

Interethnic interaction in the context of border and territorial issues

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Abstract

The study was aimed at examining the specific features of interethnic interaction in the border regions of Central Asia. On the basis of an ethnosociological survey conducted among Kyrgyz and Uzbek youth. The research methodology included a survey of young people across different age groups (16-30 years), an analysis of documents regulating border relations, and a study of the socio-economic indicators of development in border territories. The study explored the characteristics of interethnic interaction in various spheres of public life: educational, cultural, economic, and social. It was established that young people, in general, demonstrate a relatively high level of readiness for interethnic interaction. At the same time, an age-related dynamic was observed: among Kyrgyz youth, the level of interethnic tolerance increases with age, while among Uzbek youth the opposite trend is evident. The research revealed the significant role of socio-economic factors and the educational environment in fostering interethnic dialogue, with the level of interethnic interaction among Uzbek youth (35.3%) exceeding that of Kyrgyz youth (28.7%). The emergence of new forms of interethnic interaction in the digital space was recorded, with online activity levels reaching 65.3% among Uzbek youth and 58.7% among Kyrgyz youth. The study showed that the resolution of border issues is perceived as an important factor in stabilising interethnic relations. At the same time, youth displayed relatively higher levels of satisfaction with the border settlement process, ranging from 38.9% among Kyrgyz to 47.3% among Uzbek respondents.

Keywords: socio-cultural integration, cross-border cooperation, youth environment, ethnic identity, cultural dialogue.

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Interação interétnica no contexto de questões fronteiriças e territoriais

Resumo

O estudo teve como objetivo examinar as características específicas da interação interétnica nas regiões fronteiriças da Ásia Central. Baseou-se em um levantamento etnosociológico realizado com jovens quirguizes e uzbeques. A metodologia de pesquisa incluiu um levantamento com jovens de diferentes faixas etárias (16-30 anos), uma análise de documentos que regulamentam as relações fronteiriças e um estudo dos indicadores socioeconômicos de desenvolvimento nos territórios fronteiriços. O estudo explorou as características da interação interétnica em diversas esferas da vida pública: educacional, cultural, econômica e social. Constatou-se que os jovens, em geral, demonstram um nível relativamente alto de predisposição para a interação interétnica. Ao mesmo tempo, observou-se uma dinâmica relacionada à idade: entre os jovens quirguizes, o nível de tolerância interétnica aumenta com a idade, enquanto entre os jovens uzbeques a tendência oposta é evidente. A pesquisa revelou o papel significativo dos fatores socioeconômicos e do ambiente educacional no fomento do diálogo interétnico, com o nível de interação interétnica entre os jovens uzbeques (35,3%) superando o dos jovens quirguizes (28,7%). O surgimento de novas formas de interação interétnica no espaço digital foi registrado, com níveis de atividade online atingindo 65,3% entre os jovens uzbeques e 58,7% entre os jovens quirguizes. O estudo mostrou que a resolução de questões fronteiriças é percebida como um fator importante para a estabilização das relações interétnicas. Ao mesmo tempo, os jovens demonstraram níveis relativamente mais altos de satisfação com o processo de resolução de conflitos fronteiriços, variando de 38,9% entre os quirguizes a 47,3% entre os uzbeques.

Palavras-chave: integração sociocultural, cooperação transfronteiriça, ambiente juvenil, identidade étnica, diálogo cultural.

1. Introduction

The relevance of research into interethnic interaction in the context of territorial issues is determined by the profound transformations that occurred in Central Asia following the collapse of the Soviet Union. The emergence of new independent states led to a rethinking of territorial boundaries and interethnic relations, creating a new reality for the functioning of ethnic communities. The dissolution of the Soviet Union marked a turning point that fundamentally reshaped not only the geopolitical map of Central Asia but also the character of interethnic relations in the region. The formation of new independent states was accompanied by processes of national self-determination, which inevitably resulted in a re-evaluation of territorial boundaries and interethnic relations (Doszhan, 2023, Tsyryfa et al., 2024). This historical process of transformation in the political and social space produced a new reality in which traditional forms of interethnic interaction faced the challenges of state-building and territorial demarcation.

An analysis of existing research shows that the issue of interethnic interaction in the context of territorial questions has been actively addressed by contemporary scholars. For instance, De Juan and Hânze (2021) examined the impact of climatic factors on interethnic trust in border regions, highlighting how environmental challenges can exacerbate or mitigate interethnic tensions. Durneika (2020) analysed the mechanisms of ethnic internationalisation through the lens of various ethnic groups, offering a new perspective on ethnic mobilisation processes in border territories. Significant contributions to the understanding of territorial disputes and their implications for interethnic relations were made by Kim (2020) and Fang and Li (2020), who investigated the historical dimensions of territorial claims and their influence on the population's propensity for conflict.

