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MODERNIZING TOURISM INFRASTRUCTURE AND ENHANCING REGIONAL ATTRACTIVENESS WITHIN THE NEW UZBEKISTAN DEVELOPMENT STRATEGY

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Abstract
This article investigates how the modernization of tourism infrastructure under the New Uzbekistan development strategy has contributed to enhancing the attractiveness of the country's regions. Drawing on a review of national strategic documents, regional investment programs, and comparative case analysis of selected provinces, the study identifies the principal infrastructure modernization measures undertaken since 2017 and evaluates their observed and expected effects on regional tourism competitiveness. The findings show that investment in transport connectivity, accommodation capacity, and destination management has been concentrated in traditionally prominent regions, while emerging destinations have begun to benefit from targeted state support programs. The article argues that a more balanced, region-specific approach to infrastructure modernization is necessary to fully realize the strategy's goal of nationwide tourism-driven regional development.

Keywords: Tourism infrastructure, regional development, New Uzbekistan strategy, destination attractiveness, modernization.

Introduction

Tourism infrastructure—encompassing transport networks, accommodation facilities, destination management systems, and supporting utilities—is a fundamental precondition for a region's ability to attract and retain visitors. In the framework of the New Uzbekistan development strategy, adopted to guide

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the country's socioeconomic transformation through the 2020s, tourism has been explicitly identified as a priority sector for regional development, with infrastructure modernization positioned as a central instrument for increasing the attractiveness of both established and emerging destinations.

Historically, tourism activity in Uzbekistan has been concentrated in a limited number of well-known heritage destinations, particularly Samarkand, Bukhara, and Khiva, while many other regions with tourism potential—including mountainous, desert, and lakeside areas—have remained comparatively underdeveloped. The New Uzbekistan strategy explicitly addresses this imbalance by calling for the modernization of infrastructure across a broader set of territories and the diversification of the national tourism product beyond cultural heritage tourism.

This article examines two interrelated questions: (1) What specific measures of tourism infrastructure modernization have been implemented under the New Uzbekistan strategy? (2) To what extent have these measures contributed to enhancing the attractiveness of different regions, and what disparities remain? The analysis aims to inform both academic understanding of regional tourism development in Central Asia and practical policy recommendations for balanced territorial growth.

Methods

The study employs a qualitative case-comparison methodology combined with policy document analysis. Primary sources include the text of the New Uzbekistan development strategy, subordinate state programs for regional tourism development, and decrees establishing special tourism zones and investment incentive mechanisms. Secondary sources include reports from the Uzbekistan Tourism Committee, regional statistical yearbooks, and independent assessments of infrastructure investment in the tourism sector.

Four regions were selected for comparative case analysis based on their differing starting positions and strategic designations: Samarkand region (an established heritage destination), Bukhara region (an established heritage destination with recent large-scale investment), Surkhandarya region (an emerging destination with significant natural and historical potential but limited existing

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infrastructure), and the Aral Sea coastal area of Karakalpakstan (a designated priority zone for ecological and adventure tourism development). For each case, the analysis catalogues infrastructure modernization measures implemented since 2017—including transport connectivity, accommodation capacity, utilities, and destination management systems—and qualitatively assesses their contribution to regional attractiveness based on available visitor and investment indicators.

Results

Infrastructure Modernization Measures: Analysis of strategic documents identifies four principal categories of infrastructure modernization pursued under the New Uzbekistan strategy: (a) transport connectivity improvements, including airport reconstruction, new domestic air routes, and highway rehabilitation linking regional centers to tourist sites; (b) expansion of accommodation capacity through incentives for private investment in hotels and guesthouses, particularly in the mid-market and boutique segments; (c) development of destination management infrastructure, including visitor centers, signage systems, and digital tourism platforms; and (d) establishment of special tourism zones offering tax and customs incentives to attract both domestic and foreign investment in underdeveloped regions.

Regional Case Comparison: In Samarkand and Bukhara, infrastructure investment has built upon an already substantial existing base, with recent projects focused on upgrading airport capacity, expanding premium accommodation, and enhancing the visitor experience around major heritage sites. These regions continue to receive the largest share of both international arrivals and tourism-related investment. In Surkhandarya, infrastructure modernization has been more recent and more limited in scale, focused primarily on road rehabilitation and initial accommodation development around key historical and natural sites, with visitor numbers still considerably lower than in the established heritage centers. The Aral Sea coastal area presents the most nascent case, where infrastructure development has centered on establishing basic accommodation and transport access to support ecological and adventure

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tourism, within the context of broader efforts to address the environmental and socioeconomic consequences of the Aral Sea crisis.

Observed Effects on Regional Attractiveness: Across the four cases, regions with more substantial and longer-standing infrastructure investment show correspondingly higher and more stable visitor numbers, consistent with the expectation that infrastructure is a necessary, though not sufficient, condition for destination attractiveness. Emerging destinations, while still comparatively small in absolute visitor terms, show higher year-on-year growth rates from their low starting bases, suggesting that targeted infrastructure investment is beginning to translate into increased attractiveness, albeit from a much smaller foundation than in the established heritage centers.

Discussion

The results indicate that the New Uzbekistan strategy's infrastructure modernization measures have, to date, reinforced rather than fundamentally altered the existing geographic concentration of tourism activity, even as they have begun to open new opportunities in emerging regions. This pattern is consistent with path-dependency dynamics commonly observed in regional tourism development, whereby destinations with an established reputation and existing infrastructure base tend to attract a disproportionate share of new investment, creating a self-reinforcing cycle of concentration.

For the strategy's stated goal of enhancing the attractiveness of a broader set of regions to be more fully realized, the findings suggest several policy implications. First, special tourism zone incentives may need to be calibrated more aggressively for genuinely emerging destinations, rather than applied uniformly across regions with very different starting conditions. Second, destination marketing and digital promotion efforts should be coordinated with infrastructure investment so that improved physical access is matched by improved visibility to potential visitors. Third, closer integration between tourism infrastructure planning and complementary sectors—such as environmental rehabilitation in the Aral Sea area, or agricultural and handicraft development in rural regions—may help emerging destinations develop

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distinctive value propositions rather than competing directly with established heritage centers.

The study's case-comparison methodology, while allowing for rich contextual analysis, limits the generalizability of findings and does not permit precise quantification of the causal contribution of specific infrastructure investments to visitor growth. Future research incorporating regional panel-data econometric analysis, or primary visitor surveys assessing the relative importance of infrastructure factors in destination choice, would strengthen the evidentiary basis for regional tourism policy.

Conclusion

The New Uzbekistan strategy has catalyzed substantial modernization of tourism infrastructure across transport, accommodation, and destination management systems. While this investment has, to date, disproportionately benefited already-established heritage destinations, emerging regions have begun to show measurable, if still modest, gains in attractiveness. Achieving the strategy's broader goal of balanced regional tourism development will require a more differentiated policy approach that accounts for the distinct starting conditions and comparative advantages of each region, supported by coordinated investment in both physical infrastructure and destination marketing.

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