

Positive Outcomes of Cross-Border Tourism Development Cooperation: A Case of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan

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Abstract. The development of cross-border tourism between neighboring countries has become increasingly popular in recent decades. In European countries where the visa-free regime is established, this scheme is well developed and positively affects the development of the country's economy. Developing cross-border areas and establishing cross-border cooperation with neighboring countries is one of the priorities of Central Asian state policy. In the last ten years, several large-scale cross-border platforms aimed at developing tourism have been implemented among the more developed countries (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan) in Central Asia, so our study was based on the border regions of the three countries mentioned above. The study aims to highlight the benefits of cooperation in cross-border tourism by examining the experiences and expectations of experts who are well-versed in the field of tourism. A qualitative research method was mainly used in semi-structured interviews focused on the positive results associated with the development of cross-border tourism among people familiar with the region's tourism. The analysis showed that according to the informants, the development of cross-border tourism has a moderate impact on the joint development of infrastructure projects by countries. The results also showed that all of the survey participants believed that cross-border tourism would provide an impetus to strengthen joint tourism marketing and the exchange of knowledge and innovation between countries. In short, it can be seen from the results of the research that the respondents generally highly appreciated the positive influence of the development of cross-border tourism on the growth of the country's economy.

Key words: cross-border tourism; cooperation; advantages; Kazakhstan; Kyrgyzstan; Uzbekistan; Central Asia

1 Introduction

Cross-border partnerships are a unique type of organizational cooperation that is geographically anchored in the borderlands of two or more countries. One of the main advantages of cross-border project cooperation is that the project partners can test technology and socio-economical techniques in various settings by cooperating across



Source: authors' own work

Figure 1: Popular tourist attractions along the borders of KZ, KG and UZ

national boundaries (Castanho et al. 2018). In cross-border areas, formal and informal, bilateral or networked cooperation of various actors in the cross-border market may develop, including non-governmental organizations such as local governments, associations, clubs, foundations, etc. (Kurowska-Pysz, Szczepańska-Woszczyna 2017). Cooperation across borders helps to lessen the negative effects of state borders and the areas around border areas, thereby enhancing the socioeconomic standing of the local community (Dunets et al. 2019). Tourism frequently serves as a strategic policy instrument in borderlands to enhance local perceptions, sculpt identity narratives, and promote cross-border contacts (Stoffelen, Vanneste 2017). According to Prokkola (2011), through functional (institutional-infrastructure) and imaginary (socio-cultural, identity-creating) consequences, tourism projects can promote cross-border regionalization processes, altering border landscapes and contextualizing chances for regional development.

1.1 Importance of the study

Although Central Asian countries have been active in developing the tourism industry, the percentages of the tourism industry to the GDP in the Central Asian countries are about 5% on average. The competitiveness of tourism is low compared to some developing Asian countries. In the Central Asian countries, the challenges in promoting the tourism sector are effective utilization of tourism resources, planning and implementation of marketing strategies, infrastructure development related to tourism, and securing employment opportunities through human resource development for the younger generation. Based on the above background, this survey will collect detailed information on the current status of the tourism sector in three countries in Central Asia and summarize the current situation and issues related to the sustainable development of tourism and related industries. Furthermore, taking into account the great role of tourism in the implementation of sustainable development, it is undeniable that the study of the impact of cross-border cooperation in the field of tourism on economic development is a relevant topic.

Let's briefly explain why the border regions of 3 states in Central Asia were chosen for our research topic: firstly, the political climate of the 3 mentioned countries is stable, as well as friendship and cooperation between countries are deep; secondly, the socioeconomic situation of countries is improving every year; the last and most important factor is that the 3 countries are very rich in cultural and natural tourism resources, and most of these resources are concentrated in the border regions between them and complement each other. For example, as you can see in Figure 1, most of the famous tourist destinations included in the world heritage list are located near the common borders of the three countries.

2 Literature Review and Research Hypotheses

One of the fastest growing industries in the world is tourism, which not only helps many developing countries, but also some industrialized countries to progress economically and socially. The benefits of tourism development are defined as creating jobs, strengthening the local economy, contributing to local infrastructure development, helping to conserve the natural environment, cultural assets, traditions and reduce poverty and inequality (Ridho, Alisa 2020). Furthermore, because of its substantial functions as a source of foreign exchange earnings, the generation of employment opportunities and an important source of public income in many countries, tourism has drawn a lot of attention in the literature on economic growth (Ertugrul, Mangir 2015). In addition, by fostering cultural and experiential exchanges between source and origin nations, tourism increases social capital. Finally, due to initiatives in green tourism, the travel and tourist industry may also play a significant role in promoting the preservation of the environment and species (Shahzad et al. 2017). The tourism-led growth (TLG) hypothesis has emerged as a result of the favourable and interdependent effects of tourism development on the economy (Balaguer, Cantavella-Jorda 2002). This hypothesis holds that one of the key factors influencing long-term economic growth is tourism. Therefore, it is essential for governments to determine the empirical viability of the TLG hypothesis in a nation in order to allocate resources to tourism development as efficiently as possible and so to reap the numerous benefits that follow (Shahzad et al. 2017). If tourism is indeed an important means of redistributing consumption potential between economies and thus plays a major role in determining local or regional GDP, then it is important to know in which direction this redistribution takes place by choosing a tourist destination (Tubadji, Nijkamp 2018).

Tourism, together with labour migration, was noted as a source for the B-S effect by Samuelson (1964). In addition to classifying tourism as a special category of location-specific services, Samuelson recognises that labour migration and tourism are the two main factors in the relocation of consumption potential. In our contemporary society, when individuals are more mobile, we see rising tourism and falling transportation costs, which helps to highlight the immense significance and potential of tourism for counterbalancing the B-S hypothesis (Tubadji, Nijkamp 2018). A sector such as tourism, which accounts for about 3% of the GDP of most economies, needs to be given a lot of attention (Aslan 2015, Kumar 2014, Kumar, Stauvermann 2016, Perez-Rodríguez et al. 2015). Outbound (or foreign) tourism can be seen as a method for shifting the capacity for consumption across nations. Additionally, recent research has demonstrated that tourism has a positive impact on international trade as well as economic expansion (Cortes-Jimenez et al. 2011, Fry et al. 2010). These facts serve as compelling evidence that the relationship between tourism, the trading sector, and socioeconomic development in a nation should not be disregarded. Since tourists make purchases in local markets, it is natural to assume that tourism has an impact on receiving countries.

