

INSTITUTIONAL AND SOCIOPOLITICAL ASPECTS OF TOURISM IN REDUCING CONFLICT RISKS IN CENTRAL ASIAN STATES

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ABSTRACT

The article examines the role of institutional and sociopolitical aspects of tourism in Central Asian countries in reducing the region's conflict potential. The study analyzes the opportunities and limitations of tourism in strengthening interstate cooperation, intercultural dialogue, and mutual trust. By revealing the influence of historical and cultural heritage, ethnic and linguistic diversity, as well as water and border issues on the tourism industry in the region's countries, the authors propose ways to achieve regional integration and stability.

The article highlights the importance of institutional reforms, improvement of the legal framework, and implementation of regional projects. It also analyzes the impact of joint initiatives, such as the «Silk Road Visa», on ensuring sustainable peace and socio-economic growth in Central Asia.

Key words: Central Asia, Tourism, Conflict, Institutional Development, Regional Cooperation, Ethnic Diversity, Border Disputes, Integration, Sustainable Development, Silk Road Visa.

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Орталық Азия мемлекеттерінде конфликт қаупін азайтудағы туризмнің институционалдық және әлеуметтік-саяси аспектілері

Аңдатпа. Мақалада Орталық Азия елдеріндегі туризмнің институционалдық және әлеуметтік-саяси аспектілерінің аймақтың конфликт әлеуетін төмендетудегі рөлі қарастырылған. Зерттеу мемлекетаралық ынтымақтастықты, мәдениетаралық диалогты және өзара сенімді нығайтудағы туризмнің мүмкіндіктері мен шектеулерін талдайды. Авторлар тарихи-мәдени мұраның, этникалық және лингвистикалық әртүрліліктің, сондай-ақ су және шекара мәселелерінің аймақ елдеріндегі туризм индустриясына әсерін аша отырып, аймақтық интеграция мен тұрақтылыққа қол жеткізу жолдарын ұсынады.

Мақалада институционалдық реформалардың, құқықтық базаны жетілдірудің және өңірлік жобаларды іске асырудың маңыздылығы атап өтілген. Сонымен бірге, «Silk Road Visa» (Жібек жолы визасы) сияқты бірлескен бастамалардың Орталық Азиядағы тұрақты бейбітшілік пен әлеуметтік-экономикалық өсуді қамтамасыз етуге әсері талданған.

Түйін сөздер: Орталық Азия, туризм, конфликт, институционалдық даму, аймақтық ынтымақтастық, этникалық әртүрлілік, шекара даулары, интеграция, тұрақты даму, Silk Road Visa.

Институциональные и социополитические аспекты туризма в снижении риска конфликтов в государствах Центральной Азии

Аннотация. В статье рассматривается роль институциональных и социополитических аспектов туризма в странах Центральной Азии в снижении конфликтного потенциала региона. Исследование анализирует возможности и ограничения туризма в укреплении межгосударственного сотрудничества, межкультурного диалога и взаимного доверия. Авторы, раскрывая влияние историко-культурного наследия, этнического и лингвистического многообразия, а также водных и пограничных вопросов на индустрию туризма в странах региона, предлагают пути достижения региональной интеграции и стабильности.

В статье отмечена важность институциональных реформ, совершенствования правовой базы и реализации региональных проектов. Кроме того, проанализировано влияние совместных инициатив, таких как «Silk Road Visa» (Виза Шёлкового пути), на обеспечение устойчивого мира и социально-экономического роста в Центральной Азии.

Ключевые слова: Центральная Азия, туризм, конфликт, институциональное развитие, региональное сотрудничество, этническое многообразие, пограничные споры, интеграция, устойчивое развитие, Silk Road Visa.

Introduction

Tourism is a multifaceted sociopolitical phenomenon that provides an opportunity for active recreation and new knowledge. It is closely related to economic, cultural, and political factors. The role of tourism in preventing and mitigating regional conflicts is of particular importance.

Today, classical methods of geopolitical pres-

sure and force are being replaced by mechanisms of informational, economic and cultural influence. At the same time, tourism is recognized as an important element of «soft power», becoming a peaceful and effective tool for influencing international relations. The movement of tourist flows strengthens trust and mutual understanding between countries, creates favorable conditions for the peaceful resolution of border issues, the cre-

ation of customs privileges, and the adoption of mutual political and economic decisions [1].

