

Uzbekistan's Accession to the WTO: Analysis of Legal Mechanisms and Economic Outcomes

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Abstract

This study provides a comprehensive legal and economic analysis of Uzbekistan's accession process to the World Trade Organization. The article examines the stages of the accession process and the adaptation of national legislation to international agreements such as GATT, GATS, and others. The methodology is based on legal analysis, a comparative approach, and the application of TRIST and partial equilibrium models. The findings indicate that WTO membership is expected to enhance GDP growth, attract foreign direct investment, and expand exports. At the same time, the study identifies potential short-term adjustment challenges in certain protected sectors. In conclusion, WTO accession is considered a key driver of economic modernization and deeper integration into the global economy.

Keywords: World Trade Organization, accession process, international trade law, Uzbekistan economy, trade liberalization, customs reform, GATT, GATS, TRIST model, foreign direct investment, export diversification, economic integration, competitiveness.

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1. Introduction

The process of World Trade Organization accession by Uzbekistan holds particular significance as one of the country's strategic directions on the path of economic development. This path toward the WTO, which began many years ago, is not a simple technical process, but rather a complex and multilayered transformation process that has been taking shape for nearly three decades. Its prolonged duration is not accidental - it is closely connected with the specific structure of the national economy, the need for institutional reforms, and the necessity of gradually opening external trade.

In recent years, especially following the reforms initiated after 2016, this process has gained new momentum. The liberalization of exchange rate policy, reforms in the customs and tax systems, and the improvement of the investment climate - all of these have brought Uzbekistan closer to the global economic arena. At present, this process is no longer merely one direction of foreign trade policy, but is emerging as a broad-based movement aimed at modernizing the entire economic system.

The issue of WTO accession, in fact, carries a deeper meaning: it places new demands before the country, while at the same time opening the door to new opportunities. Harmonizing legislation with international

standards, creating a transparent and stable business environment, and strengthening competition - all of these appear not only as obligations, but also as necessary conditions for economic development.

The World Trade Organization has been functioning since 1995 as the principal international institution regulating the global trading system. As of 2024, the WTO has 166 official member states, and more than 98% of global trade turnover is conducted within the framework of its rules [1]. The accession process is a legally and economically complex process requiring multi-stage negotiations.

Uzbekistan submitted its application for WTO accession in 1994, and the fact that this process has continued for more than 30 years has made it one of the longest accession processes in WTO history [2]. The first phase (1994 - 2005) was mainly limited to technical preparation and documentation, while practical progress slowed. After 2016, systemic reforms and market-opening policies initiated under the leadership of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev reactivated the accession process [3].

From a legal perspective, WTO accession requires the harmonization of national legislation with international trade norms, including General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade - General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (1994 version), General Agreement on Trade in Services - General Agreement on Trade in Services, TRIPS Agreement - Agreement on Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights, Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade - Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade, and Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures Agreement - Agreement on Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures. From an economic perspective, this process implies market liberalization, tariff reduction, and the elimination of non-tariff barriers in order to establish a competitive environment. As researcher Saidmusayev emphasizes, legal harmonization should be regarded not only as an international obligation, but also as a necessary condition for the economic modernization of Uzbekistan [4].

The relevance of the study lies in the fact that Uzbekistan, while planning to implement infrastructure and technology projects worth USD 150 billion by 2030, is viewed, according to the analyses of researcher Sadyq Safoyev, as considering WTO membership to be the principal guarantee for attracting high-quality foreign investment [3]. Numerous researchers have conducted scientific studies on the opportunities and prospects of Uzbekistan's WTO accession. Ibadullaeva's study on the

automotive industry [5] and Bultakova's research on tourism services demonstrate that sectoral consequences are not uniform and require sector-specific analysis [6].

From this perspective, legal harmonization and trade liberalization appear as a dual process: on the one hand, the necessity to comply with international requirements, and on the other hand, the need to deepen domestic reforms. It is precisely at this intersection that the process of Uzbekistan's accession to the World Trade Organization becomes a crucial stage determining its economic future.

The study addresses the following main questions:

What stages constitute the legal mechanisms of Uzbekistan's WTO accession, and what is its current status?

In which areas is the harmonization of national legislation with WTO standards being implemented?

What impact will WTO membership have on the economy of Uzbekistan, particularly in terms of foreign trade, foreign direct investment, and across sectors?

What are the short-term and long-term risks and opportunities?