2.1 Benefits of Cooperation in Cross-border Tourism

Tourism-related cross-border collaboration is a key driver of regional growth. Joint cross-border tourism cooperation has always many benefits and positive results. These include joint development of infrastructure, strengthening of regional identity and marketing, improving regional economies, and promoting innovation and knowledge transfer (Hartmann 2006, Park 2014, Timothy 2002, Timothy et al. 2014, Weidenfeld 2013). It is clear that there is a connection between borders and tourism, different levels of cross-border cooperation, and complex network destinations and attractions in border areas (Skäremo 2016).

The tourism industry can be attributed to certain parts of the improved relations in the world. Some people think it can be used as a means to develop local infrastructure (Timothy 2002). In particular, tourism between border areas has the potential to increase cooperation across political borders and preserve the surrounding natural landscape. These changes are due to the increased demand for additional border crossings, border demarcations, and border-related services provided by the tourism industry in an area

(Timothy et al. 2014). Effective and well-functioning infrastructure is very important to the tourism industry. With the internationalization of infrastructure construction in border areas, the quality of transportation can meet the needs of tourists. Cross-border cooperation and networking related to infrastructure development can reduce the expensive and possibly unnecessary duplication of facilities and services frequently used by tourists such as airports, hotels, and shopping centers (Timothy 2002). Therefore, through cross-border cooperation, it is possible to effectively use the infrastructure and services related to tourism.

Effective marketing and enhanced regional identity are one of the advantages of cross-border tourism development (Skäremo 2016). The Boundaries dividing countries sometimes turn into historical sites or natural attractions. Cooperation in the field of cross-border tourism can be understood as an important force in changing the function of borders. The appearance of transnational identities is the result of increased mobility in border areas and deeper cross-border partnerships (Prokkola et al. 2015). In order to enter a broad market, an international reputation is highly valued in the tourism industry. Therefore, the promotion and marketing work of multinational companies in border areas is particularly important (Skäremo 2016). Through cooperation in marketing, there will be greater opportunities to increase the tourism potential of the entire region and bring greater benefits to stakeholders (Timothy 2002).

Cooperation in the field of cross-border tourism can be a catalyst for innovation and knowledge exchange. Regions have become important for the creation and transfer of knowledge, which is due to the globalization of the economic order, as well as the growth of knowledge and a creativity-based economy (Skäremo 2016). The cluster of actors and organizations in the border areas is particularly important because they can facilitate the flow of knowledge across borders. The benefits of engaging in innovative clusters can lead to access to knowledge and learning processes that are difficult to obtain in the marketplace (Park 2014). Maintaining the competitiveness of the region is important in the world market (Hartmann 2006), and public regional participants involved in the development of tourism may benefit greatly from participating in a wide range of cooperation across national borders. Thus, they will gain new valuable knowledge and have great opportunities to increase the tourist potential of the region (Skäremo 2016).

Other results of the further development of cross-border tourism in border areas may include a general increase in cross-border travel and social changes (Skäremo 2016). Improving the regional economy and creating employment opportunities is another benefits of tourism in border areas (Skäremo 2016). Tourism is usually a method to get hard currency, and it may improve the balance of payments. Therefore, it has become an integral part of economic transformation (Timothy 2002). As a result of the development of tourism, socio-economic growth has become a powerful tool for changing the shape of nation-states by modifying borders and territorial exchanges (Timothy et al. 2014). Creating new jobs, improving living standards, increasing regional incomes and establishing efficient governance are additional benefits of cross-border tourism cooperation (Timothy 2002). Therefore, the development of cooperation in the field of cross-border tourism plays an important role in the social and regional development of border areas. Tourism is not the main driving force for changing border functions in some areas. However, subsequent changes in border procedures and the function of border tourism often become important users of border territories (Timothy et al. 2014). Sometimes tourism is seen as a symbol of freedom because it allows citizens to travel freely, and by allowing and encouraging closer interaction between tourists and host communities, it can also serve as a catalyst for social change (Timothy 2002). Consequently, the development of cross-border tourism can lead to the efficient use of border areas and to strengthen the interaction between tourists and the region as a means of allowing and encouraging citizens to travel across borders (Skäremo 2016).

Our study seeks to update and expand previous studies by Skäremo (2016), focusing on benefits of cross-border tourism development in the Öresund Region, evaluating the advantages and challenges associated with collaborations between neighboring countries with a perspective on visitors and private entrepreneurs in border regions. The above-mentioned research has been proven among countries with advanced management

systems, developed economies and high education levels of the population, while our study area is a region with an imperfect management system, low level of economic development, and a relatively low average level of education of the population. Therefore, in order to increase the accuracy of the research results, we selected the survey participants in our research from among the qualified specialists who know the industry well.

Thus, the main purpose of this study is to evaluate the positive effects of the development of cross-border tourism between countries on the example of the border areas. In order to meet the objectives, a set of research hypotheses was formulated that relate the benefits of cross-border tourism development cooperation between neighboring countries with potential explanatory variables usually referred to in the empirical literature, and which we will now present:

Hypothesis 1 : Cooperation in the development of cross-border tourism has a positive impact on the joint development of infrastructures.

Hypothesis 2 : Cooperation in the development of cross-border tourism has a positive impact on the strengthening of joint tourism product marketing.

Hypothesis 3 : Cooperation in the development of cross-border tourism has a positive impact on the improvement of innovative and knowledge exchanges.

