

# United Central Asia. Obstacles, Opportunities, Prospects

RESEARCH PROJECT RESULTS SPONSORED BY THE ROSA LUXEMBURG STIFTUNG  
POLICY BRIEF



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Shared history, geographic location, economic and cultural ties, the absence of access to sea routes, similar ethnic composition and the presence of enclaves, dependence on the common use of water resources, irrigation transport routes, and much more – all of it would seem to predispose for closer regional cooperation in Central Asia. In 2005, UNDP estimated that the potential benefits from effective regional cooperation for the Central Asian countries could lead to a possible doubling of regional GDP in 10 years above the level achievable without cooperation<sup>1</sup>. As Ch. Aitmatov said: "the historical community, linguistic similarity, the presence of common traditions and customs give us innumerable opportunities to be together and jointly build a new world, one civilisational community."<sup>2</sup> However, except for unsuccessful attempts in the 90s and early 2000s, the CA countries did not move towards improving cooperation and integration.

At the same time, the topic of intraregional relations in Central Asia remains insufficiently studied. Much has been written on Central Asian ties with China/Russia/USA/EU. Still, there are practically no scientific works and applied research on interstate relations within the region. CA is considered from the point of view of the "Big Games", "the Great Silk Road", "Russian backyard", "a bridge between Europe and Asia", and so on, but is rarely studied without an external element. This applies to relations at the official level and the level of interaction between residents of different countries. This is especially true for more extensive and more applied research like public opinion polls in these countries.

The research project "United Central Asia. Obstacles, Opportunities, Prospects", carried out by "Central Asia Barometer", is an attempt to fill this gap and answer the following questions:

- What are the five CA countries' common cultural, political, economic, and social identities?
- How well are the residents of the five Central Asian countries aware of each other?
- What is the attitude of the population of each country towards other CA countries?
- How do experts and ordinary residents of the region assess relations between the CA countries at the moment?
- How do experts and ordinary people of the countries view greater integration between the CA countries and link the future of their countries with the development of the entire region?
- Are closer cooperation and greater integration possible between the countries of the region? What facilitates or prevents this?

<sup>1</sup> Farkhod Tolipov (2021) *Uzbekistan-Turkey: Pending the Outcomes of Strategic Relationships*. Cabar.asia. <https://cabar.asia/ru/uzbekistan-turtsiya-v-ozhidanii-rezultatov-ot-strategicheskikh-vzaimootnoshenij>

<sup>2</sup> ITAR-TASS News Agency (2021) The Turkic Council was renamed the Organization of Turkic States. Moscow. <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/12912505>

## 1.1 GOALS AND OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH

The aim of the study covering five Central Asian countries - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan - is generally to determine the level of current relations between the countries and their readiness, possible barriers, and opportunities for greater integration and cooperation. This research is applied since it uses methods such as public opinion polls, focus groups, expert interviews, and broad and explorative since it covers a wide range of topics, providing data for further research on specific issues.

For the first phase of the project in 2021 (pilot study), two countries were selected - Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. The data on the first phase of the project will be presented within the framework of this report.

Thus, the goal of the first phase of the project is to answer the following research questions with the help of a sociological approach.

1. What are the CA countries' common cultural, political, economic, and social identities based on the opinions of experts and ordinary Uzbekistanis and Kazakhstanis?
2. How well are the residents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan informed about the neighbouring CA countries?
3. What is the attitude of the population of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan towards other Central Asian countries?
4. How do experts and ordinary residents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan assess the level of cooperation between the CA countries at the moment?
5. How do experts and ordinary residents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan view the prospect of greater cooperation and integration between the CA countries, and do they connect the future of their countries with the development of the entire region?
6. Is closer cooperation and greater integration between the countries of the region possible? What facilitates and prevents this possibility from the point of view of the experts and residents of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

### 2.1 METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

The research methodology included quantitative and qualitative methods, namely population surveys and in-depth interviews with experts.

## 2.2 THE TARGET GROUPS OF THE STUDY (THE OBJECTS OF THE STUDY):

### 1. Population of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

The sample size in each country was composed of 800 respondents aged 18 and over. A total of 1,600 interviews were conducted in two countries.

The sampling is random and based on the following parameters: a sampling error of 3.5% and a confidence level of 95%.

The samples reflected the age and gender structure of the adult population of the countries.

### 2. Expert community in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

Ten interviews were conducted in each country, a total of 20 interviews.

Interviews were conducted with experts in economics, water resources, politics, interethnic relations, and border issues.

## 2.3 POPULATION SURVEY

Surveys in both countries were conducted between August 19 and September 8, 2021. A formalised structured questionnaire with closed-ended and open-ended questions was used as a data collection tool. The questionnaire had been tested, translated into local languages, and programmed. Due to the restrictions caused by the coronavirus's spread, the population survey in both countries was carried out via phone calls from call centres in Almaty and Tashkent. Phone numbers for the survey were randomly generated. Quotas by gender and age were used. Depending on the preferences of the respondents, interviews were conducted in Kazakh, Uzbek, or Russian. The average interview duration was 25 minutes. Quality control was carried out through subsequent audio recordings (20% of interview audio recordings were random). After completing the survey, the databases were checked and cleaned, and open questions answers were coded.

## 2.4 EXPERT INTERVIEWS

Interviews with experts in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were conducted from August 1 to September 17, 2021. The study's search and recruiting of experts were conducted using Internet resources, media and social networks, "snowball" sampling, and other methods. Central Asia Barometer has developed guides for conducting in-depth interviews. Interviews were conducted by the specialists of Central Asia Barometer remotely - using the online service ZOOM. The average duration of an interview was 40 minutes. Audio recordings of the interviews were further used for analysis and preparation of the report.

## 2.5 DATA PROCESSING

Statistical processing of quantitative data was carried out using the SPSS and Excel programs. Analysing the data, we used such types of analysis as the correlation method, the linear regression method, and the cross-sectional analysis method.

### 3. COMPARATIVE ANALYTICAL REPORT

This section summarises the main findings from the analysis of the opinion polls and in-depth expert interviews conducted in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan during the first phase of the project.

#### 3.1 WHAT ARE THE COMMON CULTURAL, POLITICAL, ECONOMIC, AND SOCIAL IDENTITIES OF THE COUNTRIES?

Debates about which territories are included in Central Asia and whether Central Asia can be considered a single region are ongoing, and experts' opinions differ. Therefore, to start a discussion about Central Asia and Central Asian identity, there is a need to determine whether such a region exists and which territories are included.

Most of the experts in this study, with rare exceptions, tend to believe that in political terms, there is a single "Central Asia region" consisting of five countries: Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. Interestingly, there are different arguments for this thesis. Also, most experts believe that geographically, culturally, and historically, the region is much broader and may include Afghanistan, Mongolia, and other territories.

For example, Farkhod Tolipov is one of those experts who believe that politically Central Asia consists of five post-Soviet republics, and, **referring to the early history of independent states**, explains his position as follows:

*"My opinion is based only on one important political fact - that in 1991, immediately after the collapse of the USSR, five - exactly five - presidents of the Central Asian republics at that time proclaimed it as a single region, proclaimed an integration project, and gave it its name - the Central Asian Commonwealth. In response, the CIS [countries] subsequently even adopted a new name for the region, changing the old Soviet "Middle Asia and Kazakhstan" to "Central Asia."*

Ravshan Nazarov, another expert from Uzbekistan, admitting the relevance of the terms "Lesser Central Asia", "Post-Soviet Central Asia", "Greater Central Asia", nevertheless, tends to believe that CA includes the five post-Soviet CA countries which are united **by earlier history** and that

*"for a century and a half, they found themselves within the same political space - at first, it was the Russian Empire, then it was the Soviet Union."*

Roman Vakulchuk, an economist from Kazakhstan, believes that **in the international arena and the eyes of the global community**, the five Central Asian countries are perceived as part of a single whole:

*"This can be seen in the example of how CA is used in international documents."*

Economist Yuli Yusupov from Uzbekistan, **touching upon the economic side of this matter**, argues that *"Central Asia as a region exists objectively and subjectively. For example, many investors perceive our countries as a region. When they make investment decisions, they do not intend to invest in a specific country in the region. According to their plan, production will be located in a particular country, but sales will be carried out throughout the region."*

Water management experts from both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan define the CA region **using a "natural, ecosystemic approach"**.

Thus, Bulat Esekin believes that the CA region includes

*“five Central Asian countries which are today united by one basin ecosystem of the Aral Sea” and notes that “we are united by many issues, ranging from history to culture, economy, energy, but the main unifying basis outside of politics, outside of relations, is water resources”.*

Bota Sharipova believes that Afghanistan is not part of the CA region and explains it as follows:

*“For me, Central Asia is, first of all, the Aral Sea basin. For me, Central Asia is still five countries, i.e., Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan. If possible, it is desirable to include Afghanistan when we talk about water resources, but this is not always justified, I think. In my research, I have bypassed Afghanistan, but when it begins to play a more decisive or distributive role in water issues, I think it is hard to ignore it.”*

Oytur Anarbekov, an expert on water resources from Uzbekistan, thinks that the CA region consists of five countries mentioned above and believes that Central Asia

*“is unique in that we belong to the arid region... It is believed that this is the region to feel the effects of climate change first. Besides, it seems to me that [it is] one of the ancient civilisations. We had one of the first irrigations in our region, along large rivers. ”*

However, Farhod Aminjonov, an expert from Uzbekistan, believes that Central Asia is not a single region, even though five Central Asian countries

*“are more interdependent with each other than with other neighbours in terms of security, political relations, labour, migration flows, transit, economy, in terms of the regional problems, risks, transboundary rivers, water resources”.*

He believes that the absence of regional institutions means that, in terms of political unity and economic integration, the Central Asian region does not exist.

Irina Chernykh, an expert from Kazakhstan, shares a similar opinion and believes that Central Asia, composed of five countries,

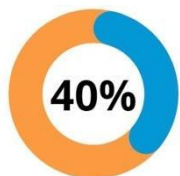
*“exists in the discourse as a political construct, but from the point of view of the objective criteria defining a region - does not”.*

She believes that based on such criteria as geography, economy, migration, and the absence of a single information space and Central Asian identity, we cannot conclude that Central Asia is a single region consisting of those five countries.

