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# Political configuration and geostrategy: An analysis of the global context influence in Central Asia

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## ABSTRACT

The five new Central Asian States that emerged from the fall of the Soviet Union began a process of State capacity building and the rule of law in their territories. Even though each one has its particularities, the continuity of autocratic political systems is a common factor among them. The privileged geographical position of Central Asia as a mandatory step between Europe and Asia, and its fundamental role in the energy security of world great powers, make the region increasingly important within the political and economic dynamics of the current International System. This might

be a factor of analysis that affects changes and configurations in the political arena.

This paper examines the extent to which external factors influence domestic politics by drawing on the theoretical background of authoritarian regimes and democratic transition, historical liaisons after the fall of the Soviet Union, as well as external factors such as security affairs, international trade, infrastructure projects in oil and gas pipelines, and competence for scarce water resources in the region.

**Key words:** Central Asia; geopolitics; political international economy.

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## CONFIGURACIONES POLÍTICAS Y GEOESTRATEGIA: UN ANÁLISIS DE LA INFLUENCIA DEL CONTEXTO GLOBAL EN ASIA CENTRAL

Los cinco nuevos países de Asia Central que surgieron después de la caída de la Unión Soviética han empezado un proceso de construcción de capacidad estatal e imperio de la ley en sus territorios. Y aunque cada uno tiene sus particularidades, la continuidad de sistemas políticos autocráticos es un factor común entre ellos. La posición geográfica privilegiada en Asia Central, como un paso obligado entre Europa y Asia, y su papel fundamental en la seguridad energética de las grandes potencias mundiales hacen que la región sea crecientemente importante en las dinámicas políticas y económicas del sistema internacional actual. Este puede ser un factor de análisis que afecta los cambios y las configuraciones en la arena política.

Este documento examina hasta qué punto los factores externos influyen en la política interna basándose en el trasfondo teórico de los regímenes autoritarios y la transición democrática, los enlaces históricos después de la caída de la Unión Soviética, así como factores externos como asuntos de seguridad, comercio internacional, proyectos de infraestructura en oleoductos y gasoductos, y competencia por los escasos recursos hídricos de la región.

**Palabras clave:** Asia Central; geopolítica; economía política internacional.

## INTRODUCTION

The five Central Asia States<sup>1</sup> re-emerged in the international arena after 1991 with domestic and international challenges: security threats, lack of state capacity building, a regional competition for natural resources, and limited economic opening. The continuity of repressive and autocratic regimes at the same time created tensions but also—to some extent—the guarantee of regional stability.

For instance, although the political stability index in 2018 shows that the Central Asian countries had improved in ranking during the previous five years (The Global Economy, 2020), the region has been in the group of worst-performing countries since 1991 in social, political, and economic indicators, and has not presented significant improvement. In the worldwide governance indicators, accountability and rule of law show poor representation, low state capacity, and lack of transparency and accountability (World Bank, 2019).

How can we explain the current political situation in the Central Asia States? The interactions with external powers have been perceived to have a great influence on political transitions, inducing the country in transition and defining identity. This paradigm might suggest that international agents can influence the institutional structures of the States through negotiation and power asymmetries that give leverage to some agents over others (Wendt, 1999; Krasner, 2011). Besides,

<sup>1</sup> The Central Asia States are Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan.

international agents—other States and non-governmental actors—can create dependence and interdependence where governmental elites define the nature of the relations with other agents and the kind of state policies they want to implement (Nye & Keohane, 1971).

In Central Asia, other countries recognised as great powers<sup>2</sup> generally motivated by their own interests, have influenced several dimensions of domestic affairs during the last three decades. The Russian strategy has been twofold: first, support to create bonding with the Russian community in Central Asia constituting a cultural reference<sup>3</sup> for elites (Larrotcha, 2014), and second, playing a role as a security provider taking advantage of the geographical proximity and historical presence in the region. Other factors such as rapid growth in the case of China have created incentives for deeper relationships on international trade and investment.

Hence, China has increased its presence in the region and positioned itself as the main commercial partner in the energy resources market, as well as being an ally in military exercises in Central Asian countries (Swanström, 2005). Other actors such as the United States of America<sup>4</sup> and the European Union<sup>5</sup> both

have a clear interest in fighting terrorism and the establishment of democratic regimes in the region supported by multilateral institutions including the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank (Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2018).

All in all, external factors have directly intervened easing the persistence of autocratic regimes in power through trade alliances and investment with foreign countries with larger capabilities. However, there are other relevant factors within the countries such as Dahl's idea that grassroots and domestic political movements shape paths to democratisation. Still, the consolidation of civil society remains a challenge, where the power is exercised under a hierarchical and patriarchal structure based on tribal connections, where the individual—or group of them e.g., ruling elites—that subordinate the community.

The countries of Central Asia specifically provide a case of complex interdependence as a result of the geographical configuration of the Fergana Valley and the slope of the rivers Amu Darya and Syr Darya and which pose an external source of tensions between the countries, since water scarcity potentially creates social unrest and instability to the au-

<sup>2</sup> A great power is a sovereign State that is recognized as having the ability and expertise to exert its influence on a global scale with military and economic strength, as well as soft power influence (Neumann, 2008).

<sup>3</sup> It is important to notice that Russia is also a cultural reference for general population. For instance, some people speak Russian and consume Russian entertainment.

<sup>4</sup> The US has emphasized its presence in security affairs, signing several agreements with Central Asian countries for joint military exercises, training, and information cooperation (Lascrain, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> Europe has engaged in activities to prevent terrorist threats in the region (Laumulin, 2010).

thoritarian regimes. Besides, borders between the five countries do not necessarily coincide with the ethnic distribution that has marked a strong division from social tension derived from migrations patterns in the region (Larrotcha, 2014). For example, Russians are the largest minority helping the Russian government interests and strategies over the region and add elements of uncertainty to the issue of interethnic tensions.

Based on the analysis of the abovementioned features, we conclude that both domestic and international factors have influenced the current political context of Central Asia countries. This is particularly marked by historical legacy: the Central Asian countries started a process to become independent republics in the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union. Despite this, the new leaders attempted to show renewed powers and exaltation of ethnic nationalism as part of the transition. The newly established governments were very similar to the ones ruling during the Soviet period.

Hence, external factors specifically show that for the case of Central Asian countries, conventional relationships are based on security alliances. Trade and investment relationships have been more influential. Central Asian countries' resources such as ores, petroleum, and gas, make those autocratic regimes create relatively stable conditions for trade benefiting great powers such as China and Russia.

To develop these ideas, the paper is divided as follows: it starts with an introduction. Section 2 presents an overview of the influence of domestic and external influences for countries in political transitions, including

theoretical remarks on authoritarian regimes, democratic transitions, and the external influence in domestic structures. Section 3 analyses the international factors with domestic political implications in terms of the internal political configuration, such as historical and cultural links, as well as external factors including security affairs, international trade, infrastructure projects in oil and gas pipelines, and water resources. Finally, some conclusions are provided at the end of the paper.

