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Migration Destinations Beyond Russia: Central Asia's Road to Economic Security and Diplomatic Autonomy.

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the dynamics of labour migration from Central Asia, particularly Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union. It examines the reasons behind Russia's dominance as the primary destination for Central Asian labour migrants and explores the factors prompting migrants to consider alternative destinations. Using a qualitative research approach and thematic analysis, the study aims to uncover the motivations driving the migrants to look beyond Russia and seek alternative destinations. Through meticulous collection and analysis of secondary data, while adhering to ethical standards, this research underscores the importance of finding alternatives to Russia for the economy and foreign policy of Central Asian countries.

Keywords: labour migration, Central Asia, Russia, alternative destinations, remittance, diplomatic autonomy.

Introduction:

The International Organisation for Migration (IOM) has defined labour migration as the movement of people from their country of origin to another country for the purpose of employment.[1] Labour migration has been a prominent feature of Central Asia's landscape since Soviet rule. This region witnessed significant inward labour migration during the Soviet era due to forced collectivization[2] and industrialization efforts. However, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Central Asia faced economic challenges, political unrest, and ecological crises, prompting significant emigration from the region. Russia, due to its proximity, visa-free entry, higher wages, and established migrant networks, has emerged as the primary destination for many Central Asian labour migrants. However, their arrival in large numbers and their undocumented status have triggered societal insecurities among native Russians.

The Natives were fearful of the decline of their population due to the low fertility rate and increasing concentration of Central Asian migrants, who were different racially and religion-wise. Moreover, Russian media and official reports started linking irregular and illegal migration, particularly from Central Asia, to the spread of crime, disease, terrorism, and an increased burden on social services (Eraliev, 2018). As a result, Central Asian migrants often encounter racial abuse and violence from both locals and security personnel. Moreover, strict migration regulations, including re-entry bans, have been implemented to address these societal insecurities. The ongoing conflict between Russia and Ukraine further exacerbates the challenges faced by migrants. As a result, many are now exploring alternative destinations like Kazakhstan within Central Asia or countries such as Turkey, South Korea, and the UK (post-Brexit).

This article explores the dynamics of labour migration from Central Asia to Russia after the disintegration of the Soviet Union. It examines the factors contributing to establishing Russia as the most preferred destination for migrants. However, the primary focus of this study is to understand why Central Asian labour migrants, particularly those from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, are keen to look beyond Russia and seek alternative destinations. By examining these dynamics, the article aims to underscore the importance of diversified migration destinations for bolstering the economic and foreign policy interests of the migrant-sending countries in Central Asia.

Historical trajectory of labour migration in Central Asia:

Before Soviet rule, Central Asia's economy was mainly based on traditional farming and herding practices. Industrialization efforts began particularly during the Stalin era (1928–53) and gained momentum during World War II when numerous industrial enterprises were relocated from Eastern Europe to Central Asia. This period also witnessed the implementation of significant irrigation projects, including the Great Fergana Canal. Furthermore, the vast

[1] https://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/our_work/ICP/IDM/Labour-Migration-Infosheet-2008.pdf

[2] The Soviet Union implemented the collectivization policy between 1929 and 1933 in an effort to weaken the economic influence of wealthy peasants (Kulaks) by pressuring farmers to give up their farms and join sizable collective farms (Kolkhozy).

grasslands of Northern Kazakhstan were transformed into extensive wheat fields through the "Virgin Land" campaign[3] Simultaneously, nuclear testing facilities like Semipalatinsk and the Baikonur Cosmodrome were also established in Kazakhstan. Consequently, a considerable number of labourers were brought in from various other parts of the Soviet Union to work in Central Asia. Various groups, such as Chechens, Ingushes, Crimean Tatars, Kurds, Germans, and Greek political migrants, were thus forcefully resettled into different regions of Central Asia (Polyan, 2001). For instance, around 60,000 Meskhetian Turks were relocated from Georgia to the Ferghana Valley in Central Asia in 1944 (Rubin & Lubin, 2000).