In our interviews, experts referred to different criteria and presented other arguments for or against considering Central Asia, a region consisting of five post-Soviet countries. It is noteworthy that, when the term "Central Asia" is mentioned, the interviewed experts from Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan think, first of all, of five post-Soviet republics, so it was already quite clear at the start of the interview which territories they would be talking about. However, the "disputes" between experts concern a different matter. There is no consensus among the experts about the criteria to perceive Central Asia as a single region since they refer to political, environmental, geographic, informational, social, economic, and other criteria. In addition, some experts believe that one or two measures may not be enough and that a whole set of criteria must be met to enable unification into one region. The opinions of Farhod Aminjonov and Irina Chernykh demonstrate this.

As for the common cultural, political, economic, and social identities of the five CA countries, our hypothesis in this study was that there were several such elements common to all five CA countries.

Research data on the unifying and separating factors in relations between Central Asian countries shed light on this understudied topic. For example, a lot can be inferred about Central Asian identity by the fact that



of Uzbekistanis and almost a quarter of Kazakhstanis had found it difficult to answer this question, because precisely this number chose the option “I don’t know” when they were asked the following open question during the survey: *“In your opinion, what is common between the countries of Central Asia?” (Q16).*

## SHARED HISTORY AND SOVIET LEGACY

Unlike some ordinary citizens, the expert community did not find it difficult to give examples of factors they consider uniting. All the experts, both Kazakh and Uzbek, have a unanimous opinion that a common history unites the Central Asian countries before and after incorporating into the Russian Empire and the USSR. Opinion survey respondents also cited history as a unifying factor. Dilfuza Kurolova believes that

*“We are united by history, by the fact that we were in the Soviet Union and that we were all originally like fraternal peoples, communities of sorts, because the Fergana Valley, for example, was not divided into Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. It was a single Fergana Valley”.*

Nigmat Ibadildin, an expert from Kazakhstan, notes that the five CA countries are united by *“the concept that there is a common root, common relatives.”* One can note here that almost a quarter of both Kazakhstanis and Uzbekistanis who visit other Central Asian countries meet with relatives and friends. This is the third most popular response after tourism and labour migration.

When we talk about shared history, it is essential to note that the experts were not talking about the distant past per se, but about elements of the present inherited from the Soviet past which exist in every Central Asian country - such as Russification; Soviet standardisation - “ranging from construction to food”; the similarity of institutions created in Soviet times, which are still in place but have been modified over time. For example, Irina Chernykh believes that the common Soviet past left a legacy

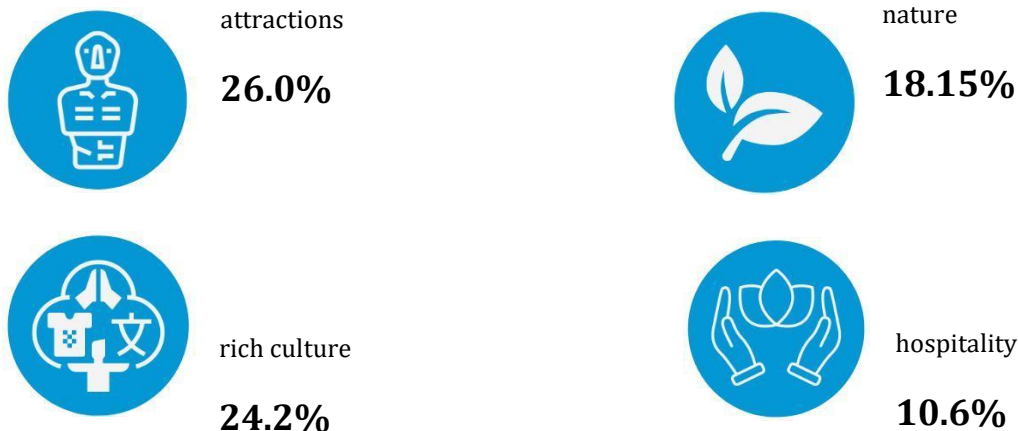
*“of similar behavioural models ... We were left with the same of level of everything after the collapse of the USSR - the level of health care, education, the level of interaction between different ethnic groups, the level of those state institutions that were created on the territory of the Central Asian countries by the Soviet Union.”*

Nigmat Ibadildin, an expert from Kazakhstan, believes that a “mental commonality unites us”. At the same time, it is essential to note that only a minority of experts touch upon post-coloniality when discussing the common Soviet past. Thus, taking into account that the survey data and expert interviews confirm this, it is possible to conclude that the commonality of institutions and all the diversity of the Soviet legacy, as well as the experience of coexistence in one state, are the most likely unifying factors for the countries of the region.



## CULTURE

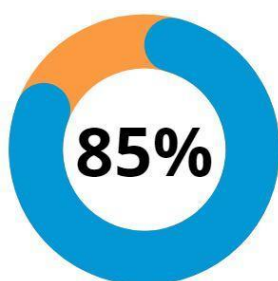
The participants in the public opinion poll and the experts name culture, including cuisine, traditions, religion, common languages, as the phenomena are uniting five Central Asian countries. Thus, respondents from Kazakhstan believe that Central Asia should be visited for the following reasons:



45.2% of respondents in Uzbekistan named the cultural heritage of Central Asia as a reason for people from other countries to visit Central Asian countries. The second most popular answer is “nature” (31.3%). The respondents noted the hospitality of these countries’ peoples as another reason to visit the region’s countries (17.6%). A consensus and understanding among the residents and the experts that strong cultural ties unite the Central Asian countries in similar cuisine, hospitality, religion, and traditions, which is a decisive unifying factor *per se*.

However, some experts believe that some linguistic, religious, cultural differences contain the potential for separation in the region. For example, they state that if Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Kyrgyzstan share a common language root, Tajikistan belongs to a completely different language group.

It is interesting to note here that approximately



of those who named the unifying factors in Kazakhstan, used such keywords as “Turks”, “Turkic” in their answers, implying Turkic languages, culture, traditions. Although the respondents in Uzbekistan used similar keywords as well, there were much fewer of them than among the responses of Kazakhstanis. It should be noted that the answers of the respondents can be interpreted in different ways. For example, this may indicate that Kazakhstanis are unaware of linguistic differences with Tajiks, which is confirmed by other survey data on awareness and visits. The difference between Uzbekistanis and Kazakhstanis in the popularity of answers with the keyword “Turkic” may also indicate that this topic is more prominent on Kazakhstan's agenda than

Uzbekistan's, in turn, be related to the history of the latter's isolation. For example, in 2001, the schools of the Hizmet movement in Uzbekistan were closed following the chilling in relations with Turkey,<sup>3</sup> while in Kazakhstan, these schools have been operating continuously since 1992.

<sup>3</sup> Marlene Laruelle (2013) *Foreign policy and identity in Central Asia*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ProEtContra\\_58\\_6-20.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ProEtContra_58_6-20.pdf)

It would be exciting to find out here how the residents of Tajikistan assess their ties with Central Asia. Do they consider, for example, that their relations with Iran are more robust than with other Central Asian countries in terms of identity or not? Also, there is a potential for further research to explore the effect of organizations such as the Organization of the Turkic States, which now includes Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan (with Turkmenistan participating as an observer country)<sup>4</sup> and excludes Tajikistan, on regional integration.

At the same time, it is essential to note that the majority of the interviewed experts on various issues hint at ideas about the antiquity of the peaceful coexistence of multiple peoples and cultures in Central Asia, especially in the Fergana Valley. For example, Ravshan Nazarov believes that the sedentary/nomadic or Turkic-speaking/Iranian-speaking dualism is not a divisive factor. This expert says that

*“sedentary and nomadic civilizations were not competing with, but complementing each other ... Moreover, there were never any contradictions between the Turkic-speaking and Iranian-speaking peoples, because bilingualism and trilingualism are completely normal in Central Asia”.*

Farhod Tolipov says that

*“the conflicts [of the countries] in CA do not have the potential for escalation, they can not spread over wider geographic territories and spaces, they are localised.”*

In general, the interviewed experts did not exclude Tajikistan while speaking about the unifying factors. Based on the results of expert interviews and a survey in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, it is possible to conclude that the CA countries are more connected with each other than with other countries in cultural aspects.

## SIMILAR PROBLEMS

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Some experts noted that Central Asian countries have similar problems. In particular, issues of ecology and natural resources require joint action, as they are transboundary. This type of problem also includes water supply, energy, transport, and other areas.<sup>5</sup>

Thus, Gabit Konusov believes that

*“problems unite as well. An example would be everything that we hear about regularly - radicalism, unemployment, our, what do you call them, border disputes, the problematic legacy of interethnic relations of the Soviet period ...”.*

8% of Kazakhstanis noted common problems that unite the CA countries, such as the quality of roads, poverty, low safety level, medicine, education, culture, fear of the government, gender inequality. On the other hand, the Uzbek people adhere to more positive opinions and cite positive uniting factors. This distinction is fascinating given the experience of CAB research, which shows that in Uzbekistan, people, in general, are more likely to answer positively

<sup>4</sup> Interview with Helge Blakkisrud (2021) *Nation-building in Central Asia on the 30th anniversary of the Independence*. Cabar.asia. <https://cabar.asia/ru/natsiestroitelstvo-v-tsentralnoj-azii-v-30-j-godovshhine-nezavisimosti-stran-regiona-intervyu-s-helge-blakkisrud>

<sup>5</sup> Marlene Laruelle (2013) *Foreign policy and identity in Central Asia*. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. [https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ProEtContra\\_58\\_6-20.pdf](https://carnegieendowment.org/files/ProEtContra_58_6-20.pdf)

to questions - choosing the options "very good" or "rather good," for example. In the questions about the uniting factors among the Uzbek people, for example, the answer "everything is common", "everything unites" was the most popular. According to the experience of our research, Uzbeks also tend to go through the questionnaire to the end, unlike Kazakhstanis, which may be due to some cultural differences or simply because the public in Kazakhstan is already a little tired of polling calls, in contrast to Uzbekistan, where there are fewer polls conducted at the moment.

