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Decentring narratives of (de)globalization and crisis: Uzbekistan's 'everyday' political economy amidst Russia's war in Ukraine

Frank Maracchione [a,b]

[a]School of Economics, Politics and International Relations, University of Kent, Canterbury, UK; [b]SPERI Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute, University of Sheffield, Sheffield, UK

ABSTRACT

Russia's invasion of Ukraine is commonly considered a global crisis, reinforcing deglobalization. However, Uzbekistan's experience challenges this conventional wisdom, as Uzbekistani actors have renounced both economic decoupling and geopolitical alignment. I employ a critical and constructivist 'everyday' International Political Economy (IPE) approach, drawing on 54 fieldwork interviews in Uzbekistan, statistics, and public opinion surveys. I argue that Uzbekistani actors challenge Eurocentric narratives of deglobalization through normative agency at three levels: state, business, and 'everyday'. I also explore the normative conflict between these three levels in interaction with global (post)colonial capitalism, which I describe as 'conflictual hybridity', with a specific focus on the normative power of micro-actors, including labourers and migrants. In a context of 'double coloniality' between material/geographical and normative/political Russo-Uzbekistani postcolonial hybridity and Western normative power, I aim to debunk elite-centric geopolitical imaginaries of non-Western agency during crises, or lack thereof, by foregrounding the 'everyday' of the Global Majority.

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1. Introduction

On 24 February 2022, the Russian Federation shocked the world by invading Ukraine. Western leaders denounced the unilateral invasion, imposing economic sanctions and supporting the armament of Ukraine (Albanese et al., 2022). European countries that historically promoted a balanced approach towards Russia, such as Germany and Italy, initiated a process of decoupling and drastically reduced their dependency on Russian natural resources (Meister, 2022). Western multinational companies stopped/shrunk their operations in the country, often at prohibitive costs (Legorano, 2024; Wiener-Bronner, 2022). Plus, Western public opinion supported Ukraine and denounced Russia's actions, even in countries where perceptions of the latter were more positive (Biancalana, 2023; European Parliament, 2024). Western commentators wrote that the invasion and related responses have changed the world irreversibly (Berlinger, 2022; Chatham House, 2023).

In the West, the war in Ukraine turned into an 'epistemic crisis' (Špecián, 2022), sparked by what Hans-Herbert Kögler (2023) described as the (Western) moral call to defend Ukraine at any cost to

CONTACT Frank Maracchione frankmaracchione@gmail.com www.frankmaracchione.com https://www.linkedin.com/in/frank-maracchione-96443375/

support liberal values like democracy and sovereignty. Western policymaking in the context of the war in Ukraine was conducted entirely on moral grounds, as opposed to material ones (Delanty, 2023). Looking beyond the West, a series of chilling economic analyses discussed the possible outcomes of economic sanctions on Russia's neighbourhood, upholding the crisis narrative. In Central Asia, Russia is a major trade partner, investor, and destination for labour migration. Hence, in 2022 the World Bank described Central Asia, including Uzbekistan, as a region directed to an economic crisis and experts looked at the invasion of Ukraine as a watershed moment for Uzbekistan-Russia relations, where Uzbekistan would be forced to choose sides and clarify its position vis-à-vis Russia's actions (Engvall, 2022; Pannier, 2022), a lesser power forced to bandwagon with stronger actors.

This has not happened. Although Western moral economics, including sanctions, is influencing Uzbekistan's political economy, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev's liberalization campaign (2016–ongoing) and bid to join the global economy and the World Trade Organization (WTO) have remained stable (Maracchione, 2025). Features of Uzbekistani liberalization policy are a push for privatization, deregulation, and an open door for foreign investment, also to promote domestic labour opportunities for its burgeoning youth. All these policies rest on balancing the role of traditional partners, Russian, Chinese and European, as well as fresh players from the West and the Arab world. This paper tries to explore the normative origin of Western failure, in academia and beyond, in forecasting economic trends in Uzbekistan amidst the war in Ukraine, by focusing on Uzbekistan's own views beyond Eurocentric moral imaginaries of crisis. Hence, my research questions are: (1) Did Uzbekistani actors narrate the 2022 Russian invasion of Ukraine as a crisis? (2) What effects did local and global narratives exert on Uzbekistan's political economy? (3) How do 'everyday' economic actors in smaller states exert agency in a conflictual strategic environment?

International Political Economy (IPE) has not yet dealt with the war in Ukraine comprehensively. I argue that it has the tools to provide explanations for the puzzle of its economic effects through its theorization on economic crises and globalization, and its pluralist conceptualization of agency. By borrowing constructivist critiques of globalization and its crises, I problematize the rising narrative of the war in Ukraine as a harbinger of deglobalization and maintain that Uzbekistan's agential interactions with hegemonic narratives equipped the country to renounce foreign conceptions of the war in Ukraine as a crisis. Yet, this paper's theoretical contribution is to pluralize agency in studies on (de)globalization through an 'everyday' political economy lens. I conceptualize 'Uzbekistan' as a variety of state and non-state actors who self-describe as being from Uzbekistan and borrow Rano Turaeva's (2014) theorization of *tirikchilik* (muddling through), in Uzbekistan, which deconstructs the boundaries between the formal and informal economy in Uzbekistan, foregrounding micro-actors' everyday actions.

I also explore the normative conflict amongst different Uzbekistani actors in a context of 'double coloniality' between material/geographical and normative/political Russo-Uzbekistani postcolonial hybridity and Western normative power (Bissenova & Medeuova, 2016), which forms what I call a 'conflictual hybridity'. I find that Uzbekistani actors renounced the necessity to change their economic policies to accommodate new ideas of what proper *moral* conduct is in international cooperation. In particular, firms, labourers and migrants maintained a business-as-usual approach vis-à-vis Russia, frustrating the Uzbekistani government's bid for neutral and balanced policies towards Russia, Ukraine, and the West. Hence, I propose that it is impossible to understand the political economy of major global events such as the war in Ukraine, and related (de)globalization, without accounting for three levels of analysis: state, business, and 'everyday'.

The article provides an 'everyday' political economy framework that accounts for 'conflictual hybridity' to challenge elite-centric geopolitical imaginaries of non-Western agency (or lack

thereof) during crises by foregrounding the 'everyday' of the Global Majority. Taking from Bishop and Payne's (2022) concept of 'reglobalization', the adaptation of globalization to accommodate perceptions from outside traditional power centres, I underline the role and agency of a plurality of economic actors to interpret political instances and narratives of deglobalization coming from 'global' crises. I also stress the normativity and Eurocentrism of theories of deglobalization that ignore the plurality of economic actors that sustain (re)globalization in the Global Majority. I support these arguments through data collected during fieldwork in Uzbekistan (54 semi-structured interviews), statistics from official sources, and public opinion data from the *Central Asia Barometer* (2017–2023).

In the second section, I explain the gap in the IPE literature that I plan to fill with my 'everyday' political economy approach. The third section contains my findings on Uzbekistan's economic framing of the war in Ukraine and its effect on the country's economy. I focus on instances of change and continuity in government and business policies, as well as public opinion and labour migration. The last section details my conclusions and avenues for further research.

