

SPECIFICS OF REGIONAL CROSS-BORDER ECONOMIC ZONES DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT. *This article explores the feasibility of and recommendations for establishing cross-border economic zones (CBEZs) between Uzbekistan and neighboring countries in Central Asia. The successful establishment of Cross-Border Economic Zones (CBEZs) between Uzbekistan and neighboring countries necessitates a multifaceted approach, as outlined in the major recommendations. The call for a broad spectrum of economic, institutional, and political reforms signifies the importance of creating a conducive regional environment for the implementation of cross-border policies. Emphasizing regional integration over cooperation and strategically selecting locations for CBEZs aligns to foster economic growth and collaboration.*

KEYWORDS: *Cross-border economic zones; regional integration; trade facilitation; institutional reforms; logistics infrastructure; foreign investments; economic diversification; cross-border cooperation.*

Introduction

The establishment of Cross-Border Economic Zones (CBEZs) between Uzbekistan and its neighbouring states in Central Asia constitutes a strategic instrument for advancing regional integration and fostering sustained economic development. Achieving this objective necessitates a multidimensional framework of economic, institutional, and political reforms, complemented by the deliberate and evidence-based selection of geographic sites.

By privileging deeper regional integration over ad hoc cooperation, CBEZs hold the potential to create a robust platform for enduring intergovernmental collaboration and mutually beneficial growth across the region.



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Method and Scope of Research

The authors of this article have used descriptive and analytical methods, combining qualitative analysis of policy documents, economic indicators, and global experiences. It evaluates cross-border economic zones (CBEZs) through case studies, statistical comparisons, and institutional assessments. The research focuses on the feasibility, implementation strategies, and potential benefits of establishing CBEZs between Uzbekistan and its neighboring Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan). It also includes a comparative perspective with international best practices.

Core Issue

The core issue addressed by the article is the lack of effective economic integration and cooperation among Central Asian countries, and how cross-border economic zones (CBEZs) can serve as a strategic tool to overcome economic, institutional, and logistical barriers, fostering regional development and sustainable growth.

Establishment of Cross-Border Economic Zones in Central Asia

The establishment of Cross-Border Economic Zones (CBEZ) between Uzbekistan and neighboring countries is a strategic step aimed at enhancing economic cooperation, trade, and regional development.

These zones rely on strong diplomatic relations, regulatory and legal frameworks, and cooperation in customs and laws to ensure uninterrupted cross-border trade. Within the framework of CBEZ, offering tax incentives, reduced tariffs, and a favorable regulatory environment helps attract substantial investments and creates a conducive atmosphere for entrepreneurship. It is important to focus on industrial growth, labor mobility, and sustainable development within these zones.

Uzbekistan has already begun putting forward proposals to develop Cross-Border Economic Zones with its neighboring countries. This initiative reflects efforts to strengthen bilateral relations and promote trade and border development. Such a forward-looking approach was embodied in the agreement between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which led to the launch of the construction of a cross-border international trade and economic cooperation center on the Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan border in 2021. Likewise, in 2021, Uzbekistan signed an agreement with

Turkmenistan to establish another trade center along their shared borders. Although the construction and development of these zones represent significant progress, plans to establish CBEZs on the borders with Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are still pending. This, in turn, influences the ongoing efforts to expand and reinforce economic cooperation across the region (Vokhidova & Yuanis, 2020).

Despite the promising potential of CBEZs, developing countries still do not pay sufficient attention to them. While in developed countries—particularly in the European Union—there is abundant literature on cross-border regions, developing countries significantly lack systematic analysis and literature regarding the implementation and impact of cross-border economic zones. This highlights the importance of studying the challenges involved in the establishment of such zones.

Development Challenges of Central Asian Countries

Uzbekistan, along with its neighboring countries in Central Asia, faces a range of complex development challenges spanning economic, social, political, and environmental spheres. Although these issues are interrelated and multifaceted, they partly stem from the region's reliance on natural resources (Mirzahatamov, 2022). This situation is often explained by the phenomenon known as the "Dutch Disease." Common in resource-rich countries, it refers to an excessive dependence on sectors like oil, gas, or minerals, which leads to a series of economic problems.

