

Removing Tourism Barriers in Central Asia: A Strategy for Regional Coordination

Key Messages

- Although different international organizations address the tourism potential of Central Asia, real breakthroughs are still lacking because of the absence of a specific regional-based mechanism.
- Such a mechanism could create value-chains by providing a uniform administrative framework to manage touristic flows and address problems on border crossing, administrative requirements, and visa issuing.
- Introducing a common “Silk Visa”, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan will provide common access to their territories along touristic transborder routes; showing their neighbors the way forward in providing travelers access based on uniform rules of registration and a single visa regime.
- By creating multi-destination itineraries and improving logistic services, this regional cooperation will foster demand, leading to improved connectivity within the region.
- Such an effort must be underpinned by a concerted academic endeavor to map cultural and historical resources shaping a recognized shared view of regional heritage.
- Through this, tourism may in the long run strengthen the long-sought aim of regional integration.
- The main challenge for this highly prospective area of regional cooperation stems from security risks: radical religious elements may exploit opened tourist channels. However, the reinforced cooperation of security services can address this issue.

The Case for a Regional Approach

Among the beneficial effects of Uzbekistan’s new foreign policy is the boost for international tourism. After years of relative isolation, by defining this sector as strategic for the national economy, Tashkent has opened up the heartland of Central Asia (CA) with its most important historic sites. Reflecting global trends¹, tourism is also a fast-growing sector for the national economies of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan. As a whole, the five Central Asia (CA) countries could form a single tourism destination which would greatly increase the region’s attractiveness as an international travel option for visitors

However, this great potential faces several hindrances.² A main one is the absence of a sound format for regional interstate cooperation for tourism development³. A multilateral regional organization would be the best instrument to: pool resources, buttress the comparative advantages of CA countries as a destination, introduce needed agreements aimed at easing border crossing, plan transborder regional routes, address logistical gaps, and improve underdeveloped infrastructure. Moreover, such a regional forum could stimulate international demand by designing an effective marketing strategy for Central Asian destinations under a well-recognized brand (such as the “Heart of Asia” or the “Great Silk Road”). The urgency for reaching such a regional approach is further supported by international development agencies active in the

¹ Since 2009, tourism has grown above average, at around 4% per year and represents more than 10% of world GDP. “UNWTO Annual Report 2017”, Madrid: OMT, 2018.

² Khetagurova V., Otkryvayem Tsentral'nuyu Aziyu: perspektivy razvitiya turizma po tropam Velikogo Sholkovogo put, *Setevoy Nauchnyy Zhurnal*, 11 (6), 2017, 15-31.

³ Usmanova, S. B., “Prospects of Intensive Institutional Cooperation in Tourism Development in Central Asia: The Case of Uzbekistan”, *Journal of Tourismology*, 4(1), 2018, 55-66

region. There is consensus that tourism has great potential to create jobs and drive economic growth⁴.

Regional Coordination Initiatives

The UN specialized agency **World Tourism Organization** (UNWTO) is playing a distinguishing role in branding and promoting Silk Road tourism. The Organization initiated in 1991 a Silk Road program, joined by CA countries in 1993, aimed at creating a collaborative and sustainable framework for tourism growth in the states on the route.

Apart from UNWTO there are several other international organizations trying to make a focus of Silk Road tourism. According to the **Shanghai Cooperation Organization** (SCO) which considers tourism cooperation is one of the main elements of cultural and humanitarian interaction between the members.

Another regional international organization paying attention to the sector is the **Commonwealth of Independent States** (CIS). The CIS has an *ad hoc* Tourism Council regularly organizing seminars, fairs and other events acting as platforms for the CA countries' operators to conclude agreements on combined initiatives.

