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## **Migration Governance Beyond the West : Historical Legacies, Contemporary Trends, and Future Trajectories**

**Eraliev, Sherzod**

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# Migration Governance Beyond the West

*Historical Legacies, Contemporary Trends, and Future  
Trajectories*

*Editor: Sherzod Eraliev*

Research Report in Sociology of Law 2025:1





*Sherzod Eraliev*

# Migration Governance Beyond the West:

Historical Legacies, Contemporary Trends,  
and Future Trajectories

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# Introduction: Mapping Migration Dynamics Across Regions

*Sherzod Eraliev*<sup>1</sup>

Migration has long been an integral part of human history, shaping societies, economies, and political landscapes worldwide. As individuals and groups move in search of better opportunities, security, and stability, migration patterns continue to evolve, influenced by globalisation, economic shifts, geopolitical tensions, and environmental changes.

Migration can be classified into multiple forms, including labour migration, forced displacement, irregular migration, and voluntary mobility. While economic incentives often serve as the primary drivers, migration is also influenced by political instability, conflict, demographic shifts, and environmental degradation. Countries with different levels of economic development and political regimes have adopted diverse approaches to migration governance, ranging from liberalised entry-exit policies to restrictive border controls.

This diversity in migration forms and governance approaches shapes global mobility patterns, with significant implications for both origin and destination countries. Despite these variations, a crucial yet often overlooked aspect of international migration is its regional dimension. Although a greater number of people migrate within the Global South accounting for approximately 37 percent of all migrants, compared to around 35 percent who move from the Global South to the Global North (Horwood, 2021), academic debates, socio-political concerns, and media coverage predominantly centre on South-North migration (Bommes & Morawska, 2017; Boucher & Gest, 2015; Crawley & Teye, 2024b; Düvell, 2020; Nawyn, 2016a).

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Mainstream scholarship, dominant media and political narratives often disproportionately emphasize the experiences of economic migrants, refugees, asylum seekers, and irregular migrants attempting to reach the Global North, while overlooking the significant impact and dynamics of South-South migration. Several factors contribute to this skewed portrayal (Crawley & Teye, 2024b).

Firstly, there exists a prevailing perception, particularly in Western societies, that migration towards the Global North poses greater challenges and implications for receiving countries. This perception is reinforced by sensationalized media coverage and political discourse that frame irregular migration as a threat to national security, social cohesion, and economic stability (Eberl et al., 2018; Innes, 2010; Trilling, 2019). As a result, attention is primarily directed towards migration flows targeting Western countries, overshadowing the magnitude and complexity of South-South migration.

Secondly, historical and geopolitical factors play a role in shaping media and political narratives around migration. The legacy of colonialism and patterns of global economic inequality have contributed to the concentration of wealth and opportunities in the Global North (Robinson & Acemoglu, 2017), leading to aspirational migration towards these regions (Mayblin & Turner, 2020; Ocheni & Nwankwo, 2012). Consequently, narratives about migration often centre on the journey of individuals seeking refuge or better prospects in Western countries, perpetuating a narrative of Northward migration.

Moreover, the framing of migration in terms of crisis and security threats tends to resonate more strongly with audiences and policymakers, garnering greater media attention and political response (Trilling, 2019). This focus on irregular migration towards the Global North overlooks the nuanced dynamics of South-South migration, which encompasses a wide range of movements including labour migration, displacement due to conflict or environmental factors, and mobility for economic opportunities within regions of the Global South (Teye, 2021).

Overall, the tendency to overlook South-South migration in academic, media and political narratives reflects broader biases and perceptions that prioritize the experiences of migrants seeking entry into the Global North. Addressing this imbalance requires a shift towards more inclusive and comprehensive discussions that recognise the diverse and complex realities of migration, including its significant role in shaping development, inequality, and humanitarian crises within regions of the Global South.

This imbalance has also reflected in academic publications. Of course, an increasing number of studies have emerged in recent years that address the nuances and unique

aspects of migratory processes and governance frameworks in the Global South contexts (Crawley & Teye, 2024b; Fiddian-Qasmiyeh, 2024; Gest & Boucher, 2021; Natter, 2021; Urinboyev, 2020; Urinboyev & Eraliev, 2022). These works have contributed significantly to broadening our understanding of migration beyond the conventional Global North-centric perspective. They explore the ways in which migration is managed in non-Western contexts, the role of informal networks, regional mobility trends, and the socio-political and economic drivers that shape migration dynamics within and between countries of the Global South.

Despite this growing body of research, there remains a pressing need to further enrich migration studies with academic and policy-oriented publications, research reports, and data-driven analyses that accurately reflect the diverse mobility patterns unfolding across different regions of the world. Many aspects of South-South migration—such as labour mobility between neighbouring countries, the impact of climate change on displacement, and the role of regional migration governance frameworks—continue to be underexplored. To develop a more comprehensive and globally representative field of migration studies, it is essential to produce scholarship that integrates perspectives from diverse geographic, economic, and political contexts.

This research report is one such effort to bridge this knowledge gap by including publications that systematically map migration trends, dynamics, and developments across different parts of the world. It offers in-depth analyses of migration flows, policy responses, and socio-economic impacts in a variety of non-Western settings. The report is part of a broader academic initiative aimed at fostering inclusive, globally relevant migration research.

The chapters in this edited volume showcase the contributions of researchers and practitioners participating in the research and staff exchange project ‘Non-Western Migration Regimes in a Global Perspective’ (MARS), funded by the European Commission.<sup>2</sup> This four-year project brings together a consortium of EU and non-EU universities, covering a diverse range of migration contexts from East Asia to the Middle East to South America. By incorporating perspectives from researchers based in these regions, the project ensures that the narratives of migration are not solely shaped by Western institutions but also by those with direct expertise and lived experiences of migration dynamics in the Global South.

This report primarily focuses on providing a comprehensive overview of migration patterns in selected countries. Chapters offer an analysis of mobility dynamics,

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<sup>2</sup> More information on the project can be found at: <https://www.mars.lu.se/mars-project>

backed by historical overview, statistical data, policy reviews, and assessments of contemporary developments. The contributors examine key drivers of migration in each context, including economic opportunities, conflict, environmental changes, and demographic trends.

Unlike many migration studies that predominantly examine immigration-receiving countries, this report takes a broader approach by covering both countries of immigration and emigration. The report covers recent migration trends, statistics, dynamics, and analysis of such countries and regions as the Caucasus region, China, Ghana, the Gulf countries, Japan, India, Indonesia, Turkmenistan, Türkiye, Uzbekistan, and others. This dual perspective allows for a more holistic understanding of migration systems, shedding light on how mobility patterns are shaped not just by destination countries but also by conditions in countries of origin and transit. By doing so, the report contributes to a more balanced discourse that recognises migration as a global phenomenon rather than a challenge confined to specific regions.

By presenting a collection of case studies and analyses, this research report offers insights into migration trends across a range of selected countries. Rather than focusing solely on well-documented Global North migration experiences, it aims to highlight diverse mobility patterns and governance approaches from different regions.

The primary objective of this report—and the broader MARS project—is to provide a data-driven and contextual overview of migration dynamics. By examining migration trends in both origin and destination countries, the report seeks to contribute to a more balanced understanding of global mobility. While it does not claim to redefine the field of migration studies, it serves as a resource for policymakers, researchers, and practitioners interested in regional migration developments and their broader implications.

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# Historical Evolution and Contemporary Dynamics of Migration Patterns in Japan

*Ulugbek Abdurakhmanov*<sup>3</sup>

## Historical context of migration to Japan

The first wave of immigration documented in written Japanese sources can be traced back to the sixth century; subsequently, Buddhism and the Chinese calendar system were imported into Japan. Spanish and Portuguese missionaries, who first arrived around the middle of the sixteenth century, brought with them not only Western ideas but also new types of weapons. After an initial period of cooperation with some of the local chieftains, it was not long before the newcomers became entangled in violent civil strife and were eventually expelled from the country.

Thus began, in the seventeenth century, Japan's period of seclusion, which, under the newly established military rule of the Shoguns, virtually isolated the country from foreign influence for two and a half centuries. Almost the only exception was Dejima, an artificial island in the Bay of Nagasaki, where Dutch and British traders were permitted to land. There was also a flourishing trade with China and Southeast Asia, which, operating through the narrow straits of the Ryūkyū Kingdom, reached as far as the most southerly of Japan's main islands, Kyūshū. During this period, immigration by non-Japanese – or even the mere attempt to set foot on Japanese soil – was forbidden on pain of death (BPB, 2012).

This era of isolation remained largely intact until the mid-19th century, when external pressures forced Japan to reconsider its policies. The subsequent Meiji Restoration of 1868 marked a dramatic shift, not only in Japan's governance but also

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in its approach to national identity and social structure. The Japanese government's assimilation policies towards ethnic minorities were framed within a legislative regime that can be traced back to this period. With the Meiji Restoration, Japan was able to finally break the grip of feudal society on the nation. Officially, the feudal hereditary warlord, or Shogun, relinquished his title to the emperor and quickly resigned his position. This led, ultimately, to all nominal authority resting in the hands of the Emperor, who was not affiliated with the feudal hierarchy. This was the culmination of a long period of struggle for reform led by those opposed to the rigidly structured feudal society, which offered little opportunity for economic and social advancement for the majority of the Japanese people.

Restoring Imperial rule in Japan was carried out with the intent of strengthening Japan in the face of the many colonial powers of the day. To achieve this, the establishment of a true nation-state was viewed as the most important objective. Fostering patriotism was a natural ingredient in this process, as it thrives at the nation-state level. In order to cultivate national unity, a distinct national identity was required.

This process began with the gradual dismantling of social barriers of society that had categorized people as either samurai, farmers, craftspeople, or businesspeople. It was further advanced by the official removal of designations regarding ethnic minority groups such as the Ainu and Ryukyuan, as well as discriminated social minorities such as the Burakumin. Whether this newly defined society, devoid of official social or ethnic classifications, was truly free from discrimination remains uncertain. Nevertheless, from this point onward, all individuals were regarded as *Nihonjin*, or Japanese (Zhang & Steele, 2012).

## Post-World War II Era

After World War II, Japan faced significant challenges, including labour shortages due to the destruction caused by the war and subsequent economic boom. This period saw a shift in migration patterns, both into and out of Japan.

**Table 1. Japanese migration movements, 1950-54.**

Year	Emigration	Immigration	Net immigration (+) or emigration (-)
1950	8,990	15,964	+ 6,974
1951	20,331	13,945	- 6,386
1952	25,633	26,990	+ 1,357
1953	6,124	70,169	+ 64,045
1954	9,062	39,313	+ 30,251
Total	70,140	166,381	+ 96,241

Source: IMO (1957).

The late pattern of development continued with establishment of liberal democracy in Japan only after 1945, and the ensuing economic miracle similar to that of West Germany. The Japanese garrison state took shape during the Meiji restoration, driven by the imperative of resisting encroachments by Western imperial powers, expanding Japanese influence in Asia, and ousting foreign ‘barbarians’.

The Meiji era was characterised by policy innovation, rapid economic development, and the promotion of *zaibatsu* (industrial and financial conglomerates) through nationalist and mercantilist policies—a strategy that persisted Japan’s defeat in WW II. Although many Koreans and Chinese were subject to forced labour in Japan during the period of imperial expansion in the 1920s and 1930s, the country remained resistant to immigration until the 1980s (Tsuda, 1999; 2003, as cited in Hollifield & Sharpe, 2017).

In the 1951 Immigration Control Order, it is interesting that though there was a category for ‘permanent residents’, no one was formally ‘accepted in the said category’ (Kondo, 2002). There was not much enthusiasm for assimilating foreign nationals into the Japanese population.

**Table 2. Registered foreigners by nationality, 1950-2021.**

Year	Total <sup>1)</sup>	China	Korea	Vietnam	Philippines	Brazil	Nepal	Indonesia	U.S.A.	Thailand
1950	598,696	40,481	544,903	25	367	169	...	257	4,962	73
1975	751,842	48,728	647,156	1,041	3,035	1,418	51	1,119	21,976	1,046
2000	1,686,444	335,575	635,269	16,908	144,871	254,394	3,649	19,346	44,856	29,289
2010	2,134,151	687,156	565,989	41,781	210,181	230,552	17,525	24,895	50,667	41,279
2021	2,760,635	767,797	436,167	432,934	276,615	204,879	97,109	59,820	54,162	50,324

Source: National Institute of Population and Social Security Research (2023)

Given its historical isolation, Japan was able to maintain a very small foreign population for much of its history. However, the picture began to change dramatically during the so-called bubble era of the 1980s. As the economy developed rapidly, Japan increasingly looked to foreign workers to supplement labour shortages, particularly in industries experiencing acute workforce gaps. This shift culminated in the passage of the 1990 revision to the Immigration Control and Refugee Act (Komai, 2001, as cited in Green, 2017), which slightly eased restrictions to foreign labour in the country and laid the foundation for Japan's contemporary immigration system.

A significant reform in immigration law was enacted in 1991 with the introduction of new 'Special Law on Immigration Control relating to Persons and their Descendants who Lost their Japanese Citizenship'. This law allowed the descendants of Japanese emigrants from various parts of the world, including Brazil, to enter Japan for work and provided them with the possibility of long-term residence. Despite this reform, significant barriers to permanent residence remained. Throughout the 1990s, various obstacles were placed in the path of immigrants seeking permanent residence. Over time, these requirements were gradually eased — from an initial 20-year continuous stay requirement, later reduced to 10 years, and now to the current five-year threshold. Regardless, between 1945 and 2000, more than 330,000 individuals had been naturalised in Japan (Kondo, 2001).

Between 1990 and 2010, Japan's foreign population increased 98%. As of 2010, Japan's official foreign population stood at 2.1 million, or 1.67% of the total population (Green, 2017). This trend continued, and by 2018, the OECD reported that foreign residents comprised just 2% of the overall population of 127 million (Dadabaev, 2022).

Demographically, Chinese nationals (389,117) constituted the largest foreign ethnic group in the Japanese labour market, representing 26.6% of all foreign workers. They were followed by Vietnamese (316,840), who accounted for 21.7%, and Filipinos (164,006), comprising 11.2% of foreign workers (Ministry of Health, Labour and Welfare 2019, as cited in Dadabaev, 2022). The fastest-growing migrant worker groups were Vietnamese (31.9%), Indonesians (21.7%), and Nepalese (18.0%) (Dadabaev, 2022).

As of the end of June 2022, the number of medium- to long-term residents in Japan had risen to 2,669,267, while the number of special permanent residents stood at 292,702, bringing the total foreign resident population to 2,961,969, an increase of 201,334 (7.3%) compared to the end of 2021 (2,760,635) (Immigration Services

Agency, 2022). Breaking this down by gender, there were 1,469,602 males (49.6%) and 1,492,367 females (50.4%), both of which had increased over the previous year.

The number of nationalities and regions represented among residence card holders and special permanent resident certificate holders was 194 (excluding stateless individuals). Notably, all of the top 10 economies contributing to Japan’s foreign workforce saw an increase in numbers compared to the end of 2021.

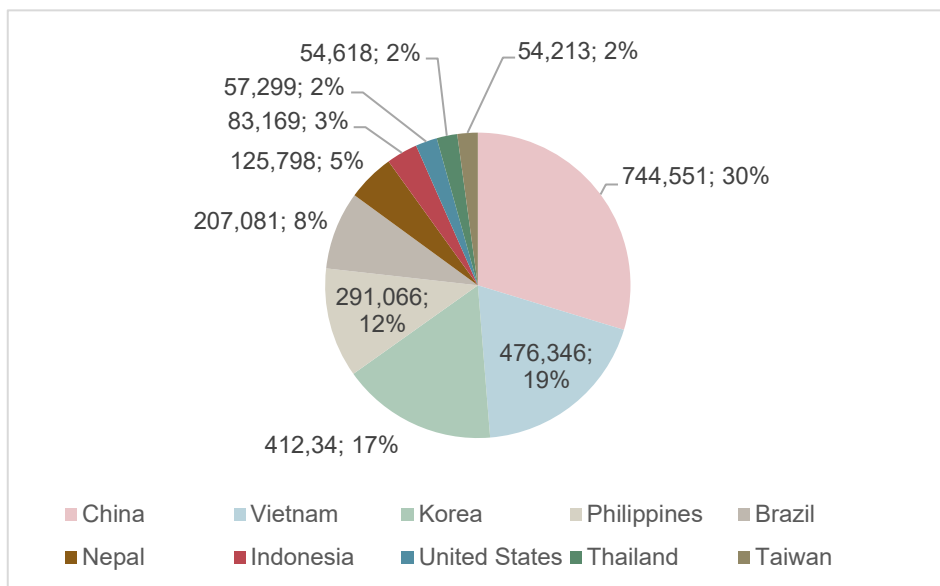


Figure 1. Number of Foreign Residents in Japan by June 2022.  
Source: Immigration Services Agency (2022).

Green (2017) provided insightful analysis regarding both the economic and cultural dimensions of immigration, highlighting the perceived threats and the significance of societal change. His findings indicate that cultural factors are significantly stronger predictors of anti-immigrant sentiment than economic concerns in Japan. This observation is intuitive, considering Japan’s ageing population and growing labour shortages. While Japanese citizens may understand the economic rationale for increased immigration, resistance persists, largely due to cultural differences (Green, 2017). Despite this cultural reluctance, the number of immigrants in Japan has steadily increased since 1990. This growth has been driven by the 1990 revision of the Immigration Control and Refugee Act, the introduction of the Special Law on Immigration Control (1991), and other essential reforms, which will be discussed in later sections.

## Japanese immigration policies and their impact on migration trends

The process of reconfiguring migration policies in Japan evidently reflects the evolving social construction of 'skills'. While maintaining the official principle that the country admits only 'skilled workers', the definition of 'skills' has been gradually broadened in response to various social, economic and political pressures.

Although the Japanese government had long admitted skilled migrants under regular work visas, it began to develop more specific skilled migration policies in the 2000s, paying attention to different categories of migrants and skill sets. These policies did not follow a strictly linear progression but were shaped by competing imperatives. Initially, policy discussions were dominated by globalisation, particularly in the context of an increasingly competitive global labour market and talent acquisition. Recognising the rising global demand for an IT workforce, the Japanese government acknowledged the challenges of securing highly skilled migrants in this sector, particularly given the competition from other industrialised nations and emerging economies (Oishi, 2021).

In response, Japan launched 'the Points-Based Preferential Immigration Treatment for Highly Skilled Foreign Professionals' in 2012. This system aimed to attract and retain highly skilled foreign talent by offering increased incentives for migrants to live and work in Japan (Oishi, 2021). As Komine explains,

Migrants working in the areas of research, technology and investment, and business management are assessed on the basis of education, work experience, income, age, and other miscellaneous factors, such as Japanese language proficiency... Applicants who manage to score 70 points or more are qualified for the scheme (Komine, 2014, p. 214).

The East Japan Great Earthquake and the Fukushima disaster in March 2011 added an additional layer of urgency for developing new policies to promote the long-term settlement of skilled migrants and minimise their exodus. In March and April 2011, over a half million migrants left the country (Oishi, 2021). While many eventually returned, the number remained below the pre-disaster levels for some time, triggering a widespread sense of urgency among policymakers to attract more skilled migrants from overseas to contribute to the Japanese economy. This led to the launch of the points-based system in 2012 (Oishi, 2021).

The central government came under further pressure when Hiroya Masuda, the former governor of Iwate Prefecture and former Minister of Internal Affairs and

Communication, published a book titled '*Disappearance of Regional Areas*'. In it, he warned that 896 villages and towns in Japan would soon 'disappear' due to a rapid decline of women of child-bearing age (Masuda 2014, as cited in Oishi & Hamada, 2019). His book, as well as his policy paper called 'Masuda Report', sent shockwaves across the country.

At the same time, regional governments were demanding greater political and financial autonomy through major administrative system reforms to better meet more socio-economic challenges in their prefectures and municipalities. In response to these regional concerns, the central government took two major actions. First, in 2015, it announced its commitment to 'regional vitalisation' (*chihou sousei*), creating a new cabinet minister position for 'the Promotion of Overcoming Population Decline and Vitalising Local Economy in Japan'. Second, it introduced a major policy scheme for regional migration (Oishi, 2021).

A major policy shift took place in 2018, when the Japanese government announced that it would drastically open its labour market to 'new categories of migrants', including those without tertiary education. Over the next five years, the country planned to admit up to 345,150 migrants under a new visa programme: the 'Specified Skilled Workers No.1 visa' (SSW-1) and 'Specified Skilled Worker No.2' (SSW-2). These visas applied to 14 occupational sectors, including agriculture, elder care and construction—sectors previously considered 'unskilled' and 'semiskilled' under earlier migration schemes.

The government recognised that these sectors faced chronic and severe labour shortages, even after implementing measures to improve productivity, encourage greater workforce participation from women and the elderly, and enhance wages and working conditions. Furthermore, under the new scheme, migrants demonstrating advanced skill levels through industry-specific skill tests after five years would gain a path to permanent residency and family reunification. This policy shift was highly significant, as the Japanese government had long maintained a strict principle of only admitting 'skilled migrants' with a bachelor's degree on a temporary basis, while restricting their ability to settle permanently (Oishi, 2021).

**Table 3. Newly-defined skilled sectors and maximum number of migrants to be admitted in 2019-2024.**

Industries	Maximum numbers (2019–2024)
Elderly care	60,000
Food service (restaurants)	53,000
Construction	40,000
Building cleaning	37,000
Food/drink manufacturing	34,000
Hospitality (accommodation)	22,000
Primary materials industry	21,500
Shipbuilding	13,000
Fisheries	9,000
Automobile maintenance	7,000
Electric/electronic-related industries	4,700
Industrial machinery manufacturing	5,250
Airlines	2,200
Total	345,150

Source: Cabinet Office (2018e) as cited in Oishi (2021).

For FY2018–2019, the national government allocated 21.1 billion yen for comprehensive measures and programmes aimed at accepting and integrating migrants (Liu-Farrer, 2020b). The policy guideline, titled ‘Comprehensive Policies for the Acceptance of and Coexistence with Foreign Talent’, had four major pillars:

- 1) public hearings from practitioners as well as awareness raising for multicultural coexistence,
- 2) life support for migrants as community members (*seikatsusha*),
- 3) programmes to promote the appropriate and smooth acceptance of foreign talent,
- 4) creation of a new immigration control system.

The first pillar, public hearings, marked an entirely new development in Japan’s approach to integration. This initiative was designed to incorporate the voices of civil society organisations into state policies and entails the component of implementing activities for raising human rights awareness under the same banner. The second pillar, life support, covered an extensive range of services, including medical interpretation, Japanese language programmes, and assistance for migrants’ children. The most notable development in this area was the establishment of ‘one-stop centres’ in 100 cities across Japan, providing migrants with comprehensive support in 11 languages (Cabinet Office 2018f as cited in Oishi, 2021).

The most significant institutional development took place in 2019, when the Immigration Bureau, formerly an office within the Justice Ministry, was upgraded to a higher-level agency, the Immigration Services Agency. This reform signalled the

government's commitment to accepting more migrants and addressing their social integration in a more structured and comprehensive manner. With these national-level integration measures implemented for the first time, Japan entered a new era of migration and integration in 2019 (Oishi, 2021).

## The Technical Intern Training Program (TITP)

The Technical Intern Training Program (TITP) was introduced in 1990 as a means for Japan to support the development needs of its neighbouring countries. In 2020 alone, the programme brought in as many as 402,356 trainees, accounting for a significant portion of the 1.7 million migrants in Japan (Onuki, 2023). While the programme initially appeared beneficial to both the participating nations and the interns, many trainees found that their expectations were not met. Some researchers have criticised the TITP as a backdoor channel for Japan to meet its demand for cheap labour (Kamibayashi, 2013; Kalapong, 2022; Onuki, 2023; Chiavacci, 2024). Rather than primarily benefiting the foreign nationals involved, the scheme appears to have served the needs of small and medium enterprises (Onuki 2023).

Although the Japanese government may have introduced the programme with noble intentions, its governance structure and reliance on numerous intermediaries—both at the point of departure and arrival—have exacerbated the challenges faced by migrants. Initially, the programme allowed interns to work in Japan for one year and acquire skills not readily available in their home countries. However, in 1997, the training period was extended from one to three years. As Onuki (2023) explains,

The overwhelming majority of trainees hail from Asia, and in 2016, Vietnam replaced China as the top source of trainees. In 2020, Vietnamese trainees accounted for 54.3% of the total, followed by Chinese at 19.1%, the Philippines at 8.6%, and Indonesians at 8.3%. The number of approved occupations for the TITP rose from 17 to 86 (pp. 40-41).

Rather than opting for direct government supervision, business leaders lobbied for establishing a supervising organisation, which would be at arm's length from the government. The Japan Business Federation played a crucial role in advocating for the expansion of the TITP to serve the interests of its members, primarily small and medium-sized enterprises. The advantages to Japanese industry are incalculable. As Onuki (2023) further explains,

The TITP is designed to provide a rotating and stable supply of a ‘calculable workforce’, secured by both a strict restriction on trainees to change jobs because of legal ties to their first employers and the prohibition of their settlement, or family reunification, in Japan... This rotation mechanism flexibly adjusts the labour force supply (p. 43).

A case study involving Thai TITP participants provides valuable insight into how trainees have experienced the programme. It might be instructive in understanding how other nationals navigate the system. From the moment they arrive in Japan, trainees are made aware that their stay in the country is temporary, which discourages them from making long-term plans, such as seeking citizenship or permanent residence. Beyond this restriction, the trainees are denied the freedom to choose their own housing. Instead, they are required to lodge in facilities provided by their Japanese employers, often in locations isolated from the local communities (Kalapong, 2022).

Criticism from participants, scholars, and social welfare groups led to government reforms of the TITP in 2010. Among the key changes was the introduction of two residence status categories:

Technical Intern Training (i): refers to first-year technical intern trainees, who must complete language and skills training in classroom setting.

Technical Intern Training (ii): refers to second-year technical intern trainees, who must pass a competence examination before proceeding to practical work (Kalapong, 2022).

In 2016, further reforms were introduced through the Act on Proper Technical Intern Training and Protection of Technical Intern Trainees, which sought to hold accountable the organisations responsible for overseeing the programme. Penalties were stipulated for those failing to comply with the Act (Kalapong, 2022). Another reform in 2017 broadened opportunities for more migrants to participate in the programme while aiming to reduce some of the burdens trainees previously faced. To further improve the system, ‘in 2019, the government of Japan introduced a new scheme for receiving workers—the so-called specified skilled workers. TITP workers can transfer to this status, which will extend their stay in Japan even longer’ (Kalapong, 2022, p. 82).

