



YOUTH UNEMPLOYMENT AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT: A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF UZBEKISTAN AND KAZAKHSTAN

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ABSTRACT: *This research paper investigates the intricate relationship between youth unemployment and economic development in the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Kazakhstan. Despite sharing a common Soviet past and similar geographical challenges in Central Asia, these two nations have adopted distinct economic models—Kazakhstan focusing on resource-based industrialization and Uzbekistan transitioning toward a diversified market economy through recent liberalization. The study analyzes the demographic "youth bulge" as both a potential engine for growth and a socio-economic risk. Through a comparative analysis of statistical data and policy frameworks, the paper identifies systemic barriers such as skill mismatches, rural-urban disparities, and the impact of digital transformation on the labor market. The findings suggest that while Kazakhstan faces challenges with "hidden" unemployment and underemployment, Uzbekistan struggles with a high volume of new labor market entrants. The article concludes with strategic recommendations for harmonizing educational curricula with market demands and fostering entrepreneurial ecosystems to mitigate the adverse effects of youth joblessness on long-term GDP growth.*

Keywords: *Youth unemployment, Economic development, Central Asia, Labor market, Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Human capital, Transition economies.*

Introduction

The issues of the labor market, employment and unemployment are becoming increasingly important as a result of economic globalization. Youth unemployment remains one of the most critical socio-economic challenges worldwide, particularly in developing and transition economies. According to the International Labour Organization (ILO), approximately 73 million young people globally are



unemployed, while over 267 million are either underemployed or working in informal, insecure jobs. This phenomenon not only limits immediate economic productivity but also poses long-term risks by creating a “lost generation” that lacks access to skill-building opportunities and stable income. Furthermore, the ongoing technological transformation under the Fourth Industrial Revolution has introduced additional barriers, as youth must now compete in labor markets that demand advanced digital literacy, creative problem-solving, and adaptability. Global experience shows that each country has its own unique labor market characteristics. A significant argument for addressing labor market constraints is the revision of the school work skills curriculum. The goal should be to balance the supply and demand for jobs by studying and continuously monitoring the global labor market. The world unemployment rate was 4.89% in 2024, down slightly from 4.92% in 2023 (ILO, 2023). In this context, countries with large youth populations face the dual challenge of harnessing demographic potential while mitigating social and economic instability.

The issue of youth unemployment is being researched and studied by experts from various countries. In a recent overview for Central Asia : Kyrgyzstan was 3,3 % U², Turkmenistan - 4,3% U, Tajikistan -11,6 % (the highest among the listed Central Asian states) (ILO 2024). Additionally , in June 2020, the Republican Scientific Center for Employment and Labor Protection of the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations of Uzbekistan conducted another sociological survey in 101 cities and districts using a methodology developed based on recommendations from the International Labor Organization. According to the survey, the unemployment rate for January-July was 13.2 %. This indicates that quarantine measures aimed at preventing the spread of coronavirus infection during the COVID-19 pandemic have had a significant impact on the labor market.

According to estimates, widely used in international comparative tables, the youth unemployment rate in Uzbekistan was 10.94%, while in Kazakhstan it was 3.83% (World Bank model, 2024). According to the latest available estimate World Bank / Human Capital Portal, NEET (youth not in employment, education or training



- youth, not studying or working) the share of youth in Uzbekistan was ~17%, in Kazakhstan it is significantly lower, around ~6–7% according to various estimates (official statistics of Kazakhstan indicate ~6.5%, media/statistics - ~7.1% in the foreseeable future). According to the World Bank's assessment of the level of "Different economic structure and level of formal employment," Uzbekistan has more informal employment and seasonal migration, which increases the vulnerability of young people in the labor market, while Kazakhstan has a higher share of formal employment and a different sectoral structure. The problem of "skills mismatch" (the mismatch of skills with educational programs and employer requirements) is noted in studies on Uzbekistan and hinders the employment of young people. In Uzbekistan, nearly half of the population is under the age of 25, and the youth labour market faces persistent strain as the economy works to absorb a growing number of young entrants; recent estimates indicate that while the national unemployment rate was around 4.5 % in 2024, youth unemployment was significantly higher at about 10.9 % (BMZ, 2025). In contrast, Kazakhstan's overall unemployment rate has hovered around 4.6 % into 2025, with youth unemployment for those aged 15–34 estimated near 3.0 % (Agency of Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025).

