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Socio-Political and Cultural Transformation of Central Asian States in the Era of Global Crises: Challenges to Security and Resilience

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Abstract

The study examines the socio-political transformations unfolding in Central Asia and seeks to identify the principal challenges and threats shaping regional development. The research draws on a diverse set of sources, including Deutsche Welle, the United Nations Development Programme, the World Bank Group, Tengri News, and Radio Azattyk. The methodological framework combines legal, content, comparative, and statistical analyses.

The structured analytical approach employed in the study included thematic coding for content analysis, comparative examination of governance models and reform trajectories, and legal analysis of national policy documents. Statistical analysis incorporated secondary datasets, including cyber threat indicators from MixMode, which capture multiple dimensions of risk across the region. The findings indicate that socio-political and cultural change in Central Asia is driven by several interrelated factors, including the COVID-19 pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the recruitment of labour migrants into military service, globalisation, and the enduring authoritarian legacy of the Soviet period.

In Kazakhstan, the adoption of the Social Code in 2023 represented a significant step towards strengthening social equity, while the country is simultaneously undergoing a process of political reorientation often described as “de Nazarbayevisation”. Culturally, Kazakhstan continues its transition to the Latin script. Uzbekistan is experiencing a cultural revival, reflected in the renovation of major cultural institutions. In Kyrgyzstan, despite its status as the most democratic state in the region, the 2021 constitutional referendum expanded presidential powers. The country also faces constraints in cultural funding, although progress has been made through the 2022 presidential decree supporting the national film industry.

In conclusion, although Central Asian governments are striving to develop more autonomous domestic and foreign policies, they remain significantly dependent on external actors in international relations.

Keywords: Digitalisation; Cyber Threats; Labour Migration; Alphabet; National Identity; Central Asian States

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Introduction

The contemporary world of the twenty-first century, shaped by dynamic processes of globalisation and recurrent systemic crises, has placed socio-political and cultural transformations at the centre of scholarly attention. Within this context, the Central Asian region, strategically positioned between Eastern and Western civilisations, occupies a particularly significant place. Over the past two decades, Central Asia has been confronted with a series of global challenges, including the COVID-19 pandemic, instability in Afghanistan, illicit drug trafficking, human trafficking, and climate change. These crises have affected multiple dimensions of societal development, ranging from political stability and economic performance to cultural identity and social cohesion.

The relevance of this research is reinforced by the complex nature of twenty-first-century crises, which simultaneously influence political, economic, and social spheres. These overlapping pressures have intensified social inequality, contributed to the erosion or collapse of traditional governance models, and generated growing demands for innovative approaches to security and resilience. Economic recessions triggered by global shocks have acted as catalysts, exposing vulnerabilities within existing socio-political mechanisms and accelerating the need for structural reform.

Cultural transformation has acquired particular importance in conditions of geopolitical turbulence (Aliyeva, 2025; Dyomin et al., 2021). The rapid expansion of digital technologies and communication tools has become increasingly dominant, while traditional cultural and social structures have weakened under the influence of globalisation (Pavlova et al., 2024; Zhazhumenov et al., 2022). As a result, cultural identity has emerged as a vital component of national resilience. In the Central Asian states, where local traditions coexist with global trends, culture functions both as an integrative mechanism and as a means of preserving national identity. However, during periods of

crisis, cultural sectors are often among the most vulnerable, which undermines social cohesion and weakens societal resilience.

Primzhanova et al. (2022) examined changes in the social sphere following the COVID-19 pandemic and argued that rapid digitalisation acted as a levelling factor across social groups. This was reflected in the emergence of online education as an alternative to elite institutions and the expansion of telemedicine as a substitute for in-clinic consultations. The authors contend that the pandemic served as a catalyst for addressing long-standing social issues. Sarybayev (2024) similarly identified increased demand for technological sectors that enable remote societal functioning, alongside a rise in cybercrime driven by the expanding digital environment. Eraliev and Urinboyev (2024) noted that various societal groups in Uzbekistan, particularly labour migrants, remain highly susceptible to Russian propaganda.

Engvall (2023) argued that Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine produced counterproductive effects for the Russian government, weakening it economically and politically. As a consequence, Central Asian governments have sought to diversify their partnerships with other states. Kabylov et al. (2024) observed that Kazakhstan's long-standing incorporation into the USSR generated cultural shifts shaped by centralised Soviet cultural norms. They conclude that national cultural identity formation should be grounded in literary works closely connected to Kazakhstan's historical and cultural heritage, thereby facilitating the transmission of cultural knowledge from educators to students.

Sheryazdanova et al. (2024) analysed political processes in Central Asia in the context of declining political participation and concluded that young Kazakhs are vulnerable to radicalisation due to economic and political factors. These include a neo-colonial economic model, declining GDP growth, rising inflation and unemployment, inadequate state-society interaction, an underdeveloped multiparty system, and a broader crisis of political engagement. Chen et al. (2024) emphasised the

influence of China's Belt and Road Initiative on regional political development, arguing that it strengthens the region's international standing and political connectivity. They caution, however, that disruptions to the initiative could negatively affect political engagement across Central Asia.

