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IMPLEMENTATION OF EU BEST AGRICULTURAL TRADE PRACTICES IN UZBEKISTAN

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Abstract: This study examines the integration of best EU agricultural trade practices in Uzbekistan in the context of ongoing domestic market reforms and the deepening of trade integration with the EU. Based on policy documents, trade data, and case studies, the research analyses the diffusion of sustainability standards, subsidy reforms, digital traceability systems, and phytosanitary measures within Uzbekistan's agri-food sector.

Key words: EU agricultural standards; Uzbekistan agriculture; trade integration; sustainability; phytosanitary measures; digital traceability; subsidy reform; export competitiveness.

Annotatsiya: Ushbu tadqiqot O'zbekistonda davom etayotgan ichki bozor islohotlari hamda Yevropa Ittifoqi bilan savdo integratsiyasining chuqurlashuvi sharoitida YIning eng ilg'or qishloq xo'jaligi savdo amaliyotlarini joriy etish jarayonini tahlil qiladi. Tadqiqot siyosiy-huquqiy hujjatlar, savdo statistikasi va holat tahlillari asosida O'zbekistonning agro-ozuqaviy sektorida barqarorlik standartlari, subsidiya islohotlari, raqamli kuzatuv (traceability) tizimlari va fitosanitariya choralari qanday tatbiq etilayotganini yoritadi.

Kalit so'zlar: YI qishloq xo'jaligi standartlari; O'zbekiston qishloq xo'jaligi; savdo integratsiyasi; barqarorlik; fitosanitariya choralari; raqamli kuzatuv tizimlari; subsidiya islohotlari; eksport raqobatbardoshligi.

Аннотация: В данном исследовании анализируется интеграция передовых практик Европейского союза в сфере торговли сельскохозяйственной продукцией в Узбекистане в условиях продолжающихся реформ внутреннего рынка и углубления торговой интеграции с ЕС. На основе анализа нормативно-правовых документов, торговых данных и тематических исследований рассматривается процесс внедрения стандартов устойчивого развития, реформ субсидирования, систем цифровой прослеживаемости и фитосанитарных мер в агропродовольственном секторе Узбекистана.

Ключевые слова: сельскохозяйственные стандарты ЕС; сельское хозяйство Узбекистана; торговая интеграция; устойчивое развитие; фитосанитарные меры; цифровая прослеживаемость; реформа субсидий; экспортная конкурентоспособность.

INTRODUCTION

The study of agricultural trade cooperation between the European Union (EU) and Uzbekistan has become an important area due to its impact on economic development, food security, and regional integration. The EU's trade policy framework with its eastern neighbours, including post-Soviet states, has undergone substantial changes since the 1990-s. These changes have been characterised by the introduction of programmes such as the European Neighbourhood Policy and Deep and Comprehensive Free Trade Agreements, which are designed to promote regulatory convergence and market integration (Berkum 2015; Banse et al. 2019).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Meanwhile, Uzbekistan's agri-food sector, which constitutes a cornerstone of the national economy, has experienced progressive changes in its export structure, shifting from traditional cotton cultivation towards

more diversified agricultural production patterns. This transformation forms part of broader changes in trade specialisation and economic policy (Stephens et al., 2023; Petrick and Djanibekov, 2019). Such cooperation is important for the development of export–import relations and for the dissemination of agricultural technologies that enhance productivity and sustainability (Khalmirzayeva n.d.; Bobojonov et al. 2010).

Although import and export policies and trade communications between the EU and Uzbekistan continue to face certain difficulties, the overall situation has shown noticeable improvement. Existing literature highlights changes in Uzbekistan’s agricultural policies and the growth of its export shares; however, it does not provide a comprehensive analysis of how these developments align with EU trade conditions and regulatory standards (Khalmirzayeva n.d.; Bagirzadeh n.d.; Crole-Rees et al. 2005).

In addition, political challenges shaping the EU’s relations with its eastern neighbours, particularly those involving Russia, exert an unfavourable influence on regional trade dynamics and may indirectly affect Uzbekistan’s trade relations (Berkum 2015; Banse et al. 2019). Scholarly debates also reveal divergent views regarding the effectiveness of Uzbekistan’s cotton taxation and farm restructuring policies. Discussions concerning their market-distorting effects and implications for farmers’ incomes remain highly contested (Rudenko et al. 2009; MacDonald 2012; Crole-Rees et al. 2005). Integrated assessments that simultaneously consider trade policies, export–import flows, and technological progress within the framework of bilateral relations remain limited. This gap may constrain the formulation of coherent policy strategies and, consequently, hinder economic growth and regional cooperation (Ninaquispe et al. 2024; Khasanov and Djanibekov 2015).