2. Methodology

This study is based on the following methodological foundations, combining qualitative and quantitative approaches:

2.1. Legal Analysis

In studying the normative-legal framework of WTO accession, primary sources - including General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT 1994), General Agreement on Trade in Services (GATS), TRIPS Agreement (TRIPS), Agreement on Technical Barriers to Trade (TBT), Sanitary and Phytosanitary Measures Agreement (SPS), and the WTO Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) - as well as secondary sources such as the scholarly works of Pomfret (2020), Saidmusayev (2022), and Bultakova (2024), were analyzed. The relevant laws of the Republic of Uzbekistan, presidential decrees, and normative documents were examined using the method of legislative analysis. In assessing the level of legal harmonization, official documents of the WTO Working Party and the minutes of meetings held between 2002 and 2023 served as primary sources.

2.2. Economic Analysis and Modeling

The following methods were applied in assessing economic impacts. First, comparative statistical analysis: the experiences of similar transition and developing economies that have joined the WTO (Kazakhstan -

2015, Kyrgyzstan - 1998, Georgia - 2000, Ukraine - 2008) were compared with Uzbekistan. Second, the Partial Equilibrium Model was used to evaluate the impact of reductions in tariff and non-tariff barriers in the chemical industry and agriculture on imports, consumer welfare, and budget revenues. Third, the TRIST (Tariff Reform Impact Simulation Tool) model was employed to calculate forecasts of reductions in agricultural tariffs based on the World Bank methodology. Fourth, document analysis: official reports of the WTO, the International Monetary Fund, the World Bank, and the National Statistics Agency of Uzbekistan for the period 2015 -2024 served as the main sources of data.

2.3. Case-study Approach

For sector-level analysis, three distinct sectors were selected: the chemical industry, where the consequences of tariffs and discriminatory measures were analyzed; the automotive industry, analyzed based on the research conducted by Ibadullaeva; and tourism services, examined within the framework of GATS based on the

approach presented in Bultakovna’s 2024 articles. These sectors were selected due to their differing risk and opportunity profiles within the economy of Uzbekistan.

2.4. Research Limitations

The study has several limitations: the results of bilateral WTO negotiations have not yet been officially disclosed; some sector-level statistical data are incomplete; and modeling forecasts are based on certain assumptions. Taking these limitations into account, the conclusions should be interpreted with caution.

3. Results

3.1. History and Current Status of the Accession Process

3.1.1. Step-by-Step Development

The WTO accession of Uzbekistan consists of four main stages, each characterized by its own legal and political features, and in this regard, Uzbekistan has undergone a long-term process [1,7].

Table 1.

Stages of Uzbekistan’s WTO accession process.

| Stage | Period (Years) | Main Events and Achievements |
|---------------------------------|--------------------------|----------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| I. Initial Preparation: | 1994–2001 | Submission of application (1994); establishment of the Working Party; Memorandum on the Foreign Trade Regime signed (1998) |
| II. Initial Negotiations | 2002–2005 | First Working Party meeting (2002); beginning of technical questions and answers; the process slowed down |
| III. Interruption Period | 2005–2016 | The process effectively came to a halt; market reforms slowed; predominance of protectionist policy |
| IV. Reactivation | From 2016 to the present | New memorandum (2019); 4th meeting (2020); 5th meeting (2022); 6th meeting (2023); process of legislative reforms |

Source: Prepared by the author on the basis of available sources and analyses.

The period after 2016 signifies a fundamental transformation in the accession process. Economic liberalization - the 2017 currency reform, the simplification of export-import procedures, and the improvement of the competitive environment -brought the World Trade Organization negotiations to a new stage. At the Working Party meetings held in 2022 and 2023, significant progress was recorded in the areas of customs duties, technical barriers to trade, sanitary and phytosanitary measures, trade facilitation, freedom of transit, intellectual property, and import licensing [1].

3.1.2. Current Status and Dynamics of Negotiations

As of 2024, Uzbekistan stands at the stage of systematic negotiations in its WTO accession process. The Working

Group under the Government and the interministerial commission prepared 23 draft legislative acts, most of which were submitted to the Oliy Majlis. The Presidential Decree of 2024 established clearly defined deadlines for harmonizing national legislation with WTO agreements. According to expert assessments, formal membership may be achieved in 2026–2027 [3].