# The Perennial Pursuit of Highly-Skilled Migrants

While Japan has long been perceived as a nation reluctant to embrace immigration, its approach to high-skilled migrants presents a more nuanced reality. When it comes to attracting top-tier professionals, Japan is as competitive as other advanced countries, actively seeking to attract individuals who can contribute to its economic and technological advancement. Some researchers even argue that Japan should now be classified as a migration country, at least in terms of its policies toward skilled labour (Wakisaka & Cardwell, 2021). The Japanese government has established clear criteria for individuals qualifying as highly skilled migrants. These typically include:

- 1) A graduate degree or its equivalent, demonstrating advanced expertise in a specified field.
- 2) At least ten years of professional experience, ensuring a high level of competence and practical knowledge.

As Wakisaka and Cardwell (2021) note, 'No language test is required, although some jobs, including medical doctors, demand a prerequisite qualification in Japanese' (p. 5). This flexibility in language requirement is particularly notable, as it differs from immigration policies in some other countries where language proficiency is a prerequisite for entry or permanent residence.

Although Japan's active recruitment of highly skilled migrants may appear to be a recent phenomenon, the government's efforts to attract this category of workers date back to 1988. Over the decades, Japan has gradually expanded its eligibility criteria in response to shifting economic needs, demographic changes, and global competition for talent. The government has introduced various incentives and policy adjustments aimed at making Japan a more attractive destination for skilled professionals. However, the country still faces challenges in retaining such migrants, as social and cultural barriers often deter long-term settlement.

## Conclusion

The evolution of migration patterns in Japan reveals a complex history shaped by periods of historical isolationism, rapid modernization, and fluctuating immigration policies. While Japan has traditionally maintained a cautious stance on immigration, recent decades have witnessed significant policy shifts, particularly in response to labour shortages and demographic challenges. The introduction of the Technical

Intern Training Program (TITP) and the Specified Skilled Workers visa categories marks a notable departure from past restrictive policies, signalling a greater willingness to accommodate foreign labour.

Despite these advancements, sustainable challenges remain. The integration of immigrants into Japanese society continues to be a complex issue, as does the need to address concerns over workplace conditions, exploitation and cultural differences (Liu-Farrer, 2020a). Nevertheless, the government's efforts to attract and retain highly skilled migrants highlight its recognition of the need for a more inclusive and sustainable immigration strategy.

As Japan continues to navigate the complexities of migration, it must carefully balance economic needs with social cohesion, ensuring that both the nation and its immigrant workforce can thrive together. The future of migration in Japan will be shaped by its ability to adapt its policies and practices to an ever-changing global landscape while upholding a commitment to human rights, social integration, and long-term economic stability.

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# China's Evolving Migration Landscape: Balancing Openness, Security, and National Identity

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The People's Republic of China (PRC) remains one of the major emigration countries worldwide, with Chinese diasporas located in different parts of the world. The formation of overseas Chinese communities can be traced back to the long history of mobility with neighbouring states. After the PRC was established in 1949, its migration policies gradually moved towards extreme control due to political reasons. After the economic opening and reforms in the late 1970s, economic development led China to become the second-largest economic power. Subsequently, its migration dynamics also experienced rapid change in the past decades. China underwent a migration transition with its process of integration into the world market. Alongside Chinese emigrants and returning migrants, a new trend has emerged with temporary migrants and foreign immigrants moving to China. To support economic growth, more measures have been introduced to ease travel and residency for foreign citizens. On a macro level, the Chinese government has worked to liberalize entry and exit policies to attract more travellers, reduce barriers for foreigners, and attract international talent. Meanwhile, as China becomes a middle-income nation with wealthier and better-educated citizens, the image of Chinese migrants is shifting from low-wage workers to potential investors and professionals. This new generation of migrants is more mobile and less inclined to change their citizenship, driven by both economic factors and a variety of other motivations to live in different countries and regions.

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However, the further opening of immigration policies in China faces several significant drawbacks. China is an authoritarian country with a long-existing mobility control system. Its immigration policies remain among the strictest in the world regarding foreigners who wish to obtain permanent residence and become naturalized. The legislation on immigration affairs is fragmented and discontinuous. Most importantly, the current nation-building narratives in China present a paradox that cannot be easily reconciled with non-Chinese immigrants. Narratives of nationalism contradict the integration of new members into the political community.

Furthermore, the primary management entity for immigration affairs remains under the control of the public security sector. In China, there is an increasing emphasis on national security issues related to foreign citizens. Amid tensions between China and Western countries, along with pandemic lockdowns, attitudes toward foreigners have become ambivalent. While there is a sentiment of welcoming foreigners into China, xenophobia also exists, resulting in a complex interplay between these opposing feelings.

China is also confronting the same challenges that many of the world's major powers face in balancing development and security concerns in relation to immigration issues. This chapter focuses on the immigration dynamics in mainland China from 2012 to 2024. Many socio-political aspects in China have profoundly changed during this period, since the current president came to power. These changes also have an impact on immigration dynamics. Including Belt and Road initiatives, a series of ambitious programs were implemented and aimed at bringing its citizens to 'go global' and attracting global talents and investors to 'bring in' (Ministry of Commerce of People's Republic of China, 2017).

At the same time, many reforms unprecedented in the past decades were introduced, including the liberalization of the visa regime, the facilitation of the residency application procedure, and the naturalization of elite athletes. However, these efforts were often interrupted by unprecedented security issues. The outbreak of the pandemic at the end of 2019 suddenly blocked all such initiatives, and the Zero-COVID policy shut off opportunities for further opening. After reopening its borders in 2022, another wave of entry policy liberalization resumed. In terms of emigration, a new model of mobility has been observed since the beginning of the 2020s due to control measures imposed during the nationwide lockdown combined with post-pandemic economic stagnation in China. This situation stimulated an emerging emigration wave among middle-class relocating to other countries.

China has a long migration history. Even before the modern nation-state concept was introduced in China, inter-regional mobility between southern China and Southeast Asian countries had already existed. However, the concept of national borders and the immigration control system did not exist in China at that time. As a traditional agricultural civilization, emigration was considered disloyal to the empire, and the flow of people was also considered a threat to society. This led to the isolation of the Chinese empire from the rest of the world until European colonizers forced a change in this status in the mid-19th century.

With the fall of the Qing dynasty, Chinese migrants moved to broader destinations, including the Europe, the Americas, Japan, and Australia. From 1911 to 1949 the first wave of out-migration took place, as China became more integrated with the rest of the world and adopted a modern border control system. However, due to China being involved in continuous wars, including both civil unrest and foreign invasions, the number of incoming migrants was very small.

In 1949, with the establishment of the People's Republic of China, China duplicated the Soviet institutions of social control, including a residential registration established in the Soviet Union in the 1930s. The entry and exit policies also reproduced the Soviet ones, with an emphasis on restricting the mobility of people, especially those with foreign backgrounds (van Dongen, 2022). As China aligned itself with the Socialist bloc and became isolated from the West, there were only limited people-to-people exchanges between China and other socialist countries, primarily involving trainees, students, and labourers participating in foreign aid projects.

Later, with the Sino-Soviet split and ongoing political movements, such as the Anti-Rightist campaign in the late 1950s and the Cultural Revolution, political instability and hostility toward both the United States and the Soviet Union led to a sharp decline in the presence of incoming foreigners and emigrants, nearly erasing them from the records.

Starting in 1978, economic development became the top priority, and the market system was introduced in China. To promote its opening up, integrate into the global market economy, and attract foreign investment, new policies needed to be implemented. Measures such as establishing special economic zones required further easing of restrictions on cross-border mobility. To accommodate such legislative needs, the Chinese nationality law came into force in 1980, and five years later, the Exit and Entry Administration Law of the People's Republic of China introduced new regulations for foreign citizens and their immigration processes within Chinese territory.

In the early era of economic opening and reform, overseas Chinese in the rising Asian economies, as well as in other developed regions of the world, were encouraged to return to invest and contribute to bringing prosperity to their ancestors' hometowns. The returning migrants from overseas Chinese communities were, indeed, a major source of foreign direct investment.

In 1992, another wave of opening initiated after Deng's trip to the southern China, accompanied by a new emigration trend and a further effort to bring multinational enterprises. In 2001, China joined the WTO, and Chinese migration patterns have been much more diverse since then. Along with labour migrants, new types of migrants, such as educational and professional migrants appeared. China started to participate in global competitions for talent acquisition. Becoming the centre of world manufacturing has led to an increasing number of foreign citizens coming to China for various reasons, but the legislation on immigration affairs remained the same as it was in the 1980s, which lagged behind modern developments and faced many emerging issues that challenged immigration regulations and laws.

In the past decade, facing both internal and external challenges, China has gradually started to implement reforms in immigration policies. Internally, the demographic situation is undergoing transition, the ageing population is increasing, and China is no longer the country with the largest population in the world. The total fertility rate has dropped, and the annual number of newborns is historically low. Externally, China actively participates in the competition for global talent, and its economic transition and industrial upgrading require international professionals and skilled workers to migrate to the country and stay long-term. However, there have been fewer policy adjustments in comparison with major immigration destination countries. The overall immigration policy changes in China can be summarised in two directions. First, attracting foreign professionals, talented individuals, and high-skill workers. Second, liberalising visa regimes: expanding bilateral visa-free agreements and implementing unilateral visa-free travel with certain foreign countries.

Talented migrants comprise a small proportion of the immigrant inflow in China. Nevertheless, the government's top-down initiative to encourage foreign citizens to come and reside in China can be seen as an early effort to reform future immigration policies. Such an ambitious project aims to build a major world centre of talent. Given the current situation, top officials have recognized that China will face challenges in obtaining advanced technologies from the West in the next phase of development. Consequently, the primary focus of immigration policies is to enhance fundamental science, strengthen basic research, and foster self-reliance in advanced technologies. A recently introduced concept by party elites is the notion of 'new

quality productive forces'. The previous labour-intensive and investment-oriented economic development models cannot be sustainable. The only way out is to upgrade the economy, by driving innovation and technology. Highly skilled professionals stand at the core of achieving this goal. The Chinese Communist Party reports have pointed out the overall developmental direction and goals in the Chinese context, which should also become the foundation for policymaking. Talent is a strategic resource for achieving national rejuvenation and maintaining competitiveness in the international community. Such claims have been mentioned in the most recent two Party National Congress reports (International Department, Central Committee of CPC, 2023).

The Central Conference on Talent-Related Work, first convened by top-level officials in 2021, underscores the highest-level commitment to competing for foreign talent migration, highlighting it as a national priority (the State Council of the People's Republic of China, 2021). So far, returning students have constituted a significant part of the foreign talent attraction project; the overall estimated number stands at 481,000 from 1978 to 2017. Other state-sponsored 'Thousand Talent' programmes brought more than 7,000 experts to China who worked in various fields (Zhang & Geiger, 2020). The main criticism on the above projects concerns the very high standards for applicants. Only a small number of potential migrants can meet the criteria to get long-term residency in China. Compared with major talent-destination countries, China's policies only focus on those at the very top of their field but ignore emerging talents, younger generations, and new graduates from Chinese higher educational institutes, who are also seeking to work and live in China.

The other new dynamic is the facilitation of travel restrictions to China as a response to the promise from the decision-making level that China will open further. Since 2014, the number of countries signing bilateral visa-free agreements with China has increased. Most of these countries are participants in the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) or countries that share close relations with China. China and Belarus liberalised visa restrictions in 2018; citizens from both countries can enjoy a visa-free regime for 30 days within each 180-day period. On 18 January 2020, a bilateral visa-free regime agreement was signed between China and Armenia, allowing visa-free stays of up to 90 days without requiring a pre-applied visa.

Starting in 2017, several Balkan countries, including Serbia (2017) and Bosnia and Herzegovina (2018), also lifted visa restrictions. Meanwhile, Central Asian countries, which previously had strict visa regulations for Chinese visitors, also opened their borders to them. Kazakhstan signed a bilateral visa-free agreement with China, allowing citizens of both countries to travel visa-free for up to 30 days. Kazakhstan

became the first neighbouring country of China to offer a visa-free regime for Chinese visitors. Uzbekistan, another Central Asian country rich in tourism resources, also implemented a visa-free regime in September 2019. In February 2021, the visa-free stay was extended to 10 days. In December 2024, China and Uzbekistan signed an agreement allowing citizens of both countries a visa-free travel for up to 30 days. Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are also considering adopting similar policies for visitors from China, aiming to attract more tourists and investment from China.

China gradually reopened its borders and lifted the pandemic-induced restriction measures from 2022. However, due to the closure of the border and the cancellation of transportation, the decline in foreign visitors impacted not only the inbound tourist industry but also China's connection with the world. Concerns are rising that China is becoming isolated, which could hinder its further economic growth. Thus, in November 2023, China introduced unilateral visa-free travel for citizens from five EU countries, later extending the list to 12 countries (Symons, 2024). In 2024, Malaysia, Thailand, and Singapore signed a bilateral visa-free agreement with China. The 144-hour transit visa-free regime also resumed in 2024, expanding to include many new provinces and cities that were never covered in the previous policy. According to the National Immigration Administration (NIA), 14.64 million foreigners entered China in the first half of 2024, an increase of 152.7 percent compared to 2023 (Xinhua, 2024). Of these, 8.54 million foreign visitors travelled under the visa-free regime, recording an annual growth of 190.1 percent (Global Times, 2024). The statistics show that China is returning to its pre-pandemic track and maintaining strong connections with the global community.

However, as an emerging international migration destination country, the top-down promotion of further border openness and long-term residency rights for foreign citizens is hindered by the securitisation of migration issues. Immigration management remains under the public security (internal affairs) department, which is characterized by contradictory policies, a lack of transparency in decision-making, inconsistent law enforcement, and a reluctance to openly release migration-related data and reports. This opacity makes it difficult for international observers to accurately analyse China's current immigration dynamics.

Like many countries dealing with immigration, China is now encountering the paradox of balancing immigration and security. On the one hand, its rise to the world's second-largest economy over the past four decades has been fuelled by opening up and embracing globalisation. This openness requires more liberalised policies for entry, exit, and residence for both foreign nationals and citizens, supporting the nation's ongoing commitment to further openness. However, the

fluid nature of immigration presents challenges to maintaining stability within China. To address this, the country has increasingly relied on advanced surveillance technologies, such as biometric data collection, to monitor and manage the activities of foreigners. In addition, the external environment in China has profoundly changed compared to the early 2000s. The political relations between China and the United States and its allies have deteriorated due to the trade war, the pandemic, and recent conflicts. The hostile attitude towards citizens from Western countries and the arrest of alleged foreign agents accused of spying also raise concerns among citizens from these countries (Reuters, 2024). The balance between security and development is a key theme the party elites frequently emphasise when facing the ‘major changes unseen in a century’ (ul Khaliq, 2023). The ambivalence towards immigration policy also reflects China’s struggles in both controlling and promoting immigration.

Domestically, China is also facing the problem of how to integrate foreign citizens into its nation-building narratives. China needs to update its nationalist narratives inherited from the previous generation to be more inclusive in order to reconcile the arrival of new immigrants, including returning migrants, children of transnational marriages, and naturalized foreigners who have no connection with China. This involves updating the definition of China, Chinese identity, and Chineseness. For instance, the PRC officially recognises 56 ethnic groups – a common belief deeply rooted in Chinese society. However, such ethnic categorisation, based on Marxist-Leninist principles, is facing challenges in adapting to the new situation and determining how to fit foreign migrants into such categories. This has become an urgent issue, as domestic identification documents usually require a compulsory column for stating ethnicity. Additionally, ethnic minorities have certain affirmative rights, while it is a controversial topic whether foreign immigrants should also enjoy such rights. Furthermore, due to the Hukou system, Chinese citizens experience unequal rights in education, medical care, and other social welfare benefits based on their household registration. Determining what kind of social benefits newly naturalised citizens should have is another point that the decision-makers must consider.

China officially does not recognise dual citizenship, but in practice, the issue sometimes falls into a grey area, involving a degree of informality. For example, to improve the performance of Chinese teams in international sports events, China has adopted international practices by naturalising elite foreign athletes, particularly to strengthen underperforming sports such as football, basketball, and winter sports. The appearances of naturalised athletes has sparked a huge debate in China about whether these ‘new Chinese’—in terms of having Chinese citizenship—can represent

China globally. This emerging phenomenon also raises questions regarding the process of obtaining and renouncing citizenship. Additionally, concerns over some Chinese citizens holding dual or multiple citizenship pose challenges to citizenship education in China, complicating efforts to promote a clear and consistent understanding of national identity (Brownell, 2022).

Middle-class emigration is another new dynamic that has attracted scholarly attention since the pandemic. It originated from an internet meme: ‘run’, or ‘runology’, which translates literally as ‘the study of escape’ or ‘the philosophy of feeling’. Due to the strict lockdown measures during the pandemic, big cities like Shanghai, with a mature middle class, became tired of such social control methods. Combined with the pressure of living and a highly competitive environment, the growing middle class became eager to ‘escape’ this environment and seek a more relaxed lifestyle abroad. The growing concerns about China’s future and the possibility of slowing economic growth, along with fears that a stable and decent life will no longer be guaranteed, have given rise to a new public sentiment. This has pushed the middle class to consider and evaluate potential opportunities to move abroad.

In 2022, after another round of lockdown in major cities, the search for the keyword ‘immigration’ increased by 440 percent on WeChat (Huang, 2022). Immigration consultation services had more inquiries than usual. The new generation that grew up during China’s era of rapid economic growth is unprepared to face a society where development is slowing down. Using immigration as a way to seek further opportunities is one of their few available options; in other words, they are voting with their feet in response to their lack of ability to influence the political direction of China. These new dynamics show that the reasons and motivations for emigration are diverse in a country transitioning into a middle-income status. Economic factors may not be the only motivation, the domestic social and political environment also plays a significant role in shaping potential migrants’ decision-making process.

In general, China and its migration dynamics are now undergoing a dramatic transition. Rapid economic growth has created a new, wealthier middle class with the aspiration and capability to move to another country and participate in skilled and professional jobs, unlike the previous generation of migrants, when Chinese workers were primarily employed in heavy labour occupations. Meanwhile, irregular border-crossing activities persist for those potential emigrants who cannot obtain a proper legal status in their destination countries.

China is also transitioning into a rising immigration destination, with the authorities implementing policies and reforms to attract foreign talent for long-term residence

in China. However, there are many challenges that China faces in becoming a country with a substantial international immigrant population. As an ethnically homogeneous country, integrating new immigrants into the nation-building narratives presents a new challenge for Party officials. The overall number of naturalized foreigners remains very small. Major institutional barriers still hinder foreign citizens from receiving equal national treatment. There is no comprehensive immigration law in China. The National Immigration Administration was only established in 2018. Regulations and policies on immigration issues are fragmented and sometimes contradict each other. As a result, China is simultaneously tightening control over the inflow of foreigners while promoting more visitors and immigrants, creating a complex and paradoxical dynamic in its immigration landscape.

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# North Coast Javanese Fisher Migration, 1900s -2010s

*Pujo Semedi*<sup>5</sup>

## Introduction

In this chapter, I will discuss the migration of fishermen along the North Coast of Java (Indonesia) from the early 20th century to the present. This chronological overview outlines the push-pull factors and migration patterns, the social networks that facilitate these movements, and the implications of this migration for fisher welfare and fisheries sustainability. Generally, the primary driving force behind fisher migration is the depletion of marine resource stocks in specific fishing areas, which occurs quickly due to the nature of resource ownership as common property and the increasing population of fishermen. More specifically, three aspects must be considered regarding fisher migration.

First, fishing labour migration is typically temporary. Traditionally, this movement has been seasonal, aligned with the fishing season. Nowadays, labour migration in Java occurs under a two-year work contract (Semedi and Schneider, 2021). This means that the migration of fishermen rarely raises social issues for migrants or settlers in an area. On one hand, this type of migration does not lead to colonization problems. However, this does not imply that fisher migration does not create issues, as they are not tied to a region and have no concern for resource maintenance. They will arrive at a body of water and leave once the resources there are exhausted. This situation is connected to the nature of maritime resources, which are largely considered common property.

Secondly, fisher migration often expands fishing grounds, which sooner than later leads to overfishing (Butcher, 2004). Overfishing in international waters is

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accelerating due to the lack of property rights and jurisdictional bodies governing these areas (Paniagua and Rayamajhee, 2024). Fishing on the international high seas increases costs and can only be conducted by large capitalist companies. These factors increase economic pressure on fish stocks and the crew's welfare.

Furthermore, migration places individuals in a vulnerable position, dependent on the goodwill of agents or employers who offer jobs but lack the social protections of their home village or country. This vulnerability is currently exacerbated, as migrants frequently work in international waters or developing nations, far from the protections provided by either their home government or their employer's host country (Strating, Rao, and Yea, 2024, p. 2).

## Method

The data in this study come from fieldwork on the north coast of Java that I have been conducting since the 1980s, government archives, library studies, and video recordings made by fishermen and shared on YouTube and other digital platforms. Thanks to these videos, I can gather information similar to participant observation without being among the fishermen. By analysing this material, I can also trace a picture of fishermen's career trajectories, observing how they move from fishing boats on the north coast of Java to fishing boats abroad, and how they move from one country to another in search of better income and working conditions.

In addition to these sources, I have also conducted interviews with fishermen, community members, and local authorities to gain insights into their lived experiences. These interviews help contextualise the visual data and provide a more comprehensive understanding of migration patterns, economic pressures, and social networks shaping fisher mobility. Moreover, government reports and legal documents have been examined to track regulatory changes affecting fisheries and fisher migration.

## Overview

The earliest written data on sea fisheries in Java can be traced back to the 10th century, in inscriptions that mention various types of side dishes from sea fish—tuna, pomfret, and squid (Jones, 1984, pp. 34-58). Records from the 14th century reveal the existence of royal officers mandated to regulate coastal fishing, and records

from the 16th century mention the export trade of dried sea fish from Java to other islands. All of this information indicates that since the beginning of the second millennium, some Javanese people have made marine fishing one of their main sources of livelihood.

Government records show that in the 1810s, there were around 35,000 fishermen in Java, which was only a small fraction of the total population estimated at 7.5 million (Boomgaard, 1987, p. 117; van Zanden, 2012, p. 3). This number increased rapidly over seven decades to 250,000 in the 1870s (Masyhuri, 1995, p. 111). This quantitative change was also accompanied by a qualitative change, in that sea fishing changed from secondary or seasonal work to a permanent occupation for a number of Javanese residents.

At least three factors contributed to the changes in the number of fishermen and the economic status of fishing labour in the 19th century. First, there was an increase in purchasing power among the people as a result of the intensification of agricultural production under the colonial policy of the Cultivation System (Fasseur, 1992). Most of the wealth generated by this policy was transported and enjoyed in the Netherlands. However, some prosperity was left in Java that was able to increase people's purchasing power and pave the way for the marketing of fishermen's catches. Secondly, capital was made available to buy boats and fishing gear for the fishermen through the hands of tax farmers, many of whom also held a monopoly on the salt and fish trade (Masyhuri, 1995). Third, the labour force was pushed out of the agricultural sector due to the social pressures of the Cultivation System, and new employment opportunities were needed (Semedi, 2003, p. 45). The availability of labour, markets, and capital encouraged fishing in Java to grow into a strong economic sector, with a total catch of 258,502 tons worth 60 million guilders in 1865—equivalent to the cost of building a 500-kilometer railway in Java (Mulyana, 2018, p. 3). The lives of fishermen at that time was reported as relatively prosperous (van Zanden, 2012, p. 9).

In the 19th century, fishermen on the North Coast of Java used completely non-mechanized boats that relied on sails and oars for movement. They only used salt as a preservative for their catch. These technological limitations confined their fishing grounds to no more than 30 kilometers from the coastline, ensuring they could bring their catch to market within hours—otherwise, the fish would spoil (van Pel, 1938). During that time, fishermen worked daily in their respective villages, leaving in the morning to take advantage of the land breeze and returning in the afternoon with the sea wind. Even with these simple fishing technologies, the 19th-century North Coast of Java fishermen managed to exert heavy pressure on the fish stock.

By the 1870s, fish stock in the north Java coastal fishing ground was overfished. Since 1870, fishermen's catches have consistently declined, falling to 77,000 tons in 1904 and further down to 20,000 tons by the end of the Japanese occupation in 1945. Following the Independence War, the catch increased to 31,000 tons in 1950 and rose to 150,000 tons in 1968. The colonial era record was surpassed in 1978, with the catch rising to 410,000 tons in 1986, ultimately reaching 645,000 tons in 1998 (Semedi, 2005, p. 2). The dynamics of catches in the 20th century were achieved through two social mechanisms: migration and modernisation of fishing technology.

## Fisher Migration

The decline in catches in the late 19th century prompted fishermen to look for solutions. Fishing in waters farther from the coastline where stocks were still abundant was not feasible because it would extend the voyage time, and without fish storage technology, the catch would spoil. The solution adopted by fishermen was to migrate daily and seasonally, following the fish seasonal pattern, to the waters of other villages or cities.

The Java Sea, which is the fishermen's fishing ground, is influenced by monsoon: the west wind in November-February, and the east wind in May-August. The monsoon, both west and east, also coincides with the pelagic fish season—notably *layang* and tuna—which move with the ocean currents back and forth from the Pacific to the Indian Ocean and across the fishing grounds north of fishing villages. This migration helps fishers extend the peak fishing season by intercepting the migrating fish schools further north in other districts (van Moll and sJacob, 1913, p. 60). Thus, fishers migrated to Cirebon and Rembang during the west monsoon, and during the east monsoon, they migrated to Jepara and the Gulf of Jakarta. They sailed from their villages in groups and fished in the migrating places for a few months.

The main factor in choosing a migration destination was the relationship with a big trader in the destination area who would provide an advance purchase of fish to cover the living expenses of the family left behind in the hometown. In the 1900s, at the Jakarta Fish Market, two infamous Chinese fish traders, Beng Lo and Yeng Seng, actively sponsored migrant fishermen. Both traders were known to provide an advance of up to 20 guilders for a skipper, 17 guilders for a seine master, 17 guilders for a sail master, and 15 guilders for a deckhand. In return, during their migration in Jakarta Bay, the fishermen were obliged to sell their catch to Beng Lo or Yeng

Seng (Commissie, 1905, p. 14). Debt installments were paid when the fishermen sell their catch—at a low price set by the trader. For the migrant fishermen, the traders' actions were exploitative. However, they had no choice but to accept these conditions because they needed money to support their families back home.

These big traders, who engaged in economic practices that harmed fishermen, were present in all fish markets, thus prompting government intervention to establish fishing associations in 14 fishing centres along the north coast of Java in the 1910s (Besseling, 1913). Under the management of these fishing associations, fish trade was required to be conducted through open auctions to provide the best buying price to fishers. However, the fishing associations did not succeed in eliminating the big traders or the mechanism of advances to migrant fishers. These practices continued long into the future.

Migration on the North Coast of Java did little to solve the problem of low catches among fishermen. Migration only reduced the number of days without fishing activities but did not increase their income. This was because, until the 1930s, fishing technology of the North Coast of Java fishermen did not change, and they continued to fish in nearshore waters. In fact, since the 1920s, diesel-engine boats had been widely adopted in Asia. However, due to their high price, large fishing companies were the only ones able to purchase them. Some Dutch entrepreneurs in Batavia and Surabaya seized the opportunity to establish fishing companies that operated outside the fishing grounds of sailboat fishermen. However, they were outpaced by Japanese fishermen who had adopted mechanised boats and ventured far from their country to catch fish in many parts of Indonesian waters—including the Java Sea—which lay beyond three miles from the coastline and fell into the category of international waters.

