

Regional Integration Models in Eurasia and Europe: A Comparative Analysis of the Organization of Turkic States and the European Union

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Abstract

Regional organizations have become central actors in the contemporary international system, shaping economic cooperation, political governance, and regional security. This article presents a comparative analysis of the European Union and the Organization of Turkic States in order to examine alternative pathways of regional integration. Drawing upon theoretical frameworks from International Relations, including Neofunctionalism, Liberal Intergovernmentalism, and Constructivism, the article explores institutional development, economic cooperation, and geopolitical roles of the two organizations. The study argues that while the EU represents the most advanced model of supranational regional integration, the OTS reflects an emerging intergovernmental framework rooted in shared cultural identity and geopolitical connectivity across Eurasia. The findings suggest that increasing institutionalization and economic initiatives within the OTS may contribute to the development of a distinct model of regional cooperation.

Keywords: Regional integration; Eurasian cooperation; European Union; International organizations

Introduction

Regional integration has become one of the defining characteristics of the contemporary international system. Since the second half of the twentieth century, regional organizations have played an increasingly important role in facilitating economic cooperation, political coordination, and conflict prevention among states.

Among the most prominent examples of regional integration is the European Union, widely regarded as the most advanced supranational political and economic union in the world. The origins of the EU can be traced to the European Coal and Steel Community, established in 1951 with the goal of preventing future conflicts in Europe through economic cooperation.

In contrast, the Organization of Turkic States represents a relatively recent initiative aimed at strengthening cooperation among Turkic-speaking countries in Eurasia. Founded through the Nakhchivan Agreement in 2009, the organization seeks to promote political, economic, and cultural cooperation among its member states.

Although these two organizations differ significantly in their institutional structures and levels of integration, both reflect broader trends toward regionalism in international politics. Comparative analysis of these organizations can therefore provide valuable insights into different models of regional integration.

Theoretical Approaches to Regional Integration

The scholarly literature on regional integration has historically been dominated by analyses of European integration. In the aftermath of the World War II, European states pursued unprecedented forms of institutional cooperation, which prompted the development of foundational theoretical frameworks aimed at explaining the dynamics of regional integration.

One of the earliest and most influential approaches was neofunctionalism, articulated by Ernst B. Haas. According to this perspective, integration evolves through a process of functional and political spillover, whereby cooperation in one policy sector generates pressures for further integration in related areas (Haas, 1958). The logic of spillover suggests that technical cooperation—particularly in economic domains—gradually expands into broader political integration as institutions and actors become increasingly interconnected.

Subsequent theoretical developments challenged the supranational emphasis of neofunctionalism. Most notably, Andrew Moravcsik advanced liberal intergovernmentalism, which highlights the central role of national governments in shaping the trajectory of regional integration. In this framework, integration outcomes are understood primarily as the result of intergovernmental bargaining among states seeking to advance domestic economic and political interests (Moravcsik, 1998). Regional institutions, therefore, reflect negotiated compromises rather than autonomous supranational dynamics.

Constructivist approaches introduced an additional dimension to the study of regional cooperation by emphasizing the importance of shared identities, norms, and social structures in international relations. Scholars such as Alexander Wendt argue that state behavior cannot be fully understood through material interests alone; instead, social identities and collectively shared meanings shape patterns of cooperation (Wendt, 1999). From this perspective, regional organizations may emerge not only from economic incentives but also from shared cultural traditions, historical narratives, and identity-based solidarities.

While these theoretical perspectives were largely derived from the European experience, they have increasingly been applied to other regions. Nevertheless, the institutional development of the European Union remains distinctive. The European integration process gradually expanded from economic cooperation to deeper political

integration, culminating in supranational institutions such as the European Commission and the European Parliament. The presence of majority voting procedures, strong supranational authority, and the legal supremacy of EU law has made this model difficult to replicate in other regions.

More recent scholarship within the field of comparative regionalism has therefore sought to move beyond Eurocentric theoretical assumptions. Scholars including Lenz and Söderbaum argue that the study of regionalism has undergone several important conceptual transformations that facilitate systematic cross-regional comparison (Lenz & Söderbaum, 2025). These developments include the analytical disaggregation of regionalism into distinct dimensions, the adoption of theoretical frameworks grounded in broader social science traditions rather than European exceptionalism, and the increasing use of methodological pluralism combining quantitative and qualitative approaches.

