





## ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF TOURISM ON THE DEVELOPMENT OF ECONOMIC AND GEOPOLITICAL RELATIONS OF THE COUNTRIES OF CENTRAL ASIA

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**Abstract:** The paper focuses on how tourism contributes to the formation of economic development and geopolitical relationships between the states of Central Asia, specifically, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan. Despite the historical, cultural and geographical connections that are strong in this region, particularly through the story of the Silk Road, tourism remains an unbalanced part of the regional agenda of development and integration. The research aims at observing how various actors view the economic and geopolitical potential tourism holds and to what level tourism helps in regional cooperation and state positioning. The study relies on the qualitative and comparative research methodology. Data was collected by use of 120 semi-structured interviews with the representatives of the common sector, academia and the tourism industry in major urban and cross-border destination. The analysis of data was conducted in NVivo 14 software with the application of the thematic and comparative and matrix codes. According to the findings, tourism, in the majority of cases, is viewed as a tool of local economic growth and enhancing the resiliency of local communities, and its geopolitical and integrative capabilities are under-explored. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are unique because they have a more advanced institutional support level, infrastructural preparedness, and strategic orientation as it allows tourism to be a source of soft power and regional presence. Conversely, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are administratively weak and their institutions have a low capacity of collaboration across borders. The paper will add to the literature on tourism and regional development by highlighting the importance of regional structures and mechanisms of joint governance to ensure the validation of tourism as an aspect of long-term stability and collaboration in Central Asia, particularly in contexts where shared narratives such as the Silk Road remain insufficiently translated into concrete policy.

**Keywords:** Tourism and geopolitics, regional cooperation, Central Asia, Silk Road, institutional barriers

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### INTRODUCTION

Tourism is taking on a strategic significance in the modern geopolitical and economic environment not only as an economic development tool but also as a source of regional balance and inter-state, along with inter-state, collaboration. In this respect, the Central Asian nations, namely Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan are working to make tourism an inseparable part of their development strategies (Gspurning, 2022; Akbar et al., 2024). This area lies on the historic Silk Road and is found at the intersection of Europe and Asia, which are blessed with very fertile natural and

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cultural resources (Palmer, 2007; Abubakirova et al., 2016). Nevertheless, it also experiences difficult factors that threaten its competitiveness in the world tourism market (Akçali, 2014; Xu, 2019). Besides being symbolic, the Silk Road is also a real platform on which heritage tourism in the region is developed. The incorporation of cultural heritage in the study of tourism is critical as most of the tourist sites in Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan use the Silk Road brand to promote their destinations. Thus, the current research contextualizes tourism as the part of the economic and geopolitical system but also as an element of the overall cultural heritage and identity taking heritage tourism as the focal element of regional cooperation policies (Liu, 2011; He et al., 2025).

Nevertheless, even these geographic benefits and symbolicity, infrastructural underdevelopment, institutional insecurity, and unattractiveness to foreign investors still do not allow the tourism potential of the region to be fully implemented (Kantarci, 2007; Alieva, 2018; Shen & Efimova, 2025). During the last several years, national policies have become more vigorous in their attempts to liberalize visa regimes, brand cultural heritage, and improve environmental protection. Nevertheless, regionalisation is more of a statement than an operational process (Koh & Kwok, 2017; Baiburiev et al., 2018; Aliyeva et al., 2019). Although there are formal structures and collaborative efforts, the lack of cooperation between the Central Asian states regarding the tourism industry is usually compounded by some hidden political conflicts, investment wars, and institutional fragmentation. Current literature on the topic of tourism in Central Asia is largely devoted to economic analysis or the assessment of individual projects, and the overall social and political dimension of this phenomenon has not been studied extensively (Chavus et al., 2012; Shatakishvili, 2021; Benacer et al., 2022; Gajić et al., 2025). Empirical investigations that combine the views of the interested parties and consider tourism as the means of enhancing regional collaboration, breaking the historical barriers and developing effective geopolitical relationships are lacking. The given research gap offers the possibilities to examine tourism as the multidimensional phenomenon, which obtains the economic, cultural, and political aspects of development. This work intends to explore the perception of tourism in the framework of economic and geopolitical relationships of the countries of the Central Asian region, basing on the findings of the previous research and overcoming their limitations. The study aims at examining the perspectives and experiences of major stakeholders in the tourism industry in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan with the view of establishing the hurdles and opportunities of cross-border co-operation.

Based on the local factor, the research aims to chart the possible areas of contact that would help to redefine the role of tourism as a stabilization and integration factor in a region between the traditional forms of organization and the new developmental aspirations. In this regard, the research helps to better comprehend the multifaceted interrelations between the tourism industry and geopolitical processes in the Central-Asia region and provides a new way to develop sustainable and inclusive development policies on the basis of the analysis of the stakeholder perceptions and institutional processes. Tourism is therefore never considered as one of the industrial sectors, but rather as a possible strategic tool towards development of cohesion and stability in the region in the long term.

The main aim of this paper is that tourism in Central Asia has a significant potential to serve as both an economic impetus and a regional integration tool at the same time, but this potential is, unfortunately, not equally fulfilled in all countries (Jenish, 2017; Khasanovna, 2020). The questions were chosen based on gaps in the literature and previous research that emphasized the economic, but not the political and institutional dimensions of tourism. They are interconnected because together they include economic effects, cross-border connections and geopolitical importance. The choice of research questions relies on theoretical approaches to regional cooperation (Palmer, 2007; Makenova et al., 2020; Thangaraj & Karthikeyan, 2021; Kenzhebekov et al., 2021) which emphasize the role of institutional capacities and cross-border interactions. With these questions, we try to connect the economic, cultural and political aspects of tourism as an integrated phenomenon.

**RQ1:** How does tourism contribute to economic development and local communities in Central Asia?

**RQ2:** What institutional and administrative obstacles shape cross-border cooperation in Central Asia and what opportunities exist to overcome them?

**RQ3:** How do actors of different sectors (government, private sector, academic community) see the role of tourism in strengthening regional cooperation and geopolitical relations?

**RQ4:** How do cultural-historical narratives, like the "Silk Road" brand, influence the shaping of regional cooperation and are they translated into concrete institutional and infrastructural mechanisms?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Over the past decades, tourism has been increasingly recognized as a significant driver of economic growth, especially in developing countries and post-conflict regions (Khidirova, 2018; Dziekański et al., 2024). A significant number of authors have analyzed the capacity of tourism to stimulate GDP growth, job creation, and regional development (Tiberghien, 2019; Rakhimov & Tursunova, 2023; Chernyshev et al., 2023; Ilkhamovna et al., 2023). While these works provide empirical evidence on the economic effects of tourism, most of them remain limited to quantitative macroeconomic indicators, with less attention paid to the institutional and political conditions in which these effects are realized.

Within Central Asia, a separate body of literature focuses on cultural and heritage tourism, with an emphasis on the Silk Road narrative. Tiberghien (2019) analyzes eco-cultural tourism in Kazakhstan, while Mukhambetov & Ottenbacher (2021) emphasize the importance of a cluster approach in the valorization of cultural heritage. However, more recent studies indicate that such approaches often remain at the symbolic level. Kostopoulou et al. (2021) and Yu et al. (2023) show that the branding of the Silk Road does not produce long-term development effects unless it is supported by coherent institutional structures and clear policies. These findings are particularly relevant to this research

because they indicate a gap between declarative strategies and practical implementation, but at the same time they do not analyze the role of key actors who reproduce this gap (Jaelani et al., 2025). At the same time, some authors question the effectiveness of tourism as an independent development mechanism. Dogru & Bulut (2018) emphasize that tourism can contribute to economic recovery, but only under conditions of macroeconomic stability and an appropriate structure of the national economy. Similarly, Cárdenas-García & Pulido-Fernandez (2019) point to the high sensitivity of tourism to external shocks, such as pandemics and geopolitical crises. Ibanescu et al. (2020) further introduce the concept of resilience, showing that the economic contribution of tourism is conditioned by accessibility and infrastructure.

