

CENTRAL ASIA: DRIVERS, DYNAMICS AND PROSPECTS OF TRADE AND ECONOMIC COOPERATION

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Abstract

The following article is devoted to the analyses of condition and expansion of trade and economic cooperation in the Central Asian Region (CAR). The positive change in the region began with the coming to power of the second President of Uzbekistan that's why the country of Uzbekistan is the central object of analysis in the article. In fact, the reforms of partial deregulation of the economy and building beneficial cooperation in the region were initiated by the former President of the Republic of Uzbekistan I. Karimov. But it was Sh. Mirziyoyev who gave impetus to the warming of the international climate in Central Asia. The reassessment of the regional policy of the Republic of Uzbekistan is dictated by the interests of the development of the Uzbek economy in the frame of new geopolitical and geoeconomic conditions. Using the comparative potential of cross-national analysis, it was compared the dynamics of establishing relations, expanding trade and economic ties of Uzbekistan with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Within a year the establishment of interstate cooperation since 2016 has given effect in the sphere of economy and trade within. This result was possible due to the fact that other countries of the CAR realized the necessity of close diverse ties with their neighbours.

Keywords: trade turnover, regional cooperation, bilateral relations, international relation

JEL classification: D78, F02, F13, F15

1. Introduction

Over the past four years, Central Asia has undergone a significant transformation in regional politics. The establishment of interstate relations, the solution of issues of borders, water and disputed territories in the region immediately affect the state of economic and trade relations in Central Asia. The experience of the Central Asian states over the years of independence, especially over the past 3-4 years, proves the primacy of high politics over economic practice, which has always been characteristic of underdeveloped regions. Frequent meetings, telephone conversations of leaders and key figures are the reason for creation the necessary political condition to open the gates for economic flows (Arkhipova, 2020). But at

the same time, it can be expected that the “avalanche effect”, the situation when these economic and trade flows, intensifying themselves, drive innovation and move political circles towards a more active dialogue and greater cooperation between the countries. The main motivator for establishing cooperation and an indicator of the dynamics of the growth of relations between the countries of the region is trade (Coufalová, 2018; Gubanova and Voroshilov, 2019; Martinho and Barandela, 2020).

To prove this hypothesis, we began our study with Uzbekistan. In 2019 “Financial Times” worthily gave the title the “Country of the year” to Uzbekistan with the title. Almost all experts agreed that it was this state that gave rise to cooperation and regionalization and that today it plays the role of a political and economic driver. But we suppose that after a quarter of a century of their independence, the states of the region, having gone through formation, having tested all kinds of options and formats for development, have matured for full-blooded relations with their neighbors in the region. Therefore, they were ready to support the initiative of the new President of the Republic of Uzbekistan to establish a regional cooperation and jointly build bridges for greater understanding, friendship and interaction. In this regard, we examined the state of relations of Uzbekistan with the other four states individually.

Pre-term election was held in Uzbekistan on December 4, 2016, where Sh. Mirziyoyev became the second Uzbek President. In early February 2017, Uzbekistan approved the Country Development Strategy for 2017-2021, which focuses the country’s foreign policy on creation of security belt, stability and good neighborliness around Uzbekistan. Sh. Mirziyoyev declared the Central Asian region as the main priority of foreign policy of Uzbekistan’s activities. The country’s main national interests are connected with the Central Asian Region (CAR). President Sh. Mirziyoyev confirmed the priority of Central Asia by the fact of his first meeting with the Head of Kyrgyzstan A. Atambayev, and his first visits to Turkmenistan and Kazakhstan, the neighboring states of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The Concept of Foreign Policy of Uzbekistan activities accepted under I. Karimov, defined Central Asia as major foreign policy priority of the country activities. Is it a tribute to succession to traditional policy or there are some deeper reasons for the politics of Uzbekistan?

The new leader of the Republic of Uzbekistan outlined five prospects that formed the basis of his program for 2017-2021, as well as the concept of reforming the legal, law and administrative systems, deregulation of the economy and the development of the social sphere. In particular, Sh. Mirziyoyev outlined five major sectors that will become the drivers of the country’s economic growth until 2021. This is textile industry, production of industrial building materials, fruit and vegetable sector, pharmaceuticals and tourism. The development and deregulation of the economy also provides reduction in the tax burden, simplification of the tax system, and development of international cooperation (Engin Duran and Pelin Özkan, 2015). The strategy involves increasing the competitiveness of the national economy. And the main steps of economic reform in Uzbekistan have already been taken. So, Sh. Mirziyoyev signed decrees on lifting of restrictions on companies to supply goods to the foreign market without an export contract (Russian business, 2018).

After coming to power, the new President was noted by a series of promising initiatives and statements that forced observers to use the words “thaw” and “liberalization”. But expert circles are restrained in their assessments of the processes taking place in Uzbekistan. At the same time, the principle and scale of the nature of the ongoing innovations should be recognized, judging by their results and the impact on the country itself and its environment. As is commonly known, I. Karimov made attempts to weaken strict state control and partial liberalization. In July 2012, a set of measures was taken to reduce control, simplify licensing and streamline permits. In order to improve the investment climate in Uzbekistan, President I. Karimov signed several legislative amendments on January 20, 2014, allowing foreign investors certain preferences for attracting foreign labor and obtaining multiple visas for their international employees, as well as providing more guarantees from the state to create the necessary infrastructure and investment protection. In addition, in January 2015, the first President gave specific instructions for the government to focus on improving the country’s rating as part of the World Bank’s Doing Business. He also instructed the government to reduce state ownership in several sectors and implement a new program of privatization of

state assets for 2015-2016, in addition to the program for the development of industrialization and modernization of infrastructure, launched in 2011-2015.

In order to improve the trade and investment climate in Uzbekistan, President I. Karimov began to implement some measures to simplify customs procedures. These measures included a significant reduction and simplification of customs documents, the creation of a common electronic database at the interdepartmental level, and the deregistration of import contracts. Separate attempts have been made to promote civil society, such as law on transparency and accountability of state bodies and legislation on social partnership. All these measures were scattered in time and in content, there was no firm, concentrated policy behind them, therefore, they had no tangible, multiplicative effects, and remained largely at the level of the declaration.