An important aspect of interethnic interaction in borderlands is presented in the work of Rahnu et al. (2020), who studied the role of ethnic context in shaping interethnic partnerships and social networks.

Anthias and Hoffmann (2021) explored the processes of territorialisation of ethnicity through the prism of state governance and social practices, offering a new theoretical approach to understanding territoriality in the ethnic context. Particular attention should be paid to the study by Stark and Seibel (2022), which analysed the impact of interethnic relations in social networks on the resilience of ethnically diverse communities and their ability to adapt in the face of territorial change.

A significant contribution to understanding the specificities of cross-border interaction was made by the research of Cehajic-Clancy et al. (2023), who examined the role of interethnic contacts in post-conflict reconciliation processes. Martin and Efi (2024) presented an analysis of the impact of interethnic interaction on social integration within the educational environment, which is particularly relevant for border regions with a mixed ethnic composition of the population. Klimov et al. (2024) analysed the socio-political factors underpinning the emergence of armed border conflicts in the region, proposing a new approach to understanding the mechanisms of territorial dispute escalation. Of particular interest are the studies by Korts (2020), devoted to analysing interethnic attitudes and contacts in the process of European integration. This experience is especially valuable for understanding the potential for harmonising interethnic relations in the context of shifting state borders.

Nevertheless, despite the considerable amount of research, the influence of borderland status on the nature and dynamics of interethnic relations in contemporary conditions remains insufficiently studied. In particular, the transformation of interethnic relations under conditions of intensified border control and changes in border-crossing regimes requires further analysis. The mechanisms of adaptation of ethnic communities to new forms of cross-border interaction, as well as the role of informal social institutions in sustaining interethnic dialogue, remain underexplored.

Unlike previous studies, which mainly focus on socio-economic, political, or historical determinants of interethnic interaction, this research places particular emphasis on the combined influence of educational

environments and digital communication practices. In addition, the study contributes to the existing literature by analysing not only traditional forms of interethnic interaction but also emerging digital formats, thereby expanding the analytical framework of interethnic relations in border regions.

The purpose of this study was to identify the features of interethnic interaction under contemporary border and territorial challenges in Central Asia. To achieve this goal, the following research tasks were defined: to analyse the historical and socio-economic prerequisites for the formation of the modern ethno-territorial situation in the border regions of Central Asia; to identify key factors influencing the transformation of interethnic relations under conditions of territorial disputes and strengthened border control; to examine the role of cultural, religious, and informal social institutions in interethnic interaction; and to assess the impact of state policy on the dynamics of interethnic relations and to develop recommendations for their harmonisation. The innovativeness of the study lies in the integrated consideration of educational and digital factors in shaping interethnic relations, which allows for a more comprehensive understanding of contemporary forms of interaction in border regions.

2. Materials and methods

The study was conducted during the periods 2012-2014 and 2023-2024 in the border areas of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan (Batken Region of Kyrgyzstan and Fergana Region of Uzbekistan), which are characterised by a high degree of interethnic interaction. The chronological framework of the analysed processes spans the period from the independence of the Central Asian republics to the present stage (1991-2024), which made it possible to trace the evolution of interethnic relations in the context of state-building and the transformation of border regimes.

For the analysis of socio-economic indicators of development in border territories, official statistical data from the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic and the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan

on Statistics for the period 2018-2024 were used, as well as analytical reports of international organisations. In particular, the provisions of the United Nations (2024) document were taken into account, containing updated assessments of the social context, border issues, and mechanisms of local dispute settlement.

The empirical basis of the study consisted of the results of an ethnosociological survey conducted among Kyrgyz and Uzbek youth in the designated border regions. The sample was stratified according to age categories (16-30 years), ethnicity, gender (48.5% male and 51.5% female), place of residence (urban – 42.3%, rural – 57.7%), and level of education (secondary – 37.2%, vocational – 26.8%, higher – 36.0%). In total, 560 respondents participated in the survey, including 280 representatives of the Kyrgyz and 280 of the Uzbek nationalities. The research was conducted in accordance with the principles of the Helsinki Declaration, and all participants gave informed voluntary consent to take part in the study.

The survey was carried out using a structured questionnaire consisting of 42 questions divided into 5 thematic blocks: socio-demographic characteristics (7 questions); interethnic contacts and attitudes (12 questions); assessment of factors influencing interethnic relations (8 questions); perceptions of border issues (9 questions); and prospects for the development of interethnic relations (6 questions). The questionnaire included both closed questions with response options on a five-point Likert scale and semi-closed questions allowing respondents to provide their own answers (8 questions). The survey was conducted both offline (65% of respondents) and online (35%) using the Google Forms platform. It should be noted that the survey results reflect primarily the frequency and intensity of interethnic contacts, rather than their qualitative characteristics, such as depth of interaction, emotional perception, or long-term stability.