3 Study Area Overview

3.1 Study area description

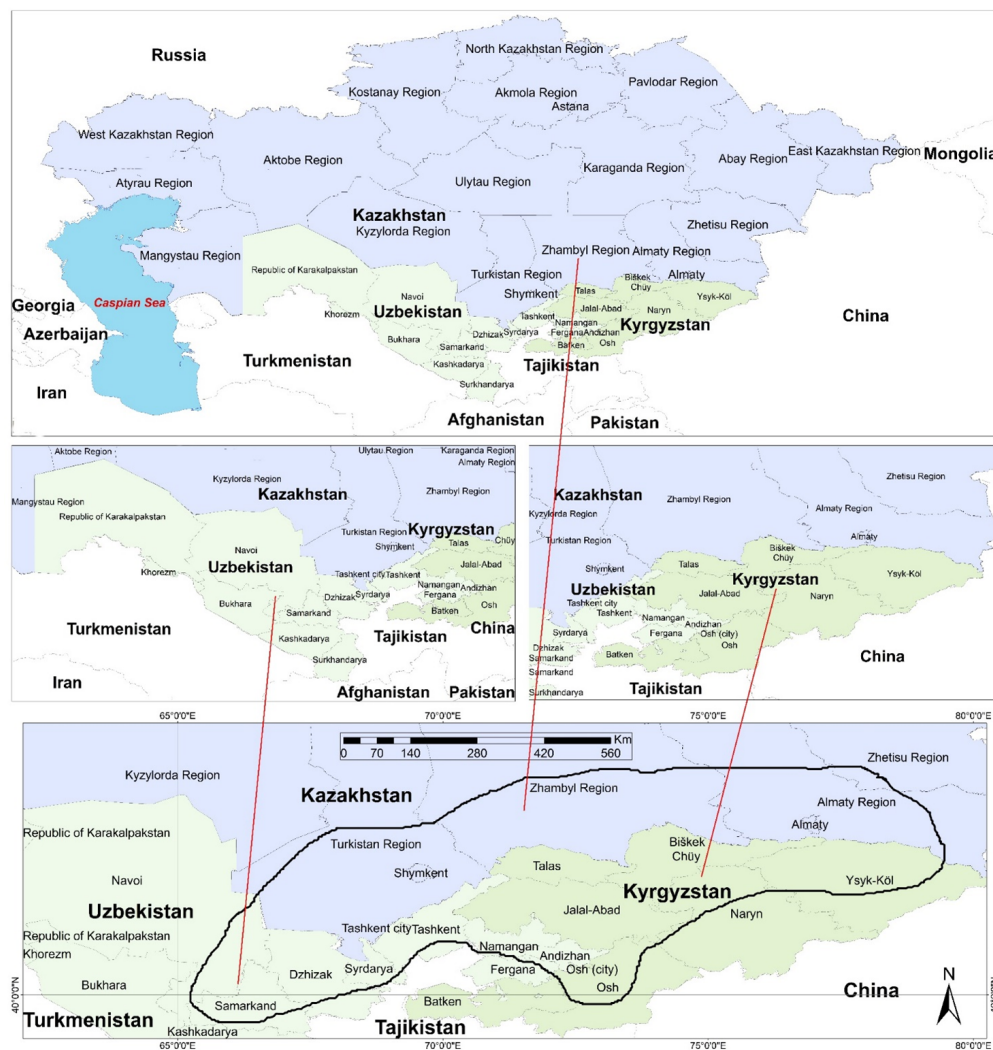
Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are separated by the beautiful Tien-Shan mountain range, and these regions were the intersection of nomadism and ancient settlement. Therefore, these regions, often rich in recreational, cultural and natural resources, offer great potential for sustainable tourism development. Leading Central Asian nations Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan have collaborated in the area of cross-border tourism for both of their mutual benefits. (Sergeyeva et al. 2022).

Kazakhstan (KZ) is the largest country in Central Asia and the ninth largest in the world. It is bounded on the northwest and north by Russia, on the east by China, and on the south by Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, the Aral Sea, and Turkmenistan; the Caspian Sea bounds KZ to the southwest. Law on Tourism in KZ was enacted in 2001 and has undergone multiple amendments. The most recent amendment was made in April 2020, and the law is shifting from a state-led tourism law for the management of tourists to one that stipulates the role of the state in guaranteeing and regulating the activities of private travel agencies.

Kyrgyzstan (KG) is one of the smallest countries of Central Asia. It is bounded by KZ on the northwest and north, by China on the east and south, and by Tajikistan and Uzbekistan on the south and west. Most of KG borders run along mountain crests. According to the National Development Strategy of the KG for 2018 - 2040, the tourism sector is one of the priority sectors, along with mining, agroindustry, and light industry. The tourism sector is positioned as a priority development sector with mining, agroindustry, and light industry.

Uzbekistan (UZ) lies mainly between two major rivers, the Syr Darya (ancient Jaxartes River) to the northeast and the Amu Darya (ancient Oxus River) to the southwest, though they only partly form its boundaries. UZ is bordered by KZ to the northwest and north, KG and Tajikistan to the east and southeast, Afghanistan to the south, and Turkmenistan to the southwest. In July 2019, a new Tourism Law was enacted, replacing the old Tourism Law enacted in 1999. While the old Tourism Law was state-centric, focusing on managing tourists with an emphasis on national security, the new Tourism Law sets rules for implementing tourism as an economic activity focusing on tourists and tourism businesses. In addition, the new Tourism Law refers to the terminology used abroad and in the UNWTO to ensure that it is in line with international standards.

The three above mentioned Central Asian countries (KZ, KG and UZ) have experienced economic growth of between 4% and 6% from 2010 to 2019. Despite high rates of economic growth in recent years, GDP per capita in Central Asia was higher than



Source: authors' own work

Figure 2: Border regions between KZ, KG and UZ







the average for developing countries only in KZ in 2013 (PPP\$23,206). It dropped to PPP\$5,167 for UZ, home to 45% of the region's population, and was even lower for KG (Mukhitdinova 2015). GDP per capita in 2019 is 7,830 US dollars for KZ, where oil and natural gas are exported, 1,323 US dollars for the KG, and 1,725 US dollars for UZ (JICA 2022). KZ leads the Central Asian region in terms of foreign direct investments. The Kazakh economy accounts for more than 70% of all the investment attracted in Central Asia. In terms of the economic influence of big powers, China is viewed as one of the key economic players in Central Asia, especially after Beijing launched its grand development strategy known as the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) in 2013 (Cheung, Hong 2018).

3.2 The Basis for Developing Cross-border Tourism between KZ, KG and UZ

The history of traveling between KZ, KG and UZ has seen considerable variations. Until the 1990s, when it was part of the Soviet Union, people in present-day KZ, KG, and UZ did not have strict border restrictions, and moved freely between the republics. After the end of the Soviet era, border crossings were tightly controlled and population movements began to decline. However, with the end of the crisis in the countries and the rapid development of the market economy, the movement of the population between the three countries to trade, travel and visit for relatives and friends was revived.