2. An 'everyday' political economy of crisis: local agency and the war in Ukraine

The field of IPE has yet to deal in-depth with the war in Ukraine. In *Review of International Political Economy*, no article was published on the issue in the last three years. A situation not dissimilar to other pivotal IPE journals, such as *New Political Economy*, *International Organization, International Studies Quarterly*, and *Third World Quarterly*. Yet, the discipline has long been engaged in understanding the relationship between war and the economy (Bieler & Morton, 2018; Coyne & Mathers, 2011). The limited IPE literature that did focus on the war in Ukraine has, crucially, looked at the humanitarian side of the economic effects of the invasion (see Clapp, 2023, on food security). In this journal, *Globalizations*, Ivan Bakalov (2024) looks at the causes of Russia's invasion of Ukraine by reviewing academic explanations for the war. They start two debates that I plan to join, one on the agency of 'small' states during war, and another on political economy explanations of the causes of the war in Ukraine. Particularly, Marxist scholars debated whether the war was the result of (a specific form of radical) neoliberalism in Russia, and therefore did not represent a systemic change for the country (Yudin, 2022), or of an anti-economic push for invasion based on salvaging regime security from the unpopularity of neoliberal capital accumulation (Matveev, 2021, Bakalov, 2024).

This second view joins the strand of Marxist literature on the war in Ukraine that focuses on 'deglobalization', or the process by which the war would be creating barriers in the global economy through sanctions and reactions (Kagarlitsky et al., 2022; Moldicz, 2022; Posen, 2022). This tradition interprets several current trends in global capitalism, including trade wars and a resurgence of nationalism and protectionism, as signs of the failure and impending demise of globalization (King, 2018). In this paper, I argue that the literature on deglobalization in the context of the war in Ukraine, which constructs Western decoupling from Russia arising from a war in Europe into a global process of 'deglobalization', is Eurocentric, as it ignores perspectives from beyond the West, which still support (embedded forms of) globalization. Here, I follow Burak Tansel (2015) in his critique of Political Marxism's structuralism, which 'renders invisible the non-West and only registers European-induced developments as causally linked with systemic change' (84).

A contribution towards the exploration of non-Western agency comes from sociohistorical traditions of critical IPE (Bhambra, 2007; Hobson, 2021; Tansel, 2015). The work of John Hobson (2021) has explored non-Western agency in historical globalization(s), thereby critiquing

mainstream and critical IR and IPE. Hobson finds that overly hierarchical imaginaries of the global system rest on the fetishization of European/Western civilization as an outlier, uniquely wealthy, powerful and imperial. This exceptionalism moulds the transhistorical West as the unique representative and promoter of global development and the main/only recipient of its fruits from ancient Greece to global capitalism. World-Systems theory, for example, crystallises this Eurocentrism in a dichotomy between the West and the rest (Hobson, 2021).

An exception, in Hobson's view, would be the students of uneven and combined development, who take from Leon Trotsky's theorization of the unevenness in capitalist expansion and of an international 'whip of external necessity' that links domestic experiences to global processes (Rosenberg et al., 2022; Tansel, 2015). These works, 'genuinely non-Eurocentric' (Hobson & Sajed, 2017, p. 554), propose a sociological engagement with history, with an attention to *longue durée* processes beyond contingencies and crises, and an empirical focus on global unevenness, which is at the base of plural conceptualizations of political agency in the global economy.

Yet, sociohistorical IPE has mainly focused on the *creation* of global capitalism, the central topic of the IPE scholarship on globalization (Hay & Marsh, 2000; Jessop, 2003). My attention here lies not on the creation but, instead, on the crises and (potential) *decline* of the global economic system. Relatedly, a wave of research after the Global Financial Crisis debated the relationship between globalization, capitalism and its systemic crises, by problematizing their normative constructions (see Green & Hay, 2015). The focus was on the processes by which financial crises are normatively constructed, the effects of such narratives of crisis on the global economy, and importantly, the actors that promote them (Hay, 2012). My research joins this normative exploration of crises and the attention to the *longue durée* of political economy beyond the West. Yet, it moves beyond *economic/financial* crises to include other supposedly global crises like the war in Ukraine, foregrounding their relevance for IPE, particularly in debunking Eurocentric narratives of crisis, which ignore the Global Majority.

A growing literature in international studies looks at the agency of smaller Global Majority states in influencing economic narratives and investment priorities of foreign actors (Calabrese & Cao, 2021; Carnegie, 2023; Wang, 2022), centring their agency and/or resistance. Connectedly, Bishop and Payne (2021) underline the normative connection of the concept of globalization with neoliberalism, and propose an alternative 'reglobalization', inclusive of views in the Global Majority, connected with the Polanyian concept of 'embeddedness', the 'endowment within public agencies of the authority and capacity to manage domestic and international economic affairs actively' (15). I aim to discuss embeddedness and agency, but look beyond public agencies and the state, foregrounding 'everyday' *normative* agency (see definition below).

The earliest theorization of 'everyday' political economy comes from an attempt to improve imaginaries of unevenness by foregrounding the agency of everyday micro-actors, also beyond the West (Hobson & Seabrooke, 2009). Many materialist IPE traditions have examined agency beyond the state, exploring labour or migrant agency in global capitalism (Hoye, 2021; LeBaron, 2015; Nnaeme et al., 2020). The few non-elite *normative* studies tend to focus on the West. For example, Liam Stanley (2014) has investigated 'everyday' crisis narratives on austerity in the aftermath of the Global Financial Crisis in the UK. Also, the IPE literature is largely silent on the 'everyday' political economy of geopolitical crises. My research and theoretical framework below aim to fill these gaps by (1) producing a holistic analysis of the political economy of (imagined) crises by adjoining state and non-state levels of analysis in exploring 'everyday' normative constructions of crises in political economy, (2) move beyond strictly *economic/financial* crises by focusing on the normative political

economy of the war in Ukraine, and (3) foregrounding 'conflictual hybridity' at different levels of local actors' agency outside the West in a context of 'double coloniality'.

2.1. Theoretical framework: 'everyday' architects of globalization

In Colin Hay's (2016) constructivist theorization, structure and agency are not ontological entities but only theoretical abstractions that are constructed socially. Stressing social construction leads to an idea of power that is not *only* given by material assets, but also by defining 'what is socially, politically and economically possible for others' (Hay, 2002b, p. 185). This form of ideational power 'is arguably nowhere more present and nowhere more important than in the moment of crisis' (Hay, 2016, p. 533), for example, Russia's war in Ukraine. Hence, to analyse the effects of such events on the global economy, we need to understand the processes by which events are constructed into global crises and global instances of systemic change.

We also need to expose the role of the actors that promote normative change. Colin Hay (2002a) famously argued that restoring subjects (agents) in the process of globalization allows us to understand its causal mechanisms (Hay, 2002a). I apply the same judgement to discussions on *de*globalization, aiming to pluralize and decentre Hay's agential focus to include 'normative agency' beyond the West. I borrow the concept from Amitav Acharya (2018), meaning the ability of non-Western political actors to influence global processes by resisting hegemonic narratives without material superiority. This happens through the contestation of global norms by a plurality of state and non-state actors, which Acharya theorizes as 'localization', adapting international norms to local contexts, and 'norm subsidiarity', creating new *original* norms that challenge international ones.

