

Decoupling from Moscow: Shifting Labor Migration Policies in Central Asia

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Abstract: This paper examines the evolving labor migration policies in Central Asia in response to the geopolitical shifts following Russia's invasion of Ukraine and the tightening of labor migration laws in Russia. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are the focus of the study since they are the most economically reliant on remittances sent by labor migrants in the Russian Federation. The paper also discusses Kazakhstan, as it is the second biggest host of Central Asian migrants. It highlights the trend towards diversifying labor migration destinations to Europe and Asia in an attempt to reduce the economic dependence on Russia. Due to limited data, the paper provides an overview of Turkmenistan's labor migration situation. The paper concludes by offering policy recommendations.

Keywords: Central Asia, Russia, migrants, remittances, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, economic risks, GDP, governance.

Introduction: Central Asian migrants contribute significantly to the Russian economy, filling labor shortages. They are heavily involved in construction, transportation, and urban services. For decades, Central Asian workers have been moving to Russia in search of higher wages and more employment opportunities not found in their home countries. The appeal of the Russian job market is further amplified by its proximity to the region, strong economic, political and historical ties, common cultural and linguistic legacy.

There are about 10.5 million migrants from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan working in Russia, according to the Russian Interior Ministry. Many more are potentially unregistered. While these migrants contribute to the Russian economy, they also face challenges including legal uncertainties, potential exploitation, and xenophobia, particularly after events like the Crocus City Hall attack.

In the past, threats to tighten immigration policies were sometimes used as a coercion tool by Russia against Central Asian and other countries. In 2019, for example, Russia implemented more restrictive policies targeting immigrants from outside the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), including Tajikistan, as a way to

pressure the country to join the EEU, where regulations for citizens of member states are laxer.

Contribution from remittances is difficult to dismiss. Remittances received from the migrants accounted for roughly 18.8% (2023) of Kyrgyzstan's, 47.9% (2024) of Tajikistan's and 14.4% (2024) of Uzbekistan's GDPs according to the World Bank. For Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan the intentions of Russia to regulate and limit labor migration are clearly a factor of risk.

Enlistment of labor migrants, especially those from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and their placement at the frontlines in Ukraine is becoming a tendency. It is estimated that over three thousand people from Central Asia now serve in the Russian army, according to the "I want to live" project of the Ministry of Defense of Ukraine. Russian officials have also acknowledged the recruitment of migrants. Alexander Bastrykin, head of Russia's Investigative Committee, stated during a legal forum in St. Petersburg that his office had identified around 80,000 individuals who received Russian citizenship but then attempted to evade military service. Of those, approximately 20,000 are currently serving on the front lines in Ukraine.

Reports suggest that Russian army representatives

have been enticing migrants with promises of fast money through short-term enlistment. These are not professional soldiers. They are more likely former cleaners, street sweepers, construction workers, undocumented migrants, often trapped in legal limbo, lured with false promises of fast-track Russian citizenship or pulled straight from prisons and detention centers.

Moreover, the deadly terrorist attack that occurred in the Moscow region at the Crocus City Hall on March 22, 2024, has intensified anti-migrant rhetoric by far-right nationalist groups and led to a nationwide increase in xenophobia. Four Tajik nationals were found to be responsible for killing 137 people and leaving 100 injured as a result of the Crocus City Hall attack. It is believed that the jihadist ISIS-Khorasan militant group has organized the crime. The slogan “Russia for Russians” has been popularized by ultranationalists.

This anti-migration campaign has been embraced by the Russian government, which has passed several legislative documents with an objective of tightening the rules regarding labor migrants. In the summer of 2024, Russian authorities amended laws regulating the legal status of foreigners in Russia to grant police broader authority to expel migrants without specific court orders. A bill on the introduction of new state fees for administrative services for migrants has passed its first reading in mid-2025. Kindergartens, schools, colleges and universities are under the obligation of providing regular information to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs on their foreign students following another Duma law. The children of the people, who appear on the Controlled Persons Register, are being denied admission unless they prove their Russian language proficiency. Raids are carried out constantly on Central Asian migrants and businesses. A steady increase in discrimination cases is being observed. Cases of migrants being detained for no reason are also not rare.