The organisation of the Turkic speaking countries, the **Turkic Council** (of which Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and, since 2019, Uzbekistan are members) also tried to be active in the tourism sector. To this end, the Council concluded a Memorandum of Understanding for cooperation with the UNWTO to realise a pilot project ("Modern Silk Road Joint Tour Package"). The project was actively promoted in 2017-18 but seems to have lost grip this year.⁵

The **Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Program** (CAREC) is also looking at tourism as means to enhance regional connectivity. CAREC is planning to bring together a forum of the national Tourism Agencies of the 11 member countries to single out and then disseminate good practices and results to the largest audiences.

However, this plurality of subjects dealing with tourism may also result in a lack of focus and outcome of the sponsored initiatives. Indeed, tourist operators do not feel, at local levels, the effects of the planned initiatives, as reported to Westminster International

University in Tashkent (WIUT) by representatives of the Tashkent-based "Silk Road Delicious".

More importantly, the problem is that there is not a specific regional-based mechanism to advance Central Asia as a tourist destination. While presenting a suitable framework to deal with this, the UNWTO Silk Road program is very large in scale as along the five CA states it involves (as of February 2018) other 29-member countries from the Pacific to Eastern Mediterranean (Silk Road Action Plan 2012/2013, 2012). As such the Silk Road program encompasses big differences in terms of economic realities, cultural aspects, infrastructure, geography, policy, rules and regulations and so forth. What Central Asia needs is a **separate institutional network** to coordinate State policies for tourism development. This could be established, according to an existing practice, as a **Regional Commission** under the UNWTO⁶. It is noteworthy that the UNWTO already created a subregional format to deal with the Western edge of the Silk Road, the Western Silk Road Tourism Development initiative⁷. This experience can be adapted and applied to the CA context.

Regional Collaboration as a Strategic Advantage

As a matter of priority, CA states should cooperate in creating a **uniformed administrative framework** to manage touristic flows. Regional collaboration will allow them to more efficiently tackle several problems that have, so far, negatively affected tourists.

Until recently, getting local **visas** was among the main problems discouraging visitors from visiting the region. In the last years, there have been concrete steps forwards to remove these obstacles. Following Kyrgyzstan (2012) and Kazakhstan (2014), Uzbekistan (2019) removed the visa requirement for touristic and business purposes. Since June 2016, Tajikistan launched an E-visa system. Such developments have changed the regional outlook for potential visitors of the region but still the fact of having to apply for several visas is discouraging potential visitors.

As reported to WIUT by the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan for Tourism Development, after one year of work, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan are about to introduce a common "**Silk Visa**". The visa

⁴World Bank, "Tourism: A Driver of Development in Central Asia", November 2, 2017, <https://worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2017/10/31/central-asia-tourism-a-driver-for-development>

⁵ According to <https://turkkon.org>. However, no information is available since 2019, and the advertised website of the package no longer exists.

⁶ Since 1975 six regional Commissions were established as subsidiaries. Currently, CA states participate in the UNWTO European Tourism Commission, which consists of 42 state members.

⁷World Tourism Organization, "Western Silk Road Roadmap, Madrid: UNWTO, 2018.

intends to give access to the whole territory of the two states. In Tashkent, there is confidence that after the adoption by the two, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan will follow suit shortly. Thus, a common visa area, like Schengen in Europe, will emerge in Central Asia. This does not mean travelers will not be stopped at the borders but a single jurisdiction for international travel can speed up procedures a lot. Especially if a unified and identifiable network of services (as specially marked buses) will develop in parallel. As highlighted by a UNWTO conducted study, the number of tourists willing to take this branch of the Silk Road is expected to significantly rise if they will have the opportunity to get a single visa.

Against such a prospective background, the position of **Turkmenistan**, both in geographical and political terms, is a hurdle to realize the potential of regional integration. Home of major historical resources, Turkmenistan has a lot to offer for international tourists but is difficult for tourists to access. Getting a visa as a private tourist or visitor is challenging: first an application with a fee should be submitted for consideration. Then you should wait five working days (which in practice may be more than 21 calendar days) to receive an answer (that, as the author personally experienced, deters entry). In addition, there are cases, when even after the issuing of a visa, the bearer is not allowed to cross the border.

