

## **Increasing poverty: The impact of Russian-Ukrainian war on Central Asia**

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*Central Asia, historically closely tied to Russia and Ukraine, has experienced severe repercussions from the 2022 Russian–Ukrainian war. The five Central Asian nations – Kazakhstan, the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan – have faced worsened poverty and an increased vulnerability of households. The paper employs a postcolonial theoretical perspective to investigate the nuanced effects of the Russian–Ukrainian war on the region. The results show that even after three decades of independence Central Asia remains economically, politically and militarily dependent on Russia. Shocks in the Russian economy have had significant effects on the region which has not recovered after the COVID-19 pandemic. The military conflict has triggered persistent poverty and inequality issues, stalling the progress made by Central Asia in reducing poverty over the past two decades. After two years, the economic damage has been substantial and long-term negative outcomes of the conflict are about to come.*

*Keywords: Russian–Ukrainian war, Central Asia, poverty*

### **1. Introduction**

Over the past two decades, the Central Asian region has made substantial progress in its development with far-reaching growth prospects. The region's GDP has been increasing at an average rate of 6.2% per year reaching \$347 billion in 2021 (Eurasian Development Bank 2022).

The population of Central Asian states keeps growing at the rate of 2% per year reaching 77 million people in 2021 (Eurasian Development Bank 2022). Inward FDI stock is estimated at \$211 billion while foreign trade turnover has surged sixfold since 2000.

Apart from these remarkable advancements, the Central Asia region holds considerable economic and political importance due to its strategic location, vast natural resource reserves and historical heritage. The region owns rich reserves of natural resources, in particular oil in Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan, natural gas in Uzbekistan, and minerals in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Central Asia is a crucial transit route for international trade connecting Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, serving a bridge between East and West. The region's geographical positioning and proximity to conflict-prone areas is particularly notable in Tajikistan's extensive border with politically and economically unstable Afghanistan.

Despite the remarkable advancements and its economic and political importance, the international community still fails to recognize the economic significance of Central Asia. Central Asia remains one of the least researched regions in the world.

One of the topics that has been least researched on Central Asia is postcolonial studies. Postcolonial studies are a field of academia examining the lasting influence

of colonialism on contemporary societies, cultures, and politics. Postcolonial studies particularly focus on those regions that once were under European colonial rule. However, in recent years many scholars have considered the Tsarist era and the Soviet period as instances of colonialism. While the degree of Russia's colonial role in Central Asia remains debatable, its cultural, political, and economic legacy is undeniable. Even three decades after independence, the Central Asian states continue to navigate their relationship with Russia within the shadow of this past. The deteriorating situation in Russia poses a great risk of triggering economic and political crises in Central Asia.

The paper seeks to investigate the nuanced effects of the Russian-Ukrainian war on Central Asia through a comprehensive review of the existing literature and available data, answering the research question "How has the Russo-Ukrainian war reinforced the postcolonial power dynamics between Russia and the Central Asian states?"

The first section of the study focuses on postcolonial studies. The second part reports on two channels through which the repercussions of war reverberated in Central Asia exacerbating existing poverty challenges.

## 2. Theoretical framework

The term "postcolonial" refers to the end of the colonial period and describes the historical interactions between Asian, American, and African communities subject to colonization by imperialist powers and Western societies (Dosbolov–Sönmez 2023). Postcolonial studies examine the lasting impact of a dominant culture on another society and analyze the effects of colonization on identity and culture.

The term "postcolonial" was coined by several scholars including Ashcroft et al. (2002, p. 2) to describe "cultures affected by imperialism, ranging from the time of colonization to the present day". According to Young (2001), postcolonialism emerged to express a range of critical ideas, oppositional political identities, and aspirations rooted in the ongoing political and cultural history of resistance against colonialism and imperialism.

