



EURASIA CENTER

BRIEF ANALYSIS

Russian's policy in Central Asia
since 2000

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EC/2024/7.



Eurasia Center

Brief Analysis

Publisher:
Eurasia Center

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EURASIA CENTER

Budapest, 2024



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ISSN 2939-5550



RUSSIAN'S POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIA SINCE 2000

Semanur Öncü

Abstract

This analysis examines Russia's Central Asia policy during the Putin era. To provide context, it is necessary to briefly discuss the pre-Putin era. Prior to the collapse of the USSR, Russia's Central Asia policy was unfavorable. However, under Putin's presidency, relations between Central Asia and Russia began to improve. Despite this, Central Asia did not receive significant attention in Russia's foreign policy following the Soviet Union's collapse. The reasons for this were the Western-oriented foreign policy of then Russian President Boris Yeltsin and Moscow's belief that these Commonwealth of Independent States countries would be economically, politically, and otherwise dependent on them due to their newness. After Putin became president, relations between Russia and the Central Asian countries began to strengthen in the 21st century. The issues of water scarcity in Central Asia, transfer of water from Siberian rivers to Central Asia, illegal migration and money laundering, and transportation of energy resources in Central Asia to world markets are among the problems that both sides are concerned about and seek cooperation on. This study analyzes the Russian Federation's relations with the Central Asian states, which it considers its backyard.

Keywords: Central Asia, Russia, Putin

Introduction

Understanding Russia's influence and relations in Central Asia requires an examination of its history and foreign policy. Throughout history, Russia has been actively involved in Central Asia and has pursued expansionist policies towards the region. These policies were driven by strategic objectives, including limiting Britain's power in the region, controlling trade routes, and protecting its southern borders. For many years, Russia has sought to maintain control over Central Asia.

However, with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, Central Asian countries declared their independence. During this period, Russia faced political, economic, and strategic challenges. As Vladimir Putin has noted, the collapse of the Soviet Union was a major catastrophe for Russia and a dramatic period for its people.

Before the Putin era, Russia's Central Asia policy was marked by instability during the Gorbachev and Yeltsin periods. Glastnost and perestroika policies were pursued during the Gorbachev era, and an optimistic approach was adopted in foreign



policy. However, these policies did not yield the desired results. During the Yeltsin era, Russia pursued a western-oriented policy and neglected relations with Central Asia. During this period, Russia's effectiveness in the international arena declined as it was preoccupied with domestic problems.

However, under Putin's leadership, Russia's Central Asia policy has gained a more realistic dimension. Putin aims to strengthen Russia's position in the international arena and has pursued a multifaceted foreign policy. His main goals include filling the power vacuum in Central Asia, ensuring stability in the region, and strengthening Russia's Eurasian policies. However, it is important to note that Russia's policies towards Central Asia have encountered challenges, such as the lack of soft power and China's increasing influence in the region.

In conclusion, under Putin's leadership, Russia's Central Asia policy has taken a more pragmatic and effective approach than in previous periods. Nevertheless, the dynamics in the region and the influence of other international actors remain crucial factors in determining Russia's role in Central Asia.

The Importance of Central Asia for Russia

Central Asia has historically been strategically important for great powers due to its rich natural resources, particularly its oil and natural gas reserves in the Caspian Basin. The region's energy resources make it the second most important region after the Middle East. Additionally, the region's low population density further increases its strategic [importance](#).

The countries in Central Asia also share close ties. The countries in the region must cooperate on economic, peace, and security issues as their interests are interconnected. Russia views Central Asia as a region of strategic interest, both as a market and a source of raw materials. The growing interest of the US and China in the region has further reinforced Russia's approach to [Central Asia](#).

The September 11 attacks in 2001 further increased the significance of Central Asia. The use of military bases in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan by the [US for military](#) operations in Afghanistan has strengthened the US presence in Central Asia and caused concern for Russia. As a result, Russia has increased its efforts to protect its presence in the region.

[The Shanghai Cooperation Organization](#), established under China's leadership, has emphasized the strategic importance of Central Asia. Russia understands that losing its leadership in Central Asia would mean losing its last line of defense, and therefore strives to maintain its presence in the [region](#).

In conclusion, Central Asia's strategic importance is closely linked to its wealth of natural resources and geopolitical position, making it a focal point of competition among great powers. Therefore, comprehending the region's developments is crucial for international [relations](#).



Relations with Central Asia under the Yeltsin era

[Boris Yeltsin](#) was the first president of the Russian Federation. He aimed to modernize Russia by pursuing Western-oriented policies in domestic and foreign affairs. Specifically, he sought to accelerate Russia's democratization and transition to a market economy, drawing inspiration from the US democracy experience. Despite initial skepticism from the United States, Yeltsin's reform efforts eventually gained recognition.

During the Yeltsin era, there was a group of individuals who supported pro-Western policies and were often referred to as 'Atlanticists'. This group consisted of democratically inclined individuals who aimed to continue the policies of innovative thinking that began under Gorbachev. In the 1990s and early 2000s, Yeltsin promoted the idea that Russia was entering a period of renewal from within, while excluding Central Asia and the [Caucasus](#).

Central Asia has historically been strategically important as the center of trade and the Silk Road. After the collapse of the Soviet Union, interest in the independent Central Asian states increased. However, Yeltsin prioritized the immediate neighborhood in the Atlantic-Eurasian [dilemma](#), leading to the announcement of the Near Abroad Doctrine¹(blijnee zarubejye) in 1993. This doctrine emphasized Russia's focus on security issues and the pursuit of its immediate [neighborhood](#).

After the collapse of the USSR, Central Asian countries pursued pro-Western policies independently of Russia. Yeltsin's policies towards Central Asia were ineffective, leading these countries to distance themselves from Russia. This was not due to Russia's lack of interest in the region, but rather because of past pressure exerted by [Russia](#). It is important to note that this is an objective evaluation of the situation. Since Putin's rise to power, Russia has been able to establish mutually trusting relations with these countries. Overall, the Yeltsin era resulted in Russia losing credibility in Central Asia and the [Caucasus](#).

