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## GENESIS AND HISTORY OF TOURISM DEVELOPMENT IN EAST KAZAKHSTAN (LATE XX TO EARLY XXI CENTURIES)

*Génesis e historia del desarrollo turístico en el este de  
Kazajistán (finales del siglo XX a principios del XXI)*

*Gênese e história do desenvolvimento turístico no leste  
de Cazaquistão (fins do século XX até principios do XXI)*

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## ABSTRACT

The paper addresses the historical development of tourism in the East Kazakhstan region. In this regard, this paper is aimed at identifying the prerequisites and reasons for the development of the tourism industry in the East Kazakhstan region at the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and considering the main stages and features of tourism development in this region at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The historical and chronological method, structural method, methods of analysis and comparison are the leading methods and approaches in the study of this problem, which allowed us to comprehensively consider the causes, stages of development of the tourism industry in the East Kazakhstan region. An analysis was carried out of the historical, natural and geographical influence on the development of tourism in the region, as well as the results were presented of the tourism industry in East Kazakhstan over the decades of its development.

### ■ KEYWORDS

Cultural and historical heritage, economy, tourist attraction, infrastructure, tourist business.

## RESUMEN

El artículo aborda el desarrollo histórico del turismo en la región de Kazajistán Oriental. En este sentido, este artículo tiene como objetivo identificar los requisitos previos y las razones del desarrollo de la industria turística en la región de Kazajistán Oriental a finales del siglo XX y considerar las principales etapas y características del desarrollo turístico en esta región a comienzos del siglo XXI. El método histórico y cronológico, el método estructural, los métodos de análisis y comparación son los principales métodos y enfoques en el estudio de este problema, que nos permitieron considerar de manera integral las causas y fases de desarrollo de la industria turística en la región de Kazajistán Oriental. Así, analizamos la influencia histórica, natural y geográfica en el desarrollo del turismo en la región y presentamos los resultados de la industria turística en el este de Kazajistán a lo largo de las décadas de su desarrollo.

### ■ PALABRAS CLAVE

Patrimonio cultural e histórico, economía, atractivo turístico, infraestructura, negocio turístico.

## RESUMO

O artigo aborda o desenvolvimento histórico do turismo na região de Cazaquistão Oriental. Neste sentido, este artigo tem como objetivo identificar os requisitos prévios e as razões do desenvolvimento da indústria turística na região de Cazaquistão Oriental a fins do século XX e considerar as principais etapas e características del desenvolvimento turístico nesta região a começos do século XXI. O método histórico e cronológico, o método estrutural, os métodos de análise e comparação são os principais métodos e focos no estudo deste problema, que permitiram considerar de forma integral as causas e fases de desenvolvimento da indústria turística na região de Cazaquistão Oriental. Analizamos assim a influência histórica, natural e geográfica no desenvolvimento do turismo na região e apresentamos os resultados da indústria turística no leste de Cazaquistão ao longo das décadas do seu desenvolvimento.

### ■ PALAVRAS-CHAVE

Patrimônio cultural e histórico, economia, atrativo turístico, infraestrutura, negócio turístico.

## Introduction

Kazakhstan's economy has historically been heavily reliant on oil exports, which for a long time were its main economic feature. However, in response to the changing dynamics of the global economy and the shift towards a post-industrial world, the Kazakh authorities have been actively working to diversify their economic base. This strategic shift, particularly noticeable after the dissolution of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) and the lifting of the "Iron Curtain", has led to the emergence and growth of new industries (Ramazanova et al., 2019). Among these, tourism has become a young and promising sector, gaining increasing significance in the region's economy. This transition marks a notable change from the past, where tourism played a negligible role, to the present, where it is becoming a key component of economic development.

The level of tourism development is seriously correlated with the economic situation of the country, they are interconnected, so many countries have to develop the tourism industry from scratch, meeting many obstacles and problems on their way (Kerimkhulle et al., 2022). East Kazakhstan is one of the most important regions for tourism development. There are numerous attractions in the region, especially those of natural origin: lakes, mountain ranges, and springs. In addition to natural attractions, for the diversity of which Kazakhstan was named "Switzerland", the long history and culture of nomadic societies are increasingly beginning to interest the world tourist community. Many people want to learn about the nomads of this little-explored country. First of all, the main tourist flows are from neighbouring regions of China and Russia. However, tourism becomes more attractive and developed with the implementation of tourist programmes, an increase in the number of tourist organisations, and the budget allocated for the development of this industry.

