

**REGIONAL TOURISM AS A CATALYST FOR LOCAL ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT
IN CENTRAL ASIA**

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Introduction. The five Central Asian republics of Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are increasingly promoting tourism as one of the main factors of local economic growth. Rich in Silk Road heritage sites and natural scenery ranging from desert to high mountain lakes, the region has seen rapid growth in tourism in recent years. This article explores the impact of regional tourism in Central Asia on local economies and draws on recent (post 2020) and historical data. Economic indicators such as tourism income, employment rate and small business growth are analyzed, as well as tourism policies and Border-back initiatives such as the proposed Silk Visa. In addition, the cultural and environmental consequences of tourism are considered, and on the example of each state of the region, these influences are illuminated through real situations. The analysis was based on Reliable Sources the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), the World Bank, the national tourism authorities and recent research.

Tourism Growth in Central Asia: Historical and Post 2020 Trends

Tourism in Central Asia has grown significantly in the last decade, but the process has briefly stalled with the COVID-19 pandemic of 2020-2021. Approximately 15-17 million international tourists visited the region in 2019, of which Kazakhstan received approximately 8.6 million and Uzbekistan 6.7 million. In particular, the tourism industry of Uzbekistan has experienced an “explosive” growth in the last decade that, this process is associated with reforms in the visa system and active promotion of Silk Road cities. The number of foreign tourists arriving in the country increased from 1 million in 2016 to 6.6 million in 2023. By 2024, however, Uzbekistan had received 8.2 million international tourists, surpassing pre-pandemic levels. This represents a rapid recovery after the 2020-2021 recession during the 1.5-2 million pandemic.

Kazakhstan recovered similarly in 2023, the country received 9.2 million foreign tourists, doubling its 2022 figure and breaking the historical record. This indicates a complete recovery with a higher level in 2019. According to preliminary data from early 2024, the growth rate continues: almost 12 million international tourists are expected to arrive in Kazakhstan by the end of the year.

Smaller nations are experiencing similar trends. In 2023, Kyrgyzstan was visited by 8.56 million foreign tourists, significantly higher than the 6.91 million in 2022. Tajikistan, which visited less than 1 million tourists annually before the pandemic, received an estimated 1.36 million visitors in 2023 when the tours resumed. Turkmenistan, which is considered one of the most closed and

least visited countries in the world, has also received discussions on the development of Tourism. However, according to some estimates, at the end of the 2010s, the number of annual foreign tourists was only around 10-15 thousand, and this figure still remains at a very low level. Thus, the post 2020 period witnessed a strong resurgence of tourism throughout Central Asia. This restoration was prompted by regional and domestic travel, as well as the return of international tourists.

One notable aspect is that regional tourism flows (tourists coming from Central Asia or neighboring countries) are forming a large part of this growth. For example, almost two-thirds of the 6.6 million foreign tourists who arrived in Uzbekistan in 2023 were from neighboring Central Asian countries (such as Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan) or other states of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS). Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are the same that, they have stated that most of the tourists visiting them come from regional or CIS countries. Such regional travel flows were greatly motivated by improved diplomatic relations and loosening of border restrictions. For example, in 2018, border visits increased dramatically immediately after the reopening of the Uzbekistan and Tajikistan land borders after a twenty-year interval. After the COVID-19 pandemic, however, Central Asian countries were able to benefit from changes in international tourist routes: Uzbekistan and other countries attracted tourists from Russia and China through Visa benefits, choosing alternative routes instead of going to Europe or East Asia. For example, the number of tourists from Russia to Uzbekistan increased from 567 thousand in 2022 to 873 thousand in 2023, indicating an increase of more than 50 percent. Kazakhstan, on the other hand, recorded a 78% increase in the number of Chinese tourists after the visa free procedure for Chinese citizens was introduced in 2024. These trends are evident in the fact that the revival of tourism in Central Asia is associated not only with the return of Western tourists, but also with the growth of regional and intra-Asian tourist flows at the historical level.