These migrants started the first wave of emigration from Central Asia after the collapse of the Soviet Union. The desire of Central Asians to create new nation-states along ethnic lines made these migrant populations insecure. Additionally, industries, particularly military installations, lost their purpose, and other sectors faced challenges due to changes in market dynamics and disrupted supply chains. For instance, between 1990 and 1999, Germany received 1.63 million ethnic Germans from the former Soviet Union in the framework of the German repatriation programme (Spätaussiedler)[4]. More than 1,20,000 Jews emigrated to Germany from the ex-Soviet countries (Dietz, B. 2000). 2183 ethnic Germans emigrated from Kyrgyzstan as well (Rahmonova-Schwarz, D. 2010). Between 1989 and 2002, the Russian population in Tajikistan fell by 59.8%, 30% in Uzbekistan, and 20% in Kazakhstan (Patnaik, 2005).

Following the dissolution of the Soviet Union, many manufacturing enterprises in Central Asia lost their previous customers and struggled to compete and succeed in the new market. As a result just after the dissolution of the Soviet Union Central Asia witnessed a partial deindustrialization process in the region (Batsaikhan & Dabrowski, 2017). Along with economic hardship, the region also witnessed political instability arising from border conflicts, ethnic tensions, and civil unrest. These conditions compelled Central Asians to leave their homes and search for work elsewhere. Tajiks were the first ones to leave their homes due to the civil war (1992–1997), followed by Kyrgyz as rural areas of Kyrgyzstan became poorer during the transition to a market economy (Laruelle, 2007). The ecological conditions around the evaporating Aral Sea, particularly in the Karakalpak Autonomous Province and Xorazm Region in Uzbekistan, significantly forced thousands of people to move to different areas. Thus, along with the forcefully settled populations, the native Central Asian population also tried to escape the economic hardship and political turmoil of the region. Around 1 million people from Uzbekistan (4% of its population) and nearly 3,60,000 people from Kyrgyzstan (7.5% of its population) emigrated from Central Asia just after disintegration (R. Abazov, 1999; Laruelle, 2007).

Russia being the primary destination

Russia, due to its geographical proximity, shared Soviet history, labour shortages, and lenient border policies, including visa-free entry, attracted Central Asian migrants. Additionally, the availability of jobs, higher wages, and, most importantly, established networks made the Russian market appealing (Bahovadinova, 2016). This scenario aligns with Ravenstein's push-pull theory of migration, where adverse conditions push people to leave while favourable conditions in other places pull them (Ravenstein, 1885). Russia experienced increasing economic growth and expansion in the early 2000s, leading to a high demand for labour, particularly in the construction, services, and transportation sectors (Eraliev, 2018). Meanwhile, Russia was grappling with a demographic crisis characterised by low fertility rates and high morbidity rates. The Central Asian states, for their part, experienced population growth and significant unemployment due to partial deindustrialization caused by the loss of Soviet cover and the political instability that accompanied it. This situation caused the migration corridor between Central Asia and Russia to emerge and develop (Abdurakhimov, 2016).

Between 1991 and 2002, Russia accepted over 11 million migrants in absolute numbers—that is, on average, 781 thousand annually—making Russia the second most popular migrant destination after the USA (Rybakovsky & Ryazantsev, 2005). In 2004, people moving from Kazakhstan made up 35 percent of all migrants coming to Russia from the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS), whereas migrants from the remaining Central Asian countries accounted for 28 percent of this migrant population (Laruelle, 2007). By the year 2015, Central Asians accounted for 66% of the total labour migrants working in Russia (Eraliev & Urinboyev, 2020). In 2019, there were more than two million Uzbeks, over one million Tajiks, and about 7,00,000 Kyrgyz nationals in Russia (Eraliev & Urinboyev, 2020a). Considering the prevalence of illegal migration in the migration pattern, this share may grow

Societal insecurities

With the influx of migrants come feelings of insecurity among the native population, as it has the potential to bring about shifts in societal identity and alter the composition of the host society. Since the early 1990s, Russia has experienced a significant decline in its population. The annual mortality rate, on the other hand, consistently hovered around 7-8% (Marat, 2009). The Muslim population in Russia was also growing at a faster rate. Therefore, it was obvious that the locals were insecure about the influx of Central Asian migrants. According to McSweeney, Bill. (1999), when communities feel that their identity is threatened, it results in societal insecurities. When society perceives a threat, it automatically generates a response mechanism. Firstly, it

[3] The 'Virgin Lands campaign' was initiated in 1953 by Nikita Khrushchev (7th Premier of the Soviet Union) to boost agricultural production by opening up virgin steppe land for wheat farming.