The primary weakness of these works is that this analysis examines tourism primarily in terms of economic consequences and does not attempt to connect tourism systematically to institutional and geopolitical processes. More recent studies further the study by associating tourism with innovation and sustainability. Pan et al. (2021) suggest using a three-fold analytical model (economic performance, innovation, and carbon footprint), especially to Central Asian nations. Nevertheless, it has been shown that the area does not have enough resources to measure the environmental impact of tourism systematically (Park et al., 2017; Putra et al., 2022; Tleuberdinova et al., 2024; Moldagaliyeva et al., 2024). Manzoor et al. (2019) also note that tourism is a significant factor in the reduction of unemployment, although they note that, unless economic sustainability is incorporated in the national development strategies, the positive impacts only have a short-lived effect. Such pieces of literature suggest that tourism cannot be a universal remedy, but an instrument whose impacts will rely on the institutional construct.

The contribution of tourism to the development of the local economies and local communities also occupies a part of the literature. Even being specialized in gastronomic tourism, Sorcaru (2019) demonstrates that tourism is also one of the possible development models in the areas that lack infrastructure. Nonetheless, such a complicated role cannot be analyzed only by using statistical indicators and must reflect on political commitment and involvement of local actors. Macro level, Alcalá-Ordóñez & Segarra (2025) demonstrate that the institutional stability preconditions the effect of development of tourism and its embeddedness within the larger public policies. Adu-Ampong (2018) and Panggabean & Sipahutar (2019) also make similar conclusions and state that in the absence of sectoral coordination and human capital investment, tourism generates sporadic and short-term benefits. These are also useful and yet their foundation is in most cases, on a case by case basis. Besides economic impacts, tourism is also becoming a tool of political and territorial integration particularly at the borders. In fact, empirical evidence demonstrates that its integrative potential is not consistent. As demonstrated by Su & Li (2021), cross-border tourism can be also operated as the tool of control and reproduction of inequality, and by Martínez-Alier (2022), even formalized cooperation programs are incapable of doing it without being associated with the larger political agenda. Likewise, Brunet-Jailly (2022) and Revilla et al. (2019) caution that institutional structures do not ensure functional integration. This picture is also complicated by the social aspects of tourism. Wani et al. (2023) demonstrate that local interactions in the border regions may influence the unity of the region more significantly than treaties, however, indicate that it may also be neutralized by political conflicts. According to Mayer et al. (2019), tourism may overcome biases due to the tourism activity, yet, without a strategic management approach, tourism may as well contribute to the existing divisions. The theoretical frameworks by Castañer et al. (2018) and Sohn (2014) also indicate the significance of institutional asymmetries in determining the results of the cross-border cooperation.

Although strategic documents increasingly position tourism as a mechanism for regional cooperation, research shows that its potential is rarely fully realized. Earlier works (Werner, 2003; Kantarci, 2007; Palmer, 2007; Sokhanvar et al., 2018; Muzaffar, 2021) have already pointed to institutional weakness and selective narratives in the region, while more recent studies continue to identify a gap between potential and implementation (Ibragimov et al., 2022; Xu, 2019; Teczke et al., 2022). Although Yu et al. (2023) and Kostopoulou et al. (2021) point to the limitations of Silk Road branding, how different actors perceive these processes remain underexplored. In the last five years, several works have appeared that look at tourism in Central Asia through the prism of cultural heritage, institutional capacities and regional positioning, but most often remain focused on individual countries, selected policies or specific forms of tourism, without integrating economic and geopolitical dimensions into a single analytical framework (Mukhambetov & Ottenbacher, 2021; Qu & Xu, 2023). Although these works contribute significantly to the understanding of the development of tourism in the region, their common limitation is insufficient consideration of the perspectives of key actors and mechanisms through which tourism can grow from a symbolic narrative (eg the Silk Road) into an operational instrument of regional cooperation. It is on these insights and the identified gap between potential and implementation that this research relies on, which aims to, through a comparative qualitative analysis of actors' perceptions in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, explain how tourism is valued as a factor in economic and geopolitical relations and which institutional barriers and conditions shape its realistic integration ranges (Azam et al., 2021; Salahodjaev et al., 2022).

The aforementioned research provides an important analytical framework for understanding the role of tourism in the economic development, institutional formation, and regional positioning of Central Asia, but at the same time points to common limitations: the dominance of national studies, a focus on individual policies or forms of tourism, and insufficient linking of economic and geopolitical dimensions (Panibratov et al., 2025). It is precisely on works that analyze cultural heritage and institutional capacities (Mukhambetov & Ottenbacher, 2021; Kostopoulou et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2023; Ramadhani et al., 2025), as well as on more recent studies that point to the importance of sustainability, governance, and human capital (Azam et al., 2021; Salahodjaev et al., 2022; Gafarova, 2025; Tokbergenova et al., 2025), that this research builds its analytical starting point, but expands it by introducing a comparative perspective and direct insights from key stakeholders. Starting from the identified limitations of existing research, primarily its sectoral fragmentation, national

focus, and insufficient inclusion of the perspectives of key stakeholders, the aim of this study is to examine, through comparative and qualitative analysis, how tourism in Central Asia is perceived as a factor in economic and geopolitical relations, and to identify the institutional conditions and barriers that affect the possibility of its transformation from a symbolic development narrative into a functional mechanism of regional cooperation.

## METHODOLOGY

To assess the impact of tourism on the development of economic and geopolitical relations among Central Asian countries, a qualitative and comparative research approach was employed. The study focused on four key countries in the region: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan.

### Research area and sample

The research was performed in big cities, tourist and administrative centers along with secondary and cross-border destinations contributing greatly to tourism industry development and regional collaboration. In each country, there were three cities or regions, two major urban and administrative centres and one cross-border or culturally important place that were situated along the historical Silk Road route. Figure 1 shows the geographical extent of the study, with highlighted regions showing the countries to be covered in the study and marked points referring to the particular cities and regions to be visited in collecting data driven by their interest in tourism, administrative significance, and their connectedness with other countries. The destinations were chosen as Kazakhstan (Almaty, Astana, Turkistan); Kyrgyzstan (Bishkek, Osh, Karakol); Uzbekistan (Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara); and Tajikistan (Dushanbe, Khujand, Penjikent) (Figure 1). The study involved three main target groups, that is, the decision-makers (employees working in ministries, tourism organizations, and at the local and regional administration), academic specialists (university professors and researchers working in the field of tourism, geopolitics, and the development of regions), as well as representatives of the private tourism sector (tour guides, hotel managers, travel agencies and tourism clusters).

In Figure 1 a graduated scale of color is used to show the relative proportion of respondents according to country within the total sample. Darker colors represent countries with a higher percentage of respondents and lighter stands for lower participation rates. The percentage values given in the legend indicate the proportion of respondents from each country relative to the overall number of respondents (N = 120).