Yet, Acharya's attention to the global level identifies deductively processes or norms that are considered hegemonic at the global level and traces their normative origin in regionally significant 'cognitive priors'. The problem with this characterization is methodological nationalism, grouping diverse experiences and singular voices into ethnocentric national political communities (Chua, 2017). My empirical focus on the single case study of Uzbekistan moves beyond the state *proper* by methodologically pluralizing the conceptualization of the state, while moving beyond political elites and engaging business, civil society, and common people, foregrounding 'everyday' reactions to crises, as well as normative diversity. The aim is to empirically understand Uzbekistan's *contextually situated* 'cognitive prior' and to examine how a diverse set of agents influences its political economy.

I adopt an 'everyday' IPE approach that maintains that micro-actors' agency represents a key component of global capitalism and the politics of (re)production. In particular, I take from Juanita Elias and Shirin Rai's (2019) feminist 'everyday' political economy framework that reveal 'structures of power alongside expressions of voice and agency' (203) exploring how everyday actions of people in communities influence (re)production in a constant struggle with global colonial and patriarchal structures. To embed the framework into the Uzbekistani context, I start from 'double coloniality', the notion that Central Asian actors are subjected to hegemonic and colonial knowledge production from both Russia (former colonizer) and the West (as a hegemon of academic, political, and economic knowledge production). The concept, developed originally by Central Asian scholars Alima Bissenova and Kulshat Medeuova (2016), originates from the notion of postcolonial 'hybridity', the mutual normative interdependence and cross-cultural exchange between colonizers and colonized (Bhabha, 1994, Sharipova et al., 2024).

Plus, my everyday approach adopts the theorization of Uzbekistan's political economy as an order of informal economics (*tirikchilik*) where 'mobile entrepreneurs (…) operate within and

across formal and informal fields of local and transnational economies' (Turaeva, 2014, p. 106). Through *tirikchilik* (muddle through), a concept that foregrounds people's desire (and power) to improve their living conditions, Uzbekistani scholar Rano Turaeva allows me to operationalize double coloniality beyond the state and explore the normative agency of Uzbekistan's transnational communities up to the individual 'everyday' informal level, and how these clash with global and national political norms/values in what I call 'conflictual hybridity'. This type of hybridity between hegemonic liberal influences, cultural/linguistic/political postcolonial ties, nationalist priorities, and pragmatic reproductive and materialist aims plays out differently at different levels of analysis discussed in this paper.

2.2. Uzbekistan, a single case study

During the rule of President Islam Karimov (1992–2016), Uzbekistan was an illiberal economy with (more or less strict) protectionist economic policies. Yet, Fazendeiro (2015) has explored the relational character of Uzbekistan's protectionism, which was heavily influenced by Karimov's narrative of self-reliance vis-à-vis foreign powers, particularly Russia. Galdini (2022) explored instead the limits of Uzbekistan's self-reliance by investigating the role of foreign multinational companies in promoting and profiting from Uzbekistan's nationalized sectors through joint ventures with monopolist SOEs (Galdini, 2022), thereby problematizing narratives centred on state agency. This contrasts with research like Lombardozzi's (2021), which stresses the coordinating role of the state in Uzbekistan's foreign economic relations. This debate proves that Uzbekistan is a relevant case study for IPE explorations on local agency in relations with foreign partners, particularly in the context of post-2016 liberalization.

The election of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev, a member of Uzbekistan's Liberal Democratic Party (UzLiDeP), led to a wave of neoliberal reforms (Maracchione, 2023a). Lombardozzi (2023) explores the country's entry into the global market, which they maintain was characterized by 'institutional overlaps between pre-neoliberal and current forms of state-capital hybrids within neoliberal globalization' (Lombardozzi, 2023, p. 13). In this agential analysis, a normative and material interaction between local and foreign actors seems to be at the base of knowledge production and policymaking about economic development, where state agency through state capitalism has a pivotal role. This paper also focuses on post-2016 Uzbekistan but, in line with more pluralist IPE analyses (see Trevisani, 2010), renounces the methodological centrality of the state, pluralizing agency amongst state, business and 'everyday' actors in the context of economic liberalization and (imagined) global crisis. A similar effort was started by Eraliev and Urinboyev (2023), who researched Uzbekistan's 'everyday' *geopolitics*, a commendable effort that I plan to translate into IPE by breaking the disciplinary binary that ties geopolitical crises to IR/area studies and financial/economic crises to IPE.

Connectedly, the war in Ukraine is believed (in the West) to represent an obstacle to Uzbekistan's political liberalization (Hedlund, 2022), as well as a moment of truth for Uzbekistan's reforms and its international status (Allayarov, 2022; Pannier, 2022). The country has been famously more ambivalent than other newly independent republics in its international relations after the fall of the USSR and has shifted allegiances many times between the Western/American and the Russian camp, while maintaining close economic and political relations with the People's Republic of China (Maracchione, 2023a) and never adhering to Russian-led economic integration in the Eurasian Economic Union (Gleason, 2008). This, together with Karimov's protectionism, makes the country an outlier amongst former socialist republics due to its

resistance to accepting its 'natural' place in the Russian-led post-Soviet space or the liberal European sphere.

Instead, the literature on Uzbekistan's nation-building depicts the construction of the Uzbekistani state as an exercise of nationalistic identity-building focused on decolonization, Islamization/Turkification and derussification (Kirimli, 1997; Laruelle, 2017), as well as economic protectionism and authoritarian centralism. Nevertheless, Russia and Uzbekistan are economically interconnected through trade, industry, and labour migration (Dadabaev & Djalilova, 2021; Kakhkharov et al., 2021). By looking at a country whose economic path is in a process of liberal reform, and whose relations with Russia and the West are contested, I aim to show how local reactions to war in Ukraine are a good empirical case study for exploring normative agency beyond the West and problematizing Eurocentric narratives of geopolitical bandwagoning, global decoupling and deglobalization.

2.3. Methodology, data collection and analysis

Fieldwork visits, including to state institutions, local and foreign-funded companies, semi-structured interviews, and public opinion data were used to access narratives from a diversity of political actors in Uzbekistan. The variety of data sources covers three levels of analysis: state, business, and 'everyday'. Through the lens of Turaeva's *tirikchilik*, I conceptualize 'Uzbekistan' as a variety of state and non-state, national and transnational actors who self-describe as being from Uzbekistan. Respondents were selected for their expertise or practical involvement in Uzbekistan's international relations as part of two research projects: a PhD project on China-Uzbekistan normative relations, and another project on Russia-China-Central Asia entanglements amidst the war in Ukraine conducted by Global Partners Governance for the British Conflict Stability and Security Fund. I conducted fieldwork in the country in May–July 2022, November 2023 and October 2024. I interviewed a total of 54 respondents in Uzbekistan. Amongst these 18 were researchers in academic institutions or private research centres, 12 were representatives of state institutions including the Ministries of Foreign Affairs, Ministry of the Economy and Finance, Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation, and the Parliament (both chambers), nine were members of civil society, and nine representatives of public and private (including foreign) companies. I conducted the interviews in English, Russian, Uzbek and Chinese, with linguistic support. The conversations were recorded (when possible), transcribed, coded and analysed thematically. All interviews were anonymised to protect respondents' safety. I also conducted more than 20 preliminary interviews in Washington D.C. (January–April 2022) with international stakeholders and four former American ambassadors, who worked in Uzbekistan. This supplemental material formed an empirical dataset on Western narratives about Uzbekistan at the onset of the war.