In our opinion, the main drawback of the planned measures in 2012-2016 was the lack of a regional projection of the innovations being adopted, as if the country was in a different dimension than the neighboring countries. Sh. Mirziyoyev, unlike the former President, recognized the paramount importance of constructive trade and economic cooperation with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan for building the economic potential of the Republic of Uzbekistan. The regional policy of the President of Uzbekistan proceeds from the resource, transport and logistics, trade significance of the neighbors in the region in the context of changes in the global economic situation. "The experts note several factors that influenced the change in Tashkent's policy. These include a fall in world commodity prices and a slowdown in economic growth in Russia and China, which are the main economic partners of Uzbekistan. As a result, the republic has faced a significant drop in external demand and a decrease in income from the sale of its main export commodities – gold, cotton and gas. In addition, the entry into force of the Eurasian Economic Union negatively affected the state of certain sectors of the economy of Uzbekistan due to newly arising barriers to trade with countries participating in this union" (Laumullin, 2020). It is necessary to emphasize that S. Mirziyoyev initially assigned a decisive role to inter-regional, cross-border cooperation in his Central Asian policy. It was he who proposed creating the Association of Heads of Border Regions of the Central Asian Countries, convening a forum of interregional cooperation between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Thus, the main goal of this study is to analyses of condition and expansion of trade and economic cooperation in the Central Asian region.

2. Materials and Methods

To study the topic under consideration, we mainly used cross-national analysis, which emphasizes national states as the main object of analysis. The current state of world politics suggests that the course of world development is fixing on states, despite the triumphal march of globalization over the past few decades. As it turned out the theorists who wrote about the "return" of classical international relations were right (Karjoo and Sameti, 2015). Today the superpowers again have embarked on a race in the political and military spheres and the geopolitical tensions in the world have intensified, medium and small states find themselves in a cramped international environment with a reduced set of options for conducting their own policies. In this context, these states are forced to seek new patterns of behavior or to compromise with what they underestimated and leveled (Napolskikh and Yalyalieva, 2019). The Central Asian states, torn by the external factors, were as far apart as possible, ignoring the potential of good neighborly relations. It is difficult to say whether they reached a peak in their remoteness from neighbors in the region, but it was the impact of exogenous influences (cheaper energy, all types of raw materials, global market environment, a new round of geopolitical outfit and conflict in the world) that created the conditions for their turn towards their region (Sakamoto, 2012).

At the same time, one must pay tribute to the theoretical concepts of "neoclassical realism", which seeks motivation for international behavior within the society and state itself (Stilianos et al., 2010). We hope that the need for changes in relations with neighbors has arisen not only in the highest echelons of power, but also in wide sections of society where businessmen and public figures realize the need for close economic cooperation with neighbors (Batabyal and Beladi, 2016). Using the comparative potential of cross-national

analysis, we compared the dynamics of establishing relations, expanding trade and economic ties of Uzbekistan with Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Kazakhstan-Uzbekistan relations: analysis of trade and economic cooperation

The key foreign policy achievement of Sh. Mirziyoyev in regional policy is improvement of the attitude with Kazakhstan. It is natural that his second visit as the President he made to Kazakhstan (and earlier it was even planned that this would be the first visit). In comparison with other countries of Central Asia Kazakh-Uzbek relations were not strongly dragged by sharp disagreements and conflicts. There was no sharp decline in trade relations and a break in political dialogue. The border issues between the states were relatively painless and resolved (not taking into account, of course, the cases of shooting and deaths at the border). In September 9, 2002, in Kazakhstan, the President of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev and the President of Uzbekistan I. Karimov signed an agreement between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan on separate sections of the Kazakh-Uzbek border.

The state border between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan was recognized under the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) Treaty. The village of Bagys and the Arnasay dam with five settlements that previously belonged to Uzbekistan, were transferred to Kazakhstan under a concluded agreement. The village of Turkestanets, previously owned by Kazakhstan, was transferred to Uzbekistan under the agreement. It was emphasized that if the residents of the village of Turkestanets wish to move to Kazakhstan, they will be given the status of oralmans. It was stated from high tribunes that “the completion of the process of legal description of the state border is an important historical event that completely removes the issue of disputed sections between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan” (Sputnik, 2017). In 2003 the process of demarcation, which ended within a year without any excesses has begun.

In comparison with other countries of the Central Asia Region, the Presidents of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan met, although not often, but regularly, and there were no long disagreements between them. The interests of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan coincided on the main points of the so-called “water problem” of the Central Asian region. The policies of Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, locating at the source of the region’s main rivers and using “water levers” on their neighbors brought together the positions of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in resolving this issue. Although trade and economic relations between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan in the period from the 1990s to the mid-2000s were at a relatively low level for a number of objective and subjective reasons, in terms of volume they were the most extensive in the region. But when in April 2008, during the visit of the President of Uzbekistan to Astana, I. Karimov and N. Nazarbayev signed the “Agreement on the Establishment of a Free Trade Area between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan” in subsequent years, the volume of foreign trade between the countries increased significantly.

According to the Uzbek specialist Mirzokhid Rakhimov (2016), in 2012 it amounted to more than \$2.5 billion, with exports from Kazakhstan to Uzbekistan amounting to \$1.344 billion, and imports from Uzbekistan to Kazakhstan – \$817 million. In 2015, trade between countries exceeded to 3.2 billion US dollars. One of the key areas of cooperation between the two countries was transit and the supply of goods from Uzbekistan to Russia through Kazakhstan or from Kazakhstan to various Asian countries through Uzbekistan (Kozhevnikov, 2020). In 2015, the transit of Uzbek goods through the territory of Kazakhstan amounted to more than 2 million tons, and the transit of Kazakh goods through the territory of Uzbekistan more than 3 million tons.

The joint intergovernmental commission on bilateral cooperation between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which can be considered on the institutional basis for establishing ties between the two countries, worked regularly, monitoring and developing a dialogue on pressing issues. As it turned out in 2008-2015, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan were not far from a real trade, economic and political partnership. But they were far from creating an integration association, union. In April 2008, during the visit of I. Karimov to Astana, N. Nazarbayev put forward the idea of creating a union of Central Asian states. The President of Uzbekistan did not accept this idea, motivating it by the fact that the economies of the states of the region are diverse, and regional integration can cause even greater damage to the economies of Central Asian

countries. The non-closure of I. Karimov's initiatives of the Republic of Kazakhstan on integration into the Central Asian Region by expert circles is generally regarded as a manifestation of competition for leadership in the region. (Although I. Karimov himself took the initiative in 2006 to create a common market for the region, which was not heard by others. Also, in September of the same year he took part in an informal meeting of the Central Asian Heads of State in Astana). But the "theory of leadership" in the CAR was no good at all, as there was no real basis for rivalry between the two countries. As Kazakhstani expert D. Satpayev said: "In fact, it was sucked out of the finger. There was no competition. Uzbekistan under Islam Karimov and Kazakhstan showed different development models – both economic and political. Under Karimov, Uzbekistan was "fixed" on itself, was a bit in a state of isolation. When it comes to economic development, Kazakhstan was considered a "favorite", but precisely in terms of attracting investment. I believe that competition will begin right now, when Shavkat Mirziyoyev very abruptly begins to change both the foreign policy of Uzbekistan and domestic economic policy" (Sputnik, 2018).