This is a visual approach designed to support the transparency of sample distribution rather than suggest spatial intensity or population density. Marked points indicate the specific cities and regions that were included in the fieldwork.



Figure 1. Research area

The total number of semi-structured interviews was 120, and the CAPI technique (Computer-Assisted Personal Interviewing) was used in this case where respondents answered in electronic forms on tablet devices. This study was conducted in the month of February to March 2025. All answers were anonymous and the identities of the participants were completely kept confidential. The information obtained underwent a strictly scientific analysis, which will not be published in a form that may result in the identification of the participants. As part of ethical considerations in social sciences and humanities research, the participants were notified of the research aims, their voluntary involvement and their right to withdraw to avoid consequences at any point in advance. Each interview was carried out with verbal

consent. The prevention of the moral hazard at the stage of data collection was also given special attention, i.e., the researchers did not strive to influence the answers of the participants and manipulate information. The interviewers were instructed to use a non-leading and impartial method of interviewing people, and the analysis of interview data was performed without references to who participated in the interviews. Even though qualitative research is not intended to be statistically representative in the conventional meaning, the sample of the study was formulated to cover all the important stakeholders in the different sectors and areas to guarantee a thematic saturation and coverage of the territories. The sample of 120 respondents representing four countries and various regions is said to be valid to apply to the qualitative analysis of thematic coding and comparative interpretation (Figure 2).

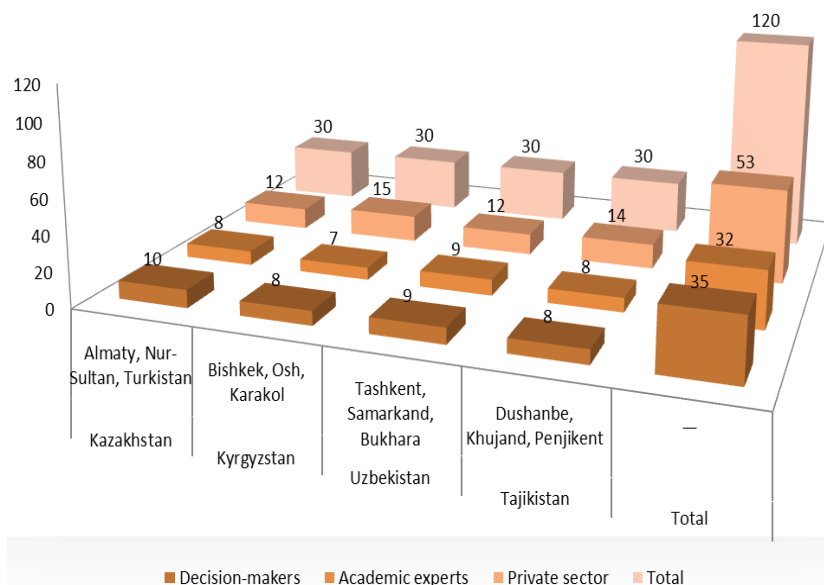


Figure 2. Distribution of respondents

The interviews were conducted directly by the authors with the assistance of graduate students in tourism and social sciences. All interviewers received a one-day training on ethical guidelines, neutral interviewing techniques, and technical use of the CAPI tablets. Out of the 120 respondents, 68 were male and 52 female, with an average age of 41.5 years. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in the selected cities, except for 14 interviews which were organized online due to travel restrictions or scheduling conflicts. The interviews were carried out in Russian, Kazakh, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, or Tajik, depending on the country and the participant's preference. The sample size was set at 30 respondents per country to ensure comparability across contexts rather than proportionality to national population size. This is the reason Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have identical respondents although there is a substantial demographic disparity between these two countries. Among the participants in the decision-maker group, there were 23 representatives of national ministries and 12 of local and regional administrations. The higher ratio of representatives of the private sector is explained by their increased availability and active involvement in the tourism business, whereas their involvement of ministries and academic specialists was relatively lower and still adequate to add diversity to the point of view. Verbal consent was used instead of written consent although the CAPI technique could use digital records. Most of them were unwilling to commit to official documents and verbal consent was, hence, deemed more convenient and culturally suitable without neglecting institutional ethical requirements. This strategy has guaranteed total respect to voluntary participation, anonymity, and freedom to pull out any time.

### Instruments and measurements

A semi-structured interview guide was designed and used as a part of this research, which relied on the major regional and international documents and studies on the subject of tourism development, cross-border cooperation, and geopolitical processes in Central Asia. Its main idea was to allow collecting the material on the perception of the representatives of the public sector, academia, and home stakeholders on tourism contribution to economic development and interstate relations. The guide was organized as per the research objectives and had five thematic areas that incorporated questions specific to the profile of the different interviewees. The questions were based on the existing topical sources (GIZ and UNDP, 2017; USAID, 2018; UNWTO and ADB, 2019; OECD, 2020), which offered guidelines, measures, and indicators of qualitative analysis that would be relevant in the Central Asian context. According to these sources, the questions were also contextualized by taking into consideration the specific features of the country, city, and target group. The interviews addressed a wide range of topics, including the economic significance of tourism, institutional barriers, levels of regional coordination, and the challenges and opportunities for cross-border cooperation. Although the questions followed a common conceptual framework, their formulation was flexibly adapted to field conditions to allow for deeper exploration of specific phenomena and to achieve thematic saturation. Table 1 provides an overview of the main questions and the sources used as a foundation for their construction.

Table 1. Structure of questions in the interview guide

Thematic Area	Example Question	Source of Adaptation
Economic Contribution of Tourism	How would you assess the role of tourism in the local economic development of your region?	UNWTO & ADB (2019), USAID (2018)
	Does tourism contribute to job creation and the strengthening of the SME sector?	UNWTO & ADB (2019)
Regional Cooperation	Does tourism contribute to political and regional connectivity among Central Asian countries?	OECD (2020), UNWTO (2019)
	Is there institutional cooperation with neighboring countries in the field of tourism?	OECD (2020)
Barriers & Challenges	What are the main obstacles to tourism development in your country or region?	USAID (2018), OECD (2020)
	How would you evaluate the role of local and central authorities in supporting the tourism sector?	USAID (2018)
Cross-Border Cooperation	Does your region participate in joint cross-border tourism projects (e.g., cultural routes)?	GIZ & UNDP (2017), UNWTO (2019)
	How does the "Silk Road" initiative influence cooperation with neighboring countries?	GIZ & UNDP (2017)
Strategic Recommendations	What specific policies do you believe would improve regional cooperation through tourism?	UNWTO (2019), OECD (2020)
	What is your vision for the future of tourism in Central Asia?	UNWTO (2019)

In accordance with the principles of qualitative research, the focus was not on statistical representativeness, but rather on thematic saturation, i.e., reaching a point where new interviews no longer provide new information. The sample of 120 participants from four countries allowed for coverage of all key dimensions of the phenomenon, including territorial and sectoral diversity. The collected data were coded thematically, and the responses were analyzed through an interpretative approach, with particular attention given to differences and similarities between countries and respondent groups.