[4] Under the German repatriation programme, a significant population of descendants of Germans from the former Soviet Union and other countries in Eastern Europe have been settled in Germany through a special acceptance process.

attempts on its own to react through communal activities as a demonstration or, in extreme cases, through the ideology of fascism. Racial violence inflicted upon the Central Asian migrants by natives comes under the first reaction. The SOVA Center[5], an analytical centre that conducts sociological research on the development of nationalism and racism in modern Russia, reported 520 such racist attacks in 2006, of which 54 were deadly. In 2008, there were at least 348 racially motivated attacks, and 82 victims died as a result (Buchanan, 2009).

Secondly, it tries to bring the issue to the state or political domain (Rakhimshoeva, 2016). Within the political realm, some try to consolidate their power by addressing societal insecurities. For instance, in the 2013 mayoral elections in Moscow, both the incumbent mayor, Sergey Sobyanin, and the main opposition, Navalny, projected illegal Central Asian labour migrants as the major root behind the crime and HIV spread in Moscow. Along with this, there was media discourse that claimed Central Asian migrants were responsible for 50% of all crimes in Moscow, which became a de facto "truth" around election time. However, the official figure is around 4 percent (Round & Kuznetsova, 2016). This serves as a convincing example of securitization and supports the Copenhagen School of Thought's idea that security is a speech act.

Strict migration policies:

A substantial body of literature examining the correlation between public opinion and discrimination against labour migrants indicates that the attitudes of host societies towards immigrants play a pivotal role in shaping state policies that impact them (Ysmanova, 2023). When migrants are constructed as a security threat and are associated with increasing crime and the spread of diseases, restrictive migration policies become the natural response from the state. The Concept of Migration Processes and the Federal Law on Russian Federation Citizenship were enacted in 2002, to regulate migrant inflows. However, the complex and arbitrary bureaucratic procedures introduced by these laws exacerbated the informal and irregular status of labour migrants (Bashirov, 2018). To address the issue of irregular migration, the Russian Federation implemented a new State Migration Policy Concept for 2012–2025 and brought changes to the administrative offence code in July 2013. The most prominent amendment was the introduction of a re-entry ban (referred to as "zapret na v'ezd") (Bahovadinova, 2016). It decided to ban the entry of those who have overstayed or have stayed illegally without registration.

A re-entry ban can be imposed on migrants for two primary reasons: First, re-entry bans can be imposed when a foreign national violates administrative regulations within the Russian Federation on two or more occasions, such as traffic rules, etc. Second, re-entry bans may be applied when a migrant remains in the country for more than thirty days beyond the expiration of their authorised stay within the territory of the Russian Federation (Kluczewska, 2014). Those who overstayed in Russia illegally for more than 270 days, or 9 months, are barred from returning for ten years, while those who overstayed for 170 to 270 days are barred from returning for five years (Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022). Based on data provided by the Federal Migration Service of the Russian Federation, it is evident that a cumulative count of 16,07,000 re-entry bans were issued over the timeframe spanning from 2013 to 2015 (IOM, 2016). Consequently, a significant number of 5,13,300 foreign individuals were deported from Russia during this particular period. The majority were Uzbek citizens, then Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Moldovan nationals (Kluczewska, 2014). By the middle of 2016, the total number of migrants under the re-entry ban list had surpassed two million (Zotova & Cohen, 2020).