Fanon (1963, 2008) examines the effect of race on colonizer–colonized relations, mentioning how colonizers impose their culture, language, religion, and education, making colonized individuals feel culturally inferior and less important, justifying the dominance of colonizers. Fanon connects decolonization with a violent stressing of its role in achieving freedom by colonized people.

Among other works, the works of three scholars – Said (2003), Spivak's 1988 theory of the subaltern, and Bhabha 1994's ideas of hybridity and mimicry are foundational to postcolonial studies. Said's 2003 concept of Orientalism is pivotal to postcolonial theory analyzing how post-Enlightenment European civilization asserted dominance over the East. Said characterized the Orient as a close neighbor to Europe, from which it derives its civilizations and languages. The concept of Orientalism refers the collective institutions and practices engaging with the Orient and dominating it. The Western perspective employs a dualistic framework to construct an "Orient", assigning characteristics to its people such as exotic, emotional, feminine, backward, and hedonistic, which sharply contrast with Western ideals such as logic,

masculinity, civilization, and modernity (Said 2003). This has resulted in a biased and distorted understanding and a skewed perception of Eastern cultures.

The Indian scholar and theorist Gayatri Spivak reframed Antonio Gramsci's concept of the subaltern, applying it to marginalized groups in postcolonial countries. Spivak (1988) argues that as these communities are burdened by poverty, oppression, and exploitation, they are left voiceless and unable to stand against colonial rule. One of the main points of Spivak's scholarship is that knowledge production often serves the interest of its creators as European academia including Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze developed theories which ultimately supported Western economic and ideological interests, justifying Western colonization and perpetuating Western imperialism and European values on indigenous populations. Colonial oppression severely limits the ability of subalterns to express their identities and voices independently.

Bhabha (1994) introduced novel ideas such as mimicry and hybridity to postcolonial studies. In postcolonial studies the concept of mimicry is utilized to describe people who replicate Western cultural norms, values, and behaviors frequently distancing from their own cultural heritage. In the colonial era, mimicry served as a tool for colonizers seeking power and influence. By mirroring the conduct of the ruling class, imitators could ascend social hierarchies to the detriment of one's cultural identity. Alongside benefits of mimicry for the colonizer, the author mentions the potential threats. Imitators who internalize Western values such as justice, equality, human rights and democracy, could inevitably sow the seeds of resistance. The potential to mimicry to challenge colonial authority became vivid when the colonial power transgresses the colonizer's boundaries. To counter this, the colonizer usually imposes a partial imitation model on native population characterized by "almost, but not quite" which still impose vulnerability to the colonial power.

Another concept in postcolonial discourse introduced by Bhabha is "hybridity". This term signifies a fusion of Western and Eastern cultural elements. In the context of colonial and postcolonial studies, it represents the balance held by colonized between their heritage and the imperial legacy. Bhabha characterizes hybridity as a tool used by the colonized to resist colonizers. According to the author, a colonial system is characterized by internal contradictions. Over time, the rulers are changed by the population they ruled, as the colonized might demand equity, and as a result, this hybrid identity undermines the imperial power.

Postcolonial studies have been a relatively new area of research in the post-Soviet states and at the same time the blind spot in the scholarship of Central Asian colonial past. If the Tsarist Russian period is identified as a colonial era, the Soviet Union's legacy is less clear due to several factors: (1) the current Central Asian leaders and senior managers rose to power during the Soviet era and have Soviet mentality and education and are reluctant to criticize the Soviet past; (2) the region is still heavily dependent on Russia for political, economic, and the security support developing a robust postcolonial discourse; and (3) production of new knowledge dedicated to postcolonial studies is greatly limited by state ideology and politics.

To apply a postcolonial perspective to the relationship of Central Asia and the Soviet Union, a fundamental question arises: Was the USSR a colonial empire, and if so, was the Central Asian region colonized?

