



POLICY BRIEF

Evaluating the Future of Uzbek Labour Migration

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Despite being the region's largest exporter of migrant labour, Uzbekistan has only recently identified migration as a key policy area with a particular focus on diversifying labour migration flows and incorporating migration into broader development planning. As part of this renewed emphasis on migration, Uzbekistan is expanding organized labour exporting schemes with third countries such as Russia, South Korea, Japan and Poland as a safe and lasting alternative to irregular and precarious forms of migration. In their current form, however, these organized labour recruitment programs cannot adequately channel the existing demand for labour migration within Uzbekistan and have not proven to be effective in protecting the rights of labour migrants. This policy paper outlines the inherent limitations of government-to-government organized labour recruitment programs, suggests mechanisms for ensuring the fair treatment of Uzbek labour migrants abroad and identifies how improving migration data collection can help better inform Uzbek migration policies.



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CURRENT CONTEXT

As the most populous country in Central Asia, **Uzbekistan has been the region's largest net exporter of labour migrants and the region's primary destination for remittances from migrants living abroad.** According to a report released by Uzbekistan's State Committee on Statistics, over 4 million Uzbek citizens left the country for employment abroad in 2018.¹ Remittances by individuals from Russia to Uzbekistan totalled over \$2.6 billion dollars in 2017 – more than double the amount sent from Russia to Kyrgyzstan and triple the sum transferred from Russia to Tajikistan in the same year.² Since the early 2000s, the Russian Federation has attracted a lion's share of all migrant workers departing from Central Asia with Uzbeks representing the largest migrant community in the country. The absence of reliable migration data and the circular nature of labour migration between Uzbekistan and Russia make it very difficult to accurately estimate the total Uzbek migrant population currently residing and working in Russia. Based on the latest border crossing data from 2017, however, over 1.8 million Uzbek citizens indicated "work" as their purpose of stay upon arrival in Russia. This number represents a conservative estimate since it does not take into account Uzbek migrants who are permanently residing in Russia or did not leave Russia in 2017.

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Under the new leadership of current president Mirziyoyev, there has been a noticeable change in tone and policy concerning labour migration. At the government level, Uzbekistan's Agency for Foreign Labour Migration Affairs under the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations was made responsible for managing outward labour migration by providing testing and training for future labour migrants.³ Moreover, Mirziyoyev signed a resolution establishing a government fund dedicated specifically to protecting the rights and interests of Uzbeks working abroad.⁴ After more than two decades of non-membership, Uzbekistan became IOM's most recent member state in November 2018 signalling Uzbekistan's renewed commitment to engaging in migration management at the international level.⁵ In December 2018, the Director-General of the ILO paid a maiden official visit to Uzbekistan showing a renewed interest in improving working conditions and enhancing social protection for all workers – both at home and abroad.

Uzbekistan is also taking a more active role in supporting its migrant worker population abroad with the country's deputy minister of employment paying an unprecedented visit to migrant workers awaiting deportation at a special detention centre in Russia.⁶ Uzbekistan's President Mirziyoyev recently highlighted that Uzbek labour migrants were leaving the country due to the lack

¹ The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics (2019), 'The number of persons who entered and left the Republic of Uzbekistan (January-December 2018)', Available at: <https://stat.uz/en/press-center/news-committee/5311-the-number-of-persons-who-entered-and-left-the-republic-of-uzbekistan-january-december-2018> Accessed January 30, 2019

² The Central Bank of the Russian Federation (2018), 'Cross-Border Transfers of Individuals (Residents and Non-residents)', Available at: <http://www.cbr.ru/eng/statistics/Default.aspx?PrId=19> Accessed December 15, 2018.

³ UZDaily (2018), 'Measures to improve the system of external labour migration adopted', [UZDaily.com](https://www.uzdaily.com/articles-id-44720.htm) 7 July 2018. Available at <https://www.uzdaily.com/articles-id-44720.htm> Accessed December 15, 2018

⁴ [Gazeta.uz](https://www.gazeta.uz) (2018), 'Создан фонд поддержки трудовых мигрантов' [Support fund for labour migrants created] in [Gazeta.uz](https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2018/07/05/labour/), 5 July 2018. Available at <https://www.gazeta.uz/ru/2018/07/05/labour/> date of access December 15, 2018

⁵ International Organization for Migration (2018), 'IOM Director General Welcomes Uzbekistan as 173rd Member State', International Organization for Migration 27 November 2018. Available at <https://www.iom.int/news/iom-director-general-welcomes-uzbekistan-173rd-member-state> Accessed December 15, 2018

