

Geopolitical reorienta- tions in Central Asia

Diplomatic balancing in a pro-Russian region

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Preface

As a state deeply entangled in the world order that emerged after the collapse of the Soviet Union, Germany is well aware of how geopolitical shifts affect both foreign and domestic politics. Being a member of the European community of states and of NATO, however, Germany has had an almost natural position in “the West” - which has only now been challenged to some extent. For many decades, the states of the Central Asian region were heavily dependent on Moscow alone. Only after 1991 did other options become available to them, each with their own specific challenges. Associate Fellow Karolina Kluczevska uses her longstanding expertise in the region, in particular Tajikistan, to show how the five Central Asian states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan) have adapted to geopolitical changes and learned to use their seemingly limited geographical and economic capabilities to their benefit. The conclusions she draws on how differently they engage with their distant partners such as the European or neighbours like China demonstrate that, for better or for worse, no state can afford to turn their back on geopolitics.

Als Staat, der tief in die nach dem Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion entstandene Weltordnung eingebunden ist, ist sich Deutschland sehr wohl bewusst, wie sich geopolitische Verschiebungen sowohl auf die Außen- als auch auf die Innenpolitik auswirken. Als Mitglied der Europäischen Gemeinschaft und der NATO nahm Deutschland jedoch eine fast selbstverständliche Position im „Westen“ ein – die erst jetzt in gewissem Maße in Frage gestellt wird. Viele Jahrzehnte lang waren die Staaten Zentralasiens stark von Moskau abhängig. Erst nach 1991 eröffneten sich ihnen andere Optionen, die jeweils mit spezifischen Herausforderungen verbunden waren. Unsere Associate Fellow Karolina Kluczevska nutzt ihre langjährige Expertise in der Region, insbesondere in Tadschikistan, um aufzuzeigen, wie sich die fünf zentralasiatischen Staaten (Kasachstan, Kirgisistan, Tadschikistan, Turkmenistan und Usbekistan) an geopolitische Veränderungen angepasst und gelernt haben, ihre scheinbar begrenzten geografischen und wirtschaftlichen Möglichkeiten zu ihrem Vorteil zu nutzen. Ihre Schlussfolgerungen dazu, wie unterschiedlich diese Staaten mit ihren weit entfernten Partnern wie Europa oder Nachbarn wie China umgehen, zeigen, dass es sich kein Staat – ob zum Guten oder zum Schlechten – leisten kann, der Geopolitik den Rücken zu kehren.

Katja Freistein

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Abstract: *For a long time, Central Asia was a pro-Russian region. After gaining independence following the fall of the Soviet Union in 1991, the five Central Asian countries remained largely oriented towards Russia, seeing it as a Soviet successor state. Albeit to a different degree, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan continued to perceive Russia as a crucial reference point in their foreign and domestic policies. This discussion paper provides an overview of Central Asia's relations with Russia between 1991 and 2026, focusing on tectonic geopolitical shifts which started in the region after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This major world event resulted in Russia being isolated by much of the Western world and caused economic turbulences on the Russian market. This, in turn, made Russia demand loyalty from its traditional allies in Central Asia, and their unexpected silence resulted in Russia putting increasing pressures on governments in the region. While disentangling from Russia would not be feasible for these five countries, they have become more pragmatic in their perceptions of Russia. Consequently, they started a diplomatic balancing with Russia to make the most of their structurally subordinated positions vis-à-vis this regional hegemon. This paper analyses how Central Asian policymakers are diversifying their international networks and looking for alternative partners and migration destinations while taking care not to antagonise Russia. Although Russia uses various types of leverage and threats against countries in the region in its claim for unconditional loyalty, Central Asia nonetheless manages to skilfully reaffirm its sovereignty.*

Abstract: *Lange Zeit war Zentralasien eine pro-russische Region. Seit ihrer Unabhängigkeit nach dem Zusammenbruch der Sowjetunion im Jahr 1991 orientierten sich die fünf zentralasiatischen Länder weitgehend an Russland und betrachteten es als Nachfolgestaat der Sowjetunion. Wenn auch in unterschiedlichem Maße, sahen Kasachstan, Kirgistan, Tadschikistan, Turkmenistan und Usbekistan Russland weiterhin als entscheidenden Bezugspunkt in ihrer Außen- und Innenpolitik an. Dieses Diskussionspapier bietet einen Überblick über die Beziehungen Zentralasiens zu Russland zwischen 1991 und 2026 und konzentriert sich dabei auf die tiefgreifenden geopolitischen Verschiebungen, die in der Region nach dem russischen Einmarsch in die Ukraine im Jahr 2022 einsetzten. Dieses bedeutende weltpolitische Ereignis führte zur Isolation Russlands durch einen Großteil der westlichen Welt und löste wirtschaftliche Turbulenzen auf dem russischen Markt aus. Dies wiederum veranlasste Russland, von seinen traditionellen Verbündeten in Zentralasien Loyalität einzufordern, und deren unerwartetes Schweigen führte dazu, dass Russland den Druck auf die Regierungen in der Region zunehmend verstärkte. Auch wenn eine vollständige Loslösung von Russland für diese fünf Länder nicht realisierbar wäre, wurden sie in ihrer Wahrnehmung Russlands pragmatischer. Infolgedessen begannen sie, diplomatisch zwischen Russland und anderen Akteuren zu balancieren, um das Beste aus ihrer strukturell untergeordneten Position in den Beziehungen zur regionalen Hegemonialmacht zu machen. In diesem Beitrag wird analysiert, wie politische Entscheidungsträger in Zentralasien ihre internationalen Netzwerke diversifizieren und nach alternativen Partnern und Migrationszielen suchen, ohne dabei Russland zu verärgern. Obwohl Russland in seinem Bestreben nach bedingungsloser Loyalität verschiedene Arten von Druckmitteln und Drohungen gegen Länder in der Region einsetzt, gelingt es Zentralasien dennoch, seine Souveränität geschickt zu bekräftigen.*

1. Introduction: Still a pro-Russian region?

One of the most prominent and stable features of international relations in Central Asia has been the region's pro-Russian orientation. Albeit to a different degree, since 1991 Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan have all perceived Russia as a crucial reference point in their domestic and foreign policies. This loyalty stemmed from pragmatic, historical and ideological considerations. Relations with Russia were attributed a status of a 'strategic partnership' (стратегическое партнерство) in key Central Asian foreign policy documents. In public and popular discourses, Russia has often been described as an 'older brother'. It is hard to estimate to what extent such subordination to Russia was voluntarily and to what extent it was imposed. It was likely both.