Academic sources offer divergent perspectives on this matter. One viewpoint, represented by Hirsch (2005), identifies the Soviet Union as a colonial empire with typical characteristics of domination and control. Conversely, other scholars such as Khalid (2007) and Abashin (2014), argue that the Soviet Union was a unique entity concentrated on modernization rather than traditional colonial exploitation.

While acknowledging elements of control and resistance, the relations between the Soviet Union and Central Asia are more complex than a simple oppressor–oppressed dynamic.

The perception of Russia and the Soviet Union as a colonizer has dramatically shifted throughout history. In the 1920s, early Soviet historiography condemned the Tsarist empire as a brutal colonizer viewing it as an “absolute evil” (Gorshenina 2007). However, by the 1930s this narrative shifted as Soviet ideology started to note the advantageous aspects of Russian rule. The Tsarist conquest was recast as a “lesser evil” (Alimukhamedov 2022), in contrast to other potential colonizers and internal conflicts in the region due to Russia’s more developed social structure and connections to revolutionary movements. By the 1950s this narrative changed entirely into “absolute good” (Nechkina 1951), and by the 1960s Soviet discourse totally rejected terms like “colonization” and “conquest” replacing them to terms such as “unity” and “solidarity”. Official Soviet ideology claimed that it had decolonized Central Asia freeing its people from the legacy of Tsarist imperialism and local feudalism (Gorshenina 2021).

However, the perestroika era (1986–1991) revealed the fragility of these ideological constructs, as local intellectuals and the public openly and increasingly criticized the Soviet system, merging anti-colonial and nationalist sentiments and demanding cultural and linguistic recognition (Igmen 2012).

The appearance of the famous “mankurt”, an individual who had forgotten his cultural identity portrayed by the Kyrgyz author Chingiz Aitmatov in *The Day Lasts More Than A Hundred Years* (1980) haunted the political discourse opposing Soviet rule, arguing that Soviet imperialism sought to eradicate Central Asian identities and so-called modernization program was questioned (Karagulova–Megoran 2011).

In the perestroika period the local intelligentsia drawing parallels with the distress of “Third World” countries (such as India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Iran) questioned the idea of equality within the Soviet Union, characterizing it as dependency relations between the center and the periphery. Interestingly, the Soviet system tolerated such critique, therefore some scholars claim the perestroika as the beginning of the postcolonial period in the Soviet context.

Contemporary Russia being formally a federation with many nations living there, exhibits increasing nationalist tendencies which dwarf its imperial past. A main narrative focuses exclusively on the Russian-Soviet empire as solely of a story of the Russian nation and culture, and this viewpoint, rooted in Soviet period academic doctrines and beliefs, denies accepting the colonial nature of the empire. In Soviet-Russian literature the terms “colony” or “metropole” explain the empire’s expansion as a “voluntary accession” which brought mutually beneficial results (Gorshenina 2021).

The lack of official recognition of Russia’s colonial legacy in Turkistan is supported also by the absence of commemorations, monuments, and educational

emphasis related to the Russian presence in Central Asia. Even if Russia is reluctant to recall its colonial history and denies its colonies or colony-like politics in the Tsarist and Soviet context, it has developed a new “neo-colonial co-dependence relationship” with the Central Asian states, still holding the significant power and influence (Abashin 2020, p. 7).

Central Asian’s postcolonial era began in 1991 with gaining independence. The region now confronts economic, political, cultural, and linguistic remnants of 70 years of Russian colonialism. Economic challenges persist due to historical resource exploitation, interconnection of the Soviet republics’ economies to each other, and subsidized economy. Politics in the region is also shaped by postcolonial dynamics.

Even after the demise of the Soviet Union, the idea of “Russian superiority” has not disappeared and Russia has not lost its central role in Central Asia using the region as a resource base (Abashin 2014, Gorshenina 2021).

The Russian–Ukrainian war has exacerbated these dynamics, pressing these nations to choose between aligning with Russia or risk economic consequences. The continued economic interdependence of Central Asia with Russia has exacerbated the region’s persistent poverty and inequality.