Based on the results of the in-depth interviews and opinion polls, it is possible to conclude that Central Asian countries have a lot in common. These uniting factors such as shared memory and history, culture, and shared institutions may be elements of Central Asian identity. They can also be mobilised to create one, positively influencing rapprochement between Central Asian countries.

According to the results of the study, we see that a specific civilisational community exists in the mixture of the post-Soviet heritage in the form of memory, similar problems, institutional commonalities, as well as cultural similarities in the form of language, cuisine, traditions, religion, and so on. The survey results show that the respondents know that they have a lot in communion with other Central Asian countries. Still, they are little informed of current events in other countries and do not name actual events, projects, phenomena, or other unifying factors *of the present*. Only a few people name such unifying, in their opinion, factors such as sports, trade relations, tourism, labour migrants. It is possible to conclude that new elements of Central Asian identity are not being created, promoted, or mobilised in the present.<sup>6</sup> Moreover, the survey results on the level of awareness show that the younger the respondent is, the less he knows about other CA countries.

### 3.2. HOW AWARE ARE THE RESIDENTS OF UZBEKISTAN AND KAZAKHSTAN OF THE NEIGHBORING CA COUNTRIES?

The experts from Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan interviewed within the project framework highlighted low awareness of each other as an obstacle to rapprochement between CA countries. Gabit Konusov says:

*"It is desirable that we have as intensive contacts as possible. That the stereotypes we have ... gradually go away."*

Rashid Gabdulkhakov shares his memories of how little people know about each other, only tens of kilometres apart. He talks about how residents of his hometown of Namangan asked with curiosity about Kyrgyzstan, receiving information only from Namangan newspapers, in which it was mentioned only in the light of the past revolutions, chaos, and instability. Ravshan Nazarov, an Uzbek expert on interethnic relations, notes the necessity

*"to strengthen direct contacts ... that is, representatives of the peoples ... should enter into contact with each other as much as possible, and at all levels - economic ties, humanitarian ties."*

Therefore, we hypothesised that the residents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have little knowledge of other Central Asian countries.

<sup>6</sup> Erkin Baidarov (2013) Central Asian Integration in the Context of a Common Cultural and Civilizational Space. Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. <https://carnegieendowment.org/2013/09/09/ru-pub-52896>

As a result, the survey data confirmed this hypothesis and showed a low level of awareness of Central Asian countries:



45% of Uzbekistan and 58% of respondents from Kazakhstan noted they are partially or entirely uninformed of the situation and events in other Central Asian countries. About half of the population in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan is not aware of current events in neighbouring countries. At the same time, we see that unawareness about events in other countries is higher in Kazakhstan.

Additionally, there is a connection with the age of the respondents who answered “rather informed”: the older the respondents, the higher the indicator (60 y.o. and older - 55.5%; 30-39 y.o. - 21%). 22% of respondents from Kazakhstan are completely uninformed (the same pattern can be seen: the most significant percentage of completely uninformed respondents are those aged 30-39 years (32%). In Uzbekistan, the level of awareness is also higher among older respondents. For example, 61% of Uzbeks aged 60 and over answered: “rather informed”. 40% of respondents aged 30-39 are entirely unaware of events in the region’s countries.

Our task was also to reveal this topic in detail. We were interested in finding out how well the respondents are informed of other Central Asia and whether they have any associative connections.

From the table below, we can judge the overall level of awareness by country based on the question *“What comes to your mind first about \_\_\_\_\_?”* Below, we can see the percentage of “don’t know” answers for each country.

Percentages of Uzbeks who answered “I don’t know” to the question of what comes to one’s mind when other Central Asian countries are mentioned:



Based on these data and considering the sampling error, it is possible to conclude that an approximately equal number of Uzbeks do not have associative links with Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The share of the population that has no association with Kazakhstan is slightly lower than other CA countries.

Percentages of Kazakhstanis who answered “I don’t know” to the question of what comes to your mind when you mention other Central Asian countries:



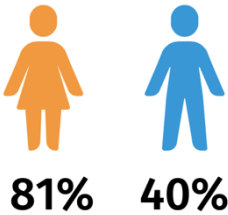
In Kazakhstan, we observe more or less equal proportions of the population that do not have any associations about Tajikistan and Turkmenistan; that is, the majority of Kazakhstanis not only do not know what is happening in Tajikistan and Turkmenistan but also have no associations with these countries. Kazakhstanis are likely more aware of Uzbekistanis and Kyrgyzstanis because a smaller proportion of the population has no associations with these countries than with Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. However, about a quarter of the population does not come up with anything about Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which is also an important indicator.

Let's compare the two countries in terms of awareness. We can see that Uzbekistanis are informed of events and, in general, about other Central Asian countries a little more than Kazakhstanis. At the same time, both countries are approximately the same in the degree of awareness of each other, and at the same time, it is essential to note that these countries are more aware of each other than of other CA countries. Looking at the data from other questions in the questionnaire, we noticed that respondents from both countries were more likely to say "don't know" when asked about Turkmenistan and Tajikistan than about the other three CA countries. But it is worth noting that their levels of awareness of Kyrgyzstan differ. Kazakhstanis are most likely more informed of it than Uzbekistanis. And this is very interesting, taking into account how close Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are geographically. Still, many experts are puzzled by the same fact and testify that ordinary people are unaware of the country tens of kilometres apart. This, of course, has the potential for further research.

Thus, we see that the levels of awareness are low, and there is also inequality in the level of awareness between countries.

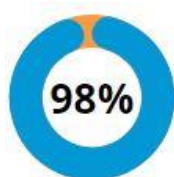
To understand the issue on a deeper level, we studied the survey data on internal movements in Central Asia, trying to find out what light the data on visits shed on the level of awareness because these data should complement each other. Below are the percentages of Uzbekistanis and Kazakhstanis who have never visited other CA countries:

Percentage of Uzbek population who have never visited:

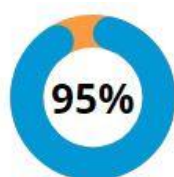


81% of Uzbekistani women have never been to Kazakhstan, 40% of Uzbekistani men have been to Kazakhstan at least once in their lives.

Percentage of Kazakh population that never visited:



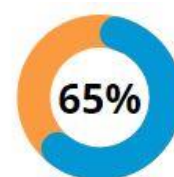
**Tajikistan**



**Turkmenistan**



**Kyrgyzstan**



**Uzbekistan**

The diagrams clearly show that Uzbek men often visit Kazakhstan, the visit rate of Uzbekistanis to Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan is about the same, and the least visited neighbouring country for Uzbeks is Turkmenistan because almost 93% of the population have never been to this country. Kazakhstanis equally rarely visit Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, but their visits to Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan are much more frequent and about the same level but also relatively low. Most respondents from Kazakhstan (94.4%) and Uzbekistan (93.60%) have never been to Turkmenistan.

The data presented can be a good illustration of labour migration patterns within the region. This topic is much less studied than the labour migration of Central Asians outside the region. Since we see that Uzbek men visit Kazakhstan twice as often as women and that among the reasons for coming to Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan, almost half of the residents of Uzbekistan listed work. Kazakhstanis, on the other hand, visit Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan more as tourists.

Awareness and visitation data provide an opportunity to conclude that the level of awareness is low and provide an opportunity to reveal the components of this low level of awareness. Thus, Kazakhstanis are the most informed ones and visit Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan more than others. Tajikistan and Turkmenistan are equally “distant” for Kazakhstanis, while Uzbekistanis are approximately equally knowledgeable and visit Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Both countries are entirely unaware of and do not visit Turkmenistan. In addition, we saw that the degree of awareness and the respondent’s age are correlated - the older the age, the higher the awareness.

These identified components, of course, require further study, but they can already point out what difficulties may arise in establishing ties and intensifying relations. In particular, the weak links of Kazakhstanis with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan with Turkmenistan, open up questions about the absence of single information space and special ties between the countries of the region. Since the survey did not include questions about the level of awareness of other countries outside the region, we have no data for comparison, and we cannot argue that, for example, Kazakhstanis are more connected with Russia than with Tajikistan, or that Uzbeks are more aware of Turkey than of Turkmenistan. However, the shallow indicators of awareness for these countries make it possible to assume that there are no exclusive, relevant and robust ties between the region’s countries at the level of ordinary residents. This raises doubts - is it worth uniting these five countries into some community?

### 3.3. WHAT IS THE ATTITUDE OF THE POPULATION OF UZBEKISTAN AND KAZAKHSTAN TOWARDS OTHER CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES?

We hypothesised that Kazakhstanis have the best attitude towards Kyrgyzstan due to more substantial cultural similarities than other Central Asian countries. Uzbekistanis have the best attitude towards Kazakhstan due to a more intense migration flow. We asked a set of questions to test this hypothesis and reveal other components of sympathies and antipathies in the region.

In general, the overwhelming majority of respondents, namely 94% of Kazakhstanis and 96% of Uzbekistanis, see the relations between the Central Asian countries as friendly. Answering questions about their attitude towards each CA country, the majority of respondents share their positive attitude towards all countries in the region:

*Kazakhstan*

Attitude towards a country	The sum of the "rather positive" and "very positive" responses.	The sum of the "rather negative" and "very negative" responses
Kyrgyzstan	90%	5%
Uzbekistan	90%  * 46.8% of Kazakhstanis aged 18-29 called their attitude towards this country "very positive".	5%
Tajikistan	74%	10%
Turkmenistan	77%	10%

*Uzbekistan*

Attitude towards a country	The sum of the "rather positive" and "very positive" responses.	The sum of the "rather negative" and "very negative" responses
Kyrgyzstan	77%  * The response rate of "very positive" is higher for the respondents aged 50 and over. For example, 24.6% of the respondents aged 18-29 and 42.8% of Uzbekistanis aged 50-59 called their attitude towards Kyrgyzstan very positive. "Rather negative" was chosen by 14.2% of the respondents aged 18-29 and only 3.5% aged 60 and older.	11%
Kazakhstan	86%  * The response rate "very positive", albeit insignificantly, is higher among respondents aged 50 and over. For example, 32.0% of	8%  * The rate of answers "rather negative" and "very negative", in turn, is higher for the respondents under 50.