⁶ Hashimova, U. (2018), 'At Last, Uzbekistan Extends Some Support to Migrant Workers', [The Diplomat](https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/at-last-uzbekistan-extends-some-support-to-migrant-workers/) 21 November 2018. Available at <https://thediplomat.com/2018/11/at-last-uzbekistan-extends-some-support-to-migrant-workers/> Accessed December 15, 2018

of adequate employment at home and signalled the intent to address this issue at the highest level.⁷

As part of the country's efforts to improve its management of outward labour migration, **Uzbekistan has placed emphasis on expanding organized forms of labour recruitment designed to send Uzbek citizens to work abroad.** A recently adopted resolution "On additional measures to further improve the system of external labour migration of the Republic of Uzbekistan" provides for the opening of representations of the Agency for Foreign Labour Migration Affairs in destination countries and the accreditation of foreign companies for the recruitment of Uzbek migrant workers.⁸ Furthermore, the Government of Uzbekistan has explicitly stated that the safety of migrants residing and working abroad represents a major migration policy objective.⁹ As part of this new commitment, Uzbekistan has established a fund dedicated to supporting and protecting Uzbek labour migrants. The fund is meant to be used to deliver legal and social protection, as well as material assistance, to Uzbek migrants who have been victims of violence, forced labour and discrimination, have had their labour rights violated abroad, have financial difficulty or have been left without documents.

Uzbekistan is currently in the process of expanding cooperation with third countries concerning organized labour recruitment programs, having recently signed a landmark agreement with the Russian Federation. Referred to as *orgnabor* in Russian, the idea behind this system is to send groups of trained labourers to meet labour shortages of specific employers in particular areas of the Russian economy.¹⁰ As part of its agreement with Russia, Uzbekistan's Agency for Foreign Labour Migration Affairs is responsible for the selection, pre-departure training and preparation of future migrant workers whereas Russian employers are obligated to provide adequate housing, ensure safe working conditions and offer fair remuneration of no less than the national minimum wage.

Uzbekistan's new push to expand organized labour programs come at the tail end of a long history of migration cooperation with South Korea where Uzbeks constitute the fifth largest migrant group with an estimated population of 55 thousand.¹¹ South Korea has had a Memorandum of Understanding in place with Uzbekistan since 2006 under which a limited number of Uzbek migrant workers were sent to South Korea under the country's existing employment permit system (EPS). Having renewed its agreement with South Korea in 2016, Uzbekistan has seen an upsurge in interest among the Uzbek workforce in going to work in South Korea with over 87 thousand registering their applications for the quota of 5 thousand set by South Korea in 2017.

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⁷ Auyezov, O. (2018). 'Migrant workers' struggles push Uzbekistan to open up', Reuters December 21, 2018. Available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-uzbekistan-economy-migrants/migrant-workers-struggles-push-uzbekistan-to-open-up-idUSKCN1OK0EX> Accessed December 22, 2018

⁸ President of Uzbekistan (2018). 'О дополнительных мерах по дальнейшему совершенствованию системы внешней трудовой миграции Республики Узбекистан' [On additional measures to further improve the system of external labour migration], 05 July 2018 Available at http://uza.uz/ru/documents/o-dopolnitelnykh-merakh-po-dalneyshemu-sovershenstvovaniyu-s-05-07-2018?m=y&ELEMENT_CODE=o-dopolnitelnykh-merakh-po-dalneyshemu-sovershenstvovaniyu-s-05-07-2018&SECTION_CODE=documents Accessed December 15, 2018 Since this restriction was lifted in 2015, all asylum seekers enjoy the right to asylum along with additional derivative rights (social, medical, educational, cultural, etc.).

⁹ International Organization for Migration (2018). 'Greetings by representative of the Republic of Uzbekistan at the 109th Session of IOM Council', Geneva Switzerland, 27 November 2018 Available at: <https://governingbodies.iom.int/system/files/en/council/109/Uzbekistan%20-%20109th%20Council.pdf> Accessed December 15, 2018

¹⁰ Historically, the term *orgnabor* emerged in the Soviet Union to refer to government-administered labour distribution programs that mobilized millions of workers between 1930 and 1970 to work on large-scale construction projects on the periphery of the Soviet Union. While this kind of internal labour migration occurred in the context of a centralized planned economy during the Soviet Union, these new organized labour recruitment schemes between Uzbekistan and employers in third countries are designed to address labour shortages in the private sector.

¹¹ Eurasianet (2017). 'Узбекистанцы на 5-м месте среди крупнейших общин мигрантов в Южной Корее' [Uzbekistan holds 5th place in terms of the largest migrant communities in South Korea], 23 June 2017, Available at <https://russian.eurasianet.org/узбекистанцы-на-5-м-месте-среди-крупнейших-общин-мигрантов-в-южной-корее> Accessed on December 15, 2018



With agreements already in place with the Russian Federation and South Korea, Uzbekistan is seeking to expand the organized recruitment scheme to other countries. Uzbekistan's Ministry of Labour held talks in February and March 2017 to start supplying Japan with a small number of qualified Uzbek workers, with an emphasis on positions in elderly care.¹²¹³ Similarly, Uzbekistan's Agency for Foreign Labour Migration Affairs signed agreements with several Polish recruitment agencies with a first group of workers departing in June 2018.¹⁴

ORGANISED RECRUITMENT PROGRAMS: FRIEND OR FOE?