3.2. Legal Harmonization: Main Directions

3.2.1. Trade Law and Tariff Commitments

In accordance with Article II of General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade, every acceding state is required to submit a Schedule of Concessions concerning tariff rates and to “bind” them before the WTO. This procedure ensures a predictable and stable tariff environment for

market participants. Uzbekistan’s Schedule of Concessions is currently under negotiation, and its main parameters are as follows:

Table 2.
Forecast of Uzbekistan’s Tariff Commitments before the WTO

| Sector | Current Average Tariff | Expected Commitment under the WTO |
|---------------------------------------------------|------------------------|-----------------------------------|
| Agricultural products | 14,2% | Reduction to 10–12% |
| Industrial products | 10,8% | Reduction to 7–9% |
| Chemical products | 15–20% | Gradual reduction to 10–12% |
| Automobiles and parts | 30% and above | Negotiations are ongoing |
| Services (General Agreement on Trade in Services) | Limited access | Gradual opening |

Source: Prepared by the author on the basis of Saidmusayev (2022) and World Trade Organization data.

Significant reforms are being implemented in the sphere of non-tariff barriers: quotas and quantitative restrictions are being gradually abolished; import licensing procedures are being simplified.

3.2.2. Competition Law Reforms

The studies of researcher Saidmusayev demonstrate that a number of provisions in the Law “On Competition” - including, among others, the prior approval procedure for the establishment of state-owned enterprises - are inconsistent with general World Trade Organization agreements. A draft law has been prepared to revise these provisions. In addition:

- Export subsidies are being gradually abolished, as they are inconsistent with the WTO Agreement on Subsidies and Countervailing Measures;
- The exclusive rights of state-owned enterprises and companies enjoying special privileges are being reconsidered;
- The selective granting of tax and customs privileges is being restricted, and the fiscal system is being made more neutral;
- Antimonopoly legislation is being updated in order to create equal competitive conditions for market participants.

3.2.3. Customs Reform and the Kyoto Convention

The implementation of the standards of the Kyoto Convention (International Convention on the Simplification and Harmonization of Customs Procedures) constitutes an important legal component of WTO accession. The following reforms are being implemented in Uzbekistan:

- Single Window System: implementation of all customs and control procedures through one-time submission of documents.

- Risk-Based Control: simplified inspection for low-risk cargo and consignments, and intensive control for high-risk consignments.

- Digital Customs: by 2023, 87% of customs declarations were processed electronically [8].

- Freedom of Transit: simplification of transit procedures in accordance with WTO and Trade Facilitation Agreement (TFA) requirements, particularly for Central Asian transit.

3.2.4. Trade in Services and GATS Commitments

The research conducted by Bultakovna in 2024 analyzes the tourism services sector within the framework of General Agreement on Trade in Services and draws important conclusions. GATS defines four regulated modes of service supply: cross-border trade, consumption abroad, commercial presence, and movement of natural persons. Uzbekistan is expected to gradually assume commitments in these areas:

- Tourism and hotel services – identified as a relatively soft sector, where branches of foreign companies and joint ventures may be permitted.

- Financial services (banking and insurance) – a cautious phased liberalization plan has been developed.

- Telecommunications – a limited competitive environment may be maintained, especially for services related to state interests.

- Professional services – national certification requirements are being aligned with GATS norms.

3.3. Economic Consequences: Statistical Results

3.3.1. Macroeconomic Forecasts

According to the 2024 studies of Professor Sadyq Safoyev, based on World Bank data, the impact of WTO membership on the macroeconomy of Uzbekistan is assessed as follows:

Table 3.
Expected Macroeconomic Outcomes of World Trade Organization Membership

| Indicator | Current Status (2023) | Forecast after World Trade Organization Membership |
|-------------------------|-----------------------|----------------------------------------------------|
| GDP growth (annual) | 6,5% | +1.0–1.2% additional growth +1,0–1,2% |
| FDI inflow (annual) | \$3.6 billion | \$6.0–7.0 billion (within 5 years)\$ |
| Export volume | \$19.5 billion | \$28–30 billion (within 5 years) |
| Trade deficit / GDP | ~12% | May increase in the short term |
| Unemployment rate | 9,6% | Variable (depending on sector) |
| Economic openness level | 52% (Trade/GDP) | Increase to 65–70% |

Source: Prepared by the author on the basis of analyses by S. Safoev and the World Bank.

According to the World Bank study analyzing transition economies similar to the 2024 results, WTO membership provided an average additional annual GDP growth of 1.0 - 1.5%. For Uzbekistan, this indicator is estimated at around 1.2%, since the main sectors of the country’s economy - energy, chemicals, and textiles - are expected

to derive significant benefits from access to global markets.