The government provided mechanised boats on credit to Javanese fishermen in the mid-1930s. However, the boats were few, so they did not significantly improve the socio-economic conditions of the fishermen. The Pacific War (1941-1945) and the Independence War (1945-1949), which lasted for almost a full decade, reduced fishing intensity due to market and transportation constraints. Normal conditions resumed in the early 1950s. Fishermen could once again go back to sea and sell their catches without much hindrance.

In the middle of the decade, the government obtained a number of small-sized motorised fishing boats to be manned by six crew members—these boats were part of a war repatriation from the Japanese Government, and a similar grant from the United States Government (Anonym, 1951). The presence of these small-engine boats encouraged innovation among boatbuilders in Java who began installing truck

diesel engines as boat propulsion. In the 1960s, fishing boat mechanisation had become widespread on Java's North Coast. From then on, fishermen could venture beyond coastal waters that had been overfished since the 1870s. With engine-powered boats, they could fish beyond the 30-kilometre limit from the shoreline and return with good catches in one-day fishing trips.

## Modernisation of Fishing Technology

Technological innovation among fishermen in the late 1960s was given a greater chance to develop through the government's marine fisheries modernisation policy. With a World Bank loan in the 1970s, the Indonesian government built a large fishing port in Pekalongan, which became the largest fishing base and fish market on the North Coast of Java. Capital owners from the city seized this development as a business opportunity. They purchased fishing boats and moored them in Pekalongan.

Within ten years, the number of engine-powered boats in Pekalongan harbor increased from just a few dozen in 1970 to 450 in 1980, and the catch rose from 2,095 tonnes to 31,869 tonnes. The rapid growth of modern fisheries in Pekalongan, as well as in numerous other coastal cities, absorbed a significant labour force from the surrounding fishing villages. These fishing labourers, who had been working in the villages with outdated small boats, flocked to the fishing vessels in the port cities, which offered the potential for better income with less physical work. Most of these workers remained in their respective villages, commuting to the port, working at sea, and then returning home.

In the late 1960s, the daily commute of fishing labourers from the village to the city was common. During that time, fishing grounds 30 to 60 kilometers from the coastline still had abundant fish stocks, and one-day fishing trips yielded good catches. However, this situation did not last long. By the early 1970s, Pekalongan fishing boats had to extend their fishing trips to three days in order to secure adequate catches. Their fishing grounds also moved farther away, reaching up to 100 kilometers from the coastline.

By the middle of the decade, the fishing grounds of Pekalongan fishermen had shifted even further into the waters surrounding the Karimun Jawa Islands, about 200 kilometers northeast of the fishing harbour. Within four to five years, after the fish stocks in the Karimun Jawa fishing grounds were depleted, the boats moved further to the Bawean and Kangean Islands (Sujastani, 1981). Their fishing trips

lasted two to three weeks (Suherman and Sadhotomo, 1985). Five years later, most of the Pekalongan purse-seiners fished in the Straits of Makassar to the east and around the waters of the Karimata Straits and the southern part of the Natuna Sea in the northwest (Nurhakim, 1995). At that time, a fishing trip lasted four to five weeks, and the crew members spent more time aboard the fishing boat than at home.

## Expansion of the Fishing Ground, 2000s-2010s

Expanding fishing grounds to areas farther from ports requires larger boats and improved storage technology. This necessitates more capital, resulting in increased exploitation pressure on the resources and reduced labour wages due to higher fishing costs. As the waters in the Natuna Sea and Makassar Strait become increasingly overfished, Javanese purse-seine vessels in the Natuna Sea have begun heading further north, approaching the borders of Vietnam, Thailand, and the Philippines in the South China Sea (Butcher, 2004, p. 264). On the eastern side, fishermen have also begun entering the Arafura Sea. In addition to the Natuna and Arafura Seas, some fishermen from the North Coast of Java have moved to the Indian Ocean south of Java and west of Sumatra. Their boats are based in Jakarta, and the crew members travel from their respective villages by bus to the port. They fish for up to six months, only returning home after they land their catch. To reach the fishing grounds, the fishermen spend up to two weeks at sea. The boats have been enlarged to ensure a productive fishing trip, and the fish storage areas are now equipped with cooling machines. The price of one fishing boat ranges from IDR 3 to 4 billion (approximately US\$ 180,000 to 240,000). Fishing entrepreneurs with substantial capital even equip boats to transport fish and fishing supplies, allowing the fishing boats to operate for 10 to 12 months at sea (NZ, 2021).

The expansion of fishing grounds into distant waters has compelled fishermen on the north coast of Java to leave their homes for extended periods. They are akin to migrant workers in the agricultural or industrial sectors who are away from home for months at a time. The key distinction, however, is that while the fishermen are at sea, their agricultural and industrial counterparts work in fields, factories, and dormitories.

Fishing in these new areas has led to high catches. However, due to elevated production costs, the wages earned by each fisherman have not increased significantly (Semedi and Schneider, 2021). After fishing for up to 10 months, a crew member can earn up to IDR 15 million (US\$ 1,000). While this may appear substantial, it translates to around IDR 1.5 million (US\$ 100) per month. This

amount is quite low for covering household expenses and supporting a family. The high fishing costs and low selling price of fish in Indonesia give leave crew members with little chance of escaping their low incomes. This problem is compounded by the fact that, within a decade, fishing grounds in the Natuna Sea and the Arafura Sea began showing signs of being fully exploited and, by the end of the 2010s, had entered overfishing status (Pusat Data, 2022, pp. 72-73).

## Overseas Fishing Labour Migration in the 2000s -2020s

The depletion of fish stocks in Indonesian waters, the low income of labour fishermen, and the waning interest among Europeans in becoming fishermen are the driving forces behind the migration of fishermen from the North Coast of Java to Europe and East Asia, including Taiwan, Korea, and Japan. (Christy, de Jong, and Knippenberg, 2021; Christy, de Jong, and Knippenberg, 2024; Kartikasari, Stringer, and Henderson, 2022).

Through a labour recruitment agency in Jakarta, they secured a two-year work contract with a monthly salary of US\$600, along with bonuses for experienced crew members. Armed with a secondary education in fisheries—established by the government in nearly every fishing port in Java—and fishing skills developed at home, these young fishermen set out to work on domestic, national, and transnational fishing vessels abroad. Foreign language skills were not a hurdle, as their work on the boat required more practical abilities than communication. While working, they gradually learned the foreign language spoken by the captain and other officers.

I first learned about the North Coast of Java fishermen working on overseas fishing fleets in the 1990s. However, their number was quite small. The migration of fishing labour abroad only became significant in the 2000s. Whenever I flew from Jakarta to Amsterdam, I encountered a group of young men with dark skin due to prolonged sun exposure and muscular arms who spoke in the dialect of the North Coast of Java. This group of fishermen departed from Amsterdam to Portugal, Scandinavia, Canada, and Peru to work in international fishing fleets in the Atlantic Ocean. A similar encounter occurred on the Amsterdam-Jakarta flight when these fishermen returned home at the end of their contract.

Determining the exact number of Indonesian fishermen working abroad poses a challenge. Official data from the Government of Indonesia has only been collected since 2017 and accounts solely for workers sent based on reports from authorized

employment agencies. The governments of the destination countries also struggle to track the number of migrant fishermen, as many do not apply for residence visas. Numerous fishing companies hire workers using a Letter of Guarantee or Letter of Contract without registering them with the local immigration office for residence and work permits.

This situation arises because the vessels operate in international waters or the waters of another country, and during work, as well as when the vessels are docked in port, the crew members remain on board (Lalu, 2024a). Based on data presented by Yen and Liu Huang (2021), I estimate that between 40,000 to 50,000 Indonesian fishing labourers work in European, Scandinavian, East Asian, South Pacific, and South American fishing fleets.

**Table 1. Number of Indonesian Fishers Overseas 2015-2024**

Year	Departure Global	Present in Taiwan
2015		9,066
2016		9,785
2017	2.819	10,524
2018	2.620	13,003
2019	2.872	11,300
2020	998	13,170
2021	184	11,790
2022	2.616	
2023	2.829	
2024	1.967	

Source: Departure Global (PPID, n.d.); Present in Taiwan: Yen and Liu Huang, 2021.

Of course, migrant fishermen experience ups and downs. Crews of European fleets enjoyed excellent accommodation onboard and good working conditions. Crews of Taiwanese fishing vessels working in local waters experience working conditions and facilities that are no different from those on Indonesian fishing vessels. Some fishermen had the misfortune of not being paid after months of work at sea (Simmons and Stringer, 2014). Some fishermen chose not to continue their contracts and escaped to take up less demanding work on land.

However, working abroad generally provides a much better income than working in Indonesia. The group of fishermen I met on the return from Amsterdam to Jakarta generally stated that they would continue their contracts. For them, working in Indonesia or abroad is the same, being away from home for months at a time, with

the difference being that working abroad pays four times as much. These fishermen also do not see working in overseas fleets as either permanent or seasonal migration but rather as expanding their fishing grounds, “The Presence of Indonesian Fishers in the Atlantic and Pacific” (Lalu, 2024b).

## Closing remark

Given the condition of Indonesia’s capture fisheries, which are increasingly affected by overfishing, fishermen’s wages are under increasing pressure. As a result, the trend of fishermen migrating to foreign countries is likely to continue rising. For a while, migration may alleviate the problem of low wages. However, this migration represents an expansion of fishing operations from Indonesian waters to international waters, where fisheries resources are devoid of government protection and are increasingly targeted by large fishing companies. Considering this, it can be anticipated that, similar to national waters, fishery resources in international waters will soon reach overfishing. After that, it remains uncertain where fishermen will find employment.

Meanwhile, working on transnational fishing fleets in international waters leaves fishers' labor vulnerable due to a lack of protection. They operate outside the jurisdiction of governmental legal safeguards. Many face exploitative working conditions, long periods at sea with little contact with their families, and the constant uncertainty of fair wages and contract enforcement. As the global demand for seafood rises, the pressure on international fisheries will continue to intensify, further exacerbating the challenges faced by migrant fishermen.

To address these pressing issues, cooperation among governments and international organisations is crucial. A stronger regulatory framework is needed to ensure that migrant fishermen receive fair wages, safe working conditions, and legal protections. Moreover, sustainable fisheries management must be prioritised to prevent further depletion of fish stocks and ensure the long-term viability of the fishing industry.

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# Improving Labour Migration Governance in Uzbekistan: Legal, Institutional and Policy Developments

*Muattara Rakhimova*<sup>6</sup>

## Migration Challenges and Dynamics in the CIS

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union and the subsequent independence of the republics, the newly established Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS)<sup>7</sup> faced numerous challenges. Among these, two key priorities emerged:

- 1) **Establishing International Recognition as Sovereign State.** The new states needed to assert their sovereignty and gain recognition as legitimate and independent actors on the global stage.
- 2) **Reformatting Bilateral Relations.** It was essential to move beyond the pre-existing bilateral frameworks inherited from the Soviet period and develop a comprehensive system of multilateral cooperation among CIS countries.

While the CIS countries shared several commonalities—such as similar approaches to economic and social development—they also encountered a range of diverging factors that led to tensions and conflicts. These included unresolved issues related to border demarcation, water resource distribution, and regional security concerns.

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<sup>7</sup> In 1991, the former republics of the USSR created the CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States)

# Migration as a Priority Issue

One of the most pressing issues for the newly independent states was migration. In the early 1990s, migration dynamics were characterised by substantial flows towards Russia and Ukraine, while the Central Asian region, including Uzbekistan, became a significant source of emigration.

**Table 1: Migration Flows in Uzbekistan in 1990-1992 (in thousands of people)**

Year	Immigrants	Emigrants	Net Migration
1990	75.7	255.3	-179.6
1991	71.5	167.4	-95.9
1992	97.8	186.5	-88.7

Source: Maksakova (1994).

During these years, the Russian Federation and Ukraine emerged as primary destinations for immigrants, while countries like Uzbekistan saw a significant outflow of people (see, for example, Table 1).

## Uzbekistan-Russia Migration Partnership

The collapse of the USSR had a profound negative impact on Uzbekistan's economy, prompting large-scale migration to Russia. Initially, this migration consisted predominantly of non-ethnic populations, followed by ethnic Uzbeks. Uzbekistan has traditionally been one of the main contributors to labour migration to Russia. During 1993-1994, the number of migrants from Uzbekistan reached a peak, fluctuating in subsequent years.

For example, according to the Federal State Statistics Service of the Russian Federation, 560.4 thousand people arrived in Russia from abroad in 2023, a 23% decrease from the previous year. Of this total, only 4% were from Uzbekistan. In contrast, Tajikistan accounted for 31% of migrants, followed by Kyrgyzstan (10%), and Ukraine, Armenia, and Kazakhstan collectively (9%) (Tochno, 2023).

The existing literature indicate that the primary motivation for immigrants from Uzbekistan is employment (Laruelle 2013, Turaeva 2016, Urinboyev 2020, Eraliev and Heusala 2021). This aligns with the broader trend of labor migration in the region.

When comparing this with data for 2024, we observe an increase in migration to certain countries. From January to November 2024, the net migration increase in Russia amounted to 420,000 people, the highest figure for the 21st century (Popkova, 2024). For example, the number of migrants from Uzbekistan rose by 83,000, from Tajikistan by 107,000, and from Kyrgyzstan by 79,000. Most of them arrived in Russia in the second half of the year (ibid.).

## Demographic Characteristics of Migrants

Analysis of the demographic characteristics of migrants to Russia reveals the following:

- **Gender Distribution:** 55% of international migrants are male, and 45% are female.
- **Age Distribution:** A significant majority (76%) are of working age, ranging from 16 years to retirement age (58 years for women and 63 years for men in Russia, as of 2023).
- **Elderly Population:** 11% are elderly, including 11 individuals over 100 years of age. The most common age group is 20-24 years (Shukurov, 2024).

These trends reinforce the fact that labour migration continues to be a critical issue within multilateral and bilateral cooperation frameworks among CIS countries. Addressing the challenges it poses requires comprehensive policies and effective in migration governance.

## Legal Aspects of Migration Governance in Uzbekistan

Over the years of independence, Uzbekistan has established a solid legal foundation that ensures the practical implementation of the universally recognised rights to work, free choice of employment, and fair working conditions for all.

Significant progress has been made in Uzbekistan in eliminating child and forced labour, safeguarding migrant workers' rights, and promoting self-employment through support for family businesses. The Ministry of Employment and Labour

Relations of the Republic of Uzbekistan<sup>8</sup> has actively collaborated with the International Labour Organisation (ILO). Uzbekistan has ratified 16 ILO conventions, including all eight core conventions. In cooperation with the ILO, the Country Programme on Decent Work for 2021-2025 is currently being implemented in Uzbekistan.<sup>9</sup>

In 2019, the UN country team in Uzbekistan conducted a Common Country Analysis (CCA), which highlights key elements of the ILO Decent Work Agenda. These included references to labour rights, the elimination of child and forced labour, the role of labour inspection and law enforcement, decent working conditions, and equal opportunities and treatment for men and women in the labour market (ILO, 2016).

However, one of the most pressing issues in this field remains labour migration, which continues to grow in all regions of the world. Developing inter-state cooperation at both global and regional levels is a critical challenge. Speaking at the international conference *‘Central Asia: Shared Past and Common Future, Cooperation for Sustainable Development and Mutual Prosperity’*, the President of Uzbekistan Shavkat Mirziyoyev (2017), emphasised: ‘A peaceful, economically prosperous Central Asia is our main goal and key task’. This statement reflects Uzbekistan’s strategic orientation towards active integration into regional and global processes, aimed at fostering inclusive global economic growth—including through more effective governance of labour migration.

The Republic of Uzbekistan has significant economic and demographic potential<sup>10</sup> in the Central Asian region. In recent years, Uzbekistan has been a leader in developing regional cooperation, with various aspects playing an important role: rapid industrial and infrastructure development, promotion of export production, attraction of foreign investment, development of international cooperation on

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<sup>8</sup> The Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations of the Republic of Uzbekistan is a state administration body implementing a common policy in the field of employment, labour migration and labour relations and in its activities under the supervision of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan - Resolution of the Cabinet of Ministers of the Republic of Uzbekistan RCM-1066 dated 31.12.2018. ‘On measures to improve the activities of the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations of the Republic of Uzbekistan’. Available at: [lex.uz/ru/docs/41430](http://lex.uz/ru/docs/41430)

<sup>9</sup> The Decent Work Country Programme 2021-2025. Available at: [https://kasaba.uz/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/RUS\\_UZB\\_DWCP-Uzbekistan-2021-2025\\_FF\\_21Sep-002.pdf](https://kasaba.uz/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/RUS_UZB_DWCP-Uzbekistan-2021-2025_FF_21Sep-002.pdf)

<sup>10</sup> The population of Uzbekistan as of January 2025 is approximately **37,5 million people**. The total annual growth of the permanent population in 2024 was **774.9 thousand**, which is an increase of 2.2% compared to the previous year. State Committee of Statistics, ‘Demographic situation in the Republic of Uzbekistan’. Available at: <https://stat.uz/uz/rasmiy-statistika/demography-2>

regional security issues in the economy and demographic growth (Abdullaeva, 2016; Abdullaeva, 2018; Abdurahmanov et al., 2017; Zokirova 2013). All these factors are characteristic of both the region and the globalised world economy.

As practice shows, the strategic course of Uzbekistan in strengthening regional cooperation, including on labour migration issues, has been reflected in several key documents, such as the *Action Strategy for Five Priority Areas of Development of the Republic of Uzbekistan for 2017-2021*,<sup>11</sup> *the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022-2026*<sup>12</sup>, and the *Uzbekistan-2030 Strategy*.<sup>13</sup>

The 2017-2021 Action Strategy of Uzbekistan, which for the first time in the country's history identified five priority areas of socio-economic development, was adopted. To implement this Strategy, about 300 laws and over 4,000 decrees and decisions were adopted, aimed at fundamental reforms in all sectors of public life.

The Strategy for 2017-2021 focused on five priority areas:

- Improvement of state and public administration;
- Ensuring the rule of law and reforming the judicial and legal system;
- Economic development and liberalisation;
- Social development;
- Ensuring security, inter-ethnic harmony, and religious tolerance, along with a balanced, mutually beneficial, and constructive foreign policy.<sup>14</sup>

Building on these achievements, the New Uzbekistan Development Strategy for 2022-2026 was adopted in January 2022.<sup>15</sup> This Strategy outlines various activities aimed at raising the state to a qualitatively new level of development, covering seven

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<sup>11</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan PD-4947 dated 7 February 2017 'On the Strategy for the further development of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017-2021'. Available at: <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/3107042:ONDATE=17.03.2021>

<sup>12</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan PD-60 dated 28 January 2022 'On the development strategy of New Uzbekistan for 2022-2026'. Available at: <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/5841077>

<sup>13</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan PD-158 dated 11 September 2023 'On the Strategy "Uzbekistan-2030"'. Available at: <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/6600404>

<sup>14</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan PD-4947 dated 7 February 2017 'On the Strategy for the further development of the Republic of Uzbekistan in 2017-2021'. Available at: <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/3107042:ONDATE=17.03.2021>

<sup>15</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan PD-60 dated 28 January 2022 'On the development strategy of the New Uzbekistan for 2022-2026' Available at: <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/5841077>

areas and including 100 strategic goals for the next five years. The strategy aims to strengthen, to develop and ensure the prosperity of the people, reflecting major trends in modern state development, such as digitalisation, the increasing role of civil society, and special attention to vulnerable populations. Its implementation will be accompanied by the adoption of legal and regulatory acts, the creation of new mechanisms and institutions or the transformation of existing ones, the introduction of new technologies and innovations, as well as continuous public awareness of the ongoing changes and best practices.

One of the seven directions of the Strategy 'Addressing global issues from a national perspective' includes Goals 79-88, which sets out measures to address global issues such as environmental problems, terrorism, corruption, migration, poverty eradication, and fighting the pandemic.<sup>16</sup>

The central focus of this Strategy is the principle of 'State for the People'. In Goal 86 'Ensuring safe, organised, and legal labour migration and an effective migration policy',<sup>17</sup> Uzbekistan has identified the further development of international cooperation in combating illegal external labor migration and human trafficking as one of the main directions in this area.

In addition, the Strategy sets out the following key tasks:

- To train citizens for work abroad in professions and foreign languages, with a systematic and accelerated implementation of measures for issuing them international certificates confirming professional qualifications;
- To expand financial and social support, life and health insurance for migrant workers;
- To reintegrate returnees from labor migration, including employment, skills development, and entrepreneurship;
- To train at least 300,000 citizens wishing to work abroad in professions and foreign languages;

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<sup>16</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan PD-60 dated 28 January 2022 'On the development strategy of the New Uzbekistan for 2022 - 2026 years' Available at: <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/5841077>

<sup>17</sup> *ibid.*

- To organize the safe and organized departure of more than 400,000 citizens for foreign labor migration, providing targeted assistance in ensuring the rights of citizens working abroad.<sup>18</sup>

As a logical extension of the Presidential Decree on the ‘Uzbekistan-2030’ Strategy and the Decree ‘On measures for the qualitative and timely implementation of the Strategy “Uzbekistan-2030” in 2023’, the Development Strategy of New Uzbekistan was approved.<sup>19</sup> It is presented in a simple and accessible form for everyone, with 100 goals clearly defined across five priority areas. Forty-four of these goals are aimed at creating decent conditions for every person to realize their potential.

The ‘Uzbekistan-2030’ Strategy is an important program for every citizen, aiming to ensure the progress of the nation and the well-being of all its citizens.<sup>20</sup>

For instance, the sub-section ‘5.1. Reforms aimed at pursuing an open, pragmatic, and active foreign policy’ in Goal 95 of the ‘Strategy for Addressing Global Issues from a National Perspective’ provides for:

- Increasing the number of agreements with foreign countries for employment;
- Organising a system of vocational training and employment for citizens in cooperation with 2,000 foreign companies as part of vocational education and foreign language training, based on public-private partnerships;
- Reintegration of returnees from labor migration, including employment, upgrading of professional skills, and encouragement of entrepreneurial initiatives;
- Further development of international cooperation in combating illegal external labor migration and human trafficking.<sup>21</sup>

Improving employment opportunities in Uzbekistan helps reduce the pressure on individuals to migrate abroad. Special state projects and programmes are developed annually to improve job-search mechanisms for vacant and quota-based jobs, and to promote effective forms of self-employment.

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan PD-158 dated 11 January 2023 ‘On the Strategy “Uzbekistan - 2030»- <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/6600404>

<sup>20</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>21</sup> *ibid.*

In other words, the large-scale work is being undertaken to create decent living conditions for the population, improve the business environment, ensure employment through socio-economic development, support active entrepreneurship, and promote innovative ideas and creative potential. For example, the ‘Every Family – Entrepreneur’ programme<sup>22</sup> was adopted.

As noted in the Programme ‘Every Family – Entrepreneur’,<sup>23</sup> an analysis of previous efforts to engage the population in entrepreneurship, create jobs, and provide practical assistance to citizens seeking income and managing labour resources had not been sufficient. Therefore, with the support of partner organisations, commercial banks, local authorities and the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations, large-scale assistance for family entrepreneurship is now being provided under the ‘Every Family – Entrepreneur’ programme.

The programme aims to improve the living standards of the population. Today, the programme is implemented in all cities and districts of the republic. In this regard, based with another government decision,<sup>24</sup> Centres to Support Family Business were established across the country, aimed at attracting more citizens into family-based enterprises.

In summary, the government is making significant efforts to improve the material conditions of citizens and bring about positive changes in the standard and quality of life, ensuring that each family enjoys a stable source of income. These efforts reflect recent and ongoing measures in Uzbekistan to improve the legal and regulatory framework and demonstrate a consistent commitment to expanding cooperation in implementation of international labour standards.

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<sup>22</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan PD-3777 dated 07 June 2018 ‘On the implementation of the programme «Every family – entrepreneur’ Available at: <https://lex.uz/docs/3772866>

<sup>23</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan PD-55 dated 20 December 2021 ‘On additional measures for the development of family business and expansion of income sources of population.’ Available at: <https://lex.uz/ru/docs/5785328>

## Strengthening Labour Migration Management in Uzbekistan

Acknowledging the growing significance of labour migration and Uzbekistan's commitment to upholding international labour standards, the country became a member of the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in November 2018. This cooperation aims to address practical migration challenges and deliver humanitarian assistance to those in need.

To protect the rights of Uzbek citizens working abroad and support victims of human trafficking, the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations established the *Fund for Support and Protection of Citizens' Rights and Interests for Performing Work Activities Abroad*.<sup>25</sup> The Fund's responsibilities include:

- **Legal and Social Protection:** Offering assistance to citizens, who have faced violence, forced labour, discrimination, or violation of labour rights abroad, or who find themselves financial hardship or lack identity documents.
- **Medical Assistance:** Covering the medical expenses of citizens injured during labour migration, in cases where they are unable to afford these costs themselves, with subsequent reimbursement by the migrant worker.
- **Repatriation and Transport:** Facilitating the return of deceased citizens' bodies and the repatriation of citizens who have been severely injured during labour activities abroad, as confirmed by relevant state authorities.
- **Support for Deported Workers:** Arranging the return of citizens deported due to violations of the host country's laws, with subsequent reimbursement of costs, and providing support for those who did not receive the promised employment conditions from foreign employers.
- **Pre-departure Training Centres:** Setting up centres in the regions for pre-departure adaptation, vocational training, foreign language education, and professional competency certification for citizens going abroad for work.
- **Awareness and Education:** Running public information campaigns to promote the organised employment system and reduce irregular labour migration.

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<sup>25</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan PD-3839 dated 05 July 2018 'On additional measures for further improvement of the system of external labour migration of the Republic of Uzbekistan.' Available at: [lex.uz/ru/docs/3811333](http://lex.uz/ru/docs/3811333)

- **Microloans:** Offering microloans through commercial banks to cover job placement expenses abroad.
- **Insurance Subsidies:** Offering one-time subsidies to insurance companies to cover premiums for life and health insurance and other risks during temporary employment outside Uzbekistan.<sup>26</sup>

As an example, in 2022, more than 308,000 Uzbek labour migrants abroad received various forms of assistance. A total of 1,397 citizens in vulnerable situations were repatriated to Uzbekistan, while \$1.2 million in unpaid wages, compensation, and insurance payments were recovered from foreign employers on behalf of migrant workers (Kun.uz, 2023)

To further support labour migrants, the Agency for External Labour Migration, under the Ministry of Employment and Labour Relations, opened offices in Moscow, Russia, and Gwangju, South Korea, in 2018. These offices serve as hubs for assisting and protecting the rights and interests of Uzbek migrant workers.