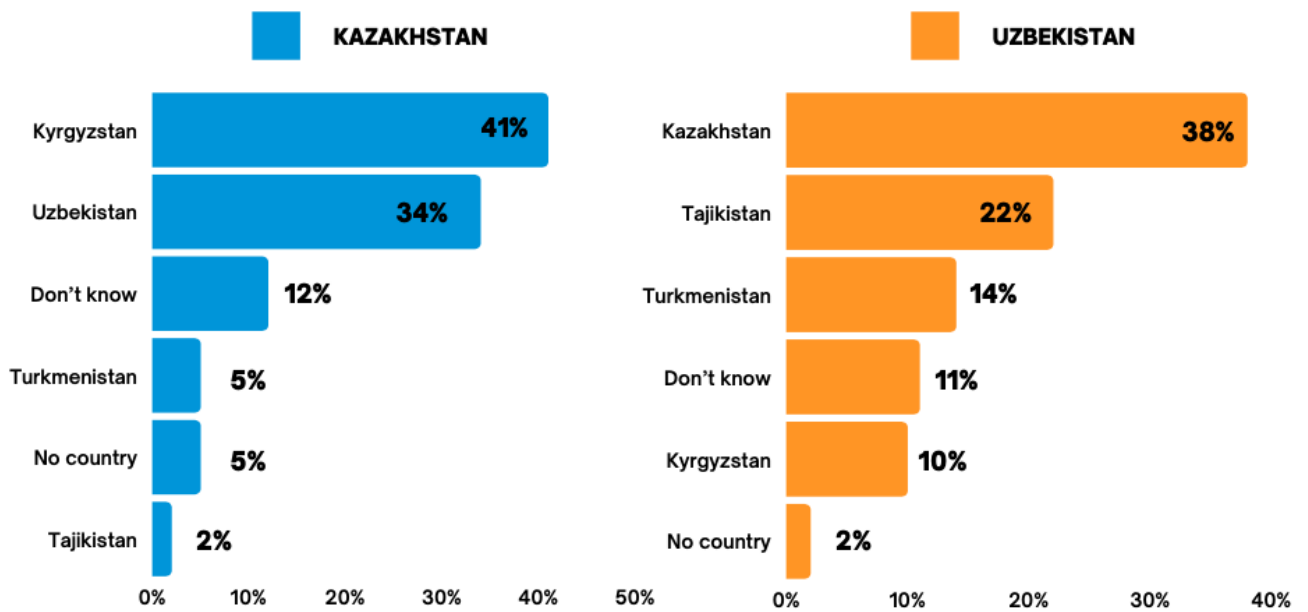
	Uzbekistanis aged 30-39 and 45.7% aged 60 and older answered this way.	
Tajikistan	70%	17%  * 20.2% of Uzbeks aged 50-59 called their attitude “rather negative”, and this indicator is the highest among all age groups. However, only 6% of the respondents aged 60 and over answered the same.
Turkmenistan	70%  * The percentage of the respondents with the “very positive” answer varies from 27.8% (18-29 years old) to 46.9% (50-59 years old).	13%

Based on these data on the attitude of Uzbeks and Kazakhs towards each Central Asian country, it is possible to make the following observations. The respondents have a positive attitude towards the region’s countries; there are no high indicators of negative attitudes. The populations of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan treat each other equally well. The overwhelming majority of the respondents shared a positive attitude. The people of both countries have approximately the same attitude towards Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. They stand apart, and the share of the population with a positive attitude towards these countries is 15-20% less. The percentage of the people that has a negative attitude towards these two countries is also higher. Kyrgyzstan is in the top two respondents’ sympathies for both countries, but in Kazakhstan (90%), Kyrgyzstan is treated better than in Uzbekistan (77%). The attitude towards the Central Asian countries among Uzbekistanis worsens with decreasing age.

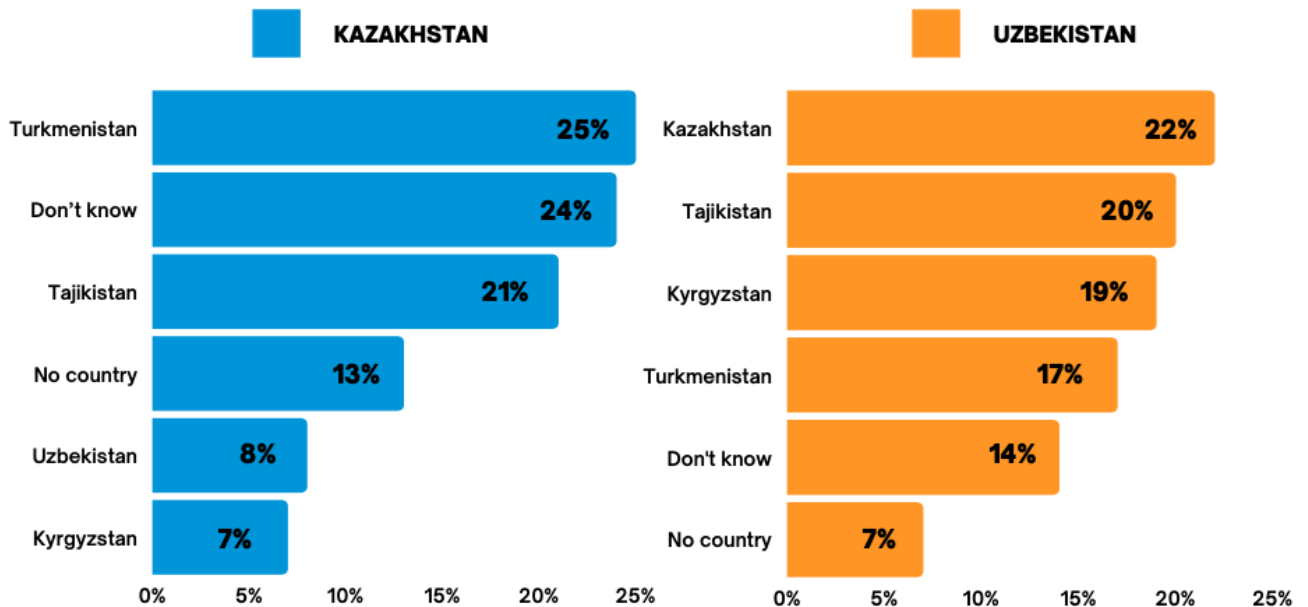
But it is worth keeping in mind the positive response bias when asking these kinds of questions and the possibility that the respondent may give false socially acceptable answers. Therefore, to better understand the actual preferences of the respondents, we asked them to name the most and least friendly country in Central Asia.



Percentages of the population of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan that named \_\_\_ as the most friendly country:



Percentages of the population of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan that named the least friendly country:



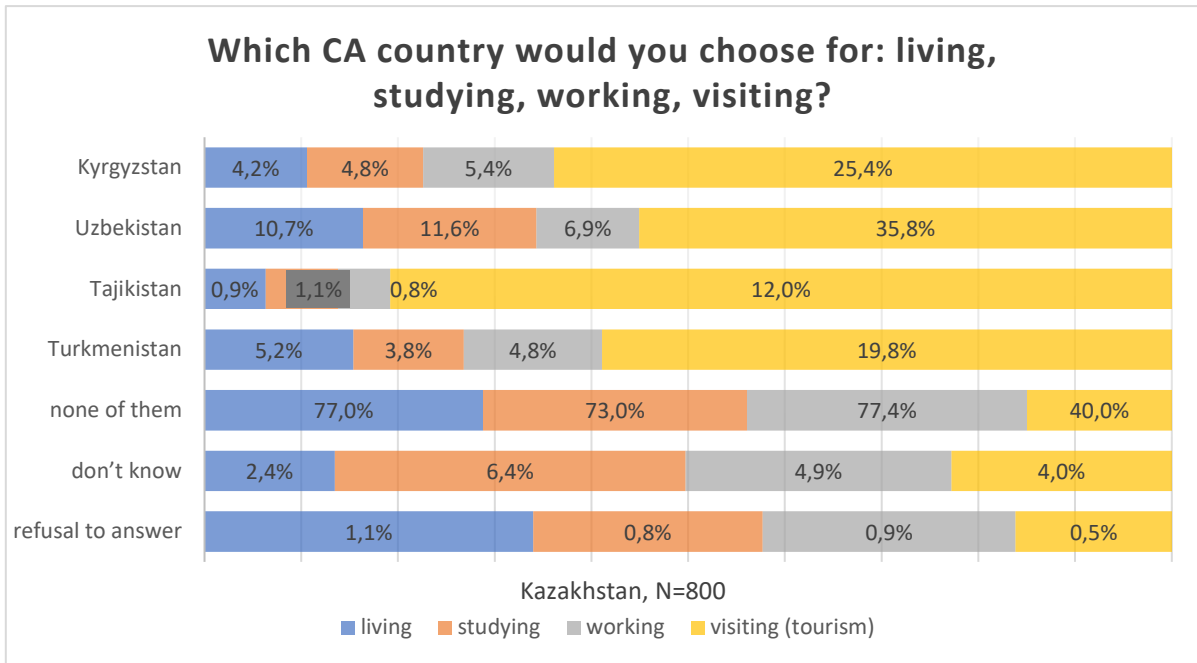
It is interesting to note here that among the Uzbekistanis, there are approximately equal shares of the population who believe that the same country is at the same time the least and most friendly. And an equal number of Uzbeks consider each Central Asian country the least friendly. These indicators may point out that there is no consensus about "friends" in Uzbek society. Still, the data show that a slightly more significant proportion of Uzbeks consider Kazakhstan the most friendly country. As for Kazakhstan, its people likely have a clearer idea of their "friends" in

Central Asia. Many Kazakhstanis think Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to be the most friendly countries, and Tajikistan and Turkmenistan the least so.

