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THE CURRENT STATE AND DEVELOPMENT PROSPECTS OF SPECIAL ECONOMIC ZONES IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract. This article examines the current state, key challenges, and development prospects of special economic zones in Uzbekistan. Particular attention is paid to their role in attracting domestic and foreign investment, stimulating export-oriented and import-substituting production, modernizing industrial capacities, creating new jobs, and strengthening regional economic development. The study analyzes the legal, institutional, financial, tax, customs, monetary, and infrastructural conditions required for the effective operation of special economic zones. It also considers the development potential of tourism-oriented zones, industrial parks, technoparks, and special scientific and technological zones, with particular reference to Samarkand, Jizzakh, and Tashkent. The findings show that special economic zones can become important drivers of economic diversification, technological modernization, employment growth, regional development, and long-term national competitiveness.

Keywords: special economic zones, investment policy, foreign investment, industrial development, export potential, technoparks, innovation, tourism zones, regional development, economic diversification, infrastructure, Uzbekistan.

Аннотация. В статье рассматриваются современное состояние, основные проблемы и перспективы развития специальных экономических зон в Узбекистане. Особое внимание уделяется их роли в привлечении внутренних и иностранных инвестиций, стимулировании экспортно-ориентированного и импортозамещающего производства, модернизации промышленных мощностей, создании новых рабочих мест и обеспечении регионального экономического развития. Анализируются правовые, институциональные, финансовые, налоговые, таможенные, валютные и инфраструктурные условия, необходимые для эффективного функционирования специальных экономических зон. Рассматривается потенциал развития туристических зон, промышленных парков, технопарков и специальных научно-технологических территорий на примере Самарканда, Джизака и Ташкента. Выявлены основные факторы, ограничивающие эффективность данных зон, включая недостаточный потенциал освоения инвестиций, слабое участие финансовых институтов, инфраструктурные проблемы и дефицит высококвалифицированных специалистов. Сделан вывод о том, что специальные экономические зоны могут стать важными факторами диверсификации экономики, технологической модернизации, роста занятости, регионального развития и повышения долгосрочной конкурентоспособности страны.

Ключевые слова: специальные экономические зоны, инвестиционная политика, иностранные инвестиции, промышленное развитие, экспортный потенциал, технопарки, инновации, туристические зоны, региональное развитие, диверсификация экономики, инфраструктура, Узбекистан.

INTRODUCTION

Tax policy plays an important role in ensuring the sustainable development of production entities operating in special economic zones (SEZs). Existing shortcomings in the tax system and the insufficient use of established incentives may limit the ability of newly established enterprises in these zones to fully realize their economic potential. Therefore, it is advisable to implement a number of measures aimed at improving tax mechanisms.

In particular, the tax burden on enterprises can be reduced by introducing accelerated depreciation methods for fixed assets or increasing the amount of depreciation deductions. This would increase the volume of financial resources remaining at the disposal of enterprises and stimulate their investment activity. In addition, establishing representative offices of domestic enterprises in special economic zones that have demonstrated effective performance in international practice and offer broad tax incentives may contribute to improving economic efficiency.

In this regard, the taxation procedure for income generated through activities conducted in foreign markets should be regulated by relevant legal documents.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Special economic zones are widely used in international practice as an important instrument for stimulating economic growth, attracting foreign investment, increasing export potential, and promoting the industrialization of regions. To analyze the establishment and development characteristics of special economic zones, it is important to examine the theoretical foundations of this concept, international experience, and their role in the national economy.

The economic essence and development trends of special economic zones have been extensively studied by foreign scholars. In particular, T. Farole (2011) considers special economic zones to be an effective mechanism for implementing economic reforms and improving the investment climate. According to him, special economic zones play an important role in integrating the national economy into the global market.

Farole and Akinci (2011) analyze the development and effectiveness of special economic zones and emphasized the importance of infrastructure, institutional quality, government support, and the investment environment. The scholars also emphasize that the performance of special economic zones directly depends on the country's institutional environment and the effectiveness of governance.

The importance of special economic zones in promoting exports was examined by Balasubramanyam and Salisu (Balasubramanyam & Salisu, 2001). According to their findings, the development of export-oriented production through such zones contributes to improving a country's foreign trade indicators.

