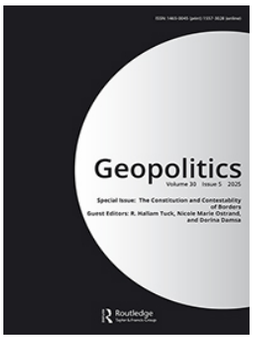

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What Happens When Borders Reopen? Dematerialising the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Boundary

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ABSTRACT

Border studies have recently been focussed on what happens when borders close, leaving the question of border reopenings both largely unexplored and unconceptualized. We argue here for a new focus on border dematerialisations to complement existing work on border materialisations. This is supported by a detailed, interdisciplinary study of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border conducted by a geographer and an economist. Having been largely sealed for many years, a change of leadership in Uzbekistan in 2016 precipitated a major policy shift promoting transboundary trade, cooperation and movement. Using both macroeconomic data analysis and ethnographic study, we trace what Uzbekistan did to reopen borders and show the economic and political consequences.

Introduction: How Can We Spot an Open Border?

In his evocative book *Human Territoriality*, photographer Roger Eberhard (2020) presents the reader with images of the sites of past borders from across the world. Some of these have faded away with the passing of the states and empires that erected them, others have moved as the landscape has altered, and in some cases neighbouring countries simply decided that they can manage without them. His striking collection poses the question that frames this paper: what happens when borders reopen?

This question runs against the grain of contemporary border studies, which is preoccupied with charting the effects of borders materialising in new places and in new ways. Writing in early 2022 Élisabeth Vallet tallied seventy-four border walls/fences/barricades across the globe – most erected in the twenty-first century – with a further fifteen being planned (Vallet 2022). More have been built or announced since then. At the same time, these physical barricades have been augmented by new practices and technologies of border

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controls, which increasingly extend outwards to intercept potential migrants before they ever reach the actual boundary, and inwards over state territory as employers, schools, and hospitals are required to police the immigration status of service users. Even a major border dematerialisation initiative like the EU's Schengen agreement has come under stress as member states have introduced piecemeal migration controls. These measures are often driven by and in turn are drivers of xenophobic anti-migrant policies (Jones 2021). The International Organisation for Migration counted nearly 70,000 migrant deaths between 2014 and 2024.[1]

Border studies' focus on the materialisation of borders is thus wholly understandable and appropriate. However, this means that the counter-dynamics of border dematerialisation are generally missed. There is no established field of what might be called 'border reopenings'. For sure, discussion of the topic can be found scattered across a number of fields of enquiry. The 'borderless world' literature on the effects of economic globalisation on trade and finance began in the 1970 s (West 1972) and reached its apex at the end of the Cold War (Ohmae 1989). By the early 2000 s it was clear that for large numbers of people borders were closing in greater and unprecedented ways. Currently the most dynamic set of debates about what border dematerialisations might look like is the 'open borders' literature within moral/political philosophy, economics, migration studies, Indigenous land rights, and other fields (Jones 2019). This work, inevitably, tends to be declarative and hypothetical. Some more empirically informed study of borders by human geographers and others has used the concept of borderland (the landscapes and social spaces proximate to and structured by international boundaries) to examine border dematerialisations in Western Europe (Wassenberg 2023), from critically interrogating the limits of cross-border identification produced by the EU project (Gielis and Van Houtum 2012; Sidaway 2001), to exploring the practical challenges created by the emergence of integrated transboundary economic regions like Greater Geneva (Sohn 2020). In contrast, scholars of Eastern Europe have used von Hirschhausen et al.'s (2019) concept of 'phantom borders' (see also von Löwis 2015) to illuminate the tangible social traces of earlier political boundaries or territorial entities, for example to show how the defunct boundaries of former empires have influenced contemporary voting patterns in Poland (Zarycki 2015) and Ukraine (Solonenko 2017).

Within Critical Security Studies a few examples can be found where scholars have looked at the desecuritisation of borders – that is, the movement of an issue from the realm of emergency into that which can be understood and managed within the sphere of 'normal politics'. These include failed examples – such as the how the EU crushed the efforts of Greece's Syriza-led coalition government to reopen borders by dismantling a new border wall built against migrants headed from Turkey (Skleparis 2018). Within the fields of public health and epidemiology the lifting of border controls after the

Covid-19 pandemic potentially offers a rich data source on the effects of border dematerialisations (Chiu et al. 2024; Huang et al. 2022; Le et al. 2022). Finally, from Medby's (2023) work on people-to-people participation across the former 'Iron curtain' in the Barents Sea region, to Bryant's (2010) exploration of the impacts on Cypriot societies of the 2003 opening of crossings over the 'Green Line', we can identify a range of scholarship that does not locate itself in any sort of border studies literature, but which offers passing and incidental insights into what happens when borders reopen.

These varied studies from the humanities, social, and medical sciences each individually tell us something interesting about what happens when border control regimes are relaxed or international boundaries themselves are erased, but there are three reasons why they are insufficient to address the general question of what happens when borders reopen. First, there is a marked skew towards processes in 'the Global North', where national politics have increasingly been animated by border closures. There are other stories happening elsewhere (García García 2024) but these often get missed. Second, the siloing of scholarly disciplines means that there is little or no dialogue between the multiple studies identified above, located as they are in genres and questions set by academic disciplines and their relevant journals. Third, there has been no attempt to conceptualise the collective subject matter identified above as the same kind of phenomena, meaning that it is not even possible to think of or talk within a collective field of the study of border reopenings.

This paper proposes an approach for the study of border reopenings by addressing each of these three problems. First, it is a study of processes in the 'Global South'. Second, it is an inter-disciplinary collaboration between an economist and a geographer. Third, it suggests that the common subject matter of these studies can be conceptualised as 'border dematerialisations'. This builds on an approach to border studies that Megoran (2012) previously advanced to think about the 'biographies' of international boundaries – how they materialise, rematerialise, and (crucially for this paper) dematerialise in different ways and at different sites and scales over time. These sites include the economic, bureaucratic, infrastructural, commercial, social, and discursive elements of border. This nuanced appreciation of the diverse forms and functions of contemporary bordering allows us to move beyond stark open/closed binaries. This article does this by examining the impacts of a significant but little-known dematerialisation of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan Ferghana Valley border from 2016 onwards.

It proceeds as follows. After setting out the background to border closures and reopenings in the Ferghana Valley (Figure 1) and the methods used, it identifies policy changes since 2016 and then looks at the impact of these from two perspectives – macroeconomic and ethnographic data. It concludes with some comments about the significance of this research for the study of both border reopenings, and economic processes in Central Asia.

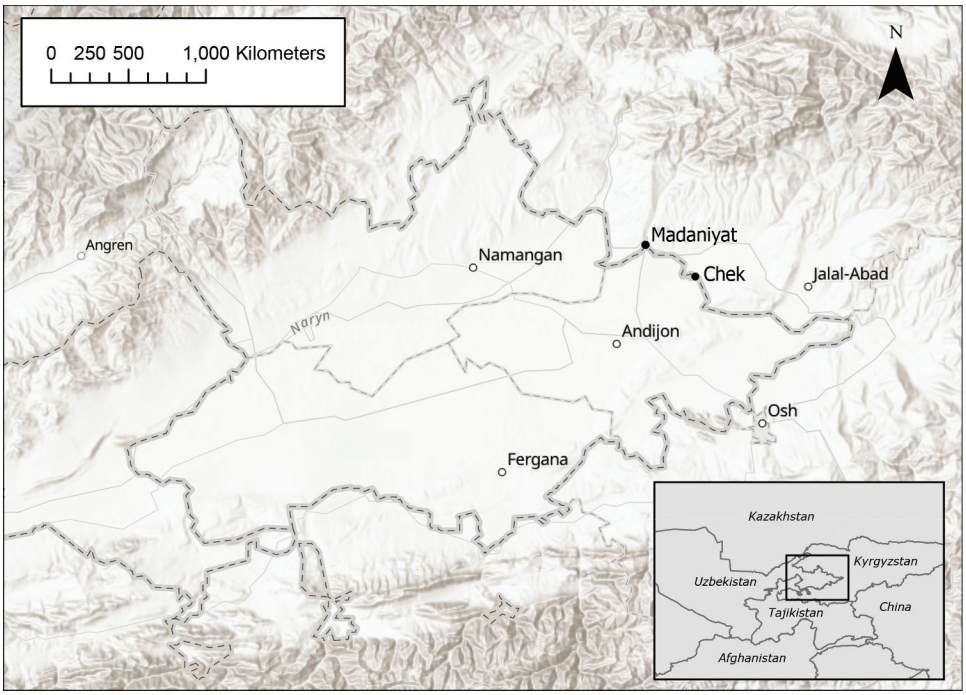

Figure 1. The Ferghana Valley (Image: Nick Megoran).