## **DOMESTIC AND EXTERNAL INFLUENCES FOR COUNTRIES IN POLITICAL TRANSITION**

### **Authoritarian regimes and democratic transitions**

Political regimes can be classified according to specific features of formal or explicit historical patterns. The degree of institutionalisation and rule of law configure the State composition based on the type of actors leading key government offices. In that sense, government characteristics, methods, and channels, enable resources, strategies, and processes to make binding decisions, thus defining the political behaviour of those actors who submit to these rules (Munk, 1996; O' Donell, 2004).

The political transition, understood as the change from one regime to another occurs when game rules are not clearly defined. This creates an atmosphere of uncertain conditions—or boundaries—in the path to democratisation. Under such a scenario, “social classes and disputing political groups accept a set of formal rules and informal agreements that determine the ‘who gets what, where, when and

how' of politics" (Karl, 1991, p. 399). That is when a political regime is consolidated. Hence, it is possible to find authoritarian regimes where the government can identify actors with representation in a dominant coalition of elite leaders, the military and businesspeople, whose decisions are made with the support of the armed forces, allowing for a limited degree of arbitrariness (Munk, 1996).

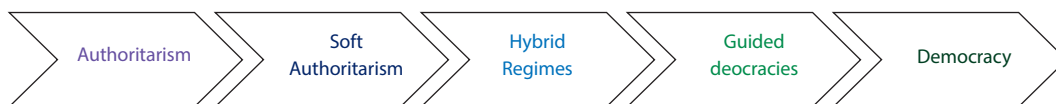
Based on this idea, scholars including Linz (1975) identify five fundamental dimensions of authoritarian political systems: limited political pluralism, ambiguous ideology, vague political mobilisation, personalised leadership, and discretionary decision-making processes. Concerning a limited political pluralism, informal agreements among coalition parties replace formal mechanisms of accountability. Following this logic, some forms of opposition are tolerated for convenience to confer the regime with a liberal tone.

The lack of a guiding ideology, on the other hand, creates a legitimacy of institutions

that is based on certain intellectual attitudes and ambiguous values. These facilitate accords among actors with different characteristics and interests. The regime with a deficit of intensive or extensive political mobilisation—since neither the autonomy nor independence of the political community - is recognised. Active repression keeps civil society out of the political arena, hampering the creation of mobilisation structures and facilitating the absence of real guarantees for the exercise of their political and civil rights.

Moreover, the power exercised by a leader or a small group in a dominant coalition<sup>6</sup> keeps the regime stable through agreements among actors or "invisible politics" and personalisation of power. Finally, the regime constrictions are not formally defined, but they are entirely predictable, which allows rulers to perform their power with more considerable discretion, more civilian control, and deprives citizens of autonomous spheres against absolute power.

**Figure 1**  
**Transition regimes to democracy**



Source: Author's elaboration.

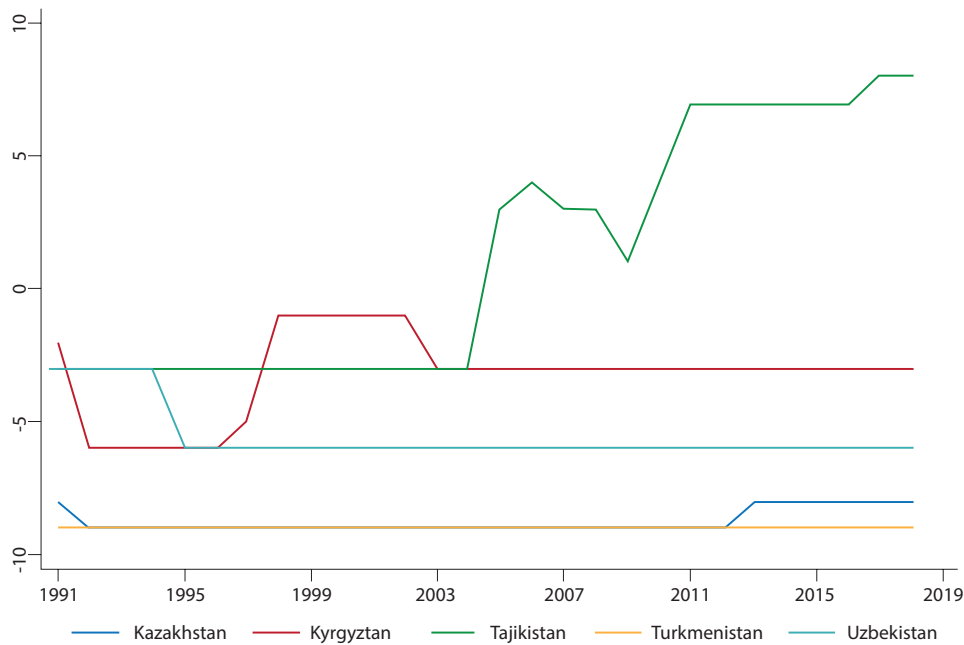
<sup>6</sup> This coalition is politically active and, depending on the case, has the support of other institutional actors such as the army, bureaucracy, the single party (if it exists), and social actors like church, industrial or financial, landowners, unions, and transnational economic structures.

Democratisation has been the most natural historic course. Achieving levels of democracy implies holding competitive, fair, and scheduled elections, where different actors compete to achieve power positions, with the citizens being the ones who choose their main decision-makers. Transitioned governments that enjoy multiple representations are more stable given a check and balance system, accountability, and civilian control over the military.

To that respect, Dahl (1989) assures that regimes could vary depending on the degree

to which they concede and guarantee civil and political freedoms, and that absolute democracy is hard to achieve. As shown in figure 1, there are different political regimes around the world. Based on different political configurations, this can be classified in extreme categories such as authoritarianism, passing through those that combine characteristics such as soft authoritarianism, hybrid regimes, guided democracies, until finally getting into democracy.

**Figure 2**  
**Central Asian countries political stability scores<sup>7</sup>**



**Source:** Own elaboration based on Polity V data.

<sup>7</sup> The polity IV scores measure regime authority spectrum on a 21-point scale ranging from -10 (hereditary monarchy) to +10 (consolidated democracy) (Center for Systemic Peace, 2018).

These categories are not static, and a regime is more or less democratic according to its political decisions in a specific time and context. In the case of the more authoritarian court regimes, their rulers used to appeal to different democratic strategies to gain more domestic and international legitimacy. Those mechanisms are also manipulated to maintain control over public institutions and remain in power. The most visible example is the elections, where they establish unbalanced conditions with few possibilities to those candidates that do not belong to the elite.

### **External influence in domestic structures**

Wendt (1999) posits that the State is an agent that adopts human characteristics. Discussions of decision-makers determining and maintaining the type of regime that best suits their necessities and interests, constituted as such, exercising a hierarchical political authority. Still, the State also acts horizontally in a system in which there is mutual recognition of the other's sovereignty, under a multiplicity of logics that define its power within its limits.

Specifically, this actor only acquires value in social practices of its performance as an agent within specific power structures<sup>8</sup>. Wendt's analysis assumes that the way States are treated by others determines each one's learning process and identity reinforcement. For this reason, the author focuses on cultural

selection as a form of identity evolution, understanding it as the transmission of behaviours between agents in different moments. There are two mechanisms to achieve progress: perception of success and social learning.