Naturally, what the Heads of states were aware of or what were their perceptions of reality important for the analysis of interstate relations. I. Karimov has repeatedly stated the continuity of statehood of modern Uzbekistan and the state of the Timurids, whose power, as is known, extended at one time to most of Central Asia. Moreover, many foreign experts in the 90s saw Uzbekistan as a potential leader in international processes in the Central Asian Region, and such expectations and the attitude based on them could be the reason for some understatement, coolness between the Presidents of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan, but not be a serious basis for the discrepancy on fundamental issues of regional policy. They were warmed up by the existing problems of bilateral relations, which, as it seemed, could not be solved any way. For example, the stumbling block in the disagreements between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan was the fact that both of these countries take water from the Syr Darya river to the detriment of each other's agricultural land (according to unofficial data, in the Maktaaral district of the South Kazakhstan region alone, about 30 percent of the land ceased to be used for sowing various crops and, first of all, cotton, due to water intake by Uzbekistan).

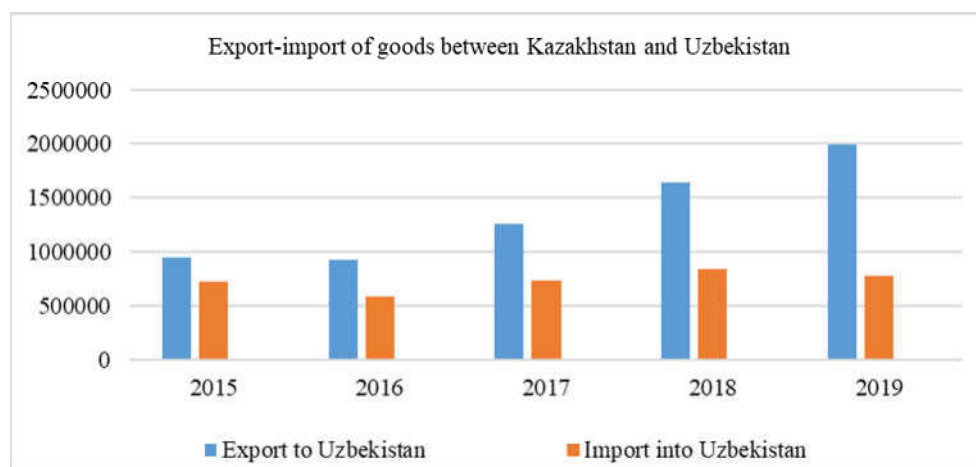
As it was mentioned above, on March 23, 2017, Sh. Mirziyoyev, as the newly elected President, paid his second official visit to Kazakhstan. As a result, Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Nursultan Nazarbayev signed a Joint Declaration on further deepening the strategic partnership and strengthening good neighborliness between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Kazakhstan. In its content, the signing of the "Strategy for Economic Cooperation between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Kazakhstan for 2017-2019" and the "Agreement between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Kazakhstan on Interregional Cooperation" was of particular importance (Official Site of the President..., 2017). In September 2017, the President of Kazakhstan N. Nazarbayev paid a return visit to Tashkent. Following the meeting of the Presidents of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan, it was decided to hold the Year of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan in 2018, and the Year of Kazakhstan in 2019 in Uzbekistan. Important documents have been adopted that serve as the basis for direct contacts between the regions of the two countries. Memoranda of cooperation in trade, economic, cultural and humanitarian spheres were signed between the khokimiyats of the Syr Darya and Tashkent regions and the akimat of the South Kazakhstan region, the khokimiyat of Navoi region and the akimat of Kyzylorda region (Khairzoda, 2018).

In order to develop cross-border trade and simplify export procedures in Uzbekistan, it is allowed to export goods (excluding raw materials), work and services without concluding an export contract, after making 100% prepayment to the accounts of exporters in banks of Uzbekistan, by invoice. Some visa and transit restrictions were lifted. It is from 2017 that the intensification of Kazakh-Uzbek trade and economic ties began, and trade between the two countries showed growth. The year 2018 was intense in terms of political dialogue and a breakthrough in trade and economic cooperation between the two countries. The Presidents of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan had a detailed conversation during a meeting of leaders of the Central Asian states on the eve of Nauryz in 2018. In November 2018, the first interregional Forum "Kazakhstan – Uzbekistan" was held in Shymkent. The forum was attended by the leaders of several regions of the two countries. Following the forum, the leaders of the regions

of the two countries signed 16 documents in the implementation of joint projects in priority sectors of the economy. The agreements were signed on the mutual recognition of visa regimes by the countries of the Silk Road, the creation of a joint venture between “KTZ Express” JSC and the “Uzavtotranstekhnika” JSC and Research and Production Center. Also, an agreement on the transportation of natural gas through the territory of Uzbekistan was signed between “KazTransGas” JSC and “Uztransgaz” JSC. With the holding of the forum, the tendency for the prevalence of interregional cooperation in bilateral relations between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan was firmly established.

It is noteworthy that K. Tokayev, as the President elected by the people, paid his first foreign visit to Uzbekistan on April 15, 2019. The Presidents of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan called 2018 a breakthrough year in the field of development of trade and economic cooperation, trade grew by 50% and exceeded \$3 billion. “The parties reaffirmed their mutual desire to reach the level of \$5 billion in the coming years, the intergovernmental commission on bilateral cooperation between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan was set the task of expanding the range of trade relations, finding and developing new long-term forms of economic cooperation” (Regnum, 2019). K. Tokayev drew particular attention to the accelerated creation of a joint tourism cluster of the two countries. On July 17, 2019, the Heads of the governments of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan opened Beineu – Akzhigit – a highway of international importance – the border of Uzbekistan. The road will open access for a shorter output of Uzbek goods to the markets of Russia and the countries of the Caucasus. According to the Consul General of Uzbekistan in Kazakhstan, Abror Fathullaev, according to the results of 2019, bilateral trade amounted to \$3.3 billion (Exclusive, 2020). The Kazakhstan side provides data at the level of \$4.1 billion in bilateral trade volume for 2019 (Figure 1) (Inbusiness.kz, 2020).