Against this backdrop, the present study aims to identify the risks and threats associated with the current geopolitical climate and to assess their impact on the development trajectories of Central Asian states. The research objectives include identifying the principal drivers of socio-political and cultural transformation and conducting a qualitative analysis of these processes. The theoretical framework draws on elements of modernisation theory, democratisation studies, and cultural-policy approaches. These perspectives allow for interpreting socio-political and cultural change as interconnected processes shaped by institutional reforms, governance models, and the evolution of cultural identity under conditions of global crisis. The study also incorporates insights from crisis-governance theory, authoritarian-resilience literature, and digital-transformation research. These approaches provide a conceptual basis for understanding how Central Asian states respond to external shocks, maintain political stability, and implement digital reforms under conditions of uncertainty.

The study is situated within broader academic debates on authoritarianism and hybrid political regimes, post-Soviet identity formation, migration processes, and regional security architectures, including the roles of the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation. Integrating these perspectives enables a comprehensive interpretation of socio-political and cultural transformations in Central Asia, linking regional developments to established theoretical and geopolitical frameworks.

Materials and Methods

The study drew upon an information release issued by the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Republic of Croatia (2021) to

contextualise Kazakhstan's contemporary economic challenges. Consideration was also given to the *Concept of the Draft Social Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (2021) and to specific provisions contained within the *Social Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (2023). Supplementary materials included an article published by Kursiv Media (2023) and a 2024 report by the United Nations Development Programme, both of which provided particularly valuable insights. The healthcare sector was examined using data from the Electronic Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2025). Additional contextual sources included materials from Deutsche Welle (2024) and Ukrainska Pravda (2019).

In relation to migration policy, the analysis incorporated the *Concept of Migration Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2021–2030* (2021) and content from the Migrant.kg portal (2025). Research on Uzbekistan drew upon a news report from Kun.uz (2023), complemented by data on cybersecurity indices.

The study's examination of political change utilised sources from Orda (2023), Radio Azattyk (2023), Tazabek (2025), Eurasianet (2025), and News Central Asia (2025). The *Criminal Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (2025) was also reviewed. Democracy indices from the Global State of Democracy Initiative (2025) and a publication by SpecialEurasia (2024) contributed to the assessment of political dynamics. Additional materials included an article from Svidomi (Ihnatenko et al., 2023) and foreign-trade statistics for Uzbekistan. GDP figures were obtained from the World Bank Group (2025).

Cultural transformation was examined through a publication from the official website of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the *Draft Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Some Issues of the Translation of the Kazakh Language Alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin Script"* (2021). Further sources included articles from Crimea. Realities (2024) and Tengri News (2023). Uzbekistan's cultural policy was analysed using materials from Uzbekistan Daily (2024) and the Art and Culture Development

Foundation of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2025). The analysis also drew upon the *Constitution of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (2022), the *Constitution of the Kyrgyz Republic* (2021), an article from 24.kg (Khurova, 2025), and the *Decree of the President of the Kyrgyz Republic No. 159* (2022).

Content analysis of official documents, media publications, and reports produced by international organisations facilitated a comprehensive assessment of social, economic, and political processes in the Central Asian states. Legal analysis enabled the identification of governmental strategies aimed at addressing social and security-related challenges. Statistical analysis was employed to evaluate data on GDP, investment flows, and labour-migration figures, thereby revealing the extent of external economic dependency. Discourse analysis was used to examine public sentiment in Kazakhstan regarding the transition of the Kazakh alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin script. In addition, aspects of cybersecurity were assessed through an examination of vulnerability indices across Central Asian countries.

It should be noted that the depth of analysis across the three countries was influenced by the availability and accessibility of data. Kazakhstan is more extensively represented in analytical reports and statistical sources, which allows for a more detailed examination, whereas data on Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are comparatively limited. This asymmetry has been taken into account in the interpretation of the results.

Results and Discussion

Social Transformation of the Region

Kazakhstan possesses the largest economy in Central Asia and therefore exerts considerable influence within the region (WBG, 2025). According to the information published by the Embassy of the Republic of Kazakhstan in the Republic of Croatia (2021), the nearly thirty-year leadership of N. Nazarbayev resulted in the establishment of an internationally recognised sovereign state endowed with the essential attributes of political, economic, and cultural development. Although these foundations

facilitated national consolidation, several structural constraints continued to impede sustainable development. These included the dominance of extractive industries within the production structure, very low competitiveness across non-resource sectors, the absence of financing mechanisms for small and medium-sized enterprises, and pronounced socio-economic disparities between regions. As the Embassy noted, “the dominance of extractive industries in the production structure, extremely low competitiveness of other economic sectors, the absence of mechanisms for financing small and medium-sized enterprises, and marked socio-economic disparities between regions” limited long-term progress.