From a geopolitical perspective, tourism can contribute to increasing the country's prestige and influence in the international arena. In this regard, Kazakhstan has great tourism potential: its natural, cultural and historical resources can play a significant role in strengthening stability and cooperation in the Central Asian region.

In addition, through tourism, tourists get acquainted with new cultures and traditions, change their views on a country, get rid of previous erroneous «preconceived notions», and form a positive public opinion. The abundance of such experiences can influence the collective consciousness of society and reduce conflict situations.

In this case, «conflict» is considered as a conflict of interests between interacting parties. Dialogue and cultural exchange through tourism increase the adaptive capacity of social systems and contribute to the improvement of mechanisms for managing conflict situations.

The development of the tourism industry and its use as a tool for socio-cultural influence should be considered as an important institutional and cultural mechanism for strengthening regional stability in Central Asia [2]. Therefore, border issues in our countries have developed as a complex, multi-factorial phenomenon of our lives, reflecting the diversity of state-building issues.

Methodology

This article uses comparative, historical, and logical methods to conduct research. The comparative method plays an important role in analyzing the potential and development priorities of the tourism industry, specific to each country in Central Asia. This method allows us to compare the institutional and socio-cultural characteristics of the states in the region, as well as the role of tourism in reducing the potential for conflict.

The historical method was used to identify the formation of modern interstate relations in the region, the factors that contributed to their emergence, as well as the roots of current conflicts. This approach contributes to the historical understanding of regional interaction and the evolution of tourism.

The logical method was used to identify the features of the development of the tourism industry, its socio-economic impact, as well as factors that cause conflict and ways to prevent or neutralize them. By identifying cause-and-effect relationships, it is possible to scientifically substantiate the potential of tourism to strengthen stability in society.

Overall, the combined use of these methods allows for a comprehensive analysis of the institutional and socio-cultural aspects of tourism in Central Asian countries, as well as its role in regional stability and conflict reduction.

Main part

The border tension between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 2017 had a significant impact on in-

terstate and interregional relations in the region. In world practice, one of the main sources of conflict is the divergence of the parties' views, goals, methods of resolving situations, and personal interests. In this case, the concept of «conflictogen» is used, which is considered as a factor that provokes or intensifies a conflict. The tourism industry is also directly dependent on these processes. For example, the tension on the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan during this period led to an increase in the number of border crossings, a temporary decrease in trade and tourism flows, and a negative impact on the living conditions of ordinary people. This, in turn, reduced the level of mutual trust between the two countries and temporarily hindered the development of tourism in the region.

Conflictology, or conflict theory, focuses on the subjective nature of conflicts. In many cases, the emergence of conflicts is associated with personal interests, personal ambitions, and socio-psychological factors [3].

In practice, these factors are often reflected in interpersonal and intergroup relations, as well as at the political level. During the border conflict in the region, for example, insufficient information and subjective decisions by political figures exacerbated the situation. In the fall of 2017, the conflict on the border between Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan severely restricted trade, transit, and tourism between the countries for two months. This situation had a particularly negative impact on citizens, business representatives, and tourists crossing the border. Various customs and border restrictions have had a negative impact on the lives of ordinary people. For example, Russian citizens crossing from Kazakhstan have also faced these obstacles. As a result of increased customs control, hundreds of trucks have been stuck at the border for several days [4]. Of course, all of these issues have led to a slowdown in economic and international relations in general.

Political scientist Francis Fukuyama notes the existence of «artificial psychological barriers» in Central Asia. He says that the obstacles to real integration in the region are mutual distrust and lack of communication. The researcher emphasizes the need to eliminate these psychological and cultural barriers in order to strengthen the mutual independence of the Central Asian countries. It also argues that the US and the West are increasingly interested in Central Asia and that interaction between countries in the region is important for effectively utilizing the region's political and economic potential [5].

In such a situation, the role of the tourism sector, especially cross-border and humanitarian tourism, is particularly important. Through tourism, mutual understanding and trust between states increase, and cultural and information exchange between peoples increases. This, in turn, reduces conflict-generating factors, that is, the tendency to conflict situations, and strengthens stability and peace in the region.