Borders in the Ferghana Valley

The present-day international boundary between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan has its origins in the process of national delimitation of territory undertaken by the Soviets in the 1920 s and 30 s (Koichiev 2003). This sought to balance two major principles of uniting nascent nations and their territories on the one hand, and creating viable economic units as judged by factors such as irrigation and transport links on the other (Abdullaev 1959). This process created the Kyrgyz and Uzbek Soviet Socialist Republics which, upon the dissolution of the USSR, were succeeded by the Kyrgyz Republic and Republic of Uzbekistan. Prior to 1991 their mutual boundary was never fully delimited, and many major infrastructural and communication projects in the Ferghana Valley were undertaken on a joint basis during that period. In towns and villages across the Valley it was common for a person to have lived, married, studied and worked on different sides of the boundary over time meaning that economic, social, kinship and educational networks wantonly transgressed what had suddenly materialised as an international boundary in 1991. Upon independence, therefore, both leaders stressed their desire for free travel and open borders between their states (Karimov 1992; Kyrgyz Tuusu 1998).

However, this resolution did not long outlive the pressures of independent nation-statehood. In late 1998 Uzbekistan began translating the international boundary (a vertical plane of no physical width marking the juridical extent of

state territorial sovereignty) into a palpable border (the infrastructures and institutions mediating exchange over the boundary). Cross-border bus routes were terminated, most roads over borders were blocked and bridges demolished, village neighbourhoods alongside the boundary were flattened, and a militarised border of multiple layers of barbed wire with armed patrols and watchtowers was established. Migrant workers who crossed the border each day for work were sacked, schoolchildren who traversed it for education in their mother tongue expelled and visas or other documents were demanded even to visit nearby relatives (Megoran 2017a). This was traumatic for borderland populations, and put added pressure on ethnic minorities – especially the Uzbeks of Kyrgyzstan who were commonly viewed by Kyrgyz as being more loyal to Tashkent than Bishkek and who suffered disproportionately in the ethnic-based violence that wracked border areas in southern Kyrgyzstan in 2010 and which, according to official figures, killed some 450 people (Kutmanaliev 2023). This violence led to a temporary total closure of the border, with many of the restrictions introduced at that time subsequently becoming permanent.

These border closures were justified by Karimov primarily on security and economic grounds. On security, Dadabaev argues that Uzbekistan's relations with its neighbours under Karimov were 'held hostage to the security issues' that he prioritised (Dadabaev 2021, 77). Economics were behind the first recorded border closures between the two states, when in 1993 Uzbekistan temporarily sealed its border with Kyrgyzstan as an emergency measure to prevent Russian currency flooding into the republic in response to Kyrgyzstan's exit from the rouble zone as it introduced its own currency (Olcott 1994, 39–41). Karimov likewise explained the later permanent closures when, on February 13, 1999, he said that the Osh-Andijon cross-border bus service, along with many other Ferghana Valley routes, had been suspended because 'Kyrgyzstan is a poor country, and it is not my job to look after the people. Every day 5000 people come from Osh to Andijon – if each of them buys a loaf of bread, there will not be enough left for my people'.[2]

However, in reality these measures had negative economic effects. Writing in this journal, Megoran, Raballand, and Bouyjou (2005) show that between 1995 and 2003 the value of Uzbekistan's trade with Kyrgyzstan decreased by a factor 3.[3] This decrease was even more pronounced if we consider the trade data for the adjacent Osh region of Kyrgyzstan. Exports from Osh to Uzbekistan dropped by more than 80%[4] between 2000 and 2001 and fell by a further factor of three between 2001 and 2002. Drawing on critical geopolitical and borders theory, that paper argued the performance of tough border controls is better understood as a geopolitical vision performing and inscribing territorially based visions of sovereignty and national identity. Karimov depicted his new border regime as vital for protecting Uzbekistan's happiness and prosperity from the threat posed by weak and chaotic Kyrgyzstan, and in

so doing justified authoritarian rule. Nationalism is an inherently geographical project, and the border acted as the site at which the nation-state was territorialised in Uzbekistan's nation-building project (Megoran 2017b).

Border Reopenings

In closing Uzbekistan's borders in these ways, Karimov anticipated what would become a new global norm of building barricades and sealing borders (Vallet 2021). However, in 2017 the unexpected happened – the republic began reopening them. Karimov died in September 2016 and, contrary to long-standing western pundits' predictions about a disorderly transition, by the end of the year was swiftly and smoothly replaced by his supposed protégé, Shavkat Mirziyoyev. Since then, numerous crossing points with neighbouring states have reopened variously for pedestrians, vehicles and freight. This article investigates this process in relation to Kyrgyzstan.

Levin (2024) writes that early predictions that Mirziyoyev's election would lead to business as usual proved quite wrong, as he quickly moved to liberalise the economy, improve relations with neighbours, and signal a willingness to relinquish some executive power. Ruiz-Ramas and Hernández, in contrast, argue that the transition is fundamentally marked by continuity. In their account, Karimov built Uzbekistan into a patrimonial state, that is one where formal-bureaucratic and informal-patrimonial logics coexist (Ruiz-Ramas and Hernández 2021, 121). Mirziyoyev consolidated this neopatrimonial authoritarianism, moving against rivals in the security services and widening his own networks by drawing on tycoons, western-educated technocrats, and others disaffected by Karimov.

Nonetheless, all observers agree that Mirziyoyev took Uzbekistan along a marked foreign policy change. Although he has maintained Karimov's previous policy of military neutrality (Toktogulov 2022) based on 'the principle of non-alignment with military and political blocks and non-intervention in the affairs of neighbouring states' (Dadabaev 2019, 163–4), Mirziyoyev has pivoted away Karimov's focus on autarkic self-reliance and the valorisation of sovereignty over good relations with neighbours (Fazendeiro 2017, 17). Dadabaev's (2021) decolonial examination of Uzbekistan's international relations is the fullest exploration of this. He argues that whereas Karimov priortised security and regime survival, Mirziyoyev has adopted a 'cooperation agenda' that has desecuritized regional relations and shifted narratives from competition to cooperation leading to swift changes such as resolving longstanding territorial conflict and relaxing rules about cross-border movement (Dadabaev, 77–81). Given Uzbekistan's central location in the region, some have argued that these policies may inaugurate 'a new era for regionalism and cooperation in Central Asia' (Costa Buranelli 2021, 10).

Top priorities for Mirziyoyev were repairing relations with immediate neighbours and increasing the volume of regional trade. Complicated

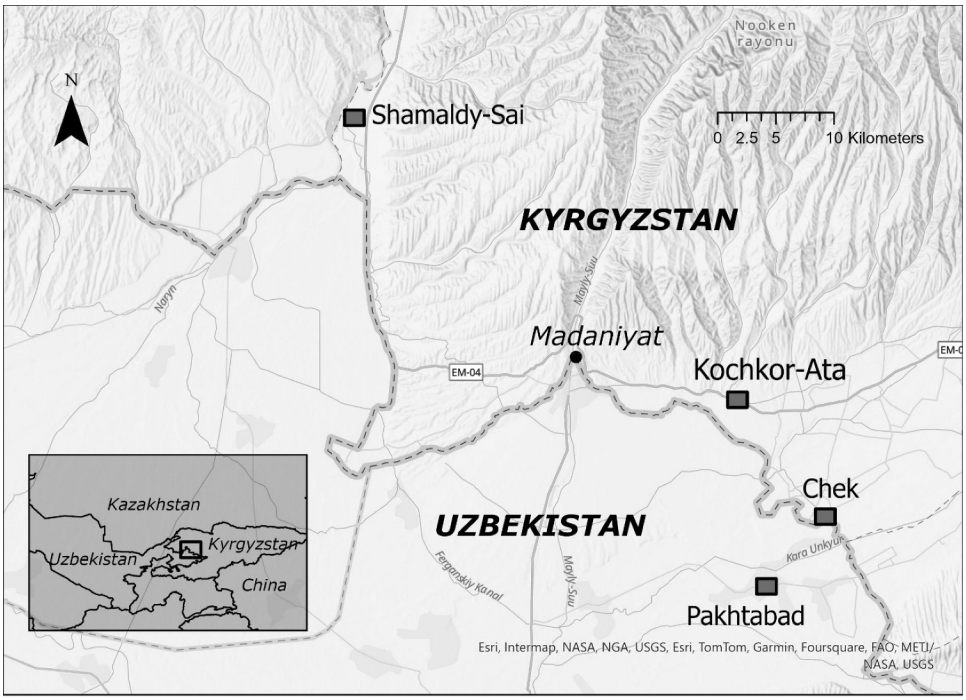

Figure 2. Fieldwork site around the Madaniyat border crossing (Image: Nick Megoran).

boundary and hydro-territorial disputes with Kyrgyzstan such as those over the Kasan-Sai and Kerkidan reservoirs were swiftly resolved (Murzakulova 2021). To great fanfare, border crossings which had been sealed for years, such as that at Madaniyat (Figure 2 – the focus of the latter part of this paper), were refurbished and reopened.[5] Buses began plying cross-border routes for the first time in a quarter of a century.[6] Whereas Karimov's suspicion of foreign organisations promoting transboundary development projects led him to veto Uzbekistani participation in schemes like the 1990 s ill-fated UN Ferghana Valley Development Project, Mirziyoyev welcomed such ventures.[7] A new Kyrgyz-Uzbek Development Fund began supporting cross-border commercial enterprises,[8] with sectors like tourism marked as particular priorities.[9]