These observations correspond with the analysis of Hausmann et al. (2023), who highlighted Kazakhstan’s uneven economic development and weak competitiveness in foreign markets. Commander and Prieskienyte (2021) similarly argued that economic growth during the Nazarbayev era was driven predominantly by large oil and gas projects, with the state budget heavily dependent on revenues from this sector and diversification remaining minimal. Additional shortcomings included unequal access to public and communal services and a shortage of qualified professionals, which stemmed from deficiencies in both secondary and higher education. Toimbek (2022) reinforced this point, demonstrating that international adult competency assessments revealed minimal variation between individuals with higher and secondary education, indicating a generally low standard of educational quality.

The empirical findings of the present study can be interpreted through several theoretical perspectives. The policy responses observed reflect elements of crisis-governance theory, while the persistence of centralised decision-making structures aligns with patterns of authoritarian resilience. At the same time, the expansion of digitalisation initiatives illustrates key aspects of digital-transformation theory within the regional context.

Efforts to address social challenges and reduce socio-economic inequality culminated in the introduction of the *Concept of the Draft Social Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (2021). Following public consultations, the *Social Code of the Republic of Kazakhstan* (2023) was adopted and entered into force on 1 July 2023. Kursiv Media (2023) reported that the code was modelled on its European Union counterpart, although adapted to Kazakhstan's specific conditions. The drafting process involved national experts and incorporated international best practices. The Social Code was designed to systematise social-security legislation and establish a unified system of citizen protection irrespective of place of residence.

Its core pillars include social support for families and individuals with dependents, employment-facilitation measures, targeted assistance for households living below the poverty line, social protection for persons with disabilities, pension contributions, and support for specific categories of citizens such as bereaved families. A notable innovation is the Digital Family Card, which integrates data on more than six million families from multiple state information systems. This unified database aggregates information on income, ownership of movable and immovable assets, loans, and other socio-economic indicators, enabling public authorities to identify households most in need of targeted assistance. According to the United Nations Development Programme (2024), the Digital Family Card draws on more than one hundred indicators, making it a reliable instrument for evidence-based policy-making. Sun (2024) emphasised the broad scope of the Social Code in strengthening legal frameworks for social issues and improving service delivery, while Michels et al. (2021) argued that its development was necessary for the revision and enrichment of related regulatory acts governing social services.

Significant social transformations have also taken place within Kazakhstan's healthcare sector. According to the Electronic Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2025), a succession of adverse events, including the

pandemic, lockdown measures, and economic shocks, necessitated the prioritisation of healthcare-system development. Of the thirty-nine government agencies responsible for healthcare provision, nineteen offer both electronic and paper-based services, while another nineteen operate exclusively online. The same source notes that "*other initiatives in healthcare include the use of artificial intelligence for oncology treatment, smart clinics, and medical certificates with QR codes*" (Electronic Government..., 2025). Barro and Cornell (2022) observed that Kazakhstan's healthcare architecture broadly corresponds to contemporary international models, although persistent challenges remain, particularly high mortality rates and the need for increased investment in primary care, treatment, and chronic-disease prevention.

In contrast, the social system of Kyrgyzstan continues to exhibit pronounced instability due to its extensive reliance on external labour migration. Abytov (2023) highlighted the absence of unified statistical data on Kyrgyzstan's labour migrants, although available figures indicate that more than one million citizens have engaged in labour migration annually since the early 2000s. Kuldasheva (2024) attributed these high levels of external migration to poverty and unemployment, while Wang et al. (2021) emphasised the country's significant dependence on remittances. Abytov also noted limited awareness of migration regulations among migrants, both domestically and in host countries. Given that approximately one in seven Kyrgyz citizens works abroad, and that most migrants are employed in neighbouring states, they have become increasingly vulnerable to mobilisation for military service in the context of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine. Deutsche Welle (2024) reported that a decree issued in May 2023 simplified citizenship procedures for foreign nationals who sign contracts with the Russian Ministry of Defence. Military service in foreign armed forces constitutes a criminal offence in all Central Asian states, and Laruelle (2023) noted that governments have publicly reiterated bans on such participation. In May

2023, a Kyrgyz court issued the first conviction for mercenarism, sentencing a thirty-two-year-old citizen to ten years' imprisonment (Balachuk, 2023). In similar context, Gabdulhakov (2023) argued that public reminders of illegality are insufficient and that more robust counter-campaigns are required. Structural constraints persist, including limited domestic employment opportunities, insufficient visa availability for Western countries, pervasive Russian propaganda, and increasingly restrictive media legislation. These dynamics correspond with Asgarli's (2024) findings on the enduring influence of Russian media across Central Asia.

The Concept of Migration Policy of the Kyrgyz Republic for 2021–2030 (2021) remains the principal legal instrument governing migration. One of its priorities is the creation of a unified job database with remote online access for employers and jobseekers. As of February 2025, the Migrant.kg portal is fully operational, enabling overseas jobseekers to submit forms that are forwarded to private employment agencies and providing updated information on employment opportunities abroad.