The Russian war in Ukraine has created shockwaves in every corner of the world causing a food and energy crisis, surging poverty, and starvation. According to a report by the United Nations Development Program (UNDP, 2022), the war has pushed approximately 71 million people into poverty worldwide, driving the global poverty rate to 9.2% (World Bank, 2024). Perhaps nowhere else have the effects of the Russian invasion of Ukraine been felt stronger than in Central Asia, which has developed close economic, political ties and cultural similarities to Russia as a part of colonial past.

Economically, Russia remains a major trading partner for Central Asia’s states, particularly in the energy and natural resources sectors. Russia serves as a pivotal market for Central Asian export, which encompass oil, gas and minerals. Moreover, the Russian Federation leads investment and infrastructure development projects in the region.

Politically, Russia exerts significant sway in Central Asia through various ways, including diplomatic relations, security cooperation, and multilateral organizations such as the Collective Security Treaty Organization (CSTO), the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). These regional integration groups enhance Russia’s geopolitical influence and enable its involvement in regional affairs.

Additionally, historical bonds between Russia and Central Asia dating back to the Soviet era continue to influence their relations. Significant Russian-speaking populations live in most of Central Asian countries, fostering strong cultural exchanges.

Two years after the start of the full-scale invasion of Ukraine, Central Asia faces direct and indirect effects of the war. While the impact of the war has been felt across the entire region, the non-commodity exporters – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan – have taken the most considerable hit in particular.

### **3. The ripple effect: The impact of Russian–Ukrainian conflict on Central Asian poverty**

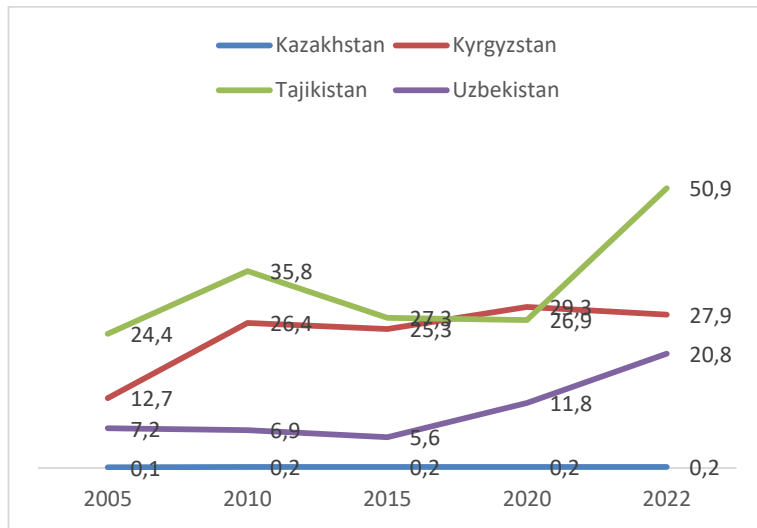
Paradoxically, the war has opened several opportunities for the Central Asian states. The region reaped gains through various channels: (1) the US and Western sanctions have compelled numerous Russian businesses to relocate to Central Asia, and, consequently, thousands new businesses have been registered in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, and to a lesser extent in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, with many multinational companies moving their staff to the region; (2) fleeing persecution and conscription into the Russian army, many highly educated and skilled Russian individuals have brought not only valuable human capital to the region but also financial capital by transferring their wealth; and (3) export and import indicators in the region have increased due to the region serving as a new transit hub between Russia and the rest of the world. An influx of capital, a heightened level of domestic consumption, and fresh business and economic activity has led to unexpected tangible economic growth in the region.

Nevertheless, the adverse implications of the conflict weigh significantly heavier on Central Asia. The Russian–Ukrainian war has affected the region through remittances and trade, having brought increased poverty and exacerbating socio-economic problems in Central Asian.