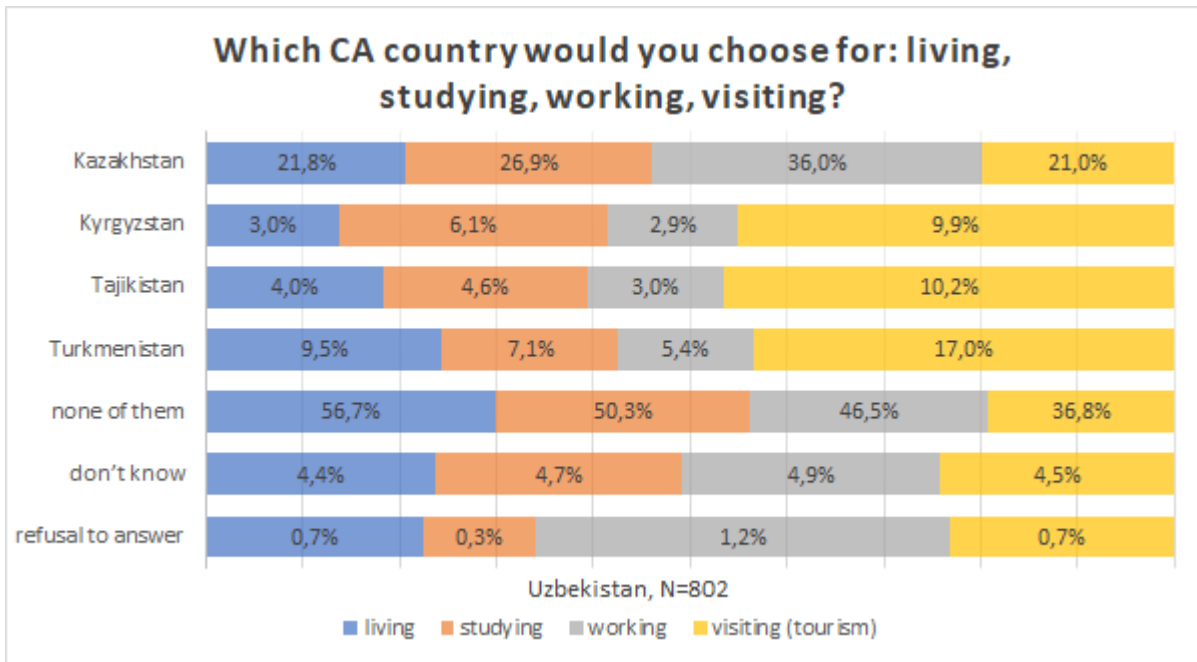
To understand the dynamics behind the choice of the least friendly country better, the respondents were asked an open-ended question about the reasons for their choice. Interestingly, 30% of Kazakhstanis blame the political regime/government, 20% blame the lack of awareness, and 20% blame the lack of unifying features. At the same time, 30% of Uzbekistanis name conflicts related to borders and their crossing, a quarter believe that dense neighbourhoods can cause difficulties and misunderstandings. This difference in answers is interesting because Kazakhstanis, who have almost entirely resolved the issues of borders with their neighbours, in contrast to Uzbekistanis, for whom these issues are still relevant, do not name border conflicts as a reason. It is also noteworthy that the problems of compact living are raised by Uzbeks, not Kazakhs, who do not live in the Fergana Valley, the most densely populated area in Central Asia. Here it can also be concluded that Kazakhstanis are more distant from other Central Asian countries on the issue of problems because many explained their choice with the lack of knowledge and common things with the least friendly country.

When the respondents were asked what first comes to their mind when mentioning another Central Asian country, both Kazakhstanis and Uzbeks named approximately the same number of positive and negative associations. Upon mentioning Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstanis recall "a friendly state, a common history", geographic location, nature and climate, "economy, market relations (for example, "trade (clothing, goods, textiles, vegetables)", "cheap raw materials", «unemployment»)). In the minds of Kazakhstanis, Uzbekistan is also associated with cultural and national characteristics, including traditional clothes, national cuisine, traditions and certain attraction sites, "hardworking people". It is noteworthy that in addition to the mentioned associations, Kazakhstanis associate Turkmenistan with the political situation in the country (for example, "a closed state", "the president does not change for a long time," "authoritarianism"). The situation is similar with the associations of Uzbeks about Kyrgyzstan where about 35% answered that the first thing that comes to their minds about Kyrgyzstan is "politics, political situation" (for example, "unstable country/turbulent situation", "democracy"). Uzbekistani associations about Kazakhstan are more positive. Kazakhstan is associated with a developed state with a high level of both economy and education ("wealth", "work", "production"). Many respondents also noted that when Kazakhstan is mentioned, the first thing that comes to their mind is "the size of the territory, the number of cities". As for Turkmenistan, in addition to other listed associations, some of the Uzbekistanis immediately recall its policy, the political situation in the country, and the head of state.

The survey data on preferences among Central Asian countries concerning life, work, education, and tourism attract interest as well. These data may reveal the elements of regional sympathies and antipathies and soft diplomacy of countries in the region.



The overwhelming majority of respondents in Kazakhstan would not choose any Central Asian countries to live, work, or study in. Central Asia for Kazakhstanis is mainly attractive only in regards to tourism. Uzbekistan is the leader in attracting Kazakhstanis among the Central Asian countries in all areas.



Half or more of the respondents in Uzbekistan would not prefer to live, work and study in any region's countries. In all the areas, Kazakhstan is the leader in attracting Uzbeks, and the number of those wishing to study, live, work in Kazakhstan among Uzbeks is two or even three times higher than the respective indicators among Kazakhstanis.

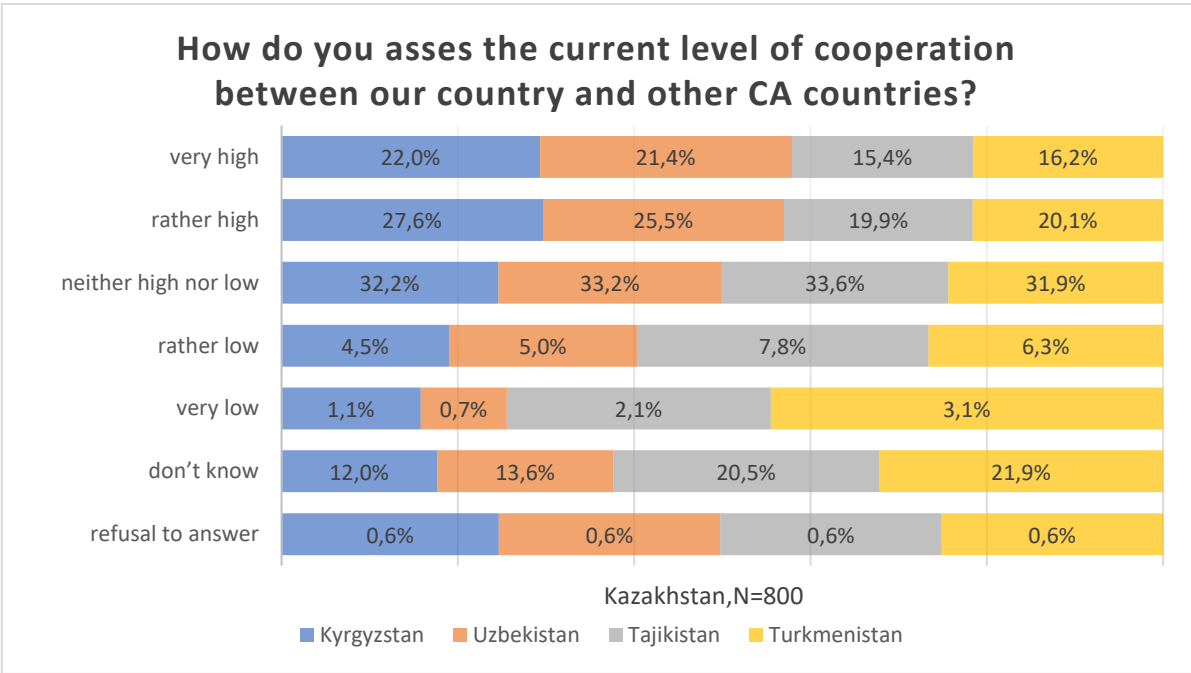
Based on the data from this set of questions, we can conclude that the hypothesis was partially proved. Kazakhstanis have approximately the same good attitude towards Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. They have the least disposition towards Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. On the other hand, Uzbekistanis have Kazakhstan as a clear favourite, have approximately the same attitude towards Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and are least disposed to

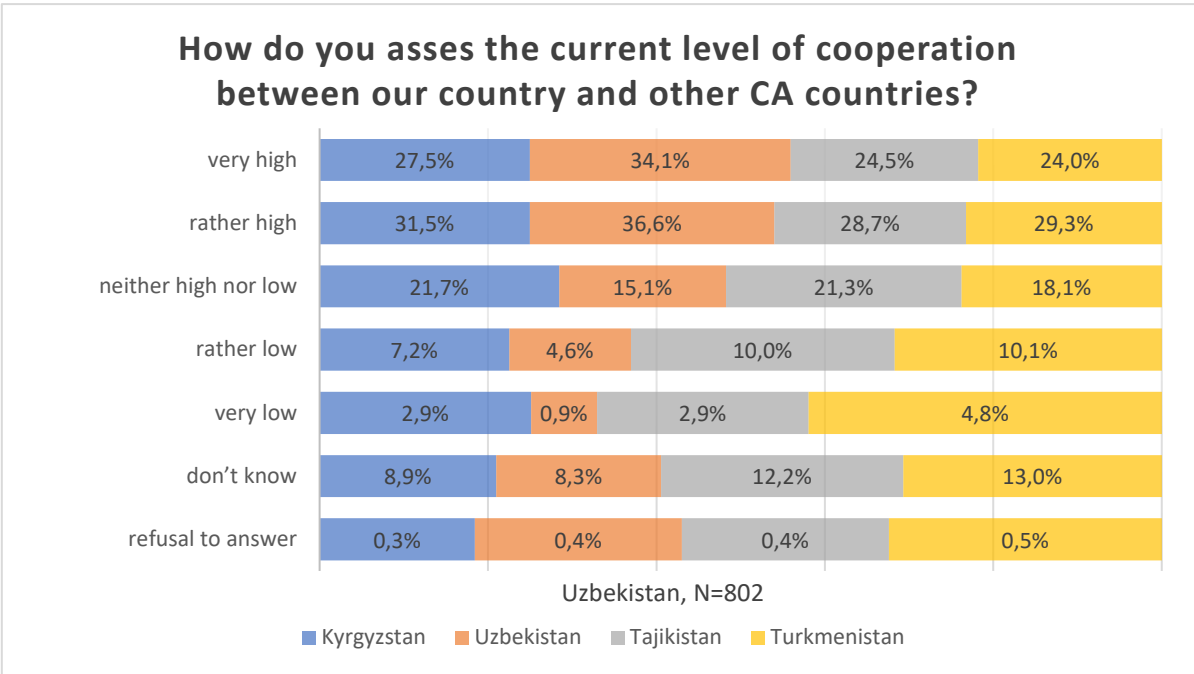
Turkmenistan. These patterns are complemented by the data on the levels of awareness and visits, and we see that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are more inclined to treat the CA countries with which they have more intense ties.