After the end of the crisis in 2009, the three neighbouring countries began to diversify

Table 1: The visitor numbers between KZ, KG and UZ from 2014 to 2018

Kazakhstan	▲ 2018	▲ 2017	▲ 2016	▲ 2015	2014
(All foreign visitors)	(8,789,314)	(7,701,196)	(6,509,390)	(6,430,158)	(6,332,734)
 Uzbekistan	▲ 4,351,413	▲ 3,344,577	▲ 2,459,757	▲ 2,297,180	2,107,177
 Kyrgyzstan	▲ 1,327,877	▼ 1,273,378	▼ 1,348,709	▲ 1,359,625	1,308,139
Total	▲ 5,679,290	▲ 4,617,955	▲ 3,808,466	▲ 3,656,805	3,415,316
Kyrgyzstan	▲ 2018	▲ 2017	▼ 2016	▲ 2015	2014
(All foreign visitors)	(6,946,531)	(4,567,370)	(3,853,385)	(4,000,558)	(3,790,849)
 Kazakhstan	▲ 2,675,523	▲ 2,759,415	▼ 2,578,320	▼ 2,841,487	2,854,972
 Uzbekistan	▲ 3,295,804	▲ 694,131	▲ 348,792	▲ 244,802	179,926
Total	▲ 5,971,327	▲ 3,453,546	▼ 2,927,112	▲ 3,086,289	3,034,898
Uzbekistan	▲ 2018	▲ 2017	▲ 2016	▲ 2015	2014
(All foreign visitors)	(5,346,219)	(2,690,074)	(2,027,034)	(1,917,714)	(1,861,961)
 Kazakhstan	▲ 2,293,077	▲ 1,752,238	▲ 1,384,220	▲ 1,250,812	1,142,865
 Kyrgyzstan	▲ 1,055,688	▲ 366,053	▲ 168,128	▲ 139,790	114,296
Total	▲ 3,348,765	▲ 2,118,291	▲ 1,552,348	▲ 1,390,602	1,257,161

Data sources: Yearbook of Tourism Statistics 2020 Edition, UNWTO (WTO 2020).

their economies and attract foreign investment to prosper their motherlands. Due to the fact that all three countries are rich in tourist resources, the development of tourism has become one of the priorities of the economy during this period. However, due to the fact that UZ has been pursuing a closed policy until recently, compared to KZ and KG, UZ lags behind in the development of cross-border tourism. A new milestone was 2018 when the borders of UZ were reopened for travellers. Since then tourist flows between KZ, KG and UZ have been growing.

The statistics take into account the total number of visitors, including travellers for work and business purposes, for seeing friends and relatives, as well as for leisure. If we analyse the number of visitors to KZ for the recent 5 years (2014-2018) from neighbouring UZ and KG, the number of visitors from UZ accounts for the vast majority of visitors to KZ, about a third in 2014, growing every year. By 2018 it reached 4,351,413 people, accounting for about half of all foreign visitors, an increase of more than 2 million people compared to 2014. As for the number of visitors from KG, during these 5 years, the number of visitors was not changed much, fluctuating around 1,300,000 people. While the number of visitors increased slightly in the first two years, the number of visitors decreased in the following two years. The highest number was in 2015, with 1,359,625 people. The lowest number was in 2017, with 1,273,378 people (Table 1).

Table 1 showed that according to the number of visitors to the KG from KZ and UZ, the number of visitors from KZ accounts for about 70% of all foreign visitors in 2014, and about more than 2.5 million Kazakhstani visit KG every year. The highest number of visitors was observed in 2014, with 2,854,972 people and the number of visitors decreased in the following 2 years. The lowest number of visitors was seen in 2016, with 2,578,320 people. The number of visitors from UZ to KG was not very high between 2014 and 2017. It gradually grew up year by year during the beginning 3 years' period. However, in 2018 the number of visitors increased incredibly, reached to 3,295,804 people. The lowest number of visitors was seen in 2014, with 179,926 people.

Table 1 also indicated that the number of visitors to UZ from KZ and KG has been growing every year from 2014 to 2018. The number of visitors from KZ remain more than a million during the beginning 4 years' period, accounting for more than half of the total number of foreign visitors to UZ. In 2018 the number of Kazakhstani tourists was the highest, with 2,293,077 people. The number of visitors from KG has been growing steadily in the beginning 4 years' period. In 2018 it increased from 114,296 people in 2014 to 1,055,688 people. The proportion of visitors from KG to UZ in the beginning 3 years accounted for about less than 10% of the total number of foreign visitors to UZ, but in 2018 this proportion increased about 2 times more. Although the number of mutual travelers between KG and UZ is not significant, the number of people traveling from KZ to KG and UZ is more than half of the total number of overseas travelers to those countries.

South Kazakhstan Region - City Almaty	10 members of the Department of Recreational Geography and Tourism - Al-Farabi Kazakh National University
North Kyrgyzstan Region - City Bishkek	6 members of the Department of Tourism and Recreational Geography - Kyrgyz National University named after Jusup Balasagyn
East Uzbekistan Region - City Tashkent	7 members of the Department of Economic and Social Geography - National University of Uzbekistan named after Mirzo Ulugbek

Figure 3: Approach for targeting the respondents

4 Data and Methodology

4.1 Data collection and methodology

To demonstrate the relevance of the chosen topic, we issued our questionnaire survey questions to the citizens of the three neighbouring countries in Central Asia, which have great potential naturally and culturally in the development of cross-border tourism, in December 2022. Considering the research work focused on the study of cross-border tourism, the majority of respondents were from the tourism sector. Initially, three in-depth open structured interviews were conducted with 28 key informants in the tourism sector. They are mainly Tourism Researchers, Tourism and Event Coordinators, Destination Developers and Project Advisor. The questionnaire was sent to the e-mails of the respondents after getting their consent by contacting the participants through acquaintances. It took about 10 days to collect the survey questions, which were completed by all participants. The survey questions were conducted by the authors of the article in Kazakh, Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Russian languages. After receiving the answers, the authors immediately translated them into English and analysed them. After the fully completed versions of the research questions were received from the respondents, a debriefing meeting was held with all authors to select the qualified answers. As a result, 23 out of 28 answers were left. Other tourism studies have used a similar multi-stage interview structure (Fan et al. 2015, Hampton et al. 2018, McCamley, Gilmore 2017, Shircliff 2018). The quotations in the analysis and discussion section represent the respondents' views on the positive effects of cross-border tourism development. To ensure confidentiality, participants were identified using an internal numerical code.