The formation and developmental processes of tourism in the East Kazakhstan Region (EKR) during the late XX – early XXI centuries are the objects of the study. The need to study the situation in tourism in the post-Soviet period determines the chronological framework because many Central Asian countries have faced the challenges of the modern world since 1991. The relevance is due to the need to analyse the causes and consequences of both the state policy in the field of tourism and the current general trends in the development of the tourism industry in the EKR. Recent studies have noted that tourism develops dynamically in the region, compared with the beginning of the XXI century, however, many problems remain unresolved, so turning to the origins and problems of several decades will help to implement tourism development programmes successfully and overcome the obstacles that have arisen in the modern world.

The topic of research on tourism potential is not new. Numerous studies have been conducted and are being conducted using data on tourism development statistics in the country as a whole. For example, researchers have repeatedly noted that the oil industry is the predominant factor in the gross domestic product (GDP), but more and more entrepreneurs turn to the tourism sector as the most promising one (Aktymbayeva et al., 2020). Specific studies, dating back to the beginning of the XXI century, addressed the EKR, outlined the prospects for the development of ecotourism, which has been gaining momentum recently and attracts more and more tourists to the region. Recent studies analyse specific factors that hinder the development of tourism in the region, for example, the lack of infrastructure in rural and inaccessible areas. There are studies on various types of tourism that develop or should

be developed in the region, for example, geo-tourism is considered promising (Chlachula, 2019). The originality of this study lies in the fact that previous studies address either the study of specific problems of tourism development in East Kazakhstan or the study of the history of tourism development in Kazakhstan, not a particular region. This paper addresses the main stages of tourism development in a particular region - East Kazakhstan. In addition, the article analyses the main problems and prospects, how the economic situation and new tourism trends affect tourism in this region.

The purpose of this research was to conduct a retrospective analysis of the genesis and developmental history of the tourism industry in EKR from the late XX century to the present. This encompassed several interrelated goals. Firstly, to systematically identify, delineate and characterize the key stages in the chronological progression of regional tourism growth since the Soviet era, examining the causal factors, policies, infrastructure expansion, and outcomes shaping each phase. Secondly, to elucidate the continuity and changes between historical periods by comparing tourism strategies across decades to highlight persisting challenges and opportunities. Thirdly, to analyse the influence of geographic, socioeconomic, political and cultural variables on tourism development in East Kazakhstan. Fourthly, an analysis of current prospects and directions for tourism growth was conducted to provide forward-looking recommendations. Finally, the research synthesized conclusions about the dynamic progression of the regional tourism industry from inception to modern status, while identifying practical implications from this evolutionary process to inform sustainable strategies for overcoming lingering barriers and capitalizing on emerging prospects. This multi-faceted examination aimed to provide comprehensive, historically-contextualized insight into tourism development in East Kazakhstan.

## Materials and methods

The historical and chronological methods are the main one to achieve this goal. Using the method allows considering the gradual or even step-by-step process of formation, starting with the prerequisites in the Soviet period and analysing changes in the tourism industry in the post-Soviet space in the 1990s and the early 2000s. The method makes it possible to trace how the authorities of Kazakhstan and EKR solved urgent problems related to the tourism sector in the early 2010s, what problems arise at the present stage, and how the world pandemic affected the tourism sector of the region. Thus, it is the chronological method that allows us to trace the process of the formation and development of tourism retrospectively. The historical method for allows considering the problems that arose at each of the stages, which of them were solved, and which remain urgent to this day. In addition, this method allows us to consider the prospects that arose at each stage, which of them have been implemented, and which have yet to be implemented. The comparative method allows seeing the difference of the tourism industry in the economy of the region, making it possible to trace the dynamics of development and identify changes in the tourism sector in East Kazakhstan, starting from the first years of independence of the Republic of Kazakhstan.