Besides, social learning takes place when States acquire new information from the environment and internalise it to accomplish their interests. In this sense, the States interact with others, hoping they behave in a predefined manner. That is why they might eventually learn from shared ideas. Newly adopted behaviours will be reproduced in subsequent interactions in response to incentives and based on their interests. However, not all States are equal. Power and dependency relations have a fundamental role in this process because they define how evolution will develop. That is to say, the agent with greater power will have a better capacity to induce the other one to define the identity under its vision.

States are the most important actors in the international system. However, authors like Nye and Keohane (1971) recognise the existence of non-governmental actors that also interact beyond national borders. They affirm that those transnational relations promote changes in attitudes, which increases the sensibility of societies and alters relations between governments. This also creates dependence and interdependence, where governmental elites are essential to define how to relate to other agents, as well as in the formulation and implementation of State policies.

<sup>8</sup> In other words, variations in the system come from changes in the relations between the State and society and from the strategic choices of the foreign policy decision-makers.



Following the posits of Wendt, Nye, and Keohane, Krasner (2011) the institutional structures of each State can be influenced by international agents beyond economic or military incentives, through negotiation<sup>9</sup> and power<sup>10</sup>. Negotiation allows national actors to take advantage of the opportunities of the external environment to generate policies and restructure or strengthen their national political structures<sup>11</sup>. However, this occurs in a power asymmetry scenario that gives leverage to some agents over others, affecting the configuration of power and authority institutions in the States and their decision-making process.

Analysing the political situation in the 1980s and 1990s, scholars realised the role of external impact in State-building processes and regime consolidation. However, studies found that the presence of external factors per se does not determine the outcome of transition, but they do contribute to its development. They could be either democratic or non-democratic, depending on the characteristics and interests of the external actors, but their influence on the type of political regime is linked to national, economic, cultural, and historical ties (Holm, 2017). That is why it is more accurate to address the issue based on external-internal interactions or synergies shaping domestic outcomes.

Obydenkova and Libman (2012) affirm that international variables could promote or inhibit democratic processes depending on the interest of international actors involved. Holm (2017) complements this idea by arguing that it could happen by deliberate or under deliberate ways with several effects among interactions. The first one implies an active promotion of a specific regime type, through an agency with clear intentions, motives, and effects. On the other side, an unintended way of influence is associated with strategies of diffusion or transference of ideas, practices, and political structures among political systems. Aid, assistance, and collaboration fit perfectly in this category.

Several authors distinguished different types of external influences, such as inspiration, coalition, and coercion, but Obydenkova and Libman (2012) place special emphasis on linkages and leverages among the actors involved. In this sense, the greater and stronger the link (ideological, economic, cultural, historical, etc.) with the external actor, the recipient State will be more receptive to its influence. In addition, without being exclusive cases, the vulnerability of a government could facilitate leverage on it. In the case of Central Asian States, for example, their close ties with Russia have favoured the relationship among themselves. But this is unequal interaction be-

<sup>9</sup> Understood as collective election processes in which an agreement is reached through voluntary arrangements or contracts (Krasner, 2011).

<sup>10</sup> "Power may reflect either explicit agent-oriented decisions or social processes that reflect the practices, values and norms of more powerful entities" (Krasner, 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Sometimes, this may imply giving up autonomy or control over some political issues.

cause of the notable power of Russia, which has allowed it to establish strong leverage over the region favouring consolidation of autocratic regimes in it.

### **INTERNATIONAL FACTORS WITH DOMESTIC POLITICAL IMPLICATIONS**

As explained, there is no theoretical consensus regarding the potential effects of domestic and international factors on certain political outcomes. On the one hand, internal forces drive into new relationships between the State and the citizens shaping new economic and political conditions. On the other hand, external powers can potentially influence certain political conditions as they result conveniently for their interests in the region. This section explores the internal political configuration in Central Asia and some of the most relevant international variables.

#### **Domestic political configuration**

Since the fall of the Soviet Union, Central Asian countries have been in the process of State-building capacity. The procedural game rules that governed them collapsed, forcing them to design and establish new institutions. However, many countries in the region opted for a domain of paternalistic politics, corruption tolerance, and power of tribe or clan loyalty, instead of the adoption of a democratic model as the trend for the time would mark.

The fact that independence came unexpectedly in 1991 as an external process in the demise of the Soviet Union, makes that the new States inherited tensions and problems

that characterised the transition. This, along with a high dependence in the centre owing to a low level of development, caused instability and uncertainty within the entire Central Asian population. Thus, the leaders of each republic's communist party continued to rule with the banner of maintaining the security and stability of their nations.

In that sense, the political structure did not change, maintaining the power concentration and repressive practices of the Soviet era (Lascurain, 2017, p. 392). The president as a political actor who has dominated the political arena with characters coming from the Soviet institutional setting, acquired a high level of legitimacy by showing presidents as founding fathers, symbols of continuity in a time of uncertainty, and guarantors of the unity, independence, and stability. Thus, power has been represented through the figure of a unique leader with exalted abilities, who rule by decree with overwhelming majorities in parliaments.

Political forces and civil society movements did not emerge with independence. The political situation did not facilitate the emergence and strengthening of alternative political and social movements. Instead, the institutional weakness, inability to adapt to the new scenario, and to consolidate support from their bases, were obstacles when confronted with the significant power structures of the elites, favouring systematic oppression of political opposition, closing any possibility of participation (Akiner, 2003, p. 434).

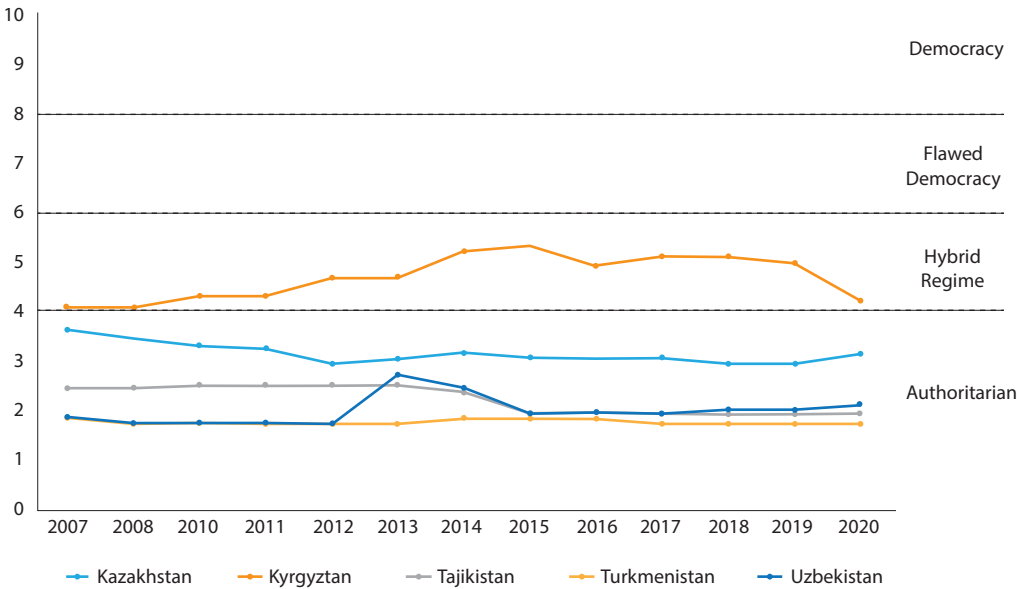
Furthermore, the governments have had policies to reconfigure the concept of the nation based on the cultural heritage before Russians, rejecting Soviet symbols, the recovery of

majority languages as official languages, and the exaltation of ethnic nationalism. Central Asia republics were multi-ethnic then and now, so those policies have placed minorities as second-class citizens, hazarding, and forcing them to migrate. Those attempts to homogenise the population facilitate the internalisation of the strongest national identities, common base values of the regimes.

