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Sustainable Commercialization of Uzbek Heritage along the Silk Road: A Perspective from the EU

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Summary

This paper aims to analyze the sustainable commercialization of Uzbek Heritage as a tourist destination along the Silk Road. Uzbekistan has the potential to become a major tourist destination with its rich historical heritage, natural beauty, and gastronomy provided sustainable commercialization strategies are pursued. However, the improper utilization of natural resources in Uzbekistan has become a worrying issue as tourism activities increase.

The EU can contribute to the sustainable tourism development and commercialisation of Uzbek heritage by providing technical and financial support to encourage tourism facilities in Uzbekistan to use energy, water, and other resources efficiently. The priorities of the EU, such as regionalism, sustainability, and multi-stakeholder approach are particularly relevant with regards to projects funded by the EU. Lastly, the paper showcases how the activities and initiatives undertaken by the newly established EU-Uzbekistan Friendship Group in the European Parliament (EP) can serve as a complimentary springboard to promote Uzbek heritage and tourism in line with the EU's increased interest in the Central Asian region.

Key words: European Union, Uzbekistan, Tourism, Silk Road, Central Asia.

Introduction

Central Asia is a vast region that has been at the crossroads of civilizations for thousands of years. The Caspian Sea borders the region to the west, the Siberian plains to the north, the Himalayas to the south, and the Gobi Desert to the east. Historically, the area has served as a crossroads of trade and cultural exchange between Europe, the Middle East, and Asia. The Great Silk Road, passing through the region, allowed to exchange and bring goods, ideas, and people from various parts of the world. The area was conquered by various empires, including the Persian, Greek, and Mongol empires, and it has been home to many different civilizations throughout history. One of these was the Timurid Empire, founded by the Mongol conqueror Timur in the 14th century. The Timurids were known for patronizing the arts and literature, and their capital city of Samarkand became a cultural center. Today, Central Asia is home to several independent nations, including Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. The region continues to be a crossroads of cultures, with influences from Europe, the Middle East, and Asia shaping its unique identity.

Located in the heart of Central Asia, Uzbekistan boasts a rich cultural heritage spanning thousands of years. The country has more than 4,000 historical and architectural sites, a carefully preserved spiritual heritage, and over 7,000 historical monuments¹. Uzbekistan's unique cultural and historical heritage can be effectively used to enhance its competitive advantages in the global tourism market. The country is known for its stunning architecture, particularly Islamic buildings such as mosques, madrasas, and mausoleums. Some of the most notable examples include the Registan in Samarkand, the Kalon Minaret in Bukhara, and the Gur-e-Amir mausoleum in Samarkand.

¹ Embassy of the Republic of Uzbekistan to the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland. http://www.uzbekembassy.org/e/tourism_in_uzbekistan/

The country is also a junction point in many ways. Uzbek cities, such as Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, served as major trade hubs on the Great Silk Road. The region's abundant natural resources, such as cotton, silk, and precious metals, were highly sought after by traders worldwide. Additionally, Uzbekistan was a center of culture and scholarship on the Silk Road. The region's cities were home to many prominent thinkers, poets, and scholars, and their works helped shape the Silk Road's intellectual and artistic landscape. The region's architecture, music, and art also reflect the influence of various cultures and traditions that passed through the Silk Road. It was a crossroads of different religions, and its cities were home to many important religious sites. Islam, Buddhism, Zoroastrianism, and Judaism all left their mark on the region's religious landscape, and many of these sites have been preserved as prominent cultural heritage sites.

These elements add value and importance to cities and have left a significant archaeological heritage behind. Many structures are currently designated as world heritage by UNESCO. These include the Historic Centre of Bukhara (1993), Historic Centre of Shakhristabz (2000), Itchan Kala (1990), and Samarkand–Crossroad of Cultures (2001). Western Tien-Shan (2016) is identified as a natural heritage.