This review proposes a conceptual framework that characterises agricultural trade cooperation as an interaction between trade policies, export–import dynamics, and agricultural technology transfer, emphasising their interdependence in shaping bilateral relations (Berkum 2015; Khalmirzayeva n.d.; Bobojonov et al. 2010). Trade policies determine regulatory frameworks and tariff structures, export–import dynamics reflect market specialisation and diversification, and agricultural technologies influence productivity and competitiveness. Understanding the relationships among these elements enables a more comprehensive assessment of cooperation effectiveness and helps identify priority areas for policy reform.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This article employs a qualitative analysis of policy documents, trade data, and case studies to assess the implementation of EU best practices in Uzbekistan’s agricultural sector. Uzbek government strategy papers and legal reforms were reviewed to understand policy adoption, drawing on sources such as the Agriculture Development Strategy 2020–2030 and updates from WTO accession working parties. International frameworks, including EU regulations and WTO agreements, as well as EU policy reports, were consulted to define the benchmarks for “best practices.”

In addition, development project reports and news materials from organisations such as the FAO, the EU Delegation, and the ITC were analysed in order to capture on-the-ground initiatives, including training workshops, pilot projects, and institutional capacity-building efforts. Agricultural trade statistics were examined to assess market integration, focusing on export growth indicators and the composition of export destinations.

Furthermore, specific regional and crop-based examples, such as a Syrdarya province pomegranate cooperative’s GLOBALG.A.P. certification initiative, were analysed to illustrate farmer-level implementation processes and related challenges. By triangulating information from policy analysis, empirical project outcomes, and trade performance data, the study provides a comprehensive overview of how EU-aligned practices are being implemented in Uzbekistan and the impacts they generate, ranging from national institutions to individual farms.

ANALYSIS AND RESULTS

Uzbekistan has increasingly opened up to the adoption of sustainability standards in agriculture, driven by their environmental benefits and their role in facilitating access to international markets. The government proclaimed 2025 as the “Year of Environmental Protection and Green Economy,” demonstrating a strong commitment to the greening of agriculture. With support from the EU and FAO, Uzbekistan has aimed to reduce dependence on harmful agrochemicals and promote climate-smart agricultural practices. A national workshop on “green agriculture,” held in Tashkent in April 2025, identified biological plant protection and ecological farming as new strategic priorities. As a result, the government has embarked on a path towards more sustainable crop production.

These initiatives are being undertaken against a backdrop of serious structural challenges. Decades of large-scale cotton cultivation have resulted in soil degradation, pesticide residues, and increasing water stress. Environmental experts note that climate change has significantly exacerbated water scarcity in Uzbekistan’s

arid regions. This context underscores the necessity of adopting improved agricultural practices to enhance long-term productivity. By aligning with international guidelines and certification systems, Uzbekistan has entered a new phase of sustainability-oriented agricultural development. National strategies emphasise the expansion of GLOBALG.A.P. certification, organic farming, and the implementation of food safety and quality management systems such as HACCP.

GLOBALG.A.P. (Good Agricultural Practice) standards encompass a wide range of sustainability criteria, including food safety and traceability, environmental management, and worker health and safety. In the Syrdarya region, an EU-supported rural development project enabled a cooperative of 35 pomegranate farmers to obtain GLOBALG.A.P. certification, representing a notable success. Farmers complied with the standards by improving orchard hygiene, applying pesticides more cautiously, maintaining detailed farm records, and properly documenting labour practices. As a result, the cooperative's pomegranates gained access to European and Asian markets through a globally recognised food safety certificate. According to a GLOBALG.A.P. auditor during the 2019 inspection, certification is "mandatory for farmers if they wish to export... [as it] increases the price of products and access to markets." This example illustrates how compliance with sustainability standards can generate new business opportunities and highlights the importance of institutional support, including technical assistance, training, infrastructure upgrades, and a supportive cooperative policy framework introduced in 2019.

At the farm level, the transition to sustainable practices has been both promising and challenging. Many Uzbek farmers, particularly younger producers, demonstrate a strong willingness to act as environmental stewards and recognise the long-term benefits of sustainable agriculture. However, they often require guidance in adopting new methods. Within an EU-funded programme, experts from NRI and CABI trained local farmers and agronomists in Integrated Pest Management (IPM) techniques. Training sessions demonstrated that combining biological control agents, crop rotation, and the judicious use of short-residual modern pesticides can effectively control pests while minimising environmental harm. IPM specialists encouraged farmers, who had previously applied pesticides on fixed schedules, to instead monitor crops closely and make informed, evidence-based intervention decisions.

