

Migrant workers make up a significant part of the Central Asian population, who are abroad. Previously, the main flow of migrants worked in Russia. However, over the past five years, the geography of labor migration has changed.

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### **Labor migration to Russia**

Currently, the main donor countries of labor migrants to Russia from Central Asia are Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. If in 2017 according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation<sup>[1]</sup> from Uzbekistan 1,822,933 people migrated to Russia, by 2018 their number increased to 2,007,407 people. In Tajikistan, for the same period of time, there were 936,752 migrants, by 2018 their number increased to 1,018,497 people. In 2017, 376,863 people worked in Russia from Kyrgyzstan, and within a year their number grew up to 351,959. Due to the fact that not all labor migration is done in a legal way, it is difficult to identify the exact number of labor migrants - most migrants do not register in the host country and do not register their status with the relevant authorities of the migration process, however they still continue working.

In general, the migration corridor between Russia and Central Asia is one of the most stable in the world since the collapse of the USSR. From 1990 to 1992, there was a huge flow of forced migration to Russia due to the unstable political and economic situation. This served as the foundation of the Federal Migration Service of Russia in 1992<sup>[2]</sup> and laid the foundation for the development of migration legislation that would in any way determine the status and rights of migrants.

Moreover, in the 1990s, Russia experienced a population decline, including the working age, and this in turn caused a shortage of labor. While unemployment was increasing in Central Asia, these factors led to increased labor migration.

The priority country for migrant workers from Central Asian countries has traditionally been

considered Russia. Most of the migrants from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan were making their way to the Russian Federation. Since the mid-2000s, the main flow of migrants was moving to Russia for permanent residence. In 2006, a state program was developed to facilitate the voluntary resettlement of compatriots, who were living abroad to the Russian Federation.

### **Stages of labor migration in Central Asian countries**

In 2000, Kazakhstan became attractive to labor migrants from the Central Asian region. Economic growth, a high standard of living, a visa-free regime, and geographical proximity, encouraged workers to seek for work in the neighboring Kazakhstan.

From the mid-2000s to 2014, labor migration entrenched as a source of income for sending countries. In 2014-2016, against the backdrop of the economic crisis, Russia, as the main host country, tightened measures to control migrants, began to expel migrants from Central Asian countries, and introduced travel bans for a certain period of time.

### **Labor migration in Kazakhstan**

Since 2014, Kazakhstan has become a transit country through which migrants from Russia returned, as a result of tightening control from the Russian side.

According to the United Nations,<sup>[3]</sup> more than three and a half million migrants of all categories live in Kazakhstan. These figures include both the repatriation of “oralmans” (*ethnic Kazakh repatriates - ed.*), migration for personal reasons or as part of a university exchange, as well as labor migration flows (both regulated and unregulated). According to these data, migrants represent 20% of the population of Kazakhstan, which was equal to 17.5 million people in 2015. In the post-Soviet space, Kazakhstan ranks third in the number of received migrants, after Russia and Ukraine.

Migrant workers from Central Asian countries move to Kazakhstan legally due to the presence of a visa-free regime, however, work illegally - without official registration and work permits, except for migrants from Kyrgyzstan who are members of the EAEU.

Consequently, over the past 19 years, the largest number of migrants arrived in Kazakhstan from Uzbekistan. Then follows Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan.

According to a survey conducted by international migration expert Elena Sadovskaya in the mid-2000s - at the time of the highest volume of labor migration, 31% of labor migrants in

Kazakhstan found work through friends and acquaintances, 22% - through relatives, and 20 percent - on their own. And only 5-7% of migrants found work through employment agencies. These data are consistent with the results of studies in other countries of Central Asia. This suggests that systems of illegal recruitment through intermediaries operating in spontaneous black labor markets prevail.

In 2011, Sadovskaya also conducted a sociological survey that revealed massive violations of labor and social rights of migrants.

“47.5% of them were faced with the fact that employers refused to sign an official contract with them that would provide them with an official legal status, 53% received wages with a delay, and 17.8% did not receive salary at all. 12.5% were forced to do unpaid work, passports were taken away from 30.7%, 41.6% were not allowed to leave the workplace, and 17.8% were denied access to medical services, ”says Elena Sadovskaya in her article “Labor Migration in Central Asia” in the OSCE Journal.[\[4\]](#)

Massive violations of labor and social rights of migrants in Kazakhstan are still noted by other researchers and international organizations.