The official rationale behind organized foreign labour recruitment programs is its controlled nature whereby destination and source countries can more effectively match supply and demand in specific areas of the economy. In this respect, these schemes bear a strong resemblance to the guest worker programs in place in Western Europe in the 1960s and 1970s. The idea is that employers can effectively pre-select qualified labourers from abroad without needing to spend time on recruiting and training at home. From the perspective of the migrant worker, these government-directed programs should guarantee adequate employment and adequate working conditions. **For source countries like Uzbekistan, the added value of these programs is their temporary or circular nature, which is designed to in theory prevent brain drain and make sure that qualified cadres return home after gaining useful work experience abroad.**

In reality, **these organized foreign labour recruitment schemes also create a number of challenges** that need to be taken into account. Here it is important to look back at the experiences of Uzbek workers under these programs both in South Korea and – more recently – in the Russian Federation.

South Korea's employment permit system has been highlighted by the ILO as a positive example of a government-to-government recruitment scheme that minimizes corruption and protects migrant workers while addressing labour shortages in the country of destination. At the same time, the recruitment of Uzbek workers in South Korea has not been an entirely smooth and unproblematic affair. Civil society organizations and trade unions have repeatedly raised concerns over the treatment of migrant workers, including Uzbeks. Violations of minimum wage laws, steep recruitment fees, predatory severance pay policies and harsh working conditions, particularly in the agricultural industry, are just some of the problems identified. Moreover, despite its stated circular or temporary purpose, many workers end up overstaying their visas and remain in the country irregularly.

Organized recruitment schemes can also incentivize bribes and corruption, particularly in cases when labour supply greatly exceeds the number of allocated visas. When only a small number of applicants have a chance of being

¹² Agency for Foreign Labour Migration Affairs Under the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations (2017), 'Япония-Узбекистан; Начало нового этапа сотрудничества в области трудовой миграции' [Japan-Uzbekistan; The start to a new phase of cooperation in the area of labour migration], 26 February, 2017 Available at http://migration.uz/ru/news/press-relizy/2ELEMENT_ID=53 Accessed on December 15, 2018

¹³ Jahon Information Agency (2018), 'В Минтруда состоялась встреча с японской делегацией' [Meeting with Japanese delegation took place in the Ministry of Labour], 15 May 2017 Available at <http://jahonnews.uz/ru/obshchestvo/160/34105/> Accessed on December 15, 2018

¹⁴ Regnum.ru (2018), 'Узбекистан впервые организованно отправил мигрантов на работу в Польшу' [Uzbekistan sends migrants to work in Poland in an organized manner for the first time], 14 June 2018 Available at <https://regnum.ru/news/2431618.html> Accessed on December 15, 2018

¹⁵ Open Working Group on Labour Migration and Recruitment (2015), 'South Korea's Employment Permit System: A Successful Government-to-Government Model' Policy Brief #2, Available at: http://www.madenetwork.org/sites/default/files/policybrief_epskorea_2015%20%281%29.pdf Accessed on December 15, 2018

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selected for the program, this can push potential labour migrants to try to “circumvent” the system. Indeed, 20 Uzbek migration officials were recently detained for taking bribes in exchange for coveted employment in South Korea.¹⁶

Under the new agreement with the Russian Federation, the first group of 992 Uzbek migrant workers who arrived in 2017 were also confronted by a number of difficulties. In St. Petersburg, a group of 53 Uzbek migrant workers had their passports confiscated and were left without employment.¹⁷ Others complained of poor working conditions and mandatory deductions from their pay checks for housing and other expenses.¹⁸ Another problem is that the program ties migrant workers to their place of employment, meaning that they cannot change jobs once they are inside Russia. There have been cases of migrant workers being punished with re-entry bans for leaving their places of employment. The potential of earning higher wages in informal sectors of the economy can also entice trained migrant workers to seek employment elsewhere. Finally, Russian employers have complained about the fact that migrant workers sent through the program in reality do not possess the qualifications they are meant to have on paper. With Uzbekistan announcing plans to send upwards of 50 thousand migrant workers through this program to Russia in 2018, one can expect these problems to continue to multiply.