On their part, Russian political elites endorsed an idea that Soviet-era hierarchical relations between Moscow and Central Asian socialist republics rightfully translated into Russia's control over governance in this region after 1991 (Sagramoso, 2020; Oskanian, 2021). In Russia's foreign policy, Central Asia has been described as Moscow's 'near abroad' (*ближнее зарубежье*). This attitude reveals the continuity of Russia's 'imperial mindset' towards its wider post-Soviet neighbourhood, including in Central Asia (Nixey, 2022).

The five countries in the region vary in terms of the extent and type of their commitment to Russia, with Tajikistan giving preference to security-oriented cooperation, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan to economy-related cooperation, and Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan adopting more neutral positions. Yet when it comes to foreign policy orientations, in practice all five states have demonstrated similar patterns of submission to Russia. With minor variations in membership, Central Asian states joined several Russia-led regional initiatives and international organisations. These include the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), which serves as the main cooperation and coordination forum of former Soviet states, the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO), which is a Russia-led alternative to NATO, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), which resembles the European Union (EU) (Russo & Gawrich, 2017). Even Turkmenistan, although formally not a member due to its permanent neutrality, maintained an associated status and remained a frequent guest in Russia-led summits and high-level meetings.

Simultaneously, Russia remained the main migration destination of Central Asian labourers who could not make a living in their home countries due to continuing effects of the Soviet collapse and precarity related to the region's integration into the global capitalist economy (Reeves, 2014; Samadov, 2025). Although estimates vary, it is thought that about 10 million migrants, primarily from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, became a vital part of Russia's capitalist economy and labour force over the last three decades (Abashin, 2014; Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022). Labour migration constitutes a key aspect of Central Asian economies and consequently of bilateral relations with Russia. Since the late

1990s, labour migration has been one of Russia's main instruments of exercising pressure over the region. To a large extent, it allowed Russia to hold all the cards in relations with Central Asia.

This pro-Russian status quo in international relations in Central Asia suddenly changed with the full-scale invasion of Ukraine in 2022. That major world event resulted in Russia being isolated by much of the Western world and caused economic turbulences on the Russian market, albeit far from its foreseen collapse (Timofeev, 2023). Despite multiple pressures from Russia, none of its traditional allies in Central Asia has officially supported the invasion. Indeed, somewhat surprisingly to the Russian government and many international observers, the five states opted for a 'strategic silence' on the matter (Dadabaev & Sonoda, 2023), whilst all attempting to uphold constructive ties with Russia.

This discussion paper provides an overview of Central Asia's relations with Russia between 1991 and 2026, focusing on tectonic geopolitical shifts which have occurred in the region since 2022. This analysis of evolving partnerships explores the links between international relations, political power and geopolitical factors such as location, natural resources and labour migration, the latter occupying a similar role to raw materials in international relations in this region.

The paper argues that a subtle geopolitical reorientation began in Central Asia following Russia's war on Ukraine, with Central Asia's relations with Russia becoming more strained in the face of increasing pressures exerted by Russia, including demanding unconditional loyalty from countries that it considered unquestionable allies. Such heightened displays of superiority towards Central Asia, often openly relying on blackmail and coercion, met with scepticism in local policymaking circles. While disentangling from Russia would not be feasible for countries in the region, they have become more pragmatic in their perceptions of Russia. Consequently, they started using the unique resources at their disposal to fully exploit their asymmetrical relations with Russia. They simultaneously accelerated the diversification of their foreign policy partnerships to build alternative networks in Europe and the US, Asia and the Middle East. These strategies can be characterised as diplomatic balancing acts. While diplomatic balancing is traditionally observed in international relations when smaller countries navigate between various competing powers, in Central Asia it involves the careful managing of relations with one dominant hegemon, Russia, while attempting to safeguard individual national interests.

Given this general trend emerging in the region, the paper zooms in on the respective bilateral relations of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan with Russia. It outlines the main features of these relations before and after 2022, pointing out major shifts caused by Russia's war on Ukraine.

2. Geopolitical reorientations

Table: Visual representation of geopolitical (re)orientations in Central Asia

	KAZAKH-STAN	TAJIKI-STAN	KYRGYZ-STAN	UZBEKI-STAN	TURK-MENISTAN
Before 2022					
Major domestic issues	Oil as a growth driver	Civil war 1992-97	Popular uprisings 2005, 2010, 2020	Hyper-centralisation of power under Kari-mov	Gas as a growth driver
International relations approach	Multi-vector; Eurasian	Open door foreign policy; priority to Russia, China, the US	Some manoeuvring between Russia and the US; dependence on China	Isolationist; since 2016 focus on East Asia	Positive neutrality
Relations with Russia	Symbiotic; Moscow-led integration	Highly subordinated; some Moscow-led integration	Highly subordinated; Moscow-led integration	Pragmatic; cautious towards Moscow-led integration	Transactional approach to Russia
Links with Russia	Trade; oil exports	Security; labour migration	Trade; labour migration	Labour migration	Gas exports
Since 2022					
Stance on Russia's invasion of Ukraine	Neutrality; pragmatic; serving as a re-export hub to Russia	Neutrality; increasingly observing Western sanctions	Neutrality; serving as a re-export hub to Russia	Neutrality; avoiding antagonising Russia	Neutrality
International relations strategy	Broadening multi-vector foreign policy	Piloting new migration schemes	Debt and loans from China	East Asia focus; rapprochement with China; expanding migration schemes	Positive neutrality while coming closer to Russia
Issues of contention with Russia	Promotion of Kazakh language; lowering	Terrorist attack in Krokus 2024	Pressures over Western	Uzbekistan's government openly	Frequent disagreements over gas pricing

Threats from Russia	the status of Russian language		sanctions enforcement	critical of mistreatment of migrants	
	Russia often questions Kazakhstan's sovereignty	Discrimination of labour migrants in Russia	Discrimination of labour migrants in Russia	Sporadic claims to the country's sovereignty; discrimination of labour migrants in Russia	N / A
Historiographical revisions	Kazakh famine 1930-33	Russian Empire's expansion to Central Asia in the 19 th century	Rehabilitation of the Basmachi movement; celebrating the Jadids	Rehabilitation of the Basmachi movement	Toning down the Memory Day

2.1 Kazakhstan

Before 2022: Positive-sum (political and personal) relations with Russia

For policymakers of newly independent Kazakhstan there were some reasons to be worried. Kazakhstan shares its entire northern border with Russia and in 1991 about 35% of its population were ethnic Russians. Indeed, in years to come Russia would actively claim the protection of ethnic Russians and Russian-speakers abroad – a concept which became known as 'Russian World' (Русский мир). Consequently, since the early 1990s Kazakhstan has championed a multi-vector foreign policy, branded as 'Eurasian', which aimed at discursively positioning the country at the crossroads of Europe and Asia (Insebayeva, 2015; Anceschi, 2020). In addition to defining its place in the post-1991 multipolar world, this could be seen as one of Kazakhstan's early strategies to assert its sovereignty from Russia, while maintaining positive bilateral relations.