Focusing on the 'everyday' level, I mostly relied on interviews with activists in the field of human rights and labour relations and on public opinion data taken from the Central Asia Barometer survey (2017–2023). CAB conducts public opinion surveys in urban and rural areas of Uzbekistan, providing a snapshot of 'everyday' perspectives on labour, migration and international relations. It uses simple random sampling of mobile phone numbers to obtain nationally representative samples. In Uzbekistan, all interviews were completed through in-office or in-home stations. The questionnaire includes questions about media usage, the political/economic/social situation in Uzbekistan, attitudes towards the government, and opinions of other countries, in addition to questions capturing demographic information. I used descriptive statistics from the CAB data to

complement my interviews and provide a holistic portrayal of local narratives and positionality amidst the war in Ukraine.[1]

A limitation of my methodology is that most formal interviews happened in Tashkent, Uzbekistan's capital. However, I travelled extensively through Uzbekistan and many of the informal discussions, and some interviews, happened in peripheral areas such as Jizzakh (2024), Sirdaryo and Karakalpakstan (2022/2023). In Jizzakh, I interviewed businesspeople and officials, conducted guided visits in foreign-funded companies, and discussed informally with local employees. In the latter two regions, I visited foreign companies and agricultural investments and collected reflections (Maracchione, 2023b). Due to my research design, focused on fieldwork in Uzbekistan, I did not speak with migrant workers abroad, whose voices represent core material in the rich literature on Uzbekistani migration to Russia (see Turaeva, 2023).

3. Conflictual hybridity: pluralizing Uzbekistan's agency amidst the war in Ukraine

Interviews in Uzbekistan indicate that, unlike in the West, Uzbekistanis did not narrate the war in Ukraine as a transformative event for their relations with Russia. For instance, an anonymous Uzbekistani Member of Parliament was very clear on the fact that Uzbekistan was going to support its trade relations with Russia (interview in Tashkent, November 2022). This does not mean that Uzbekistan's political elite did not respond to the invasion or that they supported it, as was clear from Uzbekistan's declarations of support for Ukrainian sovereignty and lack of recognition of the Luhansk and Donetsk Republics (RFE, 2022). Respondents note instead some diversity of opinion on whether to maintain close relations with Russia.[2]

Yet, no expert, businessperson or civil society member made a fundamentally *moral* case for Uzbekistan's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine. At the same time, public opinion on Russia was not affected dramatically, and an even larger number of migrant labourers moved to Russia and supported Russia's war economy.[3] Where Western countries have acted on the assumption of an incompatibility of their identity as international actors and maintaining their economic links with Russia, Uzbekistan has not. This section will start from state-level perspectives and move to explore how a plurality of Uzbekistani actors have reacted to the war.

3.1. Uzbekistan's economic liberalization and diversification after February 2022: trade, investment, debt

Russia has been Uzbekistan's main/second largest trade partner since independence and has been particularly central to Uzbekistan's exports (Galdini, 2022) and to the construction and natural resources sectors.[4] The election of Shavkat Mirziyoyev is said to have expanded the role of Russian actors in Uzbekistan through the role of banks and private funds (Interview in Tashkent with representative of law firm, 2022). For example, Kapitalbank, one of Uzbekistan's leading financial institutions, was acquired in 2021 by USM Holding owned by the Russian-Uzbek billionaire Alisher Usmanov (Kapitalbank Uzbekistan, 2021; the shares were sold after war-related sanctions hit Mr Usmanov).

The Russian invasion of Ukraine did have an impact on Uzbekistan's economy. However, differently from what the World Bank had anticipated, Uzbekistan's economy grew 5.7% in 2022, as compared to the 3.6% prevision in April 2022 adjusted soon after the start of the war (from the original 6%; World Bank, 2022). Starting from trade relations, exports and imports increased by around 20% 'largely driven by high export growth to Russia' (World Bank, 2023). Already in

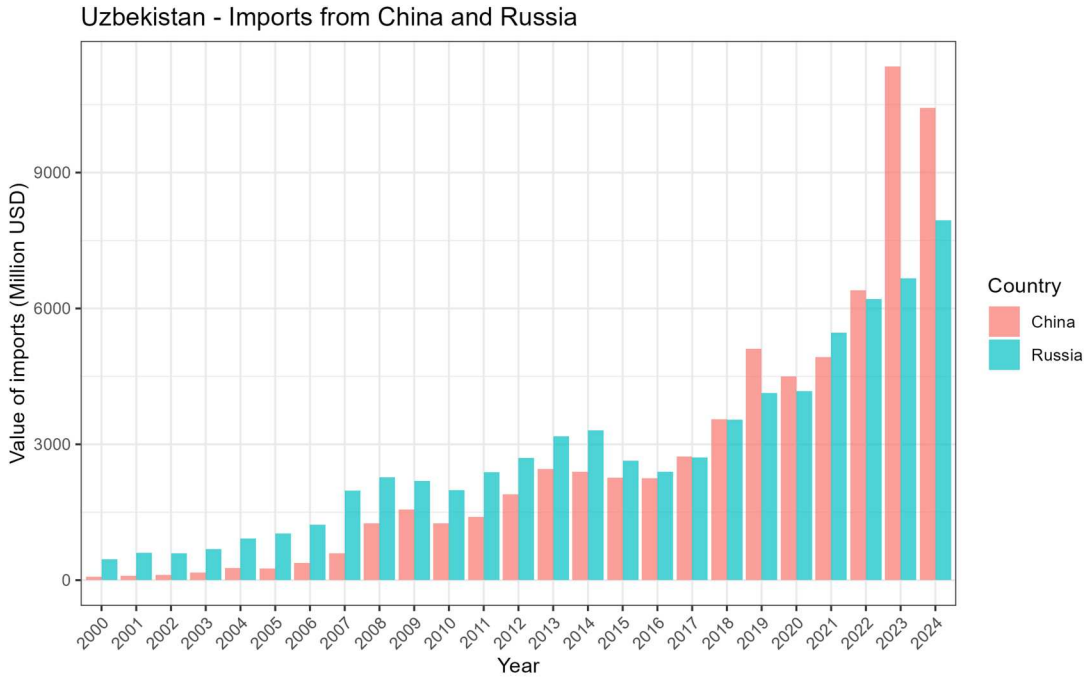
November 2022 my respondents foresaw this trend. An anonymous independent foreign policy expert in Uzbekistan, noted that 'after Russian invasion of Ukraine, Russia's economic ties with Central Asia increased'.