A key sign of Dutch Disease observed in Central Asia is the noticeable slowdown in overall economic growth, particularly the decline in per capita GDP growth. This trend points to a deeper issue: the lack of focus on economic diversification. As these countries rely heavily on their natural resource sectors, other industries often experience stagnation or decline, limiting innovation and growth opportunities in the broader economic landscape. Additionally, revenue from natural resources tends to appreciate the national currency, which undermines the competitiveness of non-resource sectors on the global market. This dynamic can deter investment in various industries and tie the economy to a narrow range of commodities. The volatility of global commodity prices adds another layer of unpredictability, affecting the sustainability and predictability of growth in these countries.

Addressing these challenges requires Central Asian countries, including Uzbekistan, to implement strategic

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changes toward diversifying their economic base. Encouraging non-resource sectors and ensuring the effective management of natural resource revenues are essential steps toward sustainable, long-term development. Such measures can help mitigate the negative effects of Dutch Disease and foster a more stable and dynamic economic environment.

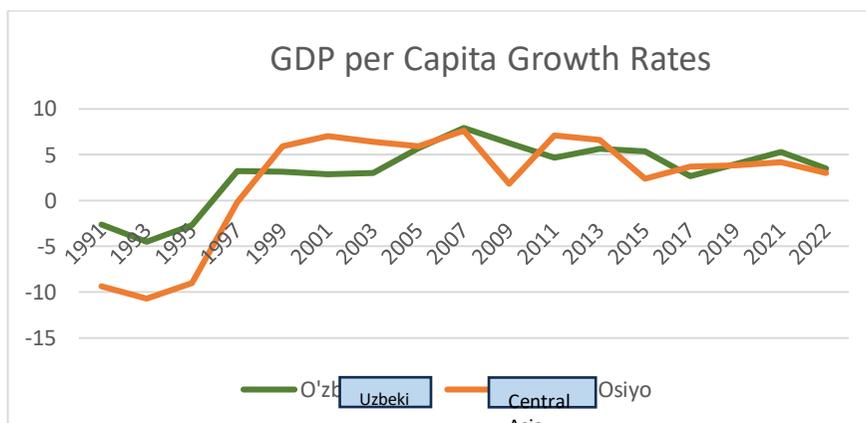


Figure 1. GDP per Capita Growth Rates

Source: Author's compilation based on World Bank data

Figure 1 illustrates the economic indicators of Uzbekistan and other Central Asian countries. It shows a slowdown in economic growth rates. The deceleration of both Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and GDP per capita growth may reflect systemic issues such as limited economic diversification, difficulties in achieving sustainable productivity gains, or vulnerabilities to external economic factors. The decline in economic growth rates and the stagnation in GDP per capita growth indicate a need to accelerate economic reforms (Kuldasheva, 2024).

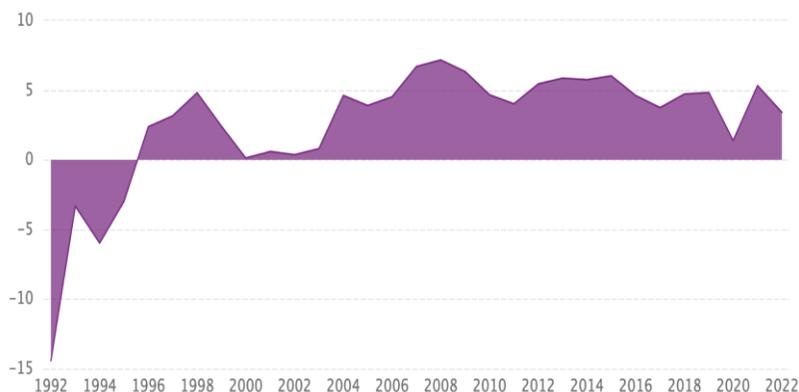


Figure 2. Labor Productivity in Uzbekistan Over the Last Thirty Years

Source: CEIC data

Figure 2 shows changes in labor productivity in Uzbekistan over the past thirty years, measured as the ratio of the country’s GDP to the labor force. According to the data, although labor productivity increased in the early years of independence, no significant growth has been observed in recent years. The low labor productivity in Uzbekistan and neighboring countries reflects inefficiencies in resource utilization and a lack of innovation. The stagnation in labor productivity highlights the need for technological advancement, investment in human capital, and the promotion of a competitive business environment. By focusing on these areas, Central Asian economies can increase efficiency, stimulate economic growth, and improve living standards.