"The city of Bukhara was awarded the prize by the "Cities for Peace" organization. The Quran of Usman and the collection of manuscripts of the Institute of Oriental Studies are included in the UNESCO register "Memory of the World." (Ismailova, 2022)²

Uzbekistan also has tens of properties on the "Sites on the Tentative List". UNESCO has been working closely with the government of Uzbekistan to preserve and protect these sites. UNESCO not only preserves the architectural properties but also helps grow and promote the Uzbek musical tradition in collaboration with the Uzbek government.

² Ismailova, Gulnoza. 2022. Protection and Promotion of Cultural Heritage of The Republic of Uzbekistan. Political Reflection, Vol. 8 No. 1 ISSN: 2042-888x

Other significant initiatives that UNESCO undertook to protect Uzbekistan's cultural heritage include capacity building, awareness raising, and emergency response. UNESCO has been working with the government of Uzbekistan to build capacity in areas such as the conservation and management of cultural heritage sites. This includes providing training and support to local communities and developing guidelines and best practices for preserving and managing cultural heritage sites. It has also been working to raise awareness about the importance of cultural heritage in Uzbekistan, both among the public and decision-makers. In this context, developing educational programs and outreach activities, as well as engaging with local communities, have been conducted to promote the value of cultural heritage. UNESCO also provides emergency response and support in the event of natural disasters or other emergencies that may threaten cultural heritage sites in Uzbekistan. This provides technical assistance and support to local authorities and mobilizes international support for emergency response and recovery efforts.

In addition, UNESCO has been making an effort to systematize these actions since the 1990s. Under the body of the Silk Road tourism program, several activities and events have been held since 1993. “The Meetings in Samarkand (1994), Khiva (1999), Bukhara (2002), Astana (2009), and Shiraz (2010) all concluded with the adoption of five Silk Road Declarations, a document outlining the main principles and guidelines of the tourism concept.”³

The above-mentioned five official Silk Road Declarations focus on some basic principles. Firstly, they aim to strengthen cultural and educational exchanges between countries along the Silk Road to promote greater understanding and appreciation of each other's cultural heritage. Secondly, they seek to promote sustainable economic development and trade between countries along the Silk Road, creating new opportunities for growth and development. Thirdly, they

³ UNWTO, Technical Cooperation And Silk Road – Declarations, <https://www.unwto.org/declarations-silk-road>

encourage the development of tourism infrastructure along the Silk Road to promote greater cultural and economic exchange. Fourthly, they aimed to preserve and protect the cultural heritage sites along the Silk Road and promote their inclusion in international heritage lists. Fifth, they seek to enhance regional cooperation and dialogue between countries along the Silk Road to promote the region's peace, stability, and prosperity.

The Declaration was crucial in promoting greater awareness and appreciation of the Silk Road's cultural and economic legacy and bringing together countries and stakeholders to work toward its revival. The declaration continues to serve as a guiding document for international cooperation and collaboration on Silk Road initiatives.

According to official statistics, the country welcomed over 6.7 million tourists in 2019, representing a significant growth over previous years. Over a five-year period, from 2014 to 2019, the number of visitors to Uzbekistan more than doubled, reflecting the country's efforts to boost its tourism sector. The change of leadership in Uzbekistan marked the beginning of the country's rise as a tourism destination, and the subsequent relaxation of travel rules has led to a noticeable growth in tourism in recent years. Ulugbek Azamov, the First Deputy Minister of Culture and Tourism, highlighted the impact of liberalization measures by stating:

"Our new president has liberalized the country, which became especially obvious in the tourism sector when the visa regime was liberalized." (Daunton, 2023)⁴

Despite all these conveniences, Uzbekistan only allows tourists from a limited number of countries around the globe. The country experienced a significant increase in the number of tourists in 2021, with 6.748 million people visiting, a 125%

⁴ Uzbekistan: The Central Asian country is opening up to the world, here's why you should visit: <https://www.euronews.com/travel/2023/03/10/uzbekistan-the-central-asian-country-is-opening-up-to-the-world-heres-why-you-should-visit>

increase compared to 2018.⁵ However, the majority of these tourists, totaling 6.260 million individuals, came from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries. Indicates that approximately 93% of tourists in Uzbekistan originate from just 9 member and associate member countries within the CIS region.