### Data analysis

The interviews gathered in the framework of this research were transcribed completely and ready to be analyzed in accordance with the qualitative research methodology principles. The qualitative data analysis software NVivo 14 (QSR International) was utilized to make the data systematized and interpretable so as to enable efficient coding, visualization, and thematic analysis of the responses by initially providing the transcripts in their original languages (either Kazakh, Russian, Uzbek, Kyrgyz, or Tajik) (O'Neill et al., 2018; Allsop et al., 2022). All the transcripts were then translated to English by certified translators and the members of the research team. A verification review (proofreading) of the translated transcripts was done to achieve consistency in the interpretation. The analysis was conducted in a number of steps. The initial step was open coding where all the responses were divided into meaning units. The second step involved the use of axial coding which outlined connections among themes and grouping of broader themes including economic contribution, cross-border cooperation, policy framework, and barriers to tourism development. During the last phase, selective coding was applied in bringing together the results and developing interpretative thematic clusters. The intercoder reliability was used to ensure coding validity as a subsample of the transcripts (20 %) were coded by two independent researchers to achieve a high agreement (Cohen's Kappa = 0.82) at the point where the reliability of data classification is high (Niedbalski & Slazak, 2023). NVivo software tools allowed producing thematic maps, conceptual glossaries, visualization, and comparison of respondent groups and countries. Comparative analysis revealed trends of common dominance that existed among all stakeholders, and particular country and sector differences. Data storage was done in accordance with the ethical research. The interviews were coded and anonymized without inclusion of any personal identifying information. Access to data was confined to two of the research team members who were authorized to access data.

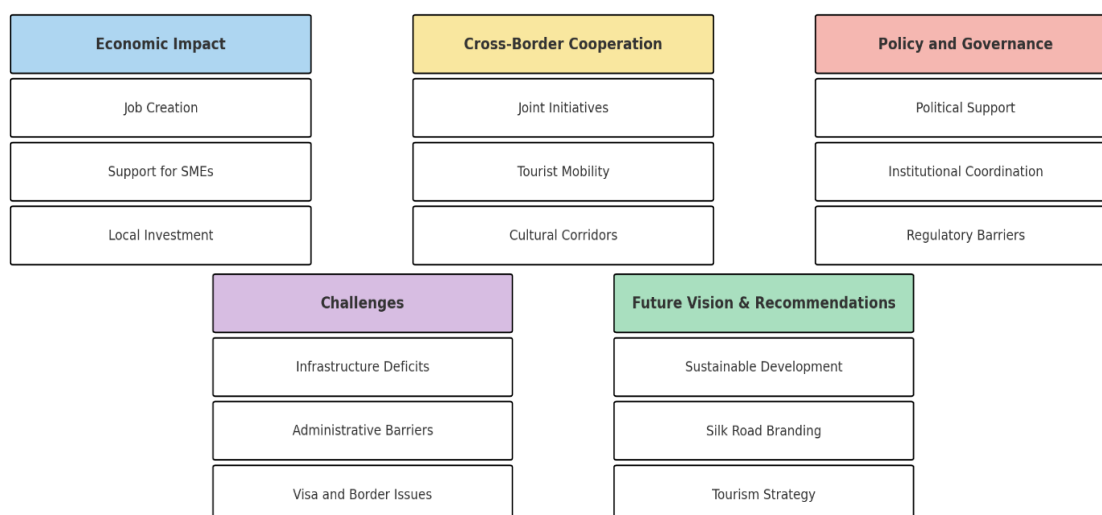


Figure 3. Thematic map of interview coding

Besides normal coding and analysis processes, advanced features of NVivo 14 were applied to add value to interpretation and validation of the results. The frequency of the words most frequently used in transcripts was determined with the help of word frequency and coding query tools, which allowed distinguishing the major thematic patterns in different respondent groups. The comparative analysis of the frequency of the themes in various categories of stakeholders (government sector, academia, private sector) and countries under study was performed through the query of the matrix coding. In the last phase of selective coding, a thematic map has been drawn in which the already coded units of meaning have been incorporated into larger interpretative categories. The visual representation was created that includes 6 primary thematic areas: Economic Impact, Cross-Border Cooperation, Policy and Governance, Institutional and Administrative Challenges, Future Vision, and Recommendations. Beneath each of these categories, there are sub-themes that are each often mentioned in various transcripts and respondent groups (Figure 3). In addition to interview analysis, a participatory approach was partially employed, allowing researchers to directly observe institutional practices and interactions among stakeholders in real-world contexts. This aspect of the methodology will be elaborated in greater detail within the discussion section of this paper.

## RESULTS

### Comparative analysis of institutional and infrastructural readiness for tourism

The results presented in Table 2 clearly show the hierarchy among Central Asian countries and indicate that differences in TTDI are not just quantitative indicators, but reflect deeper institutional and political patterns. Kazakhstan, with 52nd place and stable growth, stands out as a country that systematically built institutional stability and invested in transport and tourism infrastructure. Respondents recognized and described this as a "key advantage compared to neighbors", which confirms that strategic investments in capacities have become an instrument of both economic growth and regional positioning of the country. Uzbekistan recorded a dynamic progress of 16 places, which makes it the most obvious example of transformation through visa liberalization and opening of borders. However, several interlocutors warned that "this growth is uncertain because it depends on political will and short-term initiatives", suggesting that success may be temporary unless it is translated into stable institutional reforms. In contrast, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan remain at the bottom of the global list, although they possess valuable natural and cultural resources. Their respondents emphasize that they are held back by "closed borders, bureaucracy and weak infrastructure", which confirms that the resource potential is not enough if it is not accompanied by institutional support and policy coordination. Thus, the TTDI rankings are not just numbers, but reflect deep differences in the degree of political cohesion and capacity for cross-border cooperation, thus directly illuminating the link between tourism, economic development and geopolitical relations in the region.

The results shown in Table 3 show that the institutional framework and digital infrastructure are key factors that make a difference in the development of tourism in Central Asia. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan lead the way thanks to a relatively stable business environment, security and better digital readiness. These results coincide with the views of respondents who emphasize that "the business climate is one of the most important prerequisites for attracting tourists and investors." However, despite high marks in security and health in all countries of the region, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan record poor results in human resources and digital readiness, which respondents explain as "the biggest obstacles to modernizing tourism and connecting to global markets." It was especially emphasized that "border procedures and administration demoralize both tourists and investors", which fully fits with the low values in the business environment indicator. Therefore, the results of Table 4 indicate not only the economic dimensions, but also the institutional and political conditions that shape tourism as a strategic resource in regional cooperation and the positioning of Central Asia.

Table 2. Travel & Tourism Development Index 2024 (overall rankings)

Rank	Economy	Score <sup>2</sup>	Change since 2019 <sup>3</sup>		Diff. from TTDI Avg. (%)
			Rank	Score	
52	Kazakhstan	4.07	6	3.7%	2.6%
78	Uzbekistan	3.68	16	7.8%	-7.3%
99	Tajikistan	3.42	-3	0.7%	-13.7%
102	Kyrgyz Republic	3.38	1	2.8%	-14.7%

Table 3. Travel & Tourism Enabling Environment Index (TTDI): Central Asian Countries

Economy	TTDI rank	Enabling Environment				
		Business Environment	Safety and Security	Health and Hygiene	Human Resources and Labour Market	ICT Readiness
Kazakhstan	52	3.93	5.69	5.98	4.46	5.42
Uzbekistan	78	4.06	6.17	5.00	4.35	5.02
Tajikistan	99	3.60	6.08	4.71	3.69	3.39
Kyrgyz Republic	102	3.45	5.65	5.01	4.12	4.39

The results shown in Table 4 emphasize that politics and infrastructure are key determinants of tourism development in Central Asia. Kazakhstan stands out for the highest level of tourism prioritization, which is confirmed by the government representative's statement that "air connectivity is key to regional integration." Its relatively strong position in air transport and competitive prices give it an edge in attracting international tourists. Uzbekistan shows a higher degree of openness towards markets, but extremely low values in tourist services (1.45) confirm the remarks of respondents that "the lack of

quality service spoils the overall experience of visitors". This paradox highlights the difference between political will and operational implementation. Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, although they have favorable prices, remain stuck due to extremely weak results in tourist services and infrastructure, which respondents from the private sector interpret with the words: "visitors leave quickly because there is not enough capacity." Therefore, the quantitative findings confirm the qualitative insights, resources and favorable price alone are not enough without systematic investments in tourism infrastructure and services. This difference is particularly pronounced in the regional context, because without reliable infrastructure and coordinated policies, countries cannot develop cross-border flows of tourists or strengthen their geopolitical connection.