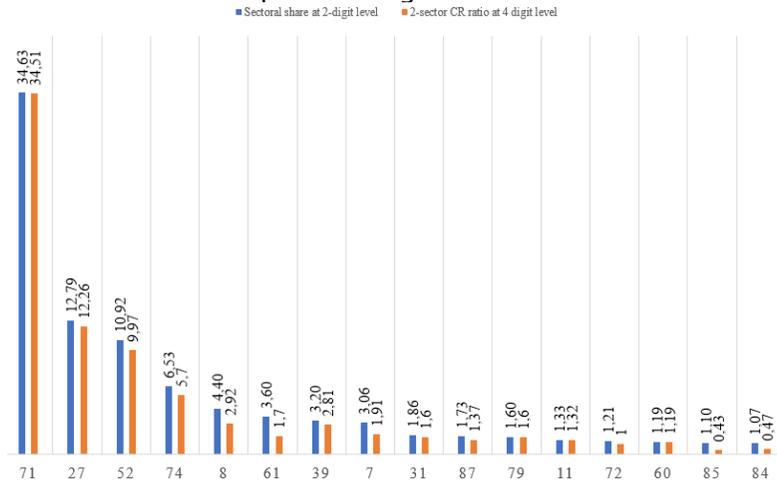


Figure 3. Share of Economic Sectors in Uzbekistan’s Exports
Source: Based on data from the World Integrated Trade Solution database.

***Note:** Based on international standard economic classifications: 7: Vegetables; 8: Fruits and nuts; 11: Milling industry products; 27: Mineral fuels, mineral oils; 31: Fertilizers; 39: Plastics and articles thereof; 52: Cotton; 60: Knitted or crocheted fabrics; 61: Clothing and accessories; 84: Nuclear reactors, boilers, machinery, and mechanical appliances; parts thereof; 85: Electrical machinery and equipment and parts thereof, televisions, tape recorders, etc.; 71: Precious metals and stones; 72: Iron and steel; 74:

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Copper and articles thereof; 79: Zinc and articles thereof; 87: Vehicles other than railway.

Finally, Figure 3 presents 16 sectors with the highest export concentration in Uzbekistan's export structure based on the international economic sector classification at the 2-digit and 4-digit levels. The dominance of precious metals and stones in Uzbekistan's export portfolio raises concerns about the sustainability and diversification of the country's overall export base. Although these goods currently contribute significantly to export revenues, overreliance on them may hinder the development of other export-oriented sectors. Diversifying the economy is essential to enhance resilience and ensure long-term growth, especially in the context of changing global market dynamics.

The same challenges are also observed in neighboring countries such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Tajikistan. Taking these issues into account, cross-border economic zones (CBEZs) emerge as a strategic solution with significant potential. By enhancing cooperation and coordination between neighboring countries, CBEZs can contribute to addressing the identified problems. These zones have the potential to promote sustainable growth, boost the economy, encourage higher production growth, create employment opportunities, and facilitate economic diversification. This regional approach can serve as a strategic response to uncertainties in the global economic landscape, enabling joint efforts to tackle and overcome the multifaceted challenges faced by Central Asian economies.

Cross-Border Economic Zones (CBEZs): Prospects for Cooperation

Cross-border economic zones play a crucial role in realizing the potential of cross-border cooperation for sustainable regional development. These zones are designed to optimize shared resources, strengthen connectivity, and enhance synergy between neighboring countries, thereby helping resolve mutual challenges and stimulate economic growth.