The lower interest in travel from non-CIS nations can be due to insufficient air connectivity. The monopolistic stance of the state-owned national carrier, Uzbekistan Airways (UZA), has hampered the development of the Uzbek aviation market⁶. To address this issue, President Mirziyoyev enacted extensive policy reforms aimed at the air transport sector, with a special emphasis on enhancing passenger transportation. Since most foreign tourists prefer airplanes, a 2018 presidential decree led to a “radical improvement of the civil aviation of the Republic of Uzbekistan”. Uzbekistan Airways has now opened air routes to 39 countries and to 92 airports.

Another significant step toward the tourism sector is the visa policies of Uzbekistan. Uzbekistan's complex visa application process was a barrier to the country's efforts to boost tourism. To that end, Uzbekistan opened electronic visas for nationals of 77 countries, including the United States, on July 15, 2018. The duration of a single or multiple entry visa is 30 days. A single-entry electronic visa costs \$35; a multiple-entry one costs \$50. Citizens of 65 nations do not need to have a visa to enter Uzbekistan for stays of up to 30 days. Additionally, Azerbaijan, Armenia, Belarus, Georgia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan (for up to 60 days), Moldova, Russia, Tajikistan (for up to 30 days), and Ukraine have bilateral visa-free

⁵ Tourism in Uzbekistan in number: <https://uzbekistan.travel/uz/o/ozbekistonda-turizm-raqamlarda/>

⁶ Uzbekistan's Development under the Leadership of Various Political Reforms: The Case of Air Transport Industry:
 file:///C:/Users/HP/Downloads/Uzbekistans_Development_under_the_Leadership_of_V.pdf

agreements in place. On a mutual basis, Uzbekistan and Japan grant visas without charging consular costs⁷.

Commercialization of Uzbek Heritage

Tourism development through the protection and promotion of cultural heritage can become a significant engine of economic growth in the nation by utilizing a business model that involves the active engagement of the private sector and the populace with the backing of the governments.

Tourism is very beneficial in terms of providing the flow of foreign currency by incoming tourists and creating employment, and developing the region. In this context, World Heritage Sites have the potential to make an economic contribution to the countries where they are located in terms of tourism. However, this is possible with a well-planned tourism development strategy and investment. Infrastructure services (hotels, internet access, electricity, shops, cafes, airport, etc.) must be meticulously provided to revive tourism.

Here, the need is to understand the commercialization of the country's heritage. It refers to using the country's cultural heritage for commercial purposes, such as its historic sites, traditional crafts, and cultural practices. This can include tourism, the sale of handicrafts, and the marketing of cultural events and festivals. In this context, the Silk Road tourism program is a comprehensive guide.

Uzbekistan has implemented numerous initiatives to promote sustainable tourism and responsible cultural heritage management to address these challenges. For instance, the government has collaborated with international organizations like UNESCO to develop sustainable tourism and cultural heritage management guidelines. It has also established several protected areas and museums to preserve and showcase Uzbek cultural heritage. Moreover, in partnership with

⁷ Tourism Development In Uzbekistan- Challenges And Opportunities, Special Policy Brief By Caspian Policy Center, <https://api.caspianpolicy.org/media/uploads/2019/11/CSPP-policy-brief-Tursim-in-Uzbekistan.pdf>

other organizations such as TURKSOY, which promotes cultural initiatives worldwide, Uzbekistan aims to showcase its culture and implicitly increase tourism potential implicitly.

International Advisory Committee on Cultural Heritage in Uzbekistan

The "International Advisory Committee on Cultural Heritage in Uzbekistan" was officially opened in Khiva and online on 15 September 2021, within the framework of the International Cultural Forum "Central Asia at the Crossroads of World Civilizations."⁸ The initiative to establish this committee was put forward by the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Mr. Shavkat Mirziyoyev, and UNESCO Director-General, Ms. Audrey Azoulay, during their meeting in August 2019.