In the Democracy Index of The Economist Intelligence Unit<sup>12</sup> (2020), between 2007 and 2020, four regimes of Central Asian

countries were situated within the political spectrum of authoritarianism. Because of its more liberal practices, Kyrgyzstan has been catalogued as a hybrid regime (figure 3). However, its rating is not too far removed from its neighbours. The Democracy Status of Freedom House posits this country as a ‘Consolidate Authoritarian Regime’ along with the others, all of them are labelled “not free” in the Global Freedom status which revises political and civil liberties (Freedom House, 2021).

**Figure 3**  
**Central Asian regimes**



Source: Own elaboration based on Democracy Index 2020 of The Economist Intelligence Unit.

<sup>12</sup> The Democracy Index of the Economist Intelligence Unit measures five variables in a range of 0 to 10: electoral process and pluralism, civil liberties, the functioning of government, political participation, and political culture. According to the score, it classifies countries in democracy, flawed democracy, Hybrid regimes and authoritarian.

What is observed now are political and legal systems that allow rulers to establish a power guided by their own interests or conveniences of the ruling elite. Here some democratic forms (for example, referendums or presidential elections) are used as legitimisation tools or instruments to perpetuate themselves in power, taking advantage of the high level of homogeneity of their population. Permissive institutions with the implementation of control, surveillance, and repression policies, with the monopolisation of resource exploitation. In this case, according to Anceschi (2015), those regimes will be maintained while the ruling elites keep strong ties with international key actors such as other governments (China, Russia, Iran, among others), or big multinationals, especially through economic, security, and infrastructure agreements.

### **External factors**

#### ***Historical and cultural links***

Despite Central Asian contemporary borders being established during the Soviet Union period, the original borders date back to Muscovite Russia at the beginning of the 18th century. According to Abazov (2008), the Russian Empire expanded itself with the leadership of Tsar Peter the Great and his successors, merging submission to the Russian protection, strategic plans of the systematic population with

farmers and Cossacks, and the generation of military alliances with local tribes.

During the 19th Century, the administration of such a vast territory represented a challenge for Russian Empire, especially with the interest of avoiding anti-Russian uprisings, the exploitation of the commercial potential of the region, and the blocking of the British Empire's advance. For that reason, the Russians established a flexible administrative system over Central Asia, in which governance oversaw local authorities, with restrictions on political and economic issues. Using the Russian education system, the members of the new institutional setting reached better political and military positions and strengthened their relationship with the colonial administration.

At the beginning of the 20th century, widespread population discontent because of the confluence of social problems, corruption, and economic recession, were breeding grounds for mass protests in the Empire<sup>3</sup>. Therefore, Central Asian elites took advantage of the chaos to compete for power in the new post-colonial era. None of them was strong enough to exert their influence over the entire region, generating parallel governance between several power centres.

Consequently, the governments of the Central Asian republics were established between 1920 and 1924 aiming to promote a national border delimitation plan, framed in the self-determination principle promulgated

<sup>13</sup> The Bolsheviks triumph promised economic, social reforms, and programs of cultural and political autonomy.

by the Soviets. The new governments arrange different levels of political and cultural autonomy, added to new configurations in the most important cities and investing channeling, to build modern and diversify economies (Abazov, 2008, p. 101).

Authors including Farrant (2006) highlight the role of factors such as the multi-ethnic, multicultural, and multilingual configuration of the region as the guiding element of the program. Thus, ethnographers, geographers, statisticians, and administrators carried out detailed analyses to build the basis for the definition of precise limits and the decision on who belonged to each territorial entity. Besides, it included strategies to weaken local power structures or dissolve affiliations to traditional clans, under the figure of independent republics, to avoid secessionist movements and increase their dependence on the centre.

### ***Security matters***

Before 1991, borders between the republics did not represent greater relevance, considering that they did not affect the daily dynamics, nor the settlements of the peoples of the different ethnic groups. As Mamatova (2018) expresses, after independence the titling of

the borders has represented an obstacle to the dynamics described, generating a feeling of uncertainty and danger when they must cross them.

According to Abazov (2008), the issue of borders was not involved at the time of the distribution of natural and mining-energy resources in the Soviet era, a situation that was reversed with the entry of the republics to the international market, placing them amid the competition of regional actors and for the access and control of resources, which has promoted their monopolisation and infrastructure at the hands of local governments, which deprive some of the communities of accessing them, or the benefits of its trade, which promotes large migratory flows and increasing tensions.

Hence, once independent States were formed, borders between the five countries did not coincide with the ethnic distribution that marked a strong division<sup>14</sup>, which has not only fragmented the communities -especially in the Fergana Valley- but also has contributed to the deepening of nationalist feelings, generating constant confrontations between them<sup>15</sup>. For example, most Uzbek people were distributed across the region, this situation for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan raises concerns over the high

<sup>14</sup> Today, some of these groups claim their historical right over shared territories among neighbouring countries distributed throughout the region (Abazov, 2008, p. 121).

<sup>15</sup> Nearly 60% of the population of the valley lives in poverty, under corrupt and authoritarian regimes, with questioned administrative capacity, being victims of drug trafficking, terrorism and environmental degradation. Considering this complex scenario, it is not uncommon to find cells of radical tribal behaviour groups in the area, which can be difficult to control, especially given the close conflicts in Syria and Afghanistan (Lascurain, 2017, p. 402).

likelihood of separatist movements in their territories that want to be annexed to Uzbekistan. Moreover, massive displacements occurred throughout the valley, with the conflicts that erupt in any of the three countries, or moments of marked gaps in the living conditions of each one (Lascurain, 2017).

Borders radically modified the daily lives of people of the valley, who maintain daily interactions with others, based on such basic needs as getting their daily food or taking their animals to pasture. Despite the complex situation, these interactions have helped the construction of cross-border networks and the strengthening of trust between communities, maintaining peace in the area.

Russians are not a majority ethnic group, but they are the largest ethnic minority in Central Asia, a fact that should not be ignored. For example, Larrotcha (2014) points out that in Kazakhstan, they represent about 24% of its population, located mainly on the border with Russia, which would facilitate any potential intervention in the area, resorting to nationalist feelings. Moreover, the Russian government strategy to support its community in the former ex-Soviet republics has added elements of uncertainty to the issue of interethnic tensions. This fact was reinforced with its actions in the Ukrainian crisis of 2014, increasing the concern of the Central Asian governments, which were aware of the strong Russian military influence in the region.

Moreover, the problem of Islamic radicalism has been one of the current concerns that require further coordinated actions from the Central Asian countries. Authors such as Kangas (2018) point out that despite extremist groups not having enough members in the region, there is still a potential threat to regional stability given that groups like ISIS have been able to attract people (especially the poorest) in the border of Central Asia and Afghanistan where this group claims to have part of their caliphate.