Global Experience: Lessons from Different Countries

The implementation of CBEZs varies worldwide, with each region adapting the concept to its specific geopolitical and economic context. The following are examples of how CBEZs have been successfully developed globally:

1. North America: Along the U.S.-Mexico and U.S.-Canada borders, economic cooperation mechanisms such as maquiladoras—tax-exempt factories—and frameworks like

NAFTA offer solid examples of functioning CBEZs. The Tijuana–San Diego corridor and the Cascadia Innovation Corridor between Vancouver and Seattle exemplify successful cross-border integration, enhancing innovation and overall economic prosperity.

2. Europe: Many border cities effectively utilize cross-border cooperation. For instance, Lille on the France-Belgium border and Malmö on the Denmark-Sweden border demonstrate the potential of joint development. In these cases, neighboring regions work together to solve shared problems, utilize common resources, and stimulate economic growth beyond national borders.

3. Asia: Examples of cross-border regions include the SIJORI Growth Triangle in Southeast Asia and the Tumen River Delta in Northeast Asia. The SIJORI Growth Triangle represents a partnership between Singapore, Johor (in Malaysia), and the Riau Islands (in Indonesia), combining each region's competitive advantages to make the subregion more attractive to regional and international investors. Specifically, it links Singapore's infrastructure, capital, and expertise with the natural and labor resources and land availability in Johor and Riau. The Tumen River Delta triangle promotes cooperation and development among China, Russia, North Korea, South Korea, and Japan. International agencies play a key role in funding and coordinating projects in these regions to support sustainable development and regional stability.

Analysis of Cooperation in Central Asian Countries

Analyzing the implementation prospects of Cross-Border Economic Zones (CBEZs) in Central Asia requires a comprehensive assessment. Institutional factors such as legal frameworks and governance structures play a key role in ensuring harmonization among participating countries. From a technical perspective, it is essential to evaluate infrastructure readiness, possibilities for technology transfer, and workforce qualifications. Operationally, administrative capacity, mechanisms for coordinating cross-border activities, and strategies for dispute resolution must be carefully considered (Khasanovna et al., 2019).

Assessing the institutional viability of CBEZs involves evaluating the legal frameworks, governance structures, and regulatory environments that govern cross-border cooperation in Central Asia. Ensuring policy alignment across participating countries and removing potential bureaucratic barriers are crucial for creating a favorable environment for

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the successful establishment and operation of CBEZs. Such an assessment offers insights into institutional preparedness and the challenges linked to cross-border economic initiatives in the region.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has undergone significant changes in its foreign policy. These changes highlight a clear focus on economic diplomacy and place priority on relations with neighboring countries. However, despite these positive developments, several measures still need to be taken for the region to reach the status of a fully integrated community.

Trade Facilitation

When analyzing the feasibility of establishing CBEZs in Central Asia, it is important to assess the economic institutions regulating trade integration in the region. Although Central Asian states have not been particularly active in multilateral negotiations such as WTO accession talks, they have engaged in various regional and bilateral agreements. They are members of the CIS Free Trade Agreement and observers of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU). There are bilateral trade agreements between each regional economy, including six agreements with former Soviet republics. Despite these agreements, a techno-economic analysis must consider both the challenges and opportunities, especially focusing on improving trade facilitation to enhance the overall success of CBEZ initiatives in Central Asia.

In recent years, Central Asian countries have made significant efforts to reduce tariffs and implement trade mechanisms free of bureaucracy. Despite these positive steps, cross-border trade performance still shows notable weaknesses. These difficulties may stem from operational problems, regulatory barriers, or logistical inefficiencies that hinder smooth cross-border trade. Addressing these issues is crucial to maximizing the benefits of tariff reductions and trade facilitation initiatives, and ensuring a more seamless and effective cross-border trade environment in the region.