Another policy reform, which was implemented on January 1, 2015, mandates that all non-Russian individuals seeking employment (except highly skilled professionals) must pass a test on the Russian language, history, and laws of the Russian Federation. Migrants also need to undergo medical tests for HIV, TB, and skin diseases and have to buy health insurance to be eligible for legal employment. Additionally, migrants are required to undergo medical tests for HIV, TB, and skin diseases and must purchase health insurance to qualify for legal employment. All these tests have to be passed within 30 days of arrival; therefore, instead of addressing the issue of illegal migration, these new regulations have promoted it (Bashirov, 2018). Moreover, heightened raids and checks on migrants compelled the migrants to avoid public transportation and crowded places to avoid security personnel. Since they are working illegally, they can't resort to the police if their employer cheats them or some far-right winger abuses them verbally or physically. Based on the online survey conducted among migrants from Uzbekistan (GMER 2017), findings revealed that 18 percent reported not receiving payment for their work, while 20 percent received less compensation than initially agreed upon. Additionally, 24 percent encountered ethnic discrimination during job searches, with 15 percent experiencing offences based on their ethnic background and 1.5 percent reporting instances of physical violence in the workplace, including beatings or coerced sexual activities (Rocheva & Varshaver, 2018). In the housing market, migrants from Central Asia often encounter difficulties as landlords, influenced by ethnic biases, frequently decline to rent apartments to them.

In 2016, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in partnership with Rosfinmonitoring (the Federal Finance Monitoring Service), conducted a major operation called “Nelegal-2016” (Illegal-2016). It was launched to disrupt illegal migratory channels to reduce the influx of illegal migrants into Russia. The operation deported nearly 55,000 foreign workers (Bashirov, 2018). Recently In October 2022, two individuals from Tajikistan carried out a shooting at a military training centre located near the Ukrainian border in Belgorod, resulting in the tragic deaths of 11 people. Incidents like the Belgorod shooting feed the insecurity of the locals, and the media and politicians use the same to convincingly depict migrants as potential security threats (Schen, 2023). As a result, anti-immigrant sentiment gets strengthened among the locals and security personnel.

Russia-Ukraine war:

The ongoing confrontation between Russia and Ukraine has added to the pre-existing vulnerabilities. Putin issued a decree to grant citizenship to all six-month frontline soldiers in September 2022 (Mirovalev, 2023). In September 2022, the Russian State Duma also approved a law that offered citizenship

[5] The SOVA Centre for Information and Analysis is a non-governmental organisation and think tank located in Moscow, Russia. Its primary focus is on conducting sociological research, with a particular emphasis on studying nationalism and racism in post-Soviet Russia.

after one year of service. The Ministry of Defence also established a recruitment centre at Sakharovo migrant centre in Moscow. Migrants reported being coerced or deceived into signing military contracts when completing migration and work-related paperwork (Bekmurzaev, 2023). Security forces are now regularly raiding and inspecting them. Identified abnormalities during these raids often lead security personnel to pressure migrants to join the Russian military or work in newly occupied Ukrainian territory.

Prisoners have also been forced to fight. For instance, fourteen Tajik migrants in Russian jails perished in Ukraine during the battle. According to reports, Central Asians imprisoned in Russian jails are dying in Ukraine[6]. As a result, Central Asian migrants are reconsidering their plans to move to or remain in Russia. Instead, a rising number of people are actively seeking alternate destinations that not only provide job possibilities and higher earnings but also promise fewer cases of abuse and prejudice from locals and security personnel. During a baseline study from 2020 to 2022, IOM Tajikistan identified 123,194 Tajiks who were returning migrant workers. The vast majority of these workers returned from the Russian Federation (97%), Kazakhstan (2%), and Ukraine (0.4%). According to 22% of respondents to the baseline survey, the key causes contributing to migrant workers' repatriation were the ongoing conflict in Ukraine with Russia and concerns about overall security (IOM, Tajikistan, 2023).

As a result of such restrictive migration policies, anti-immigrant sentiment, and apprehension about military conscription in Russia, many migrants are searching for alternatives to Russia.