3.3.2. Foreign Trade Dynamics

Uzbekistan’s foreign trade indicators have demonstrated a rapid growth trend in recent years. The dynamics during the period 2016–2025 are as follows:

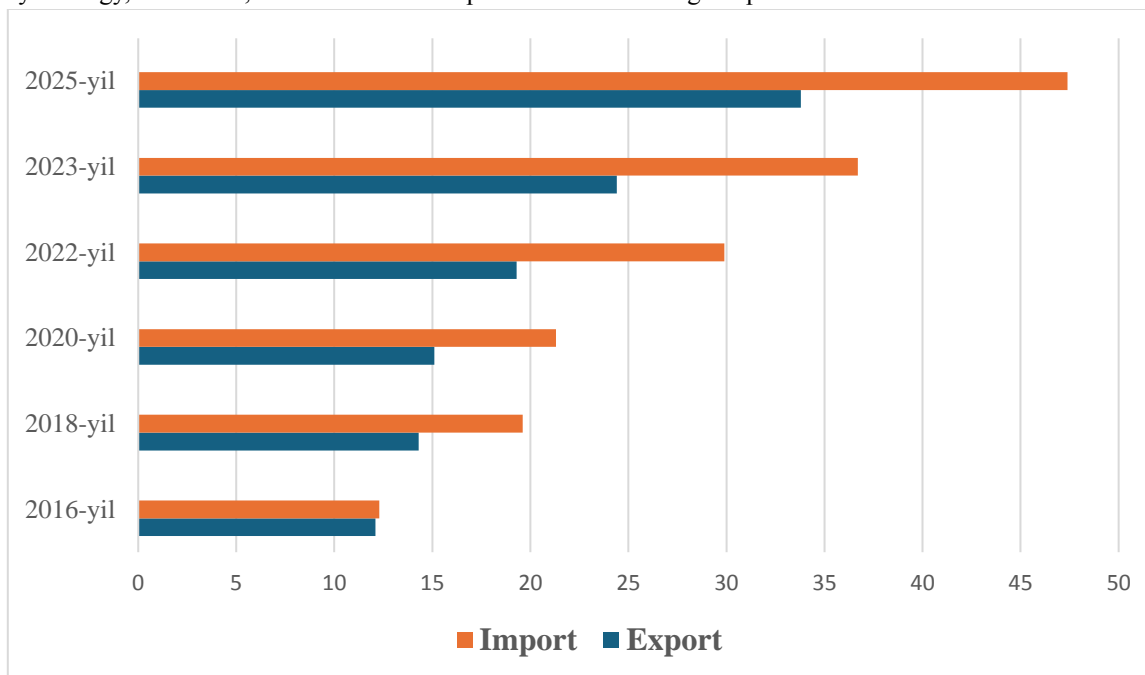


Figure 1. Dynamics of Uzbekistan's foreign trade over the years (million US dollars)

According to the preliminary data of the National Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, in 2025 the country’s foreign trade turnover amounted to USD 81.2 billion (Figure 1). This indicator increased by USD 13.9 billion, or 20.7%, compared to the corresponding period of the previous year [9]. If we analyze the structure of foreign trade, in 2025 exports

amounted to USD 33.8 billion (+24%) and imports amounted to USD 47.4 billion (+18.5%).

Uzbekistan is conducting trade relations with more than 180 countries of the world. The largest shares in foreign trade turnover fall on the following countries: China – 21.2%, Russia – 16.0%, Kazakhstan – 6.1%, Turkey – 3.7%, Republic of Korea – 2.1%. These data show that

Uzbekistan’s foreign trade is growing at high rates. In particular, the 20.7% increase in trade turnover in 2025 indicates that the country’s integration into the global economic system is intensifying.

Although the faster growth of exports relative to imports (24% versus 18.5%) is a positive trend, the predominance of imports in the overall volume remains, which means that the trade balance continues to remain negative.

Geographically, the fact that the main share of trade falls on China and Russia indicates that a high degree of dependence on regional and strategic partners exists in Uzbekistan’s foreign trade. At the same time, the

existence of trade relations with more than 180 countries indicates that export markets are becoming diversified.

Overall, these indicators show that the role of foreign trade in the economy of Uzbekistan is increasing; however, in order to ensure sustainability, it is necessary to further diversify exports and reduce dependence on imports, while accession to the WTO also creates the basis for expanding the geography of markets.

