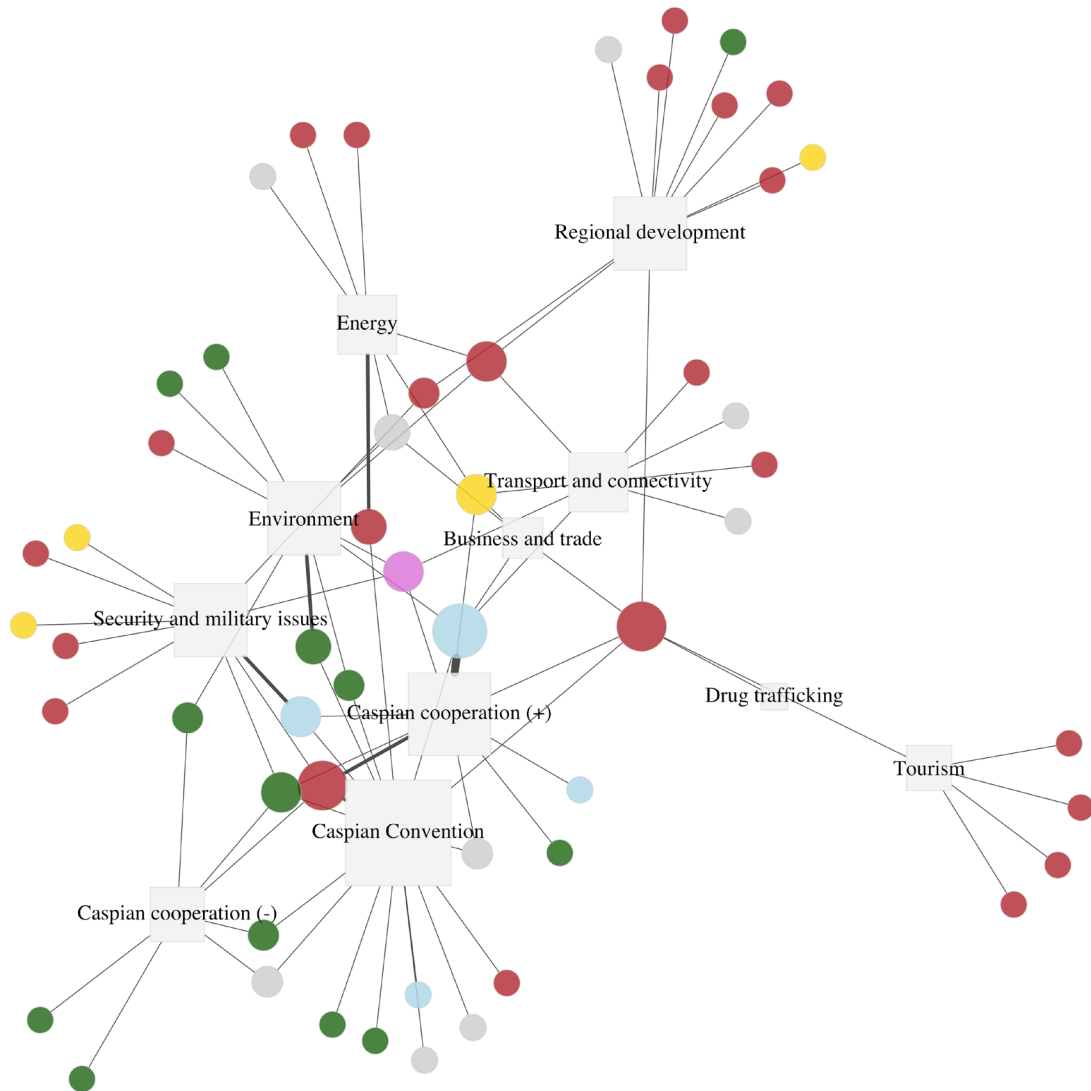


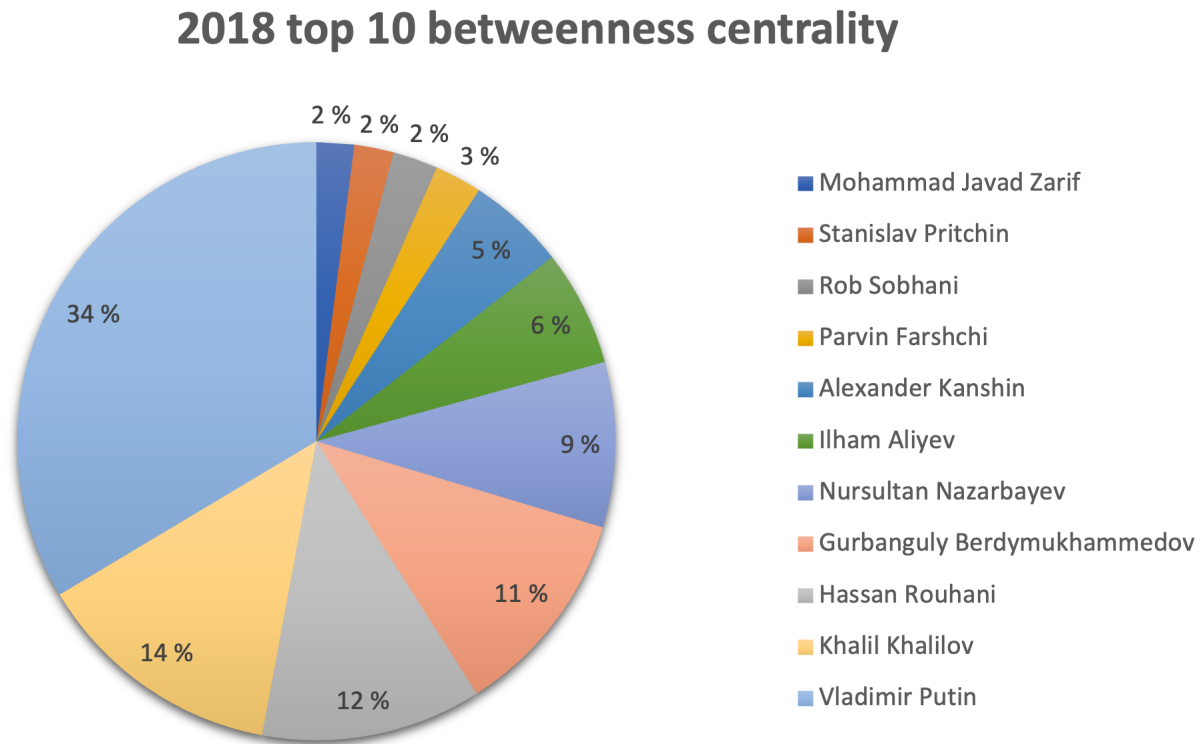
Figure 6. Caspian media network 2018



Centrality measures

To further analyse the networks plotted above, we have used the network measure of centrality, trying to identify the most important nodes in the networks. For example, nodes with more connections or in bottleneck positions are identified as central and, hence, as playing a more important role in the system's functioning (Borgatti, Everett and Johnson 2013). Figure 7 below shows the betweenness centrality scores of the actors in 2018. There were 38 actors with a betweenness centrality score of 0. A high betweenness centrality score here indicates an actor that indirectly links many other actors which are not directly connected themselves. As we see, the presidents of the five states have the highest betweenness centrality scores, in addition to Russian economist Khalil Khalilov.