Emerging alternative destinations

Kazakhstan:

During the early 2000s, Kazakhstan became the first Central Asian economy to recover from the partial deindustrialization following the Soviet Union's collapse. This period saw significant economic growth, creating a demand for labour in industrial and agricultural sectors. Factors like geographical proximity, visa-free movement, and higher wages drew workers from neighbouring Central Asian countries. Additionally, high poverty and unemployment rates in neighbouring nations, along with porous borders, further contributed to migrant inflows into Kazakhstan. Cultural similarities, as well as shared social norms and customs, make it easier for migrant workers from neighbouring countries to adapt to life in Kazakhstan (Nazibullah, 2021). Factors such as the Islamic religion, the Kazakh language being part of the same Turkic language group, and common racial features and cultural icons contribute to Kazakhstan's closeness to other Central Asian republics. This cultural affinity often provides immigrants with a greater sense of security and freedom to maintain their cultural identity compared to Russia. Additionally, the absence of racial abuse in Kazakhstan further strengthens its cultural appeal to migrants.

Kazakhstan's geographical position makes it a favoured destination for migrants, especially as a transit route to Russia. Many migrants facing re-entry bans choose to stay in Kazakhstan instead of returning home due to limited job opportunities and societal pressures. Additionally, Kazakhstan's construction and agriculture sectors are experiencing growth, creating a demand for workers and further incentivizing migrants to remain in the country. Consequently, the number of migrants from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan officially registered in Kazakhstan has been steadily rising. For instance, in 2015, just two years after Russia imposed re-entry bans, the number of residents from these countries registered in Kazakhstan surged to around 950,000, marking a significant increase from approximately 500,000 in 2011 (IOM Kazakhstan, 2016). A similar trend emerged after the onset of the Russia-Ukraine war in February 2022. In 2022, the arrival of migrants from Central Asian countries increased by 26.3%, with arrivals from Kyrgyzstan rising by 93.9%, Uzbeks by 38.9%, and Tajiks by 41.2% (IOM, 2023). Thus, the push factor from the Russian Federation and the pull factor existing in the economy have turned Kazakhstan into an emerging alternative destination for Central Asian migrants.

Turkey:

Turkey is another growing destination for Central Asian labour migrants. The pull factors acting in favour of Turkey are cultural proximity, visa-free entry and stay of up to 90 days, and a tolerant migration policy regime. The gravity approach to migration, which is used to explain the migration of Central Asia to Russia, can be applied in the context of Turkey as well. Variables such as the area and population of the destination country, the distance between countries, and historical and cultural ties with the Soviet Union had a significant impact on shaping the migration pattern to Russia. When it comes to hosting Central Asian migrants, Turkey also benefits from similar factors (Cetin 2019). Thousands of Central Asians, including a significant number of women, are employed in Turkey, making it the third-most preferred destination in the region, following Russia and Kazakhstan (Najibullah, 2022). Turkey has emerged as an increasingly preferred destination for Uzbek labour migrants due to its significantly higher income levels compared to what its home economy can provide. For Uzbeks, Turkey gives three times more wages than Uzbekistan. In 2018, 7.8% of Uzbekistan's total labour migrants were working in Turkey, a notable increase from less than 2% in 2012 (Bondarenko, 2021).

For Turkmen, Turkey is the favourite destination; Russia comes in second. Visa-free entry and cultural proximity were the biggest contributing factors behind Turkey's popularity. The Directorate of Migration Management of Turkey's Ministry of Interior reported that in 2013, approximately 12,652 Turkmen migrants had Turkish residency permits in Turkey. However, in 2019, the number of migrants increased to over 130000 (Aslanov, 2023). According to the Turkish Statistical Institute (TUIK), in 2020, Turkey was home to 36,510 Uzbek citizens, 23,645 Kazakh citizens, and 18,017 Kyrgyz citizens (Aydin, 2022). In 2022, Kazakhstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan were among the ten most populous migrant groups in Turkey with valid residence permits. The combined migrant populations from these three nations exceeded 230,000 (Aslanov, 2023). However, these numbers only scratch

[6] "Under Pressure, Central Asia Migrants Leaving Russia Over Ukraine War."https://www.voanews.com/a/under-pressure-central-asia-migrants-leaving-russia-over-ukraine-war/7357290.html

the surface, as a significant portion of migrants are working in Turkey illegally, taking advantage of the visa-free entry and lenient migration policies. For instance, in 2017, Uzbekistan was among the top 5 countries with the highest number of apprehended illegal migrants residing in Turkey (Sharifzoda, 2019). A significant aspect of Central Asian migration to Turkey is the dominance of females in the migration pattern, with women comprising 75% of the total immigrants (Akalin, 2007). Women secure jobs as carers, maids, and babysitters within private homes, as well as in the hospitality and service sectors. Some have even ventured into entrepreneurship by opening businesses like beauty salons and clothing shops in major Turkish cities (Najibullah, 2022).