Among the scholars who have studied the operation of special economic zones in the Commonwealth of Independent States and Central Asian countries, V. Popov (2017) and E. Kuznetsova (2019) assessed the impact of such zones on regional economic development and highlighted their importance in attracting investment and creating new jobs.

The establishment and development of special economic zones in Uzbekistan have also been studied by local scholars. In particular, Sh. Mustafakulov, B. Berkinov, A. Vakhobov, Q. Hakimov, and other economists have scientifically substantiated the significance of special economic zones in improving the investment climate, developing industrial production, and increasing the country's export potential.

In recent years, as a result of the economic reforms implemented in Uzbekistan, a number of studies have been conducted on improving the operation of special economic zones, strengthening their legal foundations, and increasing management efficiency. However, the current state of special economic zones, their economic effectiveness, their capacity to attract investment, and their impact on regional development still require comprehensive scientific research.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

In conducting this research, methods such as observation, data collection, generalization, and comparison were applied. The theoretical views and research findings of domestic and foreign scholars regarding special economic zones, investment activity, regional development, sectoral challenges, and possible solutions, as well as relevant legislative and regulatory documents, were examined. Based on the analysis, conclusions and practical recommendations were developed.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

One of the major challenges facing enterprises operating in special economic zones is their insufficient capacity to attract, absorb, and efficiently utilize investment resources. This situation is partly associated with the need to further improve investment mobilization mechanisms. Although enterprises seek to attract external financial resources, there remains a need to strengthen institutional capacity for their effective management and responsible utilization.

In this context, it would be advisable to establish a clear legal framework for the operation of investment banks within special economic zones and to provide them with targeted incentives during the initial stages of their activity. At the same time, commercial banks should be more actively involved in the preparation, assessment, financing, and implementation of investment projects. Financial institutions are more likely to participate in such processes when the real sector offers stable and predictable returns, thereby allowing banks to serve as reliable sources of investment financing.

To address the existing constraints, particular attention should be given to the following priority areas:

• strengthening state participation in investment processes and improving the system of government guarantees;

• further developing the legal and institutional conditions required for attracting investment into the economy;

• enhancing the role of banking associations and financial institutions in investment activity;

• providing comprehensive support to enterprises engaged in export-oriented and import-substituting production.

The implementation of these measures would contribute to satisfying domestic demand for goods, directing excess liquidity toward productive economic activities, and strengthening the purchasing power of the national currency. It would also expand opportunities to support the real sector by channeling the financial resources of state-owned entities and large economic organizations toward investment needs.

The effectiveness of special economic zones is also closely linked to the condition of the national monetary and currency system. In particular, the stability and purchasing power of the national currency, the rate of inflation, and the effectiveness of mechanisms designed to encourage exports and support import-substituting industries have a direct impact on the performance of these zones. Therefore, monetary policy and measures aimed at maintaining macroeconomic stability should be regarded as an integral component of the strategy for developing special economic zones.

In Uzbekistan, the national currency has historically been used primarily for transactions within the domestic market. To a certain extent, this limits the effective integration of special economic zones into the international economic environment. For this reason, several important measures are required to ensure their sustainable operation and more active participation in international economic relations.

First, the national currency exchange system should be further improved through the development of a market-based floating exchange-rate mechanism. Such an approach would create more favorable conditions for conducting foreign economic transactions. At the same time, exchange-rate formation should take into account the price levels of products supplied by the country’s main competitors in foreign markets, as well as broader external economic indicators.

To support export activities, it is necessary to introduce a permanent monitoring system aimed at minimizing the adverse impact of domestic inflation on the competitiveness of local producers. Comprehensive measures should also be undertaken to increase the country’s foreign exchange and gold reserves. In this regard, foreign capital attraction and the more effective utilization of domestic economic resources may both contribute to strengthening the country’s foreign exchange reserves.

Preventing excessive inflation also requires the development of competition in the manufacturing and service sectors, improvement of market infrastructure, and implementation of a consistent economic policy focused on macroeconomic stability.

The successful operation of special economic zones is inseparably linked to the liberalization of foreign trade. From this perspective, deeper integration of the national economy into the global economic system, broader access to foreign markets, and further support for exports remain important areas of economic policy. These measures would help redirect domestic producers toward external markets, improve their competitiveness, and strengthen the country’s export capacity.