In response to the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the US and European countries have imposed sanctions on Russia which resulted in thousands of international companies leaving the Russian market and weakening the Russian economy. The Russian economic downturn was specifically hurtful for remittance-dependent Central Asian countries. Russia has been the main destination for labor migration from Central Asian states, especially from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. According to the official statistics, over 5 million people from these countries work in Russia, and the number can be even higher because of workers in informal economy (Washington Post 2022a). Coming from poverty-ridden rural areas workers regularly send money to their home countries. Money transfers are the only source of income for households, helping to fulfil families' basic needs such as food and healthcare. For example, according to the report, remittances reduced the national poverty rate by 11 percentage points in Kyrgyzstan (United Nations 2022).

The two Central Asian countries – Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are especially dependent on remittances from Russia, which make up about 30% and 50% of their GDP, respectively.

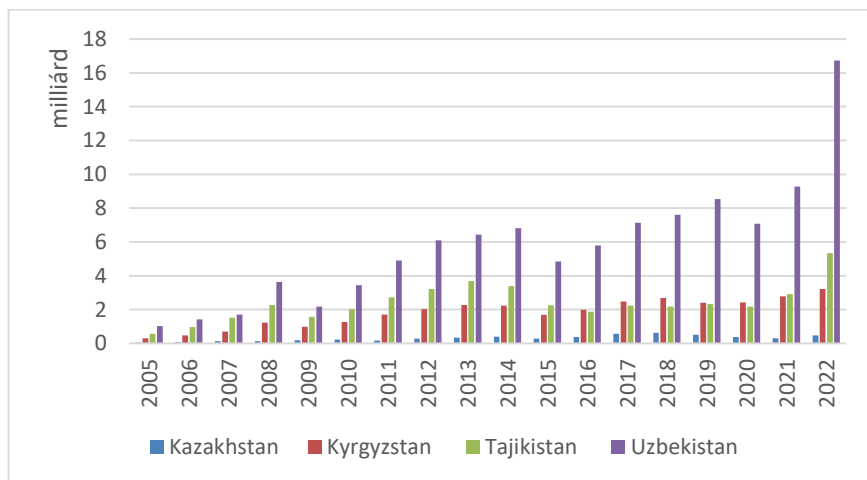
Figure 1. Remittances received by Central Asia countries for 2005–2022, % of GDP



Source: own construction based on World Bank Indicators (2024)

The imposition of sanctions had severe effect on the Russian labor market, resulting in job losses, salary cuts and migrants leaving the country in order to avoid conscription into the Russian army. Consequently, there has been a decrease in remittance inflows. By the close of 2022, IMF (2022) cautioned that a decline in remittances could push one million people into poverty in the region.

Figure 2. Remittances received by Central Asian states for 2005-2022, in billion dollar



Source: own construction based on World Bank Indicators (2024)

Nevertheless, data from 2022 indicates a steady increase in remittances in the region primarily propelled by capital migration due to the inflow of Russian migrants

to the region, fleeing the war and mobilization. Russian migrants were receiving not only money transfers but also many of them were transferring their wealth, either as a precautionary measure or to facilitate payments abroad. Additionally, many Russian companies were forced to leave and relocated to the region, which further boosted money transfer.

The World Bank Group (2022) projected decreased remittances for the years 2023–2024 in the region. According to World Bank predictions, remittances will fall by 21% in Uzbekistan, 22% in Tajikistan and 33% in Kyrgyzstan. Another international organization, IMF (2022b) forecast contraction of remittances by 5–13% by 2026.

Central Asia still has limited and concentrated trade partners. Russia remains the largest source of import for Central Asian states importing mineral products, base metals and chemicals, as well as electric machinery and food (except for Kyrgyzstan, where Russia ranks second behind China). In exports, Russia is the largest destination for Kyrgyzstan and second for Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan in buying mineral products, textiles, base metals, and vegetables (OECD 2022).

