



Journal of Tourismology

RESEARCH ARTICLE

Prospects of Intensive Institutional Cooperation in Tourism Development in Central Asia: The Case of Uzbekistan

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Abstract

UNWTO's project, the Great Silk Road, plays an important role in the sustainable development of tourism in Central Asia and in Uzbekistan. In this study UNWTO's Silk Road project is analyzed for the sustainable development of tourism in the Central Asia region. A legal assessment has been made of the partnership between the UNWTO and the Republic of Uzbekistan in terms of development of the tourism industry. The bilateral legal norms between UNWTO and Uzbekistan - i.e., the important and last tendencies of the sphere of tourism- are emphasized by the author. It developed conclusions and proposals on strengthening the institutional position of UNWTO in Central Asia. Accordingly, the research puts forward a restructuring of the UNWTO concerning institutional commissions by establishing the Regional Commission for Central Asia under UNWTO and placing its headquarters in Uzbekistan, the heart of the ancient Great Silk Road. Furthermore, this paper discusses facts promoting legal and practical issues for a multi-visa cooperation system in Central Asia region.

Keywords

Great Silk Road • Convention • Central Asia • Tourism • UNWTO (United Nations World Tourism Organization) • Uzbekistan

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To cite this article: Usmanova, S. (2018). Prospects of intensive institutional cooperation in tourism development in Central Asia: The case of Uzbekistan. *Journal of Tourismology*, 4(1), 55–66. <https://dx.doi.org/10.26650/jot.2018.4.1.0005>

International tourism is an important component of international economic, social, cultural and humanitarian cooperation. It is the means of establishing mutual understanding between people and getting acquainted with their achievements in various fields. It is known that, within the framework of a state, the development of tourism determines the creation of additional jobs, develops local infrastructure and various services, and generates huge revenues for both the private sector and the state in the form of currency from services rendered and taxes from the tourism industry. This explains why tourism is the most profitable economic sector of developed and developing countries.

The Republic of Uzbekistan, a country located in the center of the ancient Great Silk Road, is characterized today by its high tourist and recreational potential. Currently, the republic, having a rich cultural, historical and natural heritage, and an advantageous geopolitical position, occupies a definite place in the world tourist market and is now attracting considerable interest both from foreign and national tourists (Kantarci, Basaran and Özyurt, 2015).

UNWTO's Great Silk Road project plays an important role in the sustainable development of tourism in Uzbekistan and Central Asia and it represents the realization of the existing potential of mutual cooperation in this region. Opportunities for multilateral cooperation with international authorities are needed for further development of integration and this will constitute the research paper. Accordingly, the research puts forward the establishment of the Regional Commission for Central Asia under UNWTO, which leads to the expansion of touristic potential of this region by promoting universal and regional cooperation. Furthermore, the settlement of regional visa issues (Usmanova, 2018), which is present among tourists who want to visit Central Asia, is discussed. In the conclusion, the results of the discussed issues and proposals are shown according to literature and current tourism reforms in Uzbekistan.

Literature Review

The sphere of tourism cannot develop without international relations and cooperation. The main aim of this collaboration is the development of institutional relations with international organizations. The most significant of them is the UNWTO (United Nations World Touristic Organization) (Louis D'amore, 2013), in which Uzbekistan and Central Asian countries have participated since 1993. The theoretical aspects of touristic potential of Central Asian countries are expressed in tourism literature in Central Asia (Kantarci, Uysal and Magnini, 2015); As a country situated in the center of Central Asia, Uzbekistan plays a remarkable role in the region. The features of tourism development in Uzbekistan is written in the literature of national scholars (Abdurakhmanov, 2013; Mirzayev and Aliyeva, 2011). The idea of regional integration and its importance are obvious in order to create a new institution under the UNWTO.

Therefore, regional integration is being studied to evaluate the role of regional organizations in maintaining cooperation among states (Kösler and Zimmek, 2008). Institutional cooperation issues defined in this research are based on international and national legislation. Hence, international-legal norms (Manila Declaration on World Tourism, 1980; Charter of UNWTO, 1970; Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the World Tourism Organization concerning the Silk Road Office in Samarkand, 2004), declarations (Samarkand Declaration on Silk Road Tourism form, 1994; Khiva Declaration on tourism and preservation of the cultural heritage, 1999; Bukhara Declaration, 2002) and national acts of Uzbekistan (the Draft Conception of developing tourism in the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2017-2021) are analyzed. In order to evaluate recent developments and the focus of organizations, special reports are analyzed [EU-Uzbekistan Relations: Paving the New Silk Road EIAS Briefing Seminar 12 July 2016 (event report)].