Figure 1. Indicators of trade between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2015-2019



Source: Inbusiness.kz, 2020

On February 26, 2020, in the Uzbek city of Urgench, the second forum of inter-regional cooperation between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan “Cooperation of regional business in the areas of agro-industrial cooperation, industry and tourism” was held. This forum brought together more than 300 people – the Heads of government agencies, regions, as well as representatives of business circles from two countries. In his speech at the forum, the Prime Minister of the Republic of Kazakhstan put forward initiatives to create a Kazakh-Uzbek cluster of light industry on the basis of the free-trade zone “Ontustik” in the city of Shymkent, to open a joint tourist route for tourist sites of Turkestan, Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara and Khorezm areas, the joint development of wholesale distribution and agro-logistics centers (Official Information Resource..., 2020). A business meeting was held in the B2B format with the participation of business circles of the two countries. The serious and constructive intentions to increase cooperation between the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Republic of Uzbekistan are confirmed by the preparatory work on the opening of the International Center for Trade and Economic Cooperation “Central Asia” on the border of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, which will contribute to the growth of cross-border trade, improvement of access control infrastructure, as well as the

creation of Central Asian major trade and logistics hub. Specialists of the two countries are working closely to bring the positions of the parties closer and come to a common denominator in order to introduce a single SilkWay visa (2020) in the very near future.

3.2. Uzbekistan-Tajikistan relations: analysis of trade and economic cooperation

In almost all works on Central Asia, it is noted that the Uzbek-Tajik relations are axial and crucial for the region. Taking into consideration the fact that recently there were almost no communications between these countries and there were mined sections on the Uzbek-Tajik border in peacetime, the question of today's condition is particularly interesting. The interweaving and mutual influence of politics and the economy are clearly demonstrated on the ups and downs of trade and economic relations between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan since the moment of independence. In the 90s of the last century, trade relations constantly showed growth, reaching a maximum value of 445.4 million US dollars in 1999 (Melibayev, 2017). The subsequent decline in trade, starting in 2000, was the result of a deterioration of mutual understanding on security issues at the border, religious extremism, as a result of political instability, primarily in Tajikistan.

For many years, one of the sticking points in Tajik-Uzbek relations was the Tajik colonel, ethnic Uzbek Mahmud Khudoyberdiyev. From 1996 to 1998, he rebelled three times against the government of Tajikistan, and then hid in Uzbekistan. The first rebellion was partially successful – then Tajik President Emomali Rahmon had to negotiate with the rebel colonel and even remove some of the ministers. The second rebellion was suppressed by the presidential guard, and Khudoyberdiyev retreated with his supporters to the territory of Uzbekistan. From there, in 1998, Khudoyberdiyev crossed the border with a thousand fighters in less than a day and captured the Tajik cities of Khujand, Chkalovsk and the strategic pass Shakhristan. For four days of fighting, government forces ousted Khudoyberdiyev from the country. After Khudoyberdiyev's flight, the Tajik authorities regularly turned to the leadership of Uzbekistan with a request to extradite the colonel. Official Tashkent replied several times that Khudoyberdiyev died in a shootout with one of his associates. Later, the name of Khudoyberdiyev was mentioned in connection with the dispersal of a peaceful protest in Andijan.

The Agreement on Eternal Friendship, signed in 2000, was essentially the result of inertia from the previous stage of cooperation; it could not have a practical impact on the situation. In the face of terrorist danger from the territory of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan has mined vast areas along the Uzbek-Tajik border. For a short time, the parties introduced a visa regime, interrupted direct flights between the countries. The first decade of the new 21st century was a period of decline in economic relations between the two countries in many respects. "For almost two decades, relations between Tashkent and Dushanbe have been mostly unfriendly. A significant contribution was made by personal hostility between Karimov and his Tajik counterpart Emomali Rahmon, but Tajikistan's efforts to build the Rogun dam, which promised to completely change the status quo, also played a role in the field of water use, which irritated the Uzbek side" (Persing, 2018).

After a demonstration of commitment to "hyper-security" in the interest of maintaining existing regimes, by the end of the first decade of the new century, the countries are entering a new round of confrontation over water resources (first the construction of the Sangtuda-2 hydroelectric power station by Tajikistan, then the Rogun hydroelectric station) using tough water methods and gas diplomacy. The result was not long: in 2011, the volume of exports of goods from Uzbekistan to Tajikistan has the lowest level compared to the volumes of exports to other countries of Central Asia. Also, the volume of imports of goods from Tajikistan to Uzbekistan has the lowest level in comparison with the volume of imports from other countries of Central Asia. Tajikistan, which occupied first place in the export trade of Uzbekistan in the region, was thus in the last place (Ganiyev and Yusupov, 2012).

Stagnation in economic relations between the two countries continued until 2016. The new political round of the Tajik-Uzbek dialogue, which began in the fall of 2016, became the necessary political basis for the restoration of economic cooperation. On September 29, 2016, the President of Tajikistan received the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Uzbekistan, who arrived in Dushanbe on a working visit. The Foreign Minister of Uzbekistan conveyed an oral

message from acting President Shavkat Mirziyoyev to his Tajik counterpart and spoke about Tashkent's readiness to restore economic cooperation with Tajikistan, and to resume railway and air communications. After that, several government delegations and commissions from both sides visited Dushanbe and Tashkent to discuss demarcation of borders, the resumption of rail and air services, simplifying the procedure for obtaining visas and mitigating the entire process of border crossing at checkpoints and a number of issues in the field of economic cooperation.

To enhance trade and economic relations, in April 2017, the National Exhibition of Products of Uzbekistan was first held in Dushanbe. More than 160 companies and more than 400 entrepreneurs from the Uzbek side presented more than 1.5 thousand types of products, including new products from domestic electrical engineering, pharmaceuticals, perfumes, leather and footwear, chemical, food, textile industries, agricultural machinery, cars and trucks, buses, building materials, elevators, household appliances, furniture and other goods. The return exhibition was held in October 2017 in Tashkent. It was attended by representatives of more than 150 companies and entrepreneurs of Tajikistan, leading activities in such fields as oil and gas, construction, transport, minerals, pharmacology, light, processing and agricultural industries, healthcare, education, science and technology, tourism.

The holding of these exhibitions and business forums has served to unite efforts with Tajik partners to promote the products of the two countries on the world market. As part of the exhibitions in Tashkent and Dushanbe, trade agreements were signed for a total value of more than \$100 million. In the same year, air and rail links between the countries were opened, the A-377 international road on the Samarkand-Penjikent section began its work. The checkpoints on the Uzbek-Tajik state border have resumed work. In the short term, these measures quickly spurred trade relations. According to the results of 2017, the volume of trade between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Tajikistan was 20.2 percent more than in 2016 (Tajik Technical University..., 2018).