**Table 1**  
**Migration flows in Central Asia**

COUNTRY	MIGRANTS (2017)	EMIGRANTS (2017)
Kazakhstan	3.6 million	4.1 million
Uzbekistan	1.2 million	2 million
Tajikistan	273.3 thousand	578.5 thousand
Kyrgyzstan	200.3 thousand	760.1 thousand
Turkmenistan	195.1 thousand	243.2 thousand

Source: Author's elaboration based on IOM (2019).

From the very beginning Central Asian new States have claimed to be secular governments and have stated for a modern and moderate interpretation of Islam<sup>16</sup> (Larrotcha, 2014). Thus, any radical position of Islam is unacceptable, and they perceive any manifestation of radical movements as a threat. This idea has deepened with the Afghanistan war (Kangas,

<sup>16</sup> Except Tajikistan, which has expressly forbidden any social or political organisation in their territory.

2018). However, Lascurain (2017) indicates that ethnic differences<sup>17</sup> have helped to form radical religious movements in the region.

Thus, espionage has been one of the main strategies to control those issues. In this case, adoption of new technologies has been channelled through censorship and surveillance, where Omanovic (2015) finds surprising the level of the sophistication of the system as well as the number of international companies that provide them, even knowing the precarious condition of human rights and high levels of corruption in Central Asian countries. Here, the big companies have benefited from the stability of the regimes, because that relationship guarantees them long-term contracts.

Russia, on the other hand, has acted as a security provider enhancing military cooperation to fight terrorism (Gélvez & Prieto, 2020). There are Russian troops in the Central Asian country members of the Collective Security Treaty Organisation (CSTO) in Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, and Kyrgyzstan. Besides, after 9/11 the US presence in the region increased with the idea that there was a threat of the emergence of radical movements in the region. According to Lascurain (2017), Washington provided financial and logistical assistance to Central Asian countries, as a result, the US has signed several agreements with Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan to have joint military exercises, military training as well as

the exchange of military information. Also, European foreign policy has been engaging in initiatives to prevent the entrance of terrorist threats in the region (Laumulin, 2010).

### **International trade**

In the case of Kazakhstan, as shown in figure 5, the main trading partners are China and Russia. Trade with China in 2018 represented 10 per cent of the exports; the main products were petroleum gas (16.7%), refined copper (21%) and crude petroleum (13%). Other representative exports were minerals and raw materials including zinc, ferroalloys and radioactive chemicals and import share of 23.1 per cent that includes a variety of manufactured goods electronics and radiocommunication equipment.

Russia on the other hand accounts for only 8.2 per cent of the exports with a great variety of minerals such as iron ore, coal briquettes, zinc, petroleum, and gas. The country represents 34.6 per cent of the imports, most of the products imported are iron pipes, refined petroleum and petroleum gas, coke, and cars. Other important commercial partners in Europe include Italy with an export share of 16 percent. The Netherlands represents 9.4 per cent of exports, Spain 3.8 per cent, and France 6 per cent. In all these cases more than 80% of the exports are crude petroleum.

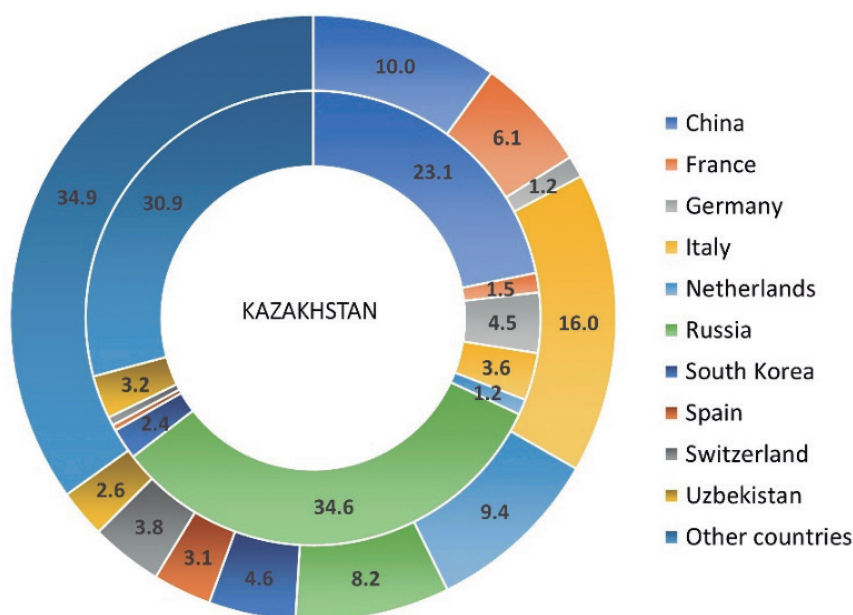
<sup>17</sup> Each country in Central Asia accounts for a majority population that belongs to an ethnic background. It is important to consider the presence of these ethnic groups beyond their borders, for example, Russians. In some parts of Central Asia, ethnic diversity has manifested itself in tensions and clashes, which destabilises relations between the countries of the region.



Whereas the imports from Europe from Germany that represents 4.5 per cent, Italy 3.5 per cent among others are mainly concentrated in machinery, spare parts for machinery and cargo cars.

Regarding its regional trade partners, Uzbekistan represents 3.2 per cent of the imports that include petroleum gas (43.6%), pitted fruits (13.7%) and ethylene polymers (5.34%).

**Figure 4**  
**Trade partners Kazakhstan in 2018**



Source: Own elaboration based on the Observatory of Economic Complexity MIT (2020).

Note: Inner circle provides information on import shares and outer circle export shares.

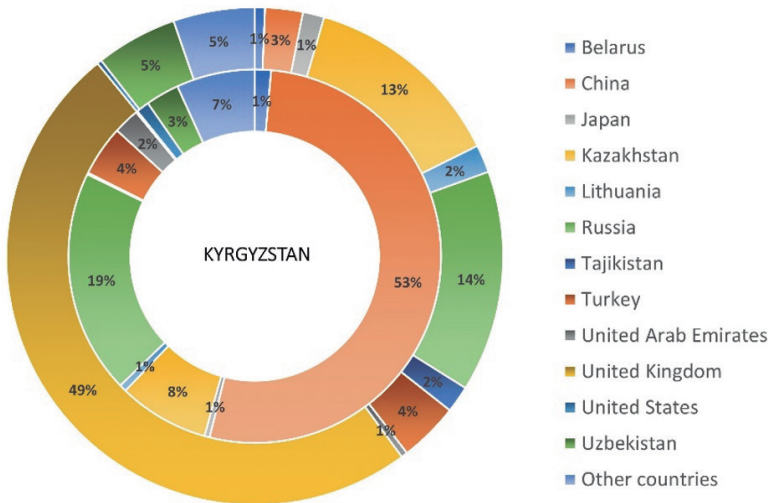
In Kyrgyzstan, nearly 50 per cent of the exports are to the United Kingdom. The country shows a close trade relationship with Kazakhstan with 13.1% of exports and 7.8% of imports mainly in natural resources and minerals. Concerning Russia represented 14.4% of the exports of garments and raw materials and 19.3 per cent imports where 41.2% were refined petroleum. China, on the other hand, is not a key commercial partner in exports (2.45%) but represents

52.4% of the imports of the country, the main products imported are linens and garments, rubber footwear.