Human Rights Watch condemned the increased hostility and the government’s anti-migrant policies towards Central Asians by releasing a 63-page report, “Living in Fear and Humiliation: Rising Xenophobic Harassment and Violence towards Central Asian Migrants in Russia” on March 17, 2025.

These discriminatory policies and xenophobia have led to many Central Asian migrants fleeing Russia. According to the Tajik migration Agency, in the first half of 2024, Tajik labor migration to Russia fell by 16%, from 467,300 to 392,800 migrants. According to the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs, 650,000 migrants from Kyrgyzstan were registered in 2023. At the end of 2024, this figure has halved to 350,000 people.

According to the Migration Agency of Uzbekistan, the decline in interest of migrants from Uzbekistan in Russia is noticeable. While 1.2 million migrants from Uzbekistan were working in this country at the end of 2023, this number dropped to 698,000 by the end of 2024.

The past few years have exposed the fragile economic dependence of Central Asian states on remittances from Russia. Central Asian states view this risk seriously and understand the vitality of taking steps towards diversifying external migration locations. In response to geopolitical shifts, Central Asian states are adopting more cohesive migration policies compared to the past. This article attempts to analyze the ongoing labor migration trends and policies in Central Asia over the past few years by mostly focusing on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan since these countries export the most labor to Russia. They will be analyzed separately in accordance with the scope of the new migration policies being introduced.

MAIN PART

Uzbekistan

Uzbekistan has seriously taken up the issue of regulating the processes of external labor migration: the state is fighting illegal labor migration, creating conditions for organized employment of citizens abroad and reintegrating former labor migrants after returning home.

The Main Directorate for Migration and Citizenship (MDMC) of Uzbekistan is under the Ministry of Internal Affairs and is a state body responsible for enacting immigration policy in the country and ensuring the implementation of immigration rules. The Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction (MEPR) is in charge of the effective implementation of labor migration policy through the Agency for Migration under the MEPR. The Institute for Labour Market Research under the MEPR conducts scientific research and surveys on employment, migration processes and labor relations issues. The agency maintains records of citizens who have left for temporary labor activity abroad through the migration platform “Xorijda Ish” (Job Abroad). It licenses private employment agencies for the employment of persons seeking work outside the Republic of Uzbekistan, controls compliance with licensing requirements and conditions, develops and implements international projects in the field of migration, interacts with the competent authorities of foreign states on issues of temporary employment of citizens abroad and ensures their labor rights. It does so through its overseas representative offices in the Russian Federation, the Republic of Korea, Türkiye, Kazakhstan and Japan. Moreover, a Migration Fund has

been established within the agency, from which microloans of up to 10 million UZS can be provided to labor migrants.

Several core legal documents, which regulate external labor migration activities, were adopted since the start of the Presidency of Shavkat Mirziyoyev, including but not limited to:

- Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Private Employment Agencies, dated October 16, 2018;
- Presidential Decree No. PP-3839 “On additional measures to further improve the system of external labor migration”, dated July 5, 2018;
- Presidential Decree No. UP-4829 “On strengthening guarantees for Uzbek citizens working temporarily abroad”, dated August 20, 2019;
- Presidential Decree “On measures to introduce a system of safe, orderly and legal labor migration”, dated September 15, 2020;
- Decree No. UP-59 “On additional measures to improve labor migration and support for persons temporarily working abroad”, dated April 4, 2024.

The legislations are directed at better organizing the process of external labor migration of citizens through controlling activities of employment agencies, introducing vocational and language programs and providing those who return home with employment opportunities.