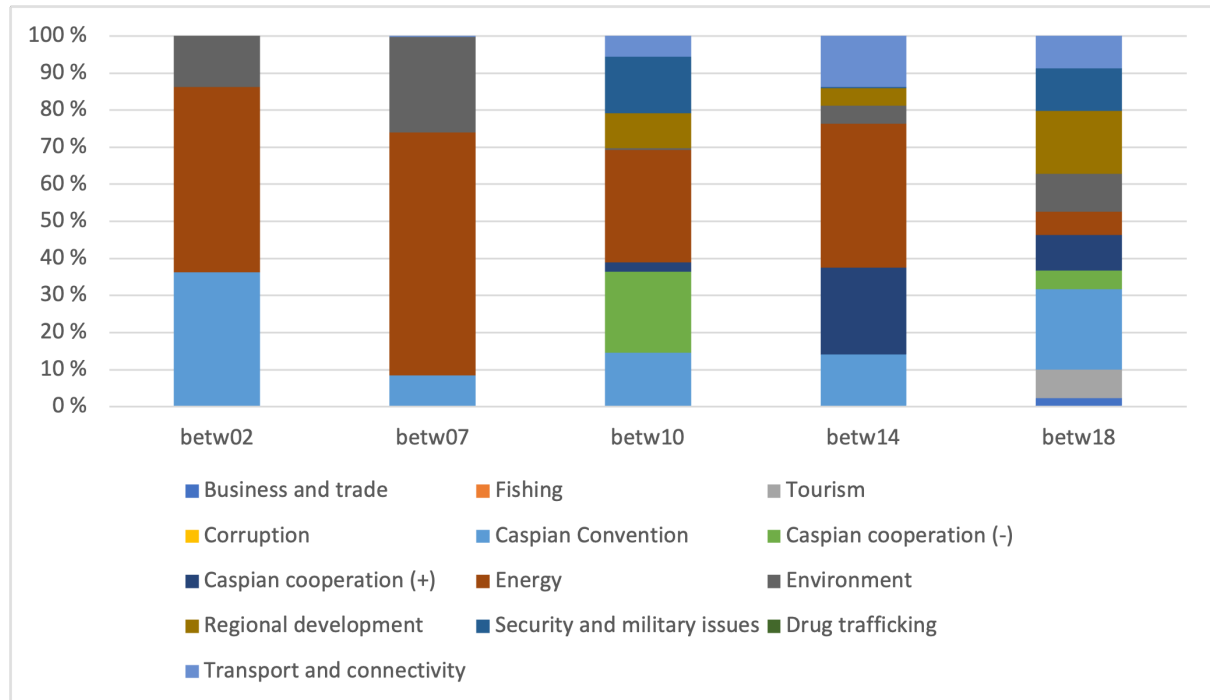
Figure 7. Actor betweenness centrality 2018



In figure 8 below, we have used the same centrality measure, betweenness centrality, to look at how topics/issues have developed from 2002 to 2018. A high betweenness centrality score here indicates a policy issue or topic (node) that links indirectly many other topics not connected directly. If we look at energy, for example, which is the reddish brown here – we see that this has the highest betweenness centrality scores in 2002-2014, meaning that it is a topic that is talked about by actors who also talk about other topics.

From 2002 to 2018 we see that more topics are being talked about by an increasing number of actors (primarily from the Caspian states). We can also see that environment was relatively more important as a topic in 2002/2007, perhaps reflecting the importance of the environmental cooperation in the 2000s. This can be understood as supporting Bayramov’s (2020b) argument that the initial environmental focus and cooperation over time has spilled over into other policy areas.

Figure 8. Topic betweenness centrality 2002-2018



The analysis above sheds light on actors and policy issues driving developments in the Caspian region from 2002 and onwards. Counter to the dominant conflict thesis in the literature, the findings suggest that the Caspian states have moved towards a more comprehensive political cooperation, anchored in an understanding of the Caspian Sea as a shared space in which there are multiple interlinkages and dependencies across the five states. The mapping and network approach allows us to see how a growing range of actors are represented in the national media discourses on the Caspian. This cooperation is more than just a state-led discursive shift – it has impacts on the number and kind of participants that have a place in addressing how the Caspian should be governed. The media snapshots and analysis demonstrate a variety of, as well as changes in and an expansion of, policy issues connected with the Caspian since 2002. Most importantly, energy has become relatively less central, and new topics have entered the media coverage, suggesting that the Caspian has become a more complex policy field.

Conclusion

This research paper has provided a systematic, data-driven analysis and visual representation of the network of Caspian stakeholders as represented in the newsprint media in the 5 Caspian states from 2002–2018. The main aim was to provide a longitudinal perspective on Caspian discourses, including which actors and issues are important, to better understand the development of Caspian politics leading up to the CLCS in August 2018. The paper also provides background improving our understanding of the situation in the region today, with the Caspian Sea gaining a more central position, in particular for Russia, working to avoid sanctions and secure weapons and equipment needed for the war against Ukraine.