The structural method is one of the key methods used in this research on the genesis and history of tourism development in East Kazakhstan. This method involves analysing the underlying framework and components that make up the tourism industry in the region. Specifically, the structural method allows researchers to break down the development of tourism into distinct stages, phases and time periods. It also facilitates the identification of key

constituent elements within each stage, such as the policies enacted, infrastructure built, challenges faced, prospects opened and outcomes achieved. Examining these structural elements provides insight into the step-by-step process of tourism industry formation over decades. In addition, comparing the structural aspects across historical eras highlights the continuity and change in regional tourism strategies. Overall, the incorporation of the structural methodology into the multi-pronged analytical approach allows for a comprehensive, chronological mapping of the causal factors, development processes and current status of the tourism sector in East Kazakhstan. The method brings order and understanding to this complex development.

Therefore, the geographical approach is the main one, which is necessary when considering the regional development, in this case, the tourism sector of a particular area of East Kazakhstan, which allows tracing specific features, differences and drawing specific conclusions for this region. The approach will allow taking into account not general constructions, but the peculiarities of the social, natural, and historical development of the region, the peculiarities of its geographical location, which affect the conditions for the development of tourism in this territory. The study was carried out in 5 stages, each of them used a geographical approach, but different methods were used to achieve the desired results and draw conclusions:

At the first stage, a theoretical analysis of the resource base was carried out, as were the existing approaches necessary for a comprehensive analysis and to achieve the goal. The second stage included an analysis performed using the chronological method, which allowed us to identify the stages for a more specific consideration of the prerequisites and results of each period of tourism development in the region. Then, the third stage consisted of reviewing the material using the historical method, which allowed us to identify for each stage the main problems and prospects of development, methods of their solution or implementation. It also allowed us to summarise and draw conclusions about the results of programmes for the development of the tourism industry in the region. The fourth stage consisted of the analysis of the main directions of tourism that can develop in East Kazakhstan. The main promising directions and methods were identified as necessary for their development. And finally, the last stage included the analysis of the results using a comparative method, which allowed us to draw conclusions about the entire decades of the dynamics of tourism development in the region, allowed us to identify the main causes and prerequisites, the main results of the existence of the tourism industry in the EKR, and, in addition, allowed us to show how tourism in one region affected the economic situation in Kazakhstan as a whole.

## Results and discussion

### *Building a model of the chronological development of tourism in the region*

Tourism began to develop in the years of Soviet power, moved to an independent stage of development after independence, already in 1992, and then in 1997, state documents were adopted on the development of tourism in the Republic of Kazakhstan (Republic of Kazakhstan, 1992), but the period of the 1990s was difficult in economic terms as in the entire post-Soviet space, so tourism still did not receive enough funds despite the laws adopted. It's important to mention that the East Kazakhstan area is among the most tourist-developed

regions (along with the Pavlodar Region, South Kazakhstan, where the Silk Road remains the most attractive place). In addition, cooperation has developed with the People's Republic of China, which borders the region of East Kazakhstan, in the field of tourism since the end of the XX century. At the first stage of development, attention was mostly paid to natural attractions known since ancient times: Lake Markakol, Mountain Altai (Arshaty, Katon-Karagay district), and Aigyrkum sands along the Kazakh-Chinese border. At this stage, tourism did not play a significant role in the EKR, the region was represented by the industrial sector, so there were very few tourist organisations and programmes.

The next stage was connected with Resolution No. 333 of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On the Concept of tourism development in the Republic of Kazakhstan" (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2001), after which more budget funds began to be attracted to the tourism sector, infrastructure development programmes were confirmed, a view on the forms and prospects of tourism development in Kazakhstan as a whole was described in more detail. A new stage of tourism development can be associated with the Message of the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan N. A. Nazarbayev "Nurly Zhol – the way to the future" (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2014), which called for the revival of the tourism sector, for enriching knowledge about the cultural and historical heritage of Kazakhstan and its regions. To attract a large number of tourists, a visa-free regime was introduced with many countries – the United States of America, Great Britain, France, Germany, Malaysia, the United Arab Emirates, the Republic of Korea and Japan, which, of course, contributed to an increase in the number of tourists from these countries. In 2014, East Kazakhstan occupied first place in terms of tourist accommodation, but recently the region has been among the three best tourist centres in Kazakhstan, behind Astana and Almaty.