Table 4. Comparative Analysis of TTDI Policy and Infrastructure Components

Economy	TTDI rank	T&T Policy and Enabling Conditions			Infrastructure and Services		
		Prioritization of T&T	Openness to T&T	Price Competitiveness	Air Transport Infrastructure	Ground and Port Infrastructure	Tourist Services and Infrastructure
Kazakhstan	52	4.31	3.15	6.14	3.19	2.82	3.14
Uzbekistan	78	3.30	3.38	5.49	3.05	3.44	1.45
Tajikistan	99	3.21	2.65	5.90	2.38	2.94	1.63
Kyrgyz Republic	102	3.51	3.13	5.87	2.53	2.22	1.26

Table 5. TTDI Rankings and Indicators for Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan

Economy	TTDI rank	T&T Resources			Infrastructure and Services		
		Natural Resources	Cultural Resources	Non-Leisure Resources	Environmental Sustainability	T&T Socioeconomic Impact	T&T Demand Sustainability
Kazakhstan	52	4.31	2.07	2.22	3.95	5.50	3.55
Uzbekistan	78	2.49	1.85	1.43	3.08	4.80	4.13
Tajikistan	99	2.37	1.46	1.14	3.93	4.66	4.46
Kyrgyz Republic	102	2.03	1.71	1.20	3.43	3.84	4.12

The results shown in Table 5 show that the wealth of natural and cultural resources does not automatically guarantee success in the development of tourism, but that the ability of institutions to valorize these resources is decisive. Kazakhstan records the highest level of socio-economic impact of tourism (5.50), which fully fits with the officials' statements that they use tourism "as an instrument of soft power and international promotion". His result indicates that institutional support directly translates into visible economic and political benefits. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan have a rich cultural heritage, but their low results in the categories of cultural resources and infrastructure confirm the respondents' assessment that "resources are undervalued due to weak institutions and lack of strategic coordination." This explains the paradox where countries with exceptional cultural and historical capital remain in the background in the global tourism market. Kyrgyzstan scores the lowest in almost all categories, especially in socio-economic impact and natural resources. These findings confirm the statements of actors from the private sector that "the infrastructure cannot keep up with the number of tourists" and that the country's potential is being lost due to weak capacities and excessive dependence on low-budget tourism. Therefore, the qualitative and quantitative results together indicate that resources by themselves do not mean development if they are not supported by institutional mechanisms and this is precisely what determines the ability of Central Asian countries to use tourism as a factor of economic stability and regional cooperation.

The comparative measures presented in the tables and the qualitative findings from the narratives provide a direct answer to the first research question. Tourism in Central Asia has significant economic potential, but it is realized in an uneven manner, while Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan record tangible results, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan remain limited by structural weaknesses. Kazakhstan stands out because it connects tourism with broader development strategies and uses it as a means of "soft power", which is confirmed by high scores in socio-economic impact and state policy priorities (TTDI Tables 2 and 5). Uzbekistan shows a dynamic jump thanks to visa liberalization and market opening, but institutional instability and a low rating of the quality of tourism services (TTDI Table 4) make growth remain unpredictable and dependent on current political will. In contrast, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan see tourism primarily as a mechanism for economic survival, but without the possibility of developing it into a sustainable industry. Their results in human resources, digital readiness and infrastructure (TTDI Tables 3 and 4) confirm respondents' claims that "borders, bureaucracy and lack of capacity" are holding back development. Although they possess valuable natural and cultural resources, these potentials remain unused without institutional valorization (TTDI Table 5). Narrative analysis further illuminates these differences: in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan the discourse on tourism as a survival sector dominates, in Uzbekistan there is a gap between the symbolism of the Silk Road and practical implementation, while Kazakhstan shows the most mature vision by emphasizing regional mechanisms and coordination. The economic potential of tourism in Central Asia has never been evenly realized. Its success depends primarily on the state's capacity to provide institutional support, infrastructure investments and the integration of tourism into the wider development policies of the region, which is the key answer to RQ1.

### Discursive analysis of perceptions of tourism in Central Asia

The results of the word frequency analysis are presented through a word cloud (Figure 4), where the most dominant terms are visually emphasized by their larger size. The most frequently used terms include tourism, cooperation, border, development, strategy, and region, indicating the thematic focus of respondents' narratives, as well as the semantic centers

around which their statements are structured. Although coding and categorization provided an overview of the dominant topics, the findings section does not yet fully reflect the qualitative methodology described in the methods. Much of the analysis relies on descriptive coding and NVivo categorization, while deeper interpretation and thematic exploration remain limited. To enhance the qualitative dimension, it is important to move beyond frequency counts and categories toward interpretive insights. For example, the data reveal that tourism is not only discussed as an economic driver but also as a symbolic instrument of trust-building among states. Expanding the findings with richer, more interpretive analysis and explicitly linking them back to the research questions would provide more detailed and analytically rigorous answers.



Figure 4. Most frequently used expressions in interviews

The analysis of the narratives of all stakeholder groups in four Central Asian countries clearly showed different views on the economic, institutional and regional aspects of tourism development, which simultaneously reveals obstacles and opportunities for cross-border cooperation (RQ2) and differences in perceptions among actors (RQ3).

In Kyrgyzstan, a representative of the private sector emphasized that "tourism sustained our economy when trade collapsed", thereby confirming that tourism is seen not only as an income generator but also as a mechanism of economic resilience in times of crisis. This statement shows that tourism has an important role in the stabilization of communities, but at the same time it indicates the country's institutional weakness, because strategic development and cross-border cooperation are secondary to urgent economic needs. Conversely, an academic analyst from Uzbekistan pessimistically noted that "The Silk Road has potential, but at the moment it is only a symbol." This attitude clearly indicates the discrepancy between the rich cultural and historical narrative and the lack of concrete mechanisms for cross-border cooperation. This confirms that the obstacles for RQ2 are not in resources, but in the absence of coordination and sustainable institutional solutions. The representative of the government of Kazakhstan emphasized that "we need a regional tourism commission, not only bilateral protocols", which emphasized the institutional maturity of this country and the awareness that fragmented approaches do not produce results. This statement confirms that it is systemic coordination that represents a key opportunity to overcome existing barriers, which is a direct response to RQ2 and confirmation of data from TTDI. In the case of Tajikistan, a government official openly admitted, "We don't have enough staff or resources to pursue new strategies," confirming that even when there is political will, limited capacity is an obstacle to the realization of development plans. This finding further explains why the country scores low in the TTDI "tourist services and infrastructure" categories. By synthesizing these findings (Table 6), it becomes clear that the quotes do not only represent individual views, but indicate systematic patterns across countries and different groups of actors. In Kyrgyzstan, the economic discourse of the private sector dominates, where tourism is seen as a "survival mechanism". In Uzbekistan, the academic community's symbolic discourse about "Silk Roads" prevails, but without real routes and coordination, which explains why the country is experiencing dynamic but unstable development. In Kazakhstan, the strongest articulation of the institutional vision appears through the insistence on regional mechanisms, while in Tajikistan, the institutional discourse is based on a lack of resources and capacity, which further confirms institutional vulnerability.

