
**SOCIO-ECONOMIC POTENTIAL OF REGIONS AND DIRECTIONS
FOR THE EFFICIENT USE OF NATURAL RESOURCES**

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Annotation:

This article provides a comprehensive analysis of the Zarafshan region's location, natural-geographical conditions, mineral raw material resources, demographic structure, and economic potential. The shares of Samarkand, Navoi, and Bukhara regions in the national gross domestic product, as well as their roles in industry, agriculture, transport-communication networks, and service sectors, are presented based on statistical data. The mineral resource base, strategic transport opportunities, and demographic potential are assessed as the key factors determining the role of the Zarafshan region in the national economy and its prospects for development.

Keywords: industrial potential, agriculture, demographic potential, environmental problems, transport infrastructure, investment, oil and gas industry.

The Zarafshan region is located in the central part of Uzbekistan and unites the Samarkand, Navoi, and Bukhara provinces. Its area is 168.1 thousand sq km, accounting for 37.4% of the country's total territory. In this regard, it is second only to the Lower Amudarya region. As of January 1, 2025, the population of the region amounted to 7,528.4 thousand people, representing 19.9% of the total population of the republic (the second-largest indicator after the Fergana region). The average population density is 42.7 persons per sq km. Of the total population, 38.6% reside in urban areas, while 61.4% live in rural settlements.

The region includes the middle and lower reaches of the transboundary Zarafshan River. A significant part of its territory is occupied by the Kyzylkum Desert. The Nurata and Zarafshan mountain ranges and their branches are located within the Samarkand and Navoi provinces. The desert and mountainous areas are rich in deposits of gold, uranium, silver, tungsten, various rare metals, marble, and

precious stones. Overall, the natural and economic conditions are extremely diverse and exert a strong influence on the territorial structure of the region's economy.

The Zarafshan region holds strategic importance due to major transport corridors connecting the eastern and western parts of the country. International airports, railway stations, and highways located in Samarkand, Navoi, and Bukhara strengthen both internal and external linkages of the region. This, in turn, creates favorable conditions for the development of logistics, trade, and service sectors. The economic foundation of the region is formed by industry and raw material resources. In this regard, Navoi province is considered the leading territory. The Navoi Mining and Metallurgical Combine (NMMC), located here, is one of the world's largest gold producers and constitutes one of the main drivers not only of the national economy but also of Uzbekistan's external trade balance.

In addition, the oil and gas fields and the oil refinery in Bukhara province significantly enhance the region's energy potential and play a key role in ensuring national energy security. In Samarkand province, food processing, light industry, and the processing of local raw materials are well developed.

The Zarafshan valley, with its favorable climate and water resources, is highly suitable for agriculture. Irrigated lands supplied by the Zarafshan River ensure high productivity in horticulture, viticulture, cotton cultivation, and vegetable growing. High-quality grapes and fruits grown in Samarkand and Bukhara provinces are supplied not only to domestic markets but also for export. Moreover, the abundance of pasturelands creates extensive opportunities for livestock development.

The region is one of the most historically and culturally rich territories of Uzbekistan. The cities of Samarkand and Bukhara host UNESCO World Heritage sites and attract thousands of domestic and foreign tourists annually.

It should be noted that the Zarafshan region is one of the most developed territories of Uzbekistan in terms of economic, cultural, and educational potential. Its strategic location, industrial and energy resources, rich historical heritage, young and capable population, and growing education and tourism sectors represent its key strengths. Effective utilization of these advantages can serve as a significant factor not only for regional but also for national development.

Despite its rich natural resources, strategic position, and labor force, a number of weaknesses can still be observed in the region's development. These include ecological challenges such as the annual reduction of water resources, accelerated

desertification due to erosion, and environmental degradation caused by waste from expanding industrial and oil–gas enterprises—particularly in Navoi and Bukhara provinces. Infrastructural problems include underdeveloped transport and digital infrastructure, while social issues include inadequate employment programs and insufficiently developed education and healthcare services. Furthermore, support for small and medium-sized businesses and the level of industrial diversification remain relatively low. The fact that a large portion of the region consists of desert territory also poses major limitations.

The socio-economic potential of the region today can be characterized by its share in the national gross domestic product. In 2024, the region accounted for 22.7% of GDP (Table 1), 25.5% of industrial output, and 26.0% of agricultural production. Notably, the region’s share in national industrial and agricultural output exceeds its share of the total population. The Zarafshan region’s share in national investment amounted to 23.1%, retail turnover 18.8%, paid services 13.1%, construction works 17.3%, and foreign trade turnover 9.8%.

The data show that the share of certain regions of Uzbekistan in the gross domestic product has been changing over the years. In the Fergana region, the share of GDP was 26.3% in 2000, but in the following years this indicator tended to decline and fell to 19.7% in 2024. Today, the share of the Fergana region in GDP continues to decrease. This can be explained by the slower economic activity or production growth in the region compared to other areas.

In the Tashkent region, the share was 25.7% in 2000, and 33.7% in 2024. This indicator shows that the region’s share has been steadily increasing year by year. This growth can be attributed to the intensive development of investment, industry, and service sectors.

The share of the Mirzachul region is relatively small (5.6% → 5.6%), and we can observe almost the same level of economic fluctuation in this area. In the Zarafshan region, the share was 20.6% in 2000 and reached 22.7% in 2024. Here, we can observe a slow but steady upward trend. The development of the region’s economy is influenced by the presence of industry and natural resources.

In the Southern region, the share in GDP decreased from 13.4% in 2000 to 10.6% in 2024. This gradual decline indicates that the region is lagging behind other regions in terms of competitiveness, mainly due to problems related to agriculture. In the Lower Amudarya region, the share was 8.4% in 2000 and fell to 7.6% in 2024.

It can be emphasized that the growth of the share of the Tashkent and Zarafshan regions in GDP reflects a relatively higher level of economic development. The decline in the share of GDP in the Fergana, Southern, and Lower Amudarya regions can be attributed to a number of socio-economic and natural factors.

For instance, the Zarafshan region occupies an important place in the country's mineral raw material resources. Navoi region is a leader in rare and precious metals, while Bukhara region holds a key position in fuel resources. Samarkand region also possesses moderate reserves of raw materials in various categories. This situation allows us to conclude that the Zarafshan region is a strategically significant area with a strong industrial and raw material base.

According to the data, about 30 percent of the country's mineral raw material resources are located in the regions of the Zarafshan area. Navoi region is not only a strategically important region within the area but also plays a major role in the country's mineral resources. Precious metals account for 28.6%, mining raw materials for 16%, and construction materials for 15.7%. The region is also rich in uranium and vanadium resources. Moreover, it is the main producer and center of gold and precious metal resources in the country.

Bukhara region stands out mainly for its oil and gas reserves and oil refining industry. Its share is 19%. Gas extraction and processing industries are among the main drivers of the region's economy. The region also has adequate reserves of construction materials — 7.3%. Other mineral resources in Bukhara, apart from fuel and construction materials, are almost negligible.

In Samarkand region, the share of mineral raw materials is relatively small (1.1%), but it has valuable material resources in several categories (2.7%). The share of construction raw materials is 5.7%, indicating that the region has some potential for industrial construction. Although the region has fewer resources, the efficient use of available raw materials provides economic diversification.

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