### 3.4. HOW DO EXPERTS AND ORDINARY RESIDENTS OF UZBEKISTAN AND KAZAKHSTAN ASSESS THE LEVEL OF COOPERATION BETWEEN THE CA COUNTRIES AT THE MOMENT?

One of the goals of this study was to understand at what level the cooperation between the countries of the region is at the moment and to determine whether there is an increase in cooperation processes and whether this is linked to large-scale reforms in Uzbekistan. To test this hypothesis, we asked several questions to experts and ordinary citizens of the two countries.

The survey data on the assessment of the current level of cooperation are not very informative, since, in general, the respondents had little knowledge about such questions and tended to favour positive answers:





Likewise, most of the interviewed experts believe the level of cooperation between the Central Asian countries at the moment is generally good or satisfactory. At the same time, Uzbek experts assess cooperation as good and excellent, while Kazakh experts are more restrained in their assessments. For example, an Uzbek political scientist Farkhod Tolipov observes a positive picture and speaks of *“increasing trust in each other, closeness, [and] there are practically no serious problems left today...”* This also applies to the Uzbek population as a whole,



of which assesses the current level of cooperation with Kazakhstan as very high or relatively high, while Kazakhstanis are 20% less inclined to evaluate the level of cooperation in this way.

Kazakh and Uzbek experts also generally differ because, when speaking about relations between the Central Asian countries, Kazakh experts call them stable, not bad or good. In contrast, Uzbek ones speak of positive dynamics. Thus, Gabit Konusov from Kazakhstan says that, in the relations of the Central Asian countries, *“there is ground both for conflicts and mutual sympathy... In general, relations are stable and good. There is good continuity. The relationships are sustained.”*

On the contrary, Uzbek experts believe that since Mirziyoyev came to power in Uzbekistan, there have been positive dynamics in relations between the countries. For example, Bakhtiyor Ergashev, an economist from Uzbekistan, says that

*“The trade turnover [of Uzbekistan] with Central Asia from 2016 to 2019 (over three years) more than doubled. If in 2016 it was two and a half million dollars, by 2019 it grew up to five-point two billion.”*

Yuli Yusupov believes that many barriers are being removed and economic relations are improving. Uzbek experts, unlike Kazakh experts, believe that *“relations are on the rise”*. Farkhod Tolipov and Sanzhar Saidov think there has been an impetus to strengthen integration processes in the past four years.

For example, Tolipov believes that through

*“the initiative of Uzbekistan ... [and with] the support of the rest of the Central Asian republics, the five-sided format has been resumed. Now it is not called OCAC, as it used to be, but these are consultative meetings of the presidents taking place once a year. ”*

We should mention the opinion of an Uzbek expert Farkhod Aminjonov that since Mirziyoyev came to power in Uzbekistan,

*“at the institutional level little has changed” and that “political will alone is not enough here, and serious working mechanisms, institutions, certain obligations and even a mechanism for resolving conflicts must be created.”*

Kazakh expert Nygmet Ibadildin shares his position and believes that the processes of rapprochement are based on personal relations between leaders. So far, no institutional changes in this regard are visible.

It is noteworthy that all interviewed economic experts, regardless of their country, point out to an improvement in the general climate, an intensification of trade and economic relations in the past few years, even though, as Askar Nursha notes, trade and economic ties are still at a relatively low level in general, because the trade between Kazakhstan and China or Russia is incomparable with the modest trade with the countries of the region. At the same time, Roman Vakulchuk emphasises that the level of trade between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan is growing by 20-30% quarterly. Both Kazakh and Uzbek economists associate the growth of trade with the "opening" of Uzbekistan and the economic reforms that took place there, incl. Reduction of customs duties. At the moment, the CA countries have probably intensified cooperation mainly in the direction of the economy. At the same time, in other areas, such intensification is not observed since only the interviewed economic experts from the two countries agree on the intensification of relations. The experts interviewed on border issues, water resources, interethnic relations from both countries do not observe positive dynamics in their respective spheres within the relations between Central Asian countries.

Thus, it is possible to conclude that cooperation between the region's countries is experiencing more changes in the economic sphere than in other vital areas of interregional relations.

### **3.5. HOW DO EXPERTS AND ORDINARY RESIDENTS OF UZBEKISTAN AND KAZAKHSTAN VIEW THE PROSPECT OF GREATER COOPERATION AND INTEGRATION BETWEEN THE CA COUNTRIES AND DO THEY CONNECT THE FUTURE OF THEIR COUNTRIES WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE ENTIRE REGION?**

To study the attitude of respondents to the prospect of regional integration, we asked them several questions:

To the question, *“In your opinion, should the Central Asian countries unite and integrate further, or should each country go its way?”*, the majority of the respondents in Kazakhstan (73%) and Uzbekistan (72%) answered that the countries of Central Asia should “unite more”. 21% of respondents in Uzbekistan and 22% in Kazakhstan believe that the countries should develop and follow different paths. In general, the respondents expressed their readiness for closer cooperation with other countries of Central Asia.

After this question, we asked *if the Central Asian countries should unite in a regional political and economic union for further development and solution of problems, or if such an alliance was not needed.* The respondents who answered this question with “Should, or, they rather should” was 70% in Kazakhstan and 83% in Uzbekistan. 18% of the respondents from Kazakhstan and 9% from Uzbekistan answered “They rather shouldn't” and “Definitely should”.

Answering open questions about why they think the Central Asian states should unite, the respondents gave such reasons as cooperation and development, security, geopolitics, etc.

To understand whether the respondents associate the prosperity of their country with Central Asia, we asked the following question: *“Can our country prosper if it unites in an economic and political union with other Central Asian countries?”* 76% of the respondents in Kazakhstan and 84% in Uzbekistan said yes.

The data clearly show that the overwhelming majority in Kazakhstan and slightly more people in Uzbekistan are optimistic about the prospects for regional integration.

The interviewed experts could not name any groups in the Central Asian countries that oppose and do not want closer cooperation. The interviewed political scientists believe that the entire population of Central Asia is interested in deepening ties and intensifying integration processes in various areas. Farhod Tolipov thinks that

*“individually, neither Uzbekistan, nor Kazakhstan, nor Kyrgyzstan, nor Tajikistan, etc., of course, will not be able to rise to any high position in the world system. They need to rise [all] together, gaining a more confident voice at the global scope, become more competitive, create a single market in their region; this market consists of 70 million people, this is a huge market.”*

Sanzhar Saidov: *“Integration allows us to form security belts in Central Asia - this is the most important thing, we must create such a belt without guidance by other powers [such] as China and Russia, etc. We can and have enough resources to create just such a safe environment in Central Asia ourselves. Secondly, integration allows us to move economic capital, human capital and – such a component exists - social capital, these factors are critical today with regards to the perspective of Central Asia's integration”.*

Economic experts emphasise that the business communities of the countries are most interested in integration in Central Asia. Thus, Askar Nursha says that

*“Kazakhstan has a market lying nearby - 56-60 million [people]. And taking into account demographic factors, we see that the population will increase every year. We have our labour market in the region, we just need to manage it. This is regarding attractiveness. From another point of view, I believe that we have to strive for economic self-sufficiency within the region, by and large. If we fail to build normal regional cooperation, I see much more risks in the long term than if we [initially] developed without integration as independent states. ”*

Another economist from Kazakhstan, Roman Vakulchuk, says integration is essential for Kazakhstan:

*“As a transit country, it is a country that possesses a large number of resources. There is potential for the development of alternative energy. The bottom line is that it is difficult for Kazakhstan to develop in isolation from others because the population is small. Under these conditions, the market is tiny. Therefore, Kazakhstan needs to double its search efforts for neighbouring markets, enter them, very closely participate in trade with other countries within the region and beyond. ”*

Experts on water resources management shared their forecasts related to climate change and water scarcity. They were unanimous that joint water resources management is of the highest priority in interregional relations. Bulat Esekin, a water expert from Kazakhstan, believes that

*“conflicts will grow; this is obvious because water scarcity is increasing, water management is not improving, water users who depend on it - millions of people - are not involved, do not participate. Conflicts are already taking place; they are breaking out at the local level, on a bilateral basis.”*

Farkhod Aminjonov, an expert from Uzbekistan, believes that the lack of effective joint management of water resources between the CA countries leads to the fact that there is a loss of water. In his words:

*“Perhaps, in the face of a threat of such a common nature, we, on the contrary, will become closer, be together, begin solving things. Or maybe, on the contrary, everyone will start solving the problem in their way; this can happen too. But the fact is that the threat will increase, and at some point, we will start to take it more seriously.”*

Thus, water experts are confident that closer cooperation in this area is required.