Some farmers reported prior partial adoption of IPM practices; however, the project facilitated a more systematic and integrated approach. Uzbekistan's network of approximately 600 private biocontrol laboratories producing natural pest enemies, such as ladybird beetles and parasitoid wasps, represents a significant asset. Before the project, however, this capacity was not fully integrated into mainstream farming practices, as many producers continued to rely on broad-spectrum pesticides that reduced the effectiveness of biocontrol agents. Policy measures are now being considered to promote wider IPM adoption, including the gradual withdrawal of the most hazardous and persistent agrochemicals from the market. Early results from these sustainability initiatives are encouraging: farmers report improved pest control with reduced health risks, and, critically, increased compliance with EU pesticide residue limits. Reductions in residue levels have immediate trade benefits by decreasing the likelihood of export rejections at EU borders, which in the past have adversely affected the reputation and revenues of Uzbek exporters. Consequently, the adoption of EU-style sustainability standards delivers dual benefits by protecting environmental and public health while enhancing the credibility of Uzbekistan's agricultural exports.

Uzbekistan has also moved to align its agricultural subsidy system with EU and WTO best practices. Historically, government support prioritised cotton and wheat due to their strategic importance. Joint analyses conducted by the EU, the Asian Development Bank, and Uzbekistan's Ministry of Agriculture revealed that more than 93 % of support was directed towards these two crops, limiting assistance for high-value horticultural production and contributing to inefficient resource allocation. The findings recommended a more equitable and targeted subsidy framework to stimulate diversification into higher-value products, including fruits, vegetables, and nuts. The transition from a Soviet-style emphasis on basic commodities to a modern system focused on quality and value addition reflects broader reforms in agricultural finance and policy.

The EU's Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) provides a relevant model, having progressively replaced coupled subsidies with decoupled payments and targeted rural development programmes that incentivise market responsiveness and environmental stewardship. Uzbekistan has drawn on this experience. The EU Ambassador to Uzbekistan, Toivo Klaar, advised that subsidies should "directly contribute to... a market-driven, internationally competitive, diverse, environmentally friendly, climate-resilient, and socially inclusive agri-food sector." Joint policy research recommended several best practices, including reducing subsidies for cotton and wheat while increasing support for export-oriented horticulture, establishing a digital platform for subsidy applications and payments to enhance transparency and efficiency, and strengthening inter-ministerial coordination to ensure coherent implementation aligned with food security, climate adaptation, and farm income objectives.

These recommendations have begun to be implemented. At a high-level policy discussion held in Tashkent in February 2025, officials announced plans to adjust agricultural subsidies in line with WTO accession commitments. Cotton export quotas and administratively set prices that had effectively taxed farmers were abolished, signalling a shift towards market-based incentives. Future subsidy schemes are expected to prioritise public goods, such as water conservation and organic production, rather than output volumes. Support for horticultural supply chains, including cold storage and packaging infrastructure, has expanded in recognition of their higher export value. These reforms aim to create a fairer, more transparent, and rules-based support system that benefits a broader range of producers, including small-scale fruit growers and agribusiness entrepreneurs. While transitional uncertainty remains for farmers accustomed to guaranteed prices, government policy statements emphasise that diversified and targeted subsidies will enhance profitability and stability. As articulated in the Agriculture Development Strategy, reallocating resources from inefficient support mechanisms can finance rural infrastructure, research, and extension services, consistent with CAP principles. Overall, Uzbekistan's subsidy reforms reflect the adoption of EU best practices and are expected to strengthen the credibility and competitiveness of its agricultural trade.

The adoption of digital traceability systems represents a further strategic innovation in Uzbekistan's agricultural trade. Traceability—the ability to track the origin and movement of agricultural products—has become increasingly important for regulators and consumers, particularly in the EU. It facilitates food safety recalls, quality monitoring, and verification of product origin. With support from international partners, Uzbekistan has initiated the digitalisation of its agri-food supply chains to enhance transparency and efficiency.

A prominent example is the introduction of electronic phytosanitary certification (e-Phyto). Previously, phytosanitary certificates were issued in paper form, resulting in procedural delays and vulnerabilities to document loss or forgery. Through the International Plant Protection Convention's e-Phyto Solution, countries can now exchange phytosanitary information electronically. Complementary initiatives involving the EBRD and FAO have explored the application of e-Phyto in Uzbekistan. Evaluations indicate that electronic certification can significantly reduce processing times and administrative costs. Empirical studies across multiple countries, including Uzbekistan, suggest that exporters can save between USD 4.5 and USD 83 per certificate by eliminating courier expenses and delays. Over time, these savings accumulate into substantial economic benefits, potentially amounting to tens of millions of USD given Uzbekistan's export volumes.