Republic of Korea:

The Republic of Korea is another promising alternative that has emerged recently. The first pull factor for South Korea originates from the presence of the ethnic Korean population in Central Asia, known as *Koryo-saram*. They are Russian-speaking Koreans who migrated to Russia's Far East between the 1860s and 1920s to escape famine, natural disasters, and repression during Japan's occupation of Korea. In 2005, the Government of the Republic of Korea initiated a programme to assist ethnic Koreans residing in the CIS countries, specifically targeting those from the "post-Soviet" era. From March 2007 onwards, the South Korean government implemented revised entry and residency criteria for ethnic Koreans from the CIS and China, granting them eligibility for H-2 visitor work visas. These visas permit them to enter and exit South Korea freely for up to five years and work within the country for three years (Rakisheva, B. (Ed.). 2022). As a result of this, from 2000 ethnic Koreans who entered South Korea in 2007, within five years, their number increased by roughly sevenfold to about 18,000 ethnic Koreans. Currently, the population of Russian-speaking Koreans in South Korea stands around 85,000 (Rakisheva, B. (Ed.). 2022a).

The substantial wage disparity between Central Asia and South Korea is acting as another strong pull factor for labour migrants from Central Asia. For example, minimum wages in Uzbekistan stand at $80 per month, while in South Korea, minimum wages are $1396 per month[7]. Rakisheva, B. (Ed.) (2022b), suggests that while comparative wage advantage plays a role, it's not the only economic factor driving Central Asian migrants' decisions to move. They are also enticed by additional incentives, such as housing and transportation. Typically, accommodation is provided along with the job offer, and thanks to well-established metro networks, commuting costs are also lower.

The Republic of Korea is also actively seeking to attract migrants from Central Asia for several reasons: first, the need for cheap labour to work in 3Ds (Dirty, Dangerous and Difficult) (An & Frigerik, 2018); second, South Korea's declining working-age population and declining birth rates; and finally, to improve relations with energy-rich Central Asia to diversify its energy source (Fumagalli, 2011). To enhance accessibility and people-to-people connections, South Korea established Korean centres across the region to offer language education and expand educational opportunities for Central Asian youth. However, limited job prospects for those proficient in Korean hindered the centres' effectiveness. To address this issue in 2006, South Korea negotiated with Uzbekistan and signed a government-regulated migration agreement, setting an annual quota of around 3,000 workers (3,400 out of 90,000 applicants by 2019) (Dadabaev & Soipov, 2022). Under this agreement, Uzbekistan identifies migrants for training and employment in South Korea and provides microcredit loans to cover initial travel expenses. Since the official channel provides limited scope, many migrants are now applying to enrol in language schools located in South Korea. Once enrolled in a language school situated in Korea, migrants are permitted to work part-time. This has led to a surge in labour migration from Uzbekistan to South Korea, from 14,246 in 2014 to 29,560 in 2019, making them the 5th largest group of foreign residents in South Korea (Dadabaev & Soipov, 2022a).

In 2014, Kazakhstan and South Korea signed a visa-free agreement, allowing Kazakhs to visit Korea for up to 30 days without a visa. However, data from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs revealed that while 19,000 Kazakh individuals were legally present in South Korea in 2019, an additional 12,000 were there illegally, taking advantage of the 30-day visa-free period (Iakupbaeva, 2014). In 2022, the Kyrgyz government collaborated with the South Korean Human Resource Development Service to create 5,000 job positions for Kyrgyz citizens within South Korean firms. Similarly, Tajikistan engaged in similar agreements with South Korea, albeit with fewer employment opportunities (Ozat, 2023).