The countries of Central Asia have not become centers of world tourism. In this regard, there is no direct competition in the field of tourism between

countries in this region, on the contrary, each state seeks to realize its tourism potential in distant foreign markets. Meanwhile, tourists in Central Asia are increasingly choosing destinations such as Turkey and Egypt, as the level of service in these countries is much higher than in the «post-Soviet» countries [6].

Most foreign tourists visiting the region want to visit several countries in one trip. This, in turn, requires coordination between tourist destinations, integration of infrastructure and visa policies. In recent years, the issue of environmental sustainability has become particularly important in the tourism industry.

Minister of Natural Resources of the Republic of Uzbekistan Aziz Abdukhakimov said, «The introduction of international standards and the use of environmental innovations are one of the main factors that increase the competitiveness of tourism. Increasing environmental education, introducing international standards and eco-technologies are crucial prerequisites for the development of regional tourism» [7].

Kazakhstani researchers also noted the uniqueness of the ecological development of the tourism industry and the exchange of experience in the Central Asian regions. These programs include the economical use of water and electricity, the introduction of waste sorting and recycling systems. Such initiatives have a positive impact on the long-term profitability of the tourism business and the improvement of the region's ecology. These programs are of particular strategic importance for regional tourism [8].

The development of regional tourism is of great importance for the preservation of cultural heritage and natural resources, improving the efficiency of infrastructure and management, cooperation between countries and international integration. Although many experts believe that tourism can be one of the most profitable industries in Central Asia, differences in countries' development models, levels of political freedom, and economic policies hinder the industry's uneven development.

Table 1 – Tourism development in Central Asian countries.

State name	Number of tourists in 2024 (million people) *	International popularity	Environmental policy	Infrastructure
Kazakhstan	7,2	average	average	average
Uzbekistan	5,4	average	average	low
Kyrgyzstan	1,1	low	low	low
Tajikistan	0,85	low	low	low
Turkmenistan	0,14	very low	low	very low

Source: *Compiled by the authors of the article based on sources [9, 10, 11] during the research.*

Table 1 presents the top five countries of Central Asia. The data presented in the table provide a comparative description of the tourism potential and the level of environmental and infrastructural development of the countries. Based on this information, it is possible to identify key issues and areas of development that should be focused on in the region's tourism industry. The sustainable development of tourism in Central Asia is directly related to the political and economic integration of countries, the implementation of international standards, environmental responsibility and the quality of infrastructure. To this end, interstate projects, exchange of experience and joint research are among the pressing issues.

Most modern tourist routes include the sites of the Great Silk Road. However, infrastructure and scientific and educational opportunities are limited. Although each country forms its own tourism brand and products, there is a lack of a unified development strategy at the regional level. The lack of common methodologies and concepts in tourism management and marketing is becoming an obstacle to development.

The concept of the Central Asian region is perceived differently by different countries and experts. While European researchers often perceive the region as a single space, the region's own states often see themselves as separate political and cultural entities. Open, large-scale

armed conflicts are rare in Central Asia, and the main conflicts in the region – issues related to «borders», the use of water resources, ethnic enclaves, and historical and cultural heritage – often occur in a latent form [12].

The historical interrelationship of nomadic and agricultural cultures, and the development of the Great Silk Road, have strengthened the values of multiculturalism, tolerance, and cultural dialogue in the region. It is widely known that medieval cities such as Otrar, Talas, Taraz, Syganak, Sauran, and Suzak were centers of trade, culture, and political interaction, through which contacts were established between Central Asia, India, China, Iran, and Byzantium.

In the years since independence, each country has chosen its own development model. This lack of political and economic reforms and the homogeneity of national interests reflects the weakness of integration in the region. Currently, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan are more focused on their external partners than on the region in economic terms. Security, water, and border issues have not yet been fully resolved.

Experts emphasize the need to develop mutual trade, cultural exchange, and tourism in order to improve interregional institutions, strengthen political and economic development in the region, and strengthen the tourism industry. These steps are perceived as an important means not

only of promoting socio-cultural integration, but also of preventing tensions in the region.

Researcher O. Boyarkina believes that one of the main causes of conflicts in Central Asia is the incomplete definition of borders and enclave territories in the Fergana Valley. This is stated in the

article «The complete definition and clarification of borders in the years following independence has not been carried out, which over time has led to the escalation of regional conflicts. There are a total of eight enclaves in this region, located mainly between Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan» [13].