The socio-economic characteristics of respondents were distributed as follows: students – 38.6%; employed – 32.4%; entrepreneurs – 14.2%; unemployed – 10.8%; other categories – 4.0%. By income level: low – 23.7%; medium – 62.5%; above average – 13.8%. By district of residence: Batken District – 22.3%, Kadamjay District – 18.7%, Leylek District – 14.6% (Kyrgyzstan); Fergana District – 19.2%, Kuva District – 15.5%, Rishtan District – 9.7% (Uzbekistan).

Quantitative data were processed using methods of mathematical statistics with the application of SPSS 25.0 software, including frequency analysis, cross-tabulation, and correlation analysis (Pearson correlation coefficient) to identify interrelations between different factors influencing interethnic relations. Statistical significance of the results was assessed at $p < 0.05$. The study also included an analysis of documents regulating border relations between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan: Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 48 “Treaty of Eternal Friendship between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of Uzbekistan” (Kyrgyz Republic, 1997); Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 71 “Agreement between the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Checkpoints Across the State Border” (Kyrgyz Republic, 2006); Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. ZRU-804 “On Ratification of the Treaty between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic on Certain Sections of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz State Border (Bishkek, 3 November 2022)” (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022); and the protocols of the meetings of the Intergovernmental Commission on the Delimitation and Demarcation of the State Border between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of Uzbekistan (2016-2024).

For the analysis of the socio-economic indicators of development in the border regions, official statistical data from the National Statistics Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic and the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics for the period 2018-2023 were utilised. These included information on demographic dynamics, employment levels, infrastructure development, and trade and economic relations (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025).

The role of educational institutions in fostering interethnic dialogue was also examined through the analysis of curricula and extracurricular activities (Shamatov et al., 2024).

The reliability of the obtained results was ensured through the application of a comprehensive approach to data collection and analysis, the use of validated sociological research methods, including the standardised Bogardus Social Distance Scale adapted to the regional context, as well as the triangulation of quantitative and qualitative data from multiple sources.

3. Results

The analysis of interethnic interaction in the border regions of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan revealed a number of significant features in the nature of interethnic relations, which are largely shaped by the influence of territorial and border-related factors. The study examined the main trends in the development of interethnic contacts, communication barriers, and the factors contributing to the strengthening of interethnic dialogue.

The findings of the ethnosociological survey demonstrated differences in orientations towards interethnic communication among youth of different age cohorts and national backgrounds. The collected data are presented in Table 1.

The analysis highlights substantial differences in the patterns of interethnic interaction between Kyrgyz and Uzbek youth residing in the border districts of Batken region, Kyrgyzstan (Batken, Kadamjay, Leilek), and Fergana region, Uzbekistan (Fergana, Kuva, Rishtan). Among Uzbek youth in the border areas of Fergana region, a higher level of readiness for interethnic interaction was observed: 37.4% of respondents in this group expressed a strong willingness for interethnic contact, whereas among Kyrgyz youth from Batken region this figure stood at 25.3%.

Table 1. Characteristics of Interethnic Interaction among Youth in Border Regions, %

Indicators	Kyrgyz Youth	Uzbek Youth
Areas of Residence	Batken (22.3%), Kadamjay (18.7%), Leylek (14.6%)	Fergana (19.2%), Kuva (15.5%), Rishtan (9.7%)
Age Category (16-30 years)	100%	100%
Gender	Male – 48.5%	Male – 48.5%
	Female – 51.5%	Female – 51.5%
Education Level	Secondary – 37.2%	Secondary – 37.2%
	Specialised Secondary – 26.8%	Specialised Secondary. – 26.8%
	Higher – 36.0%	Higher – 36.0%
Social Status		
Students	38.6%	38.6%
Employed	32.4%	32.4%
Entrepreneurs	14.2%	14.2%
Unemployed	10.8%	10.8%
Other categories	4.0%	4.0%
Income		
Low income	23.7%	23.7%
Middle income	62.5%	62.5%
Above average income	13.8%	13.8%
Interethnic Interaction		
Preference for mono-ethnic communication	27.2%	16.1%
Presence of a language barrier	23.1%	16.5%
Insufficient knowledge of the other group's culture	14.2%	7.2%
Readiness for interethnic contacts (high)	25.3%	37.4%
Proficiency in the language of the neighbouring group	38.2% (Uzbek)	42.7% (Kyrgyz)
Knowledge of the culture and traditions of the neighbouring group	54.1%	68.3%
Regular participation in cultural events	22.5%	29.7%
Participation in joint educational programmes	28.7%	35.3%
Expectation of improvement in interethnic relations	35.8%	42.3%

Source: Compiled by the authors.

Age-related dynamics demonstrate differentiated trends within the ethnosociological sample. Among Kyrgyz youth living in Batken border districts, interethnic tolerance increases with age: 19.8% of respondents in the 16-20 age group expressed a high readiness for interethnic contacts, compared to 28.2% in the 26-30 cohort. In contrast, Uzbek youth in Fergana region exhibit the opposite tendency: the highest level of readiness for interethnic communication was recorded among the youngest group (44.2%), while in the 26-30 category this declined to 31.9%. These differences underscore the importance of incorporating the age factor in the analysis of interethnic attitudes.