Changing Central Asia Policy with Vladimir Putin

This period is considered Putin's legacy from Yeltsin, as Yeltsin appointed Putin as his successor as head of state. While Yeltsin is remembered as a leader who could not hide his emotions in foreign policy, Putin displayed a more rational and patriotic attitude, prioritizing Russia's interests. Upon assuming the presidency, Russia's foreign policy underwent changes. Putin sought to resurrect Russia as a regional and energy power in the international community, which led to improved relations with [Central Asia](#).

Under Putin's leadership, Russia aimed to regain its status as a superpower and eliminate its fragmentation. Russia faced significant military, economic, and political problems as a legacy of Boris Yeltsin's presidency, including the Chechnya issue. Chechnya's independence would have resulted in Russia losing territory and



other federated states seeking independence. Putin launched the Second Chechnya War in an effort to end the war of independence. To address these and other issues and improve relations with other countries, Putin has made significant changes to his foreign policy. His announcement of prioritizing the CIS countries in his foreign policy was well-received by the Central Asian [countries](#).

[In the early](#) 2000s, Putin aimed to equip the Eurasian region by establishing cooperative organizations. In 2001, Russia established the [Eurasian Economic Union](#) with Kyrgyzstan, Kazakhstan, Belarus, and Tajikistan. In 2003, Russia, Ukraine, Belarus, and Kazakhstan formed an organization called [the Common Economic Space \(CES\)](#).

Putin did not attempt to maintain the loyalty of the Central Asian countries through political and military coercion. Instead, he sought to maintain Russia's sphere of influence in these countries by increasing its influence. Central Asian countries have been the region where Russia has strengthened its relations the most in its [near abroad strategy](#).

Putin's visits to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan after becoming president were recognized as diplomatic successes by the capitals of these countries. To win the trust of these countries towards Russia, the Kremlin emphasized important issues. These issues include fighting international terrorism and drug trafficking, preventing Western interventions that threaten CIS countries, and reaching agreements on common security and trade [policies](#).

In addition, there have been other reasons for the development of good relations between Central Asia and Russia:

- Protection of the rights and safety of the Russian population in Central Asia.
- Russia's assistance to the CIS countries facing problems.
- Beginning of the development of the integration process in the Central Asian countries.
- Solving such problems as money laundering and illegal migration of workers.
- Solving ecological problems. One of the most important is the transfer of part of the water of the Siberian River to Central Asia.

For these reasons, relations between Central Asia and Russia began to improve. When Putin improved his relations with Central Asia in line with the above-mentioned points, Russia soon received positive feedback from the region and solidified its presence [there](#).

Putin's arrival in Russia also coincided with the recovery of the [Russian economy](#). Thanks to the income generated from energy resources, Russia was able to pay off all [its debts to the IMF](#) and other organizations. Russia has shifted from Yeltsin's unilateralist foreign policy to a more independent one.

This has made it more attractive for Central Asian countries to align with Russia, given its increased political and economic strength. Additionally, the issue of



governance has brought Russia and Central Asian countries closer, with Putin promoting a centralized form of government in Russia.

Putin has revoked some of the rights granted to countries under Yeltsin and ended democratization movements, introducing the concept of “managed democracy”² [instead](#).

When Putin assumed power in Russia, Uzbekistan underwent a significant shift in its attitude towards Russia. Uzbek President Islam Karimov sought closer ties with Russia due to the increasing influence of radical Islamist groups in the country, and he believed that Moscow's assistance could help solve this [problem](#). However, it is not coincidental that Uzbekistan's warming relations with Russia occurred simultaneously with the deterioration of its relationship with the United States. The Andijan incident³ and the revolutionary movements in Uzbekistan had an impact not only on this country but also on other Central Asian countries, bringing their leaders closer to Russia. Uzbekistan formalized its relationship with Russia by signing [the Collective Security Organization Treaty](#), becoming a member of [the Eurasian Economic Community](#), and signing several friendly agreements with Russia. Additionally, Karimov closed the US base in the country. These developments helped Putin establish trust in the region, and relations began to improve.

The revolution in 2005 had a significant impact on Russia's relations with Kyrgyzstan. It is worth noting that the country's economic problems were resolved with the help of Russia. Following the resignation of Kyrgyz President Askar Akayev, his successor Kurmanbek Bakiyev pursued a foreign policy that aligned more closely with [Russia](#). Throughout his term in power, Bakiyev was considered Russia's closest ally. As a result, Kyrgyzstan became economically dependent on Russia. However, in 2010, Bakiyev failed to fulfill his promises to Russia. The closure of the US base was one of the main reasons for this. When Kyrgyzstan attempted to raise the rent of this base, Russia proposed closing the base in exchange for the cancellation of its debts and some loans to Kyrgyzstan. Although Kyrgyzstan accepted this offer and received a lot of aid from Russia, it did not close the [base](#). When Russia stopped providing aid, Kyrgyzstan experienced a significant economic crisis. This crisis was considered the primary reason for [the 2010 revolution](#), which resulted in Bakiyev's removal from power. Following Bakiyev's departure, Kyrgyz officials recognized the importance of Russia in their country's relations and sought to improve those [relations](#).

Putin prioritized Uzbekistan due to Kazakhstan's close cooperation with the West. Kazakhstan's multilateral policy allows it to choose between China, the US, and Russia. Additionally, Kazakhstan is uncomfortable with Moscow's grandiosity towards it. Kazakhstan is one of the richest countries in the region in terms of energy resources, which could make it a serious rival of Russia in the future.



Russia has taken significant steps towards becoming the dominant power in Central Asia, particularly in terms of energy transportation. This region holds great importance for Russia's strategic [interests](#).

Russia's Military Bases in Central Asia

Russia considers Central Asia crucial for its interests and security, and has sought to strengthen military cooperation with the region through the establishment of military bases. Currently, Russia maintains military bases in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan, with the Kant military base in Kyrgyzstan being established in 2003 and subsequently developed in terms of military and technological capabilities after 2006. In October 2004, the Russian fighter battalion in Tajikistan was upgraded to a military base, employing 7 000 people. Its mission is to protect the border between Afghanistan and Tajikistan, combat terrorism and drug trafficking and ensure regional security.