After its independence, Kazakhstan's main export product, oil, also became its major growth driver (Ostrowski, 2010). Hand in hand with this development, neopatrimonialism and the informal economy kept growing, becoming the key pillars of regime stability (Tutumlu & Rustemov, 2021). Amidst capitalist transformation, the country's political elites, led by President Nursultan Nazarbayev, continued to amass personal fortunes. Russia played a major role in establishing this new status quo: it was Kazakhstan's major economic partner and the oil export routes passed directly through Russian territory. Mutual economic convenience translated into political intertwining. Both countries became founding members of the CSTO, EAEU and SCO. Overall, until 2022 Kazakhstan and Russia were

close political allies, even if Russia was in the driving seat. Yet in comparison with other Central Asian countries, Kazakhstan clearly enjoyed less hierarchical bilateral relations with Russia.

When Nazarbayev unexpectedly stepped down as president in 2019, he was replaced by Kassym-Jomart Tokayev. That move was only possible with Russia's endorsement (President of Russia, 2019). On the eve of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Russia granted Tokayev a personal favour. In January 2022, a series of mass protests against rising oil prices, social inequalities and governance in general emerged across Kazakhstan. At Tokayev's request, Russia deployed its troops as part of the CSTO to help the Kazakh government suppress the unrest under the guise of a peacebuilding mission. This crackdown became widely known as 'Bloody January' (Qandy Qantar) (Abishev et al., 2024).

Just before Russia's invasion of Ukraine, the government of Kazakhstan seemed to share a similar stance Russia. It was also symbolically indebted to Russia for its recent support in 'stabilising' Kazakhstan during the unrest. Given such entangled personal and state relations, it is rather striking that Kazakhstan did 'repay the favour' when Russia demanded proof of its loyalty in February 2022.

After 2022: Diversifying international partnerships under the threat of a 'Ukrainian scenario'

Kazakhstan unexpectedly opted to maintain neutrality towards the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Simultaneously, the country adhered to Western sanctions, did not recognise Russia-occupied Donetsk and Luhansk as independent states, and even sent humanitarian aid to Ukraine (Arynov, 2022; Ambrosio, 2023). These actions, however, should not be interpreted as a sudden breakout from Russia's orbit. Rather, they signal Kazakhstan's attempts to reassert its sovereignty and reestablish relations with Russia on more pragmatic terms in times when Russia became weaker internationally.

Still, the economic interdependence of the two countries should not be underestimated. Kazakhstan also remains tied to Russia through joint membership in several international and regional organisations. Additionally, Russia continues to be a major trade market for Kazakh goods, as an estimated 30% of its exports go to Russia. Kazakhstan continues to rely on oil transit routes through Russia, with the Northern Corridor remaining the major transport route for 80% of Kazakhstan's oil to Western countries despite Western sanctions on Russia (The Times of Central Asia, 2026). Although the alternative Trans-Caspian International Transport Route, also known as the Middle Corridor, is already operational, it is not operating to its full capacity. Kazakhstan has also played a role in helping Russia bypass Western sanctions and gain access to sanctioned goods by redirecting trade flows and providing a backdoor route for imports (Chupilkin et al., 2026; Center for Global Civic and Political Strategies, 2026).

While attempting to maintain positive relations with Russia for pragmatic reasons, Kazakhstan has continued to pursue its multi-vector foreign policy. It has accelerated cooperation with major international players in fields which are of immediate relevance for the country (Cornell 2023). For example, in September 2022 Chinese President Xi Jinping visited Astana at the invitation of Tokayev to personally attend the China-Central Asia Summit. In the same year, Astana and Istanbul took steps in the direction of broadening oil and gas exports to Turkey, as well as increasing defence cooperation and trade turnover. Also in 2022, the EU and Kazakhstan started developing a memorandum of understanding on a strategic partnership in the sphere of raw materials and renewable energy (European Commission, 2022). These developments reveal that Kazakhstan seeks to expand its international cooperations in multiple spheres, while at the same time avoiding provoking Russia.

Even these small and cautious steps have drawn Russia's attention, however, as over the last few years several high-level politicians, scholars and media figures have adopted an aggressive rhetoric towards Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan's claims to statehood were repeatedly questioned, and it was even suggested that the country could be subject to the next 'special military operation' (*специальная военная операция*), the term that Russia uses for its war in Ukraine (The Diplomat, 2022; Radio Azattyq, 2026). Arguably, these narratives have sought to put pressure on Kazakhstan and punish it for not supporting Russia's war (Kassenova, 2025).

Linguistic and historiographical revisions became another bone of contention. Russia has denounced Kazakhstan's efforts to promote the Kazakh language and boost its use across education, administration and media. Relatedly, Russia also criticised Kazakhstan's constitutional changes that resulted in slightly lowering the status of the Russian language which had previously enjoyed an equal status with Kazakh (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2026). Russia argued that such developments threaten the rights of ethnic Russians living in Kazakhstan, which is a similar claim to the one advanced against Ukraine to justify the invasion. In a similar vein, Russia objected to Kazakhstan's recent reassessments of the Soviet past. In recent years, Kazakhstan has undertaken a critical re-evaluation of Soviet-era repressions and especially the 1930s famine, Asharshylyq, which resulted from forced collectivisation and sedentarisation, and claimed the lives of about 1.5 million people. Meanwhile, given the rehabilitation of Stalin and his violent governance currently taking place in the country, Russia has moved in a diametrically opposite direction in its own historiographical revisions. In view of these differences, prominent Russian figures have again threatened Kazakhstan with 'applying the Ukrainian scenario' (Radio Azattyq, 2026).