Correlation analysis, based on ethnosociological survey data of Kyrgyz and Uzbek youth in the border districts of Batken and Fergana regions, revealed a statistically significant association between the level of education and readiness for interethnic interaction ($r = 0.43$, $p < 0.01$): the higher the level of education, the greater the willingness for interethnic contacts. This tendency is present in both ethnic groups but is more pronounced among Uzbek youth ($r = 0.48$, $p < 0.01$) than among Kyrgyz youth ($r = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$). A significant limiting factor in interethnic interaction remains the language barrier, more frequently reported among Kyrgyz youth (23.1%) in Batken region compared to Uzbek youth (16.5%) in Fergana region. Correlation analysis demonstrated an inverse relationship between proficiency in the neighbouring ethnic group's language and the level of interethnic tension ($r = -0.51$, $p < 0.01$). Among Kyrgyz youth, knowledge of the Uzbek language was reported by 38.2% of respondents, while among Uzbek youth, knowledge of Kyrgyz was demonstrated by 42.7%.

The problem of insufficient knowledge of the neighbouring people's culture is also more pronounced among Kyrgyz youth (14.2%) compared to Uzbek youth (7.2%). At the same time, 68.3% of Uzbek youth declared good knowledge of Kyrgyz culture and traditions, while the corresponding indicator among Kyrgyz youth was 54.1%. These differences may be linked to educational and cultural policies, as well as the more active integration of cultural components into curricula in Uzbek schools in the border regions.

A tendency towards monoethnic communication is more typical of Kyrgyz youth (27.2%) than Uzbek youth (16.1%). The analysis revealed a positive correlation between orientation towards monoethnic communication and residence in rural areas ($r = 0.37$, $p < 0.01$): this indicator is higher in rural than in urban localities.

In everyday interactions, both Kyrgyz and Uzbek youth demonstrate high levels of interethnic contact (41.6% of Uzbeks and 38.4% of Kyrgyz). Correlation analysis showed that the intensity of everyday contacts increases with the length of residence in the border region ($r = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$). In the educational sphere, differences are also evident: participation in joint educational programmes was reported by 35.3% of Uzbek youth and 28.7% of Kyrgyz youth. Further analysis of the educational environment demonstrated that Uzbek youth are more likely to study in institutions with a multi-ethnic composition (47.3% compared to 38.5% among Kyrgyz youth) and more frequently participate in programmes focused on learning the language and culture of the neighbouring state.

In the context of cultural events, Uzbek youth exhibit greater engagement: 29.7% reported participation in intercultural initiatives, compared to 22.5% among Kyrgyz youth. These differences appear to be due to a more developed infrastructure for cultural interaction in areas of concentrated Uzbek settlement. The lowest level of interethnic interaction was recorded in the sphere of family relations, indicating a persistent orientation towards monoethnic marriages. Nevertheless, even here, Uzbek youth demonstrated a somewhat higher level of interethnic contacts (18.9%) compared to Kyrgyz youth (15.3%). Civil registry data (2018-2023) show a gradual increase in the proportion of interethnic marriages in the border regions – from 8.3% in 2018 to 12.7% in 2023, particularly in urban areas. Correlation analysis confirmed the relationship between the level of urbanisation and the likelihood of interethnic marriages ($r = 0.42$, $p < 0.01$).

The analysis of age dynamics of interethnic contacts among youth in the border districts of Batken (Kyrgyzstan) and Fergana (Uzbekistan) revealed divergent trends. Among Kyrgyz youth, a gradual increase in the intensity of interethnic contacts with age was observed: from 35.2% in the youngest group (16-20 years) to 48.7% in the oldest (26-30 years). Conversely, among Uzbek youth, a decline in contact levels with age was recorded: from 58.1% in the youngest group to 46.9% in the oldest. Table 2 presents the key factors influencing interethnic interaction in the studied border regions, as perceived by respondents of both nationalities.

The analysis of factors influencing interethnic interaction indicates that socio-economic conditions are the most significant for both ethnic groups. However, Uzbek youth attribute slightly greater importance to them (71.5%) compared to Kyrgyz youth (68.3%). Correlation analysis revealed a positive association between the subjective assessment of the regional economic situation and readiness for interethnic cooperation ($r = 0.59$, $p < 0.01$). This implies that the higher respondents assess the level of economic stability and opportunities in their region, the more open they are to interethnic interaction. The explanation of this dependency lies in the fact that improved socio-economic conditions reduce competition for resources and jobs, alleviate social tensions, and create a favourable environment for constructive interethnic relations. Economic security fosters the expansion of horizontal social ties and reduces stereotypes, which is particularly important in border areas where ethnic groups live in close proximity.