This emerging phase of global comparative regionalism provides a useful framework for analyzing institutional cooperation beyond the European context. Rather than evaluating regional organizations according to their similarity to the European model, this perspective emphasizes the importance of contextual factors shaping different forms of regional governance. (Aydın & Liu, 2024)

Within this analytical framework, the Organization of Turkic States can be understood as a distinct model of regional cooperation adapted to the political and geopolitical conditions of Eurasia. The organization operates within a complex regional environment characterized by post-Soviet state-building processes, multi-vector foreign policy strategies, and the coexistence of overlapping regional initiatives. These include institutions such as the Eurasian Economic Union and large-scale connectivity projects like the Belt and Road Initiative (Koçak, 2023).

Moreover, unlike the European experience, regional cooperation among Turkic states has developed in the absence of a single dominant power capable of underwriting deep institutional integration. Instead, cooperation within the Organization of Turkic States has largely been facilitated through shared linguistic, historical, and cultural affinities. From a constructivist perspective, these identity-based connections provide an important social foundation for regional collaboration, complementing more pragmatic political and economic considerations (Börzel & Risse, 2012).

Consequently, the Organization of Turkic States should not be interpreted as an incomplete or emerging version of the European Union. Rather, it represents a distinctive institutional configuration reflecting the historical trajectories, geopolitical constraints, and normative foundations of the Turkic world (Wendt, 1999).

Neofunctionalism and Its Limits in Organisation of Turkic States

Despite the evolution of alternative theoretical approaches, neofunctionalism continues to provide valuable insights into the conditions under which regional integration advances or stagnates. However, scholars increasingly argue that its core assumptions—particularly the expectation of automatic functional spillover and the autonomous role of supranational institutions—require adaptation when applied beyond the European context. In their analysis of Eurasian regionalism, Alexander Libman and Evgeny Vinokurov contend that the mechanisms driving integration in post-Soviet Eurasia differ substantially from those observed in the European Union (Libman & Vinokurov, 2012).

The Eurasian regional environment is shaped by a set of structural and historical conditions that distinguish it from the European experience. These include the legacy of Organisation of Turkic States formation, divergent institutional trajectories, uneven economic development, and the simultaneous processes of regime consolidation and state-building across the region. Such factors constrain the emergence of strong supranational institutions and limit the scope of functional spillover typically associated with neofunctionalist models of integration (Schmitter, 1970).

Consequently, regional cooperation in the Organisation of Turkic States space has frequently taken the form of what scholars describe as “shallow integration.” Unlike the EU’s model of deep institutionalization, many Eurasian regional initiatives have been characterized by elite-driven and highly politicized cooperation frameworks with limited societal participation. Regional projects have tended to prioritize narrow forms of coordination—particularly in areas such as border management, regime stability, and security cooperation—rather than comprehensive economic or political integration (Haas, 1958).

Moreover, the durability of these arrangements has often depended heavily on the personal relationships and political alignment of national leaders. When leadership transitions occur or bilateral relations deteriorate, institutional cooperation frequently weakens or collapses. This dynamic stands in contrast to the EU’s institutionalized governance structure, where supranational bodies ensure policy continuity across changes in national governments (Stone Sweet, 2010).

Realist Institutionalism and Regional Leadership

While neofunctionalist and liberal intergovernmentalist approaches emphasize the cooperative logic of regional integration, realist institutionalism provides an alternative perspective by viewing international organizations as instruments through which states pursue strategic interests and power projection. From a realist standpoint, regional institutions are not neutral arenas of cooperation but rather mechanisms

through which leading states shape regional order in ways that reflect their political and economic preferences (Pedersen, 2002).

Within this framework, international organizations can function as strategic tools through which dominant actors institutionalize their influence by shaping agenda-setting processes, designing institutional rules, and defining policy priorities. Through such mechanisms, stronger states are able to embed their preferences within institutional frameworks and thereby structure the behavior of smaller or less powerful members (Acharya, 2014).