These dynamics show that while economic relations between Kazakhstan and Russia have continued as before, Kazakhstan clearly avoids making concessions to Russia on political matters that it considers crucial, in particular related to its sovereignty and language.

Unexpectedly, in 2026 Kazakhstan started extraditing Russian political activists at Russia's request. In 2022, Kazakhstan became the main escape route for Russians who left

the country in opposition to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, or to avoid military conscription. Tens of thousands of people settled in Kazakhstan, with Tokayev pledging that Kazakhstan would ensure their safety at the time. Four years later, however, the country is willing to give these political emigres back to Moscow, even if they are likely to face prosecution at home (Umarov, 2026). This shows that to round off the rough edges, Tokayev's government has started to accommodate Russia on political issues which are not of immediate relevance for Kazakhstan.

2.2 Tajikistan

Before 2022: Dependence on Russia written into the country's post-war political fabric

Tajikistan presents a very different case to Kazakhstan. Since the early 1990s, the country has been in a much more subordinated relationship towards Russia. This is due to the civil war (1992-1997) and a resulting lasting dire economic situation. Tajikistan's independence started with a disastrous civil war during which between 20,000-150,000 people were killed and approximately 20% of the population were displaced internally and externally (Mullojonov, 2022).

Similarly to other prominent conflict zones from the 1990s, such as Kosovo, Sierra Leone and Rwanda, the arrival of Western donors turned Tajikistan in an internationalised state (Heathershaw, 2009). Along with liberal peacebuilding, donors started to actively foster economic liberalisation as a way to rebuild the country's economy and integrate Tajikistan into the post-1991 world. These reforms had unexpected effects, as they provided the southern fighting fraction, which de facto won the war, with a privileged access to state assets and allowed for capital accumulation among new political elites (Nakaya, 2009). Russia also played an important role in empowering the southern fraction by providing it with military support and international legitimacy during and after the war (Atkin, 2012; Klimentov, 2023). From the beginning of their rule, the new political elites, who remain in power until today, have been indebted to Russia. This put Tajikistan's foreign policy on an explicitly pro-Russia tangent.

Tajikistan's dependence on Russia has been additionally exacerbated by the scale of labour migration to the latter. During the 1990s and 2000s, Tajikistan emerged as one of the major providers of cheap labour to Russia, with more than one million out of ten million Tajik citizens having lived and worked there on a temporary or permanent basis (Samadov, 2026). Since for more than thirty years migrants' remittances proved vital for their families back home, mass migration to Russia became intrinsically linked to the notion of 'good life' in Tajikistan (Borisova, 2024). Still, similarly to Kyrgyz and Uzbek citizens, most Tajik migrants have experienced precarious living and working conditions in Russia along with widespread xenophobia and frequent mistreatment by law enforcement bodies.

The volume of migration flows to Russia cemented highly asymmetrical power relations between the two countries. On several occasions when Moscow was not pleased with Tajikistan's domestic and foreign policy, the Russian government openly threatened to deport

migrants to enforce Dushanbe's compliance with its own preferences (Kluczevska & Korneev, 2022). In view of all these dependences and Tajikistan's track record in obeying Russia, it is surprising how much Tajikistan started to carve out small spaces to manoeuvre and challenge the status quo of its subordinated relationship with Russia.

After 2022: Looking for new partnerships under Russia's radar

Like Kazakhstan, Tajikistan did not support Russia's invasion of Ukraine. February 2022 thus marked the beginning of a difficult soft balancing act in which the country's policy-makers tried to avoid acknowledging the conflict, while being constantly pressured by Russia's politicians to take its side in the war (Kluczevska, 2024). In the following months, on multiple occasions high-level Russian political figures insinuated that Tajikistan had expressed its support for Russia (TASS, 2022a). However, the government of Tajikistan refrained from publicly commenting on these claims or entering into any discussion on Ukraine and Russia (Kluczevska, 2022).

This strategic silence, visible in acting as if the war did not take place, reflects the limited choices of the Tajik government. Had it supported Russia, it would have risked losing much of the Western aid upon which the country continues to depend. Had it explicitly sided with the Western countries, it could have expected unprecedented levels of repercussions from Russia (Kluczevska, 2024). Still, Russia did not appreciate Tajikistan's ambiguity. As a result, Tajik labour migrants were subject to an unprecedented crackdown, including deportations and pressures to join the Russian army and fight in Ukraine (Bahovadinova & Borisova, 2025).

Even though the economic situation in Russia deteriorated significantly after 2022, Tajikistan's dependence on Russia grew, not least because the turbulences on the Russian market had a direct impact on Tajikistan's economy, which is highly interconnected with the Russian economy. The conditions of migrants additionally worsened after a terrorist attack at the Crocus City Hall in Moscow Oblast in March 2024, where four Tajik citizens have been accused of killing 151 people. Although the Islamic State claimed responsibility, Russia insisted that Ukraine was involved in the attack (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2025). The incident resulted in discursive persecution of migrants and their deepening mistreatment. Still, remittances sent back to Tajikistan remained high. In 2023, they corresponded to 39% of the country's GDP, and in 2024 and 2025 to 49% (World Bank, 2025).

Against this background, both migrants themselves and the Tajik government started to actively look for alternative destinations to redirect migration flows. The new top destinations are in Europe: United Kingdom, Germany, Poland and the Baltic States (Benedetti et al., 2025). Meanwhile, the government of Tajikistan signed several dedicated migration partnership agreements with the Benelux countries, Germany, United Kingdom, as well as Japan, South Korea and Qatar. However, the quotas allocated to Tajik migrants in these pilot agreements have been but small numbers, for instance only 800 in South Korea and 500 in Qatar (Asia Plus, 2026). Although these new destinations clearly cannot replace

Russia's role in the Tajik migration system, they nonetheless signal that the Tajik government recognised that it is high time for action.

As for sanctions evasion, like its neighbours but on a much smaller scale Tajikistan also initially participated in aiding Russia in this field. However, the costs resulting from being added to Western sanction lists for helping Russia bypass sanctions soon proved too high for the country. By 2026, three Tajik financial institutions had been removed from the EU sanctions lists, to which they were added the previous year, to reward their compliance with the sanctions regime (The Diplomat, 2026). In this regard, over time Tajikistan has diverged from its neighbours in Central Asia.