3.3.3. Sector-Level Impact on the Chemical Industry

The chemical industry was analyzed in detail on the basis of the partial equilibrium model. Three scenarios were considered:

Table 4.
Expected WTO Impact Scenarios in the Chemical Industry

| Scenario | Main Change | Result |
|--------------------------------------------------------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Scenario A: Tariff Reduction Only | 15–20% → 10–12% | Imports increase (+15%); consumer welfare rises; budget revenue declines slightly |
| Scenario B: Elimination of Discriminatory Measures | Import-specific excise taxes and privileges of state-owned enterprises are abolished | Budget revenue increases (+8–12%); a fair competitive environment is formed; imports decline slightly |
| Scenario C: Full Liberalization | A and B combined | Highest economic efficiency in the long term; adjustment costs in the short term |

Source: Prepared by the author.

Although there may be adjustment costs in the chemical industry in the short term within 1 - 3 years, competitiveness and export potential are expected to increase significantly in the long term. According to Saidmusayev, although the elimination of discriminatory measures increases budget revenues, it will be an important step in ensuring market fairness.

The data presented in Table 4 show that the foreign trade of Uzbekistan grew steadily and rapidly during 2016 - 2025. In particular, while export volume nearly tripled, import volume grew even faster, demonstrating the high demand for external resources in the economy. At the same time, throughout all years, the predominance of imports over exports was maintained, which indicates the negative foreign trade balance and the economy’s certain degree of dependence on imports.

The analysis shows that the high share of imports was mainly formed by investment and technological products, and although this situation supports economic growth in the short term, in the long term it creates the necessity to increase export potential and diversify it.

Overall, the dynamics of foreign trade demonstrate that the integration of Uzbekistan’s economy into the global

economic system is intensifying; however, for sustainable development, expanding exports and balancing the trade balance are of great importance.

3.3.4. Analysis of the Automotive Industry (2025)

Researcher Ibadullaeva, in 2025, analyzed the internationalization of Uzbekistan’s automotive industry and the consequences of WTO membership, reaching important conclusions. Uzbekistan’s automotive industry has been strongly protected by the state: the main producer, UzAuto Motors (former GM Uzbekistan), benefited from tariff protection of 30% and above. After WTO membership:

- Short term (1-5 years): As foreign automobiles become cheaper, competition in the domestic market will intensify sharply; a difficult adjustment period will begin for UzAuto Motors.
- Medium term (5-10 years): Quality may improve through international cooperation and technology transfer; imports of foreign components will become easier.
- Long term: If competitive production develops, export potential will emerge; integration into global production chains will occur.

Researcher Ibadullaeva concludes that a transition period and a sectoral strategy are necessary for the automotive industry, and this is expected to become one of the main controversial topics in WTO negotiations.

3.3.5. Agriculture: Results of the TRIST Model

Based on the World Bank TRIST (Tariff Reform Impact Simulation Tool) model, calculations for the agricultural sector of Uzbekistan produced the following results:

- As a result of reducing import duties, budget revenue from import tariffs may increase from USD 8.7 million to USD 10.5 million (+20%) - this is explained by the increase in total trade volume;
- If VAT exemptions are reduced, budget revenues will increase further: estimated additional revenue amounts to USD 15 -18 million;
- Agricultural exports - cotton fiber, fruits and vegetables, and melon products - are forecast to increase by 25 -30% as a result of free access to WTO markets.

4. Discussion

4.1. Legal Harmonization: Achievements and Difficulties

The results show that Uzbekistan has achieved significant progress in the legislative reforms necessary for WTO membership. As emphasized by Saidmusayev (2022), the process of legal harmonization should be assessed from three perspectives:

1. Amendment of formal legislation;
2. Practical implementation and enforcement mechanisms;
3. Oversight and transparency.

Progress in the sphere of formal legislation is clearly visible: 23 draft laws have been prepared, the Customs Code has been updated, and competition legislation is being reconsidered. However, according to Pomfret (2020), the most complex aspect - the practical implementation of laws and the formation of institutional capacity - remains a problem that has not yet been fully resolved. World Bank's Doing Business Index, in which Uzbekistan rose from 152nd place in 2019 to 69th place in 2023, is a positive signal, but not sufficient to ensure the rule of law.

In the World Justice Project Rule of Law Index [10], Uzbekistan ranks 98th out of 139 countries (0.40 / 1.00 points), which indicates that legal reforms should continue. In particular, the areas of protection of property rights (0.39), anti-corruption efforts (0.37), and procedural fairness (0.41) require attention.