An important concept within this perspective is “cooperative hegemony,” developed by Thomas Pedersen. Pedersen argues that regional powers may seek to stabilize their surrounding geopolitical environment not through coercion but through institutionalized cooperation that encourages voluntary alignment by neighboring states (Pedersen, 2002). Rather than relying solely on military dominance, regional powers employ economic incentives, institutional frameworks, and normative narratives to cultivate acceptance of their leadership.

This analytical framework offers insight into the role played by Türkiye within the Organization of Turkic States. Through diplomatic initiatives, economic cooperation, and institutional agenda-setting, Türkiye has sought to promote regional coordination while simultaneously embedding its strategic preferences within the organization’s institutional structure (Söderbaum, 2016).

Realist institutionalism further identifies several mechanisms through which regional powers utilize international organizations to consolidate influence. First, economic redistribution mechanisms—such as investment flows, development assistance, and preferential trade—can create asymmetric interdependence that encourages policy alignment by recipient states. Second, security and military cooperation can deepen strategic partnerships and facilitate the convergence of defense policies. Third, ideational and normative elements, including shared cultural, religious, or linguistic ties, can lower transaction costs and increase the legitimacy of institutional initiatives among participating states (Pedersen, 2002).

Constructivism and Identity-Based Regionalism

In contrast to rationalist approaches that emphasize material interests and strategic calculations, constructivist theory highlights the role of social identities, shared norms, and historical narratives in shaping patterns of regional cooperation. From a constructivist perspective, regional organizations emerge not only as instruments of economic coordination or power balancing but also as institutional expressions of collective identity (Wendt, 1999).

The development of the Organization of Turkic States reflects this identity-based dimension of regionalism. The organization explicitly emphasizes the concept of “Turkic unity,” grounded in shared linguistic heritage, cultural traditions, and historical experiences across the Turkic-speaking world. These elements contribute to a form of regionalism that differs significantly from the primarily functional and economically driven integration model associated with the European experience (Börzel & Risse, 2012).

According to recent scholarship, including the work of Ceyhun Avcu, the institutional evolution of the OTS is best explained through a combination of constructivist and intergovernmentalist perspectives, rather than through classical neofunctionalist integration theory. In this interpretation, cultural and historical ties provide the normative foundation for cooperation, while political decision-making remains firmly controlled by member states (Avcu, 2025).

At the same time, identity-based solidarity within the OTS is not merely an inherited cultural reality but is actively constructed and reinforced through institutional discourse and policy initiatives. By emphasizing shared heritage and civilizational narratives, the organization seeks to foster mutual trust among member states that historically had limited institutional interaction following the dissolution of the Soviet Union (Demirel, 2025).

This identity narrative also serves strategic functions. By strengthening cultural cohesion, the OTS reduces transaction costs in political cooperation and differentiates itself from other regional initiatives operating across Eurasia, including the Eurasian Economic Union, the Collective Security Treaty Organization, and the Belt and Road Initiative. In doing so, the organization constructs a distinctive institutional identity within the broader landscape of Eurasian regionalism.

The European Union: Supranational Integration and Pooled Sovereignty

The European Union represents the most advanced example of regional integration in contemporary international politics. Its institutional architecture is distinguished by a high degree of supranational authority, which differentiates it from most other regional organizations. Central to this system is the European Commission, which operates as an independent supranational institution mandated to promote collective European interests rather than those of individual member states. Legislative and policy decisions are adopted jointly with the Council of the European Union, where qualified majority voting has progressively replaced unanimity across a widening range of policy domains (Moravcsik, 1998).

Equally significant is the role of the Court of Justice of the European Union, which has developed a distinctive supranational legal order. Through landmark jurisprudence, the Court established the principles of direct effect and the supremacy of European

law, ensuring that EU legislation may take precedence over national law in cases of conflict (Stone Sweet, 2010). Together, these institutional mechanisms have created a multilayered governance system in which sovereignty is partially pooled among member states.

These institutional arrangements reflect what Stanley Hoffmann famously described as the “logic of integration.” According to Hoffmann, functional interdependence between states creates pressures for collective governance structures capable of managing shared economic and political challenges (Hoffmann, 1966). The historical trajectory of European integration illustrates this dynamic. Beginning with the European Coal and Steel Community, integration gradually expanded through successive treaty reforms such as the Single European Act and the Maastricht Treaty. Each stage deepened institutional cooperation, demonstrating the spillover dynamics emphasized in neofunctionalist theory.