Russia has also established strong military relations with Kazakhstan. In January 2004, Russia and Kazakhstan agreed to a 50-year lease of the Baikonur base in Kazakhstan to Russia. The Baikonur base is one of the most advanced and high-tech space bases in the world, and its presence is important for both countries.

Although Russia does not have a base in Uzbekistan, it uses the Khanabad base in the country. As a result, Russia has a base in almost every Central Asian country except Turkmenistan. These military bases are also politically significant for Russia.

Map 1.: Russian military bases



Source:

https://www.reddit.com/r/MapPorn/comments/10wf9i4/foreign_russian_military_bases_abroad_prior_to/?rdt=34546

Collective Security Treaty Organization

[The Collective Security Treaty Organization \(CSTO\)](#) was established on October 7, 2002, as a partnership between Russia and six Commonwealth of Independent States countries: Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Armenia. The organization's primary objective is to maintain peace and security among member countries by providing mutual support in the event of a perceived threat. According to its founding purpose, member countries cannot belong to another organization or engage in military operations against each other. The



organization's areas of activity include combating terrorism and drug trafficking, developing military cooperation, and enhancing political cooperation.

Following the events in Kyrgyzstan and the Kyrgyz-Uzbek conflict, the President of Kyrgyzstan requested that the CSTO send a contingent to his country. However, CSTO has refrained from military intervention in the region, which has led other states to question the organization's purpose. Since its establishment, the CSTO has not participated in any military operations, but it has been viewed as a political tool, particularly for Russia, and has contributed to the development of relations between member countries. Unlike the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), the CSTO's lack of Chinese membership is seen as an advantage for Russia. CSTO represents Russia's military presence in [Central Asia](#).

Shanghai Cooperation Organization

[The Shanghai Cooperation Organization \(SCO\)](#) is a regional military cooperation organization established in 1996 as the Shanghai Five between Russia, China, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and [Kyrgyzstan](#). In 2001, with the accession of Uzbekistan, it was renamed the Shanghai Cooperation Organization. Its main objective is to ensure regional security and stability. The effectiveness of the organization is demonstrated by the joint exercises organized by Russia and China with active participation from member countries.

The SCO also includes full member states such as Afghanistan, Belarus, India, Mongolia, Iran and [Pakistan](#). The accession of these countries to full membership has further increased the importance of the organization.

For Russia, the significance of the SCO lies in its potential to transform from an energy-supplying region to an alternative power to the West. The organization is also interested in security issues such as Islamist organizations and drug trafficking in Central Asia. The SCO has an important role to play in promoting regional stability and peace.

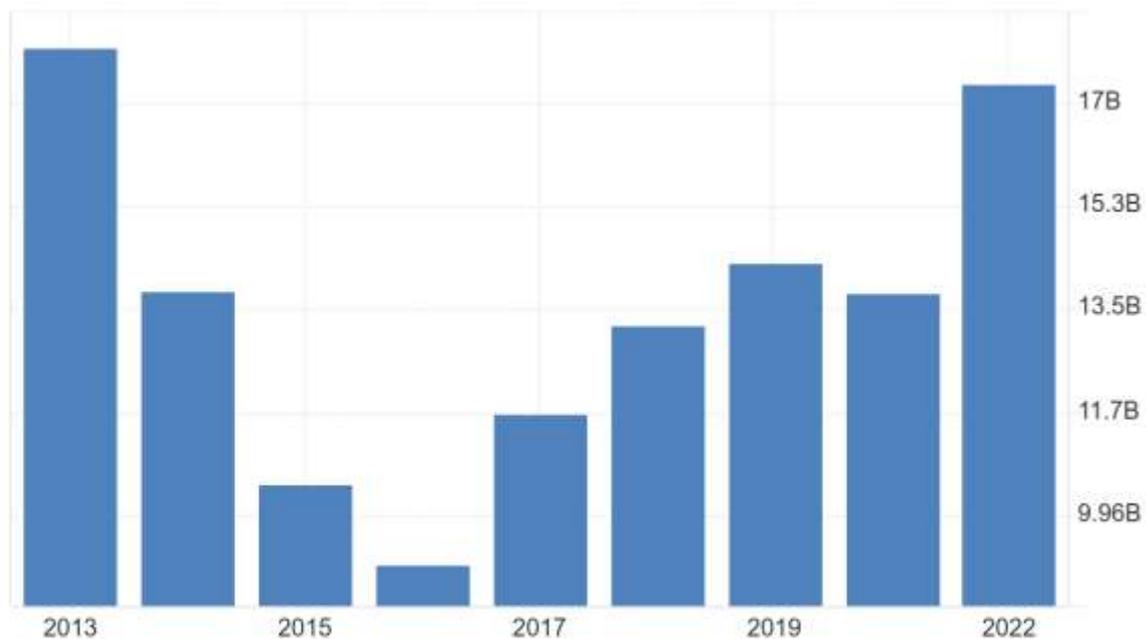
Russia's Economic Cooperation with Central Asian Countries

In terms of trade, the CIS countries give priority to Russia. Russia's largest trading partner in this region is Kazakhstan. The establishment of the Customs Union⁴ has also contributed to this. The Customs Union includes the countries of Russia, Belarus and [Kazakhstan](#). The establishment of this union was decided in October 2007 and entered into force after 2010. While the trade volume between Russia and Kazakhstan was 20 billion dollars in 2008 the 2009 crisis caused the trade volume between them to decrease to 13 billion dollars. After the Customs Union was established, the volume of trade between the two countries increased. In terms of energy, the majority of this trade volume consists of various minerals and energy resources. At the same time, [the Baikonur spaceport](#) has greatly helped both sides to develop economic cooperation.