Beyond cost savings, digital certification reduces the likelihood of errors that may lead to border rejections and enables EU border authorities to conduct targeted inspections more efficiently. Econometric analyses indicate that countries exchanging at least 50 e-Phyto certificates annually with trading partners experience significant growth in agricultural exports, particularly for perishable products such as fruits and vegetables. This is especially relevant for Uzbekistan, where fresh produce constitutes a major export category to European markets. Faster clearance and enhanced traceability through e-Phyto thus provide Uzbek exports with a competitive advantage by ensuring timely delivery and product quality.

Digital traceability systems are also being applied in food safety monitoring and veterinary services, enabling batch-level tracking of processed foods and livestock products from farm to export. Although these systems require substantial investments in software development, capacity building, and legal frameworks for electronic records, Uzbekistan has benefited from international technical assistance. For example, joint initiatives by the EU and UNDP have produced practical export guidance outlining traceability requirements for key products such as dried fruits and nuts. Overall, the adoption of digital traceability enhances export facilitation while strengthening the transparency and credibility of Uzbekistan's agricultural products in international markets. These investments align closely with the EU's broader digitalisation agenda in trade and agriculture.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This transition involves moving from isolated demonstrations towards a systematic methodology that embodies EU best practices in agricultural trade, allowing consumers freedom of choice while enabling farmers to utilise available resources to ensure sustainable incomes. The agri-food sector in Uzbekistan is already benefiting from improvements in sanitary and phytosanitary (SPS) measures, digital traceability systems, subsidy reforms, and the adoption of sustainability standards. If these trends continue, farmers and agribusinesses in Uzbekistan may increasingly engage in direct trade with EU markets. This development would generate significant economic benefits for Uzbekistan and align the country's agricultural sector with globally recognised best practices. The case of Uzbekistan thus illustrates how the adoption of EU best practices can foster agricultural growth and enhance trade competitiveness in emerging economies.

The implementation of EU best practices offers new opportunities for farmers but remains a challenging process. Progressive farmers and agribusinesses can leverage financial incentives to expand high-value production, obtain GLOBALG.A.P. or organic certification to access premium markets, and invest in digital

solutions to facilitate export procedures. They also benefit from improved extension services and training programmes, often supported by international donors, which promote the adoption of European standards and practices. Conversely, smallholders and rural communities require targeted education and practical tools to improve their production methods, including financial support for appropriate equipment, safe pesticide application, and the time and capacity to maintain comprehensive farm records required for certification. Ensuring that reforms benefit all categories of producers is therefore essential. Institutional mechanisms, such as cooperative development initiatives and rural credit programmes, can help extend successful practices beyond pilot projects.

At the same time, policy changes accompanying institutional reforms—such as the establishment of a centralised subsidy payment agency and multi-agency SPS coordination committees—are gradually strengthening the government’s capacity to sustain and scale these improvements.

In the long term, for EU best practices to generate lasting outcomes in Uzbekistan, they must be continuously applied and progressively refined. Analyses of the EU–Uzbekistan Enhanced Partnership and Cooperation Agreement (EPCA) emphasise that “effective implementation, continuous reform, and the capacity to translate commitments into tangible outcomes” will determine the durability of this cooperation. Uzbekistan should therefore continue WTO accession-related reforms and embed them structurally within its economic and institutional systems, rather than treating them solely as compliance measures. This approach entails adjusting standards in line with evolving EU legislation, including Green Deal and food safety requirements, and investing in education, infrastructure, and institutional capacity to support compliance. Such measures could also position Uzbekistan as a regional leader, enabling it to share its experience with other Central Asian countries and potentially foster regional harmonisation of standards and the development of new value chains linking Central Asian and European markets.

The adaptation of EU best practices in agricultural trade in Uzbekistan represents a substantial transition from a state-supported, production-maximisation framework towards a modern, sustainable, and internationally integrated agri-food economy. Progress in SPS measures, digital traceability, subsidy reforms, and sustainability requirements is laying the foundation for more inclusive agri-food system development. With sustained policy continuity, farmers and agribusinesses in Uzbekistan will be better positioned to compete effectively in EU markets. This process generates economic benefits for the country while upholding internationally recognised standards, demonstrating how the domestication of EU best practices can drive agricultural development and trade competitiveness in a developing economy.

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