When viewed together, these patterns clearly show differences in actors' perceptions: the private sector emphasizes the economic dimension and the need for stability, the government focuses on institutional and political mechanisms, while academia warns of a gap between symbolism and implementation. This provides a clear answer to RQ3, as it is seen how different groups shape specific narratives about the role of tourism in regional cooperation and geopolitical relations, while at the same time the views expressed illuminate key obstacles and opportunities for cross-border cooperation.

Table 6. Illustrative quotes by theme

Theme	Country	Stakeholder Group	Illustrative Quote
Economic Impact	Kyrgyzstan	Private Sector	"Tourism kept us afloat when trade collapsed..."
Cross-Border Cooperation	Uzbekistan	Academic Expert	"The Silk Road has potential, but right now it's just a symbol..."
Policy and Governance	Kazakhstan	Government Official	"We need a regional tourism commission—not just bilateral protocols."
Institutional Challenges	Tajikistan	Government Official	"We don't have enough staff or resources to follow new strategies..."

Table 6 results indicate that cultural-historical narratives in general and the Silk Road brand in particular play a very strong symbolic role in Central Asian tourism, but they are not operationalized institutionally. A scholar working in Uzbekistan commented that, The Silk Road has a potential, yet currently it is merely a symbol, which clearly shows that the cultural and historical underpinning does not get the required logistical and institutional backing to become a sustainable tourism product. This understanding is revealing the distance between the symbolic and the real. Conversely, the official of the Kazakh government underlines the fact that we should have a regional tourism commission, not bilateral protocols,

which confirms the sensitization of the necessity to transform the symbolic narrative of the Silk Road to institutionally committed policies and actual coordination mechanisms. This demonstrates that a cultural brand could be the instrument of regional collaboration, though it may happen only under the precondition of formal frameworks.

In Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, the private sector remembers practical challenges: we have to survive without trade collapsed in our country (Kyrgyzstan) and we simply do not have the staff or resources to develop new strategies (Tajikistan). These declarations suggest that the absence of infrastructural and administrative abilities cannot be redressed by means of cultural and historical narratives only. Their point is that cultural heritage is not utilized enough without institutional support and regional branding. Along these views, it is evident that the Silk Road and associated cultural discourses are indeed a potent tool to draw in tourists and to create a shared identity among Central Asians but that its role is yet to be realized until fragmentation, bureaucracy and coordination issues are addressed. This directly responds to RQ4: cultural and historical stories can hold a tremendous symbolic promise, but it is only through combined institutional action and investment in infrastructures that they can become a real force behind regional collaboration and tourism. A cluster analysis of the thematic codes was carried out to see the interrelationships between them (Figure 5) and show the similarity and logical adjacency of the thematic areas identified. The resulting dendrogram clearly indicates two major clusters the first one consists of institutional challenges and infrastructure barriers, a theme that often appears co-locally and tends to focus on systemic constraints of tourism development. The second cluster is economic impact and cross-border cooperation, which implies a mutually reinforcing association between the two dimensions of development in stakeholder perceptions. The theme policy support is placed in the central spot with moderate connectivity to both clusters which means that the theme policy support plays a central role in the discourse and different meanings ascribed to the support based on the institutional setting.

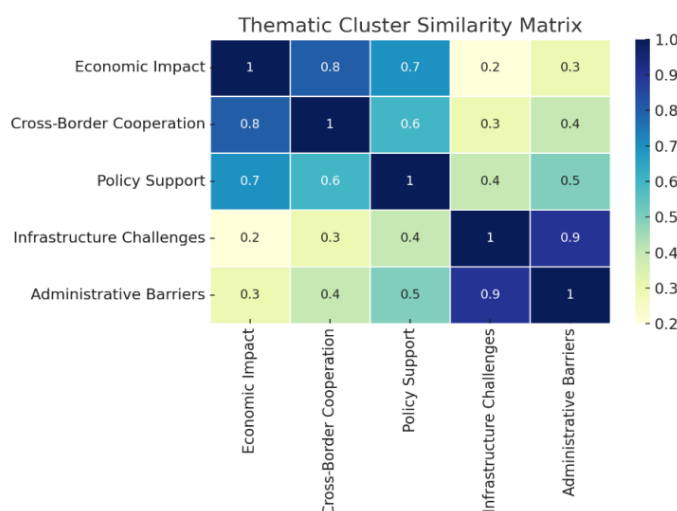


Figure 5. Cluster analysis by topic

Table 7 presents data on the frequency of thematic codes derived from the NVivo analysis, alongside the corresponding stakeholder perceptions of each theme's importance, quantified on a scale from 0 to 4 for comparative purposes. In this scale, a value of 4 indicates a strong or high perception, 3 signifies an active or pronounced perception, 2 reflects a moderate or partial perception, 1 represents weak or minimal perception, and 0 indicates a nearly nonexistent perception.

When comparing the frequency of the number of codes and perceived significance, it is possible to state that in Uzbekistan the theme economic impact was the most frequently used (28 codes) and the highest perceived score (3 high) which indicates the strong compliance of discourse and value orientations of respondents. The same trend took place in Kazakhstan where theme policy support acquired the most codes (25) with a perception score of 4 (strong), indicating a solid institutional framework and strategic orientation towards tourism. On the other hand, Tajikistan has significantly lower code frequencies and perception scores (1 -weak) in all thematic areas but especially concerning policy support and economic impact, indicating the marginalisation of the sector in terms of public and institutional discourse. In Kyrgyzstan, institutional themes have rather equal frequency of codes, but the perceptions are low to moderate (score 12), which can be an indicator of the latent existence of these topics without the real prioritizing or influence on the governmental policy. The theme of cross-border cooperation, which has more regional implications, is most dominant in Uzbekistan (24 codes, perception 3 - active), but it is practically absent in Tajikistan (10 codes, perception 0), which indicates significant variations in the degree of integration in regional initiatives (Table 7).

Table 7. Frequency of thematic codes by country (Matrix coding query) and perception

Topic	Kazakhstan (codes)	Uzbekistan (codes)	Kyrgystan (codes)	Tajikistan (codes)	Kazakhstan (perception)	Uzbekistan (perception)	Kyrgystan (perception)	Tajikistan (perception)
Economic Impact	22	28	15	12	3	3	2	1
Cross-border Cooperation	18	24	12	10	2	3	1	0
Policy Support	25	20	10	8	4	3	2	1

Table 7 quantifies the qualitative findings in Table 6 and shows that the patterns in the interview are not random, but are patterns that dominate among actors. The greater proportion of the codes associated with institutional issues in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan suggest that administrative restrictions and the deficiency of resources are considered to be universal obstacles. Meanwhile, the highest representation of codes concerning the regional coordination is observed in Kazakhstan, which proves that the institutional vision is not just a statement, but a common understanding amongst the sample. By doing so, the quantitative data in Table 8 will validate and strengthen the qualitative data in Table 7.