The last stage includes the last years of the 2010s and the beginning of the 2020s, that is, the modern stage of tourism development. During this period, the concept of tourism changes, tourism becomes global, tourists from various countries tend to visit new, not yet popular tourist places, including the EKR (Wendt, 2020a). In a narrower sense, the policy within the region concerns increasing budgets and paying attention to the development of cities such as Semey, the former Semipalatinsk, a city with a rich history and culture (Republic of Kazakhstan, 2019), creating more places for tourists to stay, upgrading infrastructure. As a result, can distinguish five stages of the historical development of tourism in East Kazakhstan:

- Development during the Soviet Period: This stage refers to the initial phase of tourism development in East Kazakhstan during the era of the Soviet Union.
- First Resolutions for Independent Kazakhstan (Early and Late 90s): This stage marks the initial efforts and policies concerning tourism after Kazakhstan gained independence, particularly in the 1990s.
- Development and Attraction of New Budget Funds in the 2000s: This phase highlights the period in the 2000s when there was an emphasis on the development of tourism infrastructure and the attraction of budgetary investments.
- Continuation of the Implementation of Tourist Programmes: This stage involves the ongoing execution and enhancement of various tourist programmes to promote tourism in the region.

- Focusing on regional tourism and increasing foreign tourist visits: In this last phase, the government is focusing on the development of regional tourism, which is leading to an increase in the number of foreign tourists visiting the Republic of Kazakhstan.

It is also worth mentioning the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic, more precisely, the introduction of an emergency in the Republic of Kazakhstan, which led to the actual suspension of all tourist flows. Tourism in Kazakhstan has turned out to be at an extreme disadvantage, and it will take a lot of money and time to restore the influx of tourists. However, as restrictions are relaxed in many countries with closed borders, domestic tourism is beginning to develop, and gradually, with the opening of borders, the inflow of tourists from neighbouring countries is increasing.

The development of tourism in East Kazakhstan has gone through several distinct phases, reflecting both regional and global economic and political changes. However, the Covid-19 pandemic was a severe setback, halting tourist flows and necessitating a focus on domestic tourism as a recovery strategy. This historical progression underscores the region's evolving tourism strategy, from an initial focus on tourism based on natural attractions to a more diversified, globally integrated approach now seeking recovery and growth post-pandemic.

### ***Analysis of the problems that arose at each stage of development***

At each of the above stages, the tourism industry solved certain problems and opened up new prospects. Transport links with the regions of the Russian Federation are an important factor in the initially dynamic development, especially with the Altai Territory, which is another promising region in the field of tourism. Nevertheless, the infrastructure within the region and the connection with neighbouring regions of Kazakhstan was one of the main problems at the early stage of tourism development. Plans and programmes for the development of road and air links were proposed by the first resolutions on the development of tourism in independent Kazakhstan, but they were implemented rather slowly. In addition, there were not enough tourist organisations, hotels, and developed routes at the first stage of the development of the tourism industry since the region was important primarily as an industrial centre. Thus, there were development prospects at the first stage, but they were implemented extremely poorly. The situation changes at the second stage and the third stage, the chronological framework of which can be considered the 2000s and the beginning of 2010. These stages are characterised by similar problems. During this period, many of the earlier problems continue, along with a lack of qualified personnel. The problem exists of the prevalence of outbound tourism over inbound tourism in addition at this stage (Pilyavsky and Takhtaeva, 2013), which contributes to the leakage of funds from the region that could be used for the benefit of the tourism industry of the EKR. The problem of infrastructure persists: Ust-Kamenogorsk and Semey are the only cities with airports, and they remain the centres where tourists arrive. The railway communication that has existed since the times of the USSR requires modernisation, but a sufficient amount of funds is not allocated for these needs at this stage.

It is worth noting that after the economic crisis of 2008, all industries faced regression and a difficult economic situation, including the tourism sector, therefore, at the turn of decades, a certain stagnation can be observed, which could not enter the growth phase for a long time (Aliyeva et al., 2019; Atanelishvili et al., 2020). At the present stage of development, the

inaccessibility of places that may be attractive to tourists and residents remains the main problem, realizing that the flow of tourists is insufficient, which affects the development of these places (Ihnatenko et al., 2020). Regional centres, ski resorts and private recreation centres are the main popular places of attraction. The problem of infrastructure is also connected with the problem of the weak development of the hotel business, the lack of suitable places to accommodate tourists, the lack of qualified personnel. Thus, educational problems also affect the development of the tourism industry. Solving the infrastructure problem will reduce the prices raised by tourist organisations due to the small flow of tourists.