Articles on these developments in the official Uzbek press celebrated connection rather than separation, and drew an implicit critique of the Karimov period. For example, reporting of the September 2023 reopening of the Khanabad crossing noted that it was last used 14 years previously, and included an interview with a local woman whose daughter married nearby just across the boundary. She said that whereas it used to take her three hours via *Do'stlik* crossing to visit her, now it only took 10 minutes.[10]

The centrality of border issues to bilateral relations is indicated by the importance given to a state visit the Uzbek president made to Kyrgyzstan in January 2023, marking the 30th anniversary of the formal establishment of

diplomatic relations between the two neighbours. The heads of state signed documents ratifying boundary delimitations, reducing bureaucracy for border-crossing, expanding cooperation between specific regions such as Namangan and Jalal-Abad and Andijon and Osh (Figure 1), setting up a Council of Heads of Border Regions, and establishing specific joint ventures as part of a programme on strategic trade-economic partnerships.[11] 'There is no similar space for such a unique dialogue with any other country', Mirziyoyev said at the concluding press conference.[12]

The Uzbekistani government thus claims to have implemented a sea change in border policy with positive effects for borderlanders. Political scientists such as Anceschi (2019, 112) have claimed that these policies have brought 'substantial benefits to the lives of the many Central Asians residing in the Uzbek borderlands'. How true is this? In important initial research, Murzakulova (2022) observes how previously separated families have been able to meet up more easily as a result of these reopenings, while Alieva et al. (2020) note ongoing capacity problems limiting transboundary economic activity like tourism. Ruiz-Ramas and Hernández (2021) predicted that Mirziyoyev's regional and borders policy 'will benefit border communities, particularly Uzbek communities in Kyrgyzstan'. This paper establishes in greater breadth and depth what the effects of the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border reopenings have actually been, and in so doing reflects on its broader implications for border studies.

Methods

Allen laments the lack of borders research that articulates multiperspectival approaches through empirical studies of specific places (Allen 2013, 293). Responding to that call, this paper is a collaboration between an economist (Enikeeva) and a political geographer (Megoran). Our chosen research methods – analysis of macroeconomic data and ethnographies of rural border areas respectively – are complementary and were previously used to good effect in the pages of this journal (Megoran, Raballand, and Bouyjou 2005) to illuminate the negative effects of the original border closures. That paper was held up by Newman as a rare example of the type of cross-disciplinary work that is needed to advance border studies (Newman 2006, 144). This present paper builds on that earlier study, asking this time what happens when an attempt is made to undo some of the negative effects identified two decades earlier.

Between us, we undertook four different research activities. First, as part of a longer-standing interest in critical geopolitical interpretations of Uzbekistan's regional foreign policy (Megoran 2004, 2005), Megoran created a database of all articles in the daily Uzbek government press service *Halq So'zi* that referenced either the border or relations with Kyrgyzstan. From these, using a recent full year's issue (2023), the dominant ways in which inter-state

relations and border issues were presented to the readership (largely a domestic audience) were identified. This was used above to look at the Uzbekistani government's presentation of its policy changes.

Second, Enikeeva conducted an in-depth analysis of trade data between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. She compiled a comprehensive summary of substantive policy changes undertaken by Uzbekistan unilaterally and in collaboration with Kyrgyzstan. Primary data was extracted from the UN COMTRADE and TradeMap databases, which provided a robust foundation for our study. These databases offer comprehensive and detailed trade statistics, enabling us to capture a clear picture of the trade flows between the two countries. To aid this analysis we sourced data from various international organisations to examine trade facilitation measures between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. These organisations provide comprehensive and reliable datasets, enabling us to analyse the impact of trade policies, customs procedures, and logistical improvements on bilateral trade. The data from international entities ensured a broad perspective and allowed for a detailed assessment of how facilitation measures are enhancing trade efficiency and economic cooperation between the two countries.

Additionally, we gathered supplementary statistics from the national statistical agencies of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. These provided critical insights into various economic indicators, eg tourism, and helped validate the data obtained from international databases. It is worth noting that Uzbekistan's trade data has become more transparent and accessible only since President Mirziyoyev assumed power. As a result up until 2017 it is only possible to study the dynamics of trade data for Uzbekistan by mirror statistics (analysis of trade data by comparing the export and import records of two countries for the same goods).

As Enikeeva's work established the bilateral state and macro-economic processes, fourth and finally Megoran fleshed this out in an ethnographic study of one specific section of the joint border, around the Madaniyat crossing (Figure 2). In 2022 and 2023 he made three field trips to the Ferghana Valley, between ten days and three weeks each. The majority of this time was spent in villages and small towns around the Madaniyat crossing, that is in rural areas of the viloyats/oblasts (regions) of Andijon (Uzbekistan) and Jalalabat (Kyrgyzstan). It also involved travelling between them in local taxis, by which is meant not private hire cars but drivers who ply routes between towns and villages, waiting in designated areas (often alongside bazaars or at border crossings) until their car fills up with passengers making the same journey.

Staying with families, much of this time involved conducting ethnographic observation. In Kyrgyzstan he interviewed officials in local administrations (*ayil okmoty*) and managers of *bazaars* (government-regulated markets). His purpose was to find out about the effects of the border reopenings on local

populations, to look out for aspects, nuances and outcomes that official figures and pronouncements might conceal, confuse, or miss. Where questions were used – largely in interviews – he simply asked people what effects the border reopenings had had on local communities. Visits of this length would usually be inadequate to develop contacts and trust needed for participant ethnographic research. However, Megoran has been conducting research in this area for three decades (Megoran 2006) and these visits can be seen as a form of longitudinal qualitative research, what O'Reilly (2012) calls 'return ethnography' which is particularly sensitive to identifying change over time. For example, in 2023 he visited two elderly brothers, Anvar and Haldun, separated – by about 200 metres – by a sealed section of the international border that did not exist when he first met them a quarter of a century earlier before their village was divided. With long-standing relationships like this he was able quickly to dive into deeper levels of conversation about topics they had been revisiting over an extended period of time. All research was conducted in Kyrgyz and Uzbek. Oral consent was sought from respondents, whose names have been changed in order to protect anonymity.

Results – Economic Data and Policy Analysis

Trends in Changes of Trade Volumes

Our data (Figure 3) show that as of 1995, the share of Kyrgyzstan's exports to Uzbekistan was considerable, sometimes reaching 23% of the country's total exports. With time, this proportion significantly deteriorated to only 3% of exports in 2003 – 2005. The low figure of 2% in 2010 is explained by the interethnic conflict that year when relations between the two states dipped to their post-Soviet nadir. Figures 3 and 4 show how trade picked up again as this

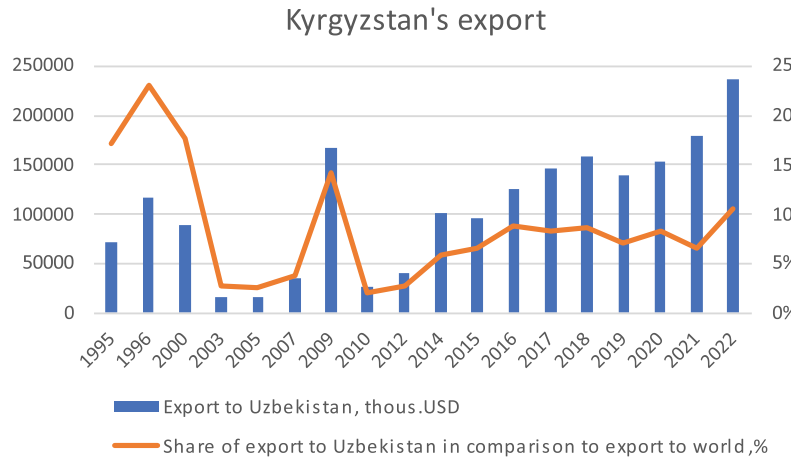

Figure 3. Kyrgyzstan's exports to Uzbekistan, 1995–2022 (Source: UN COMTRADE).

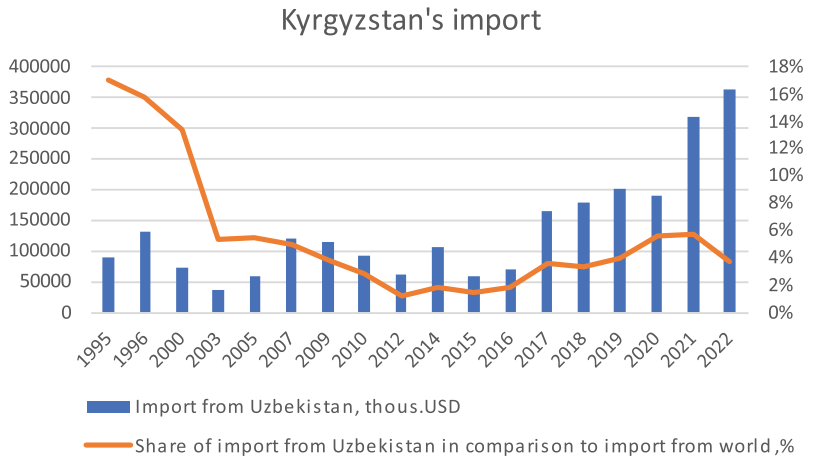

Figure 4. Kyrgyzstan's imports from Uzbekistan, 1995–2022 (Source: UN COMTRADE).