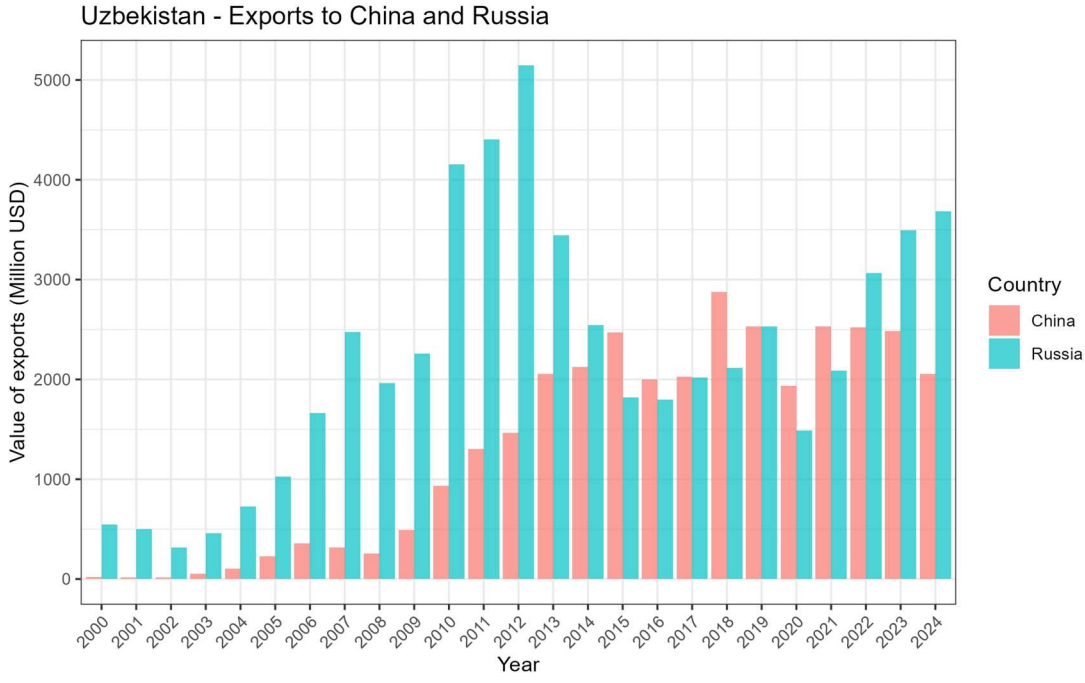
The energy sector is where this new Russian proclivity towards Uzbekistan has been strongest, with Russia even proposing a tripartite gas union (with Kazakhstan; DNA, 2023). The union did not materialize, but Uzbekistan's gas sector has strong Russian connections through Bakhtiyor Fozilov, an Uzbekistani businessman and central node of Uzbekistan-Russia economic relations, who 'controls the key construction and drilling firms operating under Mirziyoyev's energy program' (RFE, 2023). Entering such a union would signal an important policy change for a government, whose official policy is centred on diversification.[5] However, this union is attractive as Uzbekistan is struggling with recurrent energy crises, due to which in October 2023 Russia's Gazprom signed a two-year deal to supply Uzbekistan with gas (Reuters, 2023). Nuclear energy is another cooperation area and agreements were signed with Russia's Rosatom to build nuclear plants in Uzbekistan (Interfax, 2025).

Yet, Russia is not the only economic player in Uzbekistan. As Figures 1 and 2 show, the relative size of China's role in Uzbekistan's external trade relations has been growing steadily in the last 20 years. China was initially interested in Uzbekistan's gas and invested mostly in that sector in the late 2000s (Musaev, 2022), becoming the destination of a sizable amount of Uzbekistan's (and Turkmenistan's) gas (OEC, 2024), and an alternative destination to Russia, the former metropole and destination of most of Central Asian exports. However, after the implementation of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China's interests in the country moved first to transport infrastructure, as seen in the construction of the Qamchiq Tunnel between the Tashkent region and the Fergana Valley, and then to other sectors like manufacturing and agriculture. In a personal interview, a former Ambassador of Uzbekistan to the United States, presented the PRC as the country's main investor for the year 2021, accounting for more than 20% of foreign investments. Local statistics speak of 2.2 billion USD, with Russian investments following closely with a 2.1 billion USD investment.

However, data for 2022 show Russia surpassing the PRC with the amount of 1.9 billion USD (20,3%) investment, compared to China's 1.5 billion USD (16,4%; UAS, 2023b). While there were no important changes in the relative size of China's trade, trade relations have grown importantly in 2022 in absolute value. One of our interviewees mentioned that this is probably related to trade relations bouncing back from the halt during the global pandemic,[6] as trade grew also for the Russian Federation and other partners (World Bank, 2023). The following year does not show important changes in terms of Russian investment, which grew to 2 billion USD. Yet, China's investment boomed to 3.8 billion USD, 2.3 billion USD more than in 2022. The same can be seen in trade (Figure 2).[7]

Trade relations do not seem to have changed in the direction that Western commentators have imagined and seem to have returned to the pre-Covid-19 status quo, with an improvement in relations with all their partners. Uzbekistan's tepid reactions to the war and lack of moral economic narratives portray an image of a country that has not accepted any of the economic obstacles that the war was supposed to create. At the state level, the aftermath of the invasion can be contextualized as part of Uzbekistan's 'normative subsidiarity', resistance to foreign imaginaries about its role in the world, where the country has traditionally avoided strong partisan positions. While the country's diversification narrative has some practical effects via the role of China, structural aspects still tie the country to the Russian Federation and limit its ability to diversify its partners in some sectors (see gas). I will now explore how the business sector reacted to foreign 'whips' in the form of contested adaptation to sanctions.





Figures 1 and 2. Uzbekistan's trade with China and Russia. Source: Uzbekistan's Committee on Statistics.

3.2. Whose profit and whose morality? Uzbekistan's business community and the war in Ukraine

An expert in Uzbekistan's financial system mentioned that after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, many Russian companies' projects were halted. For example, the purchase of Uzagroexport Bank by Russian Sovcombank was halted due to sanctions after the deal was practically done in February 2022 (Tashkent Times, 2022). Also, just after the war, Uzmetkombinat's head of finance during a presentation on the company's future financial plans explained in detail their plan to move operations outside of Russia, which included repaying a loan from Gazprombank, and was developed in order to safeguard Uzmetkombinat's potential IPO on the London stock market (online interview, December 2022).

At the same time, companies with Russian capital are opening every day in Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's Agency of Statistics has reported that 745 enterprises with Russian capital started their business in Uzbekistan in 2023, which added to the total of 3,044 companies with Russian capital that were operating in the country as of December 2023 (see Figure 3). In 2023, these represented around 21.6% of the total companies with foreign capital in Uzbekistan (UAS, 2023a), and 700 units more than other powers, with China (2.337) and Turkey (1,883) coming second and third, respectively.