Bilateral labor agreements are being signed on a regular basis, as reflected in the news. Even more intergovernmental agreements are being discussed and prepared with foreign partners, including Serbia and Poland. Visa processes are also being simplified for workers by countries such as the Republic of Korea. Private foreign partners are also a part of the discussion. According to the Migration Agency’s deputy director Azimjon Khusanov, negotiations were held in 2024 with 240 major employers from 36 countries, leading to cooperation agreements with 122 of them. The number of potential employers and recruitment agencies collaborating with the agency has reached 384. Additionally, Uzbekistan has partnered up with the International Center for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD). An opening of a joint Migrant Resource Centre (MRC) of ICMPD in Tashkent is planned for 2025.

These policies have led to noticeable differences in labor immigration statistics. A sharp drop in the number of Uzbek migrants in Russia was observed from 1.2 million (2023) to 698 thousand (2024), a decline by more than 40%. The United Kingdom allocated more quotas for Uzbek citizens for the Seasonal Worker Scheme (SWS). If only 556 seasonal work visas were issued for Uzbeks in 2021, this number grew to 4,094 in

2023, 7.4 times increase. Regarding organized labor recruitment to work abroad, the numbers provided by the Migration Agency show a sharp increase in 2024. In the same year, the Agency for the first time conducted organized labor recruitment to Croatia, Belgium, Slovakia, Serbia, Montenegro and Qatar, employing a total of 10,000 Uzbekistan nationals in these countries.

In 2024, the number of Uzbek residents in South Korea approached 95,000, while the issuance of seasonal work visas to the UK increased 7.4 times between 2021 and 2023. In recent years, migration to European Union countries has grown substantially, particularly to Poland (which accounted for 21% of EU-issued visas), Lithuania (17%), Germany (16%), and Latvia (7%). The demand for seasonal workers in the United Kingdom remains strong. Uzbek citizens accounted for approximately 13% of all seasonal visas issued. For reference, the UK issued 556 visas to Uzbek citizens in 2021, 4,228 in 2022, and 4,094 in 2023.

Kyrgyzstan

Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Migration of the Kyrgyz Republic is the primary government organ responsible for the regulation of migration flows and policies in the country.

In Kyrgyzstan, a Center for Employment of Citizens Abroad under the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Migration was established in 2021. The center provides legal migration services to the Russian Federation, Belarus, Kazakhstan, the UK, the Republic of Korea, Türkiye, Germany, Poland, Egypt, Slovakia, Latvia, Japan, Bulgaria, the Czech Republic, the United Arab Emirates and more. Kyrgyzstan has signed labor migration agreements with 21 countries (2024) and is actively seeking to expand cooperation with other countries in this area. The center also provides a list and collaborates with private recruitment agencies, which were licensed the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Migration of the Kyrgyz Republic. An online service for entry ban verification to Russia (“Black List”) is also available on the website of the Center of Employment. It also provides compensation for the families of migrants who died abroad by giving financial support for the repatriation of bodies under the “Cargo 200” service.

Notable legislations that regulate migration in Kyrgyzstan include:

- A presidential decree “On the adoption of measures aimed at improving the migration situation” from January 29, 2021;
- Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On External Labor Migration”;
- Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On External Migration”;

- Law of the Kyrgyz Republic “On the Fundamentals of State Policy to Support Compatriots Abroad”;

Additionally, the Concept of Migration Policy 2021–2030 of the Kyrgyz Republic was adopted on May 4, 2021. The concept outlines four main tasks:

1. Improving the conditions of educational, labor, professional and cultural potential and opportunities in the Kyrgyz Republic;
2. Using the migration potential of the population;
3. Creating a system for protecting the rights of citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic located outside the country;
4. Creating a safe migration environment.

In 2024, Kyrgyzstan joined the Global Compact for Migration. ICMPD also operates an MRC in Osh, Kyrgyzstan. On 5 March 2024, the International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD) officially launched the project “Improving Migration Management in Selected Silk Routes and Central Asian Countries”. The project is sponsored by the European Union and is implemented in partnership with the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Migration.