However, there are different ideas with regards to a possible integration project between the Central Asian countries. This is seen if we consider the views of Nargis Kasenova and Farkhod Tolipov. Nargis Kasenova believes that there will be no integration in the form of creating any common supranational bodies. Still, greater coordination of actions, cooperation at a relatively small level is possible. And Farkhod Tolipov thinks that

*“both now and in the future, there can be a political union of the Central Asian countries in the format of five [countries]. It is now important to follow the path of institutionalisation as it was in Europe to create institutions and regional structures. For example, a council of the heads of states, a council of foreign ministers, a council of defence ministers, a Central Asian unified parliament, etc.”*

Both of these experts are pretty influential in forming opinions in their communities. The difference in their approaches may indicate the spectrum of views of the expert environment in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

At the same time, it is essential to note that there are no differences between Kazakh and Uzbek economists in how they see the desired format of economic integration in the region. They are all unanimous that the next step should be the creation of a free trade zone. Bakhtiyor Ergashev, for example, says:

*“I don’t think about any other, higher levels of integration yet. But the first thing that our countries will have to do, and perhaps within the next ten years - this question will be raised - is the creation of a free trade zone in Central Asia.”*

Summing up, we can conclude that both ordinary residents of the two countries and the expert community agree on the need for rapprochement and integration. Both experts and citizens of the two countries believe that the movement towards closer integration with other Central Asian countries will have a beneficial impact on the development of their countries. It is also important to note that some experts in Uzbekistan have already begun to think about deeper forms of integration. At the same time, in Kazakhstan, they believe that more cooperation would be an outstanding achievement given the current status quo.



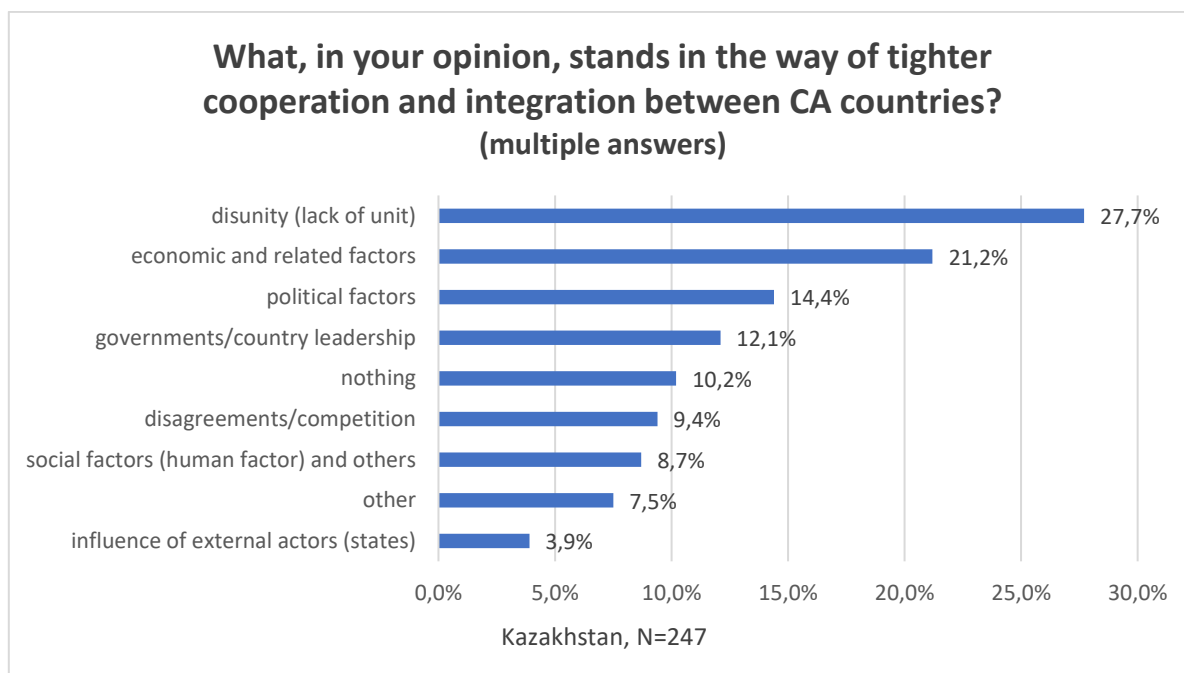
### 3.6. IS CLOSER COOPERATION AND GREATER INTEGRATION BETWEEN THE COUNTRIES OF THE REGION POSSIBLE? WHAT FACILITATES AND WHAT HINDERS THIS POSSIBILITY

All experts interviewed for the study believe that closer regional integration would bring only positive results for all the participants. But there is a difference in how experts assess various aspects of cooperation depending on their area of interest and country. For example, there is a difference between the interviewed Kazakh and Uzbek political scientists in their forecasts about the future of relations between Central Asian countries: Uzbek experts are much more optimistic, while Kazakh experts do not share their optimism. Many Kazakh experts believe that no positive or negative changes are foreseen, and the launch of integration processes is impossible. In contrast, some Uzbek experts are confident that integration in Central Asia will soon begin.

The difference in the opinions of the interviewed experts from various spheres deserves attention as well. For example, if there is a noticeable difference in the forecasts of Kazakh and Uzbek political scientists, then among the economists in both countries, there is a unanimous opinion that the positive dynamics of growth in shared trade and improvement in economic relations will generally continue.

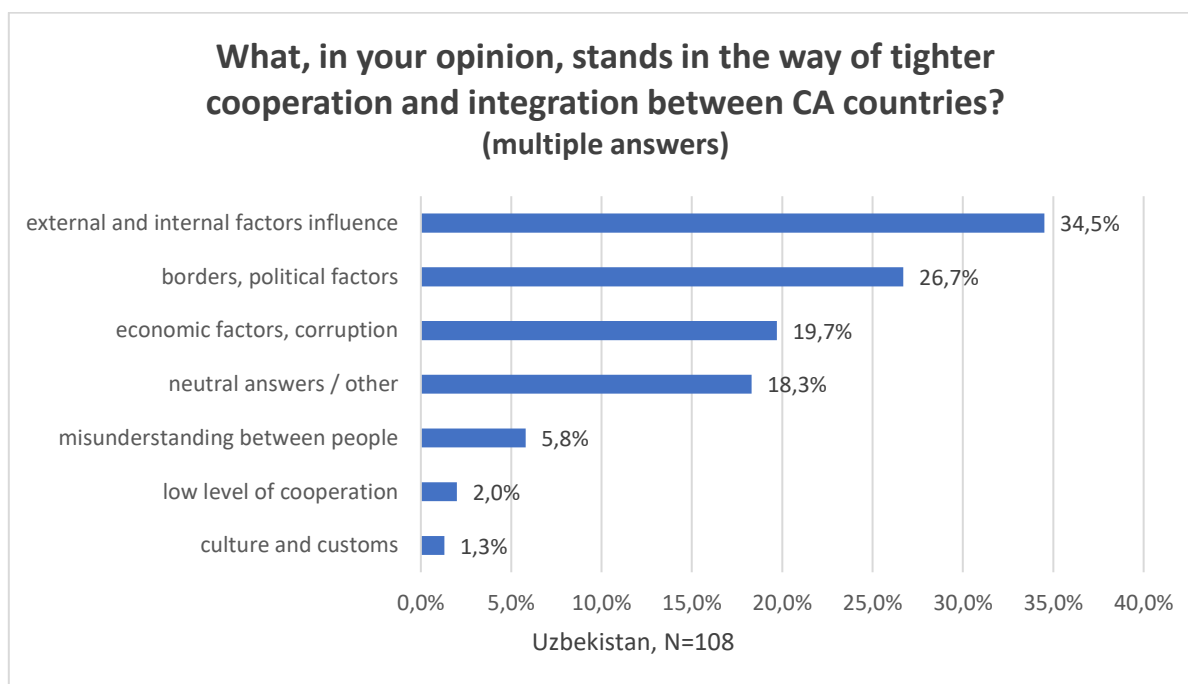
Below, we will discuss the obstacles and barriers identified in the study for closer cooperation and integration between Central Asian countries based on experts and ordinary citizens of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.

In general, within the survey framework, the citizens of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan noted the problems that, in their opinion, prevent closer cooperation and integration of the Central Asian countries. According to respondents from Kazakhstan, closer collaboration and integration between the CA countries is prevented by disunity/lack of unity. At the same time, 3.9% of the respondents named the influence of external actors (countries) as the reason, for example, "the USA", "England", "Turkey".



According to most of the respondents from Uzbekistan, closer cooperation and integration between the CA countries is hindered by external and internal factors (34.5%). Uzbekistanis also see borders and political factors

(26.7%), economic factors and corruption, misunderstanding between people, etc., as the reasons preventing integration between the region's countries.



## THE FEAR OF LOSING STATEHOOD AND ETHNIC IDENTITY

In one of her publications, Marlene Laruelle shared her observation that *“in the international arena the Central Asian states behave as if they are afraid of disappearing in both ethnic and state sense”* and rejected the claims of Turkey and Iran to the role of new big brothers.<sup>7</sup> Many interviewed experts believe that the Central Asian countries fear integration because they are afraid of losing their newly acquired statehood, independence, and ethnic identity after assimilating. Nygmet Ibadildin thinks that *“the states are too young, they are too afraid for themselves to integrate”*. Given the clear leadership of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, other Central Asian countries may fear falling under the new influence of their neighbours.

<sup>7</sup> Interview with Helge Blakkisrud (2021) Nation-building in Central Asia on the 30th anniversary of independence. Cabar.asia. <https://cabar.asia/ru/natsiestroitelstvo-v-tsentralnoj-azii-v-30-j-godovshhine-nezavisimosti-stran-regiona-intervyu-s-helge-blakkisrud>

## WEAKNESS OF INSTITUTIONS AND GOVERNMENT

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Some experts believe that weak institutions inherent in personalist regimes will also be present in regional integration and that it is impossible to build strong integration institutions with personalist regimes. They give examples of such cases when agreements between countries are accepted at the highest level but remain on paper due to weak government administration and lack of consultation with the local community.