### **Labor emigration from Kazakhstan**

Since 2016, labor emigration from Kazakhstan begins to grow. Most of the country’s inhabitants are making their way to Russia. However, experts note that the number of those traveling to the countries of the West and America is growing, but so far there are no backed up numerical data.

As Elena Sadovskaya notes, the growth of labor emigration from Kazakhstan is a confirmation of the fact that the causes of migration are a complex set of pushing factors in the country of origin and attracting factors in the country of achievement. In Kazakhstan, these are crisis phenomena in the economy, the closure of enterprises and businesses, a decline in living standards, corruption, nepotism, political stagnation, and the impossibility of self-realization. It is the new economic, social, cultural, professional opportunities and prospects that attract our citizens in Western countries.

The main reasons for moving to developed countries of the West are indicated as - a higher standard of living, as well as the possibility of self-realization.

According to political analyst Marat Shibutov, in South Korea there were 3,238 illegal immigrants from Kazakhstan in 2016, and in 2018 the number was already 11,561 people. In 2012, 34,374 Kazakhstanis came to work in Russia, and in 2019, for the first six months, 60,246 people, which at the end of the year can increase to 120-130 thousand people. He explains the observed labor migration to the USA and South Korea by the fact that the visa regime has improved. Let us assume that, in the USA they began to give a visa for 10 years, and South Korea provides a visa-free stay for 30 days. Also, according to the expert, additional factors are the drop in real incomes of the population, the drop in employment at large and medium enterprises, weak social elevators and the uneven distribution of jobs across the country.

“Therefore, despite of earning \$ 200 at best in their city, people travel illegally and earn \$ 1,500-2,000 at construction sites and so on,” mentions Shibutov.

Noting that despite significant costs, migrants manage to save money, which is not possible in Kazakhstan. These savings are used to buy an apartment and other big expenses. In general, there are two strategies, if migrants go to South Korea to earn money, then in the USA, in addition to earnings, Kazakhstanis expect to be able to stay with legalization.

In general, as experts say, young people, boys and girls who have education and speak foreign languages are leaving Kazakhstan. Middle-aged people travel with families if they find a good job. Most immigrants are specialists with higher education who have work experience.

### **Labor migration from Kyrgyzstan**

Migration has become one of the most characteristic and important processes for Kyrgyzstan during the period of independence. According to the integrated sample survey of household budgets and labor,[\[5\]](#) conducted by the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic in 2018, the number of labor migrants aged 15 years and older amounted to 263 thousand people, including men - 77% and women - 23 % Most of the labor migrants - 79% are rural residents of the republic.

Due to the entry of Kyrgyzstan into the EAEU, citizens of the republic got the opportunity to move and work freely in the territory of the Russian Federation, therefore, the largest number of labor migrants work in Russia and Kazakhstan. Most of the labor migrants from

Kyrgyzstan are low skilled and are employed in the areas of hard labor.

As the above-mentioned study showed, 96% of Kyrgyz people work in Russia, 2% in Kazakhstan, 1% in Turkey, and more recently, Kyrgyz people began to travel for work to South Korea.

According to expert Aigul Sadvokasova, people of different ages, women and men who have different backgrounds come from Kyrgyzstan. It should be mentioned that migrants from Kyrgyzstan most successfully adapt in the host countries, and have social ties in the face of ethnocultural associations.

### **Labor Migration from Tajikistan**

Labor migration in Tajikistan dates back to 1992. At that time, there was a tense political situation in the country - a civil war that followed the declaration of independence of the country as a result of the disintegration of the USSR. Also, with the collapse of the USSR, many large industrial enterprises experienced a crisis due to the lack of raw materials that had previously come from other countries of the Soviet Union. This all led to high unemployment and affected the mood of the population, which contributed to an increase in labor migration. The peak of labor migration in Tajikistan was observed from 2005 to 2013. The main flow of external labor migration from the republic was directed to the CIS countries.

To date, according to the Deputy Minister of Labor, Migration and Employment of the Population of Tajikistan Emin Sanguinzoda,[\[6\]](#) in 2018 the flow of labor migrants from Tajikistan to Russia decreased by 1% compared to the previous year. In just over the past five years, the flow of migrants leaving Tajikistan to earn money abroad has decreased by 39.5%.