4.2. Economic Perspective: Risks and Opportunities

At the macroeconomic level, WTO membership creates clear economic opportunities for Uzbekistan. However, the full utilization of these opportunities depends on the quality of reforms. According to the analyses of S. Safoyev, advancing the concept of "quality investments and high value-added production," it is necessary to view WTO membership not as a platform for low-technology exports through cheap labor, but as a platform for technology transfer and transition to a knowledge-based economy.

Across sectors, a dual picture can be observed. On the one hand, sectors such as the chemical industry, textiles, agriculture, and tourism will benefit relatively quickly from WTO membership. On the other hand, the automotive industry and a number of industrial sectors protected from import competition will face adjustment costs. In resolving this contradiction, sector-level policy and a coordinated state support strategy are of great importance.

4.3. Lessons from Transition Economies and Developing Countries

Kazakhstan became a WTO member in 2015, and its experience constitutes a valuable source for Uzbekistan. The main lessons from Kazakhstan's experience are:

- During accession negotiations, significant concessions were granted (tariff commitments, opening of services), which led to short-term difficulties in some sectors;
- Foreign direct investment inflows increased by 35 - 40% in the first three years after accession, but sectoral distribution was uneven;
- The practical implementation of legislative changes lagged 2 - 4 years behind formal adoption;
- State intervention and additional retraining programs were necessary for labor market adjustment.

The experiences of Georgia (2000) and Kyrgyzstan (1998) show that early accession does not solve all problems: if legal harmonization is not carried out in parallel with economic development, membership may not provide full benefits to a country's economy [2].

4.4. Main Strategic Advantages of Uzbekistan's Strategy

According to the analyses of researchers Pomfret (2020) and Safoyev (2024), several strategic advantages of Uzbekistan in its WTO accession process are identified: First, strategic location - as a transit hub of Central Asia, it has the opportunity to conduct important negotiations regarding freedom of transit and trade routes.

Second, demographic potential - a young and growing population of more than 37 million people, of whom 60

percent are under 30 years of age. In this way, it creates a competitive advantage in the labor market.

Third, resource wealth - in a country rich in resources such as natural gas, gold, uranium, and calcium phosphate, exports of raw materials may become more profitable under WTO rules.

Fourth, market size - a country with a population of more than 37 million represents an attractive market for importers and investors.

4.5. Main Constraints and Risks

Several major risks also exist. Institutional weakness: even if legal rules are adopted, insufficient human capacity and resource provision of implementing bodies may make practical implementation difficult. Problem of economic diversification: exports are still excessively dependent on raw materials and semi-finished products (gold 30–35%, gas and petroleum products 20%). WTO membership by itself will not change this structure. Political economy issues: protected industrial sectors and their interest groups may resist reforms, especially in the automotive industry and some agricultural sectors. Short-term social costs: employment may decline in certain sectors, which would require social adaptation programs.

5. Conclusion

The results of this study fully analyzed Uzbekistan's WTO accession process from legal and economic perspectives, leading to the following main conclusions: The WTO accession process has a 30-year history and entered an important new stage due to the reforms after 2016. The new memorandum of 2019, the Working Party meetings of 2020–2023, and the Presidential Decree of 2024 demonstrate that the process has accelerated. Formal membership is expected between 2026 and 2027. Legal harmonization is broad in scope, and significant reforms are being implemented in the fields of trade law (tariff commitments, non-tariff barriers), competition legislation, customs reform (implementation of Kyoto Convention standards), and trade in services under General Agreement on Trade in Services commitments. The preparation of 23 draft laws is a clear sign of progress.

Macroeconomic forecasts are positive: an additional annual GDP growth of +1.2%, an additional foreign direct investment inflow of USD 3 -7 billion within five years, and an increase in export volume to USD 28-30 billion are expected. However, these forecasts are closely linked to the quality implementation of legal reforms.

Differences are observed across sectors: while the chemical industry and agriculture may benefit relatively

quickly, the automotive industry and some protected sectors will face adjustment costs. It is necessary to develop sector-specific policies.

The experience of developing and transition economies - Kazakhstan, Georgia, and Kyrgyzstan - shows that formal membership is not an automatic solution to problems; it must be implemented together with legal harmonization and institutional capacity.

Professor Safojev's concept defines the correct direction: combining WTO membership with a strategy of "quality investments and high value-added production" constitutes the main path toward long-term economic growth for Uzbekistan.

As a general concluding view, WTO membership for Uzbekistan not only opens the door to trade privileges - it creates the legal and institutional framework for elevating the entire economic system to international standards. Achieving this objective depends on the consistency, quality, and practical implementation of reforms.

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