At the same time, supporting export-oriented enterprises, regardless of their form of ownership, may be considered an important direction of economic policy. In developing special economic zones, particular emphasis should be placed on industries capable of adapting to intense global competition and generating high value added. An effective monetary and credit policy is equally important for supporting such sectors.

Research indicates that the establishment of special economic zones should not be regarded as an end in itself. Rather, these zones should function as an integral part of the country’s broader economic development strategy. Their purpose should be to accelerate economic growth, modernize industrial production, supply the domestic market with high-quality goods, increase exports, and generate additional foreign currency revenues.

In the early 1990s, international experts recommended that countries undergoing economic transition establish specialized tourism zones as a means of developing the tourism sector. In particular, proposals were made to create free tourism zones based on the rich historical and cultural heritage of Samarkand and Bukhara. It was emphasized that such areas had the potential to become major international tourism centers in the future.

The legal foundations for establishing special economic zones specializing in international tourism in Uzbekistan have been reflected in a number of regulatory legal acts adopted by the competent state authorities. These documents set out priorities related to the development of tourism infrastructure, the effective use of historical and cultural heritage sites, and the enhancement of Uzbekistan’s attractiveness as an international tourist destination.

To implement these objectives, a project was developed to establish a specialized tourism-oriented economic zone in Samarkand. The proposal was subsequently reviewed by the relevant government authorities, and its principal directions received preliminary approval. However, because several components required further refinement, additional work was carried out to improve the project.

The planned tourism zone in Samarkand is considered particularly promising due to the region’s favorable geographical location, extensive historical and cultural heritage, archaeological monuments, national traditions, and natural resources. The presence of internationally compliant hotels, modern communication facilities, developed transport infrastructure, and an established service sector further strengthens the area's potential as a major tourism and investment destination.

Special economic zones focused on international tourism may contribute to expanding the economic potential of particular regions. Their establishment can improve economic efficiency, create employment opportunities, expand export potential, support import-substituting production, increase foreign currency inflows, and strengthen the country's participation in international economic cooperation. From this perspective, such zones may be regarded as mechanisms for modernizing economic relations and accelerating regional development.

Initial efforts to create a special economic zone specializing in international tourism in the Samarkand region began in 1996. At the initiative of the regional administration, a working group was formed consisting of tourism specialists, economists, and experts in the establishment and management of special economic zones. In order to study international experience, the group visited the Yantar Special Economic Zone in Russia's Kaliningrad region and examined the operation of similar zones in Israel, Türkiye, and China.

In 1997, a special commission was established to prepare the concept, development program, and organizational and legal foundations of the proposed tourism-oriented special economic zone in Samarkand. Over the following years, the working group drafted the relevant regulatory and legal documents, and by 1999 the principal stages of this process had largely been completed. The preliminary version of the project was then submitted for discussion to ministries and agencies directly or indirectly associated with the tourism sector. Relevant comments and recommendations were provided by the Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Ministry of Economy and Finance of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Tax Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Central Bank of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Tourism Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, Uzbekistan Airways JSC, and the Customs Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

On the basis of a decision adopted by the Samarkand city administration on 7 October 1997, a temporary administrative body was created to manage the project in practice, and its responsibilities were formally defined. Nevertheless, the complete formation of the zone was not finalized in subsequent years. Despite this, the Samarkand tourism economic zone project continued to be regarded by public authorities as a promising initiative and was reviewed at different stages.

The adoption of the Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. LRU-604 dated February 17, 2020, "On Special Economic Zones," played an important role in strengthening the legal framework for the development of such territories [1]. The Law supports the implementation of strategic objectives, including the deepening of economic reforms, the provision of competitive goods and services to the domestic market, the attraction of advanced technologies, the comprehensive development of regions, and the introduction of modern management practices.

Under the legislation, special economic zones may be established only by decisions of authorized government bodies. Each zone is granted a specific legal status, a defined period of operation, and clearly determined territorial boundaries. To coordinate their activities, management councils are formed with the participation of representatives of state authorities, local self-government bodies, and investors. This arrangement promotes cooperation among stakeholders and ensures their involvement in the preparation and implementation of regional development programs.