At the same time, Tajikistan has invested in expanding its commercial networks. New co-operation agreements have been signed with the EU, China, South Korea, Turkey and Arab countries. After Russia had been Tajikistan's main trade partner for over thirty years, China took over that position in 2025. That development marks a culmination of a longer process which coincided with the war in Ukraine: China has been Tajikistan's biggest investor since 2017, while Russia invested less than half of the total of Chinese investment in the same timeframe (The Times of Central Asia, 2025). It appears that in its attempts to disentangle from Russia, Tajikistan is replacing one hegemon with another. China remains high on the political agenda, which is also visible in an intensification of high-level visits by the Tajik leadership to China. In 2026, 700 Chinese companies are active in Tajikistan, with 50 new large-scale commercial cooperation agreements having been signed in the same year (President of Tajikistan, 2026).

Finally, similarly to Kazakhstan, Tajikistan has started to face its own historical disputes with Russia, although the scale of its historical revisionism has been significantly smaller. The controversy broke out in 2024, and the bone of contention concerned the portrayal of Russian 19th century expansion into the territory of contemporary Tajikistan. Tajik history textbooks have described that process as 'colonisation' and 'occupation', unleashing a threatening rhetoric by several Russian politicians and scholars. While previously years the Tajik government would have likely avoided making statements on this issue, in the current geopolitical momentum it even issued a careful, yet firm answer, arguing that such provocations are detrimental to Tajik-Russian relations (Kluczevska, 2025).

In summary, these dynamics illustrate that that Tajikistan has been slowly building its own multi-vector foreign policy. That process has deliberately been kept under Russia's radar, without boasting about it like Kazakhstan, in order not to provoke the hegemon.

2.3 Kyrgyzstan

Before 2022: A firm pro-Russian foreign policy despite tumultuous domestic politics

The case of Kyrgyzstan is somewhat akin to Tajikistan, owing to the countries' similarly structurally subordinated positionality vis-à-vis Russia. Like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan is a small state, and it has been heavily dependent on aid and remittance.

Since the independence, Russia has been Kyrgyzstan's biggest donor. Some of the assistance Russia has provided has been conventional aid, namely development and humanitarian projects, whereas other support, which is more difficult to track due to its secretive nature, has included non-conventional, security and military aid (Sharshenova, 2021). Kyrgyzstan has also emerged as a provider of cheap labour force to Russia, although it is challenging to obtain reliable data on the volume of these migration flows due to different methodologies of counting labour migrants in the conditions of a visa free regime with Russia. However, recent estimates point to about one million citizens of Kyrgyzstan working in Russia, amounting to approximately 70% of all migration flows from Kyrgyzstan (Ryazantsev & Sydygalieva, 2024).

Throughout the 2000s and 2010s, Kyrgyzstan witnessed three major revolutions and several mass public protests, which were seen by Russia as colour revolutions instigated by the West (Heathershaw, 2013). Despite several government changes, the country's foreign policy has nevertheless remained firmly oriented towards Russia. This pro-Russian orientation can be explained by the conflation of Kyrgyzstan's regime security with foreign policy, whereby loyalty to Russia has provided benefits to the country's subsequent political elites (Toktomushev, 2016). These dynamics reveal similarities with Kazakhstan and Tajikistan, where maintaining positive relations with Russia has predominantly been in the personal interest of local political elites.

There was an alternative in terms of available superpower patrons, and Kyrgyzstan engaged in some manoeuvring between them. In the context of 9/11, and the resulting invasion of Afghanistan, in 2001 Kyrgyzstan gained attention from the US. Initially, the country attempted to play Russia and the US off against each other to its own financial benefit. For example, in 2003 Kyrgyzstan started hosting Russian Aerospace Forces units in the Kant facilities, only 20 km away from the American base in Manas (Arynov & Sharipova, 2024). However, over time Moscow succeeded in limiting American influence in the country, with Kyrgyz authorities eventually revoking the concession given to the US whilst the Russian air base remained in place (KNews, 2018). Indeed, the Russian base was upgraded as a logistics centre of the CSTO in 2009, a geostrategic importance maintained to this day. On a political level, Kyrgyzstan thus clearly prioritised Russia.

Since the early 2010s, however, Kyrgyzstan has also been building economic partnerships with China. The country became a vital link in China's Belt and Road Initiative, turning into a regional investment and re-export hub between China and other Central Asian countries (Murtalieva, 2024). This cooperation quickly turned into dependence, as Kyrgyzstan's external debt to China came close to 40% of the country's GDP. Russia pragmatically tolerated these developments, seeing such indebtedness to China as a matter of economic relations, which did not overlap with its own political and military interests in Kyrgyzstan. Due to historical and linguistic ties, Kyrgyz political elites and the public remained attuned

to Russian soft power promotion (Nourzhanov, 2021), while becoming increasingly sceptical of China's expanding presence in the country (Shailoobek Kyzy 2021).

Like Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan opted for closer integration with Russia through its membership in the EAEU. Rather than demonstrating a submissive attitude towards Russia, Kyrgyzstan's 2015 EAEU accession was in the first place in the interest of the country's political elites as it helped them advance their own economic interests. The accession also served as a domestic legitimisation tool, and it was presented to the public as providing the country with more stability (Kudaibergenova, 2016).

Russia also served as a legislation model of several laws adopted by the Kyrgyz government. This includes the controversial 'foreign agent law', signed in 2024 and modelled upon the Russian law from 2012, which requires local non-governmental organisations to register as foreign agents and in practice allows for their crackdown (Kirova, 2024). This example points to active practices of institutional and legal learning between the two countries, although mainly with Kyrgyzstan following Russia's lead.

After 2022: From complicity to small acts of resistance

Following the regional trend, Kyrgyzstan has been engaged in complex balancing with Russia since 2022. The pattern repeated: immediately after Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Moscow claimed that Kyrgyzstan's President Sadyr Japarov had expressed support for Russia and blamed Kyiv for the escalation of Russo-Ukrainian conflict (TASS, 2022b). This stance, however, was neither confirmed nor denied by Kyrgyz authorities.

At the political level, Kyrgyzstan adopted the strategy of 'strategic silence' (Dadabaev & Sonoda, 2023), although in practice the government's attitude has been ambiguous. After Russia launched the war, several anti-war demonstrations in support of Ukraine were held in front of the Russian embassy in Bishkek. A few months later, such anti-war protests were banned by the authorities (openDemocracy, 2023). Over time the government of Kyrgyzstan became more responsive to Russia's demands. Like Kazakhstan, it began deporting Russian political activists who had relocated to Central Asia after the invasion of Ukraine (openDemocracy, 2023).