Table 2 – Major border disputes and ethnic enclaves in Central Asia.

State name	Border dispute (plots)	Number of enclaves	Large ethnic enclaves	Historical / culturally controversial sites
Kyrgyzstan – Tajikistan	Batken Region, Vorukh	4	Barak (Kyrgyzstan), Vorukh (Tajikistan),	Fergana Valley
Uzbekistan – Kyrgyzstan	Sokh, Shakhimardan	3	Sokh, Shakhimardan, Chon-Kara	Samarkand, Bukhara
Uzbekistan – Tajikistan	Fergana Valley border	1	Sarvan	Samarkand, Bukhara
All countries	Delimitation is incomplete	8+	Total	Cities of the Great Silk Road

Source: Compiled by the authors of the article based on sources [14, 15] during the research.

Table 2 presents the geography, ethnic characteristics, historical and cultural factors of the location of the main border conflicts and enclaves in the region, and the main sources of latent conflictogenicity, or rather conflict factors, in the region.

Economic and political reasons, along with historical and cultural factors, contribute to regional instability. Distrust in interregional foreign policy, uneven implementation of socio-economic reforms, and weak integration are seen as key risks to the region's future development. In general, the combination of cultural and historical heritage and different ethnic groups in the region leads to cultural dialogue and tolerance. And the main mechanism for preventing conflicts and strengthening integration is the development of effective governance and regional cooperation institutions.

Many of the conflicts in Central Asia over ethnic, territorial, and water resources issues persist to this day as a legacy of the Soviet-era policy of national-territorial border demarcation. A striking example of this is the recurring conflicts between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan in the Batken region. The enclaves located in this region – Sokh, Shakhimardan and Vorukh – are not only border administrative subdivisions, but also major sources of tension related to historical and ethnic identity and water (Figure 1). Especially in spring and summer, when irrigated agriculture increases, water use and distribution become a major factor of tension in the region [16].

Border conflicts in Batken region (Kyrgyzstan) in April 2021 required urgent intervention by the top leaders of both countries and an agreement on a ceasefire. However, low levels of mutual trust among local residents, water issues, and the strengthening of national identity did not allow for a full resolution of the conflicts.

Currently, the concept of national identity, the «state-forming nation» («titular nation»), is of particular importance for the states of Central Asia. This is especially noticeable in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The severe consequences of the civil war in Tajikistan, political instability and several revolutions in Kyrgyzstan, and the events in Osh in the

south (1990, 2010) reveal the important role of the ethnic factor and historical and territorial conflicts.

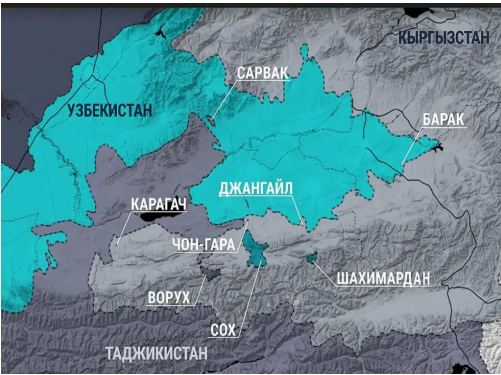


Figure 1 – Enclaves and border regions in the Fergana Valley. Source: [16].

The situation in southern Kyrgyzstan is unique: here, Kyrgyz and Uzbeks have deep historical and cultural ties, but local residents often have questions about ethnic differences in their relations and local autonomy. These issues are directly related to the state language, cultural and religious identity, and access to resources. The status of the autonomy of Karakalpakstan in Uzbekistan in 2022 once again demonstrated the relevance of the concept of a «state-forming nation» in the region [17].

Since the national-territorial delimitation carried out during the Soviet era often did not correspond to ethnic reality, today issues such as enclaves in Central Asia, border disputes, and the distribution of water resources remain one of the main sources of instability in the region. Researchers conclude that the complex borders and ethnic diversity in the Fergana region are not due to power politics, but rather an attempt to adapt to the specific historical and demographic situation in the space. However, it is known that these issues have not yet been fully resolved, and for future stability, the countries of the region need mutual trust and effective mechanisms for interregional cooperation [18].