However, apart from visa requirements, there are other regulatory measures discouraging visitors. First of all, **registration systems** have significantly improved. In Uzbekistan, they now allow visitors to stay in private homes. However, there is still compulsory registration within a three-day period similar to Kazakhstan. Progress is visible in this sector as well – notably the introduction in 2018 by Uzbekistan of an on-line registration (*Emebmon* “electronic guest”) and the recent exclusion of penalties for delays in registration. However, between the countries, there remain inconsistencies in the application of these norms which essentially aggravate the problems that tourists may face⁸. While there are improvements underway in Uzbekistan, these are not consistently implemented and a single-tier procedure should also be applied in all other countries. Also, a general problem (perhaps except for Kyrgyzstan) is the persistence of uncertainties about the practical application of the new visa and registration rules. According to an operator based

there, to some extent, this has worsened in Kazakhstan.

Regional coordination can address serious **logistic hindrances** preventing tourists to visit the region in a comfortable way and then to move within it. The main points at issue are poor facilities and extremely cumbersome regulations for **border crossing** (especially when travelling by vehicle) and inaccessibility of some posts for international tourists⁹.

With regards to Uzbekistan, one can single out the limited availability of **international flights** that until recently served the country. This can be compensated with increased connectivity with the neighboring Kazakhstani airport of Shymkent. In its turn, Uzbekistan can serve tourist flows directed to the North of Tajikistan which is suffering from low availability of domestic and international air connections. Apart from international flight connections, the region is in dire need of improved **internal connectivity** serving minor localities of different countries. Internal flights mainly serve major cities while there are many areas of tourist interest that remain inaccessible. A prospective solution, for sustainability, would be to increase the number of night trains according to schedules allowing travelers to enjoy specific places.

Next, regional coordination should create conditions for increased cooperation among **businesses** by developing a coherent institutional and legal basis regarding the functioning and the regime of licenses needed for national and international tour operators. The whole framework should be grounded on the principle of responsibility for organizations and officials for compliance with the legal rights of consumers of tourism services. On the upstream this should also address capacity building problems, facilitating a more uniformed system of vocational training and formation of qualified personnel.

All these practical directions of work are preconditions for **repackaging the marketing of the region** as a world tourist destination.

Quite surprisingly, at a global level, CA countries are only **limitedly associated with the idea of the Silk Road**.¹⁰ This can be seen as an effect of, first, the delay in developing local touristic potentials, second, the fact that the CA States only lately moved from a strictly national perspective. The latter did not help

⁸ Horák S., “Visa Regimes and Regulatory Documents as an Obstacle for Tourism Development in Central Asia”, in Kantarci Kemal et al. (eds), *Tourism in Central Asia. Cultural Potential and Challenges*, Toronto: Apple Academic Press, 2015, 233-258.

⁹ Alieva R., “Analysis of Cooperation in the Tourism Sector between Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan: a Study of Cross-border Value Chains”, Tashkent: CAREC, 2019 (forthcoming)

¹⁰ According to a UNWTO-sponsored TripAdvisor consumer survey, travellers found that none of the five CA countries was among the first 10 countries associated with the idea of the “Silk Road.”. Trip Advisor, “Travel Trends for the Silk Road 2017”, 2017.

visibility at a global level: even when considerable resources were poured into advertisement (as Kazakhstan did on worldwide media such as CNN with limited success).

For this, there is a **need for common vision**, such as to transcend the so far predominating strictly national concept of touristic offers. First, it is a matter to work toward the improvement of the **regional image** as a whole. This will match an external perception seeing Central Asia as a single destination. It is also because of its peripheral position from global routes, some tourists approaching the region would like to have at least a grasp of all five countries during a single trip. A **specific brand** name should be found (like Great or Heart of Asia Silk Road) and promoted at the international level. This would create a logo and brand identity to be used in tourism fairs, festivals and events as well as website and social media.