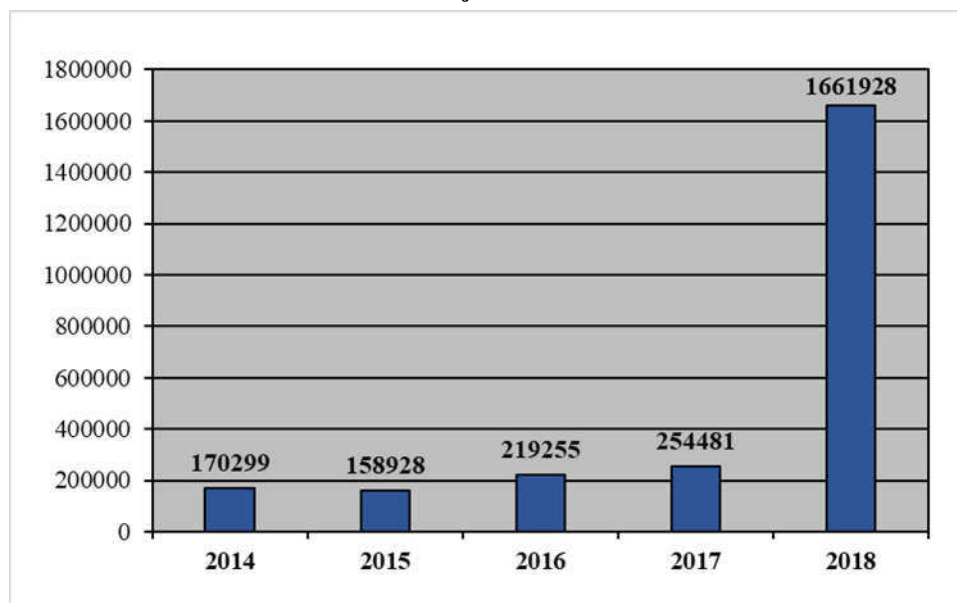
The reasons for establishing economic and diplomatic relations in the Central Asian Region, including Uzbekistan and Tajikistan in the scientific literature, are explained by diverse factors, among which the main role is played by political ones. If we remember the high degree of personification of policies in Central Asian states, the role of political will cannot really be overestimated in processes in the region. At the same time, it was time for the leaders of the states to understand and accept the fact that in addition to subjective factors, there are urgent tasks of a socio-economic nature, which in principle cannot be solved without taking into account the closest neighbors. According to Tajik expert K. Abdullayev for Tajikistan, "completely dependent on Uzbekistan in terms of transport communications, without deposits of such important minerals as gas and oil, the most promising survival strategy is to maximize integration into the Central Asian (even Turkic) community. It is Uzbekistan that can and has the chance to act as a driver of regional integration. This is perfectly understood in Dushanbe, especially against the backdrop of a weakening of Russia, "bogged down" in the unequal confrontation with the West, as well as the growing role of China (Stratakis and Pelagidis, 2020). The Uzbek vector is the most promising and probable for Tajikistan today. On the other hand, rapprochement with Tajikistan, the closest neighbor to the chronically unstable Afghanistan, is also a desirable path for Uzbekistan if it intends to become a prosperous and safe Central Asian snow leopard" (K-News, 2019).

The role of the water and energy factor as a driver in economic cooperation between the countries is significant. The issue of building the Rogun hydropower station spoiled relations between Uzbeks and Tajiks for a long time and decades Tajikistan needed to start its construction. The construction process, which began in 2016, served as a trigger for establishing relations between the states. The state visit made by the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev to Tajikistan in March 2018 has truly become a historic one. Having extended the first hand of friendship to a neighboring country, Mirziyoyev once again proved that it was Uzbekistan who initiated regional cooperation. As a result of this visit, 27 documents on bilateral cooperation were signed, including an agreement on visa-free travel for up to 30 days. The Presidents of the two countries consider this document the beginning of the degeneration of Tajik-Uzbek relations. The Heads of the states attended the opening ceremony of "the Galaba-Amuzang-Khushadi" railway line connecting the Surkhandarya region of Uzbekistan with the Khatlon region of Tajikistan. The Presidents pressed a symbolic

button, thereby giving an official start not only to railway communication, but also to a new stage in relations between the two countries (Official Site of the Ministry..., 2018).

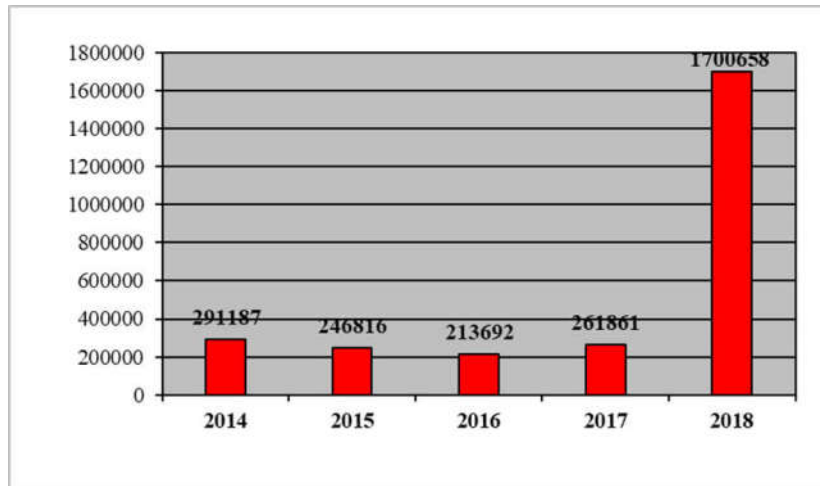
The political will of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan for cooperation was supported by the Head of Tajikistan, Emomali Rahmon, who arrived on a return state visit to Uzbekistan in August 2018. It should be emphasized that the last time he visited Uzbekistan twenty years ago, in 1998. Following the talks, Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Emomali Rahmon signed a Strategic Partnership Agreement between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Tajikistan, which defines the goals of establishing long-term and sustainable partnership relations, strategic directions of bilateral cooperation. 27 documents were signed regarding cooperation in industry, standardization and certification, intersection borders, recognition of documents on education, geodesy and geology, agriculture, culture and other fields. More than 60 large industrial enterprises of the country took part in the exhibition organized at “the UzexpoCenter” and demonstrated the products of Tajikistan produced under the slogan “Made in Tajikistan” (Radio Azattyk, 2018). 2018 in the Republic of Tajikistan was declared the Year of Tourism and Folk Crafts. In this regard, at a meeting of the Heads of the states of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, a great interest was expressed in the development of tourism between neighboring countries. An Agreement was adopted between the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan and the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan on cooperation in the field of tourism (Khairzoda, 2018). As a result of such measures, 2018 was a breakthrough year in all directions, primarily in the tourism sector. By the number of Uzbeks who visited Tajikistan and Tajiks in recent years, this year was a record year (Figures 2-3).