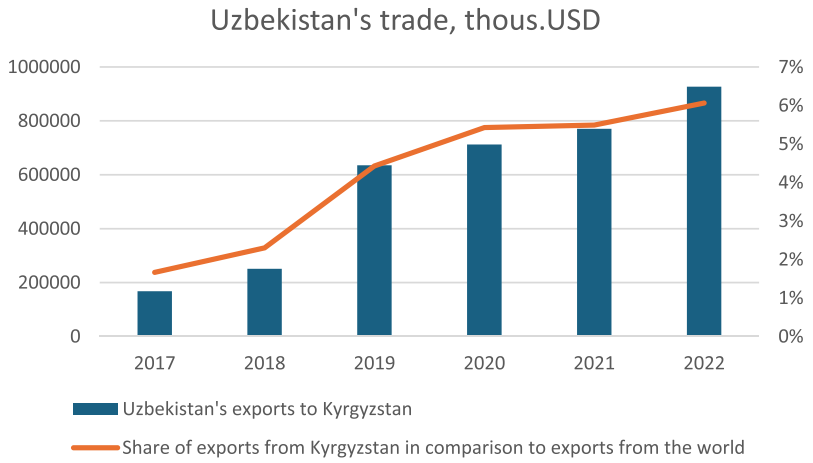

Figure 5. Uzbekistan's exports to Kyrgyzstan 2017–22 (Source: International Trade Centre (ITC).

relationship subsequently improved. Over the past decade, the share of Kyrgyzstan's export to Uzbekistan composed 7–10%. As a share of Kyrgyzstan's imports from Uzbekistan (Figure 4), one can observe its compelling fall from 17% in 1995 to 1% in 2012–2016. Since 2017, this proportion amounts around 3–6% of total import to Kyrgyzstan. It is worth noting that the actual volumes of bilateral trade started growing after 2015 since border reopenings (with a temporary decrease in 2020 because of COVID-19 border crossing restrictions).

Uzbekistan's trade data indicate that the republic's exports to Kyrgyzstan have grown during the observed period (2017–2022) reaching over $800 million or approximately 6% of its total exports (Figure 5).[13] Similarly, Uzbekistan's imports from Kyrgyzstan have shown an increasing trend

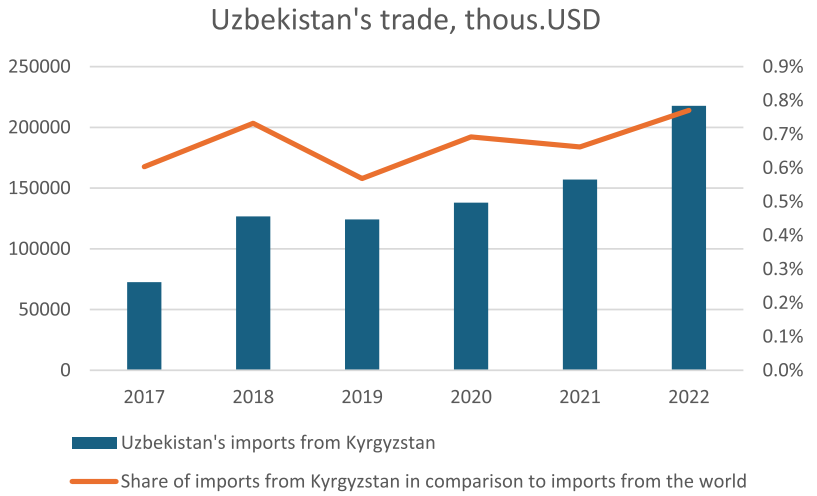

Figure 6. Uzbekistan's imports from Kyrgyzstan 2017–22 (Source: International Trade Centre (ITC).

achieving more than $200 million in 2022 (Figure 6). However, despite the growth in monetary terms, the share of bilateral trade between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan remains relatively small for both countries. Uzbekistan's imports from Kyrgyzstan constitute less than 1% of its total imports. This suggests that although mutual trade between the two nations has been increasing, it still represents a negligible proportion of each country's overall trade activities.

The most important (by value) commodities exported from Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan are most often mineral fuels, mineral oils, iron and steel, salt, sulphur, earth, stone, and plaster. Since 2020, Kyrgyzstan significantly increased the export of live animals to Uzbekistan, which accounts for 98% of its market. However, although Kyrgyzstan imposed a temporary 6-month ban on the export of live animals in January 2021, anecdotal evidence suggests that Uzbekistani buyers easily bypassed this either themselves or by using intermediaries. As Yrysbek Ulukbek uulu reported in 'Azattyk' media:

> they all drove cattle across the border together. In the Ala-Buka, Ak-Syi, Chatkal, and Uzgen districts, there are many open areas where cattle can be driven during regular grazing from pastures. In case of an issue, an Uzbek could simply claim that the cattle are his and that he is grazing them. (Azattyk 2021)

In turn, Uzbekistan's major exports to Kyrgyzstan are mineral fuels, fertilisers, electrical machinery equipment, knitted or crocheted fabrics and edible fruit and nuts. However, although overall trade has increased, this is not to claim that it has not produced difficulties. For example, in 2024 the volume of imported fruits and vegetables from Uzbekistan became so high, that during a session of the parliamentary committee focused on agrarian policy, water resources, ecology, and regional development, one deputy suggested

implementing a temporary prohibition on the importation of fruit from Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan into the country.[14] This recommendation arose in response to requests from farmers in the Aksy and Nooken districts of the Jalal-Abad region, who urged the government to establish conditions conducive to the sale of their harvest. Farmers expressed their frustration over their inability to sell produce locally, citing that the markets were dominated by imported fruit and vegetables.

Of particular interest here are Kyrgyz flour exports to Uzbekistan. In 2023 parliamentarian Balbak Tulobaev raised concerns about flour price rises and shortages which he linked exports (24.kg, 2023).[15] According to data from the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, the country exported 15,000 tons of wheat flour in the first seven months of 2023, with the entire volume going to Uzbekistan.[16] At the end, it led to a temporary ban on flour exports.[17] This is ironic given Islam Karimov's claims that open trade with Kyrgyzstan depleted Uzbekistani bread provision.

As recent trends indicate, the expansion of mutual trade often leads to heightened competition among producers. This can result in pressure on local businesses to lower prices or improve quality to remain competitive. Additionally, the growth in trade may also lead to deficits in specific markets or sectors, where domestic production cannot keep up with rising demand or where cheaper imports outcompete local goods. Consequently, while the overall trade volume increases, these dynamics can create challenges for producers and contribute to market imbalances.

Trade Facilitation

Another factor behind increased cross-border commerce is the trade facilitation measures that Uzbekistan have pursued under Mirziyoyev. Uzbekistan signed (but did not implement) the 1994 Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) free trade agreement. In 2011, a new CIS free trade agreement was signed by eight countries, including Kyrgyzstan, which Uzbekistan did not join at the time (Ganiev and Yusupov 2012). Subsequently, in 2013, Uzbekistan signed the Protocol on The Application Of The Agreement On The Free Trade Zone Between CIS Countries and the Republic of Uzbekistan. This protocol established customs import and export duties that were applied in Uzbekistan until December 31, 2020, or until Uzbekistan's accession to the World Trade Organization (WTO), whichever occurred first.

The tariffs were a protectionist measure implemented to shield local monopolies from foreign competition. High import duties aimed to create a favourable environment for domestic industries to grow and strengthen their market positions. However, this approach also led to higher prices for consumers and limited their access to a wider variety of goods.

In 2021, as part of its ongoing economic reforms and efforts to integrate into the global trading system, Uzbekistan lowered customs duties in a drive to

liberalise trade policies and foster a more competitive business environment (Burunciuc et al. 2018). This move was intended to enhance the competitiveness of Uzbek products in international markets, attract foreign direct investment, and ultimately benefit consumers through increased choice and lower prices. Uzbekistan previously protected its internal market from imports of 3,242 named products using excise policy. In recent years, the country has liberalised customs and excise tariffs. As of January 1, 2019, import customs duties were reduced for 3,410 products, and excise taxes for 780. For 72% of 11,300 imported products customs duties are now zero. This reform has reduced the number of foreign products subject to excise taxes from 208 to 50.[18]

Another factor behind increased trade was currency liberalisation. Before 2017 trade with Uzbekistan was difficult because of several exchange rates applied in the country: the Central Bank rate, the non-cash currency rate, and the black-market cash currency rate. However, one of the new president's first steps was to liberalise the economy by introducing the free conversion of the Uzbek *so'm* in relation to foreign currencies. This move aimed to boost entrepreneurship and curb the black market.[19] Furthermore, since 2018, Uzbekistan has been actively reforming its customs system to align with international standards and best practices. The country has made significant progress in reducing the time required for customs clearance, which is a crucial aspect of trade facilitation. According to one study the average time for customs export clearance was reduced from 2 hours 16 minutes to 44 minutes, while the average time for customs import clearance decreased from 6 hours and 44 minutes to 2 hours and 34 minutes.[20] The implementation of a risk management system at road border crossing points has also contributed to the improvement in customs clearance times. This system helps to streamline the process by identifying high-risk shipments and prioritizing their clearance. The introduction of a green corridor for low-risk goods and a yellow corridor for medium-risk goods has further facilitated the movement of goods across borders. In 2023, Uzbekistan made significant progress in trade facilitation, as reported in the UN Global Survey on Digital and Sustainable Trade Facilitation. This survey covers over 160 economies, and 60 measures related to the WTO's Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) as well as paperless trade and the UN treaty on cross-border paperless trade in Asia and the Pacific (CPTA). Uzbekistan's progress in this area is a testament to its commitment to improving the ease of doing business and enhancing its competitiveness in the global market.