*Table 1.* Share of key trading partners in Trade turnover of Central Asian countries in 2021, in percentages

Country					
Trading	CA	Kazakhstan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan	Uzbekistan
Russia	21.6	23.9	31.6	22.5	18.6
China	20.4	17.9	21.1	14.0	17.5
Turkey	6.0	4.0	5.7	6.5	8.7
CA	9.9	6.2	21.2	28.0	13.9

*Source:* Eurasian Development Bank (2022)

As the war erupted, Central Asia found itself in a challenging position. As the region with its 1% global trade share is one of the least integrated regions into the global market in Asia and the Pacific, it heavily relies on routes through Russia. Businesses are compelled to transport vital goods – seeds, fertilizers, production resources, and raw materials via alternative routes, leading to surged logistics and insurance costs.

The Russian–Ukrainian war has triggered the global food crisis, due to the significant roles both countries play in the world food market. Russia and Ukraine are the main exporters of wheat, corn and sunflowers. For example, Russia and Ukraine account for about a third of global wheat exports. Ukraine, in particular, holds a prominent position among the world’s top three grain exporting countries, earning it the title of the “breadbasket of Europe” (Knox 2022).

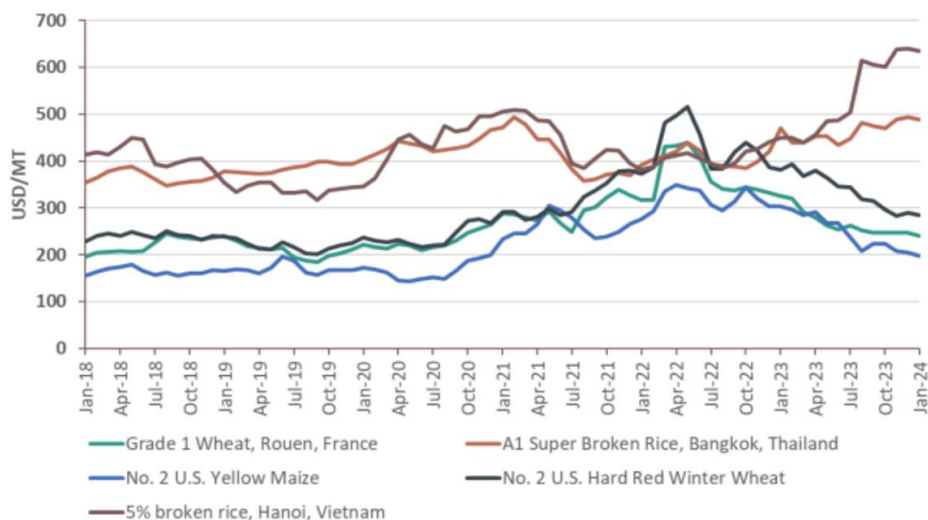
Low-income Central Asian countries especially rely on Ukrainian and Russian wheat exports. For example, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan imported 100% in 2020 and 55% in 2021 from Russia respectively (OECD 2022).

As Russia has blocked 7 of the 13 ports of Ukraine, limiting its shipping potential, the country simply cannot export its products. Moreover, grain storage facilities were destroyed, and fertilizer plants have been shut down. Many farmers have joined the army and left their lands. Russia, which was one of the main exporters



of fertilizers, and, due to banking limitations, is not able to sell its products, which has affected farmers around the globe, in particular Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, which heavily rely on the agricultural sector.