Founded by the government in association with UNESCO, the committee offers expert guidance and advice on protecting and managing Uzbekistan's cultural heritage sites. It aims to maintain the authenticity and integrity of cultural sites and activities while ensuring that heritage commercialization is sustainable. The committee comprises international experts and specialists in archaeology, architecture, conservation, and management of cultural heritage fields.⁹

Current Developments

A significant development in this regard occurred in 2023 with the launch of the "Model for Sustainable Development in Central Asia: Capacity Building, Awareness

⁸ UNESCO, 2021, International Advisory Committee on World Heritage created in Uzbekistan
<https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2339>

⁹ UNESCO, 2021, International Advisory Committee on World Heritage created in Uzbekistan,
<https://whc.unesco.org/en/news/2339>

Raising, Technology Adoption.” (The MOST Project). Funded by the European Union’s “Switch Asia” Program and supported by the Ministry of Natural Resources of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the project was unveiled at the International Conference “Development of a sustainable tourism model - a Way to Increase Tourism Potential” on March 23, 2023. This event hosted numerous partners from Greece, Cyprus, Latvia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan.

In his speech, The Minister of Natural Resources of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Aziz Abdukhakimov, emphasized the importance of efficient “green” technologies in developing the country’s tourism industry.¹⁰

The MOST¹¹ Project’s goal is to promote a new, well-planned, sustainable tourism model in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan. The project aims to support tourism organizations in these countries to implement sustainable production and consumption (SCP) practices by providing relevant knowledge, information, and communication technology (ICT) tools. It also supports regional and local authorities in planning and implementing policies that will enhance development, increase awareness of sustainable tourism and consumer awareness of sustainable consumption, and strengthen dialogue between authorities, small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), and end-users regarding SCP.¹²

¹⁰ Aziz Abduhakimov says Uzbekistan’s environmental situation is “very difficult”

<https://www.gazeta.uz/en/2023/06/02/aziz-abdukhakimov-on-enviornmental-problmes/>

¹¹ Within the framework of the MOST Project, training seminars were held on sustainable marketing, GSTC for sustainable tourism, and green procurement to increase competitiveness. The certification training of participants was focused on the following standards: ISO 14001:2015 (Environmental Management System); HCMI (Hotel Carbon Measurement Initiative. This is a methodology and toolkit that is designed for the hotel industry), and CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility). The total number of people trained at training seminars in Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan amounted to 955 people, of which 730 are representatives of tourism enterprises in Uzbekistan, 86 in Kazakhstan, and 139 in Tajikistan. The total number of registered Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, and Tajikistan users in the HCMI - Hotel Carbon Metering Initiative was 342.

¹² Delegation of the European Union to Uzbekistan, “Development of a sustainable tourism model- a way to increase tourism potential”. News Date: 27.03.2023

https://www.eeas.europa.eu/delegations/uzbekistan/development-sustainable-tourism-model-way-increase-tourism-potential_en?s=233

Within the framework of the MOST Project, tourism organizations of participating countries will take advantage of participating in a training course on environmental management and sustainable marketing in tourism enterprises.

European Union's initiatives

Uzbekistan is home to a wealth of cultural and historical sites. However, many of these sites are not well-known outside of Uzbekistan and need to be fully developed for tourism. The European Union (EU) could play a pivotal role in the tourism industry development and commercialization of Uzbek heritage by providing technical and financial assistance and expertise.

This could include supporting the development of tourism infrastructure, such as roads, hotels, and transportation networks, as well as marketing and promoting Uzbekistan's cultural heritage to potential visitors.

Moreover, the EU has the potential to aid Uzbekistan in establishing sustainable tourism practices that prioritize the environment and local communities. This effort may include advocating for responsible tourism practices, such as waste and carbon emission reduction, supporting local enterprises, and ensuring equitable distribution of tourism benefits among the local population.

In this context, the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development introduced the Integrated Cultural Heritage Framework in Uzbekistan-Khiva/Khorezm Region (the "Framework") in 2018. Its goal is to finance sovereign, sub-sovereign, and private-sector projects across sectors to support regional development holistically while using cultural heritage resources as a driver.

In 2018, the European Union launched the European Year of Cultural Heritage (EYCH). This initiative celebrates and promotes Europe's cultural heritage for a year. Although it primarily focuses on Europe, it also aims to promote cultural heritage beyond Europe's borders with an international dimension.