Beyond migration dynamics, Kyrgyzstan's social and cultural processes reflect a complex interplay between traditional structures and contemporary pressures. The education system remains central to social development, yet continues to face challenges related to unequal access, limited funding, and disparities between urban and rural areas (Muratalieva et al., 2025; Ostapenko et al., 2025). Traditional cultural practices, including folk festivals, oral heritage, craftsmanship, and community-based cultural activities, continue to sustain social cohesion and national identity. However, these cultural forms are increasingly vulnerable due to globalisation and limited institutional support. Chronic underfunding of the cultural and creative sectors constrains their development and international visibility, indicating that although Kyrgyzstan retains a strong cultural foundation, its sustainability is threatened by structural limitations that distinguish its

trajectory from that of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Digitalisation also produces uneven social outcomes, particularly for low-income and rural populations. Limited digital infrastructure, insufficient digital literacy, and disparities in internet connectivity restrict access to technological benefits (Bayandinova et al., 2012; Kengesbayeva et al., 2025). In Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, such inequalities risk deepening socio-economic divides, demonstrating that digitalisation requires targeted policy support to enhance social resilience.

The COVID-19 pandemic also accelerated the digitalisation of public services in Uzbekistan (Manghisi et al., 2020). Since 2021, all regions have implemented an automated system for disbursing social benefits through the Unified Register of Social Protection. This mechanism integrates databases from multiple ministries and agencies, significantly reducing the documentation burden for applicants (Kun.uz, 2023). Citizens no longer need to submit multiple applications, as the system generates them automatically. According to official statistics (Application for entry..., 2025), uptake of the registry-based service has increased rapidly: between January and early February 2025, more than 12,500 applications were submitted via the registry, compared with fewer than 800 through public service centres. These developments reflect broader social transformations aimed at protecting women and vulnerable groups. Taken together, digitalisation has become a foundation for social reform during periods of crisis across Central Asia, although it is accompanied by certain security risks (Table 1).

The ongoing digitalisation processes present significant risks to the cybersecurity environments of the states under consideration. Although several indicators recorded in the table appear comparatively high, the overall level of cyber protection remains moderate. The cybercrime-risk index also demonstrates an inverse relationship with the economic capabilities of individual states, suggesting that weaker economies face proportionally greater

exposure to cyber threats. Within the current geopolitical climate, strengthening cyber resilience represents a particularly complex challenge for Kyrgyzstan, where institutional capacity and technological infrastructure remain limited. These observations correspond with the findings of Weng and Wu (2024), who argued that Kazakhstan exemplifies rapid digital development, yet continues to exhibit vulnerabilities in its cybersecurity posture.

Table 1: Cyber Threat Risks in the Central Asian Region					
	National Cybersecurity Score	Cybercrime Exposure Index	Global Cybersecurity Index	Cyber Resilience Index	Overall score
Kazakhstan	48	42	93	73	69
Kyrgyzstan	38	31	50	76	52
Uzbekistan	36	28	71	73	57
Source: Compiled by the Authors based on MixMode (2024)					

Political Transformation of the Region

The political legacy of the post-1991 period has constituted one of the most significant crises in Kazakhstan’s contemporary development. Following the dissolution of the USSR, political authority was consolidated by elites who had occupied positions within the Soviet administrative system and who subsequently rose to power under the banner of democratisation. In practice, however, Kazakhstan, like many former Soviet republics, witnessed the emergence of a new authoritarian power vertical centred on a single individual for an extended period. The concentration of authority in the hands of one leader or a narrow elite became a defining political challenge.

A pivotal moment in Kazakhstan’s political transformation occurred during the January 2022 protests (Deutsche Welle, 2023). Prior to these events, Tokayev had assumed the presidency in 2019 (Ukrainska Pravda, 2019). Although his election symbolised political change after decades of Nazarbayev’s leadership, Tokayev declared in his inaugural address that it was necessary to immortalise the name of “our great compatriot”, the First President of Kazakhstan, N. Nazarbayev (Ukrainska Pravda, 2019). Terzyan (2022) similarly observed that Tokayev initially sought continuity with Nazarbayev’s legacy, and that the former president’s enduring influence constrained independent policy-making. The protests, which began in response to rising gas

prices, rapidly evolved into political demonstrations demanding the removal of Nazarbayev’s remaining formal powers. This shift reflected widespread public fatigue with his long-standing dominance.

The aftermath of the protests included symbolic and legal measures aimed at dismantling Nazarbayev’s legacy. In January 2023, the Constitutional Court ruled that there were no legal grounds to preserve the Law “On the First President of the Republic of Kazakhstan – Elbasy” (Orda, 2023a). As a result, Nazarbayev was stripped of his Elbasy status, a central pillar of his personality cult. Radio Azattyk (2023) reported that he was also deprived of his honorary senator title, and the capital city reverted from Nur-Sultan to Astana. Caron (2023) described this process, which included the revocation of honorary status and constitutional protections, as “denazarbaevification”. Since Nazarbayev was no longer recognised as Elbasy, public insults directed at him ceased to constitute a criminal offence following amendments to the Criminal Code (Orda, 2023b).