An important step in enhancing the protection of Uzbek citizens' rights abroad was the transformation of the National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Persons and Forced Labor. Established in July 30, 2019,<sup>27</sup> coordinates the activities of state and territorial bodies, self-governing bodies, and non-governmental organizations in combating human trafficking and forced labour. It is responsible for organising and implementing state programs in these areas, improving national legislation, enforcement practices, and monitoring their implementation.

These efforts reflect significant progress in strengthening institutional frameworks and administrative mechanisms to prevent child labour and forced labour in Uzbekistan.

In addition, on 23 September 2024, a video conference chaired by the country's president addressed measures for further development of the construction industry and building materials production. A new programme 'From Poverty to Prosperity' was launched, which aims to lift 500,000 people out of poverty in 2024 and one million the next year. For the successful implementation of this program, the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations must be fundamentally restructured and elevated to a new level.

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<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan PD -5775 dated 30 July 2019 «On additional measures for further improvement of the system of combating human trafficking and forced labour» of 30 July 2019. Available at: [lex.uz/ru/docs/4616390](http://lex.uz/ru/docs/4616390)

As a continuation of these efforts, the Agency for External Labour Migration under the Ministry was transferred under the authority of the Cabinet of Ministers of Uzbekistan in order to maximize the opportunities emerging in the field of external labour migration (President.uz, 2024; Kun.uz, 2024).

## Further Steps in Advancing Labour Migration Policy in Uzbekistan

Article 23 of the Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan guarantees the protection, legal support, and defence of all its citizens both domestically and abroad.<sup>28</sup> To effectively protect the rights of citizens engaged in labour migration, Uzbekistan is committed to further enhancing its national legislation in line with international treaties, which will, in turn, strengthen national institutions in the field of labour migration.

Uzbekistan is currently a member of several international organizations that manage various aspects of labour migration. It is crucial for the country to deepen its cooperation with international organizations such as the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and the International Organisation for Migration (IOM). Uzbekistan should also consider acceding to the ILO Migration Conventions to ensure equal opportunities and treatment for migrant workers.

A major step forward in this area is the Presidential Decree of April 4, 2024, titled «On Additional Measures to Improve Labour Migration Processes and Support for Persons Engaged in Temporary Work Abroad».<sup>29</sup> This decree outlines several transformative measures, including:

- **Transformation of the Agency for External Labour Migration:** The Agency has now become a government entity. Its director will serve as both the Deputy Minister of Employment and the Head of the Fund for the Support of Migrant Workers.
- **Labour Migration Attachés:** New positions of ‘Attaché for Labour Migration’ have been established in Uzbek embassies and consulates in the

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<sup>28</sup> The Constitution of the Republic of Uzbekistan adopted in 2023. Available at: <https://lex.uz/docs/6451070>

<sup>29</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan PD N-59 dated 04 April 2024, ‘On additional measures to improve labor migration processes and support persons carrying out temporary labor activities abroad’ Available at: [lex.uz/docs/6868873](https://lex.uz/docs/6868873)

UK, Germany, Poland, Hungary, and Japan, and a representative of the agency was also appointed in Saudi Arabia.

- **24-hour Call Centers:** These will be set up in embassies and relevant ministries to ensure the prompt resolution of problems faced by citizens abroad.
- **Implementation of the ‘Working Abroad Starts with *Mahalla*’ Principle:** Workers and youth leaders in *mahallas* (local community councils) will identify individuals interested in working abroad. Their data will be uploaded to the ‘Online-*Mahalla*’ platform, and candidates will be invited to recruitment competitions held by foreign employers.
- **Vocational and Language Training:** For citizens lacking professional skills and language proficiency, vocational training and targeted language education will be provided in vocational institutions. The Agency for External Labour Migration will open a center dedicated to foreign language learning and job preparation.
- **State Compensation for Employment Costs:** The state will partially cover the costs of work visas, travel, foreign language assessments, and professional qualification evaluations. Citizens obtaining an international language certificate or its equivalent will be reimbursed for 50% of their language learning costs.
- **Support for Returning Migrants:** Financial assistance and other employment services will be offered to returning migrants, following the example of the Sayhunabad district of Syr-Darya region. Preferential loans will be provided under the ‘Continuous Support of Small Business’ program.
- **Free Medical Examinations:** Returning migrants and their families will be eligible for free medical examinations at designated medical facilities.
- **Support for Children of Migrant Workers:** Special ‘Inson’ centres will provide social assistance to children whose parents work abroad.
- **Employment Subsidies for Migrant Workers:** Enterprises employing workers returning from labor migration will receive a monthly subsidy of 500,000 Uzbek sums (approximately US\$ 40) from the Employment Support Fund for each employee for up to one year.

The government of Uzbekistan is actively working to integrate international legal norms into national legislation. For instance, the 1996 ‘Agreement on Partnership

and Cooperation Establishing a Partnership between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the European Communities and Their Member States<sup>30</sup> includes provisions aimed at preventing illegal immigration. Article 72 of the Agreement mandates the repatriation of citizens residing illegally in the territories of the signatory states:

The Member States and the Republic of Uzbekistan agree to cooperate in order to prevent and control illegal immigration. To this end:

the Republic of Uzbekistan agrees to readmit any of its nationals illegally present on the territory of a Member State, upon request by the latter and without further formalities; and

each Member State agrees to readmit any of its nationals, as defined for community purposes, illegally present on the territory of the Republic of Uzbekistan, upon request by the latter and without further formalities.

The Member States and the Republic of Uzbekistan will also provide their nationals with appropriate identity documents for such purposes.<sup>31</sup>

Another example of international cooperation in the field of migration is the agreement signed during the official visit of German Chancellor Olaf Scholz to Uzbekistan on 15-16 September 15-16 2024. This agreement aims to establish a transparent and systematic collaboration between the two countries in the field of readmission and labour migration.

These steps are expected to foster constructive dialogue between Uzbekistan's national institutions and international organisations, further improving the country's labour migration processes and safeguarding the rights of its citizens working abroad.

## Conclusion

Uzbekistan continues to play a central role as a key labour-sending country in Central Asia. With over 37.5 million people, the country's growing population—particularly its youthful demographic—places increasing pressure on the domestic

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<sup>30</sup> Agreement on Partnership and Cooperation establishing a partnership between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the European Communities, and their member states dated June, 12, 1996. Available at: <https://lex.uz/docs/4557385>

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*

labour market and employment infrastructure. This demographic momentum, combined with ongoing socio-economic reforms and structural shifts in the economy, reinforces Uzbekistan's significance in regional migration dynamics. As such, labour migration remains both a necessary outlet for surplus labour and a strategic policy domain linked to economic development, poverty reduction, and international cooperation.

In recent years, the government of Uzbekistan has demonstrated a strong commitment to improving labour migration governance. This has included the adoption of over 40 legislative acts and the implementation of specialised programmes aimed at protecting migrant workers, supporting their families, and strengthening institutional capacity. Efforts have also focused on improving pre-departure preparation, expanding vocational and language training, and supporting the reintegration of returnees through financial assistance and employment services.

International cooperation remains a core pillar of Uzbekistan's migration strategy. The country has strengthened bilateral agreements—such as those with Germany—and expanded engagement with global institutions, including the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the International Organization for Migration (IOM). These partnerships are vital in promoting decent work, combating irregular migration, and ensuring the rights and safety of Uzbek migrant workers abroad.

Ongoing dialogue between countries of origin, transit, and destination is essential to ensure more equitable, safe, and sustainable migration governance. Uzbekistan's efforts to harmonise national legislation with international standards, develop institutional mechanisms, and promote coordinated regional action illustrate its strategic approach to migration as a driver of development.

In the long term, strengthening labour migration governance will contribute not only to the protection and empowerment of migrants but also to broader social and economic development goals, both nationally and within the wider Central Asian region.

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# Labour Migration Processes in Uzbekistan

*Ortikkhujja Norov*<sup>32</sup>

## Introduction

Labour migration in independent Uzbekistan has evolved significantly since 1991, following the country's separation from the former USSR. In the early years of independence, the transition to a market economy widespread unemployment, and declining living standards prompted a significant portion of the working-age population to seek employment abroad. The Russian Federation and Kazakhstan naturally emerged as the most accessible and significant labour markets for Uzbek migrants, as they required no visas, language proficiency, or specialised skills. In subsequent years, Turkey and South Korea were added to this list as increasingly attractive destinations.

Over the past 30 years, the flow of labour migration from Uzbekistan to foreign countries has not only continued but intensified. The geography of migration has gradually expanded to include the Gulf countries, parts of Europe, North America, and East Asia. However, even today, the Russian Federation remains the primary labour market for Uzbek migrants.

This chapter examines the main trends, demographic drivers, labour market mismatches, and policy responses shaping Uzbekistan's labour migration. It draws on recent statistics and government documents to provide an overview of migration dynamics, focusing on employment opportunities abroad, state regulation, and the impact of migration on Uzbekistan's development strategy.

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Several factors contribute to the emigration of Uzbek citizens for work abroad. First, demographic growth remains a key driver. The population of Uzbekistan has grown from 20.6 million in 1991 to 37.1 million in 2024 (UzAnalytics, 2019; UzStat, 2024a). Approximately 60% of the population is of working age (CBU, 2024a).

In 2024, over 414,600 young people graduated from secondary school in Uzbekistan (UzStat, 2024b). Additionally, there were almost one million births recorded in 2023 (UzStat, 2025). This means that for the last several years, approximately 500,000 individuals enter the domestic labour market annually. It is projected that this figure could reach one million in 10 years. In other words, the mismatch between demographic growth and the creation of new jobs has compelled many citizens to seek employment opportunities abroad.

**Second**, environmental factors are exacerbating economic hardship in certain regions. and degradation, water scarcity, desertification, and the shrinking of arable land—particularly in the northern (Karakalpakstan and Khorezm regions) and southern provinces (Kashkadarya and Surkhandarya regions)—have reduced agricultural productivity and income. As a result, residents of these areas are increasingly turning to international labour migration as a survival and livelihood strategy (Blondin, 2018, Andreeva et al., 2022).

Together, these demographic and environmental trends are placing sustained pressure on Uzbekistan's labour market, reinforcing labour migration as a structural feature of the country's socio-economic landscape.

## Main destinations for Uzbek labour migrants

With the increasing number of working-age population in Uzbekistan, the number of citizens seeking employment abroad also grows. Interestingly, the proportion of these numbers remains relatively constant at around 10–11% of the total population. In other words, approximately one in every ten individuals active in the labour market in Uzbekistan leaves the country each year in search of work opportunities.

Accurately determining the total number of Uzbek labour migrants is challenging. One reason is the prevalence of short-term and circular migration, particularly among residents of border regions who travel to neighbouring countries for work periods ranging from one day to a few months. These short-term engagements are typically not captured in national migration statistics, which tend to record only those who remain abroad for more than three months.

Additionally, the volume and direction of labour migration are highly variable, influenced by shifts in economic conditions, migration policies in destination countries, and seasonal demand for labour. At present, there is no unified system in place for comprehensively tracking all Uzbek citizens engaged in temporary employment abroad, further complicating the picture.

Despite these limitations, existing data and remittance flows provide a relatively clear picture of the most popular destination countries. Uzbek labour migrants most frequently travel to Russia, Kazakhstan, South Korea, Turkey, the United States, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. Notably, nearly 95% of total remittances sent to Uzbekistan originate from these countries, underscoring their importance not only as host states for migrant workers but also as vital contributors to the national economy through remittance inflows.

### **Russia as the main labour market for Uzbek migrants**

Historically, Russia has been the most significant destination for Uzbek labour migrants due to cultural familiarity, visa-free access, and a long-standing reliance on foreign workers, particularly in construction, retail, and service sectors. However, while the demographic pressure within Uzbekistan continues to increase, the flow of Uzbek labour migrants to Russia has shown signs of decline in recent years. This shift can be analysed across **four key phases**:

**First phase:** In 2014, an estimated 3 to 4 million Uzbek citizens were residing and working in Russia. That year alone, approximately one million Uzbek citizens arrived in Russia for work. However, this number decreased to 850,000 in 2015. This decline can be explained by the depreciation of the Russian ruble following the economic sanctions imposed on Russia after its annexation of Crimea in March 2014 (Eraliev and Urinboyev, 2020). The resulting economic downturn affected multiple sectors, especially services and manufacturing, leading to reduced employment opportunities for migrants. (*March 2014: US\$ 1 = 36 rubles, December 2024: US\$ 1 = 68 rubles.*)

**Second phase:** In 2015, Russia introduced the *patent system* in 2015, which requires citizens of visa-free countries (including Uzbekistan) to obtain a work permit (patent) to be employed legally. While the system aimed to streamline labour migration, it placed additional bureaucratic burdens on workers—especially those with limited Russian language skills or access to official information—thus making migration more difficult for many.

**Third phase:** Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the number of Uzbek citizens temporarily employed in Russia had reached 1.6 million. However, pandemic-related restrictions and lockdowns led to significant economic disruption and mass return migration. At the same time, the Uzbek government increased investment in domestic employment, particularly in the construction sector, creating new job opportunities and encouraging some workers to stay or return home. As of January 2021, the number of Uzbek labour migrants in Russia had declined to around 1.3 million (Kun.uz, 2021).

According to the estimates of the External Labour Migration Agency of Uzbekistan, by the end of 2020, the number of Uzbek labour migrants in all foreign countries decreased by approximately 800,000 compared to the previous year. The decline was primarily due to the pandemic (Kun.uz 2021).

**Fourth phase:** Russia’s full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 led to another sharp decline in labour migration during the initial months of the war. The uncertainty, economic sanctions, and mobilisation campaigns in Russia created significant risks and instability for foreign workers. While some migration flows resumed later in 2023 and 2024, the overall trend has been a steady decline (Heusala and Eraliev, 2024; Oshchepkov et al., 2024).

The decline in Uzbek labour migration to Russia has also been influenced by worsening anti-migrant sentiments, bureaucratic hurdles in obtaining or renewing work permits, and more frequent inspections and enforcement actions targeting migrant workers. Moreover, changes in Russian migration legislation and public attitudes have further complicated the experience for Central Asian migrants.

In conclusion, while Uzbekistan’s demographic growth remains high and the domestic labour market struggles to absorb all new entrants, the flow of labour migration to Russia is decreasing (Table 1). At the same time, Uzbek labour migrants are increasingly diversifying their destinations, with growing numbers seeking employment in a wider range of countries beyond the post-Soviet space.

**Table 1. The number of Uzbek labour migrants in Russia<sup>33</sup>**

Year	Number of labour migrants*
Up to 2016	3-6 million
2019	1.6 million
2020	1.5 million
2021	1.3 million
2022	1.2 million
2023	1.1 million

<sup>33</sup> Based on the data from the External Labour Migration Agency, developed by the author

\*Subject to seasonal, political, economic, and legal changes

## Diversification of labour migration destinations

In recent years, the destinations for Uzbek labour migrants have become increasingly diverse. While a large share of Uzbek citizens still migrate for work to neighbouring and traditional partner countries, recent shifts indicate gradual diversification in both destination and sector. Currently, many Uzbeks work, study, and reside in various countries across the world, both temporarily and on a long-term basis. A comparison of labour migration data over recent years reveals significant changes in destination patterns.

By the end of 2019, more than 1.9 million Uzbek citizens were engaged in temporary labour activities in foreign abroad. Among them:

- 77.1% were in the Russian Federation,
- 10.9% in the Republic of Kazakhstan,
- 3.3% in the Republic of Korea,
- 2.3% in the Republic of Turkey,
- 0.3% in the United Arab Emirates,
- and the remaining share in other countries.

By the end of 2023, while the overall number of labour migrants remained similar at over 1.9 million, their distribution had shifted:

- 59.7% were in the Russian Federation,
- 9.7% in Kazakhstan,
- 5.7% in Turkey,
- 3.4% in South Korea,
- 1.4% in the United Arab Emirates,
- and the rest spread across countries such as Poland, the United States, Israel, and several EU member states.<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Based on the data from the External Labour Migration Agency, developed by the authors

These figures reflect a gradual decrease in dependence on Russia as the dominant destination, paralleled by an increasing share of migration to Turkey, South Korea, and Gulf and Western countries.

It is worth noting that the number of Uzbek labour migrants is highly dynamic and can fluctuate due to seasonal labour demand, changes in visa regimes, and the economic, legal, and political situation in the host destination countries.

## Government's role in labour migration

The Government of Uzbekistan has taken a proactive approach to addressing labour migration by prioritising its diversification and formalisation. In recent years, a series of strategic decisions at both presidential and government levels have focused on expanding and streamlining official channels for overseas employment. These efforts aim not only to increase the number of citizens working abroad through legal means, but also to enhance the skills and preparedness of migrant workers to better align with international labour market demands.<sup>35</sup>

To support these goals, the government has established an extensive infrastructure for training and pre-departure preparation. This includes:

- Nearly 30 '*Ishga Marhamat*' (Welcome to Work) monocentres,
- 59 vocational training centres under the Ministry of Poverty Reduction and Employment,
- 55 short-term vocational training courses overseen by the Ministry of Higher Education, Science and Innovation,
- 13 specialised centres for training skilled professionals in the construction sector,
- As well as numerous programmes delivered through ministries, agencies, and non-governmental educational institutions.

These facilities offer practical training in professional skills and foreign languages based on the needs of destination countries. Citizens planning to work abroad can choose programmes tailored to specific sectors and learn the language of their

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<sup>35</sup> Note that legal aspects of these government-supported labour migration in Uzbekistan are analysed in the previous chapter.

intended destination. For low-income individuals, the training is provided free of charge, and participants receive stipends during their studies.

Language and cultural training programmes have been significantly expanded through international partnerships. Notably:

- **German** language courses are offered in collaboration with Swiss and German organisations such as *GLOBOGATE* (Switzerland), *Nova Agency*, *Techno Consult*, and *CBZ Munich* (Germany).
- **Japanese** language, culture, and hospitality service training is conducted in cooperation with *Nippon Educational Academy*, *AOIKAI Japan*, and *Yume* centres.
- **Korean** language and culture programmes are delivered through partnerships with the King Sejong Institute in South Korea.

Importantly, citizens who successfully complete these programmes—organised in close collaboration with foreign employers—are guaranteed job placements abroad. These targeted efforts reflect the state’s commitment to both protecting its citizens and ensuring their economic empowerment through safe and structured migration pathways.

## **Support system for Uzbek labour migrants abroad**

Given the mismatch between Uzbekistan’s rapid demographic growth and the pace of job creation, a segment of the working-age population is compelled to seek employment abroad. In recognition of this reality, and acknowledging that it cannot yet fully absorb all jobseekers domestically, the government of Uzbekistan has taken active steps to support those who pursue work opportunities overseas.

A comprehensive support system has been established to provide legal, financial, and social assistance to Uzbek labour migrants abroad. The forms of support currently available include:

- Up to US\$ 3,000 is allocated to cover the services of attorneys, legal service providers, or law enforcement bodies engaged in defending the rights of Uzbek labour migrants in host countries.
- Labour migrants left without shelter or financial means abroad may receive up to US\$ 300 to cover hostel or hotel expenses.

- The cost of economy-class airline tickets or train tickets (third-class sleeper) for repatriation to Uzbekistan is covered at rates determined by the relevant transport companies.
- Migrants facing hardship abroad may receive emergency financial aid equivalent to twice the minimum wage (approximately US\$ 30 as of October 2024).
- Partial or full reimbursement of medical costs, including urgent care, is available for labour migrants abroad—up to US\$ 1,500.
- Transportation expenses for citizens returning to Uzbekistan due to serious illness or injury, including their minor children, are covered in coordination with transport companies. If needed, mobile emergency medical teams are provided.
- The cost of a medical worker accompanying the repatriated citizen—including transportation, accommodation, and daily subsistence—is reimbursed according to official norms.
- Up to US\$ 1,000 is allocated for preparing the body of a deceased migrant for return to Uzbekistan, including customs-related services.
- The full cost of transporting a deceased citizen’s body back to Uzbekistan is covered, based on the rates of the transport companies.
- In cases involving the seriously ill or injured, the full travel costs for returning to Uzbekistan are also paid.

In addition to the above, all associated costs for returning injured or seriously ill citizens and their minor children to Uzbekistan—including the cost of any accompanying medical staff—are fully borne by the state. These measures reflect Uzbekistan’s broader commitment to the safety, dignity, and well-being of its citizens abroad, and to improving labour migration governance in line with international standards.

### **Further government plans in labour migration**

In parallel, the government has developed plans to train citizens wishing to work abroad in the languages and professions that are in high demand in destination countries, before facilitating their employment abroad.

For example, according to Presidential Decree of the Republic of Uzbekistan in April 2024, it is planned to organise the employment of 150,000 citizens abroad in 2024, 200,000 in 2025, and 250,000 in 2026.<sup>36</sup>

Responsibility for implementing these tasks lies with the External Labour Migration Agency—the sole state organisation in the country operating in the field of labour migration.

For reference, the External Labour Migration Agency has branches in all regions of the republic and representative offices in Russia, South Korea, Kazakhstan, and Turkey. Additionally, new representative offices were planned to open in Japan, the United Kingdom, Germany, and Saudi Arabia during 2024-2025.

Furthermore, 16 key documents concerning labour migration have been adopted—including two laws of the Republic of Uzbekistan, one presidential decree, nine presidential resolutions, and four resolutions of the Cabinet of Ministers. Together, these form a regulatory and legal framework introducing both long-term and short-term reforms and new policy instruments.

### **Pensions for labour migrants**

In Uzbekistan, government-organised employment abroad has been equated with types of activities permitted for self-employed individuals. As a result, the same procedures for tax payments and pension calculations that apply to the self-employed are now applied to those working abroad. To ensure that labour migrants' activities are recorded in their official employment history, the required payment has been set at four and a half times the minimum wage (equivalent to approximately US\$ 30 as of October 2024).

This arrangement enables citizens who have worked abroad to qualify for state pensions upon reaching retirement age.

### **Organised labour migration**

It is worth noting that, for many years, opportunities for officially going abroad for work through official channels were limited in Uzbekistan. Until 2018, only the External Labour Migration Agency held the exclusive authority to send citizens to

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<sup>36</sup> Decree of the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan PD N-59 dated 04 April 2024, 'On additional measures to improve labour migration processes and support persons carrying out temporary labour activities abroad' Available at: [lex.uz/docs/6868873](http://lex.uz/docs/6868873)

work overseas. However, with the adoption of the Law ‘On private employment agencies’ in 2018, this authority was extended to the private sector as well.

In 2018, the External Labour Migration Agency facilitated the employment of 3,541 citizens abroad. From 2019 onwards, private employment agencies also began sending citizens to work abroad, operating alongside the Agency. Thus, in 2019, 4,392 citizens were sent, in 2020 (*the year of the COVID pandemic*), 10,272 citizens, in 2021, 109,155 citizens, in 2022, 35,817 citizens, in 2023 and in 2024, 162,000 citizens were officially sent abroad for work.<sup>37</sup> As illustrated in Table 2, there has been a significant change in the geographical distribution of destination countries for Uzbek labour migrants.

**Table 2. Citizens sent abroad for work organized from Uzbekistan<sup>38</sup>**

Years	Number of citizens sent abroad	Sent countries
2018	3,541	Russia, South Korea, Turkey, Bulgaria, and Poland
2019	4,392	Russia, South Korea, Kazakhstan, Japan, Turkey, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Poland, Germany, United Kingdom, Croatia, UAE, Belorussia, Estonia, Qatar, Israel, Ukraine, Greece, Oman, Portugal, Czech Republic, and USA
2020	10,272	Russia, South Korea, Kazakhstan, Japan, Turkey, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Croatia, UAE, Qatar, Ukraine, and Tajikistan
2021	109,155	Russia, South Korea, Kazakhstan, Turkey, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Germany, UAE, Qatar, Israel, Oman, Slovakia, and Azerbaijan
2022	35,817	Russia, South Korea, Kazakhstan, Japan, Turkey, Latvia, Bulgaria, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Germany, United Kingdom, Croatia, UAE, Qatar, Israel, and Serbia
2023	38,401	Russia, South Korea, United Kingdom, Kazakhstan, Germany, Turkey, Lithuania, Japan, UAE, Poland, Saudi Arabia, Hungary, Romania, Bulgaria, and Latvia
2024	162,000	Russia, South Korea, United Kingdom, Kazakhstan, Germany, Turkey, Lithuania, Japan, UAE, Poland, Belarus, Latvia, Bulgaria, Romania, Slovenia, Serbia, and Croatia

To illustrate how organised labour migration is implemented in practice, we now turn to the example of the Republic of Korea—one of the key destination countries where the Uzbek government operates through official channels.

<sup>37</sup> Based on the data from the External Labour Migration Agency, developed by the author.

<sup>38</sup> Based on the data from the External Labour Migration Agency, developed by the author.

In accordance with the bilateral agreement between Uzbekistan and the Republic of Korea, the Agency for External Labour Migration is the sole organisation authorised to send citizens to South Korea for employment under the E-9 non-professional work visa through an organised process.

In cooperation with the Human Resources Development Service of the Republic of Korea, the Agency conducts selection processes—including Korean language and skills assessments—for healthy citizens aged between 18-39. Candidates who successfully pass these evaluations, and who fall within the annual quotas allocated by South Korea, are sent to work on a contractual basis for a period of 4 years and 10 months.

**Table 3. Citizens sent to work in the Republic of Korea in an organized manner<sup>39</sup>**

<b>Years</b>	<b>Number of citizens officially sent to work abroad</b>
2014	2660
2015	2718
2016	2446
2017	2632
2018	2251
2019	1717
2020	242
2021	1532
2022	4901
2023	4882
2024	3080

The data reflect a steady increase in the number of labour migrants sent to South Korea in recent years, following the disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020.

It is important to note, however, that the actual number of Uzbek citizens working in South Korea is significantly higher than the figures sent through official channels. According to estimates, there are approximately 90,000 Uzbeks currently residing in South Korea (IOM, 2024). This discrepancy can be explained by the longstanding bilateral labour agreements between the two countries dating back to the 1990s, as well as the presence of a sizeable ethnic Korean diaspora in Uzbekistan, which has historically facilitated mobility and community ties.

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<sup>39</sup> Based on the data from the External Labour Migration Agency, developed by the author.

# The economic impact of labour migration on Uzbekistan

The contribution of Uzbek labour migrants to the national economy is substantial and remains a vital component of the country's economic stability. Remittances sent by migrants working abroad play a key role in supporting household income, reducing poverty, and contributing to macroeconomic resilience (Seitz, 2019).

According to data from the Central Bank of the Republic of Uzbekistan, cross-border money transfers from foreign countries to Uzbekistan have consistently accounted for a significant share of the country's income from abroad (Table 4). These remittances provide not only direct support to families but also stimulate local consumption, small business development, and investment in education and housing.