The lack of conditions for crossing the border of Kazakhstan and Russia in the area of “transparent borders” in the Altai and for cross-border tourism between Kazakhstan, Russia, China, and Mongolia also hinders the development of tourism. Nevertheless, businessmen from this region and Kazakhstan in general understand that tourism becomes one of the most promising industries for investment, so should expect an influx of capital investments in the tourism sector in the future, especially after the end of the restrictions caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. The lack of a proper internal policy, including measures of economic motivation for tourism enterprises, is one of the main reasons for the underdevelopment of tourism in the EKR (Kliuchnyk et al., 2023). On the other hand, tourism in the EKR needs to improve the overall marketing strategy and the development of pricing rules (Aliyeva et al., 2019). It is also worth noting the difficulties that many people have with customs, which causes negative reviews from tourists after trips. Travellers are put off by high prices and other problems, including the migration bureaucracy, which will remain in place even for those who travel without a visa. For example, refusal to register with the migration police upon arrival in Kazakhstan is a procedure that some travellers have to undergo several times in different cities, often they have to pay fines, postpone departure, waste time, and buy air tickets at higher prices.

Throughout its development, the tourism industry in East Kazakhstan has faced various challenges and opportunities. Initially, the industry benefited from transport links with Russian regions, particularly the Altai Territory. However, local infrastructure and inter-regional connectivity within Kazakhstan were major early hurdles. Slow implementation of development plans and a lack of tourism organisations and hotels due to the region’s industrial focus further hampered growth. Challenges continued throughout the 2000s and early 2010s, including a lack of human resources and the dominance of outbound tourism over inbound tourism, leading to financial leakages. Infrastructure problems persisted, with limited airport access and an outdated railway system. After the 2008 economic crisis, the sector stagnated and struggled to enter a growth phase. Current challenges include inaccessible destinations, insufficient tourist flows, underdeveloped hotel sector and inadequate staff training. Cross-border tourism is hampered by bureaucratic obstacles, and the region’s marketing and pricing strategies need improvement. Despite these challenges, there’s optimism for future investment, especially post-Covid-19, indicating potential for growth and development in East Kazakhstan’s tourism sector.



### ***Influence of historical and natural factors on the development of tourism in the region***

In this section, the influence of the history and culture of the region on the potential for the development of the tourism sector is studied. In addition, the main strengths of the tourism industry are highlighted, which are either laid down in the region initially and are due to natural and historical factors or created during the period under study. As it was mentioned earlier, the EKR has been one of the leaders of the tourism industry from the very beginning. Many natural and climatic factors, wide landscapes in a relatively small area are the main explanations for this situation. The region is rich in water resources: Lake Zaisan is of interest as a place of recreation and fishing. Lake Alakol is considered one of the most beautiful in Eastern Kazakhstan and has the potential to develop medical tourism because of its therapeutic mud. Famous for their thermal waters, the Rakhmanov Springs have a similar potential for "health" tourism. Even a small part of the natural attractions, which are now most accessible in terms of transport and tourist accommodation, do not fully use their potential, nevertheless, the region has a much larger number of natural places that, with proper development of infrastructure and hotel business, can become places of attraction for thousands of tourists.

It is also worth noting the stable socio-economic situation in the region with its stable growth and reduced unemployment compared to some other regions of the country, not including the period of the 2008 crisis and several years of recovery. Thus, economic and social stability become a favourable condition for the development of tourism, in addition to the natural and historical factors. In addition, the common border with some countries interested in cooperation in the field of tourism, for example, China and Russia, is an objective factor in development. East Kazakhstan's archaeological and palaeontological potential is one of the important aspects. Archaeology and palaeontology of the region began to develop in the XX century, and they received a new impetus in the XXI century. Thus, attracting scientific researchers to the region and opening new monuments will increase the number of attractions that the region is rich in, but which have not yet been opened. If the territory of South Kazakhstan is primarily of interest to tourists as a region where part of the Silk Road passes, the EKR is primarily considered the most promising region for eco- and geo-tourism. Thus, the study of the historical heritage of the region will allow for the continued implementation of new tourist programmes, as well as revealing hidden prospects for development.