Thus, in recent years, Uzbekistan has significantly reformed its trade policies, reducing customs and excise duties and implementing international customs standards to facilitate trade. These efforts have enhanced the competitiveness of Uzbek products, attracted foreign investment, and provided consumers with greater choice and lower prices. The positive trends in cross-

border trade data since 2017 reflect these reforms, showcasing improved trade relationships and a more favourable business environment.

Bilateral Measures

As well as these trade facilitation measures which apply more broadly, a third explanation of the increase in Uzbek-Kyrgyz cross-border trade is bilateral measures relating to trade, investment and infrastructure. Since 2019, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan cooperation in different sectors has grown significantly. In 2021 the Uzbek-Kyrgyz Development Fund was established with $50 million capital contributed by Uzbekistan, which will subsequently be increased to $200 million (Akchabar, 2021). The fruits of this are already apparent. As of January 1, 2024, according to the National Statistic Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, 85 enterprises established solely or jointly by Uzbek capital were operating in Kyrgyzstan. The largest number of enterprises is represented in wholesale and retail trade, car and motorcycle repair, and in second place professional, scientific and technical activities.[21]

What may be the largest infrastructural project in Central Asia – the construction of the China – Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan (CKU) railway – would possibly boost the development of border areas as well as promote cross-border trade, although it has also sparked considerable concerns for

Figure 7. Approximate route of China – Kyrgyzstan – Uzbekistan railroad. The exact route has not yet been determined (Map data ©2024 Google).

various reasons. The project itself aims to create new transportation routes linking European and Persian Gulf countries, bolstering trade and economic ties across the region. After 17 years of negotiations, a tripartite intergovernmental agreement on cooperation in jointly promoting the China-Kyrgyzstan-Uzbekistan railway project was signed on June 6, 2024. Figure 7 shows that the main route selected during negotiations was Kashgar (China) – Torugart – Arpa Valley – Makmal – Jalal-Abad – Kara-Suu (Kyrgyzstan) – Andijan (Uzbekistan). The track gauge from Torugart to Makmal was agreed to be 1,435 mm, which is narrow by Chinese standards. In the Makmal area, there will be a break-of-gauge station for changing bogies and handling goods and containers (as well as for other operations such as weighing goods, making up and breaking up trains, changing locomotives and sorting containers), from which the track gauge will be 1,520 mm. The three countries will establish a joint project company, with China holding 51% of capital share and its Kyrgyz and Uzbek counterparts each 24.5%.

It is worth noting that, although the CKU promises to enhance trade competitiveness, promote regional integration, and support economic diversification, scholars have noted numerous challenges to this including geopolitical tensions, environmental consequences, and issues of financial sustainability (Balbaa et al. 2023; Shadimetov and Ayrapetov 2024).

Mobility and Labour

Fourthly and finally, striking evidence about the impact of Mirziyoyev's policy of border reopenings is provided by data on the volume of border crossings using figures obtained from the National Statistic Committees of both Uzbekistan and the Kyrgyz Republic. Based on Kyrgyz numbers, Figure 8 shows a remarkable increase in the number of Uzbekistani citizens crossing

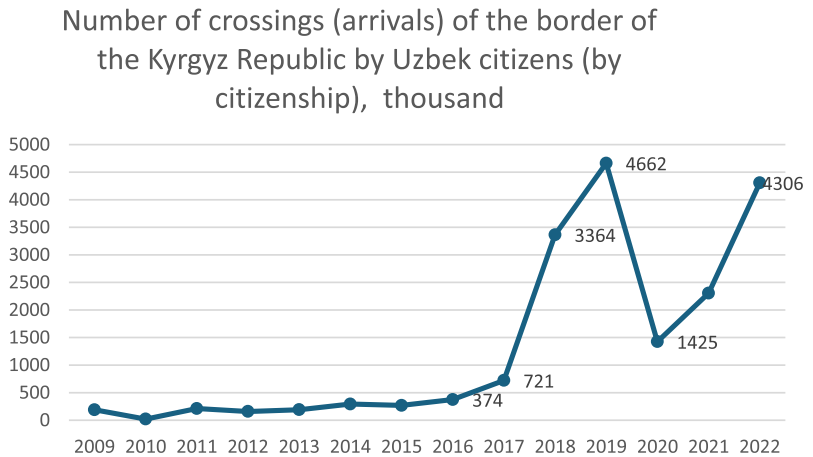

Figure 8. Number of officially recorded border crossings into the Kyrgyz Republic by citizens of Uzbekistan, 2009–2022 (Source: National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic).

the border into Kyrgyzstan since 2016, up from 374,000 people to 4.6 million by 2019. This temporarily fell to 1.4 m due to Covid-19 restrictions, but had almost recovered its 2019 peak by 2022. The corresponding Uzbekistani figures about tourist arrivals have only been published since 2018, and the 2022 data has a lot of interesting details. It claims that almost 1.4 million Kyrgyz citizens visited Uzbekistan, representing 25.9% of all foreign tourists to the republic (National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan 2023). The vast majority, 1.3 m of them, came to visit their relatives and 6,800 people came for medical treatment.

It is striking that the numbers provided by national statistical authorities of two republics differ significantly, but nonetheless together tell a story that agrees on the main points. Nevertheless, the detailed information on purposes of crossing Kyrgyzstan's borders gives us a broader picture. Since these figures were released, according to media reports and corroborated by on-the-ground ethnography (see next section), since September 1, 2023, citizens of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan can cross the border of these countries using local ID cards instead of passports. This simplifies border crossing for their citizens, many of whom do not have valid passports.[22] Nevertheless, both countries require each other's citizens to register either in a hotel or at relevant state offices[23] after five working days in Kyrgyzstan and three in Uzbekistan.

At the same time, news analysis shows that there is significant demand for workers from Uzbekistan in Kyrgyzstan. Uzbek citizens, along with other foreigners, can obtain two types of permits: an employer's permit allowing legal and physical entities to attract and use foreign labour, and an employee permit conferring the right to engage in labour or entrepreneurial activities. Applications can be submitted online or offline to the Ministry of Labour, Social Development, and Migration, requiring documents such as a written application, personal statement, notarised passport translation, medical certificate, photographs, labour contract, and notarised diploma translation. The review process takes fourteen calendar days, but obtaining a permit is subject to annual quotas based on economic sectors and regions, and an employer's permit can be cancelled if unused within three months of issuance.[24]

This is an exacting process and according to some news reports, since 2022 migrant workers from Uzbekistan are increasingly less likely to come to the border regions of Kyrgyzstan to earn money.[25] However, these numbers almost certainly do not tell the whole story: a significant number of Uzbeks in Kyrgyzstan are hired informally. Employer and worker enter into an oral agreement, so there are no exact statistics on how many Uzbek citizens work in Kyrgyzstan.

According to the Department of Migration Issues, since the beginning of 2022, only 55 citizens of Uzbekistan have officially received work permits in Kyrgyzstan.[26] This numbers is very small when we consider that the Kyrgyz Republic's Ministry of Labour, Social Protection and Migration reported about

issuing 11,000 permits for foreign citizens in 2022.[27] Other reports suggest that, for example, in 2021 about 300 Uzbek citizens crossed into Kyrgyzstan daily through the Dostuk checkpoint near Osh (Figure 1) to seek employment, often in construction, agriculture, or domestic work. They arrive early in the morning and quickly find jobs, with women also being hired for household duties. The influx of Uzbek workers significantly impacted Kyrgyzstan's labour market, as they were willing to work for lower wages than local residents (typically charging 500–600 soms for 12 hours of labour, when Kyrgyzstani labourers would not agree to such work for less than 1000 soms). In addition to this reason for their popularity amongst Kyrgyz employers, Uzbekistani labourers also have the reputation of being competent and offering a range of skills less readily available in the domestic labour market (see Mobility and Labour for more on this).

Discussion

In recent years, bilateral trade and movement between Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan has seen significant improvements, driven by Uzbekistan's comprehensive trade facilitation reforms, economic liberalisation, and border crossing reopenings. The reduction of customs and excise duties, along with the introduction of efficient customs procedures and a single currency exchange rate, has enhanced trade flows and market accessibility. These efforts have not only boosted the competitiveness of Uzbekistani products but also fostered a more favourable business environment. Consequently, there has been a notable growth in Kyrgyz-Uzbek joint ventures, reflecting strengthened economic partnership and increased investment opportunities between the two countries.

However, there is a downside to this in the form of increased competition among producers, especially farmers and labourers. The influx of cheap vegetables from Uzbek farmers poses a challenge for Kyrgyzstani farmers due to increased competition, and (as the ethnographic section below indicates) the availability of inexpensive Uzbekistani labour is highly attractive to Kyrgyzstani employers potentially undercutting wages. These trends highlight the complex nature of regional integration that intensifies inter-regional competition too. Simultaneously, the recent cooperation between these countries and ongoing discussions regarding the construction of the railroad are poised to further enhance trade and regional collaboration, although numerous concerns remain. Addressing current issues in a timely manner may prevent significant challenges in future cooperation.