Given the fact there is already a significant Uzbek migrant community in Russia, the organized recruitment scheme creates a parallel system that does not take into account family and kinship networks that already exist on the ground. Research on Uzbek migrant workers in Russia has shown that they are either sceptical or unaware of Uzbek diaspora organizations and government-affiliated programs due to past experiences with corrupt officials.¹⁹ Uzbek migrant workers often find employment or work together with members of the extended family or individuals from the same village. An organized labour migration scheme with strict rules and regulations cannot act as a meaningful alternative to these less formalized employment networks. It is important to not only look at labour migration as a question of supply and demand, but take into account the more multi-layered aspirations of the migrants themselves.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The experience of guest worker programs in other countries show that it is important to ensure that the rights of labour migrants are adequately protected and that they do not end up in situations of exploitation or underpaid employment. While the creation of a dedicated fund for the protection of migrant workers by the Uzbek government is a welcome step, more efforts need to be made on the ground **to increase trust of Uzbek migrants in Uzbek government institutions abroad.** Uzbek migrant workers should

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¹⁶ Current Time (2018), ‘Чиновников Узбекистана подозревают в получении взяток в \$20 млн за трудоустройство мигрантов в Южную Корею’ [Uzbek bureaucrats suspected of receiving \$20 million in bribes for work placement of migrants in South Korea], 28 November 2018 Available at <https://www.currenttime.tv/a/uzbekistan-vzyatka-migrant-job/29625705.html> Accessed on December 15, 2018

¹⁷ Rotkevich, Y. (2018) ‘Мигранты бегут от работы’ [Migrants running away from work], 16 July 2018 in Gorod 812 Available at: <http://gorod-812.ru/migrantiy-begut-ot-raboty/> Accessed on December 15, 2018

¹⁸ Ivaschenko, E. (2018) ‘Тракторист становится швейей. Как устроен оргнабор мигрантов из Узбекистана в Россию’ [Tractor driver becomes a tailor. How the orgnabor of migrants from Uzbekistan in Russia is set up] in Fergana News Available at: <http://www.ca-portal.ru/article:43855> Accessed on December 15, 2018

¹⁹ Urinboev, R. (2018), Migration, Transnationalism, and Social Change in Central Asia: Everyday Transnational Lives of Uzbek Migrants in Russia’, in M. Laruelle & C. Schenk (eds.), Eurasia on the Move. Interdisciplinary Approaches to a Dynamic Migration Region, 27-41. The George Washington University, Central Asia Program



be confident that their concerns can be adequately addressed by Uzbek diplomatic representations and officials from the Agency for Foreign Labour Migration Affairs. In the past, Uzbek officials did not provide legal or financial support to migrant workers in difficult situations or pre-deportation detention centres; a more proactive approach would be a welcome change.

Moreover, to ensure the safety and protection of Uzbek labour migrants in Russia – both those in organized programs and individual migrants – **Uzbek officials should look into building partnerships with civil society actors on the ground in destination countries.** Currently, the process of selecting employers for the organized labour recruitment program is outsourced to International Labour Migration Alliance (ILMA) – a Moscow-based non-profit organization. Due to their limited resources, the ILMA does not always have the ability to ensure that employers are trustworthy and can provide adequate working conditions. It is therefore in the interest of Uzbek authorities to maintain closer control over the selection of employers in order to avoid sending migrant workers to dishonest employers.

Another risk associated with organized recruitment mechanisms is the **segregation of labour migrants from host societies.** While this is sometimes seen as advantageous by authorities in destination countries, these practices can lead to social **exclusion and isolation**, which can be detrimental to the well-being of the migrant workers themselves. Working under such conditions also reduces the attractiveness of participating in such programs and decreases the likelihood of migrants contributing to the social and economic life of the host country. Measures should be put into place to work with municipal authorities and local representatives of civil society to make sure guest workers have opportunities to engage with the host community.

Finally, it is important to **allow migrant workers a degree of agency when it comes to internal mobility and choice of employment.** Tying workers down to a single place of employment creates the risk of exploitation or abusive behaviour on behalf of the employer. If the migrant worker is not satisfied with the working conditions or the employer is unhappy with a migrant worker's qualifications, both parties should be allowed to end their relationship in a dignified and mutually respectful manner. Instead of sending migrant workers back to Uzbekistan, there should be **a mechanism for allowing them to find more suitable forms of employment in their country of destination** with a limited amount of bureaucratic red tape. Foreign representations of the Agency for Foreign Labour Migration Affairs could provide assistance to migrant workers looking to change their employer once they are already abroad. Similarly, it would be mutually beneficial for employers and employees to allow for probation periods in work contracts in order to allow for both employers and employees to enjoy more flexibility. Overall, it is imperative that going forward Uzbek organized labour program include regular monitoring of working conditions abroad and provide opportunities for labour migrants to earn a living wage with full respect of their human rights.

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