The institutional and socio-cultural role of tourism in Central Asia is currently becoming an important factor in regional stability and reducing the risk of conflict. This trend is especially relevant in the post-Soviet period, when new national borders and political and economic systems are being formed. The results of the study show that tourism development is recognized not only as a source of economic income, but also as an effective tool for strengthening social harmony and intercultural dialogue.

The institutional framework of the tourism industry in the region is still weak, which is one of the main obstacles to the development of this sector. In particular, political instability in the region, the imperfection of legal and regulatory acts, and the weakness of mechanisms for implementing joint projects – narrow the scope for cross-border cooperation. Nevertheless, the tourism potential of the countries of the region is enormous, especially the historical and cultural heritage of the Great Silk Road, cities and ancient trade routes, and ethnic diversity are a powerful mechanism for attracting foreign tourists and developing cultural exchange between peoples.

In recent years, international experts have noted a number of structural problems that hinder the sustainable development of tourism in the region. These include border conflicts, disagreements over the distribution of water resources, conflicts in ethnic enclaves, as well as the specifics of national policies pursued by various states. These situations can manifest themselves as «hidden» factors of instability in the region, sometimes leading to direct conflicts. The negative impact of such a situation is clearly visible in the border conflict between Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, as well as in the disputes over water resources management. Such conditions are hindering the development of sustainable and inclusive tourism in the region.

Comprehensive reforms are needed to institutionally strengthen the tourism sector. This includes harmonizing the regional legislative framework, launching transnational tourism projects, and improving security and logistics. The organization of interstate cultural and humanitarian programs, joint festivals, and knowledge exchange platforms is also of particular importance in order to promote interethnic harmony, peace, and mutual trust through tourism. In addition, by studying the issue of «state-building nation» and national identity in the region, it is possible to strengthen the historical trust and level of agreement between peoples.

Countries in the region need to coordinate institutional and socio-cultural development, taking into account best practices in the global tourism industry. This, in turn, can serve as a basis for deepening trust and peaceful dialogue in cross-border areas, as well as for establishing long-term stability and economic growth in the region. Viewing tourism as a catalyst for peaceful coexistence and social stability should be a strategic priority for the Central Asian states.

Conclusion

A comprehensive analysis of the institutional and sociopolitical aspects of tourism in Central

Asia demonstrates the strategic importance of the tourism sector in the region's efforts to achieve peace and stability. Thanks to the effective development of the tourism industry, mutual trust and cooperation between countries will increase, conditions will be created for economic diversification, coordination of water resources, environmental sustainability, and the revitalization of integration processes. In addition, the countries of the region can gain new status as attractive tourist destinations in the international arena.

However, a number of structural and subjective obstacles prevent the full implementation of regional cooperation. The dominance of political elites over national interests, «subjectivism» in negotiations, and regional ambitions can lead to temporary restrictions on trade, transport, and cultural ties. At the same time, issues of national identity and ethnic diversity could lead to a recurrence of some historical conflicts in the region, in particular, the events in southern Kyrgyzstan (1990, 2010) and the situation in Karakalpakstan (2022). This situation demonstrates that the status of ethnic groups and «state – forming nations» is fluid and complex.

The lack of common, internationally recognized principles and legal frameworks for the management of water and energy resources in the region is a major cause of conflicts in border areas and enclaves. Failure to resolve such contentious issues undermines mutual trust and hinders the process of integration and sustainable development.

In addition, it is necessary to recognize that the borders of the Central Asian countries are not only the boundaries of statehood, but also a platform for centuries of cultural, linguistic and ethnic dialogue. Such multiculturalism enhances the region's uniqueness and potential, demonstrating the possibilities of social adaptation and integration.

In recent years, initiatives aimed at modernizing regional tourism, including the «Silk Road Visa», have underscored the openness and aspiration of the countries of the region towards global integration. This project will reduce logistical and visa barriers for foreign tourists and increase investment and tourism flows to the region. The Silk Road Visa experience, initiated by Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, can become an important impetus for the socio-economic development of Central Asian countries in the future.

In conclusion, the development of tourism and mutual trade industries are key platforms for regional cooperation and sustainable development in Central Asia, as well as the formation of new institutions. Tourism reflects the similarities and common culture of peoples, opens the way to strengthening regional identity, the priorities of peace and sustainable development. Effective policies in this direction and mutual understanding, exchange of experience and information - open up new opportunities for the countries of Central Asia on the global tourism map.

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