In 2022, [Russia's exports to Kazakhstan](#) amounted to 16.5 billion dollars. The main products exported from Russia to Kazakhstan include refined petroleum (495 million dollars), semi-finished iron (377 million dollars) and precious metal ores (289 million dollars). Over the past 26 years, Russia's exports to Kazakhstan have grown steadily at an annual rate of 7.73%, from 2.39 billion dollars in 1996 to 16.5 billion dollars in 2022. In addition, Russia supplied 1.72 billion dollars worth of services to Kazakhstan in 2020. The largest categories of services exported from Russia to Kazakhstan were transportation (678 million dollars), travel (439 million dollars) and other business services (312 million dollars).

Table 1: Kazakhstan imports from Russia

Kazakhstan imports from Russia



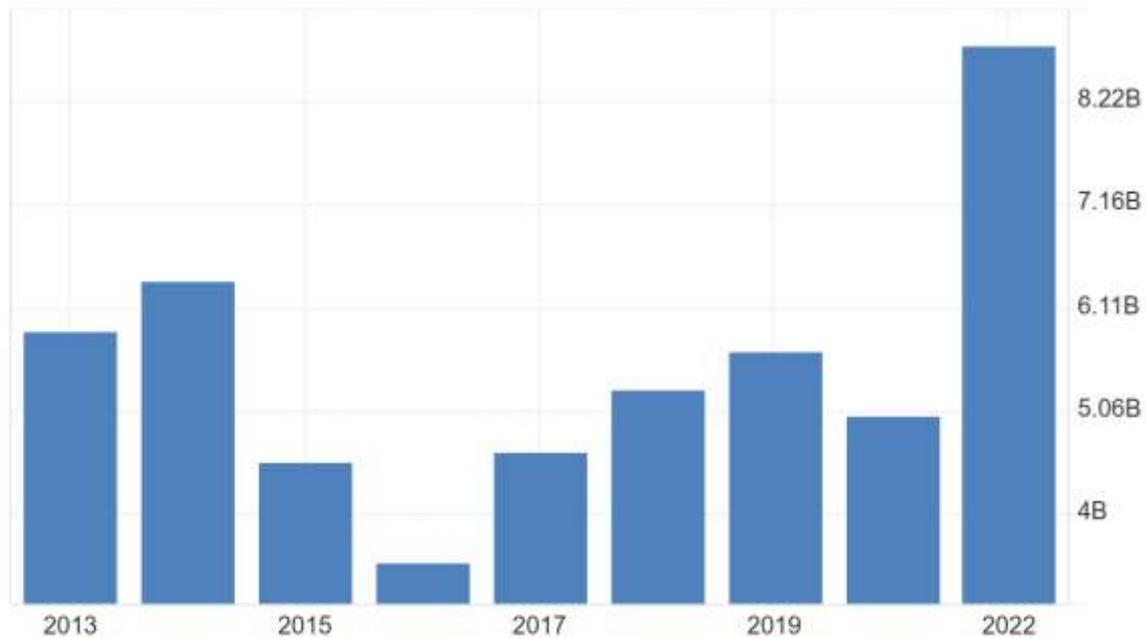
Source: tradingeconomics.com | Comtrade

Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com/kazakhstan/exports/russia>

In 2022, [Kazakhstan's exports to Russia](#) reached a value of 8.78 billion dollars. The main products exported from Kazakhstan to Russia included radioactive chemicals (959 million dollars), hot-rolled iron (473 million dollars) and precious metal ores (339 million dollars). Over the past 26 years, Kazakhstan's exports to Russia have grown steadily at an annual rate of 4.74%, from 2.63 billion dollars in 1996 to 8.78 billion dollars in 2022.

Table 2: Kazakhstan Exports to Russia

Kazakhstan exports to Russia



Source: tradingeconomics.com | Comtrade

Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com/kazakhstan/exports/russia>

Uzbekistan is the second most important partner in Russia's trade relations. Especially after the Color Revolution, bilateral relations have strengthened as Uzbekistan has moved closer to Russia. In 2010, the volume of trade between the two countries doubled to around 6 billion dollars. Energy resources have had a significant impact on this increase. For example, [Gazprom](#) (Russian oil company) bought gas from Uzbekistan in [2010](#). At the same time, the Russian energy company Lukoil is also active in Uzbekistan.

In 2022, Uzbekistan's exports to Russia totaled 2.6 billion dollars. The primary products exported from Uzbekistan to Russia included Non-Retail Pure Cotton Yarn (390 million dollars), Grapes (167 million dollars), and Knit T-shirts (164 million dollars). Over the past 26 years, Uzbekistan's exports to Russia have shown steady growth, with an annualized rate of 5.67%, rising from 619 million dollars in 1996 to 2.6 billion dollars in [2022](#).

In 2022, Russia's exports to Uzbekistan amounted to 5.62 billion dollars. The main products exported from Russia to Uzbekistan included refined petroleum (510 million dollars), hot-rolled iron (399 million dollars) and sawn timber (363 million dollars). Over the past 26 years, Russia's exports to Uzbekistan have grown steadily



at an annual rate of 6.56%, from 1.08 billion dollars in 1996 to 5.62 billion dollars in [2022](#).

[In addition](#), Russia supplied services worth 701 million dollars to Uzbekistan in 2020. The largest categories of services exported from Russia to Uzbekistan were travel (237 million dollars), construction services (173 million dollars) and transportation (136 million dollars).

Turkmenistan is another of Russia's trading partners. Political, military and economic relations between the two countries have gained momentum since the mid-2000s. Energy resources form the basis of their economic relations. In addition, the change of power in Turkmenistan and the openness of its foreign policy have had a positive influence on relations with Russia. Developments such as the purchase of trucks from Russia by Turkmenistan and the increase in the activities of the Russian mobile phone company in Turkmenistan have improved economic relations between Russia and Turkmenistan.

In the last five years, Russia has become one of Turkmenistan's most important foreign trade partners. The volume of Turkmen-Russian trade has reached a considerable level, exceeding 1.6 billion dollars annually. Large Russian companies such as Gazprom, Tatneft, Kamaz and Vozrojdeniya are active on the Turkmen market. In addition, the regions of St. Petersburg, Tatarstan and Astrakhan have played an active role in regional cooperation between the two countries. Russia attaches great importance to friendly relations with Turkmenistan, which contribute to strengthening stability and security in Central Asia and the Caspian region, the Russian embassy in Ashgabat said in a [press release](#).