**Table 4. Remittances from labour migrants to Uzbekistan, 2020-2024**

Years	Volume of Remittances (in US\$)	Growth/Decline Dynamics
2020	6 billion <sup>40</sup>	-
2021	8,1 billion <sup>41</sup>	34% (growth)
2022	16,9 billion <sup>42</sup>	108% (growth)
2023	11,4 billion <sup>43</sup>	67% (decline)
2024	14,8 billion <sup>44</sup>	30% (growth)

The expansion in the geography of labour migration has contributed to the relative decline in the share of remittances from Russian labour migrants to Uzbekistan within the total remittances from foreign countries. At the end of 2022, Russia accounted for nearly 87% of total remittances, but this figure fell to 78% in 2023.

It is also worth noting that remittances from labour migrants constitute approximately 10% of Uzbekistan's gross domestic product (GDP) on average

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<sup>40</sup> Central Bank of Uzbekistan: [https://cbu.uz/ru/press\\_center/reviews/584766/](https://cbu.uz/ru/press_center/reviews/584766/)

<sup>41</sup> Central Bank of Uzbekistan: [https://cbu.uz/ru/press\\_center/reviews/584766/](https://cbu.uz/ru/press_center/reviews/584766/)

<sup>42</sup> Central Bank of Uzbekistan: [https://cbu.uz/uz/press\\_center/reports/847193/](https://cbu.uz/uz/press_center/reports/847193/)

<sup>43</sup> Central Bank of Uzbekistan: [https://cbu.uz/upload/iblock/8c0/865m871aqmzogvjg74e5k5rl7mglwpp9/Uz\\_MPR\\_2023Q4\\_05.02.24-kiril.pdf](https://cbu.uz/upload/iblock/8c0/865m871aqmzogvjg74e5k5rl7mglwpp9/Uz_MPR_2023Q4_05.02.24-kiril.pdf)

<sup>44</sup> Central Bank of Uzbekistan: <https://cbu.uz/upload/iblock/fa2/bosg9g712b0257ovp9z2t937n063neyh/ZHismoniy-sharkh-2024.pdf>

annually over the past fifteen years, underscoring their macroeconomic significance (World Bank, 2025).

In practice, some Uzbek labour migrants transfer money home through informal channels—such as handing over cash to entrepreneurs engaged in importing goods into Uzbekistan. When these informal flows are taken into account, the actual volume of remittances is likely to be even higher than reported figures suggest.

## Conclusion

The information presented in this chapter highlights several key dynamics in Uzbekistan's evolving labour migration landscape. While demographic pressures continue to mount due to steady population growth, the number of citizens migrating abroad for work has declined in recent years. This trend suggests a potential shift influenced by state policies, socio-economic factors, and changing labour market demands, both domestically and internationally.

At the same time, the geographical scope of labour migration from Uzbekistan has broadened. Although Russia remains the primary destination for most Uzbek labour migrants, an increasing number are seeking employment opportunities in a more diverse range of countries. This reflects both the growing mobility of Uzbek workers and the government's concerted efforts to establish bilateral agreements and representative offices in new destination countries.

The structural imbalance between the expanding working-age population and the limited capacity of the domestic labour market continues to drive international labour migration. Many individuals, particularly youth, find themselves unable to secure employment at home, leading them to pursue work abroad as a necessary livelihood strategy.

In response to these challenges, the Uzbek government has taken active steps to enhance and formalise labour migration processes. These include policy reforms, institutional strengthening, and the expansion of training programmes and support mechanisms for prospective migrants. Special emphasis has been placed on promoting organised labour migration through both state and licensed private channels to ensure safer, more transparent, and legally protected pathways for employment abroad.

Efforts have also been directed at diversifying migration destinations beyond traditional corridors. While this diversification strategy is still in its early stages, it

represents an important policy direction aimed at reducing dependency on any single country, improving the resilience of labour migration flows, and aligning with broader geopolitical and economic goals.

Finally, the chapter underscores the vital role that labour migrants play in sustaining Uzbekistan's economy. Their financial contributions, primarily through remittances, not only support the livelihoods of individual households but also stimulate broader economic activity. These transfers bolster domestic consumption, facilitate investments in education, healthcare, and housing, and contribute significantly to national economic stability. In sum, labour migration remains a central feature of Uzbekistan's socio-economic development and continues to shape the country's integration into the global labour market.

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# Migration and Remittances in Turkmenistan

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## Introduction

Remittances represent household income received from foreign countries, mainly as a result of temporary or permanent relocation of people to those countries. They include both cash and non-cash transfers received through formal channels, such as electronic transactions, as well as informal methods, like the physical transportation of money or goods across borders. These diverse forms of remittance enable individuals to send financial support to their families or communities, utilising both regulated financial systems and less formal, personal means of transfer. As a crucial source of income for many migrant families, remittances contribute significantly to poverty alleviation. The reduction of costs and barriers associated with remittance transfers, as well as improvements in regulatory frameworks, can enhance the efficiency and accessibility of formal remittance channels (IMF, 2009).

The Government of Turkmenistan has implemented measures to address the problems associated with remittances. As a financial service provided by credit organizations, remittances constitute a fundamental component of the national banking system. The **State Program for the Development of the Banking System of Turkmenistan until 2030** aims to modernize financial infrastructure, expand non-cash transactions, and integrate digital banking solutions.

Additionally, the Program for the Development of Economic, Financial, and Banking Systems of Turkmenistan (2019-2025) and the Concept of Digital Economy Development (2019-2025) facilitate the adoption of innovative financial technologies and the enhancement of the country's payment system.

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Furthermore, financial literacy programmes have been introduced to help citizens better understand digital banking services and the importance of remittance transfers through secure, formal channels. These initiatives seek to increase awareness of international banking policies, minimise fraud risks, and encourage financial independence among remittance recipients.

## Data and Methods

This chapter reviews official statistical data, migration trends, and national legislation related to remittances in Turkmenistan. The research examines various money transfer systems, including international services such as Western Union, Visa, and MasterCard, as well as domestic banking institutions and financial service providers involved in remittance transactions.

A qualitative analysis of government policies and legal frameworks regulating remittance flows is conducted to assess their effectiveness in ensuring financial security, efficiency, and accessibility.

By integrating statistical data, policy analysis, and financial system evaluations, this chapter provides a comprehensive overview of remittance flows in Turkmenistan, their economic impact, and the effectiveness of national policies in facilitating secure and efficient transactions.

## Main results

Money transfers by citizens of Turkmenistan, provided as a service by credit organizations, are an important component of the banking operations within the country's payment system. These transfers facilitate financial transactions and contribute to the overall functioning of the financial sector. The regulation and development of remittances are primarily guided by national legislation, which serves as the legal framework for managing and securing the flow of remittances. These policies ensure remittances operate securely and efficiently within Turkmenistan's financial system.

## Legal and Regulatory Framework

Analysis of the legislation in the field of remittances shows that Turkmenistan has established a comprehensive legal framework governing these financial transactions. Remittances are subject to legal regulation both at the level of laws and by-laws, as well as agency agreements concluded with international financial organizations.

National legislation on remittances is categorised into general and special legislation based on its content. General legislation provides the legal foundation for the development of the remittance system as a whole. This includes, first and foremost, the Civil Code and laws such as On the Central Bank of Turkmenistan, On Credit Institutions and Banking Activity, On Currency Regulation and Currency Control in Foreign Economic Relations, among others.

Special legislation builds upon these fundamental laws and is typically regulated through by-laws issued by the Cabinet of Ministers and the Central Bank of Turkmenistan, including resolutions, regulations, and orders. This legislation governs the activities of banking institutions in conducting financial operations, establishes guarantees for secure money transfers, and outlines citizens' rights to open and manage bank accounts.

**The Credit Institutions and Banking Act (2011)** defines the legal status of the country's banks (credit institutions) and establishes their activities to carry out banking operations and transactions, open and maintain bank accounts for clients, including citizens, and carry out other banking operations. Thus, according to the Law, a bank is a credit institution, which is granted the exclusive right to attract funds from individuals and legal entities, place them in its own name and at its own expense on the terms of repayment, payment and urgency, open and maintain bank accounts of legal entities and individuals, as well as perform other banking operations. Legislation defines the activities of banking institutions to carry out banking operations, establishes guarantees to ensure money transfers of citizens, their ability to open bank accounts.

The Law defines banking activity as the activity of credit institutions in banking operations and transactions. The Law defines banking operations as: attracting monetary funds of individuals and legal entities into deposits; opening and maintaining bank accounts of individuals and legal entities; providing settlement and (or) cash services to individuals and legal entities; transferring funds on behalf of individuals without opening bank accounts; issuing bank plastic cards and (or) acquiring (Law of Turkmenistan on Credit Institutions and Banking Activity, 2011).

**The Currency Regulation and Currency Control in Foreign Economic Relations Act (2011)** establishes the right of Turkmen citizens to carry out currency transactions, open accounts (deposits) and carry out transactions on accounts (deposits) without restrictions, unless the currency regulation authorities, in accordance with the currency legislation of Turkmenistan, establish a procedure for carrying out currency transactions and a procedure for the use of accounts (deposits).

Citizens may open foreign currency accounts (deposits) with authorised credit institutions in accordance with the procedure established by the Central Bank of Turkmenistan. Maintenance of residents' foreign currency accounts (deposits) by authorized credit institutions is carried out on the basis of a contract, unless otherwise established by law. The authorized credit institutions open foreign currency accounts (deposits) without restrictions for individuals who are citizens of Turkmenistan. Holders of currency accounts (deposits) may perform operations on them either personally or through an authorized person in accordance with the legislation of Turkmenistan.

Citizens may conduct transactions through their foreign currency accounts (deposits) in any foreign currency, with exchange operations carried out at the market rate agreed upon with an authorized credit institution. Outside Turkmenistan, they have the right to make payments and transfer funds for currency transactions through accounts (deposits) held in foreign credit institutions without restrictions, unless otherwise stipulated by Turkmenistan's currency legislation (Law of Turkmenistan on Currency Regulation and Currency Control in Foreign Economic Relations, 2011).

## **Data on Migration Trends**

To fully analyse remittances in Turkmenistan, it is important to have information on population migration. Migration statistics in Turkmenistan are scarce, but foreign data sources provide insights into migration trends.

Turkmenistan's population consists of over 7 million people according to the 2022 population census (TurkmenStat 2022). 57% of the population is of working age with the median age projected to reach 35.2 years by 2040 (Heleniak and Canagarajah, 2013). This is a relatively balanced indicator, typical for countries with stable demographics.

According to the data of the Main Department for Migration Issues of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, in 2020, 83,838 citizens of Turkmenistan were registered in Russia at the place of stay, including 43,784 citizens

- for the first time. Of these, 2,456 came for tourism, 29,293 for study, 3,906 for work, 3,632 for employment, and 4,497 for other purposes.

Citizens of Turkmenistan represent one of the largest migrant groups in Türkiye. According to official Turkish data, as of March 2025, there were approximately 120,000 Turkmen citizens holding long-term residence permits and over 50,000 with short term residence permits, making them the largest Central Asian migrant group in Türkiye (PMM, 2025b). Between 2022 and 2024, Turkish authorities apprehended approximately 50,000 undocumented migrants annually (PMM, 2025a). According to other sources, 8,003 Turkmen citizens arrived in Turkey in 2019, including 52,146 men (65.2%) and 27,857 women (34.8%), while 14067 Turkmen citizens left, including 6,334 men (45%) and 7733 women (55%) (Centre for Migration Research, 2024).

**Table 1. Turkmenistan – Historical Net Migration Rate Data**

Year	Net Migration Rate	Growth Rate
2024	- 0.635	- 1.090%
2023	- 0.642	- 6.410%
2022	- 0.686	- 6.030%
2021	- 0.730	- 5.680%
2020	- 0.774	- 5.380%
2019	- 0.818	- 5.100%
2018	- 0.862	- 19.060%
2017	- 1.065	- 16.010%
2016	- 1.268	- 13.860%
2015	- 1.472	- 12.120%
2014	- 1.675	- 10.810%
2013	-1.878	- 6.666%
2012	- 2.012	- 6.240%

Source: Macrotrends, 2024

As shown in Table 1, the level of migration from Turkmenistan has been decreasing over the past 12 years. In 2012, the net migration rate was -2.012 per 1,000 people, while in 2024, this figure was 0.635 per 1,000 people. The primary reason for such decline in migration flows is the government’s measures to restrict the departure of illegal migrants from the country. A notable example of this is the cancellation of Turkmenistan’s visa-free regime with the Republic of Türkiye in September 2022. The Turkmen government requested Türkiye to implement a temporary visa regime with various categories for Turkmen citizens. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Turkmenistan, this measure was introduced to better regulate and manage the stay of Turkmen citizens in Türkiye. The decision was largely a response to a significant rise in illegal migration of Turkmen citizens to Turkey. Additionally, the

relatively low level of migration from Turkmenistan is also due to the fact that the country maintains a visa regime with nearly all post-Soviet nations, with the exception of Georgia.

### **Current Remittance System**

In Turkmenistan, citizens have the option to use the services of the country's credit institutions (banks) through various payment systems to send and receive remittances internationally. One of the key factors in selecting a payment system for money transfers is the cost of the services provided, particularly the fees charged by banks for these transactions.

Money transfers can be carried out in different ways, each varying in terms of service costs, processing time, and the location of registration. There are two primary methods for conducting money transfers: transfers using the client's account (non-cash transfers) and transfers without the need for an account (cash transfers). These methods provide flexibility, allowing customers to choose the most suitable option based on their needs.

Money transfers from bank accounts held by citizens in foreign currency can be made to foreign destinations on behalf of the account holders. Currently, such accounts can be opened in almost any bank in Turkmenistan, including institutions such as the State Bank for Foreign Economic Activity of Turkmenistan, Turkmen-Turkish Joint-Stock Commercial Bank, State Commercial Bank of Turkmenistan 'Turkmenbashi', State Commercial Bank of Turkmenistan 'Halkbank', Joint-Stock Commercial Bank 'Senagat', and Joint-Stock Commercial Bank 'Rysgal', among others. These banks offer services that facilitate international money transfers, allowing citizens to send funds abroad using their foreign currency accounts. When transferring funds in foreign currency from a bank account, the recipient must have an active account with a financial institution in the respective foreign country or possess an international bank card that allows for cross-border transactions.

According to national legislation, there are no legal restrictions on the transfer of foreign currency funds from the personal accounts of citizens. Individuals are generally free to transfer their foreign currency holdings abroad without limitations. However, in situations where the country experiences a shortage of foreign currency reserves, the Central Bank of Turkmenistan has the authority to introduce temporary restrictions on such transfers. These measures are implemented at the discretion of the Central Bank to regulate and stabilize the country's financial system in response to economic conditions.

As a general rule, funds from bank accounts denominated in the national currency, the Turkmen manat, cannot be transferred abroad due to the temporary restrictions on its free conversion. This limitation prevents the direct international transfer of manat funds from domestic accounts.

For individuals who wish to send money internationally without opening a bank account, transfers can be conducted through international payment systems such as Western Union and S.W.I.F.T.. Additionally, international transactions can be carried out using globally recognized bank cards, including Visa and MasterCard.

In recent years, the market for bank cards in Turkmenistan has experienced rapid growth. This expansion aligns with the global trend toward digital and cashless transactions. The increasing adoption of plastic cards facilitates the establishment of a unified universal payment system, which enables efficient processing of everyday financial transactions for the general population. The shift toward electronic payments is expected to significantly reduce cash circulation within the economy and lead to a more structured and efficient financial system in Turkmenistan.

Transfer of funds of citizens of Turkmenistan from abroad is carried out through credit organizations of the host country and international payment systems. In this regard, citizens have a very wide choice. As a rule, the most frequently used form is electronic transfers based on a network of branches or correspondent relations. The bank sends the money transfer via electronic communication to its branch or correspondent bank in the beneficiary country, which forwards the money transfer electronically.

### **Tariffs for Money Transfers**

Operations involving international payment systems, including plastic cards, have opened new prospects for financial services to clients and, accordingly, expanded opportunities for bank profits by receiving commissions charged on card transactions, increasing the number of clients by providing new types of services, reducing the cost of servicing cash turnover, etc. The growth of international payment systems and plastic cards is a promising and profitable business for credit institutions of Turkmenistan.

In general, the convenience and accessibility of these money transfer systems come at a higher cost compared to traditional payments between banks, with fees typically ranging between 2% and 6% of the transfer amount.

Remittance tariffs are also stipulated in agency agreements. In these contracts, the commission for money transfers abroad varies and depends on how many agent banks participate in a particular system. They may set restrictions on money transfer.

Fees for transferring money of Turkmen citizens from abroad differ depending on the services of credit organizations of the host country and international payment systems they use. For example, citizens of Turkmenistan, as non-residents of their country of residence, can open foreign currency accounts in most bank abroad and transfer U.S. dollars to Turkmenistan without restrictions. If a bilateral financial agreement exists between the two countries, the transfer is processed as a national transaction, resulting in minimal commissions fees. On the contrary, if no such agreement is in place, the transfer is processed as an international transaction, it makes it more expensive.

Due to a decline in migration, official remittance inflows to Turkmenistan have also decreased. According to the World Bank, remittances of labour migrants to Turkmenistan for the period from 2010 to 2017 amounted to: in 2010 - 35, in 2011 - 35, in 2012 - 37, in 2013 - 40, in 2014 - 30, in 2015 - 16, in 2016 - 9 and in 2017 - 10 million U.S. dollars (World Bank, 2018).

## Conclusions and Recommendations

The analysis of migration and remittances in Turkmenistan allows us to draw the following conclusions:

**First**, over the last decade, the outflow of citizens from the country has significantly reduced, leading to a corresponding decline in the volume of remittances. This trend has been influenced by certain restrictions on the exit of citizens from the country, particularly, the abolition of visa-free regime between Turkmenistan and Türkiye, and increasing difficulties for Turkmen migrants in Russia.

**Secondly**, unstable work of banking institutions in the country has contributed to further challenges in money transfers. Various restrictions on financial transactions have been introduced, limiting the accessibility of remittance services. Currently, 'Western Union' remains the dominant international provider of remittance services. Furthermore, the opening of foreign currency accounts by citizens is restricted, as banks often require specific documentation (such as contracts) to justify such transactions. Migrants working abroad frequently face difficulties when transferring money. Most of them do not have sufficient information to transfer their earnings to their families back home and do not know the language of the host country.

According to the author's observations and estimates, on average, Turkmen migrants send 150-300 US dollars per month, typically for essential expenses.

**Third**, legislation is an important basis for the implementation of citizen remittances as a service provided by credit institutions in the country. Its review shows that the country has the necessary legal framework for this purpose. Nevertheless, it should be recognized that there are reserves for further improvement of the legal and regulatory framework, its public accessibility, especially by-laws governing remittance procedures. With the increasing digitalization of Turkmenistan's economy, it is necessary to update legislation to allow for the electronic submission of documents for money transfers and currency conversions. Currently, when converting and transferring money abroad, banks require all relevant documents in paper format, creating unnecessary bureaucratic obstacles. In addition, simplifying banking procedures, expanding transfer services, and reducing remittance tariffs should also be considered. In line with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), reducing money transfer fees remains a crucial priority.

**Fourth**, due to the absence of comprehensive statistical data on migration, it is impossible to accurately track the volume and flow of remittances to and from Turkmenistan. This highlights the crucial importance of reliable statistical information. Migration affects the dynamics of the population, altering its demographic characteristics. The economic impact of migration is substantial, as migrants are active participants in labour markets and remittances contribute to household income growth and national development. Without accurate migration data, making reliable population projections becomes challenging.

To address this, public access to migration statistics should be improved. The United Nations (UN, 2011) stresses that active and broad use of statistical data helps to identify its shortcomings and stimulates its development. Therefore, the lack of public access to data is not a best practice. Instead, migration statistics should be made widely available not only to a specific category of civil servants, but also to academics, researchers and the general public to ensure informed decision-making and a more comprehensive understanding of migration's broader implications.

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# International Emigration from India: History, Drivers, and Challenges

*Chekhros Kilichova*<sup>46</sup>

## Introduction

For several decades, India has been the world's largest exporter of labour migrants and, consequently, has remained the top recipient of remittances globally. In 2024, India reportedly received \$129 billion in remittances, increasing its global share to 14.3%, and surpassing its own records year after year (Ratha et al., 2024). Despite these staggering figures, personal remittances accounted for only 3.3% of the country's total economy in 2024 (Radhakrishnan, 2024). The total number of international migrants from India is estimated to be around 18 million, making it the largest diaspora abroad (IOM, 2024).

These large migration flows and India's prominent role in global migration naturally raise several important questions that merit further study. What are the historical and contemporary drivers of India's outward migration? What are the major destination countries attracting Indian migrants and why? Additionally, how does such high migration impact India's contemporary social and economic landscape?

This chapter aims to address these questions by providing an overview of the general patterns and trends in India's external migration. While internal migration within India is even larger in nominal terms, this aspect of migration deserves a separate analysis. In India's case, the routes and migration patterns of skilled and unskilled labour migrants differ significantly, a factor that must always be taken into account when analysing migration trends.

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## Historical Context of External Migration

The active external movement of labour from India began during the colonial era, when large numbers of Indians were sent to other colonies under coercive systems. After the abolition of the slave trade by the United Kingdom in 1833, the supply of labour declined sharply, leading to a significant drop in agricultural production in the colonised regions. This necessitated a new labour arrangement, which resulted in the indentured servitude, also known as the *coolie* system (Singh, 2022). Peasants from India and other territories signed contracts lasting between five and eight years, essentially selling their labour under this new system (Singh, 2022). The recruitment and supervision of these labourers were largely managed by Indian-origin recruiters. Most of these workers were hired for sugar plantations, construction, mining, and farming. Most of the coolies were sent to work in Mauritius, British Guiana, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago, among other destinations, expanding the Indian diaspora from the Caribbean to the Indian Ocean region.

Although the indenture system initially promised better income and living conditions for the peasants, in reality, many workers became indebted to their recruiters and suffered harsh working conditions. The treatment of indentured labourers was often not significantly better than slavery, with widespread reports of abuse and exploitation. This system remained in place until around 1920 (Singh, 2022).

The partition of India and Pakistan in 1947 also resulted in one of the largest and most rapid forced migrations in history. As the partition was based on religious divisions, millions of Muslims migrated to Pakistan, while Hindus moved to India. At least 20 million people were displaced, with 12 million in the Punjab region alone (Das et al., 2020). This mass movement triggered widespread violence, leading to an estimated one million deaths and the kidnapping of approximately 50,000 women (Singh, 2022).

Post-independence emigration from India is generally categorised into two main groups—skilled and unskilled labour migration. Following India's independence from the British Empire in 1947, many doctors, engineers and scientists emigrated to Western countries in search of better economic opportunities, which peaked during the 1960 and 1970s (IGNOU, 2017). Most of this skilled migration was directed towards the UK, which, in the aftermath of World War II a labour shortage (Singh, 2022).

Conversely, the emigration of unskilled labour is largely associated with the 'oil boom' in the Gulf region from the 1970s onwards. Migration to the Middle East was initially driven by high demand for unskilled workers in infrastructure construction and the oil industry in the rapidly developing Gulf economies (Bortolazzi & Khan, 2023). Over 90% of Indians emigrating to the Gulf countries belong to the low-skilled and semi-skilled labour categories (Chandramalla, 2021). And since the 1990s, with the boom of the IT sector in the US and other Western countries, more high-skilled Indian professionals have migrated in pursuit of higher salaries and better career opportunities (Singh & Verma, 2022).

## Contemporary drivers of emigration from India

Migration literature often distinguishes between 'push' and 'pull' factors that influence a migrant's decision to move. Push factors refer to conditions that drive people out of their home country, while pull factors attract them to a destination country. Although this framework is sometimes seen as an oversimplification of a complex and multi-faceted phenomenon, most migration studies acknowledge that both factors interplay, rather than operating in isolation, India being no exception (Imran Khan et al., 2023; Singh & Verma, 2022). Generally, the highest number of emigrants from India originate from southern states such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala, as well as from less economically developed northern states, including Andhra Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and Gujarat (Putta & Biswas, 2024).

A study by Imran Khan et al. (2023) analysing the prevalence of push and pull factors among migrants from Bihar, found that 41% of migrants to the Gulf region were primarily driven by push factors. This quantitative study also revealed that education level and pre-migration salary had a strong negative correlation with the length of stay in the destination country. This suggests that migrants with lower levels of education and income in Bihar tended to remain longer in the Gulf region, whereas those with higher level of education and better financial standing before migration generally spent shorter periods abroad.

Previous studies highlight three most common reasons for Indian emigration. One of the biggest contemporary drivers is the search for better economic opportunities. Unemployment, high levels of poverty, and low wages in India are major push factors that drive migration both internally and externally. In Imran Khan et al.'s (2023) study, participants cited 'poor financial condition' and 'family debt' as key motivations for migration. Many Indians seek better job opportunities and higher

wages, particularly in sectors like technology and healthcare in Western countries (Sharma et al., 2022) and in construction, oil industries, and service jobs in developing countries, including the Gulf states (Chandramalla, 2021). A survey (Dave, 2023) conducted among 300 individuals in India found that 75% of respondents expressed a desire to move abroad for various reasons and for different lengths of stay. Among them 60% cited higher salaries as their main reason, while 45% saw migration as a way to enhance their career prospects. The majority of respondents believed that only moving to the US would provide both career growth opportunities and the ability to accumulate wealth through hard work, something they felt was not achievable by staying in India or even by moving to the UK (Dave, 2023).

Higher education also plays a significant role in increasing the number of Indians migrating abroad. A substantial proportion of Indian emigrants are students seeking advanced education and training overseas, which enhances their career prospects and earning potential (Kapur, 2010). In 2024, more than 1.3 million students from India were studying abroad, a significant increase from 675,500 in 2019, nearly doubling in just five years (Nair, 2024). According to the Ministry of External Affairs of India, the top three destinations for Indian students were English-speaking countries, with close to half a million students studying in Canada, 337.6 thousand in the USA, and 185 thousand in Australia (Nair, 2024).

Studies show that most Indian students pursuing higher education abroad intend to secure employment and remain in their destination country for the long term (Deshmukh & Sankpal, 2022; Singh & Verma, 2022). As a result, students often choose to study economics, engineering, management and medicine, as these fields are in high demand in many destination countries (Singh, 2022). However, a survey conducted among Indian students in the UK (King & Sondhi, 2018) revealed that British and Indian students share similar motivations for studying abroad, including (i) the desire to attend a prestigious world-class university, (ii) the potential for a successful career, (iii) the experience of studying abroad as an adventure or 'transformative experience', and (iv) continuing a family tradition of studying abroad.

Beyond higher education and employment, a range of economic and social factors influence Indians' decisions to migrate. Among these is the desire for a better quality of life, which includes improved living conditions, infrastructure, healthcare, and education. This motivation is especially prevalent among individuals from upper-middle-class backgrounds in India (Deshingkar & Akter, 2009). Additionally, some social and cultural factors influence migration decisions. A survey conducted by Dave (2023) found that some respondents cited the expectation of a 'non-

judgemental society’ and ‘being far from relatives’ as reasons for moving abroad. Many participants believed that living overseas would allow them greater personal freedom, as societies abroad are perceived to be less intrusive and more individualistic, where ‘people mind their own business’ (Dave, 2023). Another study highlights the caste system and discrimination as significant push factors behind both domestic and international migration in India (Imran Khan et al., 2023).