At the same time, the European integration project reveals important structural constraints. Hoffmann also highlighted the persistence of a “logic of diversity,” whereby nation-states retain a strong preference for autonomy in areas of high politics such as foreign policy and defense. This dynamic explains the comparatively limited degree of supranational authority in security policy compared with economic governance. Moreover, the institutional evolution of the EU has depended on a number of enabling conditions—including relatively advanced economic development, pluralistic social structures, and broad ideological convergence among participating states—that are not easily replicated in other regional contexts.

The Organization of Turkic States: Intergovernmentalism and Identity-Based Cooperation

In contrast to the EU’s supranational architecture, the Organization of Turkic States (OTS) represents a model of regional cooperation based primarily on intergovernmental coordination. The organization was originally established through the Nakhchivan Agreement and subsequently transformed into the Organization of Turkic States in 2021. Decision-making within the organization remains firmly anchored in intergovernmental mechanisms, with major policy directions determined through consensus among member states during regular summits of heads of state (Moravcsik, 1998; Söderbaum, 2016).

Unlike the EU, the OTS does not possess supranational institutions with independent regulatory authority. Instead, its institutional architecture is characterized by a network of specialized agencies and affiliated organizations operating alongside the central secretariat. This decentralized structure reflects the preference of member governments to preserve national sovereignty while gradually expanding cooperative initiatives across multiple sectors. (Börzel & Risse, 2012)

The integration logic underlying the OTS also differs fundamentally from the functionalist model that characterized early European integration. Whereas the EU emerged primarily from economic interdependence and sectoral cooperation, the OTS explicitly emphasizes shared civilizational and cultural identity as a foundation for regional collaboration. The organization promotes the concept of “Turkic unity,” drawing on common linguistic, historical, and cultural heritage among member states (Wendt, 1999).

This identity-based dimension is reflected in a range of institutional initiatives. Cultural and educational programs such as the Orkhon student exchange initiative, the promotion of a common Turkic alphabet adopted in principle in 2024, and events such as the World Nomad Games aim to strengthen societal linkages across the Turkic world. Such initiatives demonstrate how cultural identity can function as a facilitating mechanism for regional cooperation by fostering trust and symbolic solidarity among participating states (Wendt, 1999; Söderbaum, 2016).

At the same time, the OTS has experienced a gradual process of institutional consolidation in recent years. A key milestone was the adoption of the Turkic World Vision 2040 strategy during the Istanbul Summit of the Organization of Turkic States in 2021. This strategic document outlines a long-term framework for cooperation structured around four principal pillars: political and security cooperation, economic and sectoral integration, people-to-people connectivity, and engagement with external partners (OTS Summit Declaration, 2021).

Although these initiatives do not involve the creation of supranational authority comparable to that of the EU, they nevertheless represent a significant step toward institutionalization. The Vision 2040 agenda expands the scope of cooperation beyond symbolic cultural initiatives and seeks to establish more concrete policy coordination mechanisms across economic, political, and social domains. In this sense, the OTS demonstrates a hybrid form of regionalism that combines intergovernmental decision-making with identity-based solidarity and gradually expanding institutional cooperation (Acharya, 2014; Söderbaum, 2016).

From Bilateralism to Interregional Engagement

Historically, the engagement of the European Union with the Turkic world has been structured primarily through bilateral institutional arrangements with individual states rather than through collective regional frameworks. These arrangements include Partnership and Cooperation Agreements (PCAs) with Central Asian republics, the Association Agreement governing relations with Türkiye, and sector-specific negotiations such as the Comprehensive Air Transport Agreement. Such frameworks reflected the EU’s broader external governance strategy, which traditionally

emphasized differentiated bilateral partnerships rather than institutionalized interregional dialogue.

A notable shift emerged with the adoption of the EU's 2019 Strategy for Central Asia, which conceptualized the region as a more coherent geopolitical and economic space. The strategy emphasized principles such as connectivity, resilience, and "principled pragmatism," signaling a recalibration of EU policy toward balancing normative objectives with geopolitical realities. This adjustment formed part of a broader strategic reorientation within EU foreign policy institutions following initiatives such as the Strategic Compass, which emphasized greater geopolitical engagement with neighboring regions.