In 2021, [Russia's exports to Turkmenistan](#) amounted to 473 million dollars. The main products exported from Russia to Turkmenistan are not known. Over the past 25 years, Russia's exports to Turkmenistan have grown steadily, at an annual rate of 5.83%, from 115 million dollars in 1996 to 473 million dollars in 2021. In addition, Russia supplied 217 million dollars worth of services to Turkmenistan in 2020. The largest categories of services exported from Russia to Turkmenistan were travel (103 million dollars), construction services (61.9 million dollars) and transportation (24.3 million dollars).

In 2021, [Turkmenistan's exports to Russia](#) amounted to 134 million dollars. Over the past 25 years, Turkmenistan's exports to Russia have declined slightly, at an annualized rate of -0.44%, from 150 million dollars in 1996 to 134 million dollars in 2021.

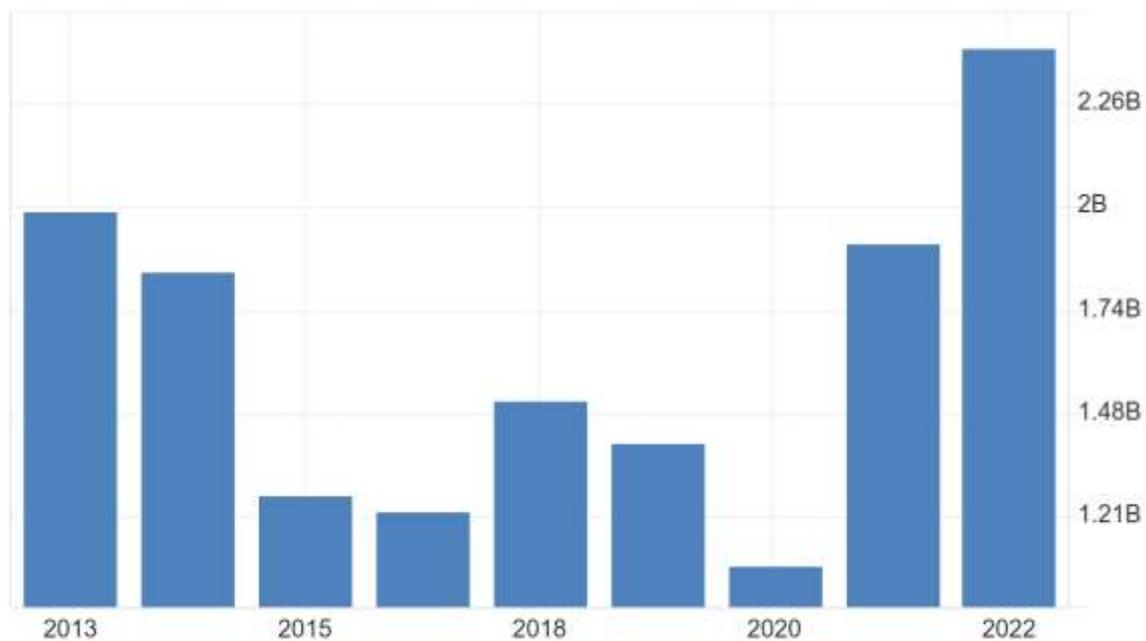
Russia is one of Kyrgyzstan's most important [trade allies](#), with the volume of trade increasing significantly every year. Russia primarily exports a range of commodities to Kyrgyzstan, including energy products, iron and steel products, food and industrial goods. Conversely, Kyrgyzstan generally exports various goods such as agricultural products, textiles and mining products to Russia.

[Kyrgyz Prime Minister Akylbek Zhaparov said](#) that the volume of trade between Kyrgyzstan and Russia reached 3.4 billion dollars in 2022. Over the past five years, joint trade between the two countries has increased by 1.8 times, with exports to Russia increasing by 3 times and imports by 19.3 times. Zhaparov said that Russia's share in Kyrgyzstan's total trade turnover is 27.4 percent and emphasized that the trade volume target with Russia is 5 billion dollars and plans to sign mutual agreements worth more than 3.5 billion dollars.

In 2022, [Russia's exports to Kyrgyzstan](#) amounted to 2.22 billion dollars. The main products exported from Russia to Kyrgyzstan include refined petroleum (732 million dollars), pig iron ingots (101 million dollars) and cars (96.3 million dollars). Over the past 27 years, Russia's exports to Kyrgyzstan have grown steadily at an annual rate of 11.8%, from 108 million dollars in 1995 to 2.22 billion dollars in 2022. In addition, Russia supplied 412 million dollars worth of services to Kyrgyzstan in 2020. The largest categories of services exported from Russia to Kyrgyzstan were travel (320 million dollars), transportation (50.4 million dollars) and computer and information services (11.3 million dollars).