Table 2. Factors Affecting Interethnic Interaction in Border Areas (%)

Influencing Factors	Kyrgyz	Uzbek
Socio-economic conditions	68.3	71.5
Political situation	54.2	58.7
Religious differences	42.7	39.4
Traditions and customs	37.5	45.8
Education level	35.2	41.3
Place of residence	31.4	28.9

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The assessment of prospects for the development of interethnic relations demonstrates a prevalence of positive and neutral expectations in both groups (Table 3). Uzbek youth display greater optimism regarding the future of interethnic relations: 42.3% of respondents expect improvements, whereas among Kyrgyz youth this view is shared by 35.8%.

The share of respondents expecting a deterioration of interethnic relations is relatively small in both groups, though slightly higher among Kyrgyz youth (12.5% compared to 8.9% among Uzbek youth). This concern, according to the results of correlation analysis, is linked to perceptions of unresolved border issues ($r = 0.47$, $p < 0.01$) and prior experiences of negative interethnic encounters ($r = 0.39$, $p < 0.01$).

At the same time, the data reveal a potentially contradictory pattern: despite relatively moderate levels of satisfaction with the process of resolving border issues, Uzbek youth demonstrate a comparatively high level of readiness for interethnic interaction. This observation is recorded as an empirical feature of the studied context and is presented without further interpretation.

A significant proportion of respondents in both groups (41.2% of Kyrgyz youth and 38.7% of Uzbek youth) expect the current level of interethnic relations to remain unchanged, which may indicate a certain stability of the established system of interethnic interaction in the border areas.

Table 3. Assessment of Prospects for the Development of Interethnic Interaction in Border Areas (%)

Development Prospects	Kyrgyz Youth	Uzbek Youth
Improvement of relations	35.8	42.3
Maintenance of the current level	41.2	38.7
Deterioration of relations	12.5	8.9
Found it difficult to answer	10.5	10.1

Source: Compiled by the authors.

The analysis further revealed significant differences in the assessment of the role of state and societal institutions in promoting interethnic interaction. These differences were identified based on respondents' answers to survey questions regarding trust in institutions and their role in strengthening interethnic relations. Cross-tabulation by ethnicity demonstrated that Uzbek youth more frequently emphasise the effectiveness of NGOs and civic initiatives, whereas Kyrgyz youth tend to rely more on state institutions. Among Kyrgyz youth, 59.3% consider the activities of local authorities in regulating interethnic relations effective, while among Uzbek youth this figure was 64.8%. At the same time, correlation analysis revealed an association between the assessment of the effectiveness of local authorities and the level of trust towards representatives of the other ethnic group ($r = 0.44$, $p < 0.01$).

A significant influence on the nature of interethnic interaction is exerted by the process of delimitation and demarcation of the state border between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The study revealed that the resolution of border-related issues is perceived by young people as an important factor in stabilising interethnic relations. At the same time, Uzbek youth demonstrate a relatively high level of satisfaction with the process of addressing border-related issues (47.3%), whereas among Kyrgyz youth this indicator stands at 38.9%.

The analysis of documents regulating border relations indicated substantial progress in the settlement of territorial disputes in recent years (2016-2023). According to the minutes of meetings of the intergovernmental commission on the delimitation and demarcation of the state border between the Kyrgyz Republic and the Republic of Uzbekistan (2016-2023), the proportion of agreed border sections increased from 76.5% in 2016 to 92.3% in 2023. This correlates positively with the dynamics of interethnic relations ($r=0.53$, $p<0.01$).

A detailed examination of the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. ZRU-804 "On Ratification of the Treaty between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic on Certain Sections of the Uzbek-Kyrgyz State Border (Bishkek, 3 November 2022)" (Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022)

revealed qualitative shifts in approaches to addressing territorial issues. Unlike earlier agreements, which were focused predominantly on border security, contemporary documents devote considerable attention to cross-border cooperation and the creation of favourable conditions for populations in border regions. Articles 14-17 of the Treaty provide for a simplified procedure for border crossing by residents of border districts, which significantly facilitates everyday contacts between ethnic groups.

The analysis of the Law of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 71 "Agreement between the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Checkpoints Across the State Border" (Kyrgyz Republic, 2006) revealed an increase in the number of official checkpoints from 9 in 2016 to 14 in 2023, as well as the establishment of 6 simplified checkpoints for local residents. Statistical analysis of data from border services demonstrates an increase in the intensity of cross-border mobility by 62.3% during 2017-2023, which positively correlates with the growth of interethnic contacts ($r=0.58$, $p<0.01$).