Practical experiments related to the establishment of special economic zones in Uzbekistan began even before their legal status had been fully formalized. In 1995, for example, the "Factory Plus Mahalla" model was introduced on a pilot basis in Tashkent using the production facilities of the Uzelektroapparat industrial association and the surrounding areas. The initiative was designed to support local entrepreneurship, stimulate private-sector development, and create new employment opportunities.

The results of this experiment indicated that transforming such structures into effective special economic zones requires simplified procedures for the state registration of business entities, optimization of the tax burden, and broader access to local raw materials.

At the same time, a number of technoparks were established in the country to promote the development of an innovation-based economy. These institutions operate as modern forms of infrastructure that integrate science, education, and industrial production. They facilitate the rapid introduction of new technologies into industry and support the commercialization of innovative ideas. In this regard, the scientific and innovation environments developed around Tashkent State Technical University and Samarkand State University have particular importance.

The legal and organizational foundations for the development of the Jizzakh Special Economic Zone were established by Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. PF-4516 dated March 18, 2013, "On the Establishment of the Jizzakh Free Economic Zone" [2]. This legal act created the necessary conditions for the gradual implementation of industrial projects, the attraction of domestic and foreign investment, and the development of modern production facilities in the region.

At the end of 1996, an initiative was proposed to establish an Uzbek-Japanese industrial park in the Bektemir district of Tashkent through cooperation between the foreign investment agency and Sumitomo Corporation, one of Japan's major industrial companies. The project received favorable international assessments and was recognized as a promising investment program. A formal agreement was subsequently concluded between the parties, defining the legal and organizational framework for its implementation. Under the proposed arrangement, the Japanese company and the local administration were expected to act as the principal founders, while the foreign investment agency would perform a coordinating role.

The project envisaged the establishment of numerous high-technology enterprises in light industry, food production, electronics, and electrical engineering. The territory allocated for the industrial park was favorably located from the perspective of transport and logistics, while a substantial share of the products was intended for export markets. The project was also expected to generate considerable social benefits, including the creation of thousands of new jobs.

This initiative was intended to attract foreign investment, facilitate the transfer of modern technologies, modernize production capacity, and enhance the competitiveness of Uzbekistan's economy. It was also viewed as an important component of broader economic reforms aimed at improving living standards and strengthening the country's integration into the global economic system.

In the Jizzakh and Samarkand special economic zones, the development of various industries was planned on the basis of local resources and available labor potential. The presence of raw materials, a sufficient workforce, and relatively well-qualified specialists created favorable conditions for locating industrial enterprises in these regions.

The production of leather and leather goods was identified as one of the most attractive sectors for foreign investors. The strong demand for these products in the global market, relatively low raw-material delivery costs, and comparatively modest capital requirements for organizing production increase the investment attractiveness of this industry. In addition, certain regions possess economic potential for the development of shipbuilding and the pulp and paper industry.

In the Jizzakh Special Economic Zone, the production of textiles, construction materials, and chemical products is regarded as one of the most promising directions for industrial development. The region possesses sufficient raw-material resources, production infrastructure, and labor potential to support the sustainable expansion of these sectors.

In recent years, considerable attention has been paid across the Commonwealth of Independent States to the creation of technoparks as a key component of innovation-driven development. One notable example is Kazakhstan, where extensive efforts have been undertaken to establish an information technology park in the Alatau area near Almaty. Such experience demonstrates the important role that innovation infrastructure can play in the transition toward a knowledge-based economy.

For Uzbekistan, the development of a national technopark system should also be considered a strategic priority. Technoparks specializing in software development may generate particularly high economic returns. Existing assessments indicate that a significant number of domestic and foreign companies are already operating in the country's information technology and software sectors. The gradual expansion of this market is increasing investor interest and creating broader opportunities for cooperation with leading global technology companies.

The establishment of innovation-oriented zones contributes to a more intensive exchange of knowledge and professional experience among specialists, accelerates the creation and commercialization of new technologies, and improves the competitiveness of the software industry. The development of such infrastructure does not necessarily require exceptionally large financial resources, since its principal asset is highly qualified human capital.

For this reason, technoparks should be developed in close cooperation with higher education institutions specializing in engineering and technology. Scientific research, innovative projects, and the training of qualified specialists at universities may serve as an essential intellectual foundation for technopark activities. In the future, such innovation centers could become major hubs for the development of national software engineering and digital technologies. The rapid growth of activities related to the design and practical implementation of integrated information and communication technology solutions in Uzbekistan further confirms the potential of this field.