The analysis confirms that the media discourse in all the five Caspian states is dominated by the executive branch of power, with limited representations of other sectors, except for the expert community/academia in some countries. More significantly, the analysis shows a broadening of policy issues deemed important and included in Caspian politics from 2002 to 2018. Bayramov (2020b) has argued convincingly that the cooperation on Caspian environmental questions has spilled over to broader cooperation in other policy fields. In the media analysis, we see a gradual move from more nationalistic and conflictual approaches to the Caspian towards a more collective approach emphasising both the challenges and the opportunities associated with the shared ecosystem of the Caspian. Even given the sampling of national media coverage, the analysis shows a tendency towards a more “regional” scaling of the Caspian, offering limited voice to outside actors and privileging certain policies over others (economic development over environmental issues for example).

However, describing the Caspian as a “region” would be stretching it very far. The cooperation tracks described early in the research paper represent the only joint platform for the Caspian states. Besides membership in United Nations, World Bank and International Monetary Fund, the five states do not share membership in any international or regional organisations. This reflects how the five Caspian states have traditionally been pulled in different directions in terms of regional projects and identities and how the Caspian Sea lies at the intersection of different economic and security complexes. Theoretically, this raises several important questions about regionalisation and regionalism, including regional trends like “balancing” (Tskhay and Buranelli 2020) and “overlapping” regionalism (Panke and Stapel 2018). It is also interesting to reflect on these more informal regional efforts and their role in authoritarian foreign policy and region-building more generally.

The paper draws on an explorative approach which has some limitations, but also raises important questions and avenues for further research. The paper shows that discourse network analysis, which primarily has been applied to contested policy issues in the European context, can contribute to new ways of exploring important questions of participation and development over time in policy problems and problematisation also in authoritarian states with strict media control. Media-based mapping and analysis can also contribute to identify interesting sectors, organisations or persons for further research through surveys or interviews. At the same time, media coverage as source of data has its limitations, especially in contexts with limited pluralism. In these contexts, I would still argue that media analysis could be important, both as a way of triangulating data, but also to more openly explore participation, patterns and background knowledge. It should also be mentioned that if automating newspaper analysis with Natural Language Processing (NLP) make it possible to use whole newspaper archives as the empirical foundation for (network) studies.

At the same time, the visualisations in this paper demand working at an aggregated level both regarding actors as well as topics/issues and it cannot be expected, perhaps particularly not in authoritarian contexts, to see explicit conflicts and clear position/opposition on different policy issues. This means that diving deeper into a more specific policy or issue/problem would yield further valuable insights into how different frames and arguments are subtly used in the public debate (Fergie et al 2018, 742; Wallaschek, Starke and Brüning 2020). Another important question, as highlighted by Hafner-Burton et al (2009, 584) is the challenge of changing levels of analysis, for example from networks of individuals to networks of governments. While there was limited space to dig deep into specific policy areas and groups of actors in this paper, the hope is that further research

can pick up on these developments in Caspian actors and policy areas. Whether and to what extent the increasing range of issues brought up in relation to Caspian politics are reflected in real politics and developments in the region was beyond the scope of this analysis. To judge that, we would need more qualitative studies of specific policy issues and decision-making processes.

The growing emphasis on cooperation and identification of new areas of cooperation in the media analyzed above is also generally reflected in discourses of Caspian peace and cooperation at the government level in official documents and statements (Beaumont and Wilson Rowe 2022). Yet, at the same time, the national media discourses to a larger extent than official documents continue to reflect more contentious issues, especially in Iranian media after the 2018 convention.

Furthermore, the Caspian Sea is again gaining geopolitical significance and how this may impact on cooperation in the area remains to be seen. Today, the Caspian Sea has become more central for Russia and Iran, as a key route for their efforts to counter international sanctions on their economies. Discussions about and work on the International North-South Transport Corridor (INTSTC) have also intensified after 2022. The other Caspian states, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan are engaged in reinvigorated discussions about not only the INSTC, but also the Trans-Caspian pipeline and alternative energy transport measures directly through the Caspian. Nonetheless, it is important to note that there are constraints and limits to these expansive plans for the Caspian. Many plans for expanded cooperation and infrastructure have been discussed for a long time and the lofty rhetoric is frequently not matched by concrete action. Additionally, the braking effect of unresolved tensions among the Caspian states (bilaterally and as a group) need to be considered. The Caspian states do not have shared interests and perspectives in all areas, including as it relates to the Caspian Sea itself. The central position of the Caspian Sea today makes studies of the regional politics and power relations important, also to shed light on the prospects and limitations of even closer regional collaboration.

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