Other countries important commercial partner is Turkey that represented 3.8% of the exports and 4.3% in products such as refined petroleum (32.2%), raw cotton (11.9%) among others. Besides, Kyrgyzstan imported 380M dollars that represented 4.38% of the imports in different manufactures, electric and vehicle parts.

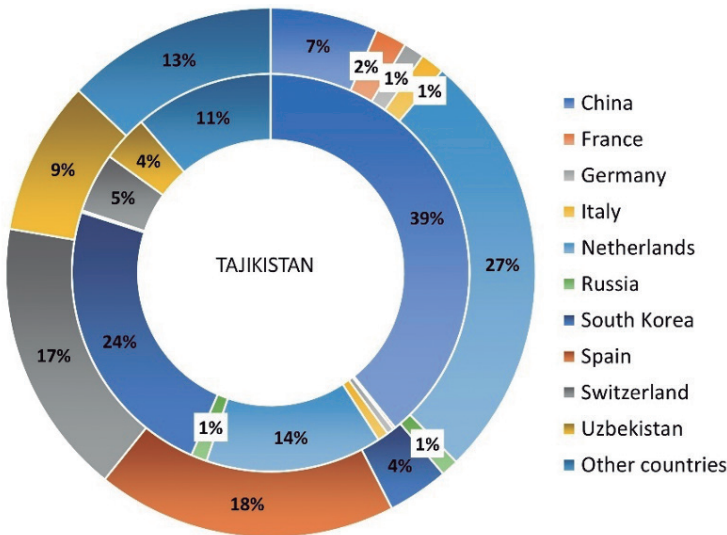


**Figure 5**  
**Trade partners and Kyrgyzstan in 2018**



Source: Own elaboration based on the Observatory of Economic Complexity MIT (2020).  
Note: Inner circle provides information on import shares and outer circle export shares.

**Figure 6**  
**Trade partners and Tajikistan in 2018**

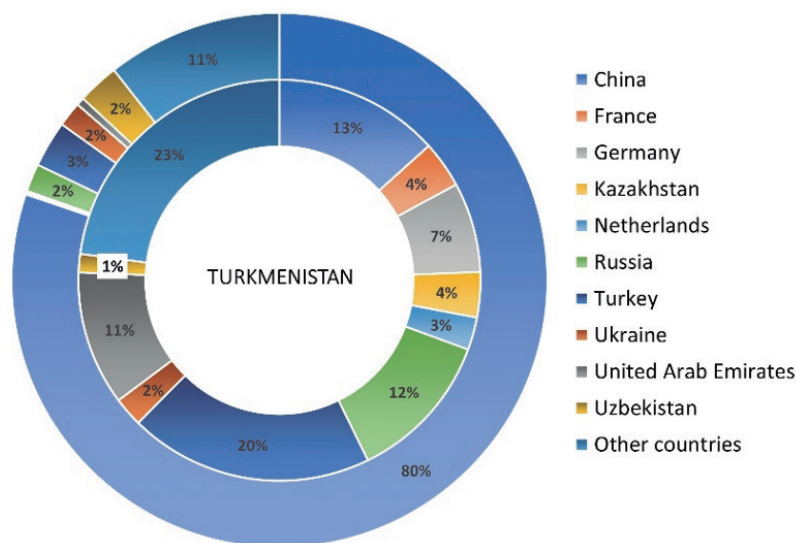


Source: Own elaboration based on the Observatory of Economic Complexity MIT (2020).  
Note: Inner circle provides information on import shares and outer circle export shares.

One of Tajikistan's main trading partners was Kazakhstan with an export share of 26.5% and a trade value of \$308M, the main products exported were metals (zinc, gold, coppers, and aluminium), and imported \$522M that represented 14.4% of the total imports. The main products imported were wheat (30.6%) and petroleum gas (20.8%). China represented 6.5% of the total exports heavily concentrated in other ores. For imports, the country represented 39.2% of the imports with a big variety of manufactured products and electronics.

Tajikistan exports to Turkey were valued at US\$196m. in 2018, which represented 16.9 per cent of the exports. The main export products were raw aluminium (74.8%) and raw cotton (11.5%). Regarding imports, Turkey represented 4.8% including vehicles, buses, furniture, valves, among other goods. Turkmenistan relies heavily on China for trade with 80 per cent of the exports going to that country. The main products are petroleum and gas. Turkey, Russia and China account for almost half of the import share and most of the exports are concentrated in manufacturing and machinery.

**Figure 7**  
**Trade partners Turkmenistan in 2018**



Source: Own elaboration based on the Observatory of Economic Complexity MIT (2020).

Note: Inner circle provides information on import shares and outer circle export shares.

Finally, Uzbekistan has three main trade export partners: China (21.3%), Russia (15.6%) and Switzerland (23.6%). Most of the export value for China and Russia was petroleum gas,

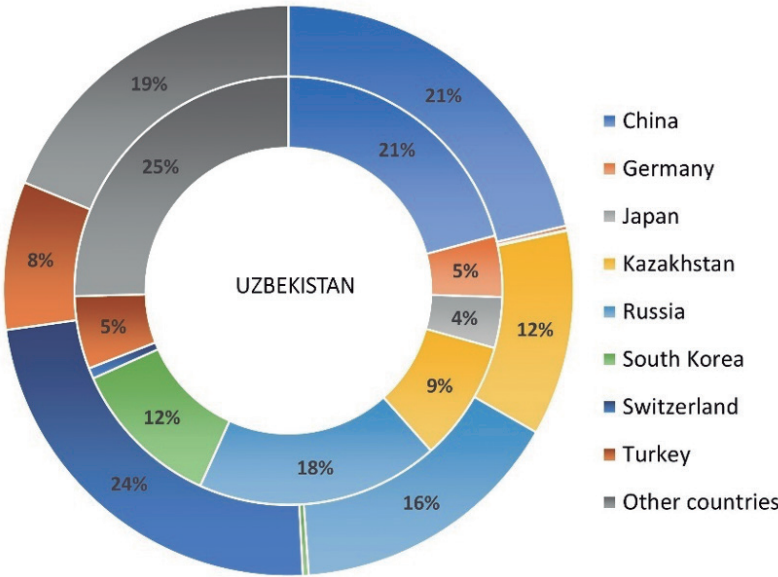
chemicals, and ores. Exports to Switzerland were entirely in gold. For imports, China represented 20.8%, with different electronic products, vehicles and machinery for oil and

gas production. Russia, on the other hand, imported US43.3bn worth of goods that represented 18.3% of total imports; the products imported include iron, refined petroleum, construction vehicles, iron pipes and raw materials.

In sum, despite the dominant presence of great powers in the international trade flows of

Central Asian countries that might potentially affect the political arena, great powers find international trade as a useful tool to achieve their goals and interests in partner countries. Hence, it is not possible to identify a direct relationship between international trade patterns and changes in domestic politics in the countries of the region.