Destination	Export				Import				Border trade ranking
	Border crossing time (hours)	Border crossing cost (USD)	Documentation time (hours)	Documentation cost (USD)	Border crossing time (hours)	Border crossing cost (USD)	Documentation time (hours)	Documentation cost (USD)	
Kazakhstan	105	470	128	200					105
Kyrgyzstan	5	10	72	110	69	499	84	200	89
Tajikistan	27	313	66	330	107	223	126	260	141
Uzbekistan	32	278	96	292	111	278	150	242	152
OECD high-income countries	12.7	136.8	2.3	33.4	98.1	8.5	3.4	23.5	

Table 2. Cross-border trade in Central Asian countries

Source: Based on the World Bank’s Doing Business Archive

From Table 2, it is clear that compared to the countries of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), Central Asian countries have higher costs related to cross-border trade in terms of both time and money. Among these countries, Kyrgyzstan shows relatively better indicators, but even in Kyrgyzstan, cross-border import costs are tens of times higher than those of OECD high-income countries. These disparities lead to difficulties and inefficiencies in managing cross-border trade processes in the region. Reducing these costs is crucial for improving the competitiveness of Central Asian economies, attracting investments, and further streamlining cross-border trade relations. Addressing factors that contribute to time delays and cost increases plays a key role in creating a more favorable environment for economic growth and regional cooperation.

Facilitating Investments

The network of bilateral agreements and comprehensive deals in Central Asian countries covers 49 countries. Additionally, the efforts to facilitate trade and investment are demonstrated through a foundational agreement on regional trade investments with the U.S. Trade Representative’s office. Central Asian countries (especially Kazakhstan) generally adopt a liberal approach to foreign direct investment (FDI) laws. While Turkmenistan has restrictions on direct investments outside the oil sector, it supports investment initiatives aimed at import substitution and export-oriented projects. However, the enforcement of laws

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and protection of private property rights vary, leading to uncertainties in the business environment in some countries. It is very important to thoroughly examine these factors to assess the alignment of regional trade and investment zones (CBEZ) initiatives with overall goals. Despite the liberalization of trade and investment in Central Asian countries, the weakness of domestic economic institutions remains a significant issue. This shortcoming continues to pose a major barrier to attracting private and foreign direct investments, which is crucial for technology transfer even within the CBEZs. To take full advantage of the benefits of CBEZs, regional economies must create a conducive environment for trade and private investment while improving their economic institutions.

Figure 1 shows the business environment rankings for Central Asian countries in 2015 and 2019, along with indicators such as economic freedom, corruption perception index, regulatory quality, rule of law, and the voice and accountability index (with 2015 figures in parentheses). It shows that the investment climate in Central Asia has slightly improved

	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyz Republic	Tajikistan	Turkmenistan	Uzbekistan
Doing Business Ranking	25 (41)	80 (67)	106 (132)	–	69 (87)
Economic Freedom	64 (68)	116 (96)	147 (149)	165 (174)	117 (166)
Corruption Perception Index	101 (131)	140 (136)	150 (151)	167 (154)	126 (156)
Regulatory Quality	56 (48)	32 (40)	12 (11)	1 (1)	31 (4)
Rule of Law	34 (33)	14 (14)	11 (11)	6 (6)	20 (12)
Voice and Accountability	19 (14)	32 (33)	3 (6)	1 (0.5)	12 (3)

Table 3. Investment Climate Indicators in Central Asia

Source: Based on the World Bank's Doing Business archive

Resolving Border Issues

Cross-border institutions in Central Asia have made significant progress in delineating borders, including those between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan and

Turkmenistan. These reforms represent positive steps toward establishing clear and recognized borders. However, despite notable achievements, specific border-related issues remain unresolved across the region to varying degrees. Ongoing disputes may stem from historical disagreements, competing territorial claims, or complex geopolitical considerations. Addressing and resolving these persistent border issues is essential to promote stability, foster cooperation, and create a favorable environment for initiatives like the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation (CAREC).