4.2 Sampling strategy and targeted respondents

The sampling strategy was to find and contact independent researchers who are already contributing to tourism development. This means selecting researchers working in higher educational institutions with knowledge of tourism development in the Central Asian region. It would be best to select informants that are representative of all shared border areas of the entire region, as it would provide views from both small border towns and large cities. However, this would be an overwhelming task considering the magnitude of the region and limited resources such as funds and time. The initial plan was to contact each of the tourism researchers in higher education institutions in all major cities near the border crossings points between the three countries. This would provide different perspectives of the respondents partly working on the development of cross-border tourism in the region.

After beginning the process of contacting organization members in border cities, it became clear that adjustments needed to be made regarding the target respondents. Since the vast majority of people with higher education about tourism in other cities near the border are graduates of the three large educational institutions that we selected, it was necessary to select only participants with responsibility and extensive experience in tourism development. Not all members of the three selected organizations were interested

Table 2: Details of respondents interviewed ($n = 23$)

Characteristics	Frequency	Percentage
<i>Gender:</i>		
Male	15	65.2
Female	8	34.8
<i>Citizenship:</i>		
Kazakhstan citizen	10	43.5
Kyrgyzstan citizen	6	26.1
Uzbekistan citizen	7	30.4
<i>Age category:</i>		
Young (18–34)	12	52.2
Middle age (35–54)	7	30.4
Elder (≥ 55)	4	17.4
<i>Education:</i>		
Middle (school or college)	7	30.4
High (university or above)	16	69.6
<i>Positions:</i>		
Tourism Researcher	7	30.4
Tour and Event Coordinator	7	30.4
Destination Developer	6	26.1
Project Advisor	3	13.1
Average years at position		5
Average total years in tourism		9

in participating in the survey. However, as shown in Figure 3, a total of 28 members agreed to participate, and they were employees of higher educational institutions in Almaty (KZ), Bishkek (KG) and Tashkent (UZ). Figure 3 shows the details of the target survey participants used in this study.

4.3 Sample Characteristics

Table 2 shows that the majority of respondents were male (65.2%), and nearly half of the respondents were citizens of Kazakhstan (43.5%), while Kyrgyzstan citizens and Uzbekistan citizens were 26.1% and 30.4%, respectively. The highest proportion of respondents was aged 18–34 (52.2%), followed by 35–54 years old, accounting for 30.4% and the lowest proportion of informants was the elder group, aged above 55 (17.4%). The proportion of informants who have attended university or above educational institutions (considered as high-level education) accounts for the largest number (69.6%) and only 30.4% were those who have received middle education (including school or college).

As shown in Table 2, the number of Tourism Researchers and Tour and Event Coordinator from the survey participants is the same, with 30.4%. The next place is occupied by Destination Developer, who holds about a quarter of the participants (26.1%), followed by Project Advisor who ranked last place, accounting for 26.7%. As far as average years at position is concerned, the term of the informants in their current work is 5 years. Concerning the average total years in tourism, the average period of their work in the field of tourism is 9 years (Table 2).

5 Results and Discussion

The “geographical transboundary structures” are of particular importance for international cooperation (Dunets et al. 2019). The historical background of cross-border cooperation between neighbouring countries is related to the peculiarities of the natural and cultural conditions of each country, which affects the formation of cultural and economic activities in the region. Central Asian states have some important overall characteristics.

For one, Central Asia historically has been closely tied to its nomadic peoples and the Silk Road. As a result, it has functioned as a crossroads for the movement of people, goods, and ideas between Europe, West Asia, South Asia, and East Asia. It is also sometimes known as Middle Asia or Inner Asia, Falls with the scope of the wider Eurasian continent (Qi, Evered 2008). The authors will discuss the benefits of cross-border tourism cooperation between KZ, KG, and UZ, which are located in the middle of four large countries (Russia, China, India and Iran) with large populations and comparatively developed economies. And the region is the main part of Central Asian countries, which is also the most developed place for tourism.

There are often a number of positive outcomes associated with tourism collaborations in border regions. These are usually improved infrastructure and a way to handle expensive investments as the region can share facilities, strengthened regional identity, creation of jobs, effective marketing, and knowledge transfer and innovations (Park 2014, Timothy 2002, Timothy et al. 2014). Many of these advantages of cross-border tourism collaborations were recognized by the informants in the studied region. And next, to achieve our research objective, we will discuss the following three topics that show the positive effects of cross-border tourism based on the respondents' opinions.

5.1 Development of Infrastructure

In 2011, the Asian Development Bank (ADB) and the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD) provided parallel co-financing for the Almaty-Bishkek road rehabilitation project to restore the 245 km area between Almaty and Bishkek highway (Asian Development Bank 2008). The regional road rehabilitation project between Almaty and Bishkek will give an additional impetus to the development of the economies, services sectors and tourism industries of the border territories and facilitate the development of these regions on the whole. Almaty-Bishkek Economic Corridor Tourism Master Plan was created by Asian Development Bank in December 2019. In Central West Asia, the area between Almaty in KZ and Bishkek in KG is home to exceptional heritage and a wealth of cultural and natural assets. The tourism potential is immense, but remains largely untapped. This tourism master plan provides a framework for developing the Almaty-Bishkek Economic Corridor (ABEC) into an international-quality destination. It identifies key investment priorities such as developing ski resorts along the mountain range between Almaty and Issyk-Kul and linking these winter sport facilities with summer tourism opportunities. It also proposes transport infrastructure improvements, including enhancing Almaty International Airport as the major gateway to the region (Asian Development Bank 2019). Bilateral cooperation in designing multi-destination travel in a whole may meet the needs of tourists and more efficient and effective travel needs, but such cooperation may also lead to the development and management of tourism in neighbouring countries in a more sustainable manner (Tosun et al. 2005). Upgrading the tourism infrastructure to accommodate the more demanding categories of tourists is something that the tourism departments of these countries can make money together. In order to assess the positive impact of cooperation in the development of cross-border tourism between the three selected countries on the development of infrastructures in-depth, we asked the survey participants the following question:

How to describe the positive impact of cooperation in the development of cross-border tourism between the three countries on the joint development of infrastructures? (The tourist infrastructures mainly include roads, railways, airports, water supply, sewage networks, electricity networks and broadband internet connection).