At the economic level, trade between the two countries surged, allowing Russia to bypass Western sanctions (Engvall, 2023). When the first sanctions were announced, the value of exports from Germany to Kyrgyzstan suddenly increased by 1320%: from a turnover of 59.3 million USD in 2021 to 783 million USD in 2023. Simultaneously, Kyrgyz exports to Russia rose by 273%: from 392 million USD in 2021 to 1.07 billion USD the following year (Heldung, 2026). These numbers reveal that Kyrgyzstan became a major re-export hub for sanctioned goods to Russia.

Much like the government's stance, public attitudes to the invasion of Ukraine were initially ambiguous. A poll conducted in Kyrgyzstan by Central Asia Barometer indicated that 36%

of respondents blamed Ukraine for the invasion, and only 14% Russia (Eurasianet, 2022). However, results obtained in a survey conducted by Internews together with the European Neighbourhood Council around the same time indicated that 34% primarily blamed the US, 11% Ukraine and 13% Russia (Versterbye et al., 2023). Rather than providing a public assessment of this conflict, these data revealed widespread public affinity for Russia. In the years that followed, however, public views largely shifted as a result of increasing repercussions faced by Kyrgyz labour migrants. Public support for Russia and the EAEU has been slowly but surely declining as a far-away war has had a direct negative impact on the citizens of Kyrgyzstan, (Arynov & Takenov, 2026).

Since 2022, reports started to emerge that Kyrgyz migrants in Russia have been increasingly facing barriers to access medical care and schooling for children, in addition to rising numbers of labourers either being banned from entering Russia or deported from Russia in unclear circumstances (24kg, 2026). Already in 2024, the volume of labour migration to Russia had halved compared to the previous year, amounting to 350,000 people (Radio Free Europe/Azattyk, 2025). As a result, several Kyrgyz politicians began publicly denouncing the mistreatment of Kyrgyz migrants in Russia, arguing that it contradicted the spirit of the EAEU treaty which gives them the same working rights as Russian citizens. Between 2023 and 2025 about one thousand Kyrgyz citizens, mostly labour migrants, allegedly joined the Russian Army to fight in Ukraine (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2025). Like in the case of Tajik and Uzbek migrants, this enlistment campaign has been characterised by high levels of coercion and involved Russian police conducting raids on migrants. That recruitment drive accelerated in 2025, with Kyrgyzstan's security services even detaining several Russian nationals who were recruiting Kyrgyz citizens directly in Kyrgyzstan (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2025).

In view of clearly worsening relations with Russia, the revision of pre-Soviet and Soviet-era history has also gathered speed in Kyrgyzstan. This process has been mainly centred on rehabilitation of the Basmachi, an anti-Russian and anti-Soviet resistance movement which was active in the region between 1918 and the mid-1930s. While Soviet and contemporary Russian historiography portrays the Basmachi as bandits, they were now re-framed in Kyrgyzstan as anti-colonisation fighters. Following hectic state and public debates, in 2024 President Japarov signed a law on the rehabilitation of victims of political repressions who were exiled, persecuted or executed in Stalinist times (24kg, 2024). It is remarkable that these revisionist efforts took place despite negative reactions from Russia.

Overall, Kyrgyzstan's position towards the war in Ukraine was initially ambiguous. Bishkek refrained from commenting on the war, while being largely complicit in evading sanctions. Over time, however, as Russia exerted increasing pressure on the government and the population, Kyrgyzstan started carving out small spaces to manoeuvre internationally and even displaying small-scale resistance towards Russia.

2.4 Uzbekistan

Before 2022: From isolationist policies to a sudden opening up internationally

Uzbekistan officially adopted a multi-vector foreign policy under President Islam Karimov (1991-2016). In practice, however, the country isolated itself from the outside world in the early 1990s and opted for the so-called Uzbek model. That implied a state-regulated market economy and limited space for foreign investment (Pomfret, 2000). Russia was still Uzbekistan's most important international partner, although bilateral relations between the two countries were more distant in comparison with other Central Asian countries.

A rapprochement came in 2003 when Uzbekistan started selling its gas to Russia's Gazprom, which at the time was attempting to monopolise natural gas flows in the former Soviet Union. That agreement augmented Russia's domestic supply and allowed for further gas exports towards Europe. While pursuing economic relations with Russia, Uzbekistan remained rather reluctant to join regional political or customs blocs. For instance, in 1999, Uzbekistan suspended its membership in CSTO, it rejoined the organisation in 2006, and again suspended its membership in 2012 (Tolipov, 2013).

There was also a brief period during which Uzbekistan aligned its security policy with that of the West. In the post-9/11 context, Uzbekistan played an active role in the US-led war on terror. The country was one of the top recipients of US aid in the region and provided the US military with an airbase in Karshi-Khanabad for air operations in Afghanistan. That honeymoon period with the US ended in 2005, however, as the US called out human rights abuses in Uzbekistan following the violent suppression of protests in Andijan by Uzbek government forces (Heathershaw, 2007). In turn, the Uzbek government ordered the US to vacate the airbase. Although relations between the two countries slowly improved over the next years, Uzbekistan's priorities shifted. The country focused on fostering its existing relations with Russia and building new ones with China. Due to China's growing interests in Central Asia and the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, in 2014 China took over Russia's place as Uzbekistan's main trading partner (Madiyev, 2017).

After nearly 25 years of isolationist policies, with the death of Karimov in 2016 and election of a new president, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, Uzbekistan's foreign policy approach has significantly changed. Although Russia remained its key international partner, relations with neighbouring Central Asian countries became the priority of the new government. The new president's first official visits were, rather symbolically, to neighbouring countries in the region, rather than to Moscow as had always been the custom in Central Asia (Kobilov, 2024). Uzbekistan also started seeking new partners in East Asia (Dadabaev, 2021). That strategy relied on attracting foreign investment and fostering joint production, for instance with South Korea in the field of automotive and machinery industries (Ruziokhunov, 2024).