The provisions of the special Protocol "On Border Cooperation" (Putz, 2022), regulating issues of joint use of water resources, agricultural lands, and pastures in border areas, stipulate the establishment of joint commissions for local-level resource management with the participation of representatives of both ethnic groups. This contributes to constructive dialogue on the most contentious issues, such as access to water sources, use of pastures, land distribution, and the functioning of border checkpoints. According to monitoring data conducted by the Centre for the Study of Border Conflicts under the Institute for Strategic and Interregional Studies under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan (ISMI), the number of incidents related to access to water resources decreased from 28 in 2018 to 7 in 2023, indicating the effectiveness of local cooperation mechanisms (Cohen; Hill; Sánchez, 2025, Karassayev et al., 2023).

The analysis established that the dynamics of border issue resolution are uneven across different sections of the border. The most significant progress was achieved in the Fergana Valley (97.8% of sections agreed), whereas in mountainous areas the process is advancing more slowly (84.2% of sections agreed). Correlation analysis demonstrated that areas with a higher level of border demarcation exhibit more intensive economic interaction ($r=0.62$, $p<0.01$) and a higher level of interethnic trust ($r=0.57$, $p<0.01$).

The review of the cross-border cooperation programme CAREC-10 (2020-2025) showed a shift of emphasis from security-related issues to socio-economic development of border territories. Within its framework, the establishment of 4 border economic zones by 2025 is envisaged, along with the implementation of 23 joint infrastructure projects and the launch of 17 cultural and educational initiatives. According to the interim CAREC-10 report (Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation, 2023), 68% of the planned projects have been launched, resulting in the creation of approximately 2,830 jobs in border areas (Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation, 2024).

The analysis of the regulatory framework revealed qualitative changes in the mechanisms of managing border incidents between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. Prior to 2018, a force-based approach prevailed, focused on the actions of border services. However, after the signing of the Protocol on the Demarcation of the State Border (16 September 2022) and the Treaty on Certain Border Sections (November 2022), multi-level mechanisms for conflict resolution were introduced, involving both formal institutions (border guards, governmental authorities) and traditional structures (councils of elders, public commissions) (KazTAG, 2022, Sherstnev, 2022). According to data from the border services of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, the share of incidents resolved at the local level without escalation rose from 54.3% in 2018 to 83.7% in 2023 (United Nations, 2024).

An important aspect of interethnic interaction in border areas is the active role of traditional institutions, primarily councils of elders. According to the research of A. Kreikemeyer (2020a, 2020b), during 2018-2023 about 76.2% of local conflicts in these regions were resolved through traditional mechanisms, providing “islands of stability” in contexts where state institutions do not function effectively.

The analysis of the economic aspects of interethnic interaction, based on socio-economic development data from border territories, revealed the emergence of integrated business structures including representatives of different ethnic groups. According to the interim report of Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (2023), the share of joint enterprises in border regions increased from 12.3% to 18.7% during 2020-2023. Correlation analysis demonstrated a positive relationship between the growth of joint business and the level of interethnic trust ($r=0.47$, $p<0.01$), confirming the role of economic cooperation in strengthening interethnic relations.

The study of the role of educational institutions in fostering interethnic dialogue, based on the analysis of curricula and extracurricular activities, showed that schools and universities have become important platforms for intercultural interaction. From 2018 to 2023, the number of joint educational projects in border schools increased by 42.3%, and the number of programmes devoted to the study of the language and culture of the neighbouring country grew by 37.5%, including courses, school exchanges, and joint cultural and educational events (Shamatov et al., 2024, Mizin; Petrov, 2021). Correlation analysis revealed a strong association between participation in such programmes and the level of interethnic tolerance among youth ($r=0.61$, $p<0.01$). This indicates that students actively involved in intercultural initiatives demonstrate significantly higher levels of trust and positive attitudes towards representatives of other ethnic groups compared to those not participating in such initiatives. The difference in tolerance levels between participants and non-participants amounted to 12-15 percentage points, which is considered a substantial effect in social research methodology.

A comprehensive analysis of the results of interethnic interaction research in the border regions of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan revealed the multifaceted nature of this process. The study demonstrated that young people from both ethnic groups exhibit a high degree of readiness for interethnic dialogue, particularly in the areas of economic and cultural interaction, with Uzbek youth displaying higher rates of engagement in interethnic contacts (36.8%) compared to Kyrgyz youth (24.5%). The nature of interethnic interaction is significantly influenced by socio-economic conditions, the development of transport infrastructure, and institutional mechanisms of cross-border cooperation.

Joint cultural events in border regions play a notable role in strengthening interethnic interaction (Doroshko; Tsyrf, 2021, Negay et al., 2022). Their steady growth reflects not only quantitative expansion but also an increased interest of young people in informal formats of communication. Particularly popular are festivals, sporting events, youth forums, and educational projects, which create environments conducive to equitable interethnic dialogue. Young people actively employ digital platforms to communicate with representatives of other ethnic groups, which allows them to overcome territorial constraints and maintain continuous contacts (Shakeeva et al., 2025, Karassayev et al., 2024). Digital interaction is gradually becoming an important component of interethnic communication.