A number of neighboring developed countries in the world are jointly developing the construction of border crossings and the infrastructure of cities and villages near the borders to ensure the comfort of guests coming to their countries (Deutschmann et al. 2023). For example, Chinavia is another large scale project focusing on the Chinese market and to attract Chinese tourists to visit Scandinavia. It is an important and interesting project for the region as it is very much driven by Wonderful Copenhagen

(Skäremo 2016). And if we look at the countries of Central Asia, according to the survey participants, the number of jointly developed infrastructure projects is not much. As they said states are often limited to joint development of customs infrastructures. They also mentioned that as we have seen, in the last ten years, in order to increase the relations between the three mentioned countries, many old infrastructures have been modernized and the number of border crossings has been increased to meet the growing demand. One participant from Uzbekistan said that, due to the increase in the number of border crossings, he does not have to wait in line for hours to cross the border when going to Kazakhstan now:

Informant UZ 5: The border crossings between KZ and UZ have been rebuilt and modernized, these positive changes will facilitate the fast travel of passengers. ... I would say generally this is a reflection of the fact that the governments of KZ and UZ opened the way for the rapid development of cross-border tourism between the countries.

At the same time, one Kazakh survey participants expressed their feelings and views on infrastructure development under the influence of cross-border tourism development cooperation. He told us about the convenience of people' movement between the countries:

Informant KZ 2: I was born in the border region of Kazakhstan with Uzbekistan, and what I saw in the past was that millions of Uzbek travelers used to come to Kazakhstan every summer for various purposes, and queued up for several days at the border crossings. ... Over the past 10 years, since the two countries agreed to renovate and rehabilitate several previously closed border crossings in order to make it more convenient for cross-border travelers, the time it takes travelers to cross the border has decreased.

If we take into account that tourism is one of the important sources of income of the countries of Central Asia, especially the people of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, the renewal of the road construction between the three countries is aimed at increasing the number of tourists between the countries. According to survey participants, the governments of these three countries have promised to improve the quality of highways and increase the number of bus stations between large cities near the border in order to reduce obstacles that slow down the flow of passengers. Two Uzbek survey participants spoke about the convenience of the modernization of the car roads between countries:

Informant UZ 2: The 200-km road between Tashkent (UZ) and Shymkent (KZ) used to take four hours for passengers, but since the construction of the road was made at a modern level, the time it takes passengers to travel has been reduced by 2 times. ...

Informant UZ 4: Thanks to the construction of high quality highways between countries, the number of tourists between the three neighboring countries has increased many times because they can travel by private vehicles, so they don't have to spend money on tickets for buses or airplanes, and they don't have to depend on anyone in terms of time.

Similar to the above, another two Kazakh participants stated the benefits of the West Europe-West China highway, which passes along the borders between KZ, KG and UZ through the Southern part of KZ, plays an important role in traveling by car between these countries. They say that the construction of this road is one of the good results of the cross-border tourism development project between the countries:

Informant KZ 6: Due to the start of this Chinese project, the Central Asian countries have modernized the transport routes to their territories in order to increase the flow of tourists between the countries, it in turn increased the movement of people between Central Asian cities along the route. ... I believe that the construction of this expressway is not only a gateway to KG and UZ, but also a passage for Chinese, Russian and even Europe tourists to Central Asian countries.

Many participants agree that the infrastructure of important tourist destinations is improving due to the increase of foreign visitors to the countries, especially that each country is paying more attention to the development of tourist destinations near country borders. For example, two of Kyrgyz participants stated that along with the development of cross-border tourism, the infrastructure in Issyk-Kul, a popular tourist destination of Kyrgyzstan, has been developed:

Informant KG 1: Due to the rapid development of cross-border tourism between countries, many infrastructures in the Issyk-Kul region of our country have been renewed and modernized. . . . As the general public knows, the highway between the capital of Kyrgyzstan and the lakeside tourist town of Sholpan-ata was built with high quality.

Informant KG 4: Because of the large number of vacationers coming from KZ, a charter flight from Almaty to Issyk-Kul was opened in the summer months of 2019, therefore the construction of the airport on the shore of Issyk-Kul was modernized and expanded. . . . You know that on the one hand, expanding airport construction leads to a large number of foreign tourists to our place, on the other hand, it offers jobs to the local residents.

One Kazakh survey participant, adding to the above views, noted that one of the significant positive effects of cross-border tourism between the three countries on the development of infrastructure is the modernization of the city of Turkistan in Kazakhstan:

Informant KZ 5: As you know, due to the development of cross-border tourism in Central Asia, the construction of Turkistan City, recognized as the spiritual capital of the Turk people, has been developed by combining the features of the medieval model with the modern model since 2019. . . . The development of tourism in the city accelerated the implementation of many infrastructure projects for the benefit of the city population, for example, many public facilities were built in the city center, new parks were opened, and city roads were renewed.

Usually, with the increase in the flow of tourists between countries, infrastructure has to be shared. For example, developed countries allow developing countries to use their infrastructure free of charge for mutual benefit. One participant from Kazakhstan warned that the neighboring Kyrgyz and Uzbek countries are attracting more tourists to their countries due to the better infrastructure in Kazakhstan:

Informant KZ 7: The most populated cities of KZ, such as Almaty and Shymkent, serve as a great example of how such infrastructure is shared in the border regions of the KG and UZ. . . . As you know, tourists from faraway countries choose Kazakhstan first to visit other countries of Central Asia.

Tourism infrastructure has long been regarded as a component of tourism and is essential to attracting visitors. One of the main elements of attracting tourists is the improvement of tourism infrastructure, which increases the attractiveness of the destination (Nguyen 2021). The infrastructure of a nation affects how desirable it might be as a travel destination (Seetana, Khadaroo 2009). Furthermore, recent studies have shown that tourism infrastructure has a positive impact both directly and indirectly on the quality of life of residents through sustainable tourism development (Mamirkulova et al. 2020). As we can see from the answers of the interviewees above, during the last 10 years, when the cooperation in the field of cross-border tourism between the three countries began to revive, a number of developments took place in infrastructure between the countries. However, most of those changes are limited to the renovation and expansion of the border crossing points. The infrastructures of the cities and villages near the border points that work for the benefit of local residents are very little developed. In conclusion, generally speaking, the infrastructure of the three countries in Central Asia has been improved by the impact of cross-border tourism development between countries, and these positive changes have been said to be working for the comfort of the people. Thus, we can say that hypothesis 1 in our research has been proven.