The experts interviewed in this study focused on the creation of effective integration institutions for regional integration. Some experts believe that the recent warming in relations between Central Asian leaders is based on personal ties. Many people think that personalistic authoritarian states cannot create long-term solid institutions for integration, which is the most critical barrier. For example, Nigmat Ibadildin says that *"authoritarian, corrupt countries will not be able to integrate – the institutions will always be weak."*

Speaking about the personal conflicts of the heads of state that influenced the countries' relations, many experts gave the example of the conflict between Atambayev and Nazarbayev before the presidential elections in Kyrgyzstan, resulting in a trade war. Some experts associate the reluctance to integrate those authoritarian leaders fear losing their personal power by entering integration associations.

## LACK OF SOLIDARITY IN THE REGION

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Many experts mentioned the lack of solidarity among the region's inhabitants, which is confirmed by the data on the level of awareness. In particular, the weak ties of Kazakhstanis with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistanis with Turkmenistan, open up questions about the absence of a single information space and unique relations between the countries of the region. The meagre awareness rates for these countries make it possible to assume that there are no exclusive, relevant and robust ties at the level of ordinary residents. Horizontal links should have become an organic instrument of integration. Many of the experts interviewed believe that these contacts are primarily hindered by the artificial constructions of the countries' governments.

## LACK OF POLITICAL WILL

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Experts from Kazakhstan mainly referred to the lack of political will for rapprochement among the leaders of Central Asia. In contrast, Uzbek experts do not mention this but talk about technical reasons such as the lack of human resources to create integration institutions and the fragmentation of positions on international issues. This may indicate differences in public discourses in these two countries, and it seems that CA integration in Uzbekistan is being discussed more than in Kazakhstan. This sounds paradoxical given the long history of Kazakhstani attempts to build regional institutions. Indeed, for a long time, experts have called the "remoteness" of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan one of the barriers to integration in Central Asia. The potential for further research lies in studying the opinions of experts from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan on the availability of political will in the respective countries.

## NATION-BUILDING PROJECTS

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Some of the experts interviewed believe that the projects of nation-building and self-identification of the countries in the region run counter to regional identity and complicate the processes of improving cooperation and integration. Each country has chosen the path of nation-building based on the so-called titular nation using a primordial approach and is participating in the struggle for the title of "ancient", "most cultured" in Central Asia.

At the same time, the countries interpret the elements of their history in a particular way - showcasing their "golden age", during which it occupied much wider territories than is the case now and covering vast parts of Central Asia. Manas and the Kyrgyz Khaganate in Kyrgyzstan, the empire of Tamerlane in Uzbekistan, the Parthian empire in Turkmenistan, the Aryan civilisation in Tajikistan - all of them are used with varying success by political elites in the countries of the region, and they hurt regional identity as they emphasise differences rather than commonalities.

## COMPETITIVE RELATIONSHIP OF ZERO-SUM GAME

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Historically, one can observe the rivalry between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan over who will be the integration project leader, which led to the fact that integration projects and proposals remained only on paper. According to this study, there is no reason to believe that there have been dramatic changes in this dynamic between the two countries.

The experts interviewed believe that the ambitions of the leaders of the countries and the competition among political elites have often been an obstacle to rapprochement and integration. For example, Askar Nursha, an expert from Kazakhstan, says: *"Ambitions get in the way, our leaders simply could not agree with each other, because everyone believed that they were in charge, especially, probably, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan."* Yuli Yusupov believes that the countries' political elites are still dominated by officials with a Soviet mindset who act according to a zero-sum game principle, i.e. "they think you win if you take a piece from another."

It is noteworthy that during in-depth interviews, the experts from both countries positioned their countries as leaders in the region, pointing out that their country is most favorably located, has a transit potential in the economy, and can also be a unifying force in the region. Speaking about the history of their country's relations with other Central Asian countries, Kazakh experts such as Nargis Kasenova and Nygmet Ibadildin say that Kazakhstan initially positioned itself as a leader and unifier in the region and was committed to regional integration. Uzbek experts are convinced that for Uzbekistan, the Central Asian countries were a priority during the period of gaining independence; however, as Sanzhar Saidov states, *"after the Andijan events, after the merger of the OCAC with the EurAsEC, there is already a trend not towards Central Asian cooperation, but [cooperation] in the Eurasian direction"*. Therefore Uzbekistan has chosen a strategy of bilateral cooperation with Central Asian countries. Farkhod Tolipov and Sanzhar Saidov believe there has been an impetus to strengthen integration processes in the past four years. For example, Tolipov believes that it was precisely according to *"the initiative of Uzbekistan [and with] the support of the rest of the Central Asian republics that the 5-sided format was resumed."*

The survey data confirm that the population of both Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan considers both countries the most developed in such aspects as the standard of living, safety, health care system, economic situation, level of business development, and others. Thus, we can conclude that Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are equally positioning themselves as leaders in the region.

Experts also note the reluctance of the countries of the region to turn to mutual assistance and the general atmosphere of ill will. For example, Roman Vakulchuk thinks as follows: *"When a difficult situation arises in a neighbouring country, [it is indicative] how other countries in the region react... - they... strengthen border controls, complicate border crossing."* Rashid Gabdulhakov adheres to the same opinion and, comparing the countries of the Central Asian region with the EU countries, says that *"it is impossible to imagine a violent conflict on the borders between Latvia and Lithuania, and that at the same time the organisations to which they both belong would remain silent"*.

## INFLUENCE OF EXTERNAL ACTORS

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On the issue of barriers to cooperation, Uzbekistanis and Kazakhstanis tend to blame external players such as Russia, China, the USA, Turkey, the EU, or the events in Afghanistan much more than internal factors. Only 4% in Kazakhstan think so. Here, the survey data contradict interviews with experts, in which much attention is paid to the fact that Central Asian integration may not be in Russia's interests. Rashid Gabdulhakov says that *"for*

*integration, it is important that it does not turn into "back to the USSR". Integration without Russia and not orchestrated by any centre - it must be organic. Give people the opportunity to do business in peace, and people will create everything they need. The main point is not to interfere." At the same time, Sanzhar Saidov believes that Western actors such as " the EU and USA are more interested in tight regional integration. Their doctrines and strategies aimed at Central Asia are fixed precisely at deepening such close integration projects of the CA countries."*

The overwhelming majority of the interviewed experts expressed confidence that the Central Asian countries themselves can solve their problems which cannot be said about ordinary residents of these two countries. Residents of the two countries still rely heavily on external forces to solve their problems rather than on their neighbours: half of the Kazakh and Uzbek population believes that, if necessary, they should turn to Russia for help. At the same time, the second places for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan do not coincide: citizens of Uzbekistan (11.8%) believe that it is necessary to turn to Central Asian countries, and citizens of Kazakhstan (11.1%) believe that it is better to turn to the European Union for help. People from both countries who indicated that it is best to receive assistance from other CA countries are more likely to receive assistance from all CA countries in general and have no particular preference. Kazakhstanis as a whole are less confident that Kazakhstan can solve its problems on its own than Uzbeks. If in Uzbekistan, 90% of the population believe that their country can solve its problems on its own, then in Kazakhstan, 60% think so. The number of people who believe that external assistance is needed is minimal in Uzbekistan and does not exceed 7%, while in Kazakhstan, on the contrary, 35% think so. Young people and those who live in cities seem to be more inclined to this opinion in both countries. This may indicate that the citizens of the countries rely more on external players than on their neighbours in solving common problems, which can be a severe barrier to intraregional integration.

### 3.7. CONCLUSIONS

Based on the results of the study, it is possible to draw the following conclusions:

- Based on the results, we see that a certain civilisational commonality between the central Asian countries exists - in a mixture of the post-soviet heritage in the form of memory, similar problems, common institutions; and cultural similarities in the form of language, cuisine, traditions, religion, and so on. The survey results show that the respondents know that they have a lot in common with other Central Asian countries. Still, they are little informed of current events in other countries and do not name actual events, projects, phenomena, or other unifying factors of the present. It is possible to conclude that new elements of central Asian identity are not being created, promoted, or mobilised. The old ones are gradually erased from the memory of the new generation. In particular, the weak ties of Kazakhstanis with Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistanis with Turkmenistan, open up questions about the absence of a single information space and unique relations between the countries of the region. The low awareness indicators for these countries make it possible to assume that there are no exclusive, relevant, and strong ties between the region's countries at the level of ordinary residents.
- Kazakhstanis have approximately the same good attitude towards Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. They are least favourably disposed towards Turkmenistan and Tajikistan. On the other hand, Uzbekistanis have Kazakhstan as a clear favourite, have approximately the same attitude towards Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and are least disposed to Turkmenistan. These patterns are complemented by the data on

the levels of awareness and visits. We see that Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are more inclined to have a better attitude towards the countries with which they have more intense ties.

- It is possible to conclude that cooperation between the region's countries is undergoing more changes in the economic sphere than in other critical interregional relations.
- Among ordinary residents of the two countries and the expert community, there is agreement on the need for rapprochement and integration. Both experts and citizens of the two countries believe that the movement towards closer integration with other central Asian countries will have a beneficial impact on the development of their countries. It is also important to note that some experts in Uzbekistan have already begun to think about deeper forms of integration. At the same time, in Kazakhstan, they believe that more cooperation would be an outstanding achievement given the current status quo.
- All the experts interviewed believe that closer regional integration would bring only positive results for all participants. But there is a difference in how experts assess various aspects of cooperation depending on their area of expertise and country of origin. For example, there is a difference between the Kazakh and Uzbek political scientists interviewed in their forecasts about relations between Central Asian countries: Uzbek experts are much more optimistic, while Kazakh experts do not share their optimism. Many Kazakh experts believe that no positive or negative changes are foreseen, and the launch of integration processes is impossible. In contrast, some Uzbek experts are confident that integration in Central Asia will soon begin.
- The survey and expert interview participants named fear of losing their statehood and ethnic identity, weak institutions and public administration, lack of political will, nation-building and self-identification projects, competition and hostility between countries, and the influence of external players among the barriers to regional integration.

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