Effective regional **tourism marketing and coordination should also be based on “connectivity tours”**, packages allowing tourists to move across the borders to enjoy the unique attractions that the region can offer and to customize tour itineraries. Tour agencies have already begun to offer different classes of tours from budget to luxury. According to Mrs Lazat Ahanova, Ambassador of Uzbekistan tourism in Kazakhstan, the two countries developed the “Golden Square” concept, that will be soon announced. It is modelled on the “Golden Ring” of Russia, the main and most popular tourist route of the country. The “Golden Square” will unite six Central Asian medieval cities (from Turkestan to Bukhara). According to the creators, the route is open for regional sites to join.

To work, similar initiatives have some preliminary requirements. There is, for instance, a need for **academic cooperation** leading to common research endeavors such to produce a common recognized historical picture underpinning regional heritage. From this may stem a work of mapping the cultural and historical resources in order to design the more apt touristic transnational routes linking the sites. According to the experience of the UNWTO Western Silk Road initiative, a Tourism Academic Network for Central Asia may be established. One of the main tasks for this network should be to develop CA Silk Road “Regional Heritage Maps” and assist national tourism organizations in the design of transnational itineraries of cultural tourism in accordance with tourism trends at the global level. Academic involvement is seminal to form human resources, notably to teach local guides on shared historical standards. As reported to WIUT,

among national tourism structures there is indeed a concern for the kind of **historical narrative** about the nation that may be conveyed by foreign guides. According to Mr Danyar Kazakov, Director General of Kyrgyz Tourism State Enterprise, Kazakhstan authorizes only nationals to work as operators, thus limiting the possibility of agencies in other countries to develop networks.

The work of identifying specific cross-border itineraries can also serve joint branding and marketing of specific itineraries beyond the classic cultural offer. According to a development agency executive in Azerbaijan, tourism flows assume a regional dimension, especially if the offer will be tailored to meet the expectations of **particular segments** of customers. Apart from strictly cultural, tourism across the region may be archaeological, culinary, ecological, and religious monuments. In each of these fields, every country has specific experience and assets (in terms of heritage, fauna, environment, etc.) to offer customers who would be eager to move across different CA countries in order to satisfy their curiosity about the region. Accordingly, coordinated regional tours would be in greater demand.

Practitioners agree that similar regional packages will **create win-win situations** since each country is bearer of particular touristic niches that will concur with offers of its neighbors. As an example, Uzbekistan mainly offers heritage tourism, Kazakhstan ethnographic, Kyrgyzstan nature and resorts, and Tajikistan mountain eco-tourism.

In addition, a strong and comprehensive regional offer will help more disadvantaged countries. For example, **Tajikistan** which is currently marginal in the tourists’ choices because of lack of availability of destination information and low demand from clients. The proposed framework of regional itineraries could provide great advantages better promoting the country’s assets as a destination¹¹.

This work of mapping and coordination of regional tourism should share the perspective of **sustainability**, caring at the protection and conservation of natural and cultural heritage. While singling out several particular sites of the region and valleys presenting unique features, the concern should be on how to preserve these localities from the impact of a sudden opening up to the external world. Given regional tourism is still taking form, there will be many opportunities for the CA countries to benefit from international experience and best-practices of sustainable and resilient tourism.

¹¹ Dall'Olio A., “Tourism in Tajikistan as Seen by Tour Operators”, Washington, D.C.: World Bank Group, 2019;

This way the sector could avoid the damages that massive, unplanned tourism exploitation might entail. A regional framework would maximize these advantages. Combination of sustainable development and multilateral cooperation, according to the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) framework will meet expectations and attract financing from international donors promoting regional development. Indeed, the proposed tourism cooperation can result job creation in participating countries and contribute to poverty reduction goals¹².