Simultaneously with this major shift in international relations, Uzbekistan remained Central Asia's biggest provider of labour migrants, with over two million out of 38 million citizens working in Russia (Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022). In the face of a rapidly increasing young population, fertility rate amounting to 3.6 and an annual population growth of 1.9%,

mass emigration emerged as a means of releasing the country's demographic pressure (National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2025). Given such dependence on Russia, appears surprising that after 2022 Uzbekistan adopted a much firmer and bolder approach towards Russia than its neighbours.

After 2022: Reaffirming sovereignty and advocating for labour migrants

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine, Uzbekistan engaged in what some Uzbek observers called a 'diplomatic balancing act' with Russia (Tolipov, 2022). In September 2022, Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Vladimir Putin signed the Declaration on Comprehensive Strategic Partnership between Uzbekistan and Russia. Discursively, the government of Uzbekistan claimed that this document marked 'a new stage in the development of multifaceted Uzbek-Russian cooperation' (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022). At first, it might seem that Uzbekistan thereby sided with Russia amidst the new regional geopolitical reality characterised by realpolitik. In the Central Asian region, the 'strategic partnership' label has traditionally been reserved for relations with Russia. This, however, was not the case.

Already prior to the war in Ukraine, the government of Uzbekistan had started to deploy the concept of 'strategic partnerships' in its other international collaborations, thereby changing and expanding its established meaning. For example, in 2019 Uzbekistan signed the Joint Declaration on Special Strategic Partnership with South Korea (President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2019). Since 2022, thus, Uzbekistan has simply continued its approach of broadening international partnerships while maintaining a warm rhetoric about bilateral relations with Russia to avoid incurring Moscow's anger. Uzbekistan has pursued this approach even more closely since Russia's invasion of Ukraine. This is well-illustrated by the case of the EAEU: in 2024, the government of Uzbekistan made it clear that the country was not interested in joining the organisation, while at the same time maintaining an observer status and loosely collaborating with Russia in multiple fields within the EAEU framework (The Diplomat, 2024).

Uzbek officials have only commented on the Russo-Ukrainian conflict once. In March 2022, the country's foreign minister Abdulaziz Komilov made a surprising statement in support of the sovereignty of Ukraine and argued that Uzbekistan would not recognise the Moscow-controlled Donbas region. Soon after that, Komilov suddenly left his post and was moved to another job (Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2022). That suggests that his announcement should be seen as an isolated and largely uncoordinated incident. No further statements referring directly to that war have been issued since.

While refraining from commenting on the Ukraine conflict, Uzbekistan has nonetheless been the most outspoken country in the region in criticising the mistreatment of migrants. Over the last few years, on several occasions Uzbekistan has officially denounced the increasing discrimination of Uzbek labour migrants and Russia's attempts to engage them in this conflict, including by coercing them to fight in Ukraine on Russia's behalf (Eurasianet, 2025). This is where Uzbekistan differs from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, which

focused on outcomes rather than the cause: they punished their citizens who joined the war instead of raising the issue of military recruitment of Central Asians with Russia. Uzbekistan has also been actively reorienting its migration flows from Russia towards Europe and Asia (Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022; Dadabayev & Akhmedova, 2022). These efforts were not unilateral, as countries such as Germany and South Korea also expressed interest in organised recruitment schemes with Uzbekistan. So far, Uzbekistan has been more successful than Tajikistan in opening and scaling up new migration channels.

In the first two years after Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Uzbekistan's transit networks were used to route goods to Russia to help it bypass sanctions, in the same way as happened in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Since then, Uzbekistan's Central Bank enforced a stricter compliance with Western sanctions by refusing transactions with sanctioned Russian entities. This has ensured that the country has not lost access to global payment systems (Frank.uz, 2025).

In response to Uzbekistan's defiance to support Russia's war, some Russian politicians and prominent public figures questioned the sovereignty of the country and called for annexation of Uzbekistan to Russia (Nova24.uz, 2023). Still, unlike in Kazakhstan's case, these were isolated incidents rather than a systemic intimidation strategy channelled through the Russian state media.

As a result of Russia's cumulated actions concerning Uzbekistan, the previously overall positive perception of Russia among the Uzbek society has suffered. Recent focus group findings on the public's perceptions of Uzbekistan's international partners reveal an important generational shift: respondents under 30 now tend to indicate China, and not Russia, as Uzbekistan's main friend (McGlinchey, 2024). These increasingly positive perceptions of China have also been supported by the Uzbek government's warm rhetoric about China, along with increased trade volumes with this country (Donaev & Zhang, 2026). These developments significantly differentiate Uzbekistan from neighbouring Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where the general public has been sceptical and anxious about China's increasing presence in the country.

Following the regional trend Uzbekistan's political elites have started to actively decolonise the country's historiography from the Soviet Union and Russia (Tutumlu, 2023). There have been two focal points to these efforts. Firstly, like Kyrgyzstan, the decolonisation process centred on the reversing the negative portrayal of the local resistance movement, the Basmachi (Myrzabaeva et al., 2025). Secondly, Uzbekistan rehabilitated the Jadids. This progressive, early 20th century Muslim intellectual movement was purged by Stalin in the 1930s, and the Soviet Union and the Russian Federation portrayed the Jadids as imperialist agents. The Jadids question was particularly championed by Saida Mirziyoyeva, President Mirziyoyev's daughter and the Head of the Presidential Administration. On multiple occasions, Mirziyoyev has himself also publicly pointed to the Jadids' legacies, going as far as to call this movement a 'foundation for the legal democratic state and civil society that we are building today' (Daryo.uz, 2023). These historiographical revisions met with resistance from Russia and were described by Russian politician actors as another tool of

‘dangerous anti-Soviet propaganda’ in Central Asia (Communist Party of the Russian Federation, 2026).

In summary, Mirziyoyev’s government has been careful not to antagonise Russia while simultaneously reaffirming Uzbekistan’s sovereignty. What differentiates Uzbekistan from Other Central Asian states are firmer actions aiming at protecting the interests of Uzbek migrants in Russia. The country has followed its neighbours in strengthening partnerships with other countries, particularly China, but with more positive outcomes in terms of public perception of this rapprochement.

2.5 Turkmenistan

Before 2022: Neutrality in foreign policy but still privileging Russia

Turkmenistan represents a unique case in Central Asia case because the flow of information about the country is limited due to internal censorship affecting local scholars and because of a lack of access to the country for foreign researchers and journalists.