Economic Contributions of Tourism to Local Economies

The rapid expansion of tourism in Central Asia has had a significant impact on local economies especially in terms of revenue, employment and entrepreneurial growth. Tourism revenue (tourist export) has become an important source of foreign exchange revenue for a number of countries. For example, international tourism revenues in Kyrgyzstan reached US \$ 708 million in 2019, accounting for nearly 22.8 percent of the country's total exports. In the same year, Tajikistan generated approximately \$ 179 million in revenue through tourism, equivalent to 14% of its export receipts, indicating that revenue from travel was of great importance in that country's narrow export base. While these figures have fallen in 2020 due to the pandemic, revenue is also increasing again as the number of tourists recovers.

According to the World Travel and Tourism Council (WTTC), Central Asia had a total revenue of around US \$ 3 billion through international tourism in 2022, and this figure is expected to double by 2033. For example, in Uzbekistan in 2022, the income from the tourism sector amounted to almost 10 trillion soums (about US \$ 0.9–1.0 billion), and this number is projected to increase as the flow of visitors increases. The tourism sector is also making a significant contribution to job creation and small business development throughout the region. In 2022, about 480,000 people were directly employed in the travel and tourism sector in Central Asia, accounting for 1.8% of total employment while, taking into account indirect and other related sectors, the figure reached 1.42 million (i.e., more than 5% of total employment). A large part of

these jobs is created at the expense of small and medium sized enterprises (SMEs) family hotels, country camps, excursion organizers, guides, drivers and craftsmen are examples of this.

For example, tourism in Kyrgyzstan before the pandemic accounted for about 5% of GDP and 3.6% of employment. The country's government has designated the sector as a major driver of economic growth in the SME leadership. As of mid-2024, according to official data, there are more than 135,000 entities engaged in tourism activities in Kyrgyzstan, a large part of which are microbusinesses providing homestay services, transport, Crafts and other tourist-oriented services.

In Uzbekistan, however, active tourism promotion conducted by the government has also spurred significant growth in the hospitality, retail and craft sectors. Each Silk Road City is experiencing an increase in boutique hotels, restaurants and souvenir shops run by local entrepreneurs.

One of the most important aspects is that tourism development is now entering not only the capital cities, but also rural and remote areas and increasing the income of the local population. A clear example of this is the expansion of community-based tourism (community-Based Tourism, CBT) programs in Kyrgyzstan. Through these programs, villagers offer cultural and natural experiences to tourists they spend the night in country houses or family hotels shopping for traditional handicrafts, and hire local guides for mountain walks or horse walks. This model has become an alternative source of income for remote mountain villages.

In the last decade, the number of destinations hosting tourists in rural regions of Kyrgyzstan has increased significantly. For example, in the village of Jyrgalan in eastern Kyrgyzstan, there was only one hotel in 2015, and as of 2023, 21 hotels are operating here, serving visitors to hiking and skiing. The expansion of residential housing under such community management created new jobs (many of which were occupied by women) and allowed families to earn a stable income through tourism. According to Kyrgyz officials, the current level of development of adventure and ecotourism is only 15-20% of the country's potential, which means that there are great opportunities for the development of small businesses.

Similarly, in Tajikistan, homestay (overnight stay at home) networks are developing along the Pamir tract and on mountain walking routes. Through this, villagers earn income by working as guest hosts, drivers or guides. Tourism in the historic cities of Uzbekistan is also revitalizing cottage industry a home-based craft activity. In Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva, artisans are making fabrics, ceramic objects and woodcarvings for tourists and for export, making traditional occupations economically profitable small businesses.

In general, the rapid development of tourism is expanding economic participation a process that is leading to the emergence of new small businesses and jobs, from large cities to remote villages on the Silk Road.