Religious practices grounded in a shared Islamic tradition contribute to the formation of positive interethnic attitudes (Mazhiyev; Rashimbetov; Kairbekov, 2024, Azhimov et al., 2026). A common value base and participation in religious events reinforce the sense of solidarity and mutual respect between ethnic groups. Proficiency in the language of the neighbouring ethnic community demonstrates its practical significance as an instrument of interethnic integration. Bilingualism facilitates communication, reduces interethnic tension, and promotes the development of trustful relationships. The urban environment ensures a higher level of interethnic interaction compared to rural areas. Cities provide greater opportunities for contact, making them natural platforms for fostering interethnic tolerance.

4. Discussion

The findings of the study demonstrate the complex dynamics of interethnic interaction in the border regions of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, aligning with contemporary research in this field. The obtained data on the high readiness of youth for interethnic engagement are consistent with the results of Rahnú et al. (2020), who highlighted the importance of the ethnocultural context for shaping interethnic attitudes among young people.

The identified territorial differentiation corresponds to the results of Anthias and Hoffmann (2021), who established that interethnic interaction levels are higher in urban areas due to mobility and access to resources. As the study showed, the level of interethnic interaction in urban settlements is 59.3%, whereas in rural areas it is 41.7%. These differences can be explained by higher levels of education and mobility among urban populations, as well as more intensive economic contacts.

The significance of socio-economic factors in the development of interethnic interaction, revealed in this study, finds confirmation in the work of Stark and Seibel (2022), who emphasise the role of social networks in the formation of sustainable interethnic ties. According to the findings, economic cooperation (reported by 68.3% of Kyrgyz and 71.5% of Uzbek respondents) emerges as a key factor contributing to the development of interethnic contacts. The identified role of educational institutions in promoting interethnic interaction corresponds with the conclusions of Martin and Efi (2024) regarding the significance of educational environments in fostering interethnic tolerance.

The analysis of the influence of borderland status on the nature of interethnic relations confirms the observations of Klimov et al. (2024) on the complex impact of socio-political factors on interethnic interaction in border areas. The results of the study demonstrate that the stabilisation of border processes is accompanied by improvements in the quality of interethnic relations, underscoring the importance of political stability for the development of interethnic dialogue.

The research findings on the formation of integrated business structures involving representatives of different ethnic groups are consistent with the conclusions of Golunov and Bitabar (2025), who conceptualise the establishment of cross-border economic zones as an effective instrument of interethnic cooperation. The authors emphasise that “certain aspects of international experience, such as the creation of cross-border economic zones, are already being actively implemented in the region”, which is corroborated by empirical data demonstrating an increase in the share of joint ventures in border areas from 12.3% in 2020 to 18.7% in 2023.

The changes in the nature of borderland cooperation identified in the course of the study align with the findings presented in the work of Pannier (2024), who highlights the development of new transport corridors in Central Asia as a key driver of regional integration. The author notes that the advancement of the international transport route known as the Middle Corridor creates new opportunities for economic interaction and cross-border cooperation. These transformations provide the basis for strengthening ties among various ethnic groups in the region, particularly in the context of borderland areas.

The results regarding the role of digital technologies in fostering interethnic interaction are consistent with the research of Kumar (2025), who analyses the evolution of research collaborations in Asia. The author observes that “over the past decade, universities in Southeast Asia have increasingly appeared in global rankings, partly due to the growth of research output and impact”. Similar tendencies are observable in the field of international cooperation in Central Asia, where, according to the collected data, 65.3% of Uzbek youth and 58.7% of Kyrgyz youth actively use digital platforms for interethnic interaction. At the same time, digital platforms appear to influence primarily the frequency and accessibility of interethnic contacts, while the qualitative characteristics of such interactions require further detailed investigation. future research

At the same time, digital interaction should be considered not only as a technical tool but also as a space of discursive construction of interethnic relations. Online communication platforms enable the formation of new narratives, identities, and patterns of interaction, which may both strengthen intercultural dialogue and reproduce existing stereotypes (Zheng et al., 2026, Ilieva, 2017). Therefore, the discussion of digital interaction requires a broader analytical perspective that takes into account its ambivalent social effects.

The positive impact of resolving border disputes on interethnic relations corroborates the findings of Umarov and Mukambayev (2025) regarding the substantial improvement of interstate relations following the February 2024 agreement on the delimitation of 90% of the contested Kyrgyz-Tajik border. Their study stresses that “the peaceful settlement of border conflicts between states will contribute to ending what has for decades been a regional ‘hotspot’”. The research further reveals that Uzbek youth report higher levels of satisfaction with the border settlement process (47.3%) compared to Kyrgyz youth (38.9%).