“During 2018, 484,176 labor migrants left the republic on the basis of migration cards. Of these, 86.7% are men and 13.3% are women. 463 552 people moved to the Russian Federation to earn money, and 13 586 people moved to Kazakhstan,” the deputy minister of labor mentioned.

By 2019, the number of labor migrants from Tajikistan increased by 27% compared to last year. Thus, in the first 7 months of 2019, according to Sputnik Tajikistan[\[7\]](#) with reference to the data of the Migration Service of the Ministry of Labor of the Republic, more than 357

thousand citizens of Tajikistan left for labor migration. In July 2019 alone, about 57 thousand people left Tajikistan in search of work, which is 26.7 thousand more compared to the same period in 2018.

In 2018, more than two thousand labor migrants from Tajikistan traveled for work to Turkey and Poland through the Overseas Employment Agency.<sup>[8]</sup> In early 2019, more than 1 thousand citizens applied for sending them to work in Poland, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Belarus and Kazakhstan.

The able-bodied population aged 17-62 years - men and 17-57 years old - women, mainly take part in external labor migration. By age structure, these are mainly young people aged 17-29 years - 262.8 thousand people or 39.2%. External labor migration covers a huge number of unemployed. According to various estimates, it reaches from 30 to 40% of the economically active part of the population.

According to expert Elena Sadovskaya, Tajikistan is a great example of the role that labor migration plays in the life of the country and the entire region. First of all, these are remittances from migrants. 10-15 years ago, their volumes were equal to half of the country's GDP. Nowadays, the share of migrant transfers from Russia alone is over 30% of Tajikistan's GDP, and in absolute terms it is about \$ 2.5 billion. According to official figures, in recent years (2013-2018) labor migrants transferred only through official channels, that is, through banks, over \$ 15 billion, which is many times higher than the volume of direct investments attracted during the same period to Tajikistan.<sup>[9]</sup>

Remittances are the basis of the survival of many families in Tajikistan. Money is spent on food, medicine, children's education, on building and repairing a house, buying furniture, as well as on the wedding of a son, daughter, or his own. Often, help is given not only to the family, but also to relatives and neighbors. Some migrants manage to start their own business, since they are returning to the country with new skills and knowledge. At the level of the national economy, there are also advantages: domestic consumption is reviving, the currency entering the country is used to ensure the import of goods and other financial transactions.

### **Labor migration from Uzbekistan**

Uzbekistan is considered as a donor country of labor migrants. The bulk of the population works in Russia and Kazakhstan. But over the past 5 years, the geography of labor migration has begun to change - there has been a steady growth trend in labor flow to the USA, Turkey, Kazakhstan, the UAE, Israel, South Korea, and the UAE.

According to the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics, the number of migrants in Kazakhstan increased 10 times over the last 5 years and amounted to 355 540 people. In Turkey, for 2018, the number of workers amounted to 34 399, and in the UAE - 4578 people. Labor migration to Russia over the year decreased from 944,328 to 852,008. According to experts, this may be due to the devaluation of the Russian ruble in 2014, and therefore earnings in dollar terms for labor migrants have been cut in half.

Most often, young and middle-aged men with secondary education travel for to work from Uzbekistan. Their primary goal is to earn and send money home.

“Young men travel to earn money to help their parents, and also earn money for marriage. They get married, as a rule, at home and then go back to work again. In the border areas with Kazakhstan, they can come with their wife, and children stay with their parents in Uzbekistan,” mentions Sadvokasova.

Correspondingly, according to the expert, young and middle-aged women also come to work in the border areas for daily work. They do not need to look for housing, or stay for a long time. With the opening of borders between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, this has become a daily practice, especially in the summer.

## Conclusion

Labor migration is seen as a political problem in Central Asia, especially in recipient countries - in Russia and Kazakhstan.[\[10\]](#) It is believed that migrants can put pressure on the socio-economic environment, and then on the political one as well. However, at the same time, the burden that the state could not bear due to economic insolvency, migrants solve for their families on their own. Remittances play an important role in improving living standards, and mass migration reduces tensions in the national labor market and increases the welfare of large groups of people.

- - *Data on labor migration from Turkmenistan are not available.*

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