Table 3: Kyrgyzstan imports from Russia

Kyrgyzstan imports from Russia



Source: tradingeconomics.com | Comtrade

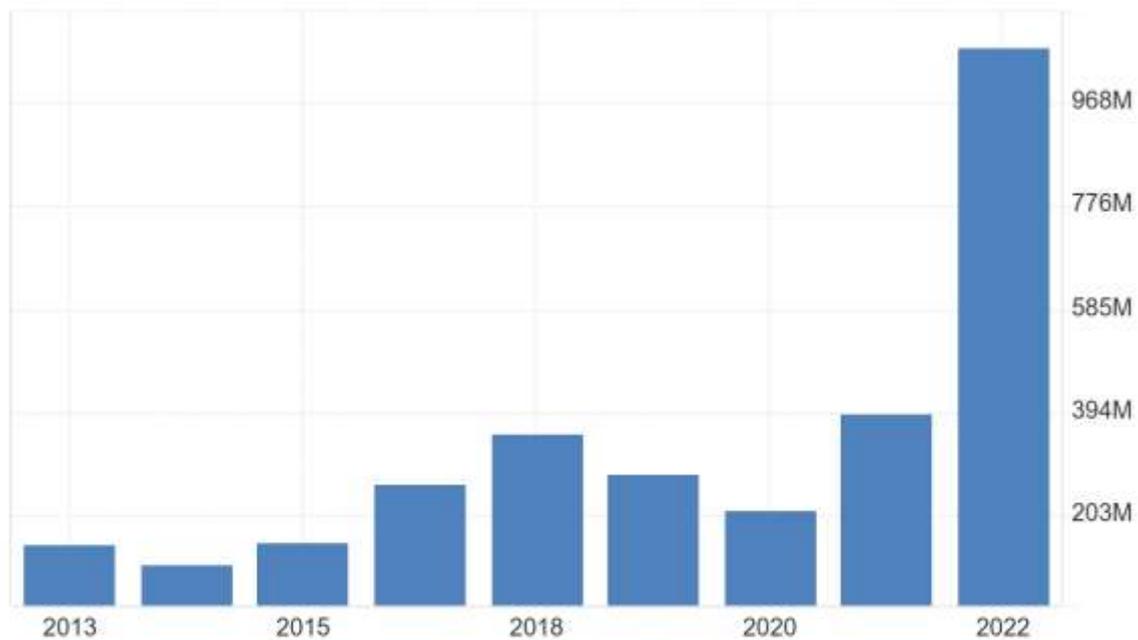
Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com/kyrgyzstan/imports/russia>

In 2022, [Kyrgyzstan's exports to Russia](#) amounted to a total of 1.07 billion dollars. The main products exported from Kyrgyzstan to Russia included copper scrap (86.2

million dollars), pure cotton yarn for non-retail trade (84.5 million dollars) and light rubberized knitwear (52.4 million dollars). Over the past 27 years, Kyrgyz exports to Russia have grown steadily at an annual rate of 8.98%, from 105 million dollars in 1995 to 1.07 billion dollars in 2022.

Table 4: Kyrgyzstan exports to Russia

Kyrgyzstan exports to Russia



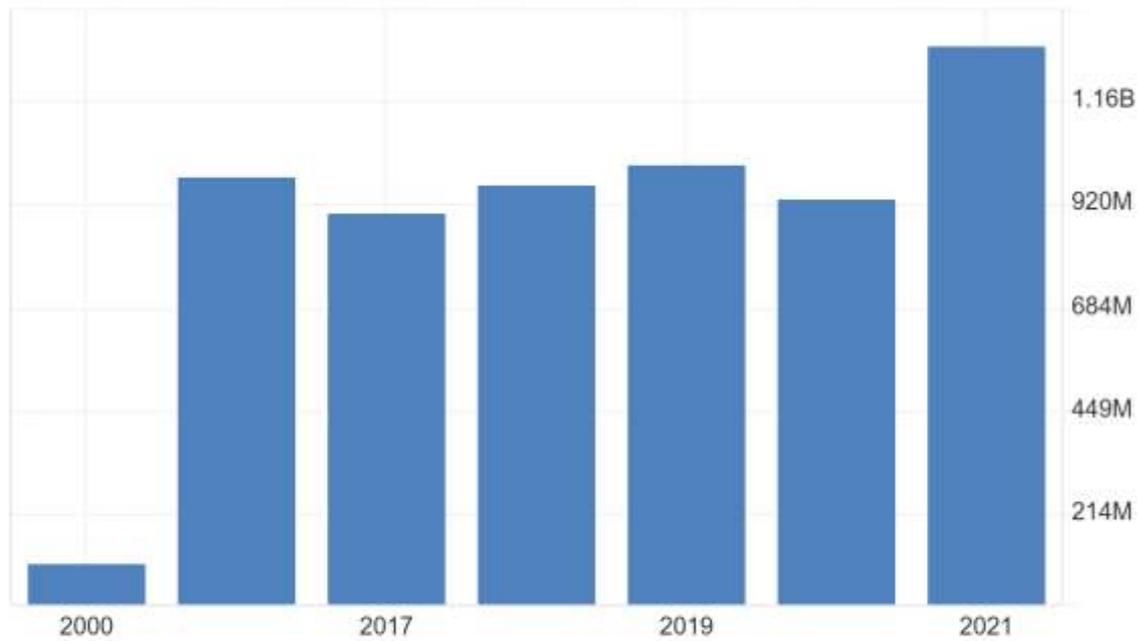
Source: tradingeconomics.com | Comtrade

Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com/kyrgyzstan/exports/russia>

Looking at trade between [Russia and Tajikistan](#), it is clear that the volume of trade between the two nations is considerable. In 2022, Russia exported goods worth 1.46 billion dollars to Tajikistan. The most important export goods include refined petroleum (530 million dollars), sawn timber (99.3 million dollars) and margarine (52.1 million dollars). Over the past 26 years, Russian exports to Tajikistan have shown consistent growth, with an annual rate of 9.12%, rising from 151 million dollars in 1996 to 1.46 billion dollars in 2022.