An important downside of the enhanced role of Russian actors in Uzbekistan's economy is the potential to incur secondary sanctions, particularly due to the role of Uzbekistan's companies. In Tashkent, respondents from state institutions said that 'Uzbekistan is not afraid to fall under the secondary sanctions of the West, since we export goods to Russia that are not included in the sanctions'. Yet, amongst the few Central Asian targets of Western sanctions was the Uzbekistani firm Promcomplektlogistic, which actively supported Radioavtomatika, a Russian defence contractor under U.S. sanctions (Lillis, 2022), and Alfa Beta Creative and GFK Logistics Asia (Eurasianet, 2023). Yet, the context is one in which economic actors from Uzbekistan enjoy larger agential spaces than in the past. Western sanctions were used in the past against Uzbekistan, for example,

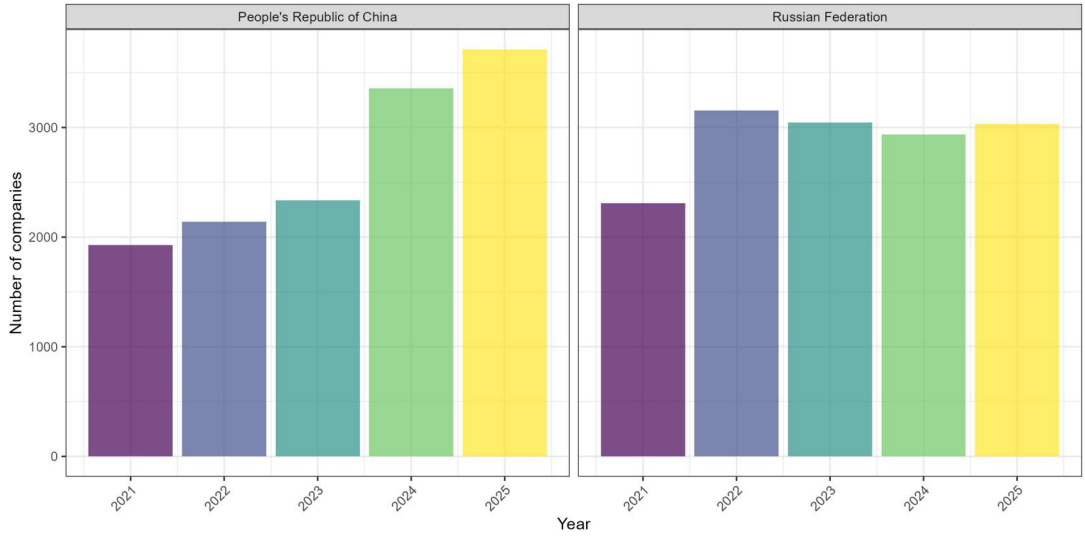


Figure 3. Number of companies with foreign capital in Uzbekistan (2022–April 2025). Source: Uzbekistan's Committee on Statistics.

as connected to the repression of political dissent during the Andijan protests in 2005 (RFE, 2019). Nevertheless, the use of sanctions has been extremely limited in this case, implying a stronger bargaining power of Uzbekistan vis-à-vis the West.

Remarkably, the number of Chinese companies witnessed a surge in 2024, reaching and surpassing the number of Russian companies in the country (UAS, 2025). It is also interesting to notice that when labour is discussed, Russian companies are not mentioned as much as Chinese companies by our respondents, implying that Russian investments are not in labour-intensive sectors. An important aspect of China's future economic role that was mentioned by experts interviewed in Uzbekistan is the evolution of the Chinese economy, which is moving away from the focus on manufacturing as a way of reducing its dependency on exports (Amighini, 2021). This is good news in countries like Uzbekistan that are happy to welcome Chinese companies that move the entirety of their production to the country. A representative from Uzbekistan's Institute for Strategic and Regional Studies (ISRS) noted that 'Chinese companies in Uzbekistan produce finished products with high quality' and that these products are 'competitive and fully meet international standards' (Interview in Tashkent, July 2022). While the heavy industries in Uzbekistan seem to remain in the hands of Russian investors, Chinese companies invest in new sectors of Uzbekistan's economy, promoting the creation of jobs and an evolution of Uzbekistan's production patterns. An example is the production of electric vehicles (EVs, Uzavtosanoat, 2022), where the Chinese company BYD has created a joint venture with the monopolist SOE Uzavtosanoat to assemble EVs in a factory in Jizzakh with the aim of localizing part of the production by 2025.[8]

Uzbekistan's 'normative subsidiarity' in its interpretation of the war is manifested again in the business sector, as Uzbekistani business is still cooperating with Russian companies, potentially even more than before the war, while also supporting the government's plan for diversification, particularly through ties with China. The second prong of the 'double coloniality' concept also plays out here, as connected to Western financial gatekeeping in the internationalization of Uzbekistani companies. Many companies have reshaped their narratives on relations with Russian actors as a means of salvaging their financialization in Western markets. Some others that kept business as usual were fined with secondary sanctions.

Uzbekistan's adherence to liberal economic narratives became more apparent in my latest visit to Central Asia in October 2024, where narratives of opening up, diversification of partners, free trade, privatization and free competition were used as measures of new investment projects' good faith.[9] These also represented the core agenda of the ruling liberal party during the October 2024 parliamentary elections (UzLiDep, 2024). Uzbekistan's liberal charm offensive, in parallel with its deepening business ties with Russia, counterintuitively shows the limits of Western normative power in that new Western decoupling norms are respected only as reactions, and 'localised' through the removal of moral narratives. Secondary sanctions represent instead direct effects of what I call 'conflictual hybridity', where business hybridity with Russia and global repercussions represent a structural limit to state agency.

3.3. Uzbekistan's 'everyday' agency amidst the war in Ukraine: labour, migration and public opinion

Nowhere is Russian influence in Uzbekistan stronger than in people's 'everyday' life. Firstly, Russian media have a hegemonic role in Uzbekistan, which shapes the strategic environment where citizens construct their responses to Russia, with 48.8% of Uzbekistani citizens regularly accessing news from Russian sources (CABS, 2024). In 2022, remittances accounted for 17.6% of

Uzbekistan's GDP, and some 80% of remittances to Uzbekistan came from Russia (World Bank, 2022). Almost one in three Uzbekistani people (31%) has a relative who works in Russia (CABS 2024), as two of four million migrants currently employed in Russia are from Uzbekistan. Figure 4 shows the World Bank estimation of remittances received by Uzbekistan between 2005 and 2024 (80% from Russia). The projected fall in personal transfers from Russia to Uzbekistan has not happened, and on the contrary, remittances have grown substantially after the invasion. Government data for 2024 seems to follow the same direction with an overall increase of 30% and a similar percentage coming from Russia (Gazeta.Uz, 2025).

The explanation for the growth of remittances from Uzbekistan's Central Bank (2022) is that the 'flow of funds from the informal sector to the formal sector, as well as the direction of export earnings by small (seasonal) exporters through money transfer systems, including strengthening of the Russian ruble'. An anonymous respondent mentioned that some remittances only passed through Uzbekistan to reach other Central Asian countries due to comparatively fewer obstacles to transferring remittances to the country, which was confirmed by the Central Bank (Gazeta.Uz, 2022). They also confirm the explanation given by the Central Bank about the strengthening of the ruble and the movement of Russian refugees escaping sanctions and the partial mobilization of Russian men (18–50 years old) for the war (Uzbekistan's Central Bank, 2022). However, a similar or larger size of remittances was sent in the three following years, showing a stable trend in labour migration more than a temporary surge, despite safety issues arising from rising xenophobia in Russia (see footnote 2).