Other destinations:

Though far behind Russia, Europe is also an emerging destination for Central Asian migrants. According to Khashimov et al. (2020), there was a 14 percent increase in the number of Central Asian residents who obtained permission to work, study, or reside in the EU between 2016 and 2019. Due to the scarcity of agricultural labour resulting from Brexit, a significant number of labourers hailing from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Kazakhstan have lately migrated to Britain as part of the Seasonal Workers Scheme implemented by the U.K. government. The Seasonal Workers Scheme was first introduced in 2019 and has been extended until 2024 because farms are having trouble hiring people from Europe for harvesting and other jobs since Britain left the European Union, which makes it harder for EU citizens to move to Britain (Najibullah, 2022). By employing individuals from Central Asia, Britain is effectively tackling its labour scarcity while simultaneously benefiting from a cost advantage in manpower. In 2022, more than 7,000 applications came from Kyrgyzstan to be a part of the Seasonal Workers Scheme (Lillis, 2022). In fact, out of 34,500 seasonal worker visas issued by the UK, 44% went to people from Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Ukraine[8]. Despite its tiny size, the UK might be seen as a burgeoning option for Central Asian immigration. IOM has recently launched a project funded by the UK Government named “Supporting safe and orderly migration

[7]Minimum Wage by Country: Global Payroll Guide. Retrieved from https://mauvegroup.com/innovation-hub/blog/minimum-wage-by-country-global-payroll-guide

[8] UK figures show a boom in the number of seasonal work visas issued to ‘Stans.’ (n.d.). Retrieved from https://www.intellinews.com/uk-figures-show-boom-in-number-of-seasonal-work-visas-issued-to-stans-285595

from Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to the UK.". The project intends to expand employment opportunities for Central Asian migrants under the Seasonal Workers Scheme[9].

Significance of destination diversification:

A) Remittance security is a key to regime security

The search for these alternative destinations is taking place at two levels: individual and state. At the individual level, migrants are trying to find alternatives based on their social networks, such as friends, relatives, etc. Here we can see the application of network theory (Massey et al., 1993). At the state level, Central Asian states, especially remittance-dependent ones, i.e., Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, are bound to search for alternative destinations because the remittances sent by the migrants play a crucial role in ensuring economic security and stability in the region. Remittances account for 44% of the GDP in Tajikistan and 31.3% in Kyrgyzstan (Eromenko, 2016). In Uzbekistan, the most populous country in Central Asia, remittances accounted for nearly 17% of its GDP in 2022 (IOM, 2023). Apart from their contribution to GDP, remittances have played a vital role in boosting the financial sector's growth in Central Asia. Historically, bank account ownership and participation in formal financial transactions were limited in the region. However, the increase in remittances has spurred the need for these transactions, leading to greater financial inclusion (Kakhkharov & Rohde, 2020).

Beyond promoting economic security, remittances are essential to addressing poverty and hunger in the region. Surveys indicate that about 40% of households in Tajikistan have at least one member working abroad, and for 31% of Tajik households, remittances constitute their sole income (Lemon, 2022). However, these data solely include money transferred via legitimate means, usually bank transfers. Since many people use informal methods to transmit money, the actual number of money transfers is likely to be higher than officially reported (Malyuchenko, 2015). In the context of the Kyrgyz Republic, it has been seen that migrant remittances have resulted in a reduction in poverty rates by approximately 6-7 percentage points (World Migration Report, 2020) [10]. Additionally, these remittances have played a role in enhancing the nutritional intake of households in Tajikistan, hence contributing to the development of child growth (Rocheva & Varshaver, 2018). Therefore, besides bolstering the economy, remittances also enhance human security in the region.