Tourism Policies and Regional Cooperation Initiatives

Central Asian governments have realized the economic potential of Tourism and implemented various policies to attract tourists and ease travel, especially in the last 5-7 years. The basis of these efforts was the liberalization of the visa system. Uzbekistan took the lead in this regard:

after President Shavkat Mirziyoyev took office in 2016, the country introduced an electronic visa system and subsequently provided visa-free entry for citizens of 90 States. As of 2023, tourists from most EU countries, the United Kingdom, Canada, Japan, South Korea and many others, have been able to visit Uzbekistan without a 30-day visa.

Similarly, Kazakhstan has provided visa-free entry for citizens of many nationalities, including most countries in the United States, Europe and Asia, for up to 30 days. Kyrgyzstan, on the other hand, unilaterally permits visa-free entry to citizens of more than 60 countries for up to 60 days. In recent years, Tajikistan and Kazakhstan have launched an electronic visa portal and have introduced a simplified visa application procedure at airports; Tajikistan has abolished visas for citizens of neighboring countries. The overall result of these policies is a decrease in travel barriers studies show that even the light e-visa requirement itself can reduce the flow of tourism by 50-75 percent, so the total elimination of visa requirements will significantly increase the number of visitors.

In addition to national visa reforms, initiatives to strengthen regional cooperation with the aim of promoting Central Asia as a single travel destination are also gaining momentum. One of the most important ideas is the Silk Visa (Silk visa) concept, which provides for the introduction of a single visa for several Central Asian countries. The idea was inspired by the experience of the Schengen zone in Europe, allowing international tourists to move freely around Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and possibly Turkmenistan with only one visa.

The idea for Silk Visa was first conceived in late 2018 when a preliminary agreement on Silk Road Visa was announced between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, but the project was not put into practice at the time. However, this initiative was revived in 2023-2025. In March 2025, Kyrgyz President Sadiir Japarov officially proposed a single central Asian visa regime covering all five countries. Such a visa system simplifies travel and enhances regional integration tourists can now freely explore Silk Road cities and various landscapes through a single document, without having to go through five separate visa systems separately. This is expected to lead to an increase in the number of tourists and regional income.

Although Silk Visa has not yet been officially introduced, the fact that even historically closed Turkmenistan has expressed interest in it, the fact that all five states supported this initiative means cooperation in the field of tourism in Central Asia at a new stage.

Other collaborative initiatives include joint marketing and infrastructure projects. The countries of the region are cooperating in the creation of cross-border tourpackages and cultural routes within structures such as the "Silk Road program" of the UN World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Recent scientific articles have pointed out that before the pandemic, Central Asian countries are on the verge of making a huge profit from the regional tourism development program promoted by the SCO. These plans are now being revived. For example, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are jointly developing a high-speed rail project connecting Turkestan, Chimkent and Tashkent, which will improve communication between important cultural heritage objects.

The "Silk Road" Brand is used to attract long distance tourists based on cooperation-tourists want to get acquainted with several Silk Road cities in one trip. In addition, the Organization of Turkic states, of which Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan are members of

the observer status, has launched a Tourism Cooperation Program to harmonize standards in tourism and coordinate advertising activities.

At the national level, however, each state has developed strategic plans aimed at developing sustainable tourism. Uzbekistan established the State Committee for the development of Tourism and designated tourism as one of the important directions of economic diversification. Kazakhstan formed the National Company “Kazakh Tourism” to coordinate investments and branding and set goals to significantly increase the flow of tourists until 2030. Kyrgyzstan's Tourism Development Program for 2019-2023 was aimed at promoting the country as an attractive destination for adventure and ecotourism and bringing tourism's share of GDP to 7% by 2023 by improving infrastructure. Tajikistan declared 2018 The "Year of Tourism" and sought to attract foreign investment to improve tourist infrastructure in mountainous areas. Even Turkmenistan with strict visa procedures has implemented a huge national project for the development of the Avaza tourism zone on the Caspian Sea and is turning to narrow specialized tourist segments, conducting events such as the Silk Road International Rally.