Kyrgyzstan is widely regarded as the most democratically developed state in Central Asia (Global State..., 2025), yet it faces persistent challenges to political stability and security. One of the principal risks is the potential for increased radicalisation, associated with constitutional amendments adopted through the 2021 referendum. The revised Constitution

designates the President as both head of state and government, with authority to appoint the Prime Minister, chair Cabinet meetings, and exercise executive power (Deutsche Welle, 2021). Notably, the preamble of the Constitution omits reference to the rule of law and instead emphasises traditional values and ancestral heritage. This concentration of power may erode political pluralism and heighten the risks of authoritarianism, instability, and revolutionary upheaval. Kurmanov and Knox (2022) expressed similar concerns, noting that although Kyrgyzstan had progressed further toward democratic governance than its more authoritarian neighbours, recurrent political revolutions repeatedly transformed the state from a republic into a quasi-autocracy.

The unstable geopolitical climate of the 2020s further undermines Kyrgyzstan's prospects for sustainable development. The country's geography places it within a zone of competing regional powers, including China and Turkey, each pursuing divergent interests. Kyrgyzstan's economic and infrastructural dependencies significantly limit its decision-making autonomy. As of the first nine months of 2024, China was the largest investor, contributing USD 221.5 million (Tazabek, 2025). Calabrese (2024) noted that Chinese investment, negligible in the early 2000s, reached nearly forty per cent of total foreign direct investment by the late 2010s, primarily targeting manufacturing, mining, and financial intermediation (SpecialEurasia, 2024). Aguirre-Unceta (2024) emphasised that Kyrgyzstan's macroeconomic growth has been highly volatile due to vulnerability to external shocks, with China serving as the primary external creditor. Kyrgyzstan also occupies a strategic position between Russian and Chinese interests. For China, the country is central to the Belt and Road Initiative, while Russia views it as instrumental in circumventing sanctions imposed after its full-scale invasion of Ukraine (Eurasianet, 2025). Roberts and Ziemer (2024) similarly argued that Russia's regional allies have demonstrated willingness to assist in sanction circumvention, citing the disappearance of up to USD 1 billion worth of EU-bound goods during transit through Russia to Kazakhstan and

Kyrgyzstan. Consequently, strategic competition among external actors has a dual effect: it increases the risk of secondary sanctions due to cooperation with Russia, while deepening political dependency on China.

These constitutional changes have reshaped formal institutions and altered patterns of governance. The concentration of executive authority has diminished parliamentary influence and shifted decision-making toward centralised models. This reflects elements of authoritarian adaptation, whereby institutional reforms maintain political stability while limiting pluralism. In comparative perspective, Kyrgyzstan's trajectory differs from Kazakhstan, where reforms combine controlled liberalisation with institutional continuity, and from Uzbekistan, where gradual reforms aim to balance state control with economic modernisation.

External actors also exert significant influence over Kyrgyzstan's domestic political processes and public opinion. Chinese investment supports infrastructure and economic growth but increases financial dependency and constrains policy autonomy (Tsyrfya et al., 2024; Panteghini & Schjelderup, 2006). Russia maintains influence through media presence, labour-migration channels, and security cooperation, shaping political narratives and public perceptions. These overlapping pressures contribute to political uncertainty and limit independent reform trajectories.

Political transformation in Uzbekistan has followed a distinct path. Yusupov, writing for Svidomi (Ihnatenko et al., 2023), argued that Uzbekistan remains an authoritarian state, particularly under its first president, I. Karimov. Efforts at "decolonisation", understood as distancing from Russian history, culture, and politics, largely served to consolidate presidential authority. Genuine decolonisation did not occur, as nostalgia for the Soviet era remains widespread and Russian propaganda continues to exert influence through mass media (Barlybayev & Turginbayeva, 2025; Doroshko & Tsyrfya, 2021). Uzbekistan previously exhibited ideological dependency on Russia in legal

drafting, with legislation written first in Russian and later translated into Uzbek. This practice has now been discontinued. By 2025, most officials preferred to use Uzbek, and legal drafts were required to be submitted solely in the state language. Schmitz (2023) noted that social movements advocating equal status for Uzbek and Russian were active in the late 1980s, culminating in the 1989 law establishing Uzbek as the state language. This is significant, as language embodies national identity. As of 2025, the current version of the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. 167-I “On the State of the Republic” (1995) stipulates Uzbek as the official language. Kabulovna (2025) examined language policy in relation to Russian influence, noting that student-led initiatives and grant programmes sponsored by Russia aimed to cultivate a favourable image of Russia in Uzbekistan, potentially eroding national identity.

External actors also shape Uzbekistan’s political and social dynamics. Russia influences public opinion through media, education initiatives, and labour-migration ties, while China’s expanding economic presence strengthens its role in strategic decision-making and

infrastructure development. These pressures encourage a balance between political autonomy and economic dependence. Uzbekistan’s reform trajectory therefore reflects both internal priorities and the need to navigate competing geopolitical interests.

In March 2022, Foreign Minister Kamilov stated that Russia remained a strategic trade partner, while also noting cooperation with Ukraine in trade, culture, education, and agriculture. This balance shifted after 2022. According to the Agency of Statistics under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan (2024), bilateral trade with Russia reached USD 10 billion in 2023, while trade with China totalled USD 13.8 billion. Safiyev (2024), drawing on alternative data, argued that Russia remained Uzbekistan’s top export destination in 2023 with a 10.5 per cent share and the second-largest source of imports at 18.4 per cent. These figures underscore China’s growing importance in the region, particularly in the context of Russia’s geopolitical weakening due to sanctions and international isolation. Efforts to distance itself from Russia have included attempts to establish alternative trade and transport corridors (Figure 1).