5.2 Strengthening of Joint Tourism Product Marketing

Tourism product marketing refers to the management process by which national tourism organizations and/or tourism enterprises identify the specific potential of their target tourists and communicate with them to determine and influence their desires, needs, motivations, likes and dislikes. It is believed that cooperation in the implementation and control of tourism marketing management, marketing plans and designed plans can not only create benefits for the participating countries, but also create, establish and maintain mutual benefits for tourists and other stakeholders (Tosun, Parpairis 2001). To better understand the positive impact of cooperation in the development of cross-border tourism between the three selected countries on the strengthening of joint tourism product marketing, we asked the survey participants the following question:

How to describe the positive impact of cooperation in the development of cross-border tourism between the three countries on the strengthening of joint tourism product marketing? (Main tourism products are tourist attractions, accommodation, transportation, travel agencies, shopping centers and restaurants).

Joint marketing and regional identities to attract tourists are considered to be one of the most important outcomes of further cross-border tourism cooperation confirmed by the respondents. Clearly, the advantage lies in reaching distant markets and competing with similar regions in Central Asia. This is of great importance because a strong international identity in the tourism industry is highly valued only when aiming to reach a large market Timothy (2002). Most of the informants from the three countries mentioned that Central Asian states are working together on marketing and regional identities to attract more tourists from nearby markets such as China, India and Europe now:

Informant UZ 1: The three neighboring countries, which previously developed tourism as independent competitors, now feel foreign tourists want to organize trips to the entire Central Asian region under the influence of cross-border tourism cooperation between them, and they gradually began to jointly strengthen tourism product marketing. . . . For example, the cities of Turkistan (KZ), Samarkand (UZ) and Osh (KG) can be considered as a network of pilgrimage tourism in Central Asia (Seen in Figure 1).

Informant KG 5: Taking into account the priority directions of tourism (business tourism in Almaty-KZ, mountain tourism in Karakol-KG and cultural tourism in Samarkand-UZ) established in these three countries, one of the main goals of cooperation in the field of tourism between countries is to create a marketing network of tourism by combining various destinations of Central Asian tourism. . . . such a diverse trip, in turn, gives a good mood to tourists who are tired of monotony, and it would be an inspiration for them to invite others to travel to this region.

Most respondents agree that UZ has a very strong international brand of cultural heritage that represents Central Asia, such as Samarkand, which is often cited as one of the best places to experience ancient culture and the world's oldest historical cities. This advantage makes Uzbekistan a strong attraction in the region for international visitors. However, one survey participant from Kazakhstan stated that there is potential to create other brands such as healing water tourism in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan with the initiative of Central Asian trans-border tourism:

Informant KZ 3: Since the establishment of cross-border tourism between the three countries, healing waters such as Issyk-Kul (KG), Balkash and Alakol (KZ), which are very popular in the CIS countries, have presented Central Asia in a different light to large tourist markets such as China and India. As a result, the number of tourists coming for treatment from them is increasing every year.

A joint effort between countries in marketing can maximize the tourism potential of the border region and bring more benefits to all stakeholders (Timothy 2002). Furthermore, through cross-border tourism cooperation, some survey participants say that because the various attractions and cities in the region complement each other, it is possible to combine the border tourism destinations of these three countries to form a unique brand for tourists:

Informant KZ 3: It can be said that Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan have created a common ecotourism brand within the framework of the Almaty-Bishkek corridor cross-border tourism project. The Issyk-Kol region in the KG can be considered as the Switzerland of Central Asia, including its unique nature and unforgettable tourist experience. At the same time, the amazing view of the Kazakhstan's Kolsai Lakes National Park and the Sharyn Canyon (it is described as the third most beautiful Grand Canyon in the world) are the unmissable opportunity for Eco tourists.

Informant UZ 6: It can be easily seen that the inclusion of the Western Tien-Shan territory between the three countries into the natural world heritage list, which is jointly protected by the state, has given an impetus to the cross-border tourism cooperation between the countries. In this context, the common tourist marketing of Central Asia, which shows the biodiversity in the region, was formed.

The place of food of that region in promotion of tourism marketing is special because the guests who come here do not want to feel only the nature and culture, and also the taste of food will be a special surprise for them. According to an interviewee from Uzbekistan, a strong brand has been formed in the food marketing of Central Asia due to the development of cross-border tourism among the three countries:

Informant KZ 8: People of these countries travel to Uzbekistan or the southern regions of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan if they want to eat Pilaf, if they want to eat meat and drink Kumyz, they go to the northeastern regions of Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and if they want to eat fish, they travel to the Caspian coast in the west of Kazakhstan.

One of the most important types of tourist products is service, while in the past technology and production were the main factors determining competitiveness, now it is true that countries compete with service industry. For the tourism and hospitality industry, accommodation, catering and leisure services are of particular importance, as they contribute greatly to meeting the needs of tourists (Ionel 2016). The development of cross-border tourism in Central Asia contributed to the development of the country's service sector. According to a Kyrgyz survey participant, two different brands can be promoted in the tourism service of Central Asia:

Informant KG 3: In my opinion, in the tourist service of the north-eastern regions of Central Asia, friendly and kind characteristics in service have been recognized due to the mentality of the Kazakh and Kyrgyz peoples, while in the south of the region where the Uzbek population is concentrated, there are humble and fast advantages in providing services. . . . These types of services are improved within the framework of the development of cross-border tourism and promoted as one of the important elements in attracting foreign guests.

Almost all of the responses of the participants in the above survey prove that thanks to the cross-border tourism development cooperation between the countries, the three mentioned countries have achieved excellent results in the joint promotion of tourism products. Summing up, we conclude that the development of cross-border tourism between countries can create a common tourist product market that accelerates the sale of tourist products in those countries. Therefore, we can say that hypothesis 2 in our study was proven.

5.3 Promoting innovation and knowledge transfer

Knowledge transfer is an important element of productivity, competitiveness and innovation in tourism organizations (Shaw, Williams 2009, Weidenfeld et al. 2010). In many industries, the survival and competitiveness of firms depends on how well they can use past experience to innovate their products and combine knowledge with re-use experience. This entails managing the sharing and transfer of vast amounts of knowledge from one project to another over time, facilitating synergy and learning (Corso, Paolucci 2001). The diffusion of knowledge is closely related to the concept of innovation. Innovation has many different conceptual definitions, but it is usually defined as a new or improved product or process which is successfully introduced to the market (Lorenz 2010). When analyzing and discussing the positive impacts of cross-border tourism development cooperation between these three nations on the improvement of innovative and knowledge flows in detail, the following survey question was taken into consideration:

How to describe the positive impact of the cooperation in the development of cross-border tourism between the three countries on the improvement of innovative and knowledge exchanges? (increasing the exchange of innovations, experience and theoretical knowledge between countries).