Returning to the historical factor, the city of Semey, the former Semipalatinsk, may be the special attraction of the region in the direction of the museum or local history, where the first Soviet atomic bomb was tested in 1949 and which is of interest from a scientific, research, and historical point of view. Among the achievements in the field of tourism, can single out strong inter-ethnic cooperation and integration, the development of multi-sectoral infrastructure: air, rail, road transport (reconstruction of the Ust-Kamenogorsk airport, construction and reconstruction of roads connecting the region with neighbouring states, construction of roads from regional centres to the nearest tourist-attractive places) (Sholpanbaeva et al., 2020). Nevertheless, it can be noted that there are still not enough funds invested in the road communication of small settlements, the infrastructure is poorly developed in cities and towns far from the regional centres, which also have tourist potential.

EKR has long been a leader in tourism, largely due to its rich natural and historical heritage. The region's diverse landscapes, together with attractions such as Lake Zaisan and Lake

Alakol, offer considerable potential for recreational and medical tourism. In particular, the thermal waters of the Rakhmanov Springs offer opportunities for health tourism. Despite these natural treasures, the full potential of many attractions remains untapped due to limitations in infrastructure and the hotel industry (Tsybukh, 2023). The region's stable socio-economic climate, with the exception of the 2008 crisis, further enhances its tourism prospects. In addition, its proximity to tourism-interested neighbours such as China and Russia, and its rich archaeological and palaeontological history, particularly in eco and geotourism, are significant assets. Semey's historical significance in nuclear research adds a unique dimension to the region's appeal. While progress in multi-sectoral infrastructure is commendable, more investment is needed, especially in remote areas with tourism potential, to fully exploit the region's assets for tourism development.

### ***Analysis of development prospects at the present stage***

This section discusses the most promising development lines of the tourism industry in East Kazakhstan and the present results. Ecotourism is considered a promising type of tourism, whose development is facilitated by all types of natural landscapes on the territory of the entire EKR, recreation and ski resorts. In particular, many works address the prospects for the development of geo-tourism. The potential interest is 8,9 million tourists (or 63% of the total potential). It occupies the best position in the world tourism market and should become one of the key directions for the development of tourism in East Kazakhstan. Despite this, ecotourism is not a priority of the state tourism policy today. The topic of this direction of tourism in the region has not yet been touched upon in any important strategic government document. The future development of geo-tourist and eco-tourist resorts in East Kazakhstan is associated with first-class natural places (such as the resort on Lake Yazevoye, Rakhmanov Springs, Sibinsky Lakes, Lake Shulba, Kiin-Kerish Canyon, Aigyrkum Dunes, etcetera). The Irtysh River with local ferries is a good option for recreation, as well as the geographically most convenient river route to Lake Zaisan through a tributary of the Bukhtarma reservoir (Chlachula, 2019). Also, reindeer and horse farms are vital to the development of geotourism and ecotourism resorts, especially in regions such as Eastern Kazakhstan, where the landscape is rich in diverse natural attractions. These farms provide a unique and immersive experience that is in line with the fundamental principles of geotourism and ecotourism. They support environmental sustainability, local cultures, and educational experiences, making them a valuable addition to the region. Visitors can take part in traditional activities, discover local lifestyles, and understand the interdependence of communities and their environment. These experiences deepen respect for nature and stimulate the region's economy by supporting local traditions and landscapes (Sholpanbaeva et al., 2020).

Health tourism is the next promising direction for the development of the tourism industry, it remains attractive for millions of tourists. There are many mud springs in the region, but there are not enough well-equipped and attractive polyclinics or sanatoriums near these sources, with accessible infrastructure. Despite this, there are already several dozen such tourist places, so with the refinement and modernisation, with the implementation of the programme to increase the influx of tourists, this direction can actively develop and bring profit to the region. One of the promising areas is historical and cultural tourism, due to the interest in the nomadic way of life, the revival of the idea of escapism in modern man, which has received an impetus for development in recent years. The Eastern Kazakhstan region is

of particular interest for scientific research of the neo-nomadic culture of Kazakhstan and other Central Asian countries, and the history of the nomads of the region is revealed in many tourist blogs. Residents are the keepers of many traditions that have existed for centuries and can participate in the development of nomadic tourism, so attracting funds to this area, developing transport, infrastructure, attracting residents, and creating good conditions and benefits for them will actively develop this area, attracting more and more tourists. As part of the education reform and increasing knowledge about history and culture, knowledge must be popularised about the main sights and historically significant places in East Kazakhstan. An ascent of Mount Belukha and a visit to sacred sites took place in the period from June 23 to July 1, 2018, with the participation of such international organisations as the Asian Development Bank (ADB), the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development (EBRD), and the World Bank.