Table 5: Tajikistan imports from Russia

Tajikistan imports from Russia



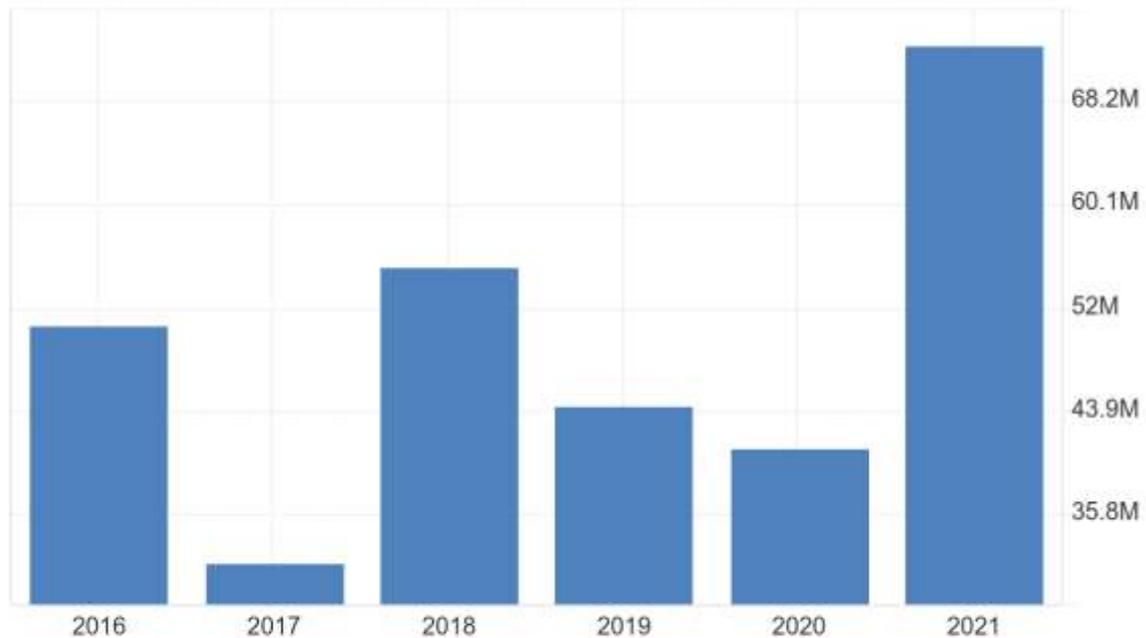
Source: tradingeconomics.com | Comtrade

Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com/tajikistan/imports/russia>

Conversely, [Tajikistan exported](#) 88.2 million dollars worth of goods to Russia in 2022. The main products exported from Tajikistan to Russia were pure cotton yarn for non-retail trade (25.5 million dollars), raw cotton (15.5 million dollars) and dried fruits (13.4 million dollars). Although the export volume from Tajikistan to Russia is comparatively smaller, it has increased slightly at an annualized rate of 0.2 over the last 26 years and reached 88.2 million dollars in 2022.

Table 6: Tajikistan exports to Russia

Tajikistan exports to Russia



Source: tradingeconomics.com | Comtrade

Source: <https://tradingeconomics.com/tajikistan/exports/russia>

When we look at Russia's economic relations with Central Asia in general, Gazprom also has an important place. Gazprom was founded in 1989 and is one of the largest energy companies in the world. Therefore, it positively affects economic relations with Central Asian countries. Gazprom procures a part of its total gas exports from Central Asian countries (Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan). This rate constantly changes as a result of agreements made between countries.

Russian foreign direct investment (FDI) in Central Asia varied between 2016 and 2020. In Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, it averaged 32% and 14.1% respectively of total FDI stocks. Notably, Russian net FDI inflows to Kyrgyzstan were the highest in the region at around 15% of total inflows. In Kazakhstan, Russian investment is largely confined to large-scale mining [projects](#).

Energy

Oil and gas are known to be important sources of revenue and geopolitical leverage for nations around the world, with Russia being one of the biggest energy powers



on the global stage. Due to its abundance of natural resources such as natural gas, oil and coal, Russia occupies a prominent position as a major energy exporter. Russia also plays a decisive role in marketing the energy resources of the Central Asian countries to the consumer countries. With an extensive network of pipelines in its own region, Russia has a considerable influence on the transportation of [energy resources](#).

After the dissolution of the Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of the Commonwealth of Independent States countries, particularly Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan, these countries wanted to become major players in the region by developing their economies and reaching international markets with their energy resources. However, as they lacked the infrastructure to transport these resources to international markets, the Central Asian countries took various initiatives to build pipelines for this purpose.

Concerned about losing transit fees, Russia opened its pipelines to Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan. However, these pipelines proved to be insufficient for both countries, so Kazakhstan decided to join [the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan](#) pipeline and thus reduce its dependence on Russia. As a result, relations between Russia and Turkmenistan developed primarily in the energy sector, culminating in a natural gas agreement in [2003](#). Gazprom, the Russian energy giant, buys cheap gas from Turkmenistan for domestic consumption.

Energy-related relations between Russia and Uzbekistan are also important. According to bilateral agreements, Uzbekistan has leased its gas fields, including Shahpati, to Russia for a period of [15 years](#). As a result, these countries have become dependent on Russia for access to international markets for their energy resources. It can be assumed that this dependence will continue in the coming years. Russia is using this dependency strategically as an instrument of its foreign [policy](#).

However, there are various competing interests between China, the EU, the USA and Japan regarding the use of energy resources in the [Central Asian region](#). As Russia does not like to see rival nations exerting influence in the region, it is trying to consolidate the Central Asian countries under a common umbrella. A notable example of this is Russia's efforts to strengthen its control over the sale of natural gas from Kazakhstan and Turkmenistan to European markets, effectively sidelining Turkey. Russia opposes all energy projects involving CIS countries without its consent, as demonstrated by its attempts to prevent the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline.

A look at Putin's Russia shows that the country is wary of any developments that could have a negative impact on its energy interests. In fact, Russia is actively involved in projects involving Iran and China, countries with which the Central Asian states are cooperating to prevent developments that could affect its interests. Consequently, Russia is closely monitoring developments in order to secure its influence and dominance in the energy sector in the region.



Eurasian Economic Union

The process leading to the [Eurasian Economic Community \(EEC\)](#) began after the Customs Union Agreement signed between Russia and Belarus in 1995. The EEC comprises Russia, Belarus, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan with the aim of formulating a common economic policy and creating a single customs union. This community can be seen as a new opportunity to promote the integration process for both Russia and the CIS countries. In addition, the EEC aims to create a single energy area. Russia sees this organization as an alternative to the World Trade Organization (WTO) and would like to strengthen it. From the Russian perspective, the importance of this community lies in Putin's inclination towards a Eurasian political framework in his foreign policy agenda, especially in the neighboring Central Asian region. After the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia was unsettled by the drift of CIS states towards organizations such as the EU and NATO, prompting it to protect its interests in Central Asia through organizations such as the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, the CIS, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Eurasian Economic Community. While the CSTO represents Russia's military presence in Central Asia, the EEC serves as its economic arm.