Methods

In order to engage the practicability of this idea, different analysis methods such as content analyses and comparative-legal, normative-legal analyses of international and national legal norms are used. The content of the international legal norms are analyzed and form an integral part of the research. The content of international and national legal acts was also analyzed by the researcher. The statistics relating to tourism development in Uzbekistan was learned by the author during her fellowship in the State Committee for tourism development in Uzbekistan.

Results of data collection

Current statistics and prediction for the tourism industry in Uzbekistan [(Expected results of development of tourism in the Republic of Uzbekistan, expressed in the target indicators) Draft of Conception for tourism Development in the Republic of Uzbekistan for mid-range perspective, 2017)].



Figure 1.

Translation: Investments to main capital of tourism industry is showed in total billions (national currency of Uzbekistan 1 US dollar = 8 051.46 Uzbekistan sum)



Figure 2.

Translation: Growth in number of foreign visitors to the Republic of Uzbekistan (thousands of people, year by year)



Figure 3.

Translation: Export of tourism services is shown and predicted year by year (millions of USD)

Legal aspects of cooperation between UNWTO and the Republic of Uzbekistan

International regional organizations play an important role in maintaining collaboration and partnership among states. Therefore, international-legal cooperation of Uzbekistan in the field of tourism is constructed through both bilateral and multilateral contractual bases. The tourism industry in Uzbekistan not only has great potential in the first instance, but also has unique sources of ecological tourism and a rich cultural-historical heritage. Today by possessing more than 7,000 historical and cultural monuments, Uzbekistan is considered to be one of the world's 10 leading countries in number of historical heritage sites (Abdurakhmanov, 2013). The cities of Samarkand ('Queen of All Cities'), Bukhara ('Princesses Bukhara'), Khiva and Shakhrisabz are included in UNESCO's World Heritage List (Kantarci, Uysal, and Magnini, 2015). "The most unique cultural, historical and socio-economic phenomenon in the history of the world - the Great Silk Road" has just passed through these cities and centers of culture. According to the estimates of the World Tourism and Travel Council for 2016, Uzbekistan ranks 115th among countries in terms of total contribution to the country's GDP formation, 103rd in the use of investments,

69th in terms of the number of people employed in the industry and 150th in tourist arrivals. Moreover, it accounts for 0.2% of the total flow. Thus, having the highest tourist potential (according to expert international estimates), with the available materials and technical base this indicator could reach 2.2% [The Draft of Presidential decree on measures of realization of the Conception for tourism Development in the Republic of Uzbekistan for mid-range perspective, (statistical facts in the first and second paragraphs were taken from the same Conception) viewed 08 April, 2017, https://my.gov.uz/ru/getPublicService/332?item_id=1296&action=view]

The Republic of Uzbekistan has consolidated its presence in the world tourist market but it is too soon to talk about significant progress. This is confirmed by Uzbekistan not being placed in the Competitiveness Rating for countries in tourism (Competitive Rating defines 140 tourist destinations with the highest levels of desirability). At the same time, Kazakhstan ranks 85th in this Ranking, Kyrgyzstan - 116, Tajikistan - 119 (Ibid).

The legal basis of touristic activity in Uzbekistan developed after its independence in 1991. Currently, tourism is a priority for development in Uzbekistan, with plans to increase visitor numbers annually. The country's diverse tourism heritage and potential ensure that there is significant opportunity for growth. Consequently, it was elaborated in a Presidential Decree "On measures to ensure the accelerated development of the tourism industry of the Republic of Uzbekistan" dated 02.12.2016 and Draft of the Conception for tourism development in the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2017-2021 by the Committee for tourism development in Uzbekistan. According to these across-the-board norms (along with other priorities), the main preemptive directions and goals of governmental policy on developing tourism in the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017-2021 should be:

- (i) Accomplishment of the legislation and normative-legal basis in the sphere of touristic activity, which sets favorable facilities for functioning subjects of touristic activity and national and foreign visitors;
- (ii) Enlargement of international cooperation in the sphere of touristic activity (Ibid legal norm).