A significant institutional development occurred in November 2024 with the adoption of the EU–OTS Joint Working Plan, which established a structured dialogue between the EU and the Organization of Turkic States (OTS). This initiative marked the first formalized mechanism through which the EU engaged the Turkic institutional framework collectively rather than exclusively through bilateral channels. The development reflects a broader EU trend toward engaging regional organizations as strategic interlocutors in areas such as connectivity, trade, and regional governance.

Economic Asymmetries in the EU–OTS Relationship

Despite the growing institutionalization of dialogue, the economic relationship between the EU and the OTS remains highly asymmetric. Financial assistance data from the European Commission's Directorate-General for Budget indicate that EU funding flows to OTS member states are overwhelmingly concentrated in Türkiye. Between 2021 and 2023, Türkiye received approximately €2.687 billion in direct EU financial assistance, accounting for more than 97 percent of the total funding directed to OTS member countries. By contrast, other members received comparatively modest allocations: Kazakhstan (€28.02 million), Kyrgyzstan (€33.46 million), Uzbekistan (€5.22 million), and Azerbaijan (€3.51 million) (European Commission, 2024).

Trade patterns similarly illustrate the structural asymmetry of EU–OTS economic relations. In 2024, EU exports to Türkiye reached approximately €112 billion, while imports from Türkiye totaled €98.4 billion (Eurostat, 2025). This exchange represents roughly 41 percent of Turkish exports and 32 percent of imports, confirming the EU as Türkiye's largest trading partner (Eurostat, 2025). Conversely, Türkiye accounts for approximately 3.6–4 percent of the EU's total external trade, ranking among its significant—but not dominant—partners.

For other OTS members, trade with the EU constitutes a smaller share of overall external economic relations. Their commercial exchanges remain strongly oriented toward neighboring powers and regional economic frameworks, particularly trade networks

linked to Russia and China. As a result, the EU–OTS economic relationship exhibits a multi-layered structure in which Türkiye functions as the principal economic bridge between the European and Turkic regional systems (Kubicek, 2013; Libman & Vinokurov, 2012).

Infrastructure connectivity represents one of the most significant areas of functional cooperation between the EU and OTS member states. In particular, the development of the Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, widely known as the Middle Corridor, has emerged as a central strategic project linking Europe and Asia. (Baldwin, Söderbaum, 2016).

The corridor connects China to Europe through a multimodal transport chain that passes through Kazakhstan, crosses the Caspian Sea to Azerbaijan, and continues through Türkiye into European markets. By bypassing Russian territory, the route offers an alternative to the traditional Northern Corridor that historically dominated Eurasian freight transport (World Bank, 2023; Söderbaum, 2016).

The EU has increasingly recognized the strategic importance of this route within broader Eurasian connectivity strategies. Policy initiatives such as the Connecting Europe and Asia Strategy and the Global Gateway identify the South Caucasus and Central Asia as key logistical nodes in emerging transcontinental transport networks (European Commission, 2021, 2023).

The OTS has played an active coordinating role in promoting the development of the Middle Corridor. Cooperative initiatives have included sister-port agreements linking maritime infrastructure in Baku, Aktau, and Samsun, as well as trilateral coordination among Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Türkiye. Additional institutionalization occurred with the adoption of the Baku Declaration on Cooperation in the Transport and Communications Spheres in July 2022, which established an intergovernmental working group aimed at improving logistical efficiency and enhancing the corridor's competitiveness (OTS Declaration, 2022).

Energy cooperation constitutes another key area of convergence between the EU and OTS member states. Following the disruption of European energy markets after the deterioration of relations with Russia, the EU has increasingly sought to diversify its sources of hydrocarbons and renewable energy. Within this context, the EU concluded a Strategic Energy Partnership Memorandum with Azerbaijan in 2022 aimed at expanding natural gas exports to European markets (European Commission, 2022; Youngs, 2023).

The energy resources of OTS member states contribute significantly to this diversification strategy. Azerbaijan possesses substantial natural gas reserves in the Caspian basin, while Kazakhstan remains an important supplier of crude oil exports through pipelines connecting the Caspian region to global markets. In addition to hydrocarbon resources, several OTS members also possess considerable potential

for renewable energy development, including solar and wind capacity across Central Asia (Henderson & Mitrova, 2022).