As part of the implementation of the Rukhani Zhagyru Programme, a film crew of the international TV channel MIR, headed by the editor-in-chief V. Popova, arrived in East Kazakhstan at the invitation of the Department of Tourism and External Relations of the EKR. An electronic book for children's audience *Legends and Fairy tales of East Kazakhstan*, has been released, which includes fifteen stories about the sacred places of the EKR (Sholpanbaeva et al., 2020). The factor of the availability of development prospects is the interest in studying the region, there is an increase in the number of scientific publications concerning both the socio-economic situation of the region and the cultural and historical heritage, there are a large number of conferences on the development of entrepreneurship and business in the region (Wendt, 2020b; Komilova et al., 2021).

It is worth considering not only promising types of tourism but also the impact of global economic and business trends. Recent studies show that small and medium-sized travel companies provide relatively higher growth rates in the number of employees. Travel companies can actively create jobs for socially vulnerable categories of the population, contributing to the development of self-employment. However, it is also necessary to point out the ambiguous impact of the development of travel companies on the employment processes, since, on the one hand, travel companies, when expanding, attract more and more labour, but at the same time, fierce competition both within the system and between travel companies and large businesses leads to the ruin of some small enterprises and the loss of jobs. Therefore, it is necessary to create such conditions for the functioning of the tourism system when employment growth is stable (Aktymbayeva et al., 2020; Jawabreh et al., 2023).

Ecotourism and geotourism have been identified as the most promising sectors for tourism development in East Kazakhstan, taking advantage of the region's diverse natural landscapes and resources (Amanova et al., 2017). Despite their potential to attract large numbers of tourists, these sectors are currently under-represented in government tourism policy. The region's natural attractions, such as Lake Yazevoye and Rakhmanov Springs, offer significant opportunities for ecotourism development. In addition, the inclusion of local cultural experiences, such as reindeer and horse farms, is in line with the principles of sustainable tourism. Health tourism is also promising and will require infrastructure improvements to maximise its potential. Historical and cultural tourism, particularly focusing on the region's nomadic heritage, is another growth area. However, the development of these tourism sectors needs to take into account the wider economic context, in particular the impact on employment

and the sustainability of small and medium sized tourism enterprises. Creating a balanced environment that supports both tourism growth and stable employment is critical to the long-term success of the tourism industry in East Kazakhstan.

## Conclusions

The research traced the progress through five distinct phases, catalysed by the dissolution of the Soviet Union, early independent policies, budgetary prioritisation in the 2000s, implementation of strategic programmes, and the recent emphasis on global integration and pandemic recovery. Each period has experienced site-specific challenges and changes, but persistent infrastructure limitations, human capital deficits, and inter-regional connectivity barriers have persisted from the beginning to the present. Natural and cultural heritage have remained fundamental assets, while economic stability and cross-border cooperation have facilitated growth.

Current strengths, such as multi-sectoral transport links, contrast with the unfinished development of remote destinations. Prospects in ecotourism, geotourism, and health tourism show potential for competitive advantage for mega-resorts if harnessed through government prioritisation, foreign direct investment, public-private partnerships, and sustained local participation. However, the realisation of such ambitions will depend on addressing remaining shortcomings in policy support, destination accessibility, tourism workforce skills, hotel industry gaps, and marketing sophistication.

The transformation of East Kazakhstan's tourism industry, while still facing systemic constraints, has shown considerable success despite external shocks. The industry has moved from peripheral status to growing economic importance and international visibility. There are strategic imperatives to improve competitiveness, broaden appeal beyond neighbouring countries and balance wider socio-economic integration. If barriers can be overcome through cohesive public-private planning, the sector can move from ancillary revenue generator to a structural pillar of regional development. The industry's dynamism and resilience suggest this potential, provided that it is able to seize emerging opportunities despite current or unforeseen crises.

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