The knowledge of the thematic distribution of various stakeholder groups shows subtle difference in focus and priorities in regard to tourism development. The economic significance of tourism is most specifically pointed out by the representatives of the private sector who are directly affected by the income earned by the tourism industry and consider tourism as an essential element of business survival and development. Contrary to this, institutional perspective on tourism is used by decision-makers and focuses on multiple systemic obstacles, which implies that the recognition of constraints in government capacity and regulatory frameworks is made (Table 8).

Table 8. Dominant themes by groups of respondents (\* The number of marks (✓) is proportional to the frequency of thematic codes in the actor's statements, ✓✓✓✓ high representation, and ✓✓ low to moderate)

Topic area	Decision makers	Academic community	Private sector
Economic Impact	✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓✓
Cross-border Cooperation	✓✓✓	✓✓✓✓	✓✓
Policy Support	✓✓✓✓	✓✓	✓✓✓

Table 8 clearly shows how perceptions differ among stakeholder groups. The private sector, most often, emphasizes the economic aspects and the need for market stability, while the academic community dominates the discourse on the symbolism and limitations of the "Silk Road". Government representatives, on the other hand, more often emphasize institutional coordination and the need for new cooperation mechanisms. These results confirm that different actors not only have specific positions, but that their narratives differ systematically, which contributes to a deeper understanding of the dynamics of regional tourism. Thus, Table 9 additionally explains the findings from Table 7, but also contributes to a clearer answer to RQ3, because it shows how each group shapes its interpretation of the role of tourism in regional processes.

The centrality of some of the themes in the stories of respondents is further supported by the quantitative analysis of codes within the NVivo environment which is displayed in the number of references and the percentage of text coverage. The most references and highest percentage of coverage is given to the theme of economic impact of tourism, as one of the major concerns of all the participants involved in all countries and sectors highlighted the role of tourism as a source of income, creation of employment opportunities and as a means of local investment. This thematic dominance underscores tourism as a key driver of economic development in the region, particularly within the context of post-transition economies.

The cross-border cooperation also becomes one of the most prevalent themes, which suggests the awareness of its potential to connect regions and the need to ensure the development of joint tourism initiatives is done in a coordinated manner. Whereas it is somewhat subtler, the theme of policy support is also a strong feature of the discourse, especially when it comes to the issue of strategic planning and institutional structures. Themes that discuss infrastructural issues and administrative constraints, even though they have a slightly lower value, are of significance, which reflects underlining structural barriers to the enactment of tourism policies. The general distribution of thematic coverage shows that there is a balance between the potentials in development and constraints in the system, which validates the complexity of tourism industry as a multi-dimensional phenomenon in Central Asian context (Table 9).

Table 9. Total frequency and coverage of the text by topic

Topic	Number of references	Coverage (%)
Economic contribution	198	12.4%
Cross-border cooperation	154	9.8%
Political support	143	8.7%
Infrastructure challenges	129	7.5%
Administrative barriers	111	6.3%

Table 9 gives a full image of the thematic distribution and demonstrates that the economic, institutional and cultural dimensions are not isolated phenomena, but the components of one process. The general focus of the codes reflects that in some countries, the economic narratives are predominant, but institutional challenges and cultural-historical narratives are always present in every country of the region. Such conclusions imply that tourism in Central Asia is an economic tool, a political tool and a symbol of culture simultaneously. By doing so, Table 9 does not only in a sense amalgamate the results of the previous results but also opens the ground to a discussion where tourism can be conceptualized as a multidimensional phenomenon with strategic implications on regional cooperation.

## DISCUSSION

As a result of the above discussion of the findings, the role of tourism in building economic and political relations between Central Asian countries is multidimensional and, in many cases, is internally incongruent. The analysis of semi-

structured interviews supplemented by participatory observations suggests that tourism is not so much seen as a stand-alone mechanism for foreign currency inflow, but rather as a possible instrument for stabilizing interregional relations and redefining cooperation across borders. However, in line with previous studies, the results show that there are significant variations across countries in the level of institutional preparedness, political will, and ability to place tourism within other regional development initiatives (Mukhambetov & Ottenbacher, 2021; Kostopoulou et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2023).

**RQ1:** What is the role of tourism in the economic development and local communities of Central Asia?

The results offer a clear answer to RQ1, and demonstrate that tourism is a positive contribution to economic development and the resilience of communities, albeit in a highly uneven way. Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are the most active cases in terms of strategic positioning of tourism based on the implemented policies on visa liberalization, infrastructure development and institutional strengthening of tourism. These results are consistent with previous research that identified Kazakhstan relative competitiveness and attractiveness to foreign investors (Abubakirova, 2016; Xu, 2019), as well as the more recent research that showcased the shift of Kazakhstan from the landlocked to the land-linked economic model in broader regional efforts (Panibratov et al., 2025).

In the case of Uzbekistan, narratives of stakeholders imply that tourism is increasingly presented as not only an economic development tool, but also a means of raising political relevance and regional image-building. This perception is commensurate with the concept of tourism as a soft mechanism of integration as earlier discussed in the literature on regional positioning and symbolic diplomacy (Koh & Kwok, 2017) and is in line with research pointing at the increasingly crucial role of cultural and institutional branding in Central Asia (Azam et al., 2021; Salahodjaev et al., 2022).

On the other hand, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are characterized by infrastructural fragility, administrative barriers, and limited governmental capacity. Although stakeholders consistently recognize the importance of tourism, their stories point to a large gap between strategic will and the practical implementation. As one representative from the Kyrgyz private sector noted, tourism was a survival mechanism in times of economic disruption while a Tajik official expressed the shortage of financial and human resources needed to pursue new development strategies. These qualitative insights reinforce wider structural assessments captured in tourism competitiveness rankings and confirm the findings of earlier studies that identify institutional weakness and limited absorptive capacity in these contexts (Gafarova, 2025). Overall, the results suggest that the contribution of tourism to the economic development and resiliency of communities is highly dependent on the alignment of institutional capacity, political will, and resource availability.

**RQ2:** What are the institutional and administrative challenges to cross-border cooperation in Central Asia and what are the opportunities to overcome them?

The results are also a clear answer to RQ2. While respondents often referred to a common cultural and historical basis that spans the region as a possible source of cooperation, effective institutional mechanisms for cross-border governance of tourism are largely absent. Interview narratives consistently highlight that symbolic initiatives especially linked to the Silk Road have been widely invoked but few in number as being operationalized. As one Uzbek academic observed, "the Silk Road is a potential, but at the moment it's only a symbol". This finding echoes previous criticisms in the review literature stating that heritage-based branding initiatives frequently do not transfer into orchestrated development policies without coherence within institutions (Mukhambetov & Ottenbacher, 2021; Kostopoulou et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2023).

The difference between the symbolic potential and the actual implementation is further worsened by the lack of bilateral agreements in a coordinated manner, a lack of administrative coordination and a unified visa regime. These barriers are in line with wider regional studies suggesting that Central Asian cross-border cooperation is limited by unequal bargaining power, administrative disorganization, and divergent national priorities (Panibratov et al., 2025). At the same time, recent methodological advances in cross-cultural tourism analytics suggest that a better data integration and network-based approaches could support more coordinated planning of the region, if the institutional conditions would facilitate their effective application (Ramadhani et al., 2025). Collectively, these findings strengthen the conclusion that to overcome institutional and administrative barriers, we not only need shared narratives and cultural closeness, but also concrete governance mechanisms and political commitment over time.