In summary, the Eurasian Economic Community is emerging as a major player in shaping the economic landscape of the region, with Russia at the forefront, seeking to strengthen its influence and economic integration between the member states.

Russian Minorities in Central Asia

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, significant [Russian minority](#) communities emerged in the countries of the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), playing a crucial role in Russian foreign policy. President Putin recognized the importance of the Russian communities living in Central Asia and ensured their representation by establishing a commission in the Russian parliament, [the Duma](#). In addition, Putin was keen to use Russian minorities as an influential tool in his relations with [Central Asia](#).

The presence of the Russian population in Central Asia has had a positive impact on Russia's presence in the region. With almost identical ethnic and cultural ties, the two regions have historically maintained close relations. The Russian population in the region gives Moscow the right to interfere in the internal affairs of the CIS countries, which is particularly evident in Kazakhstan, which is home to the largest Russian minority. Russia is satisfied with the presence of Russian communities in Central Asia, as this enables the defense of their cultural rights. This mutual interaction has facilitated the defense of the rights of citizens of both countries and the rapid resolution of problems to avoid tensions in bilateral relations, which has further promoted rapprochement between Central Asia and Russia.

Table 7: Proportion of Russians in the Ethnic Structure of the Population of the Regions of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2021

Region	%	Region	%
Akmola	32,2	Kostanay	40,5
Aktöbe	10,7	Kızılorda	1,7
Almatı	12,8	Mangistav	5
Atırau	5	Türkistan	1,6
West Kazakhstan	18,4	Pavlodar	34,5
Jambıl	9,3	North Kazakhstan	49,2
Karagandı	34,6	East Kazakhstan	35,4
Nur-Sultan	11,8		
Çimkent	8,5		

Source: <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/2334999#:~:text=Bugün%20Orta%20Asya'da%20yaklaşık,asgari%20olduğu%20Kazakistan'da%20yoğunlaşmıştır.>

Table 8: Proportion of Russians in the Ethnic Structure of the Population of the Regions of the Kyrgyz Republic 2017

Region	%	Region	%
Batken	0,5	Narin	0,04
Celal-Abat	0,6	Oş	0,1
Issık-Göl	6,2	Talas	1,4
Çuy	16,1	Bişkek	17,7

Source: <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/2334999#:~:text=Bugün%20Orta%20Asya'da%20yaklaşık,asgari%20olduğu%20Kazakistan'da%20yoğunlaşmıştır.>

Table 9: Rate of Change of Russian Population in Uzbekistan by Regions (1989-2017)

Region	1989	2005	2013	2017
Andican	2,6	0,9	0,7	0,6
Buhara	8,2	2,0	1,6	1,4

Cizzak	4,4	1,7	1,3	1,2
Karakalpakistan Republic	1,6	0,8	0,6	0,6
Kaskaderya	2,4	1,0	0,7	0,7
Nevai		4,5	2,5	1,9
Namangan	1,9	0,7	0,5	0,4
Semer kand	5	2,2	1,5	1,3
Surhanderya	3	1,3	1,0	0,9
Taskent	14,6	7,4	5,6	5,0
Fergana	5,8	2,0	1,4	1,2
Harez m	1,2	0,5	0,4	0,3
Taskent City	34	21,6	16,2	14,2
Sirderya	10	4,4	3,3	2,9

Source: <https://dergipark.org.tr/en/download/article-file/2334999#:~:text=Bugün%20Orta%20Asya'da%20yaklaşık,asgari%20olduğu%20Kazakistan'da%20yoğunlaşmıştır.>

Conclusion

When Vladimir Putin took office in the early 2000s, there were significant changes in Russia and the world. As Yeltsin's successor, Putin made changes to foreign policy he gave priority to the Central Asian countries and visited Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan shortly after taking office, which was well received in the region. For Putin, the importance of Central Asia lies in Russia's security concept.

Russia was keen to maintain control over these regions to prevent any perceived threat to its own country. It also did not want to lose its strategic interests in the region. To this end, Russia pursued military, political and economic cooperation with the region and recognized the importance of energy resources in Central Asia. Russia has influence over the energy exports of these countries and opposes their independent export of natural gas or oil to other states. There were frequent disagreements over the construction of pipelines with the CIS countries as Russia sought a monopoly over energy resources.

Overall, Putin was not able to achieve complete dominance in Central Asia, but he wanted to have a say in the region. The interest of other major powers in the region also prompted Putin to cultivate closer relations with Central Asia. This can be seen in the regional organizations he founded to promote military and economic relations with Central Asia. In the military sphere, the Collective Security Treaty Organization and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization are the best examples.



Russia established these organizations to preemptively counter threats from other states or Central Asian countries. In economic terms, Russia supported the Central Asian states and invested in them in order to make them economically dependent on itself. In this way, Putin pursued strategic initiatives in Central Asia and ensured that these countries gave him priority in their foreign policy. He was also cautious about China's potential influence in the region and excluded the country from organizations other than the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Throughout history, Central Asia will retain its geopolitical and strategic importance due to its energy and natural resources and its role as a bridge between East and West. Russia is keen to maintain and expand its relations with these countries and is even striving to become the dominant power in the region.

Notes

¹ The Near Abroad Doctrine is Russia's strategy for strengthening and controlling its relations with its border neighbors and nearby regions. This strategy is aimed at expanding Russia's sphere of influence as a regional power and protecting its strategic interests.

² "Managed democracy" refers to the practice of authoritarian leaders using democratic institutions to maintain their power. In Putin's Russia, while maintaining a democratic facade, dissent is repressed and authoritarian practices continue.

³ The Andijan Incidents refers to the clashes that erupted in Andijan, Uzbekistan in 2005 when protests in the city turned violent. Security forces opened fire on anti-government demonstrators, resulting in the deaths of hundreds of people. The incidents sparked international outrage and drew criticism of the Uzbek government for its human rights violations.

⁴ "What Does the Customs Union Mean? The Customs Union was born primarily as an attempt to implement common market norms. Harmonization of customs codes and tariffs and regulation of the foreign trade process and technical legal framework constitute the primary task of the Customs Union" (Keleş, 2016).