Water Resource Management

Water resource management in Central Asia is marked by complex disagreements between upstream countries (Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan), which have around 40 water canals, and downstream countries (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan). Disputes often revolve around the distribution and consumption of water. Climate change further exacerbates the situation by affecting water availability and distribution. Existing water agreements, formed based on historical accords, may face challenges due to changing climate conditions and evolving water demands. Therefore, addressing current and future challenges in water management may require reviewing and potentially revising these agreements to strengthen cooperation and sustainability in the region.

Border Security

Central Asian countries, along with international organizations, have invested heavily in developing border connectivity through multilateral transport systems such as CAREC, the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), and TRACECA. Although transit agreements exist, they are not always implemented effectively, and even when they are, execution and monitoring remain challenging. Harmonizing standards and regulations is crucial to enable seamless cross-border movement and to realize the full potential of transport corridors. Addressing these issues is critical to ensuring the success and sustainability of extensive investments in regional border connectivity.

Border security in Central Asia is closely tied to geo-economic, geographic, and geopolitical factors. The region faces unresolved issues related to borders, energy, and water, which can sometimes escalate into broader problems. These issues pose serious internal and external security

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threats encompassing political, military, economic, ethnic, religious, and social dimensions. Regional organizations such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) play an important role in resolving these challenges with the involvement of external stakeholders. Effective collaboration is essential to address the multifaceted security threats facing Central Asia.

Conclusion

The technical and economic aspects of establishing Cross-Border Economic Zones (CBEZs) between Uzbekistan and its neighboring countries explore opportunities to expand bilateral relations, enhance trade, and develop border regions. Emphasis is placed on the complex nature of CBEZs, highlighting their role in politically unifying fragmented territories. Economic indicators show that Uzbekistan and other Central Asian economies face developmental challenges, including symptoms of the “Dutch disease.” Overall, such analyses offer insights into the potential benefits, challenges, and complexities associated with CBEZs in Central Asia.

Key recommendations for establishing CBEZs between Uzbekistan and its neighbors include the adoption of comprehensive economic, institutional, and political reforms across the region. The proposed shift from regional cooperation to regional integration is considered essential to creating a conducive environment for cross-border zone policies. Based on the analysis, the following conclusions are made:

- Focus should shift from duty-free trade centers to logistics and production-oriented CBEZs.
- Strategic locations for establishing CBEZs include: Gisht Kuprik–Jibek Joli (with Kazakhstan), Dashoguz–Shovot (with Turkmenistan), Oybek–Fotekhobod (with Kyrgyzstan), and Dostlik–Dostlik (with Tajikistan).
- It is recommended to develop an industrial zone on the border with Kazakhstan, a logistics zone with Turkmenistan, an industrial zone with Kyrgyzstan, and both industrial and logistics zones with Tajikistan.
- Prioritizing sectors with high added value—such as mechanical engineering, electronics, vehicles, chemicals, and metals—can enhance national capacities. Strategic planning, incorporating both local and international analyses, is essential to transform borders into growth mechanisms.

Implementing such projects requires strategic approaches that encompass stakeholder management, human resource management, risk and cost management, and social capital management. Moreover, to ensure the success and sustainable impact of the CBEZ initiative, it is vital to establish a well-designed monitoring and evaluation system, along with a robust oversight strategy.

In conclusion, the successful establishment of Cross-Border Economic Zones between Uzbekistan and its neighboring countries, as outlined, demands a multi-dimensional approach. Implementing a broad spectrum of economic, institutional, and political reforms is crucial to creating a favorable regional environment for cross-border initiatives. Transitioning from economic cooperation to regional integration, along with the strategic selection of CBEZ locations, aligns with the goals of promoting economic growth and collaboration, contributing to the collective development of Central Asian countries.

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Xalqaro munosabatlar: siyosat, iqtisodiyot, huquq” jurnali O‘zbekiston Respublikasi Tashqi ishlar vazirligi tasarrufidagi Jahon iqtisodiyoti va diplomatiya universitetining ilmiy- nazariy nashrlarining fanlararo turkumiga mansub.

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Журнал принимает к публикации теоретические, методологические, тематические обзоры аналитических статей, научных исследований; научные рецензии на публикации и т.д. Плата за публикацию статьи в журнале не взимается.