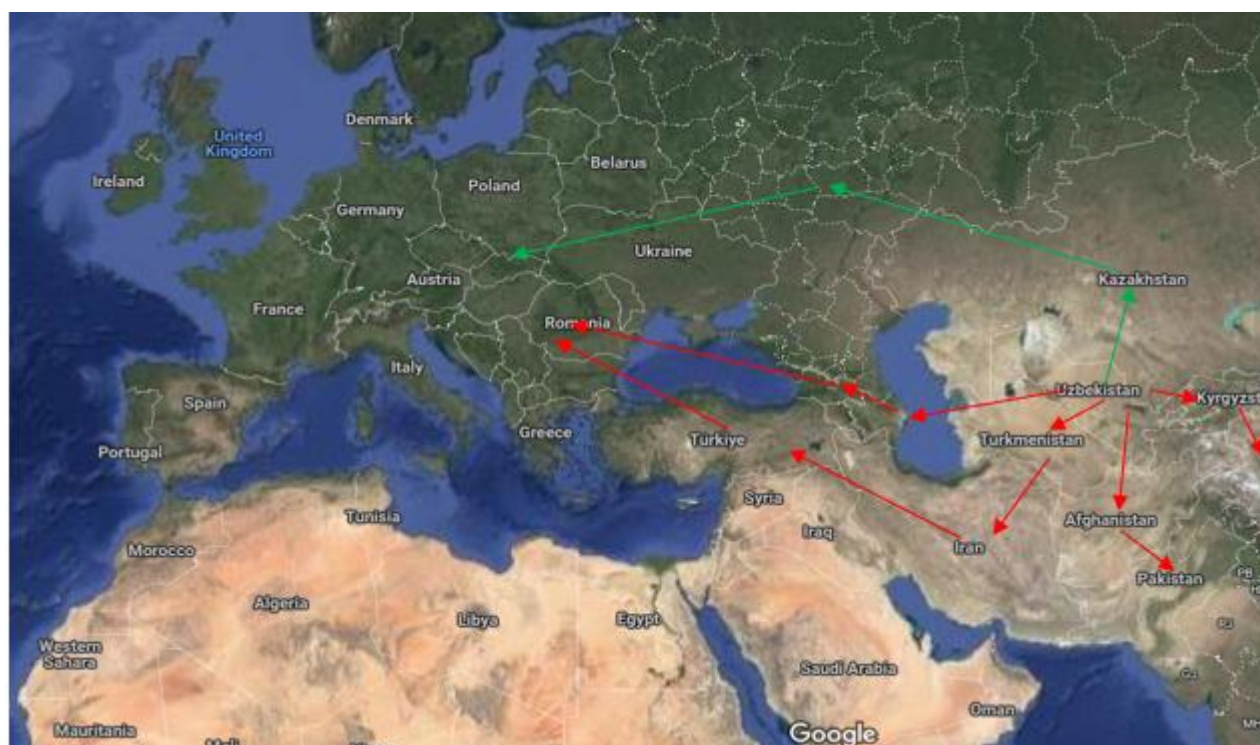


Figure 1: Alternative trade routes considered by the Ministry of Transport of Uzbekistan as of early 2025

Note: —→ — alternative trade routes; —→ — traditional route for trade with Europe.

Source: Compiled by the Authors based on News Central Asia (2025).

The developments outlined above demonstrate that the government of Uzbekistan is actively seeking to diversify its trade routes in order to reduce both economic and transit dependency. This strategic shift reflects the limitations of previously established corridors, which assumed the transit of goods through Kazakhstan and other neighbouring states. Continued reliance on these routes may generate reputational risks for the Uzbek government, particularly given the increasing importance of diversifying economic partnerships within the current geopolitical environment. Several of the alternative corridors have been examined by Keliwaal and Mubariz (2024), who emphasised the potential of the Pakistan–Afghanistan–Uzbekistan route, noting its considerable throughput capacity and strategic relevance.

Taken together, these developments indicate that Uzbekistan's political transformation is characterised by a gradual and carefully managed reform trajectory. State-led modernisation is pursued in tandem with the preservation of centralised governance structures, producing a calibrated balance between openness to change and the maintenance of political stability. This approach distinguishes Uzbekistan from the more centralised and increasingly personalised model observed in Kyrgyzstan, as well as from the hybrid reform strategy evident in Kazakhstan, where controlled liberalisation is combined with institutional continuity.