Figure 2. The number of citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan who left for the Republic of Tajikistan



Source: State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics, 2020

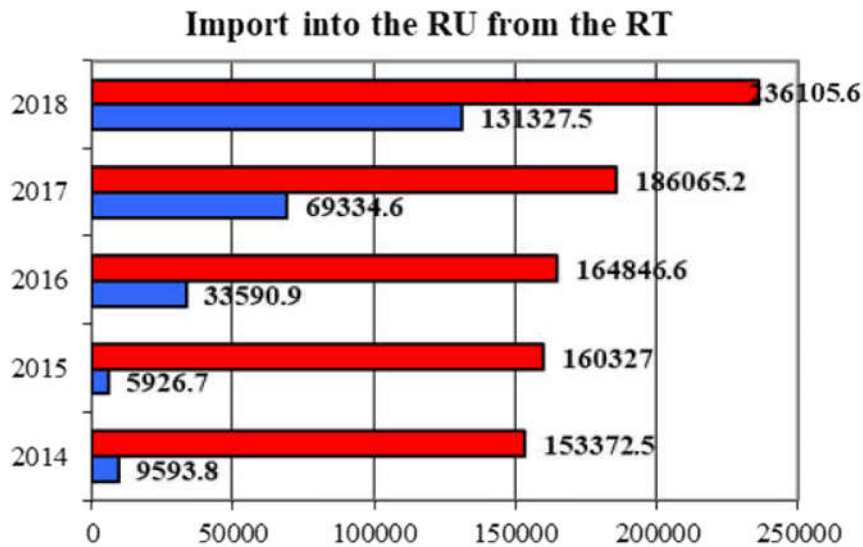
Figure 3. The number of citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan who left for the Republic of Uzbekistan



Source: State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics, 2020

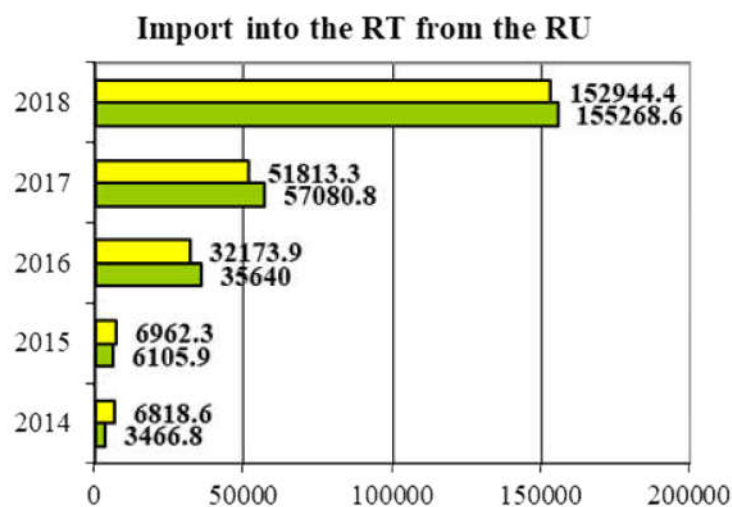
Improving the international climate in the region, investments, PR strategies have paid off. According to AFAR Travel Magazine, there has been an increase in the flow of tourists in Tajikistan: there were 431 thousand in 2017, and a year later, in 2018, already 1.25 million (BBC News, 2019). The multiplier effect of the whole complex of measures for establishing bilateral cooperation had a positive effect on trade (Figures 4-5).

Figure 4. The dynamics of trade between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Tajikistan for 2014-18



Source: Khairzoda, 2018

Figure 4. The dynamics of trade between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Tajikistan for 2014-18



Source: Khairzoda, 2018

As it was mentioned above, the water-energy factor plays a decisive role in bilateral relations (Hamm, 2013). A key event in Tajikistan was the launch of the second Rogun unit in September 2019. The country is steadily making every effort to complete the construction of this hydraulic structure, which in the near future can turn the country into a major producer of cheap and environmentally friendly electricity in the region (Sitarov and Urekeshova, 2017). Also, Uzbekistan, with its growing economic needs, can benefit from the full launch of the Rogun hydroelectric station, becoming one of the main consumers of cheap, low-cost electricity. Also, Uzbekistan, according to Vladimir Paramonov, the Head of the Central Eurasia analytical group: “In my opinion, neither the nuclear power plant construction project nor solar power plant construction project will affect the growing needs of Uzbekistan for cheap energy, the generation of which is possible only at the hydroelectric power station. Diversification and a combination of different sources of electricity generation is the right path to development” (Krivosheev, 2018). Therefore, the water and energy sector may be the guarantor of the continuation of the policy of building up cooperation, supported by both sides (Belyakova and Vorobyeva, 2018).

3.3. Uzbekistan-Turkmenistan relations: analysis of trade and economic cooperation

Economic pragmatism initially supported relations between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, preventing the differences from escalating to critical levels. Compared with Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, with Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan had established trade and economic relations and they did not experience sharp confrontations over the years of independent existence, with the exception of the first decade of the 21st century. Relations between the countries were spoiled by the alleged assassination attempt on Turkmenbashi on November 25, 2002, in the organization of which the Turkmen authorities accused Boris Shikhmuradov, the former Head of the Turkmen Foreign Ministry. Ashkhabad accused the authorities of Uzbekistan, showing some evidence that the main “suspect” Shikhmuradov secretly entered Turkmenistan from the territory of Uzbekistan. This was followed by a diplomatic scandal when representatives of the Turkmen special services searched the Uzbek embassy and the ambassador was expelled from the country.

But countries established relations relatively quickly. Prospects for joint transportation of gas to a new market – to China and the five-sided agreement between Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Oman and Qatar to form a new international transport corridor “Central Asia – Middle East” pushed the countries to seek a compromise in relations. Transport corridors, where Uzbekistan would gain access to the sea, and Turkmenistan – access to China, became weighty arguments for both sides, so as not to focus on negative experiences. “For Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan is interesting in several keys. Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan

are well connected by road and rail, which makes it possible to plan joint transport projects in all three areas: Central Asia and Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus and the Middle East, Central Asia and China. Connecting to transit and transport corridors is a vital need for commodity-oriented economies. The implementation of the “Turkmenistan-Uzbekistan-Kazakhstan-China” gas pipeline project, commissioned in 2009, was a good experience in the two countries’ interaction in diversifying energy transportation routes. The summits took place on such a wave of mutual understanding. The President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov visited Turkmenistan in 2012 and 2014. Other Central Asian countries, except Kazakhstan, did not receive the attention of the President of Uzbekistan, who was clearly supportive of his southern neighbor. The President of Turkmenistan Gurbanguly Berdimuhamedov paid a return visit to Tashkent in 2015. The reason was, first of all, the pragmatic questions of potential joint projects. The above-mentioned five-sided agreement between Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Iran, Oman and Qatar on the creation of an international transport and transit corridor was initiated in April 2011 in Ashgabat following the negotiations of the delegations of the participating countries.