This clearly reflects the fact that political measures at the national and regional levels are advancing tourism by Central Asian states as a pillar of regional cooperation during economic development and the post-Soviet period.

Cultural and Environmental Implications of Regional Tourism

In addition to the economy, the rapid development of tourism in Central Asia has significant cultural and environmental influences at the local level. Culturally, the increase in tourism is Dual in nature, providing, on the one hand, the impetus and funds for the preservation of historical heritage, and on the other hand, the risk of its commercialization. On the positive side, due to tourist interest, governments are investing heavily in the restoration of historical monuments and the promotion of traditional culture. Uzbekistan's UNESCO heritage listed cities Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva-are benefiting through the renovation of mosques, madrasas and architectural monuments; this serves to preserve these invaluable monuments for future generations and to demonstrate them to tourists in a more qualitative way. For example, the famous Registan complex in Samarkand was carefully restored, new museums and cultural centers were opened. Income from tourism (entrance tickets, etc.) is often redirected to the maintenance of these sites.

In addition, the Intangible Cultural Heritage — music, dance, crafts — is also being revived through the demand for tourism. Tourists seek authentic traditional performances and manual labor products that encourage local artisans and artists to maintain their traditions. For example, the traditions of silk weaving in Margilan in Uzbekistan and the making of felt carpets woven in Kyrgyzstan have come to life thanks to tourism, creating an important source of income for artisans through the purchase of these products by tourists and maintaining skills passed from generation to generation.

Tourism also promotes cultural exchange and mutual understanding. As the cities of Central Asia open to the World, local communities are engaging with tourists from different countries. For example, rural homestay programs in Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan provide an opportunity for tourists to experience traditional lifestyles, and for locals to meet other cultural tourism also promotes cultural exchange and mutual understanding. As the cities of Central Asia open to the

World, local communities are engaging with tourists from different countries. For example, rural homestay programs in Kyrgyzstan or Tajikistan provide an opportunity for tourists to experience traditional lifestyles, and for locals to meet other cultures. The increase in regional tourism (for example, the rest of Kazakh citizens in Kyrgyzstan or Uzbek visits to Kazakh cultural sites) serves to strengthen historical and cultural ties between the peoples of Central Asia.

Annual festivals and events are also becoming cultural sights that attract tourists – for example, the Nomad Games (World Nomad Games), which began at the initiative of Kyrgyzstan and takes place with the participation of several countries, celebrates nomadic sports and culture. These activities attract the attention of viewers and the media from all over the region and beyond, and increase the sense of pride in common cultural values. All these are positive cultural influences that have arisen through tourism.

On the other hand, the flow of tourists can put pressure on local culture and the environment if not managed in a sustainable way. There are concerns about the commercialization of sacred or historic sites for example, damage to the original condition of heritage sites in order to match the expectations of tourists, the possibility of their loss of authenticity. Some community leaders warn of the dangers of staging cultural expressions to show only tourists, that is, turning them into "shows". Also, popular destinations are subject to excessive mass tourism, which can negatively affect the way of life of local residents. So far, Central Asia is far from such "overtourism" that is, the number of guests is moderate in relation to opportunities – but governments are well aware of the need to maintain a balance between receiving guests and preserving local culture.

The environmental impact is equally important. Natural beauties in Central Asia the mountains of Tian Shan and Pamirs, mountain lakes such as Issyk-Kul and Sonkul, deserts and canyons attract lovers of adventure and ecotourism. But the increase in tourist flow in these sensitive environments presents a number of problems: waste management, pollution, and the risk of damage to the natural habitat. For example, with the growth of trekking (hiking) tourism in the Issyk-Kul region and other mountainous areas of Kyrgyzstan, the amount of plastic and household waste has increased significantly. If adequate waste infrastructure is not available, plastic and other garbage can accumulate in lakes and forests, threatening wildlife and water quality. The UN Environment Programm(UNEP) warns that if these cases remain uncontrolled, millions of tons of plastic waste may fall into ecosystems such as Issyk-Kul in the coming decades.