Since its independence from the Soviet Union, Turkmenistan has opted for ‘positive neutrality’ in the international arena (Anceschi, 2008). This unique foreign policy approach, recognised by the UN in 1995, signalled that the country committed to non-alignment to political and military blocs, while simultaneously pursuing beneficial economic cooperation with other states. This last point is particularly relevant in view of Turkmenistan’s resource endowment, as the country has the fourth largest natural gas reserves in the world. Turkmenistan has been actively involved in bilateral economic cooperation with Russia, particularly in the field of energy and transport (Horak, 2023b). Already since the early 1990s, Russia tried to secure exclusive deals for mass export of natural gas from Turkmenistan, and later used it for re-export (Overland, 2009).

After the death of Turkmenistan’s first president, Saparmurat Niyazov, and with the 2006 election of the second president, Gurbanguly Berdymukhamedov, the country’s attitude to trade relations with Russia changed. The new government engaged in building relations with Azerbaijan, Iran and China to bypass Russia’s gas transit monopoly. This gradual diversification prompted Russia to offer better deals for Turkmenistan’s gas by relying on market prices rather than imposing transit monopoly (Overland & Torjesen, 2010). Ultimately, however, Russia lost its privileged place: Turkmenistan’s gas exports to Russia decreased in favour of China.

Somewhat counterintuitively, however, whilst diversifying its network of economic partners, Turkmenistan started to engage more closely on a political level with Russia under President Berdymukhamedov. In 2008, the two countries signed a declaration which gave their relations a strategic status. Although formally not a full member of any Russia-led regional organisation, Turkmenistan remains an associate member of the CIS. Moreover, despite not being a member of the EAEU, Turkmenistan has attended several EAEU

meetings in recent years, often as an honorary guest (Business Turkmenistan, 2021). This shows that while Turkmenistan has maintained its neutrality in the international arena and still refrains from official membership in international and regional organisations, the country still affords Russia a special place in its foreign relations.

After 2022: New synergies with Russia, despite an overall distance

Breaking the regional trend, Turkmenistan's relations with Russia strengthened after Russia's invasion of Ukraine. On the one hand, the country reasserted its neutrality towards the Russo-Ukrainian conflict. Unlike other Central Asian states, which mainly chose to abstain from voting in UN resolutions concerning the invasion of Ukraine while remaining present in the voting venue, Turkmenistan chose to be absent from the room during each such voting session (The Diplomat, 2025). On the other hand, in practice Turkmenistan and Russia continued to deepen their strategic partnership. In a symbolic gesture, Serdar Berdykumamedov, Turkmenistan's third president and son of the second president, made Russia the destination of his first foreign visit after taking power in March 2022 (President of Russia, 2022). As revealed during Berdymukhamedov's meeting with Vladimir Putin, the two countries had signed a total of 288 treaties in various fields by that time (President of Russia, 2022).

After several rounds of Western sanctions against Russia, the Russian government started to consider Turkmenistan as a re-export base. That would offer alternatives to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan whose willingness to participate in re-exports started to decline due to the threat of secondary sanctions. Eventually, however, this idea did not materialise due to logistical complications, such as border crossings and unavoidable road and rail reloads (Horak, 2023b).

Still, a certain rapprochement with Russia both on a political and an economic level can be seen. Despite only being an associated member of the CIS, with Russia's backing Turkmenistan is serving as chair of the CIS in 2026. Under the country's chairmanship, the CIS agenda is largely focused on East-West trade routes and logistics, as well as economic cooperation among CIS countries, the latter in view of the 35th anniversary of this organisation (Commonwealth of Independent States, 2026).

These developments reveal the actual complexity of Turkmenistan's geopolitical approach, despite the self-declared neutrality principle. Turkmenistan currently seems to be aligning with Russia more than the other four Central Asian states. While the latter had been more closely connected to Russia on political and economic levels since 1991, owing to Russia exercising more pressure on them, demanding obedience and punishing them for lack of expected submission, they started to display more conflictual attitudes as of 2022. Turkmenistan, in turn, used to maintain more distant relations with Russia, but further pragmatic rapprochement has become apparent since 2022 (Horak, 2023a).

Consequently, in terms of historical narratives Turkmenistan constitutes a unique case in Central Asia, whereby improving political and economic relations with Russia have translated into more aligned historiographical accounts between the two countries. Decolonising tendencies that had been strongly articulated in the first years of Turkmenistan's independence have been reversed. For example, under Niyazov, Turkmenistan's first president, Russia used to be portrayed as a colonial power. The Memorial Day on 12th January was introduced to commemorate the defeated Turkmen tribes and the conquest of the territory of today's Ashgabat by the Russian Empire army in 1881. Correspondingly, under Berdymukhamedov, Victory Day on 9th May, a holiday of crucial importance for the Soviet Union and today's Russia, ceased to be a state holiday and its observance in the country declined. Against these trends, Memorial Day was now suddenly abandoned and its observance forbidden. This, as some analysts believe, should be seen as an attempt to appease Moscow by toning down any conflictual narratives between Russian and Turkmen sides, and banning their circulation at a societal level (Eurasianet, 2023).

3. Conclusion. Central-Asian style diplomatic balancing

After Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022, Western expectations were that the rest of the world would have to take sides: with Russia or against Russia. Nevertheless, no such repositioning has been observed in Central Asia following the invasion. From the perspective of the countries in the region, the Russo-Ukrainian conflict is not their war. For Central Asian governments, being traditional allies of Russia did not mean that they felt they had to become involved in the conflict. Geopolitical reorientation in Central Asia began only when the war started to have direct consequences for the region, namely when a worsening economy and international isolation led Russia to start demanding unconditional loyalty and support, and when over ten thousand Central Asian citizens were mobilised, often under duress, to fight for Russia in the war in Ukraine.

These events marked the beginning of diplomatic balancing. Given the political and economic interconnectedness of Russia and Central Asia, the latter is not in a position to effectively distance itself from Russia. Consequently, the Central Asian countries started to even more carefully manage their relationship with Russia as a major power in the post-Soviet world, while protecting their national interests related to sovereignty, economy and labour migration. This mainly involves avoiding submitting to Russia's demands without simultaneously antagonising Russia, and at the same time expanding international partnerships and seeking new migration destinations. Central Asia is still a pro-Russia region on the surface, but less so on the inside.

In terms of broader implications arising from this analysis, Central Asia offers an interesting range of formal strategies and informal practices that smaller states develop to

navigate around the hegemon. They manage to do it successfully even in conditions of immense political and economic dependences, as well as conflicting international pressures.

4. Literature

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