Stakeholders from Kazakhstan identified the need for a more systemic solution: "we need a regional tourism commission, not just bilateral protocols." This reflects a broader understanding that declarative initiatives can never replace formalized regional governance structures. Respondents from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan mentioned more practical obstacles such as border restrictions and poor infrastructure and say that tourists are often dissuaded by lengthy administrative procedures. At the same time, opportunities were also seen. A Kazakh private-sector representative said that "Chinese tourists are interested in multi-country trips, but the lack of a common visa is a major barrier," while a ministry official from Uzbekistan emphasized that "heritage tourism could become a real driver of cooperation if we had a regional commission to coordinate Silk Road initiatives." These are statements that demonstrate that although barriers are not insignificant, there is also a common understanding that heritage branding and visa liberalization could open new avenues for cooperation. Thus, the findings confirm that cross-border tourism in Central Asia is still fragmented and declarative, but there are real opportunities of its operationalization, if the institutional alignment can be achieved.

**RQ3:** How do actors with different sectors (government, private sector, academic community) perceive the role of tourism for strengthening regional cooperation and geopolitical relations?

The evidence also gives direct insight into RQ3, with some obvious differences between stakeholder groups. Policymakers are mainly concerned with the normative framework and strategic planning. For example, representatives of Kazakh government highlighted the necessity of integrated mechanisms of the region, which is indicative of institutional maturity. The

academic community, especially in Uzbekistan, voiced their skepticism about the possibility of practical implementation, indicating that the project of the Silk Road is still to a large extent symbolic and not developed in terms of infrastructure and real routes. Private sector actors were more pragmatic and focused on operational constraints such as poor services, inadequate facilities and bureaucratic delays. As one Kyrgyz tour operator noted, "visitors come for the heritage, but without proper infrastructure and investment, we lose them quickly." These differences show why tourism is viewed inconsistently across the region. For governments, it is a strategic instrument; for academics, a symbolic narrative with long-term potential; and for private operators, it is a business activity which is hampered by the barriers of everyday life. This validates the idea that tourism can't be approached as one policy area but rather as a multi-sectoral field with varied and often conflicting interests. Recognizing these differences is the key to developing policies that balance a strategic vision with practical realities.

**RQ4:** what is the role of cultural-historical narratives, such as the "Silk Road" brand, in the formation of regional cooperation and how are they converted into tangible institutional and infrastructural mechanisms?

Finally, the results answer RQ4 as they show that the cultural-historical narratives such as the Silk Road continue to have a potent impact to this day throughout Central Asia as the identity markers and common history. Nevertheless, they hardly become concrete co-operation mechanisms. This paradox was confirmed in the framework of participatory observations in the course of the Regional Conference on Sustainable Tourism in Tashkent (October 2023) and the Central Asia Tourism Development Forum in Almaty (December 2023). The Silk Road is often referred to as the unifying story, but institutional disintegration does not allow it to be made into a cohesive regional brand. This is in accordance with Yu et al. (2023) and Kostopoulou et al. (2021) who believed that Silk Road branding is more of a declaration than an operation. This absence was even acknowledged by the respondents themselves: whilst they considered great potential for international appeal in heritage tourism, unless there is a regional hand in sharing heritage tourism, the Silk Road is nothing more than an attractive but little-used story. Tajik authorities, such as those, stressed that closed borders mean the incapacity to create regional Silk Road routes, and Kazakh political elites threatened the incapacity of the best branding to integrate unless there are mutual institutional formats. Therefore cultural-historical narratives are important symbolic resources, but unless they are embedded into concrete institutional and infrastructural mechanisms, e.g. visa liberalization, cross-border routes and coordinated policies, they cannot serve as engines of sustainable regional cooperation.

## CONCLUSION

The conducted research showed that tourism in Central Asia has a significant but uneven impact on economic development and regional cooperation. The obtained results indicate that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan manage to integrate tourism into broader development policies thanks to stronger institutions and infrastructure investments, while Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan remain limited by a lack of capacity and administrative barriers (Tokbergenova et al., 2025).

The analysis also confirmed that there are serious limitations in cross-border cooperation, which still relies on symbolic narratives like the Silk Road, without sufficient institutional and logistical support. Despite this, the findings indicate that tourism remains an important channel for strengthening regional cohesion, provided that existing obstacles are overcome and deeper coordination among the countries of the region is ensured. The present study substantiates the assertion that tourism in Central Asia has an enormous integrative capacity, but this potential has not been harnessed because of the ineffective geopolitical and economic roles of tourism. The work adds to the theoretical discourse in terms of changing the orientation of traditional economic indicators to political-institutional and examining tourism as a source of regional stability, cultural diplomacy, and transnational dialogue. Linking tourism with concepts such as soft power, symbolic politics, and intersectoral coordination represents a significant theoretical advancement in understanding its role in contemporary regional dynamics. This research makes a contribution that is mainly empirical and exploratory. The research contributes to the body of evidence on tourism and cooperation in Central Asia by recording the perception of the stakeholders and institutional impediments. Although it does not present a detailed theoretical framework the findings can be used as an empirically based perspective that can be used not only in academic reflection but in policy-making. These insights are driven by theoretical implications that are limited unless subsequent research builds these insights into a more systematic framework. These findings have implications in practice that would be of interest to a broad group of actors including national policymakers and international development agencies as well as local communities and tourism stakeholders. The paper proposes that regional organizations should be put in place to facilitate the development of joint tourism products, development of visa regimes, and integration of both cultural and natural heritage. It also demands intensified intersectoral dialogue in institutionalized forums, and Shared educational platforms in addition to strategic documents that cross national lines.

On the whole, the research does not only show the imbalanced nature of incorporating tourism into the regional development plans but also identifies the need to redefine tourism as economic and geopolitical asset. The paper highlights the latent potential of tourism in enhancing trust, connectivity, and long term stability in Central Asia by making a clear correlation between the findings and the three research questions. Combined in the above responses to the three research questions would indicate that tourism in Central Asia is a multidimensional phenomenon that it creates economic openings, offers symbolic accounts to cross border cooperation, and indicate enduring institutional obstacles. The empirical and exploratory nature of the contribution to the study helps to frame the importance of the research in reflecting stakeholder views and increasing awareness of the difference between rhetoric and practice in political discourse.

## Limitations and future research

The limitations of the study are mainly associated with the qualitative nature of the study and limited geographic area that covered only four countries in the Central Asia, which had different political and institutional backgrounds. Although the

results cannot be generalized, they offer profound reflections on the symbolic and working structures of tourism development within a complex and unequal geopolitical environment of development in a region. The characteristics of the region including the post-conflict discourse, ethnic multiplicity, historical seclusion, and disintegrated institutions need the careful treatment of the interpretation of the results. Political sensitivity of the data and the unstable situation in the international relations in the region only confines the direct application of recommendations and appeal to the flexible and context-sensitive approach.

The use of mixed-method strategies in future studies that involve the use of competitiveness measures and tracking of changes in institutional capacity, strategic orientations, and public discourses should be implemented. Inclusion of stakeholders that were not the main concern of this study like tourists, local communities, NGOs and regional development agencies should be given special attention so as to be able to understand more of the social and political aspects of tourism. The review of policy implementation versus formal strategies would also be relevant in future research given the complexities and unevenness of institutional practices in the region to understand the gaps in planning and execution. Also, regional tourism research cooperation is not yet sufficiently developed to provide an opportunity to establish transnational research networks that will observe the dynamics of tourism sector in real-time and contribute to the creation of joint development platforms.

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