## Major Destinations for Indian Migrants

India ranks among the top countries in the world’s largest migration corridors, specifically India–United Arab Emirates (UAE), India–United States (US), India–Saudi Arabia, which are the fourth, sixth and ninth largest migration corridors globally (IOM, 2024). Notably, India is the only country featured more than once as an origin country on this list. Furthermore, all other top migration corridors involve neighbouring countries that share a common border, except for the three corridors where India is present. This demonstrates that, on average, Indian migrants travel longer distances than migrants from any other country. Let us now examine the work and living conditions of the Indian migrants in the two leading destinations shown in Figure 1.

The migration from India to the UAE is the fourth-largest migration corridor in the world, having increased by more than 7.5 times in just 30 years (IOM, 2024). Remittances from the UAE account for nearly one-third of India’s total remittance inflows (Chandramalla, 2021). The UAE and Saudi Arabia host 3.5 million and 2.5 million Indian immigrants, respectively. More broadly, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states—five of which are featured as the top destinations for Indian migrants in Figure 1—collectively host over 8.5 million Indians (Ministry of External Affairs of India, 2024).

Interestingly, due to the stringent naturalisation policies in GCC countries, most Indian migrants live in these states for years or even generations as temporary or permanent residents, without acquiring citizenship. According to some estimates, one-fourth of the Indian diaspora resides in the GCC states, with only 25% of this population being female migrants, 90% of whom work in the services sector, particularly as domestic workers (Chandramalla, 2021).

It is suggested that a large number of undocumented Indian migrants reside in the GCC countries. Approximately half of the workforce in the GCC consists of Indian migrants, who have played a crucial role the region’s rapid development by

contributing to major infrastructure projects, working across various service sectors, and holding white-collar positions such as doctors, nurses, architects, and engineers. Additionally, several large businesses established by Indian immigrants have significantly contributed to the economic prosperity of the region (Jawed, 2024).

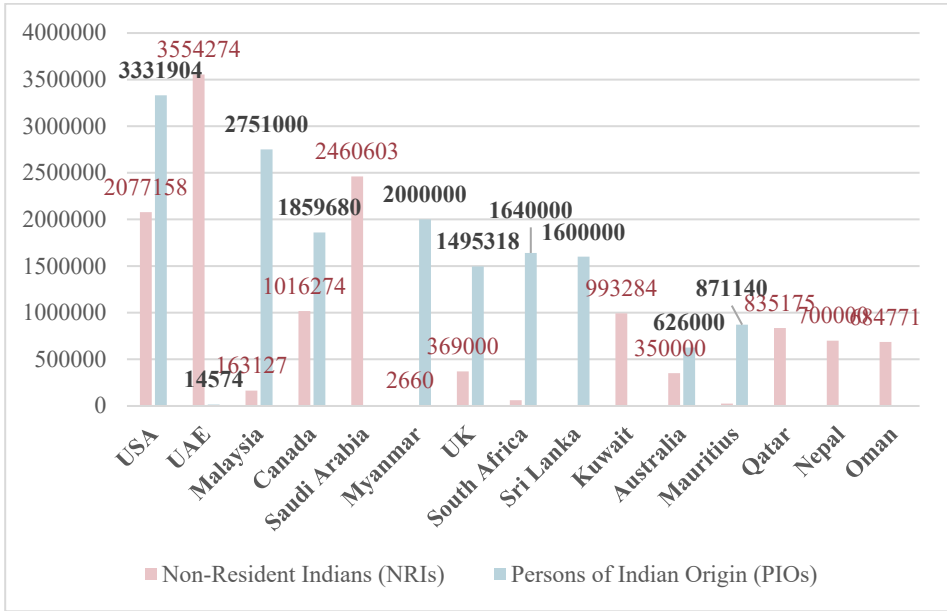


Figure 1. Top 15 destinations of emigrants from India in 1990 and 2023. Data source: Ministry of External Affairs, Government of India (2024).

Indians constitute the second-largest immigrant group in the United States, after Mexicans. The abolition of country-based immigration, introduced by the 1965 Immigration and Nationality Act in the US, opened the doors for more Indian migration to this country. Because a significant proportion of Indian migrants hold advanced degrees or have graduated from prestigious US universities, their median income is nearly twice as high as the average American salary (Greene & Batalova, 2024). In 2023, 49% of all Indian immigrants had advanced degrees, compared to just 14% of US-born citizens (Greene & Batalova, 2024). Statistics show that more than 20% of all H-1B visa for highly skilled workers in 2024 were issued individuals of Indian origin (The Hindu, 2025).

The Indian-American community plays a crucial role in US foreign and domestic politics, holding positions across the Congress, the Office of the Attorney General, and the FBI. Meanwhile, Silicon Valley and the broader tech industry continue to rely heavily on a steady influx of Indian engineers, programmers, and entrepreneurs

(Wadhwa, 2025). With the high inflow of Indian migrants, there is also a growing number of undocumented Indian immigrants in the US. According to the Migration Policy Institute, 3% of the 11 million unauthorised immigrants in the US in 2022 were of Indian origin (Greene & Batalova, 2024). Additionally, the US Customs and Border Protection reported that more than 170,000 individuals of Indian origin attempted unauthorised border crossings through Mexico and Canada (BBC, 2024).

## Socio-Economic Impact of Emigration

The impact of migration on the Indian economy is complex and difficult to quantify. On the one hand, migrant remittances serve as major pathways for capital transfers, market expansion, new industries, technological advancements, and knowledge exchange, all of which have significantly contributed to India's economic growth and improved the country's balance of payments. Since the 1980s, personal remittances received by India from its overseas migrants have far exceeded official development assistance by the UN and other multilateral organisations (Figure 2). At the micro level, migration has positively influenced household consumption patterns, leading to better health, nutrition and overall wellbeing for family members (Chandramalla, 2021). Up to 60% of total inflows in states like Kerala, Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu remain dependent on remittances (Ganesh, 2018).

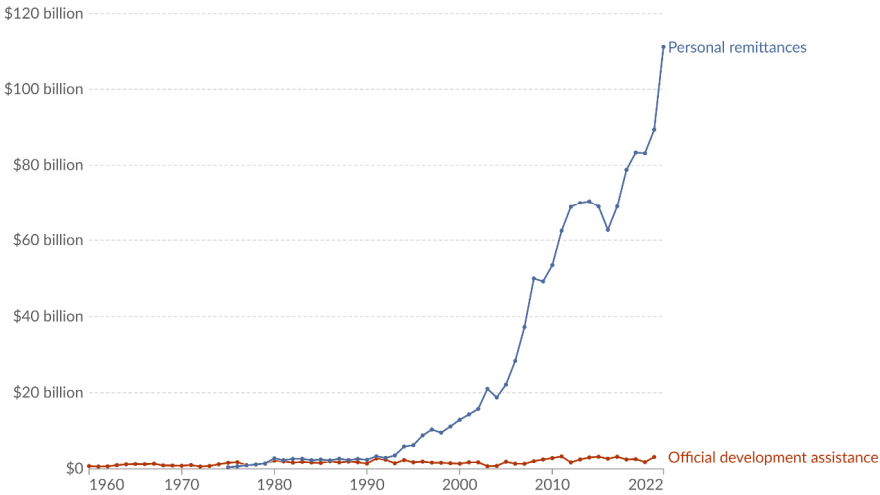
On the other hand, there are economic trade-offs associated with high emigration rates. One key drawback is the potential tax revenue lost due to the departure of skilled professionals who would otherwise contribute to India's economy. Additionally, India has faced the challenge of brain drain for decades, with a significant outflow of highly skilled professionals (Mani, 2012). In 2022 alone, a quarter of a million Indians renounced their citizenship, the majority of whom were highly educated professionals (Mohapatra & Mitra, 2024).

Beyond macroeconomic impact, large-scale migration has social and economic consequences at the household level. A study of 200 rural households in India (Das et al. 2020) found that the absence of emigrated fathers negatively affected children's education and behaviour, while left-behind wives faced increased security and safety concerns. The study also highlighted initial decreases in farm output following male migration from agricultural households. However, over time, remittance investments in better farm inputs and resources led to increased agricultural productivity.

## Personal remittances and official development assistance received, India, 1960 to 2022



Remittances – financial transfers from non-residents to residents of a country, such as a worker abroad sending money to family and friends – and official development assistance<sup>1</sup> measured in current US\$.



Data source: Multiple sources compiled by World Bank (2024)

OurWorldinData.org/migration | CC BY

Figure 2. Personal remittances and official development assistance received in India from 1960 to 2022. Source: Global Change in Data Lab (2024)

## Challenges Faced by Indian Migrants

When examining the ethnic and religious composition of Indian international migrants, a striking observation is that although Hindus make up more than 80% of India's population, their share among international migrants is less than half (45%) (Connor, 2017). Meanwhile, religious minorities are more likely to migrate abroad, as Christians, who constitute only 3% of India's population, account for 19% of emigrants, while Muslims, represent about 14% of the population, make up 27% of international migrants (Connor, 2017). This trend may indirectly point to structural and systemic inequalities, in combination with chain migration patterns, which require further study.

The caste system significantly influences who migrates from India and the benefits they receive (Chatterjee, 2022). Individuals from upper castes often possess intergenerational wealth, enabling them to afford the high costs of international migration and send back higher remittances, which further enhances their economic

standing (Chatterjee, 2022). Conversely, individuals from lower castes often migrate out of necessity, frequently borrowing money to cover migration costs, and their remittances barely cover household expenses (Chatterjee, 2022). This reinforces the concentration of wealth within upper castes, while marginalised communities struggle to benefit from migration opportunities.

Many migrants incur significant debt to finance their departure, covering costs such as health checks, visas, recruitment agency fees, and flight tickets. These financial burdens mean that migrants often begin repaying their debts only after securing work in their destination country.

Beyond financial difficulties, Indian migrants—like many others worldwide—face poor working conditions, limited access to healthcare and social services, exploitation, human trafficking, and abuse. These challenges were exacerbated during the Covid-19 pandemic, as millions of migrants worldwide were stranded abroad without jobs, healthcare support, or the means to return home due to lockdowns.

Qatar has faced global criticism for its treatment of migrant workers, particularly during the construction of infrastructure for the 2022 FIFA World Cup. Reportedly, a total of 6,500 migrant workers from India, Pakistan, Nepal, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka died in Qatar between 2010 and 2021 (Pattison et al., 2021). Many of these deaths were suspiciously classified as ‘non-work related’ or ‘due to natural causes’ on death certificates (Amnesty International, 2021). The majority of deceased workers were reported to have died from pulmonary diseases, despite having passed pre-employment medical examination confirming their good health (Amnesty International, 2021). The case of Qatar highlights broader concerns about migrant rights in the Gulf region, where reports frequently indicate that basic human rights are not upheld and that decent working conditions are often denied to migrants by their employers.

## Conclusion

This chapter has explored the multifaceted nature of Indian emigration, tracing its historical roots from colonial-era indentured servitude to the contemporary drivers of skilled and unskilled labour migration. The analysis reveals that while economic opportunities remain the primary motivator for emigration, other significant factors include education, social inequalities rooted in the caste system, and the pursuit of improved living conditions. Moreover, the chapter has highlighted the significant

impact of remittances on the Indian economy, as well as the challenges faced by Indian migrants in various destination countries.

Thus far, India's migration policy has largely left emigration trends and patterns to market forces, both at the international and domestic levels (Singh, 2022). However, one of the biggest challenges India continues to face how to balance demographic growth, economic prosperity, and migration—both domestic and international. The outcomes of these migration patterns will not only shape India's socio-economic development, but will also have wider implications for other countries, as discussed in this chapter.

Going forward, India must find ways to harness the potential of its vast diaspora, establish stronger bilateral agreements to promote safe and orderly migration, and address worker protections and social security concerns, particularly for low-skilled Indian labourers facing poor working conditions abroad. Additionally, improving social services and support mechanisms for left-behind families should remain a key policy priority.

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# Managing Migration in Türkiye: Patterns and Policies

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## Brief Migration History of Türkiye

Türkiye has long been a land of diverse migrations. The country's migration experience encompasses both the transformations brought about by the transition from empire to nation-state and the continuities that have persisted from past to present. Located at the crossroads of Europe, the Middle East, and Asia, Türkiye serves as a crucial meeting point for various migration flows. Its strategic geographic location, situated at the intersection of multiple migratory routes, has played a defining role in shaping its migration dynamics. Consequently, migration has been a recurrent theme in Anatolia, and population movements have been important not only for modern Türkiye, but also for the Ottoman Empire.

During the Ottoman period, voluntary migration was often restricted, with population movements primarily driven by political control or the need to support the Empire's expansionist strategy (Faroqhi, 2014; Erder, 2018). Additionally, the Empire occasionally faced refugee influxes, requiring structured responses (Melton, 2014). To regulate these movements, the Ottoman state implemented a highly institutionalized 'settlement policy' (*İskan Politikası*) (Erder, 2018; Barkan, 1952). While this policy governed internal population movements within the Empire, external migration management began in 1867 with the adoption of the *Ottoman*

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*Passport Regulation*, which sought to control mobility into and out of Ottoman territories.



Source: Encyclopedia Britannica, (2024). Türkiye. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Türkiye/Settlement-patterns> (accessed 11.09.2024).

The following decades saw the outbreak of World War I, marking the end of the age of empires, with the dissolution of the Ottoman, Russian, Austro-Hungarian, and German Empires, as well as the Turkish War of Independence (1919-1923). These geopolitical developments and conflicts triggered change of borders, the formation of new states and nation-building processes, leading to significant population movements. During this period, non-Muslim minorities left what is now Türkiye in large numbers, often facing discrimination. At the same time, Muslim immigrants—primarily from the Balkans—migrated en masse into Anatolia. Dispossessed and displaced Muslims from the Caucasus, Crimea, and the Balkans sought refuge in the Empire’s Anatolian heartland (Karpas, 2003; Chatty, 2010). This mass migration included many different Muslim groups, including Circassians, Chechens, Tatars, Laz, Acar, and Pomak. In addition, large groups of Russian Jews arrived in the Empire this time (Chatty 2010). Academic estimates suggest that between 1783 and 1914, the total number of migrants and displaced persons ranged between 5.3 and 5.7 million (Karpas, 2003; Özbay and Yücel, 2001; Erder, 2018).

In addition to these historical migration flows, Türkiye has also experienced successive waves of migration, particularly from its eastern neighbours. These more

recent movements have been characterised by irregularity, often involving asylum-seekers, irregular workers, and transit migrants (İçduygu and Yüksek, 2012). Asylum-seekers have primarily come from politically unstable regions such as Iran, Iraq, Bosnia, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, and, more recently, Syria. While earlier migration movements involved more than 1.5 million individuals, many of whom transited through Türkiye or returned to their home countries, the recent influx from Syria has resulted in the arrival of more than 3.6 million refugees, marking one of the most significant population movements in Türkiye's modern history.

Irregular workers primarily come from the neighbouring countries and Commonwealth of Independent States (Toksöz, Erdoğan and Kaşka, 2012). Türkiye maintains a liberal visa regime with many countries, granting nationals of these countries a ninety-day visa exemption. According to PMM (2025b), irregular migrants originate mainly from Afghanistan, Syria, Palestine, Turkmenistan, Morocco, Uzbekistan, Iraq and Iran. They are predominantly employed in the informal economy, working across various sectors, including domestic service, child and patient care, entertainment, the sex industry, garment workshops, construction, tourism, and agriculture (Toksöz, Erdoğan and Kaşka, 2012). Additionally, since the late 1970s, Türkiye has also become 'a waiting room' for irregular migrants intending to continue their journeys to Western Europe and North America (Erder, 2000, p. 251). These transit migrants primarily come from Middle East, Asia, and Africa.

Conflicts and wars profoundly influence migration trends and dynamics, often serving as a primary driver of large-scale displacement (Uslu and Ceylan, 2019; PMM, 2025a; Sirkeci and Eroğlu Utku, 2020). Armed conflicts not only disrupt social, economic, and medical infrastructure but also severely damage essential systems, including healthcare, communication, and education (Collier, 2003; Goldson, 1996). Beyond these harms, fundamental rights and freedoms, such as the right to life and security, are frequently disregarded during times of conflict. Under these dire circumstances, individuals often endure significant losses, including the death of a family member and loved ones, the destruction of homes, the loss of social networks, and the erosion of their sense of security and stability (Silove, 2013). Compared to previous eras, there has been a notable escalation in the number of civilians affected by wars and armed conflicts, particularly non-combatants (Goldson, 1996). Civilians are increasingly being targeted through violence, and their fundamental rights and freedoms are violated, thereby leading to an increase in forced displacement. Thus, wars and conflicts remain major drivers of forced migration, compelling individuals to flee their homes in search of safety and stability elsewhere.

Migration is broadly defined as the relocation from one place to another, either within or beyond national borders, with the intent of making the transition permanent or semi-permanent (Lee, 1966; Wood, 1994). Forced migration occurs when individuals are compelled to leave their homes and become displaced within their own country or outside to ensure their safety and avoid persecution and violence (Moore and Shellman, 2004). Depending on the region of displacement, and the laws of the country where they seek asylum, individuals may assume the status of ‘refugees’ if they migrate to another country, or they may be classified as ‘internally displaced persons’ (IDPs) if they relocate within their own country (Collier, 2003; Wood, 1994; UNHCR, 2024a). Wars and conflicts are not only a global driver of migration but also a historical catalyst for migration in Türkiye, particularly from the mid-19th century onwards. As explored in the following sections, Türkiye’s migration history has been shaped by successive waves of forced displacement, spanning from the mid-19th century up to the present day.

### **Migratory Movements from Caucasia and Crimea to Anatolia**

During the mid-19th century, the Ottoman Empire, the predecessor of the Turkish Republic, underwent significant social changes due to large-scale migratory movements from Caucasia and Crimea (Zafer, 2017; Tepekaya, 2006). The Crimean War (1853-1856) and the Russian-Ottoman War (1877-1878) intensified the migratory movements from these regions to Anatolia. These waves of displacement continued from the mid-19th century until the early 20th century, ultimately affecting nearly three million individuals. Upon arrival, many migrants initially settled in the Balkan regions; however, following the Ottoman Empire’s loss of its Balkan provinces, they were forcibly displaced once again and were eventually resettled across various parts of Anatolia.

### **Balkan Migrations**

The Ottoman Empire encountered significant migration movements from the Balkans to Anatolia, following the loss of its territories in the Balkan Wars of 1912 and 1913 (İçduygu and Sert, 2015). During this first wave of Balkan migrations, approximately 300,000 people were displaced and resettled in Anatolia. Unlike those migrating from the Circassia and Crimea, most migrations from the Balkans occurred by land. At the time, Istanbul served as the first safe place for those coming from the Balkans, and later they settled in Anatolia.

However, migration waves from the Balkans were not limited to this period; it continued throughout the Republic of Türkiye era until the early 2000s (İçduygu and Sert, 2015). When considered in the context of mass migration, a significant number of people migrated from Greece, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, and Romania to Türkiye (Uslu and Ceylan, 2019; PMM, 2025a; İçduygu and Sert, 2015). The following events and policies played a major role in these migrations:

- 1) The population exchange between Greece and Türkiye (1922-1938) – an agreement relocating Greeks in Türkiye to Greece and Turks in Greece to Türkiye.
- 2) Bulgaria’s Bulgarization policies (1925-1989) – forced assimilation measures, including the replacement of Turkish names with Slavic names and language bans.
- 3) Migrations from Yugoslavia and Macedonia (1924-1953) – caused by the conflicts during Yugoslavia’s formation and disintegration.
- 4) Attacks on Turks in Romania – due to economic struggles and ethnic tensions.
- 5) The Bosnian War (1992-1998) led Bosniaks to seek refuge in Türkiye.

These migrations resulted in approximately 1.7 million people from the Balkans being forcibly displaced during the Republic of Türkiye period (İçduygu and Sert, 2015). Balkan refugees witnessed significant historical tragedies, including World War I and World War II, and suffered significant losses. Considering the scale of these mass migrations to Türkiye, although some Balkan settlers were from various ethnic backgrounds, most were of Turkish origin. Accordingly, these mass migrations likely contributed to the increase in the Turkish population within Türkiye.

### **Migrations from East Turkestan**

Türkiye has been one of the key destinations for Uyghur Turks fleeing persecution (PMM, 2025a). This migration flow began following China’s occupation of East Turkestan in 1950, initially as a large-scale refugee movement, followed by ongoing individual migrations to Türkiye. The first migration wave consisted of approximately 1,850 individuals (Kul, 2022). While subsequent migrations were not on a mass scale, frequent and significant. Although official data is lacking, the Uyghur refugee population in Türkiye has grown steadily. Today, approximately 70,000 individuals from East Turkestan have migrated to Türkiye (Kul, 2022).

Although Türkiye does not share a border with the region, it has emerged as a primary destination for displaced Uyghurs.

### **Migrations from the Middle East: Iran and Iraq**

Several major conflicts and political upheavals have driven migration from Iran and Iraq to Türkiye, including the Iranian revolution (1979), the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), the Gulf War (1990-1991)—which involved the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait followed by the US-led military intervention—and the US invasion of Iraq (2003). These events have been the primary triggers for migration from these countries to Türkiye (PMM, 2024a; Özdemir, 2016; Sirkeci and Eroğlu Utku, 2020; Şahin and Düzgün, 2015). Following the Iranian revolution (1979), approximately one million Iranians initially migrated to Türkiye, fleeing the new regime. Similarly, the prolonged Iran-Iraq war and the subsequent Gulf War triggered another wave of mass displacement, with approximately 500,000 Iraqis migrating to Türkiye by 1991 (Uslu and Ceylan, 2019). The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 caused another surge in asylum applications from Iraqis to Türkiye (Şahin and Düzgün, 2015). During these periods, a substantial number of the migration movements to Türkiye consisted of refugees from Iran and Iraq.

### **Migrations from the Middle East: Syria**

The civil war in Syria, which began in 2011, has led to an unprecedented mass migration, causing a major refugee crisis (Sirkeci and Eroğlu Utku, 2020). According to United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) data, by the end of 2023, a total of 13.8 million people were forcibly displaced, with 7.2 million internally displaced within Syria and 6.4 million refugees and asylum seekers who were forced to flee the country (UNHCR, 2024b). The largest of these migrations have been to Türkiye, with 3.76 million registered refugees, mainly due to Türkiye's geographic proximity (UNHCR, 2024c). Because of Türkiye's position as a transit country, human traffickers, promising to smuggle Syrians to Europe by sea, have led to numerous tragic incidents (UNHCR, 2015). However, the overwhelming majority of Syrian refugees who migrated to Türkiye have remained in the country (Republic of Türkiye, 2014a).

In accordance with the 1951 Geneva Convention, international agreements, and Turkish regulations regarding the legal status of refugees, Syrians who arrive in Türkiye are granted 'temporary protection' status (Republic of Türkiye, 2014b; Turkish Grand National Assembly Human Rights Inquiry Committee, 2012). As

noted in following paragraphs, the Temporary Protection Directive, published in the Official Gazette (No. 29153) on October 22, 2014, came into force, granting ‘temporary protection’ status to Syrians who have arrived in Türkiye since 2011. Under this directive, Syrians are entitled to access basic services such as health and education, as well as employment, while their security and humanitarian needs are addressed.

### **Migrations from Afghanistan**

Türkiye has long been a destination for Afghan migrants, especially those with Turkic heritage. Since 2007, the influx of Afghans to the country has increased due to the diminishing humanitarian spaces in Pakistan and Iran—countries that have hosted the largest Afghan refugee populations since the 1970s—positioning Türkiye as one of the nearest asylum options (Kaytaz, 2016, p. 284). The US withdrawal from Afghanistan in September 2021, and the subsequent political turmoil led to increased migration flows from Afghanistan. By 2022, the number of Afghan refugees worldwide had doubled compared to the previous year. According to the year-end data for 2023, a total of 5.8 million refugees were forced to leave their homeland. Although Afghanistan does not share a border with Türkiye, some Afghan migrants have chosen Türkiye as either a destination or a transit country. Afghan migrants in Türkiye do not have legal status and are referred to as ‘irregular migrants’ (PMM, 2025b). While there is no official data on the total number of Afghan migrants in Türkiye, they have been recorded as the largest group of apprehended and deported irregular migrants (PMM, 2025b). A report published on this issue states that between 2022 and September 2024, 225,442 Afghan migrants were deported from Türkiye, accounting for nearly half of all deportations during this period (PMM, 2025b). Based on this data, it can be inferred that a significant number of Afghan refugees have migrated to Türkiye, predominantly through irregular channels.

### **Migrations from Ukraine**

One of the recent migration movements caused by conflicts and wars is Russia’s occupation of Ukraine, which began in 2022 and continues to this day (UNHCR, 2024b). While a large portion of forcibly displaced Ukrainians have migrated to Europe, some have sought refuge in Türkiye. According to UNHCR data, as of February 2025, the number of refugees from Ukraine who have resettled in Türkiye is approximately 35,000 out of 6.9 million displaced Ukrainians (UNHCR, 2025). Although around 150,000 Ukrainian refugees migrated to Türkiye by the end of

2022, many of them have since moved on to other countries (UNHCR, 2022). Türkiye has extended its open-door policy to Ukrainian refugees, welcoming those forcibly displaced who have been exposed to traumatic events.

## Türkiye's Migration Laws and Institutions

Türkiye holds multiple migration identities within various migration regimes reflecting the historical migration, asylum and refugee movements it has experienced since the early years of the Republic as well as the control, admission, and settlement policies it has developed for different migrant groups (Ihlamur Öner, 2022). Türkiye manages migration through a framework of laws and regulations. Additionally, Türkiye is a party to several international conventions and readmission agreements, and it signed a highly debated migration agreement with the EU in 2016.