Most of the informants stated that there have been many exchanges in the field of knowledge and technology between countries along with the development of cross-border tourism in the Central Asian region. Some of them mentioned that travelers of various purposes between countries share innovations and technologies from their country wherever they go. As a result, the people of the host country will contribute to the development of their regions by using those experiences.

Informant UZ 3: It is known that every year Uzbek tourists travel to Kazakhstan and the Kyrgyz Republic to visit their relatives or friends. Uzbek travelers usually teach local people the secrets of building houses and gardening in the places they visited because the Uzbek people have specialized in construction and horticulture.

Informant KG 6: Kyrgyz and Kazakh peoples are the descendants of ancient nomads, since the development of cross-border tourism between the countries, they have been traveling to Uzbek country in order to teach the knowledge of animal husbandry to the neighboring Uzbek peoples.

There is no doubt that the above narratives are a vivid example of cross-border tourism-led knowledge exchange. Since the movement of people between countries has been made more convenient, a number of opportunities for the exchange of knowledge and innovation have appeared. One survey participant from Kazakhstan stated that more and more Uzbek and Kyrgyz students are attending universities in Kazakhstan now:

Informant KZ 4: In Central Asia, Kazakhstan has the most developed education and the most grants have been awarded, which, in turn, has increased the opportunities for students of the other Central Asian countries that have cooperated in cross-border education. ... As a result, every year, hundreds of Uzbek and Kyrgyz students study at higher educational institutions of the Kazakhstan.

Similarly, another Uzbek interviewee said that many Kyrgyz and Kazakh merchants come to Uzbekistan to learn production technologies within the framework of shopping tourism cooperation between the countries:

Informant UZ 7: It is known that light industry is better developed in Uzbekistan than in other Central Asian countries. Since cross-border tourism between the three countries has received interstate support, many Kazakh and Kyrgyz businessmen come to Uzbekistan to learn production technologies.

It is a natural phenomenon that the rapid development of the tourism industry in one country affects the development of tourism in neighboring countries. About the exchange of experience in the field of tourism development between the three mentioned countries, two survey participants from Kazakhstan expressed their opinion:

Informant KZ 10: With a large number of cultural and historical tourist destinations at the UNESCO level, Uzbekistan has gained a lot of experience in the development of cultural tourist destinations. Under the influence of cooperation in the field of cross-border tourism between countries, the experiences of Uzbekistan are currently being used in the promotion of tourism in Kazakhstan, which has a high cultural tourism potential.

Informant KZ 9: The abundance of unspoiled beautiful mountains, rivers, and lakes in Kyrgyzstan has motivated developed countries to develop community-based rural tourism there. As everyone knows CBT was set up by Swiss development agency Helvetas in the early 2000s to develop tourism in Kyrgyzstan. . . . In other words, Kazakh tourists who traveled to that country learned the practices of community-based rural tourism development in the neighboring country of Kyrgyz and started to develop it in their regions after returning.

The participants of the survey confirmed the fact that cooperation in the field of cross-border tourism between countries is conducive to the transfer of theoretical knowledge. According to a Kyrgyz survey participant, with the improvement of cross-border relations between countries, the number of people from other countries of Central Asia who go to Kazakhstan for treatment has increased:

Informant KG 2: Patients who come for treatment to Kazakhstan, where medicine is relatively well developed, go to their country and give advice to other patients around them after receiving advice from a doctor about prevention of pain and self-treatment. In this way, I can say that theoretical knowledge was exchanged between countries due to the effect of traveling across borders.

Based on the answers of the interviewees mentioned above, it was determined that the cooperation in the development of cross-border tourism between the three countries has promoted the exchange of knowledge, experience, technology and innovation in many fields. In short, we come to the conclusion that the development of cross-border tourism contributes to the exchange of theoretical knowledge, technology and innovations between countries. Consequently, based on the views analyzed above, we can say that the 3rd hypothesis in our study is also fully proven.

6 Conclusion

Cross-border cooperation between public entities within the framework of tourism development is considered as one of the new directions in the Central Asian region. The study's informants have positive experiences of such cooperation and seem to strongly support large-scale initiatives in the region. By analyzing the responses of the survey participants, the results of the study can be summarized as follows:

- If we evaluate the impact of cross-border tourism development on the joint development of infrastructures of countries, we can say that a number of infrastructural projects have been realized between countries, but we witnessed that they are implemented only on a very limited scale;
- We can highly appreciate the role of cooperation in the field of cross-border tourism in the joint development of the tourist product market of the three mentioned countries in Central Asia.

- Similar to the above, we can say that cooperation in the field of cross-border tourism is an important factor that accelerates the exchange of knowledge and innovation between the peoples of the three countries.

This case study showed that the development of cross-border tourism is relevant among regions located near the border in Central Asian countries. The study was very relevant due to the purpose of analysing the attitudes and expectations of qualified specialists in the field of tourism, as well as the implementation of a number of large-scale socio-economic projects among Central Asian countries. It is important to clarify that the collected information on experiences and expectations is representative of a specific region and cannot be generalized to a wider scale, as they are location-specific and cover only some of the many public actors in the Central Asian region. However, it still provides a perspective for new directions of cross-border tourism development research and valuable insights from experts in the field of tourism.

Unfortunately, the voices of the residents of the border towns were left out of the research work, but considering the diversity of the participants' experience and the fields in which they work, the data increases the scientific value of the research. Further research should be analysed from the perspective of border residents and administrative staff. Recommendations for such studies are to carry out a similar study after two, three or more years, when specific projects within the framework of cross-border tourism development between the three countries are implemented. It may also be interesting to study the interest, perception and expectations of tourism researchers in other Central Asian countries (Tajikistan and Turkmenistan) for the large-scale development of cross-border tourism among neighbouring states. Such studies could focus on how the views of tourism experts in other Central Asian countries relate to their branding in individual countries and what other benefits such large-scale collaborations could bring.

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Conflicts of Interest

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

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