Forum Mekendeshter serves as a platform for dialogue between members of the Kyrgyz diaspora living abroad. The Forum was created by the “Rosa Otunbayeva Initiative” International Public Foundation with the support of the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic, the International Organization of Migration in the Kyrgyz Republic, and funded by a grant from the Swiss Bureau on international cooperation. Under the Forum’s framework, a Council on relations with compatriots living abroad under the President of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan operates.

Shifts in policies are leading to noticeable differences in external labor migration patterns of Kyrgyz citizens. More than 20,000 citizens of Kyrgyzstan officially found jobs abroad in 2024. According to him, with the support of the center, more than 4,000 citizens were employed, including 3,800 in the United Kingdom and over 400 in South Korea. Additionally, private employment agencies helped in the employment of more than 16,000 people. The main destinations are Turkey, Bulgaria, Hungary, and the United Kingdom. If Lithuania welcomed 2 thousand workers from Kyrgyzstan in 2023, in 2024, this number sharply increased to 6 thousand. In Bulgaria, there were more than 2 thousand people from Kyrgyzstan. The quota for working in South Korea was increased to 3 thousand in 2024.

According to official data from the Ministry of Labor, Social Development and Migration of the Kyrgyz

Republic, 650 thousand citizens of Kyrgyzstan are in external migration. These statistics show that the influx of migrants is decreasing every year. For example, last year, 932 thousand people were officially registered as being in labor migration. Among the CIS countries, it is in Russia that a large number of migrants from the Kyrgyz Republic are registered. Today, according to official data, 350 thousand migrants work in the Russian Federation. Kyrgyzstan being a part of the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) eases the process of migration for its workers. The EEU provided legalized forms of labor migration for Kyrgyzstan’s workers, easing the opportunities to find work in Russia and send remittances to family at home. This labor mobility has been a relative success story of the Union.

However, recently there has been a trend when Kyrgyzstanis who are in labor migration in Russia have begun to leave for European countries. Deputy Minister of Labor, Social Development and Migration of the Kyrgyz Republic Bakyt Darmankul uulu told Kabar that this is primarily due to the tightening of Russian migration legislation after the terrorist attack at Crocus City Hall and high wages in other countries. In 2024, more than 10,000 Kyrgyzstanis work in Austria, and in the UAE, in recent years, the number of migrants from Kyrgyzstan has amounted to more than 11,000 people. According to the latest data, there are more than 36,000 Kyrgyzstanis in the United States, about 61,000 in Turkey. Also, about 5,000 Kyrgyzstanis are in migration in Italy.

Tajikistan

Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia and half its gross domestic product (GDP) comes from remittances sent by relatives abroad. Surveys indicate that 30 to 40 per cent of households in Tajikistan have at least one member working abroad. Only a handful of other countries have a greater reliance on remittances than Tajikistan. Migrants have become the country’s prime export and the single largest source of income.

Following the deadly Crocus City Hall attack, Tajik migrants became the most targeted in Russia. In the first half of 2024, more than 3,000 Tajik migrants were deported from Russia.

Tajikistan has the lowest wages among the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) countries, with an average monthly salary almost eleven times lower than that in the Russian Federation, which is why the Russian labor market is attractive to migrant workers from Tajikistan.

The Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment of Population of the Republic of Tajikistan is the central government body designated to oversee migration and create regulatory policies and legislation. The

Migration Service under the Ministry serves as an executive organ of the Ministry for migration. It is responsible for various migration-related issues, such as preventing irregular migration, monitoring immigration levels, issuing work permits to migrants and stateless persons, and monitoring compliance with immigration legislation. Its responsibilities further include coordinating with Tajik diplomatic missions abroad and diaspora communities and organizations. A Commission between ministries for Regulating Migration Processes gives recommendations on migration-related issues from across the government ministries. The Inter-ministerial Commission meets at least twice a year to develop semi-annual workplans and allocate tasks for each ministry. Each ministry also reports its accomplishments on agreed plans and tasks to the Commission during the subsequent meetings.