In response, certain measures are being taken by local governments and international partners in order to promote sustainable tourism. For example, in the village of Jyrgalan in the Issyk-Kul region, the first infrastructure for recycling and collecting waste was created. This not only protects the local ecology, but also creates green jobs – this center employs workers engaged in garbage collection and separation, and even local residents have the opportunity to earn income by submitting waste. Such initiatives are a model for other tourist areas in Central Asia as tourism develops through them, ecological traces can be reduced.

In addition, there is a growing interest in the principles of environmentally friendly and “green” tourism in Central Asia. Governments and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are promoting the “leave-no-trace trekking” concept, which requires tourists not to leave undue marks on nature reserves, take waste with them, and not interfere with the natural environment.

There are also restrictions on the number of tourists in some sensitive ecological zones, and sustainable technologies such as solar energy use are widely promoted in country camps. Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have begun developing ecotourism guidelines for national parks, while Uzbekistan has introduced environmental sustainability principles to its tourism strategy for the first time as evidenced by its recognition of the need to preserve cultural and Natural Resources.

Cooperation is also growing at the regional level: Central Asian countries are exchanging experience through the “Global Tourism Plastics Initiative” (Global Tourism plastics initiative) and other sustainable tourism programs, exploring international practices. The emphasis on sustainability is critical because environmental degradation can jeopardize the long-term prospect of Tourism. For example, melting glaciers and decreasing snow levels due to climate change pose a threat to skiing and mountain tourism in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan or Kazakhstan. For this reason, several Central Asian countries are trying to combine tourism development with climate adaptation and conservation strategies.

In conclusion, the cultural and environmental dimensions of tourism in Central Asia place great responsibility along with opportunities. Tourism serves as an important tool in the revitalization of culture and strengthening dialogue among peoples, but this process should enrich local traditions and values and not decay. Just as natural landscapes and riches attract tourists, their maintenance can only be carried out through a conscious and sustainable tourism policy. While Central Asia is still in its infancy in this regard, positive examples such as the Waste Management Project in Jyrgalan or regional cooperation on sustainable tourism suggest that the region is choosing a way to reconcile growth with cultural and environmental responsibility.

Case Studies in Central Asian Tourism

Revival of the Uzbekistan-Great Silk Road. Uzbekistan has made tourism a central focus of its economic reforms. As a result of the aggressive visa free entry policy conducted by the government and the active promotion of ancient Silk Road cities on the world market, the number of tourists increased dramatically-from 1 million in 2016 to more than 8 million in 2024. The historical cities of Samarkand, Bukhara and Khiva were transformed into modern tourist centers that, ancient monuments were restored, new infrastructures and services were introduced. For example, next to the ancient Registan Square in Samarkand, the modern Silk Road Samarkand complex a large tourist center, which includes hotels, Congress halls and Resorts was built.

The development of tourism has created jobs for local youth in the field of guiding and hotel services, while increasing demand for pottery and craft cooperatives engaged in the sewing of suzani. Tourism's attention to cultural heritage encourages preservation: revenues from tourism are directed to the preservation and restoration of Uzbekistan's 7 UNESCO World Heritage sites.

Government initiatives-such as the Safe Travel Guaranteed (Safe Travel guaranteed) sanitary certificate introduced during COVID-19 and ongoing advertising campaigns in foreign languages-show the country's firm intention to promote tourism sustainably. Uzbekistan is one of the active supporters of the Silk Visa project, which aims to promote the entire region as a single tourist destination and attract even more tourists.