### Regulation of Migration and International Protection until 2010s

Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Türkiye signed treaties with Greece, Bulgaria, and Romania to manage emigration from former Ottoman territories. Only these groups, as well as Muslim Turkish speakers and Muslim ethnic communities deemed capable of assimilating into the new Turkish identity, were granted the right to immigrate (Çağaptay, 2002; Kirişçi, 2003: 4). This right and their movement to Türkiye were regulated by successive Laws on Settlement.<sup>50</sup> The 1934 Law of Settlement (Law No. 2510) became the foundational piece of legislation, defining the rules of immigration and asylum in the Republic of Türkiye, as well as managing internal migration. The third article of this law laid the foundation for Türkiye's traditional migration policy. According to this article, the right to immigrate to and settle in Türkiye through international migration is granted only to those 'of Turkish descent and of Turkish culture'. However, this does not refer to all individuals of Turkish descent, but rather to Turkish and/or Muslim groups who remained in the Balkans following the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire. The ethnonationalist approach expressed in this article shaped Türkiye's policies regarding the mobility of foreigners (İçduygu, Erder and Gençkaya, 2014). This restrictive migration policy can also be seen in other laws adopted during the early years of the Republic, including the Village Law, Foreigners' Employment Law, and regulations on land

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<sup>50</sup> 1923 Population Exchange Law, 1926 Law No. 885 on Settlement, 1934 Law no. 2510 on Settlement, 2006 Law no. 5543 on Settlement.

ownership (Genç and Eryılmaz, 2021).<sup>51</sup> As previously noted, in the period between 1923 and 1997, more than 1.5 million Turkish-speaking Muslims and Muslims from Bulgaria, Yugoslavia, Romania, Greece, and East Turkestan immigrated to Türkiye. Half of them were officially settled through the state-managed settlement policy and its institutions.<sup>52</sup> To this day, this policy continues to apply to Muslim Turkish speakers and Muslim ethnic groups from former Ottoman territories.<sup>53</sup>

Another significant development affecting Türkiye's migration policies was its signing of the 1951 United Nations Convention Relating to the Status of Refugees. Later, in 1967, Türkiye acceded to the New York Protocol, which updated the 1951 Convention, but retained a geographic limitation. In line with the geographical limitation, Türkiye applies the Convention and its Protocol only to persons who have become refugees due to events occurring in Europe.<sup>54</sup> However, beginning in the late 1970s, Türkiye started receiving mass asylum movements from its neighbors, first from Iran and then from Iraq. In 1994, Türkiye introduced the Asylum Regulation to align its migration and asylum framework with global standards under changing circumstances (Kirişçi, 2002: 19). This regulation was intended to manage mass asylum movements from Türkiye's eastern neighbours while preserving the geographical limitation. It also facilitated the resettlement of refugees in third countries. The 1994 Regulation was widely criticised by human rights organizations and scholars for maintaining the geographical limitation, recognizing only temporary protection, experiencing implementation challenges, and restricting the rights of refugees (İçduygu, Erder, and Gençkaya, 2014).

Until the 2010s, Türkiye's migration and asylum system, shaped by these laws, the UN Convention, its Protocol, and the 1994 Regulation, operated on three main principles: (1) prioritizing individuals of Turkish descent in migration to Türkiye, (2) granting refugee status only to asylum-seekers from Europe, and (3) providing temporary protection to non-European countries (Kirişçi, 2003; Suter, 2013). This created a two-tiered asylum system, in which European asylum-seekers and people

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<sup>51</sup> As part of the EU accession efforts, 1934 Law of Settlement was replaced by a new law on settlement in 2006. However, the restrictive spirit is kept in the new law as well.

<sup>52</sup> The Grand National Assembly of Türkiye, *İskan Kanunu Tasarısı ve İskan Kanununda Değişiklik Yapılması Hakkında Kanun Tasarısı ile Bayındırlık, İmar, Ulaştırma ve Turizm Komisyonu Raporu* (1/352, 1/12 (Ankara, 2003).

<sup>53</sup> These immigrants can acquire Turkish citizenship through citizenship laws that allow ethnic Turks to become naturalized Turkish citizens (İçduygu and Aksel, 2012: 7).

<sup>54</sup> There are cases when Türkiye chose not to grant refugee status even to Europeans fleeing to Türkiye as a result of events occurring in Europe. For example, Bosniac asylum-seekers, who fled to Türkiye during the war in Yugoslavia (1992-1995), were not recognized as refugees but offered only temporary protection (Şirin, 2008).

of Turkish descent were granted prioritised status, while non-European asylum-seekers were required to submit asylum claims to both the UNHCR and the Turkish government (Suter, 2013). In the 1990s, Türkiye provided temporary protection to Iranians, Iraqi Kurds, Bosnians, and Chechens, many of whom either returned home, relocated to third countries, or, if of Turkish descent, obtained Turkish citizenship (Kirişçi, 2003; Erder, 2007). Türkiye continued to receive asylum seekers from Bosnia, Afghanistan, Somalia, Sudan, and more recently, Syria. Although they were not officially granted refugee status, Türkiye upheld the principle of *non-refoulement*, offering them de facto international protection and treating them as temporary residents. During earlier waves of forced migration, many returned to their home countries or relocated to third countries (Kirişçi, 2003). However, as will be discussed in later sections, a distinct legal framework applies to Syrian forced migrants in Türkiye.

### **Criminalisation of Migrant Smuggling and Human Trafficking**

In addition to the asylum-seekers, and in line with globalisation and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Türkiye began receiving irregular workers and transit migrants in the late 1990s (İçduygu and Yüksek, 2012). With these movements, new phenomena—such as organized crime networks facilitating the movement of unauthorized migrants—started to emerge. These activities spanned several countries, transcended national borders, evaded state jurisdiction and enforcement, and exploited and harmed migrants. In a short period, the international community started to conceptualize these phenomena as human smuggling<sup>55</sup> and human trafficking. To address these crimes, international protocols were developed, and many states incorporated them into national legislation criminalising these acts.

Due to its geographical position, connecting developing countries to industrialised Europe, and the fact that its eastern and southeastern borders divide ethnic groups—sometimes separating family members—Türkiye has long grappled with cross-border migration issues (Genç, 2015). Türkiye's counterterrorism efforts against the PKK, since the late 1980s, have added further complexity to these challenges. The dissolution of the Soviet Union in the 1990s, along with the acceleration of globalisation, further intensified transnational migration-related activities in Türkiye.

With a long and irregular coastline, proximity to the Greek islands (an EU member state), and mountainous and difficult-to-control land borders, Türkiye serves as both

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<sup>55</sup> Human smuggling would later be reconceptualized as 'migrant smuggling'.

a source and a transit country for irregular migrants (Çiçekli, 2011). In recent decades, it has also become a destination country. Migrant smuggling networks have long played a role in facilitating the entry and transit of irregular migrants in Türkiye (İçduygu and Toktaş, 2002). Meanwhile, following the dissolution of the Soviet Union in the mid-1990s, Türkiye became both a destination and a transit country for human trafficking, particularly trafficking of women. Reports from the 1990s and 2000s highlight that women from former Soviet states, including Romania, Russia, Ukraine, Moldova, Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia, were trafficked into or through Türkiye (Erder and Kaşka, 2003).

Although Türkiye has long experienced migrant smuggling and human trafficking, these phenomena were not fully recognised in the country until the late 1990s, and no national legal definitions had been established. As a result, until that time, migrant smuggling and human trafficking were not classified as criminal offenses under Turkish law, nor were there laws imposing criminal penalties for these acts (Genç, 2022). International efforts to regulate migrant smuggling and human trafficking gained momentum in the late 1990s, leading to the adoption of international conventions that established common definitions, principles, and legal frameworks. Türkiye aligned itself with these developments. The most significant developments in this regard include the establishment of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) in 1997 and the drafting of the United Nations Convention on Transnational Organised Crime (UNTOC) and its supplementary protocols. These protocols, also known as the Palermo Protocols, include the 'Protocol Against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air' and the 'Protocol to Prevent, Suppress, and Punish Trafficking in Persons, Especially Women and Children'. Türkiye signed UNTOC and its Protocols on December 13, 2000. UNTOC and its Protocols came into force in Türkiye in March 2003. Following their entry into force, Türkiye revised its domestic legal framework. Articles 79 and 80 of the Turkish Penal Code (Law No. 5237), which came into force in 2005, redefined and criminalised human smuggling and trafficking.

## **EU Impact on Türkiye's Migration Laws**

In the early 2000s, as part of its EU accession process, Türkiye started reviewing and updating its laws to align with the EU acquis. Türkiye's migration, visa, asylum and border control policies were brought under scrutiny. In the Accession Partnership Document, signed with the EU Commission, Türkiye's responsibilities regarding migration were outlined. Türkiye was required to draft a comprehensive migration law addressing key areas such as strengthening border management to combat

irregular migration, aligning with the Schengen system, removing the geographical limitation, and reforming the asylum application and evaluation system. To meet these requirements, Türkiye published National Action Plans for the Adoption of the EU Acquis in 2001, 2003, and 2008, which served as roadmaps for reform. In 2005, Türkiye also adopted the National Action Plan on Asylum and Migration.

As part of these efforts, Migration Management and Border Management Bureaus were established within the Ministry of Interior in 2004 to develop a legal framework and facilitate compliance with the EU acquis. That same year, Türkiye became a member of the IOM, marking another milestone in capacity-building. In 2006, the 1934 Law of Settlement was repealed, and the new Law No. 5543 on Settlement was enacted. While these legal changes were being implemented, debates persisted. On one hand, there was broad recognition of the need for a new, comprehensive law—one that would address Türkiye's evolving migration dynamics, while also meeting EU pressure to remove the geographical limitation. On the other hand, there was reluctance to lift the geographical limitation due to concerns that Türkiye would become a primary destination for asylum seekers and struggle to prevent their permanent settlement. As noted previously, Türkiye began receiving Syrian asylum-seekers in March 2011, and as their numbers grew into a mass influx, Turkish authorities took significant steps in migration management. The most notable step was the adoption of the Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP, Law no. 6458) in 2013.

### **Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP)**

The Law on Foreigners and International Protection (LFIP, 2013) is the first national law in Türkiye that systematically regulates migration. The LFIP was designed to institutionalise Türkiye's fragmented migration management system, regulate visas, residence permits, and protection regimes, combat irregular migration, and introduce migrant adaptation policies for the first time.

One of the major reforms introduced by the LFIP was the transfer of Türkiye's migration management to a civilian institution, the Directorate General of Migration Management (DGMM), under the Ministry of Interior, along with its provincial migration directorates (Evranoş and Ark Yıldırım, 2022). The DGMM assumed the broadest mandate in Türkiye's migration governance, overseeing entry to and exit of foreigners, residence permits and international protection, deportation processes, temporary protection measures, and protection of victims of human trafficking. In 2019, the DGMM was elevated to a Presidency under the Ministry of Interior, now known as the Presidency for Migration Management (PMM). This

change aimed to enhance migration governance and improve efficiency in managing asylum processes in Türkiye.

Additionally, the LFIP introduced new provisions, aligning Türkiye's system closely with the EU's Schengen model. Key changes included: a) a maximum of 90-day visa limit, b) an airport transit visa requirement, c) a 15-day border visa, only issued 'in exceptional cases' and d) detailed criteria for visa denial, cancellation, and refusal, ensuring foreign nationals are informed of the reasons for visa rejections. Despite these new measures, Türkiye maintains a highly liberal visa regime, largely due to its e-visa system (Evranos and Ark, 2022).

The LFIP expanded legal protections for asylum-seekers who do not qualify under Türkiye's geographical limitation. It introduced three distinct international protection statuses for refugees (granted to those fleeing persecution from Europe), conditional refugees, and subsidiary protection. A conditional refugee is simply a refugee from a country outside Europe - and according to law they shall be allowed to reside in Türkiye temporarily until they are resettled to a third country. Individuals who cannot be classified as refugees or conditional refugees but would face life-threatening situations if returned to their country are, for the first time in Turkish legal system, granted protection under the subsidiary protection status. (Şirin Öner and Genç, 2015). Additionally, LFIP recognised temporary protection for mass displacement situations (PMM, 2025e). However, the law lacked detailed implementation mechanisms, which were later addressed in the Temporary Protection Directive of 2014. The principle of *non-refoulement* was also formally established as a fundamental rule, ensuring that individuals cannot be forcibly returned to countries where they would face persecution or harm.

The LFIP also introduced major reforms to residence permits to combat irregular migration and encourage regular migration. In this context, a residence permit requirement has been introduced for individuals who will stay in Türkiye for more than 90 days, and different types of residence permits were defined such as long-term residence permit, student residence permit, family residence permit and residence permit on humanitarian grounds.

## **EU-Türkiye Readmission Agreement and the EU – Türkiye Migration Deal**

The EU and Türkiye have historically had a difficult relationship, with mobility and migration emerging as key topics in their relations in recent decades (Erzan and Kirişçi 2006; İçduygu 2011; Aydın-Düzgit and Tocci 2015). İçduygu (2011) highlights two primary factors that have shaped the debate over Türkiye's EU

membership in relation to migration. First, the rise in irregular migrants entering the EU via Türkiye raised concerns that Türkiye was losing control of its borders. Second, politicians opposing Türkiye's EU membership often invoked fears of a potential 'invasion of the EU' by migrants from Türkiye or a 'flood of Turkish nationals' should full membership be granted (Erzan and Kirişçi 2006, p.1; İçduygu 2011, p. 2). Additionally, Aydın-Düzgit and Tocci (2015: 134) emphasize other critical concerns, including 'the tensions caused by the EU's requirement for Schengen visas for Turkish citizens' and 'the challenge of integrating Turkish migrants in EU member states,' both of which intensified the significance of mobility and migration in the membership negotiations. Furthermore, negative public sentiment towards granting Turkish citizens freedom of movement has been fuelled by concerns over integration policies, the legacy of earlier Turkish immigration waves, and rising Islamophobia in Europe (İçduygu 2011). There is a widespread fear that such visa regularisation could lead to a substantial increase in migration from Türkiye to EU countries (Erzan and Kirişçi 2006).

The EU, on the other hand, has approached the issue pragmatically, using visa policies and visa liberalisation as strategic tools in its migration management strategy. Since the early 2000s, it has granted visa-free or simplified Schengen access to citizens of third countries that agree to sign readmission agreements—particularly those that serve as sources or transit countries for irregular migration to the EU. Meanwhile, candidate countries, including Türkiye, are required to tighten border controls to prevent irregular migration as part of their preparations to join the Schengen Area. These countries must align their migration, border, and asylum policies with EU standards before their territory can be integrated into the Schengen Area (Dedeoğlu and Genç, 2017).

During the mid-2000s, while the EU was open to discussing visa liberalisation in exchange for a readmission agreement, Turkish officials expressed hesitation. There was concern that signing such an agreement would turn Türkiye into 'a buffer zone' or 'a dumping ground' for irregular migrants (Bürgin 2012). Additionally, Türkiye viewed the EU's approach as contradictory, as visa facilitation was extended to third countries and members of the European Neighbourhood Policy, yet not to Türkiye—a future EU member state (Kirişçi 2008, p. 20). Due to these concerns, negotiations on visa facilitation in exchange for a readmission agreement stalled in 2006. However, in January 2011, the European Commission announced an agreement with Türkiye regarding the return of irregular migrants entering the EU via Türkiye. The readmission agreement was initialled on 21 June 2012 and formally signed on 13 December 2013. Alongside the readmission agreement, the EU launched the Visa Liberalisation Dialogue, guided by the 'Roadmap towards a visa-

free regime with Türkiye', which outlined the necessary steps Türkiye had to fulfil (Kirişçi 2014). However, during 2014 and 2015, Türkiye made little to no progress in meeting the conditions set forth in the Roadmap. The massive influx of Syrian refugees into the EU in 2015 prompted both sides to reassess their relationship and redefine their cooperation on migration management.

The influx of Syrian refugees to Europe in 2015 fuelled panic within the EU and created an urgent need to negotiate an arrangement with Türkiye to stop or slow the flow of migrants. For domestic political reasons, the Turkish political leadership was also eager to revive the EU accession process and resolve the protracted visa liberalisation issue (Kirişçi, 2021, 2). In this context, the parties negotiated the EU-Türkiye Joint Action Plan in October 2015, followed by the Migration Deal.

Under the terms, Türkiye agreed to strengthen border control, while Greece was granted the option to return 'all new irregular migrants' to Türkiye. For every irregular migrant returned from Greece, one registered asylum seeker in Türkiye would be resettled in the EU. Additionally, Türkiye was to receive two tranches of three billion euros in aid to support refugees in the country. As part of the deal, the EU committed to revitalise Türkiye's EU accession process by opening a new negotiation chapter and introducing a visa liberalisation programme for Turkish citizens (Önder, 2022).

The transactional nature of the agreement sparked significant criticism, with some describing it as a 'dirty deal' and likening it to 'horse trading', carried out at the expense of some of the world's most vulnerable people (Kirişçi, 2021:2). At the same time, both parties expressed dissatisfaction with its implementation. EU leaders were frustrated by Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's repeated threats to 'open the borders' and allow refugees to flood into Europe. Meanwhile, Turkish officials criticised the financial aid, arguing that it was insufficient and that its distribution was too slow. Additionally, Türkiye frequently condemned the EU's failure to grant visa liberalisation for Turkish citizens and to reinvigorate Türkiye's EU accession process (Önder, 2022; Kirişçi, 2021).

## Main Migrant Groups in Türkiye

The latest statistics from UNHCR (2024d) indicate that Türkiye hosts more than 4,4 million foreign individuals, with 3.2 million of them applying for international protection. Most of these are Syrians (93,8%) who hold temporary protection status (PMM, 2025c). Other foreigners include those with international protection status mainly from Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, and Ukraine. As reported by the UNHCR (2024d), there are approximately 195,000 refugees and asylum seekers in Türkiye. Additionally, as of March 2025, there are almost 1.1 million foreign nationals with residence permits in Türkiye (PMM, 2025d). Currently, Türkiye hosts a diverse range of migrant groups, with significant populations from Syria, Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran and various Central Asian nations.

### Syrians

Since 2011, Türkiye has experienced a significant influx of Syrians due to the Syrian Civil War, making Türkiye the largest refugee-hosting in the world (UNHCR, 2025). According to the latest data, Türkiye currently hosts 2,814,402 Syrian refugees under temporary protection, with the population comprising 51.5% males and 48.5% females (PMM, 2025c). As of March 2025, over 123,000 Syrians hold short- and long-term residence permits (PMM, 2025d). With a total of 34,631, Syrians rank second among migrants attempting to enter Türkiye illegally, following Afghans (PMM, 2025b). The Directorate General of Civil Registration and Citizenship Affairs (2024) reported that 238,768 Syrians have been granted Turkish citizenship. Compared to other migrant groups in Türkiye, Syrians have migrated in much large numbers over a shorter period, resulting in a significant impact on Türkiye's economic and social structure. Unlike other migrant groups, Syrians have spread across nearly every province in Türkiye, with significant concentrations in Istanbul (489,000) and Gaziantep (394,000) (PMM, 2025d). Consequently, over the years, Syrians have increasingly interacted with Turkish society, integrating into daily life. However, prejudice and negative attitudes toward Syrians have intensified in recent years (Akpınar, 2017; Sönmez and Adıgüzel, 2017), partly due to concerns over additional refugee influx from Central Asian countries and Türkiye's ongoing economic difficulties.

Like other Syrian communities worldwide, Syrians face significant challenges in Türkiye. UNHCR (2019) reported that 45% of school-aged Syrian children had not enrolled in school in Türkiye in 2019. Therefore, Syrian children struggle with language barriers, cultural differences, and a limited access to educational resources,

which hinder their integration into the Turkish education system (Taşkın and Erdemli, 2018). Access to healthcare services is another major challenge for Syrians. Barriers such as a lack of health insurance, language difficulties, and limited social security coverage contribute to their restricted access to primary healthcare services (Bircan and Sunata, 2015; Genç and Elitsoy, 2023).

## **Afghans**

Due to ongoing conflicts and prolonged instability in Afghanistan, the number of Afghan migrants heading to Türkiye has been increasing each year. Afghan migrants typically reach Türkiye under challenging conditions, often using irregular migration routes. According to PMM (2025c), there are 60,000 Afghans in Türkiye holding short- and long-term residence permits. In 2024, Afghan migrants ranked first among the groups attempting to enter Türkiye through irregular ways, with a total of 65,815 individuals (PMM, 2025b). In addition, Türkiye hosts approximately 140,000 Afghan refugees and asylum-seekers. When considering unregistered Afghan migrants, estimates suggest that their total population in Türkiye may have reached to half a million in recent years. With the increase in their mobility, prejudice and discriminatory attitudes towards Afghans in Türkiye have risen (Tümtaş, 2022). In line with this trend, Afghan migrants tend to settle in specific neighbourhoods, leading to ghettoisation (Üstün and Vargün, 2022). Uncertainty stemming from their irregular status and limited access to basic services pose a significant barrier to their long-term integration into Turkish society (Kara and Tilbe, 2023).

## **Iraqis and Iranians**

Long-standing instability and security problems in Iraq have led to the migration of Iraqi individuals to Türkiye. No official data exists on the size of the Iraqi community in the country. However, as of March 2025, PMM (2025c) reports that 123,254 Iraqis hold residence permits, and 8,535 were apprehended for being irregular throughout 2024. Additionally, 2,776 Iraqis are under international protection. Furthermore, according to UNHCR (2024d), 12,909 Iraqi individuals in Türkiye are recognized as refugees, while 89,397 are classified as asylum seekers. Considering all data, it is estimated that there are approximately 300,000 Iraqi individuals in Türkiye. Topgül (2016) stated that Iraqi refugees face social exclusion rooted in perceptions of otherness and language barriers. Furthermore, misconceptions by employers about their willingness to work for low wages and lack of agency exacerbate challenges in their employment experiences (Topgül, 2016).

The number of Iranians migrating to Türkiye has also increased in recent years. Political repression in Iran, particularly targeting ethnic and religious minorities, has led to an exodus from the country (İçduygu and Aksel, 2013). Many Iranians seeking asylum in Türkiye view the country as a transit point for resettlement in the West (Akcapar, 2006). According to PMM (2025c), there are approximately 112,000 Iranians residing in Türkiye with short- and long-term residence permits. In addition, the number of Iranians apprehended irregular migration has been determined to be 2,632 in 2024 (PMM, 2025b). Only 1,416 Iranian individuals have been granted international protection status. Additionally, Türkiye hosts 5,388 refugees and 9,280 asylum seekers from originally Iran (UNHCR, 2024d). Recent studies (Ekhtiari and Aysan, 2023) indicate that Türkiye is one of the best destinations for Iranians, mainly due to its geographical and cultural proximity, which facilitates their integration into Turkish society. However, Iranian women face notable challenges in education, social, and economic areas (Lotfi and Porsuk, 2021).

### **Migrants from Central Asian Countries**

Türkiye has become an attractive destination for migrants from Central Asian countries due to strong linguistic and cultural ties. Migrants from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, and Uzbekistan constitute a significant migrant population in Türkiye. As of March 2025, there are 170,631 Turkmens and 79,130 Uzbeks holding short- and long-term residence permits and 43,684 Kazakhs with long-term residence permits in Türkiye (PMM, 2025c). Throughout 2024, 10,285 Turkmen and 12,571 Uzbek irregular migrants were apprehended by Turkish authorities (PMM, 2025b). Educational migration is also a key driver for Central Asian migration to Türkiye. By March 2024, there were 27,604 Turkmens, 9,737 Kazakh and 5,732 Uzbek citizens holding student visas in the country (PMM 2025c). In total, it is estimated that Türkiye hosts over 300,000 migrants of Central Asian origin. The primary motivation for migration to Türkiye among Kyrgyz, Tajik, and Uzbek migrants is economic (Urinboyev and Eraliev, 2022). Türkiye is a preferred labour destination for Central Asian migrants due to visa-free regime, shared Islamic and Turkic heritage, established social networks with fellow Central Asian migrants, and relatively higher salary expectations (Nurdinova, 2018).

# Conclusion

Türkiye has long been at the crossroads of migration due to its geopolitical location, historical ties, and evolving migration policies. Over the decades, the country has transitioned from being a source and transit country to a key destination for migrants, asylum seekers, and refugees. Driven by regional conflicts, economic disparities, and political instability, migration to Türkiye has significantly increased, shaping the country's demographic, social, and economic landscape.

Türkiye hosts one of the largest refugee populations in the world, with Syrians forming the majority under temporary protection, alongside significant numbers of Afghans, Iraqis, Iranians, and Central Asian migrants. These groups face varied challenges, including legal uncertainty, integration difficulties, labour market discrimination, and access to education and healthcare. While Türkiye has made significant strides in migration governance—introducing the LFIP, establishing the DGMM and later elevating it to PMM, and signing agreements with the EU—many challenges persist, particularly regarding the long-term integration of migrants, rising anti-migrant sentiment, and economic pressures.

Türkiye's relationship with the EU has further influenced its migration policies, leading to agreements such as the EU-Türkiye Readmission Agreement and the 2016 Migration Deal, which have shaped Türkiye's approach to irregular migration and asylum management. However, these agreements have been controversial, with both parties expressing dissatisfaction over their implementation and outcomes.

Looking ahead, Türkiye's migration policies will need to adapt to address emerging migration trends, ensure the protection and integration of migrants, and balance national interests with international obligations. As migration remains a defining feature of Türkiye's societal landscape, comprehensive policies, regional cooperation, and sustainable integration strategies will be essential for managing migration effectively and equitably in the years to come.

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# Migration to and from Ghana: Historical and Contemporary Dynamics

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## Introduction

Ghana is situated in West Africa and covers an area of about 234, 000 km<sup>2</sup>. It shares boundaries<sup>59</sup> with Ivory Coast, Burkina Faso and Togo to the west, north and east respectively. To the south is the Gulf of Guinea which gives a coastline of about 600 km to the country (Dei, 2010). According to the 2021 Population and Housing Census, Ghana's population stood at 30.8 million (GSS, 2021), making it the most populous country in West Africa second only to Nigeria. As Ghana's population continues to increase, so does the movement of her people. This chapter explores the migration history of Ghana, as well as current trends and dynamics of international and internal migration.

## Abridged Migration History of Ghana

In Ghana, migration is a common socio-economic, but complex phenomenon with a long history. Long before the arrival of Europeans on the coast, a well-established

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<sup>59</sup> These are artificially created boundaries and a legacy of European imperialism in Africa

North-South migration pattern existed within the geographical space that later became the Gold Coast and modern-day Ghana. At the time, trade was a major driver of migration. The North-South migration pattern was part of the Trans-Saharan caravan trade route, facilitating the movement of people from neighbouring territories and the Sahel region to trade in goods like ivory, kola nuts, gold, salt and clothes at Salaga market or further south in markets in present-day Kumasi (Addo, 1975 cited in GSS, 2023; Clapperton, 1966).

Given that the mode of transportation was primarily by beasts of burden, a single trade trip could take up to several months, meaning that traders were often away from home and could technically be classified as migrants. Aside from trade, inter-tribal wars, often driven by competition for fertile or mineral-rich land, enslavement, or the need to escape dominant groups, also led to irregular and undefined patterns of migration in Ghana at the time (Boahen, 1975; Buah, 1980).

