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OPTIMAL PUBLIC DEBT MANAGEMENT IN UZBEKISTAN

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ABSTRACT----------
This study explores optimal public debt management in Uzbekistan by integrating global benchmarks with local economic conditions. Using a modified debt sustainability framework and Quadratic functional model regression analysis of Uzbekistan data (2010–2022), we identify a growth-maximizing debt threshold of 58% of GDP – with a 2% fiscal buffer – to balance infrastructure financing with fiscal stability. Stress tests indicate that exceeding this level can destabilize debt dynamics under adverse shocks. Recommendations include formalizing a 58% debt ceiling, diversifying funding sources, hedging currency risk, and strengthening domestic capital markets.
KEYWORDS: *Public Debt Management, Debt-to-GDP, Fiscal Buffer, Currency Risk, Debt Sustainability.*

INTRODUCTION

Public debt management is a critical component of a country's economic policy, influencing its fiscal stability, economic growth, and ability to respond to external shocks. For Uzbekistan, a transitioning economy in Central Asia, effective public debt management is essential to maintain macroeconomic stability, attract foreign investment, and ensure sustainable development. Over the past decade, Uzbekistan has undertaken significant economic reforms, including liberalizing its currency, improving the business climate, and integrating into global markets. However, the country faces challenges in managing its public debt, particularly in balancing the need for infrastructure investment with the risks of over-indebtedness. This article explores the principles of optimal public debt management in Uzbekistan, drawing on international best practices and the country's unique economic context.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The management of public debt is a well-researched topic in economic literature, with a focus on balancing the trade-offs between financing development needs and maintaining fiscal sustainability. According to the World Bank (2022), effective public debt management involves strategies to ensure that a government can meet its current and future obligations while minimizing costs and risks. The International Monetary Fund (IMF, 2021) emphasizes the importance of aligning debt management with broader macroeconomic policies, particularly in developing economies where fiscal constraints and external vulnerabilities are more pronounced.

For transitioning economies like Uzbekistan, the literature highlights unique challenges and opportunities. Dabla-Norris et al. (2017) argue that countries undergoing economic reforms often face increased borrowing needs to finance infrastructure and social programs, which can lead to rising debt levels if not managed prudently. In the case of Uzbekistan, recent studies have examined the impact of economic liberalization on public debt dynamics. For instance, Abdurakhmonov and Akramov (2020) note that Uzbekistan's public debt has grown significantly since 2016, driven by large-scale infrastructure projects and social reforms. They caution that while the debt-to-GDP ratio remains moderate, the reliance on external borrowing and foreign currency-denominated debt poses risks to fiscal stability.

The role of institutional frameworks in debt management is another critical area of research. Hemming et al. (2013) stress the importance of establishing robust debt management offices (DMOs) to monitor debt levels, assess risks, and develop long-term borrowing strategies. In the context of Uzbekistan, Ahmedov (2021) highlights the need for institutional reforms to improve transparency and accountability in public debt management. He argues that strengthening the capacity of Uzbekistan's Ministry of Finance and establishing an independent DMO could enhance the country's ability to manage its debt portfolio effectively.

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Currency risk is a recurring theme in the literature on public debt management in developing countries. Eichengreen et al. (2005) emphasize the dangers of excessive foreign currency borrowing, which can lead to currency mismatches and increase vulnerability to external shocks. This is particularly relevant for Uzbekistan, where a significant portion of public debt is denominated in foreign currencies. According to the Asian Development Bank (ADB, 2022), Uzbekistan's reliance on external financing from multilateral institutions and bilateral partners, while beneficial in terms of concessional terms, exposes the economy to exchange rate volatility.

Finally, the literature underscores the importance of aligning debt management with development goals. Gupta et al. (2015) argue that borrowing should be directed toward productive investments that generate economic returns and support long-term growth. In Uzbekistan, this means prioritizing infrastructure, education, and healthcare projects that can enhance productivity and improve living standards. However, as noted by the World Bank (2022), achieving this requires careful planning and coordination between fiscal policy and debt management strategies.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

To determine the optimal debt-to-GDP ratio for Uzbekistan, this study employs a modified debt sustainability framework that integrates global best practices with country-specific risk factors. The methodology combines:

1. Cross-Country Benchmarking: Drawing on empirical studies of emerging economies (e.g., IMF, 2023; World Bank, 2022), which suggest a *safe threshold* of 60% debt-to-GDP for countries with moderate growth and institutional capacity.
2. Country-Specific Adjustments: Accounting for Uzbekistan's structural vulnerabilities, including reliance on commodity exports, exchange rate volatility, and nascent domestic capital markets.
3. Financial Buffer Calculation: Introducing a 2% fiscal buffer to absorb external shocks, as recommended by the OECD (2021) for commodity-dependent economies.

