



Comprehensive Analysis of Changes in Migration Trends in Central Asia

Executive Summary

October 2024

CONTEXT

Labor migration in Central Asia has rapidly evolved due to a mix of global and regional changes. Millions of Central Asians have sought work abroad due to a lack of decent work options at home, with Russia historically being the top destination. Various factors including the COVID-19 pandemic, geopolitical tensions, and economic changes are causing significant shifts in labor migration trends in the region. The pandemic triggered a mass return of migrants to their home countries, forcing governments to reassess migration policies. Additionally, Russia's practice of banning entry for persons after legal infractions, combined with sanctions stemming from the Russia-Ukraine conflict and a dramatic tightening of immigration policies in response to a terrorist attack in March 2024, has further complicated migration flows. Migrants from Central Asia working in Russia now report regular police harassment, reduced employment opportunities and the threat of mobilization into the Russian army. Geopolitical tensions, stricter migration policies and economic shifts are thus pushing many Central Asian migrants to explore alternatives to Russia, including Kazakhstan, Turkey, South Korea, and countries in the European Union and Persian Gulf region.

Labor migration patterns are influenced by demographic pressures, particularly in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, where a large number of young people enter the workforce annually. Economic instability and rising inflation in these countries push people to seek better-paying jobs abroad. Kazakhstan plays a dual role in migration dynamics as both an origin and destination country. In 2022, Kazakhstan hosted a significant number of migrants, primarily from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and neighboring countries. Yet Kazakhstan is experiencing growing outbound migration to South Korea, Poland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. On the whole, however, Kazakhstan remains a net sender of remittances, and future trends suggest it will continue to attract growing numbers of migrants from neighboring countries. Interestingly, Kyrgyzstan, historically an origin country, is gradually becoming a destination country for workers from India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as local firms aim to further suppress already low wages. The

Kyrgyz government is thus in the unfamiliar position of needing to take measures to ensure that the labor rights of inbound migrants in the country are well protected.

An emerging trend is the “feminization of migration,” as families seek alternative income sources amid declining male migration to Russia. High population growth in Uzbekistan—over 1 million young people entering the labor market annually—has driven more women to migrate. Women now make up nearly half of Kyrgyz labor migrants, especially in Russia. Women, many with secondary or higher education, often find themselves in low-wage jobs with precarious working conditions. Low wages, cited by 72% of respondents in Kyrgyzstan and 45% in Uzbekistan as their main reason for seeking work abroad, remain the primary driver of migration, as many jobs at home are unstable and insufficient to meet workers’ needs.

RESEARCH FINDINGS

To explore the impact of these changes on migrant workers, the Solidarity Center conducted a comprehensive analysis of changing migration trends in Central Asia (Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan), which have been published in three national-level studies, each developed through the lens of regional comparative analysis, with recommendations for improving migration policies. The research includes quantitative survey data from 1,031 respondents across the three countries collected in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Uzbekistan, Turkey, Germany, the United Kingdom, Italy, Korea, the UAE, Qatar, Bulgaria, France and the Czech Republic. The research also includes analysis of data from open sources such as legislative reviews.

Findings include:

- A concerning trend is the low awareness of labor rights among migrants. In Kazakhstan, a staggering 76% of Kyrgyz and Uzbek migrants lack formal labor contracts, making them vulnerable to exploitation. Issues such as unpaid leave, irregular hours, and poor working conditions are common. Conversely, Kazakh migrants are better protected, with 79% having signed contracts. This low awareness leads to violations across workers from all three countries. The majority of respondents, for instance, around 60% of those surveyed, do not receive paid holiday or sick leave. Nearly half of respondents do not receive overtime pay, and salaries were paid irregularly for 40%. A significant proportion of respondents experienced more serious forms of exploitation – 17% had had their identity documents confiscated and 20% experienced physical or sexual violence at work.

- The methods migrants use to secure jobs are crucial to their experiences abroad. Reliance on informal channels—such as personal networks, social media, and advertisements—remains high, contributing to unstable work environments. Despite the potential benefits, private and state employment agencies play a minimal role, with only 3-4% of Kyrgyzstani migrants using their services due to low awareness and trust. However, those working in distant countries show higher engagement with these agencies, suggesting their untapped potential in facilitating safer migration. For migrant workers from Uzbekistan, only 12% find employment through government agencies, while 27% of migrants use private employment agencies to find work abroad, also indicating a high proportion of migration through informal channels.
- The way migrants go to destination countries, including the methods of finding employment, in most of the cases predetermine their work experience at migration. Usage of informal channels for finding employment abroad increases the risks of migrants to face unscrupulous employers and encounter labor rights violations.
- Looking at Kazakhstan as a destination country for migrants from neighboring countries, it is obvious that migrants from Uzbekistan are predominantly men (64%), while Kyrgyz migrants show gender balance. Both groups are largely married and have completed secondary education. Despite their efforts seeking better lives through migration, around half of these migrant households struggle with financial difficulties, teetering on the edge of poverty. Uzbek and Kyrgyz migrants in Kazakhstan earn an average salary of \$287, notably less than the average wages in their home countries. In contrast, migrants from Kazakhstan, who are evenly split between men and women, enjoy higher salaries averaging \$760. Their educational levels are generally higher, with a significant portion holding advanced degrees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The research emphasizes the need for all three countries to develop comprehensive, nationwide employment assistance programs that leverage digital platforms to safeguard their citizens working at home or abroad. Pre-migration programs must be strengthened to better inform potential migrants of the risks they face, including job insecurity and the importance of securing employment contracts. Governments should establish dedicated bodies to oversee migration policies within a worker rights framework, strengthen partnerships with foreign diasporas and worker support organizations and develop comprehensive regulatory frameworks.

- Additionally, efforts to build trust in employment agencies, both public and private, should involve launching awareness campaigns and implementing systems to detect and prevent fraud. Professional development for these agencies will be critical as migration destinations continue to diversify. By certifying agencies and ensuring transparency in recruitment practices, governments can provide migrants with more reliable job opportunities and protect them from fraud. Collaboration between government bodies, PEAs, and non-governmental organizations will ensure that migrants receive accurate and up-to-date job market information. Such collaboration should ensure that workers are not charged fees for recruitment.
- Coordinated efforts between governments, civil society, and experts are critical to ensure safe and informed migration. Increasing awareness of labor rights and safe migration practices is equally important. Since over half of migrants are unaware of basic labor rights or migration laws, widespread information campaigns via social media and other accessible platforms should be launched. Coordinating messaging across networks migrant workers can trust will expand the reach of this information.
- Finally, strengthening labor law enforcement is essential to protect migrant workers. This means building legal protections into bilateral agreements, investing in labor inspectorates and other enforcement agencies. better regulation of employment agencies and fostering international collaboration that will ensure safer and more regulated migration processes. Particular attention should be paid to ensuring the freedom of association, right to organize and collectively bargain for migrant workers; access to a safe and healthy work environment; freedom from GBVH and forced labor; portable social security; and, fair and easily accessible access to justice mechanisms in destination countries.