An analysis of trade policies and statistics, and numbers of recorded border crossings, thus shows multiple ways in which the Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstan border dematerialised. But in order to obtain a more fine-grained understanding of the consequences for the borderland, and to understand what

these figures might conceal, confuse or miss, the remainder of this paper presents an ethnographic study of this process.

Results – Fieldwork

On a hot day in July 2023 I (Megoran) came to the Kyrgyz side of the reopened Uzbekistan-Kyrgyzstani border crossing of Madaniyat (Figure 2). I spent a couple of hours hanging around the bustling space as vendors hawked their services to the travellers who were coming and going across the border. Money-changers and SIM-card sellers competed to win the custom of people passing out of immigration control, and taxi drivers yelled out the names of their destinations, a verbal cartography of southern Kyrgyzstan. To get a better sense of some of the new cross-border dynamics, I hoped to travel somewhere – anywhere – with some of the people who had come over from Uzbekistan that morning. They fell into three groups. The first was a car of middle-aged Uzbek men headed to Bazar-Korgon for *pata* (funeral prayers) of the son of a friend of theirs. They were, obviously, serious and sombre and it would not be appropriate to join them. The second was a carload of four men in their 30 s. I guessed correctly from their dress, robust appearance, and small travel bags that they were here for manual labour. They were happy to discuss football as they wait for their local contact to collect them, but didn't seem inclined to invite me to join them for the ride so I took the hint and drifted away. Finally, there were two retired Uzbek men heading to the tourist destination of Arslanbob, up in the mountains. They were friendly and interested in me, and I gladly accepted the invitation to join them. I paid for my share of the joint taxi fare and spent the next couple of days with them.

I undertook this ethnographic element of our research in order to ground and to examine in specific detail and with more nuance the overall picture painted by our macro-scale data above. This vignette illustrates the five major effects of border reopenings that I encountered in my research, and which will now be considered in turn. As Madaniyat is a pedestrian-only crossing, and at the time of research commerce was limited (see discussion below), trade in goods was relatively small-scale and will not be considered.

Reconnection of Friends and Family

The first group of people I spoke to were older, middle-aged men going to the *pata* for the son of one of their friends in Bazar-Korgon. This would involve visiting his house to pay respects to his family, with prayers and Quranic recitation offered and food provided for the mourners. This illustrates the first major impact of border reopenings that people related to me and which form the bulk of crossings shown in Figure 8: the reconnection of kinship networks, of family and friends.

In earlier research on border materialisations, I found that the greatest negative impact of new borders was that the political geography of international borders ruptured a moral cartography of kinship – a cartography drawn by the dense networks of family and friendship links and responsibilities that had developed before 1991. Unsurprisingly, the restoration of these links was cited most regularly as a benefit of the reopenings, with the example of the ability to attend weddings and funerals on the other side of the border being most commonly used. For example, in taking a shared taxi to the border post that morning, a fellow passenger, Iroda, a schoolteacher from Pakhtabad in Uzbekistan (Figure 2), was heading back home after visiting family in Kochkor-Ata, Kyrgyzstan. I told her that I was writing a book about borders in the Ferghana Valley, and she spent the rest of the journey sharing her thoughts on the subject. Although her parents were from Pakhtabad they had moved to Kochkor-Ata during the Soviet period, so she goes to see them a lot. I asked her how she got there before the border reopened. 'Oh, we had to take such a long and difficult route: Ferghana, then Osh, then up round by Jalal-Abad. I admit sometimes I took the unofficial routes going under the wire', she confessed. When I asked her 'Wasn't that dangerous?' she replied:

> Yes, but you have to see your parents, don't you? So, what would happen would be that you'd arrange for a time to cross, someone to take you, and pay the soldiers – they'd look away for that bit. So you'd creep up to the fence then lift it and cross under and make a run for it, and when you reached the main road you knew you were safe. But you were never sure, would some soldiers come along? They had the right to shoot.

'That must have been good exercise', I joked: 'did they take a lot of money?' 'No', she answered, '100, 200 *so'm*. So we say, glory to God, this has now happened [the Madaniyat reopening]. You walk up to the crossing, show you passport, and cross over. Easy, it's great – thank God those days are over'. Iroda added: 'The reopening was very good – how many people missed the funerals of their mothers or fathers because the border was closed?' It was a refrain I heard again and again.

For example, Anvar and Haldun are two brothers in Chek village who were separated when the connecting bridge was destroyed and the village spliced by a barbed-wire fence. Anvar, on the Kyrgyzstani side, told me that half of his six children each ended up on different sides of the border – including some in Pakhtabad. After the borders were closed, he said, 'you used to have to go via Osh – If you left at 7am you'd get there about 7pm, a difficult and long journey. Now, if you leave at 7am via Madaniyat you get there at 10 or 11am'. Anvar's brother, Haldun, lives on the Uzbekistan side, and likewise since the reopening regularly visits Anvar and other family and friends.

The Re-Emergence of a Local Labour Market

The second conversation I struck up in the taxi rank by the Madaniyat crossing was with the group of young Uzbekistani men heading into Kyrgyzstan to work. This illustrates that the reopening of the border crossing has led to the re-emergence of the local labour market that was previously shattered by border closures.

The men explained that, although there is work in Uzbekistan, the pay is better in Kyrgyzstan so they come to work on housebuilding a couple of times a year. These trips are based on invitations from existing contacts, and the men were waiting for their sponsor to collect them. This method of arranging work is common, but it also happens speculatively. A fortnight earlier I was sitting in a café on the other side of the Madaniyat crossing and got talking to two middle-aged Uzbekistani men who had just returned from Kyrgyzstan to their home in Madaniyat. They go for two months at a time, and sit waiting at the Kyrgyz side for people to employ them for manual labour. The employers provide food and accommodation and help with legal registration, and they get taken all over southern Kyrgyzstan to places like Osh, Jalal-Abad and Nooken. There is more work there, they said, and the wages are better.

These dynamics of finding workers were confirmed when I interviewed Nurgul, a member of a rural *ayil okmoty* in Shamaldy-Sai whose remit covered social issues. In listing the effects of the border reopenings, she went on to say, 'Then there is the issue of labour. Workers come from Uzbekistan, to work in building/construction (*stroika*). This is good. They come, stay here for a while after getting registered, work, and then return. This is positive'.

I asked how Kyrgyzstani people find them:

> Some get invited through contacts, some just turn up and get employed. They are highly skilled – for example, very good at building houses. They take lower wages than our workers. For example, I hired some Uzbeks recently. They are very good at *bak kyrkat* [gardening/horticulture], it's a real skill that the Uzbeks have. I arranged getting them through contacts, and they stayed at my sister's house for a couple of days. We paid them 5000 som.

Many of these exchanges would not take place without the opening of the local crossing. In Kochkor-Ata bazaar I spoke with a young Uzbek woman, Madinahon, from Pakhtabad. In her mid-20s and with two pre-school children, she had recently started coming to the bazaar to work helping her aunt sell vegetables and staying with her. She told me that her aunt had being doing this on and off for 20 years. Madinahon goes back every three days to see family: women are far more constricted in their ability to engage in labour migration than the men who regularly go for months at a time. This form of short-term labour migration would not be feasible had the crossing not reopened.

Nurgul's comments about Uzbek workers being particularly good at construction and horticulture reflect longstanding divisions of labour in the Ferghana Valley's segmented labour market. Traditionally the sedentary Uzbeks were better equipped at crafts and trades, and the semi-nomadic Kyrgyz specialised more in animal husbandry. Although this reality has altered since independence, the legacy persists. I spoke at length to Hotamjon, a migrant labourer working baking bread near the bazaar at Shamaldy-Sai. Coming from nearby Namangan in Uzbekistan, he had learnt the skill as a boy and always undertaken this occupation. In recent years he had done stints as a baker in Russia and Kazakhstan, but with the opening of the Madaniyat crossing had come to work in Shamaldy-Sai. It was close and convenient, and whilst he usually came for two-month stints he could easily pop back overnight to see his family.

Murzakulova (2022, 195) observed that closed borders destroyed local labour markets in the Ferghana Valley. We found that they have bounced back. President Karimov closed borders on the dubious claim that poor Kyrgyzstanis were depriving Uzbeks of bread. Hotamjon's example shows the opposite: the reopening of borders by Karimov's successor enabled the re-emergence of a local labour market in which Uzbeks come to Kyrgyzstan to make and sell them bread – and everyone benefits as a result.

Tourism

The third group of men I spoke to that July morning were a pair of older Uzbekistanis, Ahadjon and Hamza, heading up to the mountainous resort of Arslanbob to meet their *juralar* (circle of mates) from their *gap* (periodic feasting amongst a group of friends with a particular past affinity such as neighbours, classmates, or military service conscripts in the same cohort). Ahad and Hamza's *gap* is, I learned, formed of classmates from their school in Pakhtabad, men all born in the early 1960s. They save money each time they meet to fund an annual excursion, which this year was to Arslanbob. Tourism to destinations like Arslanbob is another segment of the border crossings shown in Figure 8, that the official statistics do not disaggregate.