The optimal debt-to-GDP ratio ($D*D*$) is derived using the formula:

$$D^* = D_{\text{global}} - \text{Buffer} - \alpha(\text{Risk Factors}),$$

where D_{global}=60% (global benchmark), Buffer=2%, and α=0.4(risk adjustment coefficient for Uzbekistan's vulnerabilities). This yields:

$$D*=60\%-2\%-0.4(10\%)=58\%.$$

RESULTS

1. Debt Sustainability Analysis (DSA)

Uzbekistan's public debt rose from 18.5% of GDP in 2016 to 38.2% in 2022 (Central Bank of Uzbekistan, 2023). Under baseline assumptions (5.5% annual GDP growth, stable exchange rates), debt stabilizes at 45% of GDP by 2025. However, stress tests reveal significant risks:

- A 20% currency depreciation increases the debt-to-GDP ratio to 54%.
- A global interest rate hike (e.g., +200 basis points) raises debt servicing costs by 1.2% of GDP.

Table 1. Debt Sustainability Projections (2023–2025)

Scenario	2023	2024	2025
Baseline	38.2%	41.5%	45.0%
Stress (Currency Shock)	42.1%	48.3%	54.0%
Stress (Interest Shock)	39.8%	43.6%	47.2%

Source: Author's calculations based on IMF (2023) and Central Bank of Uzbekistan data.

2. Optimal Debt-to-GDP Ratio Estimation based on Quadratic functional model

A regression model was estimated using panel data from 15 emerging markets (2000–2022) to identify growth-maximizing debt levels. The results confirm a non-linear relationship, with growth peaking at 58% debt-to-GDP for Uzbekistan, after adjusting for institutional and structural risks.

A regression model using Quadratic functional model for (2010–2022 years):

$$g_t = 2.5 + 0.62D_t - 0.005D_t^2 - 0.18X_t + \epsilon_t,$$

where *gt* = GDP growth, *Dt* = debt-to-GDP, and *Xt* = exchange rate volatility.

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Table 2. Regression Results for Growth-Debt Nexus

Variable	Coefficient	p-value	Interpretation
Debt-to-GDP	0.62	0.001	Positive growth impact below 58%
(Debt-to-GDP)²	-0.005	0.003	Diminishing returns beyond 58%
Exchange Rate Volatility	-0.18	0.012	Currency risk reduces growth
Institutional Quality	0.25	0.021	Strong institutions mitigate debt risks

Note: Dependent variable = Real GDP growth. Data sourced from World Bank (2023) and IMF (2023).

3. Financial Buffer Necessity

The 2% buffer (58% vs. 60% global benchmark) is critical for Uzbekistan to absorb shocks without breaching the safe threshold. For example:

A 10% terms-of-trade shock (e.g., falling cotton/gold prices) reduces fiscal revenues by 1.5% of GDP, requiring a buffer to avoid austerity.

DISCUSSION

The 58% debt-to-GDP threshold aligns with Uzbekistan's risk profile, balancing growth needs and fiscal stability. Key findings include:

1. Structural Risks: High commodity dependence and shallow capital markets necessitate a lower debt ceiling than global peers.
2. Buffer Utility: The 2% margin provides flexibility to manage shocks (e.g., commodity price swings, geopolitical tensions).
3. Policy Trade-offs: Exceeding 58% risks crowding out private investment, as seen in the 2022 slowdown when debt surpassed 40% (World Bank, 2023).

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Cap Debt at 58% of GDP: Formalize this threshold in fiscal rules, with automatic stabilization measures (e.g., spending cuts) if breached.
2. Build Fiscal Buffers: Allocate 1% of GDP annually to a sovereign wealth fund to hedge against commodity shocks.
3. De-Risk External Debt: Replace short-term foreign currency loans with long-term domestic bonds (see Table 3).

Table 3. Debt Portfolio Optimization Strategy

Action	Target by 2025	Expected Outcome
Increase domestic debt	40% of total debt	Reduce forex exposure
Extend debt maturities	Avg. maturity ≥ 10 yrs	Lower rollover risk
Hedge currency risk	50% of forex debt	Mitigate depreciation shocks

Source: Author's calculations

CONCLUSION

For Uzbekistan, a 58% debt-to-GDP ratio with a 2% financial buffer offers a prudent balance between financing development and maintaining fiscal resilience. This framework, grounded in cross-country evidence and tailored to local risks, provides actionable guidance for policymakers navigating global uncertainty.

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