Uzbekistan has continued a fellowship since 1993 and UNWTO initiated a long-term project to organize and promote the Silk Road as a tourism concept. In 1994, representatives from 19 participant nations came together and adopted the historic "Samarkand Declaration on Silk Road Tourism" and approved a specific goal for all the governments, organizations and private sector enterprises involved. The above-mentioned cooperation became stronger after the signing of an agreement between the government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and UNWTO on tourism, the preparation

of specialists and the propulsion of the brand name “Great Silk Road”. The next step in the legal promotion of the historical-cultural heritage of Uzbekistan was the signing of the “Khiva Declaration on tourism and preservation of cultural heritage” on the 21st of April, 1999 (Mirzayev and Aliyeva, 2011).

Since then, forums and meetings have been held, and in 2002 the participants of the fourth International Meeting on the Silk Road adopted the “Bukhara Declaration on Silk Road Tourism” which stressed the benefits of sustainable tourism and outlined specific steps to stimulate cultural and ecological tourism to Silk Road destinations. The Bukhara Declaration endorsed Uzbekistan’s offer to open a Silk Road office in Samarkand in 2004, which at present continues its function in the capital of country - Tashkent. The office functions as part of the organizational structure of the Committee for tourism development in Uzbekistan concerning the agreement signed in 2004 between UNWTO and the Republic of Uzbekistan (Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the World Tourism Organization concerning the Silk Road Office in Samarkand, 2004).

In accordance with the agreement on the establishment of this regional organization, its main tasks include:

- (i) Strengthening the links between tourism development among Silk Road countries;
- (ii) Providing regional cooperation along the road (Silk Road) and supporting the participation of governments;
- (iii) Ensuring the participation of tour operators in the development of tourism within the region;
- (iv) E-documentation and surveys on tourist travel destinations along the Silk Road in the participating States;
- (v) Providing joint tourism fairs between the Silk Road countries;
- (vi) Introduce other initiatives and projects in the field of tourism along the Silk Road (Article 3, Agreement between the Government of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the World Tourism Organization concerning the Silk Road Office in Samarkand).

The opening of a UNWTO regional office in 2004 in Samarkand, which encouraged the coordination of the activities of the national tourist organizations of the Great Silk Road countries, was a milestone event. The uniform information base, which has collected the valuable data on noteworthy places and historical monuments of these states was created there (Abdurakhmanov, 2013).

In October 2010, the next UNWTO international meeting on tourism development was held in the Great Silk Road destination - Uzbekistan. Recognizing Samarkand

as one of the top 50 must-see cities in 2014 (The top 50 cities to see in your lifetime blog updated 06.12.2017. www.huffingtonpost.com/minube/the-top-50-cities-to-see_b_5547308.html) and organizing the 99th session of the UNWTO Executive Council on 2nd October of 2014 were the most successful Uzbekistan achievements. With almost 3,000 years of history, architectural monuments, blue domes, and its unique oriental image, Samarkand city has been attracting the attention of travelers and visitors. In this regard, it should be emphasized that a number of the above mentioned legal agreements have been adopted, thus proving the effectiveness of collaboration between the Republic and UNWTO for the sake of future realization of new projects and reforms.

Touristic potential of Central Asia

Central Asia countries located in the core of Asia contain large and distinctive tourism resources to serve the world tourism market. The five CA countries have some similarities and differences as touristic destinations. These five countries (Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Turkmenistan) form the whole CA region as a tourism product, yet they are competitors with each other as well as individual tourist destinations. These countries offer their unique tourism products on the basis of their common culture and history of the region. In this way, having a unique tourism product might be a determinative factor in order to have a comparative advantage (Kantarci, Basaran and Ozyurt, 2015).

Prospects for tourism development in South-East Asia countries are related to their cooperation. For example, a tour to Thailand could be combined with a visit to Southern China, Malaysia and Singapore. The states of the Pacific region cooperate to develop the sphere of tourism. Consequently, a similar model could be used by the states of Central Asia as a separate and unique region with sufficient touristic potential. For instance, a tour to Uzbekistan could be combined with a visit to the other four countries. We cannot deny that this kind of tour has been organized by some tour operators recently. However, it is time to establish the legal promotion of Central Asian tour activities by developing an institutional and legal basis. One of the options here could be establishing a Regional Commission for Central Asia under UNWTO, which would coordinate the functioning of governments in mutual tourism development among the Central Asian countries.