State Agency for Employment Abroad under the Ministry organizes migration to partner states, negotiates and signs agreements with foreign companies willing to hire Tajik workers. It also provides opportunities and services for placement abroad. Training of professionals is also a point of the migration policy agenda. The state-administered Adult Education Center of Tajikistan offers training in more than 100 professions, with new specializations emerging every year.

Although the country is the most dependent on its external migrants, its laws regulating the process of migration are quite outdated. The concept of the State Migration Policy of the Republic of Tajikistan (1998) set the groundwork for Tajikistan's migration governance. The primary legal document is the Law "On Migration" of the Republic of Tajikistan from 1999 (with later amendments).

The Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan dated June 30, 2023, No. 309 "Strategy for regulating migration processes in the Republic of Tajikistan for the period up to 2040" was adopted and approved in 2023.

The strategy is an important socio-economic step for Tajikistan and was developed to achieve the goals of the National Development Strategy for the period up to 2030 in the direction of migration, taking into account today's migration conditions, positive trends in sustainability, alternative development, prospects and socio-economic policy of the republic. The strategy is implemented in six stages and for the first time within the framework of a single strategy for regulating the process of all types of population migration (labor migration, external migration, internal migration, environmental migration, refugees and asylum seekers). The strategy defines goals and objectives,

analysis of the current situation, problems, indicators, main directions and mechanisms for the implementation of the State Migration Policy of Tajikistan.

Some noticeable progress has been made in migration outflows in recent years. A total of 41 international legal acts were signed regarding the labor and migration context in 2024 with 15 countries, including the Russian Federation, Republic of Belarus, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, Islamic Republic of Iran, Türkiye, India, Qatar, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, China, Japan and the Republic of Korea. Of these, 13 were inter-governmental agreements and 28 were inter-agency agreements. Furthermore, 12 agreements aimed at establishing a legal framework and strengthening bilateral relationships on labor migration were introduced with the Russian Federation, Republic of Tatarstan (federal subject of Russian Federation), Georgia, Poland, Serbia, Belgium, United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, the Republic of Korea, Japan, Qatar, Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. Of these, four agreements were signed in 2024.

Although there is identifiable progress, its level remains low. Official data show that 9,478 Tajik citizens found employment through 29 licensed organizations in the first half of 2025. Of those, 5,648 were assisted by the State Employment Agency. Despite appearing significant, these numbers represent only a fraction of the working-age population seeking jobs abroad. South Korea, for example, allocated 800 worker quotas for Tajikistan in 2025. Yet only 26 of 35 citizens trained under the Employment Permit System (EPS) passed the required exam. A new group is now in training for the next selection phase. Japan also ranks as a priority destination, but the volume remains low. Of 68 registered candidates, four have begun working, and eight have passed interviews, underscoring Japan's high entry standards and limited intake.

Kazakhstan

Kazakhstan, along with Russia, is the biggest host of Central Asian migrant workers. In 2024, Uzbekistan became the second biggest exporter of labor to Kazakhstan. However, as the number of labor migrants opting to go to Russia continues to fall, Kazakhstan is becoming a growing destination for Central Asian workers. As in Russia, the Kazakh economy suffers from a shortage of labor. Because of the oil-driven economic boom during the last decade, Kazakhstan has an increasing demand for both high-skilled labor in industry, business, and education, and low-skilled labor in agriculture, bazaars, and the construction sector. Unlike the Russian government, however, the Kazakh

government has taken a more accommodating stance toward labor migrants, resulting in increased numbers of Kyrgyz, Uzbek, and Tajik workers in the country over the last few years.

Based on the data from the Migration Agency of Uzbekistan, there were 322.7 thousand Uzbek workers in the northern neighbor at the beginning of 2025. This was the second biggest destination for migrants from Uzbekistan after Russia. The same applies to Kyrgyzstan. In 2024, there were roughly 70,000 Kyrgyz labor migrants in Kazakhstan according to the IOM Migration situation report for January-December 2024. For Tajikistan, in terms of labor export, Kazakhstan was also in top 2, with 6,534 migrants working there in the second half of 2024, according to the IOM migration situation report for July-December 2024.