Issues related to the implementation of the project were discussed at a meeting of the Heads of the foreign affairs agencies of these states on August 7, 2014 in Muscat, the capital of Oman. Following the talks, the parties signed a Memorandum of Understanding on the implementation of the Agreement between the governments of Iran, Oman, Qatar, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan on the creation of an international transport and transit corridor. In February 2015, a meeting of the Coordination Council was held in Tehran under the agreement of this transport corridor with the participation of representatives of Iran, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan and Oman. The Ashgabat agreement on the creation of an international transport and transit corridor between the governments of Iran, Oman, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan entered into force in April 2016 (Sputnik, 2019). Thus, the discussion of the problems of this project has become a good platform for building up the Uzbek-Turkmen cooperation.

In this context, it was logical that Turkmenistan became the first country where the newly elected President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, made his first state visit in March 2017. The opening of the railway bridge through the Amu Daria river by the Heads of two states during his visit was really a symbolic event; the transit sphere has become the core of economic cooperation and political dialogue between countries. In 2017, the President of Uzbekistan made three visits to Turkmenistan, and 40 Uzbek delegations also visited this country during the indicated period. This fact indicates a rather high intensity of political dialogue and practical interaction between countries.

Another sign of trusting relations between the countries was the Turkmenistan invitation of the business circles of Uzbekistan to participate in the Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India (TAPI) gas pipeline project. Uzbekistan was also invited to start developing oil and gas fields on the Turkmen shelf of the Caspian (the construction of the Turkmen section began in December 2015 from the Turkmen city of Mary and on February 23, 2018, the Afghan TAPI section was stratified). During the negotiations, the President of Uzbekistan during his visit to Turkmenistan in April 2018 announced the intention of the republic to take part in the construction of TAPI. Problems with financing this project are still holding back Uzbekistan from participating in the construction of the project. But in the long run, the growing needs and opportunities of the Uzbek economy can push political and business circles to become more active in this direction. In the same 2018, a new section of the railway between Turkmenistan and Afghanistan, Serhetabat-Turgundi was launched. Turkmenistan is gradually turning for Uzbekistan into a really important way for reaching the southern borders of Asia.

According to official data, in 2018, the volume of international traffic between the two countries through railways increased by 23.7 percent. Over the past 9 months of 2019, this indicator increased by another 37 percent compared to the same period last year. Positive growth is also observed in road transport. In 2018, a 3.5-fold increase was observed in this direction. Over the 9 months of last year, this indicator increased by 2.8 times compared to the same period last year. (Hasanov, 2019). Further build-up of interstate dialogue has a positive effect on trade between the two countries. If, according to statistics, in 2017, the trade between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan amounted to \$177.3 million, then the indicators for the

next 2018 were much higher. At the end of 2018, the volume of trade between the countries increased by 70%, amounting to \$302 million. Agricultural machinery, fresh and processed fruits and vegetables, mineral fertilizers, building materials, chemical and finished textile products are exported from Uzbekistan to Turkmenistan. Oil and oil products, equipment, polymers, as well as other chemical products are supplied from Turkmenistan to Uzbekistan. (TheWorldNews.net, 2019). And according to the results of the first half of 2019, the trade turnover between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan amounted to \$257 million, which is 2.8 times more compared to the same period last year (Hasanov, 2019). Large-scale implemented in Uzbekistan. The projects allowed to increase the volume of imports from Turkmenistan of various industrial goods, including cement, glass products, construction materials, equipment and furniture (Sattarov, 2017).

At the same time, the two countries did not immediately manage to settle all the problem points in bilateral relations. According to expert A. Shabalin (2018): “Visa issues remained unresolved, which is an extremely important issue for residents of the border regions, as well as the lack of air connections between the cities of the two states. Turkmenistan demonstrates readiness to be friends, but not open. And Uzbekistan’s position is readiness to discuss cooperation in the field of logistics, economics and education, without touching on the “sick” topics for the neighbor. The visa regime is maintained between the two countries, in this regard, citizens of neighboring countries, primarily residents of border regions, experience difficulties crossing the border. Air traffic between Ashgabat and Tashkent was interrupted in 2013 due to financial disagreements between the parties. From 2017, all high-level meetings raised the issue of restoring air and bus connections between Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, but so far concrete steps have been taken directions are not observed in the position of the Turkmen side.

In the section on Uzbek-Tajik relations, it was said about the intensification of communication between citizens of the two countries, the same can be said about Uzbek-Kyrgyz relations. Perhaps, if we take into account the official policy of Turkmenistan, aimed at isolation, then we should not expect rapid progress. The needs of the economy are pushing the country for openness, close ties with neighbors, including Uzbekistan. “Through the roads and railways of the two countries, trade cargo is transported, which is also sent in transit to third countries. In particular, in 2018, the volume of international traffic through railways increased by 23.7 percent. Over the past 9 months of 2019, this figure has increased by 37 percent compared to the same period last year, there is also a positive increase in road transportation. In 2018, growth in this direction was 3.5 times. Over the past 9 months of 2019, this indicator increased by 2.8 times compared to the same period last year” (Hasanov, 2019). But so far, these positive developments are not projected onto the social sphere. Having the necessary infrastructure for civil transportation, the peoples of the two countries are not free to visit each other.

3.4. Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan relations: analysis of trade and economic cooperation

Compared to other countries in the region, relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan were hardened by the historical heritage of the past. The enclaves inherited by these countries as a result of an ill-conceived definition of borders by the Soviets and the water issue were the reason for the alienation between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan for many years. In January 2013, Bishkek and Tashkent finally quarreled after the incident around the Uzbek enclave of Sokh, located in Kyrgyzstan. Clashes between residents of the Uzbek Sokh enclave and Kyrgyz border guards occurred due to the installation of power lines in the disputed territory. The conflict led to the isolation of Sokh with the outside world. Kyrgyz border guards completely blocked the enclave – and food stopped coming to the village of Khushyar. The countries, after an exchange of sharp diplomatic notes, ceased relations at all levels. The water issue and use of water resources were a stumbling block between the countries. Kyrgyzstan, like Tajikistan, located in the upper reaches of the Amu Darya River, has a certain advantage in terms of applying “water diplomacy” to its neighbors. Official Tashkent under the Karimov administration took a tough stance on the construction of the Kambarata-1 hydroelectric power station by Kyrgyzstan. Uzbek authorities feared that Kyrgyzstan would begin to regulate water supply in the summer.

Another important problem that has not been resolved between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan for many years is the state border. The reports of conflicts, including the use of firearms, now and then came from border areas. As a result of the estrangement of the two neighboring states, it turned out, as Kyrgyz expert Igor Shestokov notes: “Paradoxically, Kyrgyzstan’s relations with Russia in the economic plan and with China were better built than with Uzbekistan” (Kari, 2017). As is the case with other states in the region, the situation has changed dramatically with the change of leadership in Uzbekistan. In fact, with the advent of Mirziyoyev, the intergovernmental commission between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan immediately started working, which has been in sleep mode for 8 years.