**Figure 8**  
**Trade partners Uzbekistan in 2018**



Source: Own elaboration based on the Observatory of Economic Complexity MIT (2020).  
Note: Inner circle provides information on import shares and outer circle export shares.

**Infrastructure Projects: Oil and gas pipelines projects**

Central Asian countries possess some of the biggest oils and gas reserves in the world. This condition made the region key in global energy security, especially for Russia, China and

European countries that seek to diversify their sources from Gulf providers. The transport of energy resources has been one of the most challenging issues creating tension between allied territories in order to avoid potential blockages and way out to the international market. In this context, Central Asian countries have a

clear interest in opening new and distant markets in which infrastructure for transportation of gas and oil is a priority for the region.

Russia has agreed to act as a security provider and stability in the State-building process and in deterring the emergence of other power presences in the region. Moscow has guaranteed exports of oil and nuclear mate-

rial for energy production. Moreover, regional integration initiatives such as the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)<sup>18</sup> and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU)<sup>19</sup> where Russian aims to create multilateral frameworks that allow the exploitation of natural resources in Central Asia (Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2018).

**Figure 9**  
**Railways projects, oil and gas pipelines**



Source: Taken from Batsaikhan & Dabrowski (2017).

During the last decade China has increased its influence in Central Asia especially on trade and investment relations with the region seek-

ing to guarantee raw material providers for their industries and open markets for Chinese exports. Besides, China has also applied soft

<sup>18</sup> CIS seeks to maintain political, military, and economic ties with Central Asian countries (Lascrain, 2017).

<sup>19</sup> It was founded in 2015 as a more formal cooperation framework based on the Eurasian Economic Community. Currently Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan are members. This regional integration project seeks the free flow of goods, capital, labour force and services. In addition, it introduces common macroeconomic and industrial policies.

power strategies through banking and financial services that Russia is unable to provide cooperation. Moreover, Chinese trade and investment growth have also benefited its strategic interests in oil and gas in the region.

Finally, after the fall of the Soviet Union, Central Asian countries have been supported by the U.S. to be included in international markets through the IMF and the World Bank (Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2018). In this context, U.S. private companies and international organisations have been the main mechanism to assure gas and oil extraction in Central Asia based on the idea that the projects are fostering sovereignty.

Other influential middle powers that have been also interested in Central Asian energy resources include the EU, Iran, Turkey, and Japan. The European Union countries, through economic development initiatives, have promoted economic integration, as well as decreased political dependence and prevented conflict among big powers. Iran and Turkey, which enjoy geographical proximity and share cultural ties with Central Asia, have also been interested in creating alliances in the region. On the one hand, Iran provides simpler and shorter routes, faster and cheaper ways to extract oil from the Caspian Sea to international markets, especially to South and East Asia (Lascurain, 2017, p. 411).

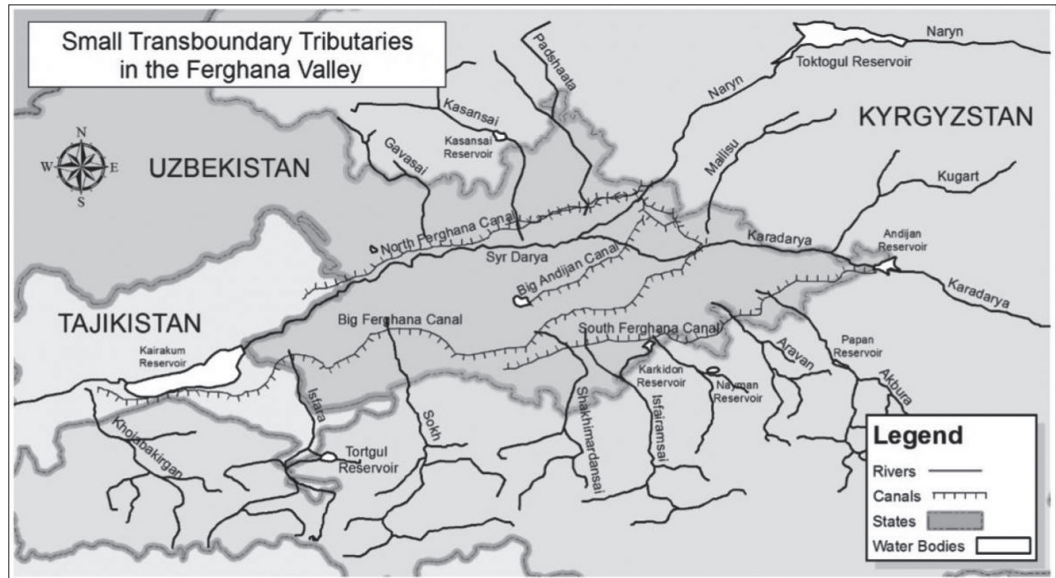
Turkey on the other hand, can take advantage of cultural ties and consolidate its role as a bridge between east and west by transporting oil through the Caspian Sea. Finally, despite Central Asia not being a priority for Japanese foreign policy, Japan has participated in foreign aid projects that have helped it to create a counterbalance to Chinese power with the Freedom and Prosperity Arc initiative<sup>20</sup>. This includes Central Asia given its importance in uranium extraction (Byrd, *et al.*, 2006; International House of Japan, 2007).

### **Water resources projects**

Byrd, *et al.* (2006) point out that the lack of access to the sea, poor transport infrastructure conditions, strong dependence on commodities, energy resources, and an inefficient State, have benefited the consolidation of an informal sector that goes beyond borders. Moreover, the project to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa in a network of trade reviving the old Silk Route has been launched by China in the Belt and Road Initiative. In this framework, Central Asia is a key region for China in which it has signed agreements to receive investment and construction of roads, railways, transport centres, mines, factories, and plants (Sanghera & Satybaldieva, 2018).

<sup>20</sup> The Arch of Freedom and Prosperity constitutes a pillar of Japanese diplomacy. Geographically it includes the north, centre and east of Europe, passing through Central Asia, Turkey and the Middle East. Reach Afghanistan, India and Asean members. It also includes the peninsula of Korea, Mongolia, Australia and New Zealand (International House of Japan, 2007).

**Figure 10**  
**Amur Darya and Syr Darya river basins**



Source: Taken from OSU Program (2020).

Despite Central Asian countries being rich in energy resources, these countries have a scarcity of water and most of their water supply relies on the Syr Darya and Amur Darya<sup>21</sup> rivers as depicted in Figure 10, making water supply a national security priority. Since their independence, the five ex-Soviet countries have discussed how to manage the resource considering that water supply is related to shared rivers. As a result, Central Asian countries are

forced to cooperate through joint declarations to assure access to water and electricity throughout the region. It is one of the aspects where there is continuous regional cooperation with initiatives such as the International Fund to save the Aral Sea<sup>22</sup> in 1993 (Kushkumbayev & Kushkumbayeva, 2013).

It has been challenging to develop joint infrastructure projects because negotiations tend to be very complex and inconclusive

<sup>21</sup> The Syr Darya river flows from Kyrgyzstan (74,2%) to Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. The Amur Darya river flows from Tajikistan (72,9%) to Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan (Kushkumbayev & Kushkumbayeva, 2013).