On the other hand, external labor migration from Kazakhstan is modest and declining. Remittances only account for 0.1% of the country's overall GDP.

The primary government organ that oversees migration policy is the Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of the Population of Kazakhstan, while the main piece of legislation is the Law "On Migration" (2011, No. 477-IV, with amendments through 2024), which governs all types of migration. In 2023, the Kazakh government also passed the Migration Policy Concept for 2023-2027.

According to the data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 137 thousand Kazakh citizens are abroad for employment purposes in 2024. The largest share lives in the Russian Federation, the Republic of Korea, Türkiye and the United Arab Emirates; others choose such countries as the United Kingdom or Poland.

In 2024, the number of arrivals in the country amounted to 29,282 people, and the number of departures from the country was 12,732 people. The net migration amounted to 16,550 people. Compared to 2023, the number of arrivals in Kazakhstan increased by 15.3%, while the number of departures from Kazakhstan decreased by 20.9%. The main migration exchange of the country takes place with the CIS countries. The share of arrivals from the CIS countries was 81.6%, the share of departures to these countries was 74.8%. A record low number of people left Kazakhstan for a permanent residence abroad in 2024 since the country's independence.

Turkmenistan

While this analysis focuses more on Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, it is pertinent to briefly examine Turkmenistan's labor migration situation.

The Ministry of Labour and Social Protection of

Population and the State Migration Service of Turkmenistan are the responsible bodies for migration policy. Main legislative documents include the Migration Law of 2012, the Law on Migration Service of 2009 and the Law on the Employment of the Population of 2016.

Authoritative datasets on labor migrants are thin or absent for Turkmenistan. The limited availability of data makes it hard to produce a proper analysis. Since Ashgabat discloses little to no migration data, most studies rely on host-country statistics and reports of international organizations. According to UN DESA migrant-stock estimates, in 2020, 242,554 people from Turkmenistan lived in other countries, which represents 4.1% of Turkmenistan's population.

Whereas in other Central Asian countries, Russia plays a fundamental role as a destination country for labor migration, in Turkmenistan, Turkey is the most popular destination. This is due to the linguistic affinity between these two countries, as their languages belong to the same linguistic group. The next most popular destinations are Iran and the Persian Gulf countries, such as the Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, in light of their geographic location. Labour migration is the result of a prolonged economic crisis that has forced people to leave the country in search of work elsewhere. Many of the Turkmen who migrate for work go to Turkey. However, in 2022, at Ashgabat's request, Turkey canceled its visa-free regime for Turkmen, and the following year, Ankara tightened rules covering Turkmen migrants. Since then, the number of Turkmen migrants in Türkiye has been steadily decreasing, reaching around 112,000 in mid-2024.

The increasingly tough conditions for Turkmen nationals in Turkey have heightened Uzbekistan's and Belarus' attractiveness as labor-migration destinations. Between January and October of 2024, Turkmen made up two-thirds of those traveling to Uzbekistan for commerce and trade, with about 89,000 Turkmen visiting over that period. In 2024, 16,300 Turkmen entered Belarus, in large part thanks to migration reforms the country undertook in 2023 that made it easier for foreign workers to obtain legal status.

Moreover, in recent years, Turkmenistan has ceased to renew expired, expiring, or invalid passports or replace lost ones for its citizens living abroad via diplomatic missions in an attempt to compel Turkmen abroad to return to their home country. The situation has been condemned by the Human Rights Watch through a report titled "“It's Like I Live in a Cage”: Turkmen Authorities' Denial of Passports to Turkmen Citizens in Türkiye”.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSIONS

The current population of Central Asia is 83,739,349 as of August 11, 2025. On top of that, Central Asia is experiencing a significant demographic growth. Population growth for 2024 was 1.3% for Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan – 1.7%, Tajikistan – 1.9%, Turkmenistan – 1.8%, Uzbekistan – 2.0%. With such numbers, the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan, in particular, are finding it hard to accommodate the needs of their excess labor force. The process has to be met with proper levels of job creation. In the meantime, sending workers abroad is a good resolution since it benefits the country's economy, lifts some weight off the domestic job market and brings back more skilled workers.