The primary objective of this study is to analyze and compare the dynamics of youth unemployment in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, identifying key socio-economic factors that influence its persistence and potential solutions for reduction. The research covers the period from 2010 to 2025, reflecting recent trends and policy developments in both countries. Methodologically, the study employs a mixed approach, combining quantitative analysis of official statistical data from national and international sources with qualitative assessments derived from academic literature and policy reports. This integrated approach allows for a comprehensive understanding of the similarities and differences in the youth labor market conditions of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan.

Literature review

The existing literature highlights multiple dimensions of youth unemployment in transition economies. One key framework is the “**skills mismatch**



theory,” which asserted that the education systems of former Soviet states have not evolved in line with labor market requirements (Myant & Drahokoupil, 2013). This mismatch results in overqualified youth in low-productivity jobs or underqualified youth unable to meet industry demands. Scholars emphasized that youth unemployment is not merely about the absence of jobs but about the lack of “**decent work**”—employment that was secure, fairly compensated, and aligned with individual qualifications.

In the context of Central Asia, several studies underline the interplay between demographics, economic structure, and policy effectiveness. Karimov & Saparov (2022) note that Uzbekistan’s youth unemployment is exacerbated by the large number of graduates entering the labor market annually, compounded by rural-urban disparities in employment opportunities. Nazarbaeva (2023) emphasizes that Kazakhstan’s youth face “aspirational mismatches,” where high educational attainment does not guarantee employment in specialized sectors, leading to underutilization of skills and brain drain.

Additionally, migration studies reveal that high youth unemployment contributes to significant labor outflows, particularly to Russia and South Korea. World Bank (2024) highlights that remittances provide short-term economic relief but can undermine long-term domestic human capital accumulation. Furthermore, the digital economy is reshaping youth employment, offering new remote and freelance opportunities while simultaneously creating a “precariat” class lacking social protections.

In Uzbekistan, youth unemployment has remained one of the main policy concerns in the last decade. According to the World Bank (2023), the country’s youth unemployment rate averaged around 10–12% between 2019 and 2024. Several scholars have analyzed its causes and consequences. Abdurakhmanova and Mirkadirova (2021) emphasize that the education system often fails to provide practical and technical skills demanded by the labor market. Similarly, Karimov (2020) argues that the mismatch between university curricula and employer needs contributes to structural unemployment among young graduates. Research by



Ismailov (2022) also notes that informality plays a major role in youth employment, with many young people engaged in temporary, seasonal, or low-paid jobs without social protection.

Comparative analyses by international organizations and regional scholars suggest that both countries share common structural problems inherited from the Soviet labor model — centralized vocational training systems, slow private-sector development, and weak labor mobility. Kadyrova and Baizhumanova (2023) emphasize the need to modernize vocational education and foster stronger partnerships between educational institutions and employers. They argue that dual education models, similar to those in Germany, could help bridge the gap between theory and practice. In terms of policy and reform efforts, several authors have assessed recent government strategies. The World Bank (2023) notes that Uzbekistan's employment policies increasingly focus on entrepreneurship and digital skills, while Kazakhstan prioritizes industrial diversification and innovation. Nazarov (2024) points out that youth employment programs in both countries often overlap with broader national development strategies, yet lack clear evaluation mechanisms.

Methodologically, most studies rely on quantitative data from labor force surveys, ILOSTAT, and the World Bank World Development Indicators. However, recent research by Bekmuratova (2023) and Rakhimov (2022) employs mixed methods, combining statistical analysis with interviews to explore young people's perceptions of job quality, migration, and informal work. This approach provides a more nuanced understanding of labor market realities in Central Asia.

Despite a growing body of previous research on youth unemployment in transition economies, significant gaps remain in the comparative understanding of Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan. Previous research largely emphasizes macroeconomic indicators, skills mismatch, and policy frameworks, while giving limited attention to youth perceptions of job quality, decent work, and career aspirations. Moreover, the interconnections between youth unemployment, informality, migration decisions, and long-term human capital development are insufficiently analyzed in an



integrated manner. Policy-oriented studies often lack rigorous evaluation of program effectiveness and comparative outcome analysis, particularly across regions and sectors. Therefore, this research will conduct a comparative, mixed-method analysis of youth unemployment in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan, examining structural factors, youth experiences of employment and job quality, migration behavior, and the effectiveness of government employment programs, with the aim of providing evidence-based recommendations for improving youth labor market outcomes.