<sup>22</sup> Ratified in 1997, these communities seek to tackle the desertification of the Aral Sea and its environmental implications on densely populated areas of low-lying countries, if one of these dams fails (Kushkumbayev & Kushkumbayeva, 2013).



when affecting the national interest of each State. On the one hand, the northern Central Asian countries perceive water resources as strategic national resources and place a lot of interest in creating infrastructure initiatives for hydroelectric projects. For instance, Qobil (2016) highlights that for the cases of Kyrgyzstan's and Tajikistan's lack of energy resources, the construction of hydroelectric mega-projects that guarantee electricity, especially in the winter, becomes a priority.

Southern Central Asian countries, rich in oil and gas, rely on water that flows from the south in which hydroelectric projects decrease the flow of water that goes to the northern part. Hence, they perceive these projects as a threat. Moreover, a lower flux of water increases salinity levels of the river and soils also putting at-risk food supply and health of communities.

In this context, there is no legal framework that regulates these matters, nor tools to monitor if countries are abiding by existent agreements. Also, northern countries likely take advantage of their position in future negotiations. In the meantime, Kazakhstan has opted for investing in hydroelectric projects and mutual benefit agreements (Kushkumbayev & Kushkumbayeva, 2013).

Lastly, The Caspian Sea<sup>23</sup> has also geostrategic importance and economic importance that allocate vast reserves of oil. Thus, western countries and electricity companies -state and

private- are very interested in the exploitation of crude. Before 1991, the Soviet Union and Iran controlled the exploitation of resources (fishing and oil), and pipelines. After the fall of the Soviet Union, this has been one of the factors of tension in the region because the lack of legislation has created the opportunity for Russia and Iran to keep managing the resources and control the area<sup>24</sup>. Hence, until 2017, 40% of the Caspian Sea reserves were controlled by public companies, while the remaining 60% was in the hands of Western private companies, such as Chevron, Exxon / Mobile or Shell. This demonstrates the strong influence of the West on this sea and the difficulty of the Central Asian States to diversify the exits of hydrocarbons to the international market (Lascrain, 2017).

## CONCLUSIONS

Applying Gramsci's ideas to the Central Asian States, there is a trend for governments to blame civil society expressions as a cause of instability and an obstacle to their visions and policies. That is why there are several efforts to keep it out of the political arena, hampering the creation of mobilisation structures and facilitating the absence of real guarantees for the exercise of civil rights. All of this facilitated the permanence of clans, local elites, and financial magnates who define the *statu quo*.

<sup>23</sup> It is in western Central Asia and is shared by Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Azerbaijan, and Russia

<sup>24</sup> However, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Azerbaijan have claimed to reclaim maritime zones under their jurisdiction in order to exploit undersea oil resources.

Starr (2006) ensures that political dynamics in each Central Asian country occur between the president and these 'power brokers', but not between the president and parliament that could counterbalance the authoritarian rules.

Other important elements that explain the situation are differences in economic growth, development level, natural resources (water and energy), economic complexity, trade, and economic policies, revive old international relations principles such as the Mackinder theory of Central Asia as the heartland, or geographic pivot: "those who control the pivot will control the world" (Mackinder, 1904). Despite internal incentives by the regional elites or clans to lead under authoritarian regimes, this paper seeks to identify specific international factors that have impacted the domestic configuration of the five ex-Soviet countries.

The Russian standing in Central Asia is based on historical, geographical, and cultural ties with Central Asia (Laumulin, 2010). From a historical perspective, Russia has been the most influential power since the XVII century, and despite the fall of the Soviet Union, it maintained its ties with the Central Asian countries through values with the identity of the post-Soviet States and relations based on mutual benefit.

In the aftermath of the fall of the Soviet Union, Central Asian countries started a process to become independent republics. Their State-building processes led them to consolidate authoritarian regimes, which have maintained until today. Although they are a source of stability, they have also been responsible for

deficient political, social, and economic indicators through the last decades.

Despite new leaders showing renewed powers, they established similar governments as in the Soviet period. Understood from the Linz perspective, it is evident how power has been concentrated in local elites and clans. The cult of the leader's personality prevails. Governance is based on ethnic and nationalist values that homogenise, leaving other communities as second-class citizens.

Besides, there have been few possibilities from political alternatives to emerge and consolidate. There has been persecution and lack of guarantees for the exercise of civil and political rights such as popular demonstrations or freedom of expression, as well as a lack of effective and safe channels for accountability. Added to the long tradition of leadership of this type even before the URSS, this broadly makes up the internal factors that favour the permanence of authoritarian regimes in the region.

Under this logic, Dahl's idea that grassroots and domestic political movements shape the path to democratisation has not been the case in Central Asian countries because the consolidation of civil society remains a challenge. Despite this, precarious conditions create an opportunity for radical groups to approach vulnerable populations. There is not enough evidence to consider this phenomenon as an immediate threat. However, this situation is used by the governments as a pretext to exercise more control over the population and to promote international security and military agreements.



Being a region with great geostrategic importance, it is evident that different powers and non-governmental agents have interests in resources, geographical location, and the way in which the Central Asia countries are governed. Therefore, it is not surprising to consider the influence of external factors in the permanence of authoritarian regimes. In this paper, we were able to theoretically explore this behaviour, understanding that States make decisions and define their identity based on interactions with other agents beyond national borders. All of this in a framework of a power asymmetry, dependencies, and interdependencies, where some have more influence on others and is evident through figures like coercion and negotiation. Influence on political transitions can also be understood through linkages, leverages, and vulnerabilities.

Conventional relationships still rely on security and military alliances, relating to the fight against terrorism, the presence of troops in the region, and the protection of direct threats. In this case, Russia is the main ally, but the US and the EU have had some opportunities. Nevertheless, trade and investment relationships have been more influential. The magnitude of their reserves of ores, petroleum, and gas locate Central Asian countries in the middle of the global energetic security strategies. That made autocratic regimes a relatively stable scenario for trade and infrastructure agreements with great powers such as Russia and especially China with its One Belt One Road plan.

Furthermore, at the regional level, Central Asian countries have a complex interdependence because of the geographical configuration of the Fergana Valley. On the one

hand, water supply and its consequent energy production is a national priority issue. This might be one external source of tensions between the countries as it can create social unrest and instability of the authoritarian regimes. The situation becomes more complex considering the absence of a legal framework that rules these affairs.

Migration is another important factor. Borders between the five countries do not necessarily coincide with the ethnic distribution that marked a strong division. During the Soviet period, borders were not so relevant, but once the system fell, the titling of the borders has represented an obstacle to daily dynamics, generating a feeling of uncertainty and danger when people must cross them and being the centre of resources and territorial disputes. In addition to that, Russians have consolidated as the largest minority helping the Russian government interests and strategies over the region and add elements of uncertainty to the issue of interethnic tensions.

To summarise, despite the external influence not being the only factor influencing the process of transition of Central Asian countries into democracy, autocratic conditions have been convenient for the elites in their relationship with external powers, as well as the maintenance of the *status quo*. For instance, for Russia, autocratic stability can guarantee a long-term arrangement of loyal elites in service of their interests. However, history does not fully explain all the interactions of Central Asian countries. Instead, the more active role of great powers such as the US fighting terrorism in the region and China with the OBOR project has created new dynamics that

also influence the domestic politics of Central Asian countries.

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