Practical initiatives in this area include specialized centers focused on training young programmers and supporting their innovative ideas. Students and young specialists participating in such centers are able to reinforce their theoretical knowledge through practical projects, thereby developing professional competencies and gaining experience relevant to the labor market.

The establishment of special scientific and technological zones requires the creation of an effective legal and institutional environment. This involves improving the existing legislative framework, introducing appropriate amendments to regulatory acts, and adopting government decisions that clearly define the objectives, functions, governance mechanisms, and operational procedures of such zones.

In particular, it would be appropriate to introduce a specialized legal regime for technoparks, technopolises, and innovation cities focused on software products, internet technologies, and other industries requiring a high level of intellectual capacity. Such a legal framework could be based on the following principles:

- directing the majority of production toward international markets;
- simplifying state registration procedures for newly established enterprises;
- allowing foreign investors to import scientific and technological equipment without customs duties;
- exempting exported software products from certain fees and customs charges;
- granting temporary tax incentives to newly created innovation-oriented enterprises.

This approach would enable the government to implement a comprehensive policy aimed at developing innovation infrastructure. As a result, technoparks and technopolises would become not only centers for the creation of new technologies, but also important institutions integrating education, science, and industrial production. They could contribute to strengthening intellectual capital, developing an innovation-based economy, and supporting long-term economic modernization.

Uzbekistan is already undertaking certain measures in this direction. Authorized public institutions responsible for the development of information and communication technologies have prepared conceptual documents aimed at expanding the software industry and supporting the digital economy. Organizational measures have also been proposed for establishing scientific and technological zones and coordinating their activities.

The effective functioning of such zones depends heavily on the ability to attract and retain highly qualified specialists. Therefore, the remuneration of programmers, engineers, and researchers should be brought closer to international labor market standards. This would help attract qualified professionals and create more favorable conditions for retaining highly skilled specialists in the country.

It is equally important to create favorable conditions for participants in foreign economic activity, since the products and services generated in special scientific and technological zones are expected to be primarily export-oriented. Efficient zones specializing in software production could significantly accelerate the development of Uzbekistan's information and communication technology sector. This, in turn, would contribute to faster digitalization of the economy, stronger national economic capacity, and higher international competitiveness.

The idea of establishing free economic zones in Uzbekistan was already viewed by economists and specialists in the final decade of the twentieth century as an effective instrument for modernizing the national economy. An analysis of international experience shows that such zones can play a major role in attracting foreign and domestic investment, introducing innovation, increasing exports, improving economic competitiveness, and creating new jobs. From this perspective, special economic and scientific-technological zones may serve as important instruments for supporting national economic development.

CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTIONS

The study of the establishment and improvement of special economic zones makes it possible to draw the following principal conclusions.

First, international experience demonstrates that the creation and effective operation of special economic zones can generate a wide range of positive economic outcomes. These include higher rates of economic growth, lower unemployment, the production of high-value-added finished goods based on local raw materials, increased exports, stronger foreign exchange and balance-of-payments positions, and the introduction of modern machinery and advanced technologies into production. The effectiveness of a special economic zone may be evaluated through practical indicators such as rising wages among local employees, increased inflows of foreign investment, declining unemployment, and a growing supply of goods and services in the market. Positive changes in these indicators suggest that the zone is functioning successfully.

Second, in developed economies, special economic zones are often created to strengthen the economic position of specific territories, support particular industries, or, in some cases, promote the development of individual enterprises. When selecting a location for such a zone, policymakers typically assess indicators such as the local unemployment rate and household income levels. Another important feature of special economic zones in industrialized countries is that priority is often given to domestic private capital rather than to foreign investment.

The experience of the United States shows that foreign-trade zones were established primarily to reduce unemployment and expand participation in international trade. This objective became especially important during the Great Depression of the 1930s, when the creation of special economic zones formed part of broader government efforts to address unemployment and stimulate economic activity.

Enterprise zones, by contrast, are designed to promote the development of a particular territory or business through targeted incentives. Such zones are generally focused on supporting the domestic market. Another important form of special economic zone in the United States is the technopark, whose main purpose is to promote innovative activity and develop knowledge-intensive technologies. These structures may operate as research centers affiliated with universities or as independent research and innovation institutions.

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