Kazakhstan-investment in tourist routes and infrastructure. Kazakhstan, which has the largest economy in Central Asia, sees tourism as a means of economic diversification outside the oil and mining industry and has made significant infrastructural investments in this direction. One of the most striking examples of this is the development of the city of Turkestan in southern Kazakhstan. Formerly a historic city visited mainly by pilgrims, Turkestan (where the mausoleum of Khoja Ahmad Yassawi, dating from the 15th century, is located), is now being transformed into a major tourist and spiritual center. Since 2018, more than \$1 billion of investment has been invested in this city: a new international airport, highways, hotels (including the international level Rixos Hotel), a tourism university, as well as a large “Keruen-Saray” Park and a market complex based on cultural heritage have been built. These initiatives aim to attract foreign tourists and pilgrims across Central Asia as well as create new jobs. As of 2024, Kazakhstan has received 11.5 million visitors from abroad, all of whom are non-tourists (some have visited businesses or relatives). This indicator indicates a significant increase in the country's tourism potential. Another important destination is the mountainous areas of Almaty: the government is developing adventure and ecotourism by modernizing ski resorts and hiking trails. The experience of Kazakhstan shows that investing in clearly selected tourist zones (in combination with large events such as the Expo 2017 exhibition and international conferences, for example) can revitalize the tourism sector and increase local employment. However, this process also requires principles of sustainability, especially since the popular natural masks around Almaty are being protected from overuse, and the authorities are now working on regulations for their conservation.

Kyrgyzstan community-based and adventure tourism. Kyrgyzstan, relying on its unique mountain landscapes and nomadic culture, has chosen an approach in tourism in the direction of “from the bottom to the top”. Started by local associations in the late 1990s, the Community-Based Tourism (CBT) model has become a nationwide network to date: rural hotels, overnight accommodation options in the lawn, and local tourist services are being provided to tourists.

This model directly supports the local population economically. For example, in the meadows around Song-Lake Lake and the valleys of Pomir-Olay, during the summer months, the villagers receive guests and thus earn income. Kyrgyz CBT Association helps hotels with the quality of Service, cultural validity, and marketing.

One of the cities that has become a successful example the town of Karakol near the Issikkol Lake. It was through local initiatives and support from international donors that the city became a center for adventure tourism. Today, Karakol has become a hub for travelers, backpackers, and ski tourists. This has led to new cafes and restaurants, guided services, even tech startups operating in the tourism industry.

UNDP (UNDP) The project helped develop adventure tourism services and create new walking routes in Osh and Naryn provinces. Even though tourism accounted for only 5% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP before. During the pandemic, the sector has been recognized as having great growth potential. In particular, it allows the development of women's entrepreneurship and local employment in remote mountainous areas.

Kyrgyz experience shows that sustainable and community-led tourism can not only stimulate economic development, but also serve to preserve cultural heritage. However, environmental

protection issues (e.g., waste management project in Jyrgalan) are still one of the problems that need to be addressed.

Tajikistan-Adventure Tourism and regional integration. Tajikistan, one of the poorest countries in Central Asia, sees tourism using its unguarded natural beauties as a means of strengthening economic and regional ties. The Pamir mountains, especially the route of the "Pamir Highway" (Pamir Highway), located in eastern Tajikistan, have become a popular destination for adventure seekers with some of the world's highest road passes and breathtaking views. In recent years, the demand for cultural tourism has increased along mountain walks (trekking), mountaineering, and Vakhon Valley. Here, local Pomir communities can generate direct income by offering home-hotel (homestay) services to tourists. The number of tourists arriving in Tajikistan every year is still low (around 1.3 million in 2023), but tourism accounted for more than 10% of export revenues, which means it is an important currency for the country and a lively economic resource for rural communities. One of the important shifts was improved relations with Uzbekistan after 2016. Air services and border points were reopened, giving way to a mutual tourist interchange. Now Uzbek tourists are freely traveling through Tajik cities such as Khojand, Panjakent, while Tajik tourists are visiting Samarkand, Bukhara, and other historical cities. This mutual tourist flow enhanced cultural exchange by developing small businesses in bordering areas, for example, Uzbek-Tajik cultural festivals are being organized along the Fergana Valley. Tajikistan has also introduced the e-visa system and is trying to strengthen its position on the world tourist map by participating in international tourist fairs. Nevertheless, one of the biggest obstacles remains weak infrastructure roads and aviation connections are limited. But reconstruction of the Pamir Highway, which is being financed by China, and through new air traffic, it is planned to eliminate this problem. The experience of Tajikistan shows that even a state with a late start in the field of tourism can achieve much greater economic results if it focuses on unique tourism routes (Mountain, Eco-Tourism) and improves regional relations.