Arslanbob is a village in the world's largest free-growing walnut forest, situated between the Chatkal and Ferghana mountain ranges. With access to spectacular waterfalls and lakes where some people make pilgrimages to pray and seek blessings (*ziyorat*), and tourist provision such as a funfair and horse riding treks, it has long been a favourite destination for people from the hot lowland Ferghana Valley. Ahadjon and Hamza had been going there all their lives, and regaled me with stories of their youthful Soviet-era alcohol-fuelled sexual exploits there. The *juralar* had stopped going with the border closures under Kairmov, but had now started returning as it was more pleasant in the summer, they said, than Uzbekistan.

Figure 9. Tourist sleeping facilities, Arslanbob (Image: Nick Megoran).

Figure 10. View of Arslanbob from the cabins shown in Figure 9 (Image: Nick Megoran).

On arrival at the centre of Arslanbob we rented a space in a lovely private garden that was divided up into booths for visitors, relaxing and cooking the food we had bought at the village's market. Later on, we moved up to another private house (found through personal contacts) whose owner had built a row of open-sided cabins along the side of her garden (Figure 9), with stunning

views out over the mountains and backing down towards the stream (Figure 10). The cabins were provided with mattresses and pillows, and visitors had access to a cooking area and a toilet. It would not be obvious from the street that this was a tourist facility, the owner telling me that all her guests come through private contacts and that she reckoned about 50% of them were Uzbekistanis.

Tourist traffic is not one way, and I met various – usually older – Kyrgyzstanis who had taken holidays in Uzbekistan, visiting sites like the ancient cities of Samarkand and Bukhara. An aspect of this reconstituted cross-border tourism from Kyrgyzstan to Uzbekistan is 'medical tourism', travel for the purpose of seeking healthcare (Reed 2008). In trumpeting Uzbekistan's role as a health tourism destination, a *Halq So'zi* article of June 2023 on the top-ten countries where health tourists came from in the first half of the year had Kyrgyzstan at number three.[28] During my research I met a number of Kyrgyzstanis who formed part of this number.

The most commonly cited destination was the 'Focus' private eye clinic in Andijon which was described as being more advanced, cheaper, and convenient than equivalents in southern Kyrgyzstan. For example, the first leg of my homeward trip following research in 2023 was taking a taxi (with a driver, Muratjon, who was put in touch with me over WhatsApp by a Kyrgyzstani friend) from Madaniyat to the railway station in Andijon to catch the Tashkent train. The other two customers were Kyrgyzstani Uzbeks, a young man going to Focus for a post-operation check-up, accompanied by a friend. I asked him why he came here, and he replied that he was seen by a Kyrgyz doctor in Jalal-Abad who recommended that he come to Focus for the operation as they didn't have the right apparatus in Jalal-Abad, and Andijon was more convenient than Bishkek. When dropping them off Muratjon asked them if they wanted picking up and taking to buy medicine afterwards. The patient declined 'it's cheaper in Kyrgyzstan' he said – borderlanders know how to work the border for their advantage. As we pulled up, there was an elderly Kyrgyz lady coming out, with two younger women supporting her, and our driver was keen that they should take his WhatsApp number for future lifts. Earlier, when staying with a family in Chek, the father of the household commented that Uzbekistan's medical facilities place adverts on regional Kyrgyz television, and said that this 'medical tourism' is an example that '90% of the benefit of all this [border reopening] has gone to Uzbekistan'.

The Border as a Resource

The fourth observation that hot July morning about the impact of the border dematerialisations is that the border itself is a resource. Vendors were hawking travel essentials and gifts to take to the people they were visiting. Taxi-drivers were noisily competing for customers: 'Two people for Arslanbob!'; 'Bishkek! Bishkek! Anyone for Bishkek?'; 'Shamaldy-Sai! One person for Shamaldy-Sai,

and we're straight off!' Over the weeks of my research I too changed money and bought new SIM-cards on both sides, and sat in cafes having meals and chatting to people passing through. None of these services would have existed without the crossing.

Taxi drivers represent the quintessential men (and, in the rural Ferghana Valley, drivers are invariably male) who work the border. For example, Manas, from the Kyrgyz side of Madaniyat (known as Burgondu), drove me part of the way back from my trip to Arslanbob. He told me that he was a cattle farmer by occupation but had been working as a taxi driver for five years, since the crossing reopened and the opportunity appeared. Similarly, Muratjon, the Madaniyat-based taxi driver who took me away from the border via the Focus eye clinic the day I left, reckoned that '70% of the village made a livelihood from the border'. He listed five different roles. First there were, he estimated, about sixty men working as taxi drivers. He himself had previously worked in government employment but started driving a taxi immediately after the crossing reopened and only takes customers to or from the border. A significant number of customers had come via personal contacts, mostly using WhatsApp (which was how I met him). Second, intermediaries (Russian = *posrednik*, Uzbek = *o'rtakash*) who work out cross-border goods deals between buyers and sellers and smoothing things over with the customs officers and border guards on both sides. Third, are the porters (*grushchik*/*yuk tashuvchi*) who physically carry goods across the border once deals have been made. Fourth, currency exchange traders operate on both sides, and finally he grouped together the people who sell services to people crossing like drinks and food. That borders are both inconveniences but also resources for borderlanders is a tension the world over. That the border is itself a significant resource that can transform a place like Madaniyat would not be apparent from the macro-scale data we collected and presented in Figures 3–6.

Ethnic Relations

The fifth and final benefit of the border reopening was one that was not directly visible as I milled around the border area in July 2023, and which was completely illegible in the official figures on the flows of people and goods over the border. Nonetheless, it could be read indirectly as Kyrgyz and Uzbeks traded and interacted: a positive political effect on inter-ethnic relations that have been so strained and tense at times.

In interviewing Nurgul of Shamaldy-Sai's *ayil okmoty*, she surprised me by claiming that a:

> real positive from the reopening of the borders is that it has contributed to *yntymak*, between Uzbek and Kyrgyz. When the borders were closed we used to think about Uzbekistanis a bit negatively, to see them in a bad light. Now that the borders have

> opened up again we can see them differently, we can meet each other, and these means people see each other in a more positive light

I was sceptical of this: it is the sort of thing that politicians easily say to gloss over real problems of discrimination. It isn't my usual practice as a researcher to ask direct questions on such a sensitive topic as they can generate data rather than reflect genuine concerns (Megoran 2007). Rather, as an ethnographer I prefer to take part in daily life and see what I encounter unexpectedly. However, given that these claims were being made, I put them directly to some borderlanders I had known a long time. I asked a Kyrgyz friend, simply, 'How are Uzbek-Kyrgyz relations here nowadays?' He replied, 'Good, they are much better now, because people can go backwards and forwards since Madaniyat opened. Karimov closed the borders, but Mirziyoyev opened them up again, it was a good thing to do'. This man's son was tragically killed in the 2010 inter-ethnic violence, so that would not be an answer he would give lightly.

In the course of our conversation, I asked an ethnically Uzbek man in the same Kyrgyzstani village what effect border reopenings had had on Kyrgyz-Uzbek relations in Kyrgyzstan. He replied:

> It has had a good effect. They used to dislike us, say we were rich, living in their country, etc. Now better, products are coming, they want to get on with Uzbeks. Or, Kyrgyz people ask their Uzbek neighbours to get them contacts in Uzbek for trade. So they see a benefit in better relations.

He added that because the Kyrgyz government wants to stay on good terms with Uzbekistan, it is easier for ethnic Uzbeks to get justice. Picking up on his discussion, I asked how the border opening has affected inter-ethnic relations. 'It has had a very positive effect', he answered. 'People here used to say that Uzbekistan's president is doing this and that and they'd blame us for it. Now they are impressed at him and what he has done in improving relations with Kyrgyzstan [. . .] overall things are much better now'.

This discussion of the importance of presidential relations as representative of inter-ethnic relations was mentioned by another Chek Uzbek, Anvar, whom we met above, in responding to the same question: 'The thing here is that the two presidents, Shavkat Mirziyoyev and Sadyr Japarov, have developed such a good relationship. They visit each other and are welcomed with bread'. Given the sacred role that bread has in Central Asian cultures, this is a reference to the presentation of specially baked breads to honoured guests and visiting dignitaries. Although I doubt this was in Anvar's mind when he made the comment, it is a striking contrast with Karimov's infamous '5000 loaves of bread' slight: border closures were justified by a bread-based slur, border reopenings marked by the proper, dignified use of bread to celebrate good relations between neighbours.

Summary and Conclusion

When Uzbekistan's first president, Islam Karimov, began closing and fencing off the country's borders with Kyrgyzstan, he justified it in terms of both military and economic security. The question about whether these measures were able to prevent armed attack is beyond the scope of this article. Based on this research we are, however, willing to claim with confidence that Karimov got his economics wrong. Karimov's closures were harmful to the Uzbek economy, and the rapid border reopenings implemented by his successor, Shavkat Mirziyoyev, have yielded significant economic benefits in trade, tourism, and labour migration, as well as providing boosts to the economies of borderland communities in rural areas. In an ironic reflection on Islam Karimov's disparaging comments that impoverished Kyrgyz were coming and taking away Uzbek bread, our research shows that Uzbekistanis are travelling to Kyrgyzstan to make a living selling them bread, and even that Kyrgyzstan now exports flour to Uzbekistan! On top of this, borderland communities have been reconnected and the reopenings may yield a political benefit in promoting positive inter-ethnic relations in the Ferghana Valley. Mirziyoyev's emphasis on Central Asia as region (Kobilov 2025) has had significant impacts. Our ethnographic findings help flesh out the realities and details of the aggregate statistics, and also point to other less tangible but nonetheless important positive effects of border dematerialisations.