Figure 3. Food commodity prices in selected international markets. January 2018 – January 2024

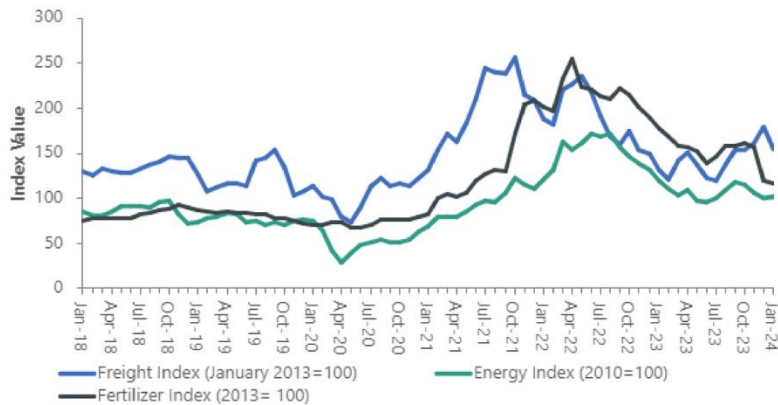


Source: Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO), World Bank

Note: The ICG Freight Index considers costs from significant grain exporting countries. Crude oil composes more than 80% of the World Bank energy index, while nitrogenous fertilizer contributes over 40% of the fertilizer index

Consequently, food prices have surged. Low-income countries such as Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, where 70% of income (IMF 2022b) is allocated to food expenses and grain is the staple food, increased food costs for wheat, sugar and cooking oil caused additional financial strain on the households. The surging food prices can be life-threatening for many families and households in the region. According to the Washington Post (2022a), because of the debt burden, Kyrgyzstan is not able simply to deal with the hunger crisis.

Figure 4. International Energy, Fertilizer, and Freight Cost Indices. January 2018 – January 2024



Source: International Grains Council and World Bank

For example, food prices have increased by almost 50% since 2019 in Kyrgyzstan. In Tajikistan, bread prices have increased by 25-30%, sugar, meat and eggs by 40-50%, and energy resources by 200%, while overall inflation reached 12% in Uzbekistan (Bekbassova 2023) and 20.3% in Kazakhstan (Benin et al. 2023).

High inflation was also exacerbated by the increasing energy-intensive goods and services, causing a worldwide energy crisis. According to the World Economic Forum between February and September 2022, the cost of coal rose by 176%, crude oil and petroleum by 51%, and natural gas by 94%, increasing household expenditure by between 2.7 and 4.7%.

The higher energy prices push vulnerable families in Central Asia into energy poverty, as energy dependence is an urgent issue in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan, where energy imports from Russia account for 60% and 30% of domestic utilization, respectively.

#### 4. Conclusion

Central Asia is a strategically important region which must balance between its colonial past and geopolitical challenges in the present. Even more than three decades after the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asia continues to maintain a high level of economic dependence on Russia.

Today, the Central Asian states must navigate a postcolonial landscape concentrated on sovereignty, resource control, and economic development. Decolonization efforts require a comprehensive analysis considering political, cultural, economic, and social factors. Diversification and regional cooperation can be among potential steps to assist the decolonization process in the region.

First, the recent disruption of supply chains, resulting from the ongoing war, highlights the region's high reliance on transit routes through Russia. Furthermore, Russia continues to be one of the largest trade partners in the area. An overwhelming

90% of Central Asian individuals choose Russia as a destination for labor migration. Historically, Russia has served as a regional hub for knowledge transfer, technology access, and know-how. Russia's isolation will end this trend. Diversification of both trade routes and migration destinations are imperative. To ensure continuing access to the cutting-edge technologies and knowledge, Central Asian countries should forge stronger links with other regional hubs.

And second, regional cooperation serves as a key factor in bolstering the resilience of relatively small and undiversified economies of the region to crises and external shocks. So far, the Central Asian region remains one of the least integrated regions in the world with the region's connectivity indicator averaging below 60% in terms of access to the global GDP placing the region at the lowest end of the spectrum. As the Central Asian states possess complementary energy resources with the Kyrgyz Republic and Tajikistan owning hydropower potential, while Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan have substantial renewable energy potential alongside flexible fossil fuels, regional benefits arise from interstate trade. Moreover, the region can strengthen relations with other regional players such as China and Turkey to avoid excessive economic and political dependence.

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