Digital economic cooperation has also emerged as a growing dimension of EU–OTS relations. The Digital Economy Partnership Agreement (DEPA) adopted by the OTS in November 2024 provides a framework for collaboration in areas such as digital trade, electronic commerce, and data governance. Within this domain, EU regulatory frameworks—including the Digital Markets Act and the Digital Services Act—may serve as potential models for the development of digital governance standards within the Turkic institutional space (European Commission, 2019).

Beyond material cooperation, the EU–OTS relationship also contains a normative dimension involving competing models of regional governance. Historically, the EU has promoted a process of Europeanization, linking economic cooperation and political partnership to the adoption of norms related to democratic governance, rule of law, and human rights. These principles have traditionally been advanced through conditionality mechanisms embedded in EU external relations policies (Bradford, 2020; European Commission, 2020).

However, the effectiveness of this approach has diminished in recent years amid increasing geopolitical competition and the EU's own strategic recalibration. The 2019 Central Asia Strategy explicitly embraced the concept of “principled pragmatism,” reflecting a shift toward prioritizing stability and geopolitical engagement alongside normative objectives (Damro, 2012).

In contrast, the normative framework promoted within the Organization of Turkic States emphasizes sovereignty, non-interference, and civilizational identity rooted in the concept of Turkic solidarity. This discourse resonates with political elites in Central Asia who seek to maintain domestic autonomy while diversifying their external partnerships (Acharya, 2014).

The emphasis on shared linguistic and historical heritage provides the OTS with a distinctive normative vocabulary that differs both from European liberal universalism and from the geopolitical narratives associated with Russian Eurasian integration initiatives. Consequently, the evolving relationship between the EU and the OTS reflects not only functional cooperation but also a broader interaction between competing regional governance models within the Eurasian geopolitical landscape (Schimmelfennig & Sedelmeier, 2005).

Conclusion

This article has presented a theoretically grounded comparative analysis of the OTS and EU, demonstrating that these organizations represent distinct models of regional integration adapted to different geopolitical contexts. The EU exemplifies “deep integration” through supranational institutions, pooled sovereignty, and legal supremacy, driven by functional spillover and consolidated through decades of political development. The OTS represents “strategic identity regionalism”—intergovernmental coordination instrumentalized by Türkiye for regional leadership projection, characterized by flexible institutionalization and multi-vector diplomacy.

The November 2024 Bishkek Summit marked a significant step in the OTS’s institutionalization and external orientation. The establishment of a Joint Working Plan with the EU, the signing of DEPA, the creation of the Turkic Green Finance Council, and the inauguration of the Council of Central Banks demonstrate the organization’s evolution from a cultural forum toward a comprehensive regional organization. However, the persistence of intergovernmental decision-making and the absence of supranational authority indicate that this institutionalization serves primarily to consolidate Turkish leadership rather than create an autonomous regional polity.

The emerging OTS-EU relationship exemplifies “complex interregionalism”—combining functional cooperation on connectivity, energy, and digital governance with competitive dynamics regarding normative influence and regional order. This relationship challenges conventional interregionalism theory and demonstrates the need for comparative approaches that treat the EU as one case among many.

This study makes three contributions to comparative regionalism theory. First, it advances the “Global Comparative Regionalism” agenda by applying a non-EU-centric analytical framework to a post-Soviet regional organization, demonstrating how theoretical concepts derived from general social science can illuminate cases outside the European experience

Second, it develops the concept of “strategic identity regionalism” to capture the OTS’s unique combination of cultural solidarity and strategic hedging. This concept bridges constructivist and realist approaches, showing how identity-based solidarity can be strategically instrumentalized for power projection while remaining constrained by the material realities of asymmetric interdependence and geopolitical competition.

Third, it characterizes the OTS-EU relationship as “complex interregionalism”—engagement between organizations with asymmetric institutional capacity, competing normative frameworks, and overlapping functional interests. This framework moves beyond the “hub-and-spokes” model of EU-centered interregionalism toward a networked understanding of regional organization interactions in a multipolar system.

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