Due to the mobilization and related shortage of workers in Russia, the number of migrants moving from Central Asia to Russia has increased between 2022 and 2024. About 3.47 million migrants went to Russia to work in 2022 (Tass, 2023), the majority from Uzbekistan (42%, 1.45 million;

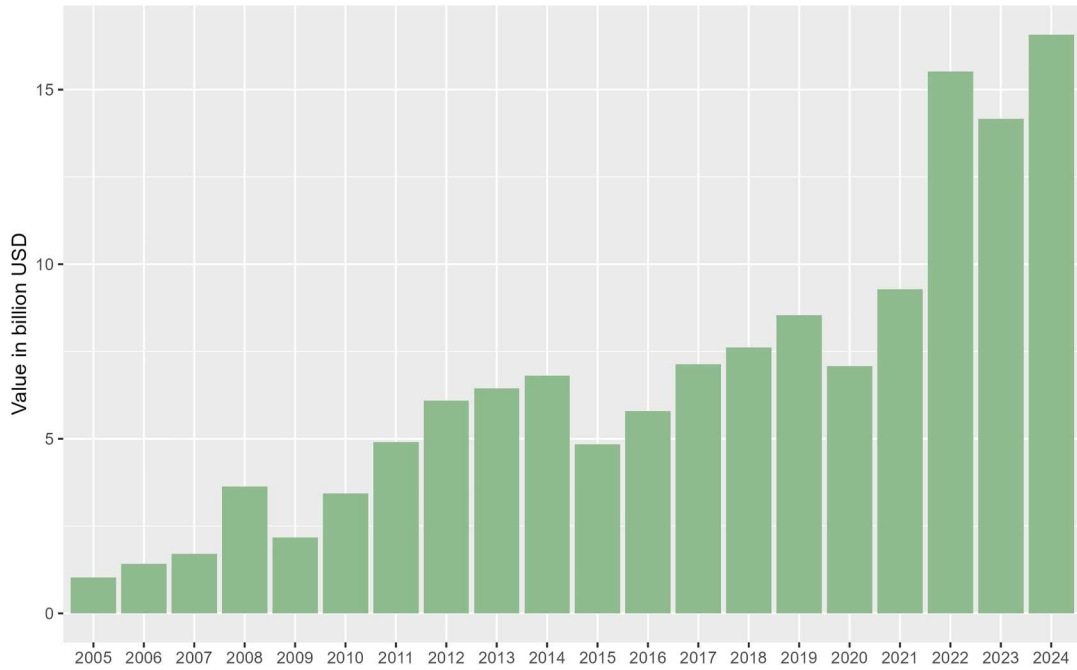


Figure 4. Remittances received by Uzbekistan (2005–2004). Source: World Bank.

Kun.Uz, 2023). Kommersant reported that the Russian industry was facing 'a record shortage of personnel due to partial mobilization' (Manuylova, 2022). The largest shortage of personnel was recorded in light industry enterprises (−70%), mechanical engineering (−35%) and food production (−25%) (Manuylova, 2022). Labour migration towards Russia makes Russia relevant for the lives of individual citizens in Uzbekistan. One respondent, an anonymous independent researcher, stressed that migrants connect Uzbekistani citizens to Russia, a link that has important effects on public opinion.[10] Wave 12 of the CAB survey reports that 47% of Uzbekistani respondents believed that Russian actions in Ukraine are somewhat justified, while 35% did not know, and only 16% did not justify it. Another interesting finding is that only 42% of respondents believed that the war in Ukraine would have a negative impact on Uzbekistan's economy, while 13% thought it would have a positive effect, and the majority (44%) did not know (16%) or thought it would have no impact (28%).

Overall, 64% of the population had a favourable opinion of Russia in 2023 (CABS Wave 14), down from 76% before the war, but still representing a huge majority. This finding is strengthened by the fact that public opinion on alternative partners, like China or the US, has worsened dramatically in 2023, showing that Russia has a unique place in the hearts of Uzbekistanis. It is clear that Uzbekistani citizens have resisted the perception of the invasion of Ukraine as a game changer in the interpretation of what is and isn't allowed in economic decision-making. While citizens in the West imagine travelling to Russia as impossible after February 2022, Uzbekistani migrants flocked to the country to substitute the decimated Russian workforce. Although Uzbekistan's government has sought to regulate the conscription of Uzbekistani citizens into the Russian army, it has not limited migration. People's actions and perceptions represent both another structural limitation to state agency and a rebuke to the understanding of the war in Ukraine as a global crisis.

In this area, the role of other international actors is still in the potential. As discussed above, the government of Uzbekistan has been promoting a balanced policy that looks at traditional and new partners in order to promote investment in its economy. The effect of this policy in the field of labour and migration is connected to two aspects. The first is that the government is trying to become a manufacturing hub, for example through Chinese investment in the textile, technological, and automotive sectors. The result can be the creation of jobs for Uzbekistan's growing youth. The second is the negotiation of new migration routes, for example towards the United Kingdom. In 2022, Uzbekistan was the second largest source of seasonal workers in the UK after Ukraine, with 2,000 seasonal workers farming British fields (Gazeta.Uz, 2023). In the following years, the number of Uzbekistani migrants to the UK has grown (Kun.Uz, 2024). The effort of foreign partners in this area will be fundamental for the success of the diversification policy.

The bid for better economic conditions for individual Uzbekistani citizens ignores geopolitical lenses in 'everyday' economic behaviour. Notwithstanding the many intersectional challenges witnessed by migrants in European, including Russian, labour markets, which became more dire after the Moscow Crocus City Hall attack in March 2024, Uzbekistanis are still moving to Russia and sustaining their war economy.[11] The 'norm subsidiarity' of Uzbekistani citizens both in terms of public opinion and labour migration, where 'everyday' micro-actors challenge the crisis mode by looking for new opportunities both in Russia and the West, works in interactions with postcolonial hybridity in the form of structural aspects like the influence of Russian media, culture and language. This multilevel subsidiarity is a central feature of what I call 'conflictual hybridity' and works both against Western decoupling and against Uzbekistan's government and business elites' effort to balance their own narratives of economic liberalism and political self-reliance, with 'localised' Western norms through adherence to the sanctions regime.

4. Conclusions

Uzbekistan has not acted either as Russia's backyard or as a staunch pro-Western defender of Ukraine's self-determination. I conceptualized Uzbekistan's balanced engagement with foreign narratives about the war in Ukraine as 'normative agency', in the form of 'localization' and 'norm subsidiarity'. Specifically, I argue that Uzbekistani actors challenged Eurocentric narratives of deglobalization through normative agency at three levels: state, business, and 'everyday'. In my interviews, no respondent made a fundamentally *moral* case for Uzbekistan's reaction to Russia's invasion of Ukraine, which disproves the idea of Russia's invasion of Ukraine becoming a global 'epistemic crisis' with effects on Uzbekistan's view of Russia and the world. Where European countries have acted on the assumption of an incompatibility of their international identity and their economic links with the Russian Federation, Uzbekistan has acted according to alternative subsidiary norms, avoiding siding with either belligerent. Yet, I argue that the picture is less coherent beyond the state.