On September 5, 2017, Sh. Mirziyoyev visited Kyrgyzstan. The parties signed the “Agreement on the Uzbek-Kyrgyz state border” which clearly described 85% of its length. This, of course, was a sharp leap in bilateral relations. The most tangible sign of better relations was the resumption of the extended Dostuk/Dustlik border crossing on September 6, 2017. Thousands of citizens of both countries gathered to celebrate this event (Centre-1, 2017). Another important signal for establishing good neighborly relations between the states was that Shavkat Mirziyoyev, during a state visit to the Kyrgyzstan Republic, said that Uzbekistan was not against the construction of Kambarata-1 hydroelectric power station and agreed to participate in the implementation of this project (Tolkanov, 2019). In 2017, two energy companies of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan signed a memorandum of cooperation on the Kambarata hydroelectric station. The aggravated Ungirtau problem on the border between the two countries in 2016, against the backdrop of such changes, declined and soon subsided. Sooronbay Jeenbekov paid his first official foreign visit as the President of Kyrgyzstan to Tashkent on December 13, 2017. During the two-day visit of Jeenbekov to Tashkent, agreements for \$139 million were signed. An agreement was reached on providing a loan of \$100 million to Kyrgyzstan.

In the spring of 2018, after a long break, railway and bus services resumed between Bishkek and Tashkent, and flights between the two capitals began to operate more often. The positive effect of the warming of relations between the countries became noticeable in the field of trade at the end of 2016. If in 2016 the volume of exports of goods from Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan amounted to only 67 million dollars, then in 2017 this amount amounted to 163 million dollars. In 2018, Uzbekistan sent goods for \$248 million, thus, the export of goods from Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan increased five-fold in terms of 2016-2018. In 2018, trade between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan increased by 189.6 percent, amounting to \$481 million. Construction materials, agricultural and dairy products and electricity are traditionally supplied from Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan. Vegetables, textiles, plastic products, and automobiles are imported from Uzbekistan to Kyrgyzstan. Kyrgyz economists note the presence of an obvious negative balance in trade between the two countries and express dissatisfaction with the trade policies of the neighboring state (Figures 6-7) (Nurmatov, 2019).

Figure 6. Indexes of trade between Uzbekistan and Kirgizstan for 2016-2018



Source: Nurmatov, 2019

Figure 7. Indexes of trade between Uzbekistan and Kirgizstan for 2016-2018



Source: Nurmatov, 2019

According to the State Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the foreign trade turnover between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan in 2019 amounted to 829.1 thousand US dollars, which is almost twice as much compared to the previous year. Exports amounted to 679 thousand dollars, imports – 150 thousand dollars, the share of the Kyrgyz Republic in the foreign trade turnover of the Republic of Uzbekistan amounted to 2% (Kabar, 2020).

The transport and logistics sector acts as a driver in relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In October 2017, countries completed the project by opening a new route for delivering goods to China, the Tashkent-Osh-Kashgar transport corridor (route length is 900 km). The most important transport project to date, contributing to the establishment of relations between the two states, is the construction of the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway, the construction of which has been talked about since 2002. This project was supported by China as part of the “One Belt – One Way” program. For a long time, there was no agreement between Kyrgyzstan and China on the technical characteristics of the future railway. “Despite the fact that Kyrgyzstan has been striving to implement this project for many years, because of the hidden opposition from Russia, the construction of the road has been delayed for all 15 years. Russia considers this region as the territory of its geopolitical interests, and therefore hindered the implementation of large projects of other powers”, says the Kyrgyz analyst Aidanbek Akmat Uulu on why the implementation of this project is being delayed (Zholdoshev, 2019).

It is noteworthy that after Russia announced its participation in the project in 2018, the Chinese side made concessions in determining the technical characteristics railway, accepting the arguments of the Kyrgyz side. In this vein, it is believed that the geopolitical halo around this project will probably accelerate its implementation and thereby Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan will receive a strong connecting link in their relations. The Uzbek side has already alerted its section and expressed a desire to continue the construction of the road to Afghanistan and Iran (China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan-Afghanistan-Iran marching route). One of the outstanding issues is that residents of the border regions of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan can cross the border without a visa only for a short time, the visa regime between the two countries has not been completely canceled. This, accordingly, prevents full-blooded relationships. A positive effect from the development of relations can be expected only if the visa regime is completely abolished (Kari, 2017).

4. Conclusions

The economic and political transformations in Uzbekistan initiated by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Sh. Mirziyoyev, have an effect not only at the national level, but also at the regional level. An analysis of events in the region indicates an improvement in interstate relations, the establishment of a political dialogue between leaders and mutual understanding between societies. The initiative of the President of Uzbekistan was understood

and supported by the leaders of all countries. Following the Republic of Uzbekistan, the CAR states reoriented their international politics to a regional format. It has become a tradition that newly elected Presidents pay their first visit to neighboring states in the region. A step has been taken towards independence in regional processes: the leaders of the CAR countries began to gather without the participation of external factors.

The desire to resolve controversial issues and specific actions to overcome alienation between countries undertaken by Uzbekistan, supported by four states, had a positive effect on the condition of trade and economic relations between them. Already in 2017, growth was observed in trade between countries and this trend continues to this day. It is trade that is both a trigger and a driver of cooperation in the region. The analysis shows that trade is growing dynamically between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, between Uzbekistan and Tajikistan. Trade relations between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan have a positive trend, but they have the largest negative balance. In general, if we recall times when borders in the Central Asian Region were mined, people died in border conflicts and state leaders did not communicate for years, then the current condition of interstate relations is more than encouraging. A feature of the growing relations between states in the Central Asian Region is a special emphasis on cross-border and inter-regional cooperation. Economic and trade units of regions and regions of all countries without exception support and develop interaction among themselves.

Another driver and a guarantee of stability of relations, at least in the medium term, is the fact that almost all five countries of the region are interested in developing and diversifying transport and logistics routes. All countries have their own implementing and planned projects to increase the transportation of their raw materials and goods to already established points or would like to reach new frontiers in the south and east. In such circumstances, getting around the neighbor will be at least economically disadvantageous. The global market environment itself is pushing the CAR countries to enter into close economic ties with neighboring states. Uzbekistan remains the flagship of regional cooperation as long as its political leadership understands and recognizes the economic feasibility of friendly, close ties with neighbors in the Central Asian Region. It is also true that the expanding needs of Uzbekistan's growing economy for energy and new markets will push the country towards more liberal, trusting relations with Central Asian states. Therefore, we can assume that the current problems with unresolved visa issues, gray trade, insufficient communication between the countries will be resolved in the near future.

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