We do not, however, wish to romanticise these changes as implying that some authentic, borderless community of the Ferghana Valley has reasserted itself in people's hearts. In her research on Uzbekistani-Kyrgyzstani border reopenings in the far south of the Ferghana Valley, Murzakulova identified a generational difference between older people who had memories and experiences of transboundary linkages and younger ones who did not (Murzakulova 2022). We found the same: the majority of cross-border tourists, for example, were older. Muratjon, the taxi driver from Madaniyat whom we encountered above and who makes his entire living from the border, has never been over to Kyrgyzstan as an adult. When I asked why not, he simply replied, 'I'm not interested'. We found this attitude repeatedly. Older people have sought to reconnect; younger people have been socialised into the nation-state system and, if they cross the border at all, it is mainly for reasons of necessity. Such dynamics are not evident in data considered above released by the state statistical committees, as they do not disaggregate by age bracket.

Nor do we wish to suggest that the resumption of freer market relations between the two states is the untrammelled good. Some people suffer as a result of the increased trade flows shown in Figures 3–5. The director of a bazaar explained that the increase in trade of fruit and vegetables had brought in larger numbers of cheaper Uzbek produce, which undercuts

Kyrgyz farmers: 'This is good for customers, but it is bad for farmers', she said. And the farmers' complaints from border districts given in the news analysis section earlier only confirm this. 'For Kyrgyzstan, the opening of Madaniyat has led to more harm than benefit', a Kyrgyzstani farmer in Chek told me. Against this background, the trade in goods was not visibly coming through the Madaniyat crossing in 2023 whereas it had done previously. I was told by a number of people that this was a temporary measure to protect Kyrgyz producers, but could find neither evidence of this nor consistency in comments. Further research is needed into this aspect of border reopenings.

Empirically, a challenge in analysing cross-border operations is the lack of regional statistics. This deficiency makes it difficult to understand the nuances of cross-border trade and the economic ties that exist between specific regions rather than entire countries. Without detailed regional data, the analysis of trade flows, economic interactions, and the impact of border policies remains incomplete and less accurate. This gap hampers efforts to develop targeted strategies to enhance regional economic cooperation and optimise the benefits of cross-border trade. Thus, improving the availability and quality of regional statistics is crucial for a more comprehensive understanding of cross-border operations and their economic implications.

Our research also speaks to border studies more generally, in two ways. First, it shows the value of an ethnographic investigation of how macro-scale economic processes play out in specific border locales (as Tucker, 2020, demonstrates ably in her study of the Paraguay-Brazil border). For example, the ethnographic approach has been able to draw out aspects of border dematerialisation, such as generational and gender differences in reconnection, tensions over the trade of certain products, local economic effects, and positive impacts on ethnic relations, that would be invisible in state-scale statistics.

Second, our research points the way to a comparative conversation about border reopenings. This is not a naïve move that assumes a simple dichotomy of open/closed borders that maps unproblematically onto a good/bad scoresheet. Different modalities of opening and closing (what we suggest the concepts of materialisation/dematerialisation capture with more nuance) usually happen simultaneously, and as ethnographic studies like those of Pelkmans (2006) and Sarma (2021) show, these processes have differential effects on different populations. Nonetheless, particularly with the convergence of migration studies and border studies in response to western right-wing populism over the past fifteen years, border studies has been dominated by the study of closures at the expense of thinking systematically about border reopenings. We agree with Mezzadra and Neilson's critique that 'taking the wall as the paradigmatic icon of contemporary borders leads to a unilateral focus on the border's capacity to exclude' (Mezzadra and Neilson 2013, viii). This focus on border materialisations

and rematerialistions reflects preoccupations of scholars in the Global North, the siloing of disciplinary knowledge, and the lack of conceptualisation of border reopenings preventing the development of a systematic body of knowledge. For example, whilst western scholars were still celebrating the dawn of the supposed borderless world and the replacement of an 'iron curtain' with a 'gold one' (Eskelinen, Liikanen, and Oksa 1999), Central Asian states had already started putting up the fences and walls that would come to be emblematic of border studies in the early twenty-first century. It is perhaps then appropriate that Central Asian states are showing how these barricades can be, if not dismantled, then at least dematerialised in some ways. In parts of the Ferghana Valley like Madaniyat, border crossings that were totally sealed have actually reopened, and a number of significant benefits can be identified. In an age of fences and walls and disputes over them, this hopeful example reminds us that borders can open as well as close and, against dire warnings of the consequences, that this can enhance the lives and livelihoods of society at large and those who live alongside them. This observation leads us to conclude with a call for border studies more attuned to the dynamics of both border closure and opening, materialisation and dematerialisation.

Notes

1. https://missingmigrants.iom.int/.
2. Axborot news broadcast, Tashkent TV1, 13/02/1999.
3. These statistics do not take into account trade in transit, which potentially could be the most affected by Uzbekistan's border policies.
4. We did not take into account the export of special machinery to the value of 2 million USD, because it appeared to be exceptional. If we include it, the actual drop is close to 98%.
5. 'Ноокенде "Маданият" өткөрүү жайы ачылды', *Kabar*, 3/10/2017, accessed at https://kg.kabar.kg/.; 'Кыргыз-өзбек чек арасындагы «Маданият» бекети ачылды', NTS media, no date, http://nts.kg/kyrgyz-ozbek-chek-arasyndagy-madaniyat-beketi-achyldy/.
6. Madiyorov, Botir. 'Farg'onadan Qirg'izistonga mikroavtobus qatnovi yo'lga qo'yildi', *Halq So'zi*, January 26, 2023. Accessed at https://xs.uz/uz/.
7. 'FAO Farg'ona vodiysida asalarichilik salohiyatini oshirishiga ko'maklashmoqda', *Halq So'zi*, June 15, 2023. Accessed at https://xs.uz/uz/.
8. 'O'zbekiston Prezidenti Qirg'iziston bilan parlamentlararo aloqalarni kengaytirish muhimligini ta'kidladi', *Halq So'zi*, September 26, 2023, accessed at https://xs.uz/uz/.
9. Husanov, Saminjon. 'Salohiyati yanada ortadi', *Halq So'zi*, November 17, 2023, accessed at https://xs.uz/uz/.
10. Husanov, Saminjon, 'O'zbekiston – Qirg'iziston chegarasidagi ikkita post faoliyati qayta tiklandi ', *Halq So'zi*, September 4, 2023, accessed at https://xs.uz/uz/.
11. 'Imzolangan hujjatlar O'zbekiston-Qirg'iziston munosabatlarini keng qamrovli strategik sheriklik ruhida yanada mustahkamlashga xizmat qiladi'.
    Halq So'zi, January 27, 2023, accessed at https://xs.uz/uz/.

12. 'Prezidentlar tashrifning samarali natijalaridan mamnunligini bildirdilar',*Halq So'zi*, January 27, 2023, accessed at https://xs.uz/uz/.
13. The apparent discrepancy between Kyrgyzstan's import data and Uzbekistan's export data is not uncommon in trade statistics. These differences can result from several factors, including differences in data collection methods, time lags, customs valuation, transshipment through third countries, and informal trade flows. Discrepancies of this nature are frequently noted in trade literature, particularly in the context of bilateral trade between neighbouring countries in the Global South with porous borders.
14. 24.kga. 'Deputat predlagaet vremenno zapretit vvoz fruktov iz Uzbekistana i Turkmenii', *24.kg*, August 8, 2024, accessed at https://24.kg.
15. See footnote 27.
16. 'Kursiv.uz. 'Kuda idet eksport muki iz Kyrgyzstana', *Kursiv.uz*, September 20, 2023, accessed at https://uz.kursiv.media.
17. Tazabek. 'Predlagaetsya proekt snizheniya nalogov na syr'e dlya proizvodstva myl', *Tazabek*, November 10, 2023, accessed at https://www.tazabek.kg.
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21. See note 14.
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24. Sputnik. 'Uzbekistan i Kyrgyzstan: Razresheniye na rabotu', *Sputnik Uzbekistan*, February 13, 2024, accessed at https://uz.sputniknews.ru.
25. CurrentTimes. 'Pochemu v Kyrgyzstane stanovitsya vse menshe trudovykh migrantov iz Uzbekistana', *CurrentTime*, June 10, 2022, accessed at https://www.currenttime.tv.
26. Ibid.
27. 24.kgb. 'Eto vazhnee flaga i gerba: Deputat obespokoen rostom tsen na muku', *24.kg*, May 16, 2023, accessed at https://24.kg.
28. 'Yurtimizga so'nggi besh oyda 28 mingdan ziyod xorijlik davolanish maqsadida kelgan', *Halq So'zi*, June 15, 2023, available at https://xs.uz/uzkr.

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