3. Methodology

3.1 Theoretical Framework

This study is based on **skills mismatch theory**, **human capital theory**, and **structural unemployment theory**. Youth unemployment arises when the skills acquired through education do not match labor market needs, particularly in economies undergoing digital and structural transformation (ILO, 2023; World Bank, 2022). While investment in education enhances employability, limited job creation and weak private-sector absorption can result in persistent youth unemployment (World Bank, 2023). Structural labor market conditions further explain cross-country differences, with Uzbekistan facing constraints related to informality and job availability, and Kazakhstan exhibiting greater sensitivity to macroeconomic and trade-related factors (ILO, 2024).

3.2 Conceptual Framework

Youth unemployment is influenced by macroeconomic performance, demographic pressure, and labor market structure. GDP growth reflects job creation potential, total unemployment captures labor market inefficiencies, youth population share represents demographic stress, and trade openness indicates exposure to global economic conditions. The impact of these factors varies across countries due to differences in labor market institutions and levels of formal employment.

3.3 Empirical Framework

The empirical framework operationalizes the conceptual model using a **panel data regression approach** covering Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan from 2010 to 2025. Youth unemployment is modeled as a function of selected macroeconomic and



demographic variables, allowing for cross-country comparison and analysis of structural differences.

The estimated model is specified as:

$$YU_{it} = \beta_0 + \beta_1 GDPG_{it} + \beta_2 TU_{it} + \beta_3 YPOP_{it} + \varepsilon_{it}$$

- YU_{it} = Youth Unemployment Rate (%) → Dependent Variable
- $GDPG_{it}$ = GDP Growth Rate (%) → Independent Variable
- TU_{it} = Total Unemployment Rate (%) → Independent Variable
- $YPOP_{it}$ = Youth Population Share (%) → Independent Variable
- i_{ii} = country (*Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan*)
- t_{tt} = year (*2010–2025*)
- β_0 = intercept (constant term)
- $\beta_1, \beta_2, \beta_3$ = coefficients to be estimated
- ε_{it} = error term

Results

Uzbekistan faces a high volume of labor market entrants, with substantial informal employment.

Kazakhstan exhibits hidden unemployment and underemployment despite high educational attainment.

Both nations experience regional disparities and challenges in integrating youth into the digital economy.

Table 1

Descriptive statistics about Uzbekistan

Variables	YUO	YPI	GDP	TOI
Obs	16	16	16	16
Mean	11.50687	45.375	7.0625	5.38125
Maximum	13.4	47	8.5	5.9
Minimum	10.6	44	1.6	5.2
Std. Dev.	.8205098	.8062258	1.674465	.2166988



Descriptive statistics about Kazakhstan

Variables	YUO	YPI	GDP	TOI
Obs	16	16	16	16
Mean	3.966875	30.3125	4.31875	5
Maximum	5.22	32	7.5	5.8
Minimum	3.7	29	1.1	4.6
Std. Dev.	.3986932	.7932003	1.778096	.332666

Table 2

Correlation matrix about Uzbekistan

	YUO	GDP	TOI	YPI
YUO	1.0000			
GDP	-0.4171	1.0000		
TOI	0.0656	0.0402	1.0000	
YPI	-0.1876	0.4309	-0.2242	1.0000

Correlation matrix about Kazakhstan

	YUO	GDP	TOI	YPI
YUO	1.0000			
GDP	0.6624	1.0000		
TOI	0.8359	0.5297	1.0000	
YPI	0.8233	0.6762	0.9348	1.0000

Table 3

Augmented Dickey-Fuller Test for Unit root about Uzbekistan

Variables	Level		Fisrt Difference	
	ADF Test statistics	P-value	ADF Test statistics	P-value



YUO	-2.188	0.2107	-4.164	0.0008***
GDP	-2.719	0.0708*	-5.413	0.0000***
TOI	-1.593	0.4870	-3.548	0.0068***
YPI	-1.442	0.5619	-3.780	0.0031***

Augmented Dickey-Fuller Test for Unit root about Kazakhstan

Variables	Level		Fisrt Difference	
	ADF Test statistics	P-value	ADF Test statistics	P-value
YUO	-5.842	0.0000***	-3.535	0.0071***
GDP	-2.491	0.1178	-4.273	0.0005***
TOI	-3.617	0.0054***	-2.777	0.0616*
YPI	-1.676	0.4437	-3.780	0.0031***

Table 4

Regression analysis about Uzbekistan

Number of obs = 16

F(3,12) = 0.88

Prob > F = 0.4771

R-squared = 0.1809

Adj R-squared = -0.0238

Root MSE = .83023

Source	SS	df	MS
Model	1.82706796	3	.609022652
Residual	8.27147588	12	.689289657
Total	10.0985438	15	.673236256