Cultural Transformation in the Region

The cultural transformations unfolding across Central Asia are closely intertwined with the intensifying influence of globalisation, the re-evaluation of national identity, and the expanding role of cultural diplomacy. As noted earlier, the assimilation of numerous ethnic groups during the Soviet period constituted a pervasive crisis phenomenon. According to Radio Azattyk, in 1940 the Soviet government issued a decree mandating the urgent transition of all Turkic republics to the Cyrillic script. This formed part of a broader assimilationist policy designed to reinforce the primacy of the Russian language, culture, and traditions, which were

largely alien to the indigenous peoples of Central Asia. Can (2023) emphasised the scale of these reforms, noting that twenty-one languages changed their alphabets twice, thirteen did so three times, and seven lost their writing systems entirely. These linguistic transformations were implemented hastily and with little regard for cultural continuity.

Kazakhstan's transition from Cyrillic to Latin script has been under discussion since 2006, following a proposal by the country's first president, Nursultan Nazarbayev. The process gained formal momentum in 2017 with the publication of Decree of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 569 "On the Transition of the Kazakh Alphabet from Cyrillic to Latin Script" (2017). As of 2025, the active version of the Latin alphabet remains the one published in April 2021 (Draft Decree..., 2021). The protracted nature of this reform can be attributed in part to the composition of the national elite, many of whom are Russian-speaking Kazakhs who fear political pressure from the Russian Federation. Consequently, Kazakhstan, despite its sovereign status, remains constrained by linguistic and cultural norms imposed first by the USSR and subsequently reinforced by the modern Russian state. The country must therefore take decisive steps to safeguard its language and orthographic standards, as linguistic autonomy is a matter of national dignity.

Crimea.Realities (2024) observed that Russian officials frequently comment on linguistic reforms with overtly chauvinistic undertones. Eisenberg (2022) documented the hostile reaction of the Russian government to Tatarstan's attempt to adopt the Latin script in the early 2000s, and similar responses have been directed at Kazakhstan's efforts two decades later. These reactions reveal the Russian government's broader stance toward attempts to dismantle Soviet-era norms. The so-called "protection of the Russian language" was even cited as one of the pretexts for Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. The script reform in Kazakhstan has therefore generated internal tensions, as public discourse reported by Tengri

News (2023) suggests that opinion is almost evenly divided between supporters and opponents of Latinisation. Bekzhanova and Makoelle (2024) interpreted the reform as a political project aimed at distancing Kazakhstan from Russian influence and the Soviet past, while cautioning that it may also intensify societal polarisation.

In conclusion, Kazakhstan's shift from Cyrillic to Latin script carries profound cultural, linguistic, and security implications. The reform has produced internal disagreements, with some citizens viewing it as a necessary step toward cultural sovereignty and others regarding it as an unnecessary and burdensome change. This polarisation heightens social tension and may contribute to political instability. Moreover, the Russian government interprets such reforms as geopolitical challenges, potentially increasing pressure on Kazakhstan.

Globalisation has also posed significant challenges for Uzbek culture (Doszhan, 2023; Jahelka, 2024). A structured response is required, as globalisation may lead to cultural homogenisation and the erosion of distinctive national traits. Triana and Sari (2023) argued that one of the potential consequences of globalisation is the loss of unique cultural identities under the weight of a uniform global culture and economy. In response, Uzbekistan has undertaken proactive efforts to revive and promote its national culture throughout the 2020s. A prominent example is the Bukhara Biennale, scheduled for late 2025 (Uzbekistan Daily, 2024). The event is expected to become one of the most significant cultural initiatives in Central Asia, bringing together artists and cultural practitioners from around the world while showcasing the richness of Uzbek cultural heritage. The Biennale, developed by the Art and Culture Development Foundation of the Republic of Uzbekistan, forms part of a broader strategy to preserve and promote national culture through international collaborations, restoration of heritage sites, creation of art spaces, and partnerships with leading museums and cultural institutions.

Another major cultural initiative is the Renovation of Cultural Institutions Programme (Art and Culture Development Foundation, 2025). This programme aims to modernise the infrastructure of four key cultural institutions: the State Museum of Arts of Uzbekistan, the State Museum of Applied Arts of Uzbekistan, the Aibek House Museum, and the State Art Museum named after I. V. Savitsky. The reforms include an international open call for the directorship of the Savitsky Museum, systematic cataloguing, digital galleries, audio guides, and augmented-reality technologies. Alzhanova et al. (2024) noted that Uzbekistan demonstrates the highest level of governmental engagement among the Central Asian republics in renovating cultural institutions, particularly museums.

These initiatives allow Uzbekistan to address the challenges of globalisation by safeguarding cultural heritage while integrating into the global cultural arena. They represent a strategic response to the threat of cultural homogenisation and reinforce culture as a pillar of societal resilience and social cohesion.

Kyrgyzstan, a country with rich cultural traditions, also faces risks associated with globalisation. Traditional practices, including folk festivals such as Nooruz, crafts such as felt-making and yurt decoration, and oral heritage linked to epic traditions such as *Manas*, continue to play a vital role in preserving national identity and social cohesion (Eralieva, 2022; Ivashko et al., 2020). These cultural forms are maintained at the community level and reflect deep historical continuity. However, their sustainability is threatened by limited institutional support and insufficient funding, particularly in the creative industries (Khurova, 2025). Political instability and recurring revolutions often disrupt governance and deprioritise cultural policy.

