POPULATION GROWTH AND REGIONAL STABILITY IN CENTRAL ASIA

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Central Asia is one the few regions in the world where the population continuous to grow rapidly. While many countries in Western Europe and North America are dealing with aging populations and shrinking workforces, but Central Asian states are experiencing the opposite trend. Between 1950 and 2023, the region's population grew from 17.5 million to 80.8 million (UNFPA EECA, 2025). Uzbekistan is the most populated country in the region, with 37.4 million people in 2024, and about half of its population is under the age of 30 (Krzyżanowska, 2025; UNFPA EECA, 2025).

This paper asks: How does rapid population growth influence regional stability and labor migration in Uzbekistan? The main argument is that population growth creates a short-term opportunity for economic development, known as the "demographic dividend". But it also increases labor migration, puts pressure on cities and infrastructure, and may lead to long-term economic tension if the government does not act. The key challenge for Uzbekistan is to use this opportunity while it lasts.

The most obvious impact of the growing population in Uzbekistan is the rise in labor migration. Each year, an estimated 780,000 people enter the workforce, while the domestic economy cannot generate sufficient employment for each (UNFPA EECA, 2025). In consequence, many seek employment abroad; an estimated 2-8 million Uzbek citizens are currently working outside their country, the highest amount among the countries of Central Asia (Marat, 2009). The sum of funds transferred by migrant workers in 2024 reached 4.8 billion, equals to 14% of the country's GDP (World Bank, 2025). Whereas without remittances, the poverty rate would rise from 9.6 to 16.8% (World Bank, 2025). Thus, a substantial portion of Uzbek households receive the means to meet basic economic needs from the Russian, South Korean or Kazakh labor markets rather than from domestic economic development efforts by the state.

The issue with this dependency is how swiftly it can unravel. After the declaration of military mobilization by Russia in September 2022, the flow of Uzbek migrants to Russia decreased by 15% in a month and the share of households that receive transfers decreased by 65% in just three months (Kursiv Uzbekistan, 2025).

This was not caused by the failure of any Uzbek policy but due to a decision made in a foreign country by a foreign government that took income away from hundreds of thousands of families in one go. A country that receives more than half of its remittances is inherently as stable as its migrant host countries, which is a weak argument.

Gradually, over time Uzbek migrants have begun to expand to other destinations as well. Formerly Russia received more than 60% of all Uzbek migrants; this proportion has started to fall. An increasing number of workers are now moving to South Korea, Japan and EU member states where work conditions are more stable through labor agreements (IOM Uzbekistan, 2025). Although this change in direction of migration is welcome it necessitates stronger language skills and better professional qualifications. More than 95% migrants of Uzbekistan are currently classified as low-skilled workers(World Bank, 2025). Therefore, investment in education and training is necessary to ensure that this trend can become a solution to the labor migration challenge.

Population pressure is creating challenges not only outside the country but also within it, placing stress on both domestic conditions and external relations. Once Soviet-era restrictions on internal movement were eased in 2019 a rush of rural inhabitants moved into cities such as Tashkent and put immediate strains on housing, water, and services (Hogg 2019). According to the ADB Uzbekistan requires about 145,000 homes to be built per year simply to keep pace with existing demand (ADB 2011). Construction output has thus far failed to meet the demand and the consequences include a housing deficit among those with the least means to withstand it-rural to urban migrants are increasingly likely to end up in informal settlements on the edges of the city with minimal services and therefore with a reduced standard of living-the population grows, but it doesn't improve everyone’s condition equally.

Water supply is also another emerging issue. According to ADB (2021) and the World Bank (2025) due to the rapid melting of glaciers, and increasing use for agriculture purposes, competition of this water supply will likely to raise by 2030. Meanwhile if enough resources are not allocated to education and public services by the government, many youngsters will have to face the problems of entering adulthood without sufficient qualifications to gain employment and stable work life (ICG, 2003). A large volume of youth unemployment is one of the factors contributing social frustration and disappointment. This is why development investment in infrastructure and public services are vital not only to promote development, but also stability.

Even with all these obstacles, the demographic structure of Uzbekistan also presents an economic advantage. A country's saving rate, investment rate and output will increase if the size of its working-age population exceeds the size of its child population plus old age dependents. This will increase the country's growth, referred to as 'demographic dividend' by many economists (Park & Shin, 2023). By 2050, working-age population of Uzbekistan is expected to be increased to over 33 million (UNFPA EECA, 2025). East and Southeast Asian experience suggests that a similar country's rapid growth came when such a demographic structure prevails if it invests in education, health and job creations (Park & Shin, 2023).

But, this window will not be open forever. By 2050 the median age is projected to increase to 35 in Uzbekistan, while the number of elderly persons would increase to approximately 6.1 million (UNFPA EECA, 2025). Once this occur the number of working age person who would support older generation will decrease while there would be greater proportion of retired persons to work, which in economic terminology it is called as "demographic tax" (Park & Shin, 2023). One of the measures to take to meet this demand is to raise women participation in workforce, currently stands at 43.6% (UNFPA EECA, 2025). Better childcare services, flexible working hour arrangements, and education equal for both gender would ensure greater contribution to the economy without adding population growth.

It is arguable that population growth in general and on a large scale is beneficial for a country. A large and expanding population offers a wider domestic market, more employees for a country's firms and could grant higher influence in its region. While these benefits have merit. In 2025, Uzbekistan’s economy grew by 7.7% and poverty dropped from 8.9% to 5.8% in just one year (World Bank, 2025). Others have cited countries like South Korea, in East Asia, turning a large young workforce into an economic driving force.

This comparison does not hold completely for the case of Uzbekistan. For South Korea and others, the growth came with strong institutions, educated workforce, active industrial policy, and substantial role of women in labor market; these factors are not entirely present in Uzbekistan. More than 95% of Uzbek migrants fall into the category of low skilled (World Bank, 2025) and female labor force participation stands at 43.6% (UNFPA EECA, 2025). Unless these issues are addressed, a large population is more likely to strain job and public services rather than generate productivity growth. As is clear from the findings of Marat (2009), when labor population size grows at a faster rate than employment and skill formation opportunities, individuals get pushed to informal and unsecured jobs. In a nutshell, size of the population doesn’t matter; it's the quality of education, institutions, and available opportunities.

To summarize, rapid population growth has positive and negative consequences for stability and economy in Uzbekistan. On the one hand, this has increased labor migration and led many households to rely on remmittances from abroad, the risk of which depends on outside circumstances. Also, it has led to problems with housing, water and public services in the towns. On the other hand, this fact offers a real chance of economic growth if it is properly used.

If the opportunity provided by Uzbekistan's current demographic dividend is to be fully leveraged the focus needs to shift away from controlling population and towards enhancing the human capital. Investment in education and skills, higher employment of women in productive economic activities, improvement in urban infrastructure and generating more formal employment at home are key. The positive demographics that Uzbekistan enjoys at present are not forever. What the next 10-15 years throw up will define the demographic opportunity of this generation of youth: whether it proves to be engine of sustainable development or an outstanding economic problem.

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