The differentiation between age cohorts in the character of interethnic interaction identified in this study complements the conclusions of Soutullo and Rinaldi (2025) regarding the role of youth in advancing regional cooperation in Central Asia. The Inter-Parliamentary Union (2023) report notes that “Parliaments emphasise the importance of human rights, good governance, and social development, underscoring the role of parliamentary diplomacy”. According to the collected data, among Kyrgyz youth, the intensity of interethnic contacts increases with age (from 35.2% in the younger age group to 48.7% in the older), whereas among Uzbek youth, the opposite trend is observed (a decline from 58.1% to 46.9%).

A significant outcome of the research is the identification of bilingualism as a crucial factor in successful interethnic interaction, which supports the conclusions of De Juan and Hänze (2021) on the role of language skills in building interethnic trust. The data show that 42.7% of surveyed Uzbeks speak Kyrgyz and 38.2% of Kyrgyz respondents speak Uzbek, thereby providing a foundation for effective communication.

The findings concerning the impact of religious factors on interethnic interaction complement the conclusions of Durneika (2020) regarding the role of cultural and religious practices in the processes of ethnic internationalisation. Respondents who regularly participate in religious activities demonstrate higher levels of interethnic tolerance, highlighting the potential of religious institutions in promoting intercultural dialogue. In addition, both religious and historical factors should be considered as important background conditions shaping interethnic interaction in the region, as they form shared value systems and collective memory that influence patterns of mutual perception and communication.

The study also revealed a significant potential for the development of cross-border e-commerce as a platform for interethnic engagement, consistent with the conclusions of Fenwick, Vermeulen and Compagnucci (2024). The authors of that study identified “opportunities for strategic digital transformation and regional cooperation” despite existing regulatory and cultural barriers. The collected data indicate that young entrepreneurs from both ethnic groups actively utilise digital platforms for business development (43.2% among Uzbek youth and 35.8% among Kyrgyz youth), thereby establishing a basis for sustainable economic cooperation.

Thus, the findings of this research not only corroborate earlier studies but also enrich them with new empirical evidence on the specificities of interethnic interaction in the borderland areas of Central Asia. The identified patterns and trends may serve as a foundation for designing effective strategies for the development of interethnic dialogue and cross-border cooperation in the region.

5. Conclusions

The study of interethnic interaction in the context of border and territorial issues has made it possible to formulate a number of important conclusions. It was established that the nature of interethnic interaction in border areas is shaped by a complex of factors, among which socio-economic

conditions (noted by 68.3% of Kyrgyz and 71.5% of Uzbek respondents) and the political situation (54.2% and 58.7% respectively) play a key role. At the same time, significant differences were identified in attitudes towards interethnic engagement between Kyrgyz and Uzbek youth: representatives of Uzbek youth demonstrate a higher level of readiness for interethnic contacts (37.4%) compared to Kyrgyz youth (25.3%). Moreover, youth from both ethnic groups emphasised the importance of cultural traditions as a factor contributing to interethnic trust: 45.8% of Uzbek youth and 37.5% of Kyrgyz youth considered this aspect essential for successful interaction.

The research recorded the emergence of new forms of interethnic interaction in the digital sphere, where the activity of Uzbek youth (65.3%) surpasses that of Kyrgyz youth (58.7%). Digital platforms are becoming an important instrument for sustaining interethnic contacts and developing cross-cultural dialogue, particularly under conditions of heightened border control. The study also identified the significant role of educational institutions in advancing interethnic dialogue, with levels of interaction among Uzbek youth (35.3%) exceeding those of Kyrgyz youth (28.7%). The educational environment is emerging as an effective platform for fostering interethnic tolerance and developing intercultural communication skills. Furthermore, 29.7% of Uzbek and 22.5% of Kyrgyz youth reported participation in joint cultural events – festivals, forums, and sports activities – which expands the scope of interethnic engagement beyond the formal educational context.

It was established that the settlement of border issues is perceived as an important factor in stabilising interethnic relations, with Uzbek youth demonstrating a higher level of satisfaction with the process of resolving border disputes (47.3%) compared to Kyrgyz youth (38.9%). The growing importance of bilingualism as a factor of successful interethnic interaction was also revealed: 42.7% of Uzbeks surveyed reported proficiency in Kyrgyz, while 38.2% of Kyrgyz respondents reported proficiency in Uzbek. A marked differentiation was observed between urban and rural areas in the nature of interethnic contacts: in urban settings, the level of interethnic interaction stands at 59.3%, while in rural areas it is 41.7%.

This study has several limitations related to the geographical specificity of the sample, which is restricted to the border districts of Batken (Kyrgyzstan) and Fergana (Uzbekistan), as well as to the age category of respondents (youth aged 16–30). Therefore, the results should be interpreted with caution and may be applicable primarily to similar socio-cultural and border contexts. These limitations may constrain the generalisability of the findings to the broader population of the region. It should also be noted that religious and historical factors contribute to the formation of interethnic attitudes, while digital platforms mainly facilitate the frequency of contacts, with their qualitative impact remaining insufficiently explored.

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