The international dimension of the EYCH was reflected in several activities and events that took place throughout the year. To collaborate with non-EU countries

the EYCH encouraged collaboration with non-EU countries to promote cultural heritage and foster international cooperation. For example, the initiative supported projects that brought together European and non-European heritage professionals to share knowledge and expertise.

By using cultural diplomacy, the EYCH serves as a platform for cultural diplomacy, promoting Europe's cultural heritage and values around the world. Previously, the initiative supported cultural exchanges, exhibitions, and other events that showcased European cultural heritage to international audiences. Additionally, the EYCH aimed to boost cultural tourism by promoting Europe's captivating heritage sites as must-see destinations for visitors worldwide. The initiative supported projects that enhanced the visitor experience at cultural heritage sites, as well as efforts to promote sustainable tourism. It used digital platforms to reach international audiences, including a dedicated website that provided information about events and activities throughout the year. The initiative also used social media to promote cultural heritage and engage with audiences worldwide.

In 2020, the UNESCO Office in Tashkent partnered with the European Union and the municipality of Khiva to organize a two-day workshop. The purpose was to develop a strategy for sustainable tourism in Khorezm. The workshop was led by Mr. Peter Debrine, Senior Project Officer of UNESCO World Heritage, and Sustainable Tourism Programme, and Mr. Peter Seek, Sustainable Tourism Consultant. The workshop aimed to help local representatives from the public and private tourism sectors define priorities and create a Destination Management Plan for the City of Khiva.

This workshop was part of the UNESCO project called "Afghanistan, Central Asia, and Iran - Common Heritage along the Silk Roads and Corridors to and from Europe". The project was launched in October 2018 with financial support from the European Union. The project aims to diversify tourism products and improve visitor experiences along the Silk Roads heritage corridors in the participating countries.

Its goal is to promote culture as means of sustainable development, focusing on heritage-based tourism.

The EU recognizes the importance of capacity-building programs that improve the skills of tourism professionals and stakeholders, allowing them to carry out sustainable tourism plans efficiently. Workshops, training sessions, and knowledge-sharing platforms can all be used to promote best practices and novel approaches.

Furthermore, the EU encourages collaboration between the public and corporate sectors and civil society organizations to form partnerships that promote sustainable tourist growth. These collaborations may enable the interchange of knowledge, resources, and ideas, ultimately contributing to Uzbekistan's tourist sector's overall growth and resilience.

Conclusion & Recommendations

The European Union (EU) supports Uzbekistan in the protection of cultural heritage and the enhancement of tourism potential. The EU develops various projects aimed at safeguarding cultural heritage and promoting sustainable tourism, thereby bolstering Uzbekistan's capacity in these areas. The EU's aid package encompasses financial resources for restoring and protecting cultural heritage, facilitating access to this heritage, providing technical assistance to develop the tourism infrastructure, and conducting training on tourism management. This support enables Uzbekistan to preserve its cultural heritage and cultivate its tourism sector in a sustainable manner.

For example, the restoration of historical sites and development of tourist attractions, with the backing of the EU, can promote the preservation of Uzbekistan's historical and cultural assets and encourage tourists to explore these regions. EU technical assistance can be used to enhance the tourism management capacity of Uzbekistan. Projects focusing on areas such as strengthening tourism

marketing and promotional activities, boosting employment within the tourism industry, and organizing tourism education and certification programs can be initiated. Consequently, Uzbekistan's tourism sector becomes more competitive, which in turn enhances the satisfaction and experience of tourists.

Moreover, there should be an increase in projects aimed at commercializing tourism. For example, projects that encourage investments in areas like the development of touristic facilities and services, accommodation for tourists, restaurants, and guidance services should receive more support. This way, tourism can contribute to economic growth and augment employment potential.

In conclusion, the assistance provided by the EU to Uzbekistan presents significant opportunities for the preservation of cultural heritage and the enhancement of tourism potential. An assessment of these aids, coupled with the development of new projects aimed at commercializing tourism, can ensure that Uzbekistan's tourism sector experiences sustainable growth and contributes significantly to the country's economy.