In addition, regional coordination can provide more reliable **statistics** concerning the scale and the trends of flows of tourism in the region. Even if CA countries adopted the UNWTO methodology of tourist definition, as reported by Leonid Ibragimov and several other tour operators in Uzbekistan, it seems some data may be inaccurate.¹³

Despite the attractiveness and potential benefits of an open and integrated space of tourism for Central Asia, there is an **issue of potential concern** that should be highlighted as well. One of the drivers of increased regional tourist connectivity are **religious related travels**, the so called *ziyorat* (pilgrim) tourism. This concerns Uzbekistan in particular, whose territory hosts important Islamic religious centers which have previously been difficult to access for pilgrims. Since Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan applied more relaxed religious attitudes, potentially radical groups have developed in those countries who may now attempt to reach out to like-minded persons in Uzbekistan. In Central Asia, this situation is compounded by threats of drug trafficking and terrorism that tend to interact with the underground of religious extremism. From this perspective, the channels opened by the “Silk visa” may well become a way of penetration of extremist and/or criminal elements, which are already using the increased possibilities of free movement throughout the region to reinforce their networks. So far the strong security forces of CA countries have managed this well.

This religious dimension should be considered when designing the outlook of the CA Silk Road tourism. The same problem concerns the plan to include China, Turkey, Iran and other countries into transnational tours. This would create a contradiction with the legal

regime of the CIS and, for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), where there is a common visa-free space.¹⁴

These issues will put state Tourism bodies in tension with responsible for security and law enforcement versus the idea of regional tourism coordination, creating potential obstacles to practical implementation. At the same time a hands-on answer, can be increased parallel cooperation between security agencies of five countries in view of managing increased tourism flows.

Conclusion

The elements provided in this short overview of the potential for a regional approach to tourism development in Central Asia testify how positive perspectives of tourism are gaining momentum.

At the Consultative Summit of the Central Asian Republics, President Mirzoyev singled out tourism as one of the most promising areas of cooperation of the countries stressing the need to form a single, recognizable tourism brand of Central Asia.¹⁵

At the same time, a regional approach to tourism development has more than economic implications. Legal cooperation will allow the successful implementation of a joint visa program and other regional solutions packages for tourism among four Central Asian countries. This will not only increase the inflow of tourists, but also strengthen new collaboration within the region. In perspective, this may also exert a positive effect on the Turkmen authorities suggesting a revision of the policy of self-isolation followed so far.

Further contribution to regional stability will stem from the improvement of touristic revenues for more disadvantaged states as Tajikistan which will address poverty that feeds extremism.

The proposed solutions can indeed improve the life of local communities by way of amelioration of their internal and transborder connections after years of disregard because of past national-oriented schemes of development. Such kind of impact will be maximum if regional tourism management shapes the **idea of a historical common regional space**, transcending sometimes narrow narratives of national historiographies.

¹² Asian Development Bank, “Sustainable Tourism Development in the Central Asia Regional Economic Cooperation Region: Technical Assistance Report”, August 2019. <https://adb.org/projects/documents/reg-53148-001-tar>

¹³ The high number of relatives visiting across borders are often counted as tourists even if their travels have little economic effect on hosting communities.

¹⁴ Shustov A., “Naskol'ko realen analog Shengena dlya stran Shelkovogo puti?”, *Ritm Eurasia* 29.07.2019

<https://ritmeurasia.org/news--2019-07-29--naskolko-realen-analog-shengena-dlja-stran-shelkovogo-puti-44041>

¹⁵ “V Tashkente prokhodit vtoraya Konsul'tativnaya vstrecha glav gosudarstv Tsentral'noy Azii”, *Uz24.uz*, 29.11.2019, <https://uz24.uz/ru/politics/v-tashkente-prohodit-vtoraya-konsulyativnaya-vstrecha-glav-gosudarstv-centralnoy-azii>

By this way, regional tourism coordination will **contribute to long-term aspirations of regional integration** which will attract international support to the extent it will be responsible according to the UN SDGs and promote stronger faith on the part of foreign investors.

To start to develop this huge potential we must begin to work on the creation of “connected” stories, raising the profile of the region and fostering positive elements of change implicit in regional coordination.

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