Kyrgyzstan's small economic base further constrains cultural development. The state of the film industry illustrates this challenge. According to filmmaker E. Djumakmatova, members of the Kyrgyz Association of Film Producers sustain ninety per cent of the industry's activities, while government support

remains minimal (Khurova, 2025). The country lacks a fully developed film sector, although some progress has occurred following the adoption of Presidential Decree No. 159 “On Measures for the Development of the National Film Industry” (2022). Despite these improvements, Kyrgyz cinema has yet to achieve international recognition at major festivals such as Cannes, Venice, Berlin, or Toronto. Djumakmatova also noted that international benchmarks recommend allocating at least 0.1 per cent of the national budget to the film industry, whereas Kyrgyzstan allocated only 0.03–0.04 per cent up to 2025. Eralieva (2022) similarly observed that creative industries contribute only one per cent of national GDP.

In summary, the countries examined exhibit varying degrees of success in mitigating the cultural pressures associated with globalisation. These differences are shaped primarily by the economic capacities of the respective states, which determine the scale, direction, and sustainability of internal cultural transformations.

Conclusion

The research findings indicate that the dynamics of social transformation across Central Asia reflect profound changes that have unfolded under the pressure of global crises. One of the most consequential crises for Kazakhstan, shared by many post-Soviet states, was the dissolution of the USSR. Although Kazakhstan successfully consolidated itself as a sovereign state, it continued to face structural challenges associated with a poorly diversified economy and unequal access to social services. A significant step toward systematising social policy under the new administration was the adoption of the Social Code. The pandemic period also accelerated the digitalisation of healthcare services, prompting a shift to online formats. Nevertheless, the overall standard of healthcare provision remains insufficient.

Kyrgyzstan continues to grapple with the persistent challenge of extensive outbound labour migration. More than one million citizens leave the country annually in search of

employment, predominantly in Russia, where they face heightened risks, including recruitment into the occupying army involved in Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine. In Uzbekistan, the 2020s have been marked by notable progress in digitalisation, exemplified by the implementation of the Unified Register of Social Protection. However, these advancements have been accompanied by growing cybersecurity threats, reflecting the region’s generally weak cyber-protection infrastructure.

The political transformation of Central Asia is characterised by a tension between authoritarian tendencies and democratisation processes. This dichotomy was particularly evident in Kazakhstan, where developments in 2022 and 2023 signalled a symbolic rupture with the past. Former president Nursultan Nazarbayev was stripped of his honorary titles, and the capital city reverted to its previous name, Astana. These measures marked the beginning of a dismantling of the personality cult that had shaped Kazakhstan’s political landscape for decades. In contrast, Kyrgyzstan, often regarded as the most democratic state in the region, adopted constitutional amendments in 2021 that significantly strengthened presidential powers. This shift may have serious implications, particularly given the potential for radicalisation of public sentiment and the recurrence of political revolutions. Uzbekistan’s political trajectory has been shaped by the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, yet this did not result in a revision of its relations with Russia, which remained a strategically important trading partner after 2022. The structure of trade volumes nonetheless shifted, with China becoming Uzbekistan’s primary trade partner, accounting for USD 13.8 billion compared with Russia’s USD 10 billion. Despite maintaining ties with Russia, Uzbekistan has explored alternative trade routes, with relevant ministries discussing corridors to Europe via Turkey, Azerbaijan, and Georgia rather than through Kazakhstan and Russia.

Cultural transformation represents another major challenge for the region. In Kazakhstan, the transition to the Latin alphabet, initiated in

2006 and significantly accelerated after 2017, constitutes both a linguistic reform and a political effort to distance the nation from its Soviet legacy and, more specifically, from Russian influence. This process has generated substantial societal tension and carries the risk of retaliatory measures from Russia. Uzbekistan is undergoing an active phase of cultural transformation, exemplified by the forthcoming Bukhara Biennale in 2025 and the renovation of major cultural institutions. These initiatives enhance the visibility of Uzbek culture and promote national heritage both domestically and internationally. Kyrgyzstan, by contrast, faces considerable obstacles in developing its cultural sector, largely due to limited economic capacity and recurring political revolutions that have relegated cultural priorities to the margins. Even with the adoption of presidential decrees such as the 2022 measure aimed at supporting the national film industry, funding for creative sectors remains minimal, creating a risk of cultural erosion in an increasingly globalised world.

The conclusions presented here summarise the principal findings for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, while acknowledging that the analysis of other Central Asian states remains limited. Future research could examine the potential consequences of the closure or downsizing of USAID programmes for the development of creative industries and civil-society organisations in the region.

The primary limitations of this study relate to political censorship and strict control over the information space, which necessitated the exclusion of Tajikistan and Turkmenistan from the analysis.

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Ethical Approval

Ethical approval was not required for this study because it involved only the analysis of publicly available documents, reports, legislation, media sources, and secondary statistical data and did not involve human participants or the collection of personal data.

Conflict of Interest

The authors have no conflicts of interest.

AI Statement

The authors used AI-based tools for limited proofreading and language refinement. All

proposed changes were carefully and critically assessed by the authors before inclusion, with full responsibility for the final manuscript retained by the authors.