YUO	Coefficient	Std.err.	t	P> t	[95% con. interval]
GDP	-.209427	.1436117	-1.46	0.170	-.5223299 .1034759
TOI	.3271057	1.027575	0.32	0.756	-1.911788 2.565999



YPI	.016223	.3058126	0.05	0.959	-.65600853	.6825313
_cons	10.4896	15.837995	0.66	0.520	-24.01833	44.99752

Regression analysis about Kazakhstan

Number of obs = 16

F(3,12) = 13.24

Prob > F = 0.0004

R-squared = 0.7680

Adj R-squared = 0.7100

Root MSE = .21471

Source	SS	df	MS
Model	1.83113806	3	.610379352
Residual	.55320548	12	.046100457
Total	2.38434354	15	.158956236

YUO	Coefficient	Std.err.	t	P> t	[95% con. interval]
GDP	.0777933	.0459928	1.69	0.117	-.0224164 .1780031
TOI	.9669695	.509896	1.90	0.082	-.1439984 2.077937
YPI	-.0831886	.2462121	-0.34	-0.34	-.6199387 .4532614
_cons	1.317713	5.073577	0.26	0.26	-9.736662 12.37209

4.1. Descriptive statistics

Table 1 displays the descriptive statistics of the data. The result shows that the youth joblessness in Uzbekistan averages 11.51 % , ranging from 10.6% to 13.4%, indicating a persistent job market challenge for young people. Despite a



relatively high average GDP growth of 7.06%, youth unemployment remains stable with a low standard deviation (0.82), suggesting that economic growth has not translated into sufficient youth job creation. The consistently large youth population (mean 45.38) further increases pressure on the labor market.

Also the second table shows data about Kazakhstan youth unemployment over a 16 year period. Youth unemployment in Kazakhstan averages 3.97%, ranging from 3.7% to 5.22%, which is substantially lower than in many developing economies. GDP growth averages 4.32% with noticeable variability (standard deviation 1.78), yet youth unemployment remains relatively stable, as reflected by a low standard deviation (0.40). This suggests that Kazakhstan's labor market has been more effective in absorbing young workers despite fluctuations in economic growth.

4.2. Correlation matrix

Table 2 represents the results of correlation matrix, used to check potential multicollinearity among variables. The findings confirm that several variables including, GDP and Total Unemployment Rate have quite strong correlation with Youth Population formation, other variables are not strongly correlated over time. These results assist the decision to proceed with later analysis to get the study's objectives.

4.3. Unit root test

To evaluate the stationarity of variables the Augmented Dickey-Fuller (ADF) test for unit root was conducted. According to the Table 3, or Uzbekistan, youth unemployment is non-stationary at level ($ADF = -2.188$, $p = 0.2107$), suggesting the presence of a unit root. However, after taking the first difference, the series becomes stationary ($ADF = -4.164$, $p = 0.0008$). This implies that shocks to youth unemployment in Uzbekistan have persistent effects, and the variable follows an I(1) process.

In contrast, in Kazakhstan, the youth unemployment rate has already stabilized at the target level level ($ADF = -5.842$, $p = 0.0000$). This indicates that the youth joblessness in young people rate in Kazakhstan tends to converge toward



the mean, and any short – term shocks tend to dissipate over time without the need for differentiation.

4.4. Regression analysis

Results of regression analysis are presented in **Table 4**. According to the table it is shown that, the number of observations is 16. F-statistics: 13.24 90(Kz) and 0.88 (Uzb) with a p-value of 0.0000, indicating statistically significant. R-squared is 0.1809 (Uzb) and 0.7680 (Kz). For Uzbekistan, the regression model has low explanatory power and is statistically insignificant (Prob > F = 0.48), indicating that GDP growth, trade openness, and youth population do not significantly explain youth unemployment. Although GDP has a negative coefficient (-0.21), suggesting higher growth may reduce youth unemployment, the effect is not statistically significant ($p = 0.17$), pointing to structural labor market issues beyond macroeconomic factors.

In contrast, the Kazakhstan model is statistically significant ($F = 13.24$, $p = 0.0004$) with strong explanatory power ($R^2 = 0.77$). Trade openness shows a positive and marginally significant effect on youth unemployment ($\beta = 0.97$, $p = 0.08$), while GDP growth ($\beta = 0.08$) and youth population ($\beta = -0.08$) are not statistically significant, suggesting that external economic integration plays a more influential role in youth labor outcomes in Kazakhstan.