However, the concerning factor is that these remittances predominantly come from Russia, accounting for 82% of Tajikistan's remittances and 76% of Kyrgyzstan's remittances (World Bank, 2017). The Russian Federation continued to serve as the primary source of remittance inflows to Uzbekistan as well, accounting for 80% of the total remittance (IOM, 2023). Relying excessively on Russia as the primary source of remittances poses risks to remittance security. For instance, following Russia's annexation of Crimea and subsequent sanctions, remittances to the region dropped by 40% in 2014 (Jardine, 2022). According to data from the Central Bank of Russia, remittances to Kyrgyzstan also plunged from $2.03 billion in 2014 to $1.08 billion in 2015, marking a significant 47% decline (IOM, 2016). Remittances to Tajikistan have also suffered, with transfers from the Russian Federation decreasing from $3.8 billion to $1.28 billion (66% decline) in 2015, as per data from the Central Bank of the Russian Federation. A considerable portion of this decline can be attributed to the depreciation of the Russian ruble against the dollar. COVID-19 served as another lesson for these economies; the closure of the Russian border led to a 22% decline in total remittances (Schenk, 2023).

Therefore, diversifying destinations and reducing overreliance on Russia for remittance are essential for achieving economic and human security in remittance-dependent economies. Moreover, when economic security and human security are jeopardised, it can undermine regime security. Male migrants who are unable to depart from their home country represent a potential source of social discontent that could be directed towards the government (Kluczewska, 2014). Thus, maintaining resilient remittance flows is crucial for ensuring political stability in the region.

B) Diplomatic autonomy

Another benefit for Central Asian nations to look for alternative destinations is to reduce Russia's 'privileged sphere of influence'[11] over the region. Since a major chunk of GDP comes from remittance and the primary source of remittance is Russia, remittance-dependent economies like Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and, to some extent, Uzbekistan are in fact under the 'emigration trap' of Russia (Abdurakhimov, 2016). Moscow frequently attempts to utilise the labour migrants from Central Asia to exert pressure on Central Asian governments in support of its regional initiatives. For instance, Moscow is utilising the situation of migrants to coerce Tajikistan into joining the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU), mirroring the approach it took with Kyrgyzstan (Cooley, 2017). Moreover, the incident in 2011 involving the detention of two Russian pilots in Tajikistan, followed by Russia's deportation of numerous Tajik labour migrants, illustrates Russia's utilisation of labour migration as a tool to uphold its regional influence. Thus, the need for diversifying

[9] https://kyrgyzstan.iom.int/news/supporting-safe-and-orderly-migration-kyrgyzstan-uk

[10] World Migration Report 2020 / International Organization for Migration // https://publications. iom. int/system/files/pdf/final-wmr_2020-ru. https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf

[11] Russian President Dmitri Medvedev's statement on August 31, 2008, outlined five principles of foreign policy, including the assertion of a privileged sphere of influence referring to countries where Russia traditionally had friendly, cordial, and historically special relations.

remittance sources is imperative, not only from an economic perspective but also from a geo-strategic perspective. Central Asians need destination diversification for their migrants.

Conclusion:

Migration has become a way of life in the societies of Tajikistan, Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan. In the early 2000s, migration was primarily perceived as a last resort for the poor to meet their basic needs. However, over time, even individuals from more privileged backgrounds began to see migration as a viable lifestyle choice. Today, except for certain industrial towns and major cities, it's rare to find a family that hasn't been touched by migration in some way (Urinboyev, 2020). Since the working-age population is rapidly growing in these countries, and the home economy is unable to create enough jobs; therefore sustaining the flow of migration is essential to ensure economic and political stability in the region. Depending primarily on Russia as a destination for their outgoing population is not a safe strategy, especially in the backdrop of war, sanctions, and growing anti-immigrant attitudes against Central Asian labour migrants. By embracing a strategy of destination diversification, Central Asian countries can mitigate the risks associated with overreliance on any single destination. This not only safeguards the socio-economic interests of migrants but also strengthens the region's resilience to external shocks, such as changes in migration policies or economic downturns in host countries.

Furthermore, reducing dependence on a single destination like Russia enables Central Asian countries to assert greater autonomy in their foreign relations and pursue a more balanced and diversified approach to international relations. By diversifying migration flows, empowering marginalised groups, and asserting greater diplomatic autonomy, the region can chart a more sustainable and resilient path towards inclusive development and prosperity. Therefore, Central Asian countries, particularly those reliant on remittances, should actively engage in migration diplomacy at bilateral and multilateral levels to facilitate alternative destinations for outgoing migrants.

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