



THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE TOURISM INDUSTRY DURING THE YEARS OF INDEPENDENCE AND ITS IMPACT ON NATIONAL ECONOMIC GROWTH IN UZBEKISTAN

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ABSTRACT	KEYWORDS
This article examines the evolution of the tourism sector in Uzbekistan since the country gained independence in 1991 and evaluates its contribution to national economic growth. Using a mixed-methods approach that combines descriptive statistical analysis of official tourism indicators with a review of national development strategies, the study traces the sector's transformation from a marginal activity into a strategically prioritized industry. The findings indicate that liberalization of the visa regime, infrastructure investment, and institutional reform have been the principal drivers of growth in international arrivals, tourism receipts, and employment. The article concludes that tourism has become an increasingly significant, though still under-utilized, engine of diversification for the national economy, and it proposes directions for further research and policy development.	Tourism industry, economic growth, Uzbekistan, independence period, national economy, diversification

Introduction

Tourism is widely recognized as one of the most dynamic sectors of the global economy, generating employment, foreign exchange earnings, and multiplier effects across related industries such as transport, hospitality, and retail. For resource-rich but export-dependent economies such as Uzbekistan, the development of tourism offers a pathway toward diversification away from raw material exports and toward a more balanced, services-oriented growth model.

Since gaining independence in 1991, Uzbekistan has progressively repositioned tourism as a strategic priority. The early transition years were characterized by limited institutional capacity, restrictive visa policies, and underdeveloped infrastructure, which together constrained the sector's growth. From the mid-2010s onward, however, a series of liberalizing reforms—including simplified visa procedures, currency convertibility, and targeted investment in transport and hospitality infrastructure—have significantly altered the sector's trajectory.

The purpose of this article is twofold: first, to describe the principal phases of tourism sector development in Uzbekistan during the years of independence; and second, to assess the extent to which

this development has contributed to national economic growth. The article addresses the following research questions: (1) What policy and institutional factors explain the trajectory of tourism development since 1991? (2) What is the observable relationship between tourism sector indicators and macroeconomic growth indicators? (3) What structural constraints continue to limit the sector's contribution to the national economy?

Methods

This study adopts a qualitative-quantitative mixed-methods design. The qualitative component consists of a documentary and policy analysis of national legislation, presidential decrees, and strategic programs related to tourism development, including the Concept for the Development of Tourism and successive state programs. The quantitative component draws on secondary data published by the State Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Uzbekistan Tourism Committee (Uztourism), and international bodies such as the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), covering the period from 1995 to the most recent available reporting year.

The analysis proceeds in three stages. First, the historical trajectory of tourism policy is periodized into distinct phases based on major institutional and legislative milestones. Second, descriptive statistical analysis is applied to indicators including the number of international visitor arrivals, tourism receipts as a share of GDP, and employment in tourism-related activities, in order to identify trends and inflection points. Third, a correlational comparison is drawn between tourism sector growth and aggregate GDP growth rates to assess the plausibility of a positive association, while acknowledging that correlation alone does not establish causation. Limitations of the data, including gaps in pre-2000 statistical reporting and definitional inconsistencies across sources, are discussed where relevant.

Results

Phases of Tourism Sector Development: The trajectory of tourism development in independent Uzbekistan can be divided into three broad phases. The first phase (1991–2000) was marked by institutional formation, including the establishment of the National Company Uzbektourism, but was constrained by a restrictive visa regime, currency controls, and limited private sector participation. The second phase (2001–2016) saw gradual infrastructure improvement, particularly around the historic Silk Road cities of Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, but growth remained modest relative to regional competitors. The third phase (2017–present) has been characterized by rapid liberalization: the introduction of e-visas and visa-free regimes for a growing number of countries, simplified hotel registration procedures, and substantial public investment in airports, roads, and heritage-site infrastructure.

Tourism Sector Growth Indicators: Descriptive analysis of available statistics indicates a marked acceleration in international visitor arrivals beginning in 2017, coinciding with the liberalization reforms described above. Tourism receipts as a share of GDP show a corresponding upward trend over the same period, alongside growth in formal employment within accommodation, food service, and tour-operator activities. The COVID-19 pandemic produced a sharp but temporary contraction in 2020–2021, after which arrivals and receipts resumed an upward trajectory, suggesting underlying structural resilience in demand once travel restrictions were lifted.

Relationship with National Economic Growth: Comparison of tourism sector growth rates with aggregate GDP growth rates over the post-2017 period reveals a broadly positive association,

consistent with the hypothesis that tourism has contributed to overall economic expansion, particularly through service-sector value added and regional employment generation. However, the relative contribution of tourism to total GDP remains modest compared with sectors such as agriculture, manufacturing, and mineral extraction, indicating that while tourism's growth rate has been high, its absolute weight in the economy is still developing.

Discussion

The results support the view that policy liberalization has been the decisive factor behind the acceleration of tourism development in Uzbekistan since 2017. This finding is consistent with the broader literature on tourism-led growth, which emphasizes the importance of market access, ease of entry, and institutional facilitation as preconditions for sector expansion. At the same time, the analysis suggests that Uzbekistan's tourism sector remains at an early stage of maturity relative to its potential, given the country's rich cultural heritage along the historic Silk Road.

Several structural constraints continue to limit the sector's contribution to national economic growth. These include uneven regional distribution of tourism infrastructure, with development concentrated in a small number of heritage cities; a shortage of qualified hospitality and tour-guiding personnel; and insufficient integration of small and medium-sized enterprises into the tourism value chain. Addressing these constraints will likely require continued investment in vocational training, further diversification of tourism products beyond cultural heritage (including ecotourism, adventure tourism, and MICE tourism), and stronger linkages between tourism and other sectors such as agriculture and handicrafts. This study is subject to limitations common to secondary-data analyses, including definitional inconsistencies across statistical sources and the inherent difficulty of isolating tourism's causal contribution to GDP growth from other concurrent reforms. Future research employing econometric techniques such as Granger causality testing or computable general equilibrium modeling would help to more precisely quantify the sector's economic contribution.

Conclusion

Since independence, Uzbekistan's tourism sector has progressed through distinct phases of institutional formation, gradual development, and rapid liberalization-driven growth. The evidence reviewed here indicates that tourism has become an increasingly important, if still developing, contributor to national economic growth, particularly following the reforms initiated in 2017. Sustaining this trajectory will require continued attention to infrastructure development, human capital formation, and regional diversification of the tourism product, in line with the goals articulated in national development strategies.

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