Workers have sought jobs abroad largely through private recruitment agencies for the longest time. As a result, misinformation has been widespread, as the government has yet to provide credible and consistent information on recruitment processes abroad.

Brain drain is another important aspect of labor migration to consider. The impact of the outflow of students, scientists, and other scholars is increasingly worrying the region's governments. These countries are already suffering losses because of the departure of students, scientists, and other scholars, and fear that without such people, their countries' development will be hobbled. All five countries are committed to addressing this problem. All invest far less in education and research, however, than the average of the world's countries, most by more than an order of magnitude. Money shortages have limited their ability to hold, let alone attract back. Kazakhstan, in particular, experiences a pronounced "brain drain" across various industries.

The region's governments are gradually starting to deepen their involvement in migration processes and are facing similar challenges. Some significant progress has been achieved, but the processes are not without shortcomings. Based on its findings, the paper proposes the following recommendations:

- Offering comprehensive guidance to migrants on critical topics such as contract terms, workplace safety, emergency communication channels to avoid exploitation and poor working conditions. Cases of labor abuse, contract violations, and even homelessness have been reported even in Europe with Tajik migrants in Lithuania. This led to Lithuania closing its visa center in Dushanbe in July 2025.
- Expanding bilateral agreements, especially with the countries of Europe, which have high demands for labor given the low birth rate, especially in sectors like agriculture, construction and more.

- Strengthening diplomatic efforts to improve working conditions and combat discrimination by offering free legal consultations through foreign missions, not only in home countries.
- Expanding foreign language courses and training in in-demand professions. South Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS), through which the country hosts Central Asian migrants, has a language test requirement – EPS-TOPIK. The language barrier is preventing many from leaving to higher-income countries such as the Republic of Korea.
- Establishing mutual recognition of qualifications and simplification of the procedure for validation of diplomas for employment abroad.
- Combatting illegal labor migration. Systemic misconduct within the recruitment industry often creates the conditions for, or directly causes, many of the abuses that migrant workers suffer. Existing licensing schemes for private employment agencies should be improved and strengthened.
- Establishing better programs of reintegration for returning migrants. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan share the challenge of insufficient reintegration support for returnees seeking to translate their overseas experience into meaningful employment opportunities at home.
- Strengthening the process of producing timely and accurate data on migration stocks and flows; increasing their availability and accessibility.

Addressing bottlenecks in domestic labor markets can increase the attractiveness of home economies, reducing the push and pull factors to emigrate. Overall, policies that can help make the domestic labor market more attractive and efficient. Job creation, social protection, unemployment and poverty reduction should be domestic priorities. These will lessen the need for seeking jobs abroad and reduce the reliance on remittances. More broadly, the low quality of life, one of the main factors for seeking work abroad, should also not be neglected and should be addressed more properly through long-term policies and strategies.

CONCLUSION

Central Asian economies need to shift away from the current dependence on labor migrants in the Russian Federation, especially Tajikistan. The instability of the Russian ruble as a consequence of economic sanctions following the invasion of Ukraine has impacted the remittance values and even occasionally strained some regional currencies such as the Kazakh tenge.

The regional governments closely monitor the possible economic risks and the fragile situation regarding the legal status of their labor migrants in Russia. Recent developments demonstrate the firm commitment of

Central Asian countries to diversify the sources of remittances and reduce their dependence on Russia. The region needs to strike a balance between searching for more opportunities abroad and maintaining good diplomatic relations with Moscow through their multi-vector foreign policy. Proper labor diplomacy with partner countries could turn this economic weakness into an advantage.

While Russia still remains the biggest host of labor migrants from Central Asia, just a few years ago it would have been impossible to imagine hundreds of thousands of Central Asians seeking work in Asia, or tens of thousands going to Europe. Central Asia needs to continue working on the competitiveness of its workforce through professional trainings and government programs. The region is on the right track.

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