If business and 'everyday' actors seem more prone to be accepting of their place in foreign stories about Uzbekistan, through continued engagement with Russia, they are also subjected to strong structural challenges, particularly in terms of their connections with Russia, and exert their agency both in support and contrast to state policies. Connectedly, my theoretical contribution is to pluralize agency in the IPE literature on (de)globalization in the context of the war in Ukraine through 'conflictual hybridity', the normative conflict between different levels of Uzbekistani actors (see Table 1). I find that business elites, as well as Uzbekistan's population, have engaged in normative paths that have become structural limits for Uzbekistan's bid for neutral and balanced policies vis-à-vis Russia and the West. Particularly, I propose that it is impossible to understand instances of (de)globalization, decoupling tendencies, and related effects without taking into account three levels of analysis: state, business and 'everyday', with a focus on labour and migration. Through an 'everyday' framework that explores 'conflictual hybridity', represented in Table 1, I contribute to the IPE literature on globalization and its crises, by expanding its scope to the economic effect of geopolitical crises and to the Global Majority, whose perceptions and resistances are often disregarded, particularly at the 'everyday' level.

Starting from the everyday, this critique of deglobalization theory moves economic thinking in the postcolonial Global Majority beyond economic nationalism. Nationalist sovereignty-focused postcolonial economic policy, including state dirigisme, import substitution and protectionism, is widely accepted as the central hybrid form of economic governance in newly independent countries, including Uzbekistan. Yet, where Western geopolitical morality is attempting to use decoupling to isolate its enemies, particularly Russia and China, postcolonial economic policymakers are reacting through globalism, open economy and liberalization, from the everyday to the state level.

Table 1. Three levels analytical framework, Uzbekistan's 'conflictual hybridity' amidst the war in Ukraine.

Level	Russia	The West	The war in Ukraine	Agency (Localization / Norm subsidiarity)
State	Hybridity, self-reliance, dependency	Financial gatekeeping, sanctions	Partial political case against Russia, no moral economics	No bandwagoning (norm subsidiarity), adherence sanctions, non-recognition territories (localization)
Business	Hybridity	Financial gatekeeping, sanctions	No moral case against Russia, sanction evasion	Declarations on adherence and/or evasion of sanctions (localization), investment from all (norm subsidiarity)
Everyday	Hybridity, positive opinion	Negative opinion	No moral case, positive opinion and material support	Migration to Russia (but also to the West), support for the invasion, work for PRC firms (all norm subsidiarity)

In the last two years, the PRC has opened its borders to the world by allowing visa-free access to a large chunk of the world, an unthinkable move in the increasingly racialized and nationalist Western world. Plus, the offshoring of Chinese companies is revolutionizing manufacturing, energy, and agricultural production all over the world. In parallel, the WTO, widely considered a weakening organization in the West, is busy welcoming new members, which are subscribing to the liberalization reform packages necessary for accession.

WTO Director General, Dr Okonjo-Iweala, a Nigerian economist, routinely uses the reglobalization narrative when discussing the accession of new members (Maracchione, 2025). Connectedly, Bishop and Payne (2021) on *Globalizations* stated that by looking at the plurality of actors of globalization, foregrounding the Global Majority, we learn that globalizing tendencies are still strong and leading to a *re*globalization. In the context of the war in Ukraine, Western moral deglobalization narratives, focused on decoupling from Russia, were not adopted at any level of plural Uzbekistan, aside from a number of pragmatic actions. I argue that causally connecting a war in Europe and connected European/Western retaliation measures, to a deglobalizing process is inherently Eurocentric.

In a context of 'double coloniality' between Russo-Uzbekistani postcolonial hybridity and Western knowledge production, micro-actors exert 'everyday' normative agency in socially constructing the structural context in which economic actors make decisions during geopolitical crises. Public opinion and labour migration, also in the Global Majority, should become central places to explore to understand the 'everyday' political economy of global crises (imagined or not) beyond IPE's traditional focus on financial/economic collapses. Therefore, my framework proposes a possible operationalization of what Tansel and Tilley call 'a planetary political economy of the global majority' (2024, p. 514).

A limitation of my research design is the lack of qualitative interviews with single workers/migrants due to ethical constraints. The latter were substituted by civil society representatives such as labour and human rights lawyers. Another limitation is the lack of focus on alternative foreign actors, although pivotal, in discussing Uzbekistan's normative resistance and political balancing. Future research should provide qualitative data from workers in Uzbekistan, as well as Uzbekistani migrants to Russia, to triangulate surveys on public opinion. Furthermore, more research should be done to discuss other instances of structural and agential factors arising from the role of other foreign partners in Uzbekistan, such as Turkey, South Korea, Japan, India, Pakistan, or the Gulf states.

Notes

1. For a more detailed analysis of Uzbekistan's public opinion on foreign partners, with a focus on China, see the report I recently co-authored with a team of colleagues for CAB (Neafie et al., 2024).
2. Interviews with anonymous independent scholars and journalists. Tashkent, November 2022.
3. The Moscow Crocus Hall attack in March 2024, perpetrated by Central Asians and claimed by ISIS-K, has changed this trend, at least temporarily, due to the worsening xenophobia and anti-Central Asia sentiment and legislation in Russia. Yet, this development is unrelated to the war in Ukraine.
4. Online interview with anonymous financial experts, December 2022.
5. Stressed in interviews with anonymous state officials in Tashkent, 2022, 2024.
6. Interview with anonymous Uzbekistani investor, November 2022.
7. The boom is related to imports of electric vehicles from the PRC (Maracchione, 2025).
8. Interviews with representatives from Uzauto in Tashkent, and BYD engineers in Jizzakh during a visit to their EV factory in October 2024.

9. Visits and ten anonymous interviews in the following companies and institutions: BYD and ADM car factories in Jizzakh, Uzauto in Tashkent, Ministries of the Economy and Finance, Ministry of Education, Institute for Legislative Studies and for Regional and Strategic Studies under the President in Tashkent.
10. Interview in Tashkent, November 2023.
11. For more details on the lived experiences of Central Asian migrants in Russia, see Urinboyev (2018), Turaeva (2023) and Pannier et al. (2024).

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Notes on contributor

Frank Maracchione is a Postdoctoral Research Associate at the School of Economics, Politics and International Relations, University of Kent. In Kent, he works on an ESRC project on knowledge production on Global China in the Global Majority led by Dr Jamie Gruffydd-Jones. He is also affiliated with the Sheffield Political Economy Research Institute (SPERI), where he works on the SPERI Presents … podcast, and with the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs. He is a member of the Board of Directors of ASIAC – Italian Association for Studies on Central Asia and the Caucasus, and a member of the editorial board of the journal Studies on Central Asia and the Caucasus (SCC). Frank holds a PhD from the Department of Politics and International Relations of the University of Sheffield which he conducted thanks to an ESRC White Rose Pathway Award for his PhD thesis titled 'Amir Timur in Shanghai: Locating agency in Uzbekistan-China relations'. His work critiques the top-down dimension of Chinese normative power by focusing on Uzbekistan's normative agency in its relations with the People's Republic of China. His research interests include the political economy of South-South cooperation, normative power and agency of political actors in the Global South, political communication and machine learning.

ORCID

Frank Maracchione http://orcid.org/0000-0002-6628-2114

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