Discussion

This study analyzes the determinants of youth unemployment in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan using selected macroeconomic variables. The regression results reveal clear contrasts in how these factors influence youth unemployment across the two countries. In the case of Uzbekistan, the regression model exhibits weak explanatory power and fails to achieve statistical significance, indicating that macroeconomic variables such as economic growth, trade openness, and youth population do not meaningfully explain variations in youth unemployment in regression terms. Although economic growth shows a negative association with youth unemployment, the relationship is not strong enough to be statistically significant, suggesting that broader macroeconomic performance alone does not



sufficiently account for labor market outcomes for young people in Uzbekistan. This finding is consistent with evidence that youth unemployment in the country is shaped by structural issues such as skills mismatches between graduates and labor market needs, limited job opportunities, and labor market rigidities that impede the absorption of young job seekers (Rixsiboyev, 2025; UNICEF, 2020).

In contrast, the regression model for Kazakhstan demonstrates strong explanatory capacity and is statistically significant, pointing to substantive relationships between the selected determinants and youth unemployment. In particular, trade openness appears to exert an important influence on youth unemployment outcomes, whereas economic growth and the size of the youth population do not show similarly significant effects in the model. This suggests that Kazakhstan's youth labor market is more responsive to changes in external economic conditions—especially those linked to international trade and labor market structure—reflecting labor market dynamics where structural factors, such as the mismatch between skills and labor demand and the prevalence of informal employment, continue to shape youth employment outcomes (Khussainova et al., 2023).

Regional Implications:

Youth unemployment has important regional implications, as it directly affects economic growth and social stability, consistent with Okun's Law linking higher unemployment to lower GDP growth (Okun, 1962). Both Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan face the challenge of creating sufficient employment opportunities while ensuring effective skills utilization among young workers (International Labour Organization [ILO], 2023). The digital economy offers new opportunities for youth employment; however, inclusive policies are necessary to prevent labor market exclusion (World Bank, 2022).

Policy Insights:

Policy priorities differ across countries. Uzbekistan must address structural constraints by formalizing informal employment and expanding private sector participation, while Kazakhstan should focus on aligning labor market demand with



youth skills through regional diversification and targeted training programs (World Bank, 2023). Shared strategies include promoting green jobs, strengthening university–industry collaboration, and enhancing regional labor mobility. Overall, the findings indicate that youth unemployment in Uzbekistan is largely structural, whereas in Kazakhstan it is more closely linked to macroeconomic and trade-related factors, underscoring the need for country-specific policy approaches.

Conclusion

This study aimed to analyze and compare the dynamics of youth unemployment in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan from 2010 to 2025, identifying the key socio-economic factors influencing its persistence and highlighting potential strategies for improvement. Using a mixed-method approach that combined quantitative analysis of macroeconomic and demographic variables with qualitative insights from academic and policy literature, the research examined structural constraints, labor market responsiveness, and regional disparities in youth employment.

The findings reveal important contrasts between the two countries. In Uzbekistan, youth unemployment is predominantly shaped by structural factors, including skills mismatches, informality, and limited job opportunities, with macroeconomic growth exerting little influence on labor market outcomes. In contrast, Kazakhstan's youth labor market is more responsive to external economic conditions, particularly trade openness, though structural challenges such as hidden unemployment and skills underutilization persist. These differences underscore the need for country-specific policy interventions, as one-size-fits-all approaches may be ineffective. Furthermore, the study highlights the significance of aligning youth skills with labor market demands, fostering inclusive employment in the digital economy, and mitigating the socio-economic risks associated with high youth unemployment, such as social instability and underutilized human capital.

For future research, more attention should be given to qualitative assessments of youth experiences, including perceptions of job quality, career aspirations, and the impact of digitalization on employment. Longitudinal studies examining the



effectiveness of targeted policy interventions, regional labor mobility, and private sector engagement would provide further insights into sustainable solutions for youth employment in Central Asia.

Based on the findings, the following policy recommendations are proposed:

1. Uzbekistan: Formalize informal employment, expand private sector participation, and implement targeted vocational and digital skills programs to address structural barriers.

2. Kazakhstan: Align labor market demand with youth skills through industry-specific training, regional economic diversification, and enhanced university–industry collaboration.

3. Both countries: Promote green jobs, support regional labor mobility, strengthen apprenticeship and dual-education programs, and establish monitoring mechanisms to evaluate youth employment initiatives.

Overall, this study emphasizes that addressing youth unemployment requires integrated, evidence-based strategies that consider both macroeconomic conditions and structural labor market realities, ensuring that young people can contribute effectively to economic growth and social development.

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