Moreover, increased tourist attention in the Central Asia region could influence solutions for visa issues for travelers to this destination (travelers from other countries to CA often claim to have visa problems). There isn't a single "Standard" visa for Central Asia similar to the Schengen visa for Europe. And it is time to promote legal and practical issues for a multi-visa cooperation system in the Central Asia region. This could open additional travel possibilities for international tourists who are

interested in the Central Asia region and help increase the flow of tourists, which in turn could increase growth in the states' economy. Here, it should be noted that, according to official reports, two of the five countries in Central Asia - Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan - will sign an agreement on multiple entry visas (See: <http://www.kazpravda.kz/en/articles/view/kazakhstan-and-uzbekistan-to-sign-multi-visa--agrt/>). The agreement will be signed in the field of tourism cooperation jointly with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Central Asian countries. Furthermore, the Council of tourism for the CIS countries discussed the creation of a single visa system of the states of Central Asia for tourists on August 10, 2018 in Dushanbe. The committee on tourism of the ministry of culture and sport of Kazakhstan is now working on the creation of a visa called, "The Silk way". It will be the analogue of the Schengen visa [See: <https://24tv.ua/> (last seen 20.08.2018)]. Hopefully, this step will be established continuously in the field of uniting the next single visa regimes among Central Asia countries. Consequently, it will influence economic growth and states' income from the tourism industry. Simultaneously, tourists would have an opportunity to visit the unique Central Asia states during their single trip.

Almost all the studies mentioned the fact that the Central Asian countries are unique in that they are exotic and newly emerging destinations, offering a wide variety of rich cultural heritage and possessing natural beauty and great hospitality. However, in some instances they may lack good infrastructure for basic tourism amenities, trained personnel and - more importantly - lack distribution channels and suffer from inaccessibility to some areas other than major cities. Due Thanks to the Silk Road project and their abundance of cultural and natural resources, the Central Asian countries are gaining more attention and heightened interest from potential investors as well as from tour operators and thus visitors. All of this signifies that these countries have tremendous potential for tourism development. However, turning these opportunities and potential into a reality is likely to be the result of a long, expensive, and complicated processes (Uysal and Kantarci, 2015). The Silk Road is a unique joint program with Europe and Asia. However, Central Asia currently needs a separate institutional network such as the Regional Commission for Central Asia which could coordinate the development of tourism collaboration in a certain region. The legal basis and structure of this institution will be organized by comparing operations of six other commissions and whilst simultaneously remembering the peculiarities of the Central Asia region as well.

The need for special cooperation under UNWTO

We argue that we now need a new way of thinking in international law that exhibits a principle of territorial distinction and self-restriction, which is more suitable for both vital dynamic trends towards "regionalism" within international law, relations and politics, and the emergent possibility of a pluralistic multipolar legal order (Delmas-Marty, 1998).

The process of global integration in the sphere of tourism is carried out by the World Tourism Organization (UNWTO) - an intergovernmental organization which was established under the United Nations in 1975 on the basis of the International Union of Official Tourism Organizations for coordinating the actions of the world community to develop tourism. The growing importance of the industry in the global economy means that by 2023, the total contribution will account for 10.0% of GDP and 1 in 10 jobs globally (D'amore, 2013).

The importance of this organization was emphasized in the Manila Declaration which announcing that, international cooperation in the field of tourism is an endeavor in which the characteristics of peoples and basic interests of individual States must be respected. In this field, the central and decisive role of the World Tourism Organization as a conceptualizing and harmonizing body is obvious.

Furthermore, an important international act – the 3rd article of the UNWTO charter - clearly states that the main objective of the Organization is to promote the development of tourism in order to contribute to economic development, international understanding, peace, prosperity, universal respect and observance of human rights and fundamental freedoms for all people without distinction as to race, gender, language or religion. The above mentioned aims could not be realized without integration inside UNWTO. It unites the governmental tourism organizations of more than 100 countries around the world (See: www.unwto.org). Many governmental and non-governmental organizations are considered to be members of UNWTO as observers. It has an extensive network represented by six regional organizations for various continents. These include the following organizations:

- (i) The European Tourism Commission;
- (ii) The Arab Tourism Association;
- (iii) The American Society of Tourist Agents;
- (iv) The Conference of tourist agencies of Latin American countries;
- (v) The Association of British Tourist Agencies;
- (vi) The Tourist Association of the Pacific Region.

These regional Commissions, established in 1975 as subsidiary organs of the General Assembly, enable member States to maintain contact with one another and with the Secretariat between sessions of the General Assembly, to which they submit their proposals and convey their concerns.