Turkmenistan-Unused Opportunity Between Restrictions. Turkmenistan is a special exception in the tourism sector in Central Asia. Despite having significant historical and natural attractions, ranging from ancient Silk Road cities such as Merv and Kunya-Urgench to the unique gas crater known as the "gate of Hell", Turkmenistan is visited by a very small number of tourists. According to assessments, less than 15,000 foreign tourists come to the country each year, making it one of the least visited countries on Earth. Available tours also usually take the form of group tours organized through state-approved agencies. Because of this, the impact of tourism in Turkmenistan on the local economy is very low compared to neighboring countries – tourism represents one of the lowest in the world with a contribution of only 0.2 percent to the gross domestic product. The government has invested in model projects such as the Avaza National Tourist Zone, which includes a complex of luxury resorts on the Caspian Sea coast, as well as occasionally hosting international events. However, these efforts have not yet led to sustainable tourism growth. Nevertheless, Turkmenistan's participation in regional initiatives such as the proposed single central Asian visa indicates opportunities for openness. If the Government of Turkmenistan loosens access restrictions and cooperates on routes (for example, allows travelers to easily transfer from Uzbekistan or Kazakhstan along the Silk Road to Turkmenistan), this can open up tourism potential and benefit local communities – in cities with access to historical monuments such as Mary and Dashoguz, jobs in the hotel and service sector are created. So far, Turkmenistan has remained very limited in terms of economic benefits from

tourism. This situation once again demonstrates the importance of openness and cooperation, which is supported in a much more active way by other Central Asian countries.

Conclusion. Regional tourism in Central Asia is taking shape as a powerful factor for economic development. This sector is playing an important role in diversifying the economy of the countries of the region and creating new sources of income for the local population. The data and experiments studied show that international and regional tourism has grown significantly, especially since 2017 and during the post-2020 recovery period. Tourism imports significant amounts of foreign currency, contributes significantly to GDP (especially in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan), and directly employs hundreds of thousands of people in each of the “five Stan”. The most notable aspect is that the development of tourism in Central Asia is usually taking place at the local level, which makes small businesses support hotel owners in mountain villages, artisans in historic cities, ensuring that economic profit spreads to a wide range of populations. Policies such as the simplification of visa procedures and the Silk Road Visa Initiative show a commitment to reducing barriers and creating a single travel area in the region. Such cooperation facilitates regional travel (e.g., trips along the Silk Road covering several states), promoting longer tourist stays in the region and is more cost-effective. From a cultural point of view, the increase in tourism has helped Central Asians celebrate and preserve their rich cultural heritage. However, care is needed to maintain original value and authenticity in this process. Ecologically, however, the influx of tourists is reminiscent of the need to introduce sustainable practices into Tourism Planning, which is important for preserving the natural and cultural resources that are the foundation of the industry.

In conclusion, tourism in Central Asia is becoming one of the main pillars of regional economic strategy, and not just a recreational sector, but also an important bridge for cultural exchange. While Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan continue to invest in tourism infrastructure, improve their policies, and possibly implement Common Projects at the regional level, it will be of great benefit to local economies through increased income, increased jobs, and the development of rural areas. The Central Asian experience suggests that under reasonable management, regional tourism can become a powerful driver of sustainable local economic growth and regional integration. In the future, research and monitoring work will be important to keep tourism development balanced, maximize benefits to communities, and minimize negative impacts, especially as Central Asia opens its doors to the world more and more widely.

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