According to UNWTO's agenda, the first issue is the need to concentrate its work on a few, high priority subjects of interest and relevance to most members,

aiming at significant results in those areas, so as to strengthen its position as a global leader on tourism policy issues and to provide more meaningful, strategic services to members. Proposals are made to involve the members more strongly in the definition of priorities for the biennial programs of work, giving the Regional Commissions a new, more substantive role in the identification of regional priorities (CEU/52/3 Madrid, March 2011 UNWTO COMMISSION FOR EUROPE Fifty-second Meeting Katowice, Poland, 14 April 2011 Provisional agenda item 3).

The states of Central Asia participate in the functioning of UNWTO within the European Tourism Commission, which consists of 42 state members. It is known that, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan together form the macro destination of Central Asia. In this period of constant change and progress it is time to reform the institutional structure of the UNWTO European Commission by separating one of the regions, namely Central Asia. Central Asian states are not considered to be part of the European region either from a geographical point of view or logically. Moreover, the touristic potential of CA countries should be better organized by institutional structure in order to attract more tourists from various countries of the world. It is necessary for regional cooperation of CA countries for tourism development. Hence, it is time to extend and to specialize the reach of UNWTO's sphere of cooperation by establishing a Regional Commission for Central Asia. Here, it should be emphasized that, this issue was also discussed during a meeting between the Uzbek President Sh. Mirziyoyev and ex-Secretary General of UNWTO Taleb Rifai (Uzbekistan, UNWTO mull co-op prospects, viewed 28 August, 2017, <https://www.en.trend.az>).

The main role of UNWTO's Regional Commission for Central Asia would be to coordinate tourism issues, such as visa questions, sustainable development of tourism in the region and implement UNWTO's projects alongside Central Asia effectively. Additionally, other aims could be specified according to the demands of the five states (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan). Moreover, each

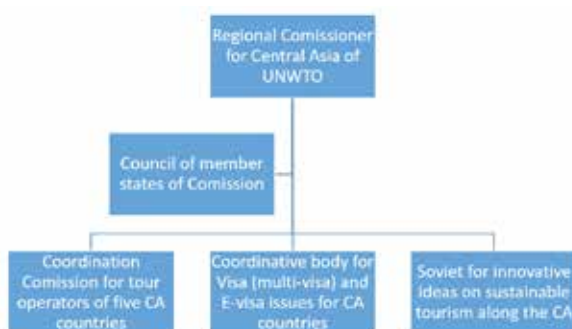


Figure 4.

member state of Central Asia would offer at least one candidate in order to participate in the decision-making process of Regional Commission. The Head of the institution should be elected by the member states and/or it may be organized headed by each state in turn. For instance, every four years the Head should be changed alphabetically (Kazakhstan's official body would be first in this instance).

Conclusion

The analysis, conducted by the mutual touristic relations of Central Asian countries, in particular, the cooperation of Uzbekistan with UNWTO, shows that the regional tourism industry has entered a period of sustainable growth in the volume of travel and excursions associated with an increased competition in this sector of the market. In such conditions one cannot overestimate the role of legal and institutional mechanisms for regulating the diverse relationships of subjects of the tourist market both inside and outside the country. The states, civil societies and organizations involved in the formulation of a strategic development of tourism, improve legislation, provide favorable conditions for collaborative activity of business structures, increase the responsibility of organizations and officials for compliance with the legal rights of consumers of tourism services, and stimulate a system of training qualified personnel for the tourism industry.

It is proposed to reform the structure of the UNWTO concerning regional commissions by establishing the practical implications of current research, i.e. to organize a *Regional Commission for Central Asia under UNWTO* and place its headquarters in Uzbekistan, the heart of the ancient Great Silk Road. Notwithstanding the uniqueness of the Silk Road Project which passes along Central Asia destinations, it is time to reform the structure of the UNWTO by organizing a special institute for Central Asian countries. On one hand, this innovation would centralize touristic activities and sustainability in five regional states, and on the other, UNWTO as a universal intergovernmental organization, would strengthen its position and concentration on tourism development in the aforementioned strategically important region. Furthermore, the theory of establishing a joint visa program in Central Asia by promoting a legal cooperation agreement on this issue would play an important role in increasing the tourist flow to Central Asia. It shouldn't be a competition among these countries, rather collaboration should be encouraged to grow the countries' economy and tourism industry.

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