The arrival of Europeans on the coast of Ghana added a new dimension to and extended the established North-South migration pattern and intra/inter-tribal struggles (Boahen, 1966). The European presence expanded trading opportunities and intensified migration both within and across the country (Daaku, 1970; Sudarkasa, 1974-75). People from Mali, Nigeria and Niger migrated to Ghana for trade (Nypan, 1960; Rouch, 1959). During the European occupation, the introduction of cash crops such as oil palm, rubber, and cocoa in the coastal belt and forest zone of Ghana further intensified the North-South migration. This time, migration was not only for trade but mainly for labour, as people moved to work on plantations and in mines (Amin, 1974, as cited in Anarfi et al., 2003). The demand for labour in plantations and mines exceeded local supply, and there were reported cases of local resistance to these jobs, as they are more demanding than trading. This labour shortage pulled migrants from neighbouring French Colonies and Northern Ghana, who migrated southward to fill the workforce gaps (Adepoju, 2005; Nabila, 1985). The British colonial administration concentrated economic development in Southern Ghana, where they could extract natural resources such as gold, cocoa, bauxite, manganese, and rubber. As a result, Northern Ghana was largely relegated to a labour reserve. Later, the transatlantic slave trade further intensified forced migration. Powerful and armed groups raided villages, captured people and sold them into slavery. Salaga market transformed into a well-known slave trading centre, where captives from Northern Ghana and the broader Sahel region were paraded and sold before being transported to the coast and across the Atlantic into slavery. Additionally, wealthy individuals in central and southern Ghana purchased enslaved women, primarily from Northern Ghana, to serve as domestic workers and, in some cases, as mistresses (Setrana and Kliest, 2022).

In 1957, Ghana gained independence from British rule, but the North-South migration pattern persisted (Yaro, 2008). In the first decade of the post-colonial era, Southern Ghana remained a popular destination not only for migrants from northern Ghana, but also for labour migrants from Niger, Mali, Burkina Faso and other West African countries such as Togo, Benin, and Nigeria, due to the thriving mining and cocoa industries at the time (Awumbila et al., 2014).

In 1966, Ghana's first President, Osagyefo Dr Kwame Nkrumah, was overthrown in a military coup, and for over a decade, the country experienced repeated military coups and economic stagnation. This period could be described as Ghana's first 'lost decade' after independence. During this period, immigrants were partly blamed for the country's economic difficulties, and Nigerians in particular were expelled from Ghana (Bakewell and Haas, 2007; Yaro, 2008). This led to an exodus of both Ghanaians and foreign nationals, mainly to other countries within the West African subregion. This period largely marked the transition of Ghana from an immigration country dating back to pre-colonial and colonial times to an emigration country, as economic hardships drove large numbers of Ghanaians abroad.

Ironically, as Ghana's economic situation worsened, many Ghanaians migrated to Nigeria<sup>60</sup>. By 1980, it was estimated that about one million Ghanaians had moved to Nigeria (Teye et al., 2015). At the time, approximately 300 Ghanaians migrated to Nigeria each day (Anarfi, 1982). Many Ghanaian migrants took advantage of the establishment of the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) to move to other countries within the subregion (Anarfi, 1982). Those who could afford to migrate further relocated to the United Kingdom (UK) due to colonial ties, while others migrated to the United States (US) and Canada, as English proficiency reduced language barriers in these countries. That is not to say Ghanaians did not migrate to other European countries; many relocated to Germany and the Netherlands, although in smaller numbers compared to English-speaking destinations (van Hear, 1998).

In 1983 and 1985, due to economic decline in Nigeria and under military rule, there were tit-for-tat expulsions of approximately 1.7 million Ghanaians from Nigeria. This event led to the popularisation of the term "Ghana Must Go", referring to the

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<sup>60</sup> Nigeria was a popular destination for Ghanaians for two main reasons. First, the discovery of oil in Nigeria and the subsequent oil boom of the 1970s led to economic growth, attracting migrants in search of better opportunities. Second, both Ghana and Nigeria were colonised by the British, and with English as their official language, there was no language barrier, unlike in the neighbouring French-speaking colonies.

cheap and spacious bags that Ghanaians rushed to buy to pack and transport their belongings to Ghana (Bakewell and Haas, 2007; Lawal, 2019).

The return of civilian rule in 1992, which ushered Ghana into its ongoing Fourth Republic, along with relatively stabilised economic conditions in the mid-1990s, contributed to a slowdown in emigration and even encouraged return migration to some extent. However, this trend was short-lived. By the early 2000s, a wave of young Ghanaians—mostly the male youth—began embarking on risky migration journeys through the Sahara Desert to North Africa, particularly Libya, and across the Mediterranean Sea into Southern Europe. While most of these migrants lacked formal skills in high demand in Europe, making regular migration difficult, the increasing difficulty in securing visas due to stricter EU immigration policies further pushed them towards these perilous migration routes.

We now examine the current flow, stock, trends, and patterns of migration in Ghana, with a focus on OECD countries and the West African subregion, as they are the primary destinations of Ghanaian migrants. Additionally, we explore the patterns and dynamics of internal migration.

## Flow and Stock of Migrants between Ghana and OECD countries

Ghanaians migrate to nearly every country across the globe. Outside West Africa (WA), the majority move to developed nations. Since the concept of development is both contextual and contested, we use OECD countries as a reference point. Table 1 shows the annual flow of Ghanaians to the top ten OECD destination countries from 2012 to 2021.

**Table 1. The leading OECD recipients of annual flow from Ghana, 2012-2021**

Time period	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
Reference area										
United States	10,463	10,143	6,990	6,103	6,787	8,321	8,282	8,439	4,532	3,883
Germany	2,356	3,014	3,544	4,983	3,890	3,785	4,025	4,736	3,305	3,777
Italy	4,007	3,503	2,353	2,981	4,094	5,968	4,557	2,511	1,840	1,792
Spain	1,108	1,059	878	877	955	1,237	1,760	2,460	1,339	1,778
Canada	531	518	518	369	485	685	895	1,025	545	1,055
United Kingdom	1,000	1,000	1,000	2,000						
Belgium	565	608	525	529	442	395	499	564	380	475
Netherlands	427	450	381	392	396	471	568	639	373	526
Japan	362	336	296	298	422	311	424	407	169	98
Korea	122	158	173	283	294	389	346	279	199	188

Source: OECD, 2024

As shown in Table 1, over a ten-year period from 2012 to 2021, the USA received the highest flow of Ghanaians among OECD countries. In Europe, Germany and Italy, and in Asia, Japan and South Korea, have been popular destinations for Ghanaian migrants. Although data for the UK has been missing since 2016, it remains one of the key destinations, receiving a significant annual flow of Ghanaians. Migration flows from Ghana to all top ten OECD destination countries declined significantly in 2020, most likely due to travel restrictions, the prevalence of COVID-19, and related fears. However, as shown in Figure 1, there was already a downward trend in migration flows after peaking in 2017.

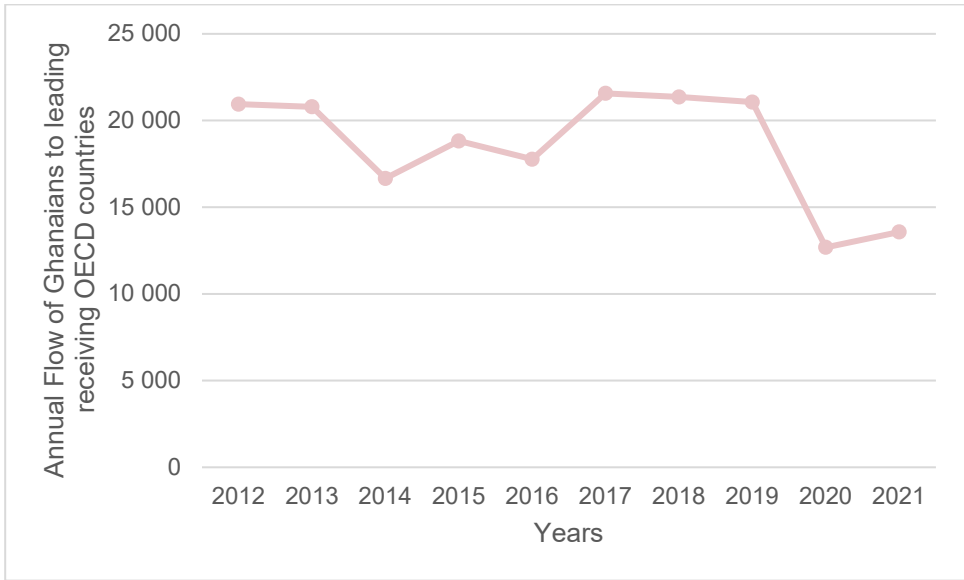


Figure 1. Trend of total annual flow of Ghanaians to the top ten receiving OECD countries  
 Source: OECD, 2024.

The OECD data explorer does not provide a filtering system for tracking the flow of citizens from OECD countries to non-OECD countries. This limitation may stem from challenges in generating and storing migration data in many countries, including Ghana. However, data on outflows indicate that the top ten OECD countries from which Ghanaian migrants leave annually (though it is unclear whether they return to Ghana) are Germany, Spain, Italy, Japan, South Korea, the Netherlands, Türkiye, Belgium, the United Kingdom, and Denmark. While the USA receives the highest number of Ghanaian migrants annually, and Canada is also a leading recipient, these two countries do not appear among those from which Ghanaian migrants depart. Similarly, Japan and South Korea, which receive the smallest inflows of Ghanaian migrants among the top ten OECD destinations, rank fourth and fifth, respectively, in terms of outflow of Ghanaian migrants. Additionally, Türkiye and Denmark, which are not among the top OECD recipients of Ghanaian migrants, are among the key departure points for Ghanaian outflows.

The continuous movement of Ghanaians abroad is contributing to an increasing global stock of Ghanaian migrants. According to the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA), Ghana contributed 1,004,324 migrants to the international migrant stock by mid-2020, of which 47.3% were female (UNDESA, 2020). In the same period, Ghana hosted 476,412 international migrants (UNDESA, 2020). This indicates that Ghana is primarily a country of

emigration, as net migration remains negative. A notable example is that while the USA hosted 201,086 Ghanaian migrants, Ghana hosted only 716 American migrants in 2020. Although the UNDESA data is currently the most comprehensive source available, it remains incomplete, as figures for citizens of many countries, such as Germans, residing in Ghana are unavailable.

The top ten OECD countries with the highest accumulated stock of Ghanaian migrants from 2012 to 2021, in order of significance, are the United States, Italy, United Kingdom, Germany, Spain, Netherlands, Belgium, France, Japan, and Sweden (OECD, 2024). According to the UNDESA, 509,861 Ghanaians—representing 50.8% of the total Ghanaian migrant population—were residing in Europe and North America as of 2020 (UNDESA, 2020).

Many Ghanaian migrants have acquired nationality in their destination countries. Table 2 presents the top ten countries that granted nationality to Ghanaian immigrants from 2012 to 2021.

**Table 2. Acquisition of nationality by Ghanaians**

Time period	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021
United States	5,292	5,061	5,075	5,968	6,344	5,729	6,002	6,863	4,908	5,999
United Kingdom	4,744	4,676	3,138	2,978	3,562	2,591	3,179	2,719	2,415	2,303
Italy	1,288	2,838	3,700	3,465	4,416	2,993	1,696	1,526	1,411	1,377
Germany	456	760	669	707	694	830	695	785	560	690
Spain	200	705	730	472	673	234	520	522	655	592
Netherlands	540	435	575	503	507	393	374	426	524	353
Canada	397	436	652	638	447	267	477	570	260	392
Belgium	406	310	239	319	402	490	417	420	366	322
Australia	149	196	183	179	182	203	112	169	243	
France	121	136	145	121	149	139	146	134	93	144

Source OECD, 2024

Table 2 shows that the USA ranks first among the top ten OECD countries granting nationality to people of Ghanaian origin. During the time period under review, naturalisation peaked in 2016, followed by a steady decline in subsequent years, as illustrated in Figure 2.

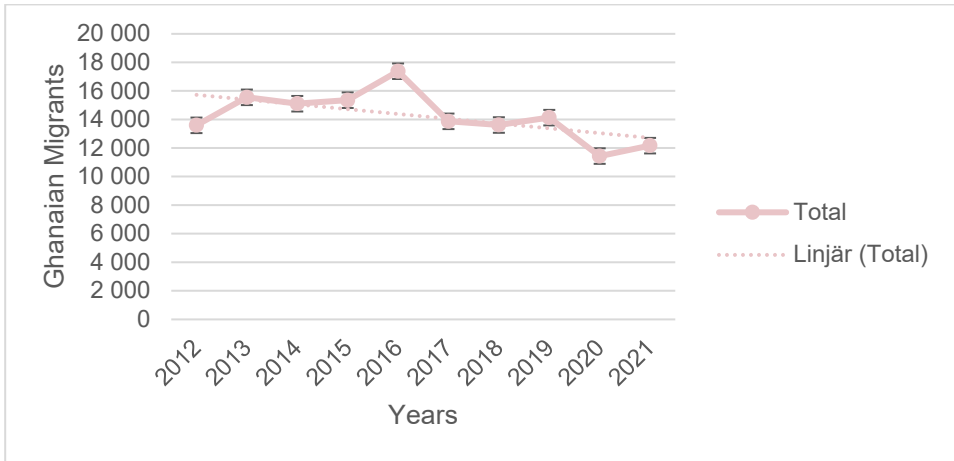


Figure 2. Number and trend of acquisition of destination country's nationality by Ghanaian migrants  
Source: OECD, 2024

## Flow and Stock of Migrants between Ghana and West African countries

It is estimated that 53% of African migrants migrate to other African countries (Yaro and Setrana, 2023). By mid-2020, 481,917 Ghanaians were living in other African countries. Of this number, the vast majority resided in Sub-Saharan Africa. Interestingly, 466,077 Ghanaian migrants were in other West African countries, meaning that 96.7% of Ghanaian migrants in Africa live in the West African subregion.

Table 3 presents the stock of Ghanaian migrants in selected West African countries alongside the stock of West African migrants residing in Ghana from 2000 to 2020.

**Table 3: Stock of West African migrants in Ghana and Ghanaian migrants in other West African countries**

Year	2000			2005			2010			2015			2020		
	WAM in Gh	GhM in WA	WAM in Gh	GhM in WA	WAM in Gh	GhM in WA	WAM in Gh	GhM in WA	WAM in Gh	GhM in WA	WAM in Gh	GhM in WA	WAM in Gh	GhM in WA	
Benin	9 987	3 698	14 044	7 844	13 963	12 065	17 183	15 076	19 736	16 226					
Burkina Faso	46 451	29 139	50 321	27 293	48 452	30 810	58 704	32 217	67 431	33 487					
Côte d'Ivoire	5 465	94 236	25 762	98 654	52 511	103 072	64 621	107 604	74 228	111 708					
Liberia	13 084	9 542	50 459	6 646	24 718	7 069	30 418	8 113	34 940	7 524					
Mali	4 004	2 388	5 631	9 786	4 175	4 058	5 137	4 993	5 900	5 857					
Niger	4 714	1 602	6 629	1 632	4 915	1 659	6 048	1 680	6 945	2 145					
Nigeria	16 584	90 479	28 321	179 834	57 056	183 688	70 214	222 377	80 652	238 284					
Senegal	59	1 395	83	1 500	61	1 678	75	1 790	85	1 845					
Sierra Leone	2 385	1 242	3 354	1 232	1 939	1 107	2 386	995	2 740	939					
Togo	72 060	26 455	86 196	32 848	73 412	42 991	90 343	46 794	103 799	47 232					
<b>Total</b>	<b>174 793</b>	<b>260 176</b>	<b>270 800</b>	<b>367 269</b>	<b>281 202</b>	<b>388 197</b>	<b>345 129</b>	<b>441 639</b>	<b>396 456</b>	<b>465 247</b>					

Source: UNDESA, 2020. WA=West Africa, Gh=Ghana, WAM/=West African migrants; GhM=Ghanaian migrants

Since the year 2000, the number of Ghanaian migrants in other West African countries has consistently exceeded the number of West African migrants in Ghana. However, Ghanaian migrants outnumber the citizens of those countries in Ghana only in Nigeria, Ivory Coast, and Senegal. Additionally, Mali was the only country in 2005 where the number of Ghanaian migrants surpassed that of Malian migrants in Ghana. For all other West African countries, the number of migrants in Ghana exceeds the number of Ghanaian migrants residing in those countries. Figure 3 presents the trend in migrant stock between Ghana and the top ten West African destination countries for Ghanaian migrants.

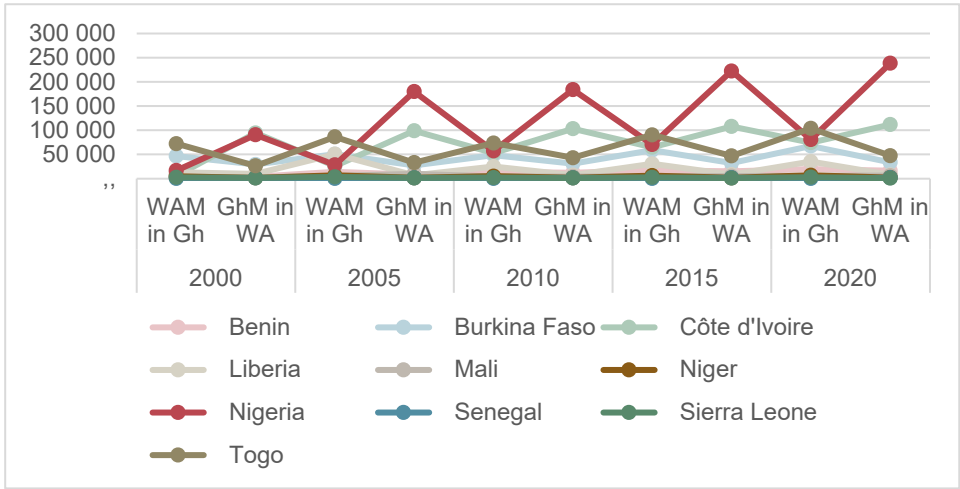


Figure 3 Trend in the stock of Ghanaian migrants in West Africa and West African migrants in Ghana. Source: Authors' construct based on UNDESA, 2020 data.

Figure 3 shows that while the number of Ghanaian migrants in Nigeria is significantly higher than in Ivory Coast, the number of migrants from these two countries residing in Ghana is relatively similar.

## Internal Migration in Ghana

Internal migration in Ghana is dynamic and intense with patterns that largely reflect pre-colonial and colonial North-South migration trends. Post-colonial governments also concentrated development in southern Ghana, leaving the Northern part relatively underdeveloped. This has contributed to a higher movement of people from the north to the south than the reverse (Jarawura et al., 2024; Nabila, 1985).

Another key driver of the North-South migration pattern in Ghana is climate change. Northern Ghana falls with Savannah zone, where climatic conditions are already harsh and have been further exacerbated by environmental changes. As a result, many migrants move southward, particularly during the off-farming season, in search of employment (Jarawura et al., 2024; Teye et al., 2021; Teye & Nikoi, 2022). It is important to note that these factors provide a simplified explanation of the North-South migration pattern. In reality, migration drivers are complex and multifaceted.

Migration in Ghana is predominantly rural-to-urban, as people move from villages to cities in search of better opportunities. Even within Southern Ghana, development is heavily concentrated in urban areas, leading to significant rural-to-urban migration. This trend is most common among young people, with median age of internal migrants being 29 years (GSS, 2023). Unlike international migration trends, where male migrants outnumber female migrants from Ghana, internal migration is female-dominated, with 52.5% of internal migrants being women (GSS, 2023).

## Conclusions

Ghana has transitioned from a country of immigration during the pre-colonial and colonial eras to predominantly an emigration country in the post-colonial period. There is a strong relationship between flow and stock of Ghanaian migrants in their destination countries, as well as patterns of nationality acquisition. Most of the popular destination countries for Ghanaian migrants also have a large stock of Ghanaian nationals, and they are also the primary locations where Ghanaians acquire nationality.

Germany and Italy receive a significant inflow of Ghanaian migrants but also experience high outflow of Ghanaians, suggesting that these countries may serve as transit points for Ghanaian migrants. Given that the USA grants nationality to the highest number of Ghanaians, it is possible that some migrants first settle in European countries before moving to the USA. Although migration flows from Ghana have been declining since 2017, historical trends suggest that economic downturns typically drive increased out-migration. Since 2022, Ghana has experienced one of its worst economic crises, reinforcing expectations of a rise in out-migration in recent years.

Additionally, there is an intense and sustained flow of Ghanaians to other West African countries. While more migrants from other West African countries reside in Ghana, the extremely high number of Ghanaian migrants in Nigeria, Ivory Coast, and, to a lesser extent, Senegal, has resulted in Ghana having more migrants across West Africa than the number of West African migrants in Ghana.

Lastly, internal migration in Ghana follows a predominant North-South direction, mainly rural-to-urban movement, with women constituting the majority of internal migrants in recent years. With increasing climate variability and the absence of clear and radical policies to develop Northern Ghana and rural areas in general, current internal migration patterns and dynamics are expected to persist and even intensify

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# Migration Trends in the South Caucasus: Past and Present

*Lola Ruzikulova*<sup>61</sup>

## Introduction

The phenomenon of migration is as old as humanity itself (Haas, 2023). Throughout history, people have moved for various reasons, whether to explore new lands, escape conflicts and disasters or seek better living conditions and employment opportunities. The South Caucasus region is no exception and has experienced significant human mobility throughout its history. This article provides a concise analysis of migration trends and their historical context within the three South Caucasus nations—Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia—summarising the most significant shifts in migration patterns over the past two centuries. It examines a brief history of mobilities across three distinct periods: (1) the era of the Russian Empire, (2) the Soviet period, and (3) the post-Soviet transformations.

Geopolitical events, economic transitions, social transformations, and armed conflicts have been key drivers of migration flows and shifts in these countries. The current borders of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia were established in the 1930s during the Soviet era. However, the ethnic composition of the region had already undergone significant changes under the rule of the Russian Empire and the Communist Party. The drawing of national borders was not primarily intended to align with ethnic identities; instead, it was dictated by political agendas. This process was further complicated by the region's complex and overlapping cultural, linguistic, and religious landscape.

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First under the Russian Empire, and later under the Bolsheviks, entire population groups were relocated across the region to serve political interests—for example, to shift the demographic balances in favour of one ethnic group or to resettle emptied territories with another (King, 2008).

The interethnic conflicts in the South Caucasus are not merely the result of recent political tensions but are deeply rooted in the resettlement policies of both the Russian Empire and the Soviet Union. These policies, which involved the strategic relocation of ethnic groups, often ignored historical territorial claims and disrupted demographic balances, creating long-term grievances. The artificially altered ethnic composition of certain regions contributed to conflicts, such as the ongoing disputes between Armenia and Azerbaijan, and the ethnic tensions affecting Georgia. The legacy of these resettlement policies continues to shape the geopolitical landscape and mobility patterns in the South Caucasus today, where economic pressures are now a dominant force. Unequal economic development, disparities in job opportunities, and resource distribution remain the primary drivers of mobility, influencing both internal migration and cross-border movement.

Studying migration trends in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia presents several challenges, particularly regarding demographic data collection. Statistical records from the late Soviet and post-Soviet periods are often inconsistent or incomplete, making it difficult to construct a precise and unified account of population movements. Additionally, methodologies for collecting and categorising migration data have varied across different periods and institutions, often leading to discrepancies that complicate comparative analysis. Political influences on data reporting further obscure the accuracy of historical migration statistics. Despite these limitations, this chapter seeks to provide a comprehensive overview by critically assessing available sources and contextualising migration trends within a broader historical and geopolitical framework.

## A Brief Historical Overview of the Events That Shaped the Region

### The Russian Empire

The incorporation of **Georgia** into the Russian Empire began in 1801 with the annexation of the Kingdom of Kartli-Kakheti, marking a turning point in the region's political landscape and, as a consequence, migration patterns. The Russian

Empire's policies encouraged the settlement of various ethnic groups on the annexed territories, including Russians, Armenians, Greeks, and Jews, significantly altering Georgia's demographic landscape with the newcomers. Russian peasants, particularly from the north of the country, were encouraged to settle in fertile regions like Kartli and Kakheti. Armenians became a prominent part of Tbilisi's population, while Greek and Jewish communities largely settled in Batumi and its surroundings, playing a key role in trade and commerce (Suny, 1988).

The integration process of **Armenia** into the Russian Empire followed soon after, beginning in the early 19th century. This process accelerated after the 1828 Treaty of Turkmenchay, which ended the Russo-Persian War and transferred Eastern Armenian territories from Persia to Russia. To strengthen its control, the Russian Empire encouraged Armenian migration from Persia and the Ottoman Empire to these newly acquired lands. This movement substantially altered the region's demographics, increasing the Christian population in areas previously dominated by Muslims and contributing to cultural transformation, diversity, and economic development (Suny, 1993).

The Russian Empire's expansion into the South Caucasus also affected **Azerbaijan**, formalised through the Treaty of Gulistan (1813) and the Treaty of Turkmenchay (1828), which followed the Russo-Persian Wars. These treaties resulted in massive territorial changes, leading to the cession of Azerbaijani provinces from Persia to Russia. About twenty Azerbaijani khanates were divided between Persia and Russia, fundamentally reshaping the region's demographic and political landscape (King 2008; Suny, 1993; Medzhid and Aleksanyan, 2019).

The Russian Empire continued its controlled migration policies to consolidate its rule over the newly acquired lands. The Erevan and Nakhichevan Khanates, incorporated following the Russo-Persian War of 1826-1828 and the Treaty of Turkmenchay, were reorganised into the Armenian Region. Russian authorities oversaw the resettlement of around 57,000 Christian Armenians from Iran and the Ottoman Empire, while approximately 12,000 Muslim nomads emigrated, further changing the demographic balance (Shopen, 1852 as cited in Saparov, 2015).

However, it was not until after the Russo-Turkish Wars of 1855-1856 and 1877-1878, which led to a new wave of Armenian migration from the Ottoman Empire, along with the continued emigration of Muslims, that Armenians formed a substantial majority in the region. Regardless of that, even then, and well into the twentieth century, the city of Erevan still had a Muslim majority (Bournoutian, 1996; King 2008).

## Soviets

At the beginning of the twentieth century, all three South Caucasus states experienced a brief period of independence: Georgia in 1918-1921, Azerbaijan and Armenia in 1918-1920. During this time, they made efforts to establish and consolidate themselves as independent nations. However, internal tensions and instability undermined their ability to resist the Bolsheviks effectively, ultimately leading to their Sovietization (King, 2008).

The Soviet authorities followed the example of predecessors, orchestrating 52 internal relocation campaigns between 1918 and 1952, as documented in historical records (King, 2008, p. 197). These campaigns further reshaped the ethnic landscape of the South Caucasus, which had only recently begun to establish national identities within the borders defined by Soviet authorities.

Suspecting entire ethnic groups of disloyalty and collaboration with enemy forces, the Soviet government initiated mass deportations during World War II, a practice that continued in the postwar period. In November 1943, 70,000 Karachai were forcibly removed to Kazakhstan. In February 1944, over 300,000 Chechens and 80,000 Ingush were deported to various parts of Central Asia. The same year, under Stalin's orders, approximately 120,000 Meskhetian Turks, along with some Kurds and Khemshils, were forcibly relocated to Central Asia. Entire villages and districts in the Caucasus were completely depopulated, and in their place, new settlers—predominantly Russians—were brought in to replace the displaced communities (King, 2008; van Selm, 2017).

The urbanization process further influenced migration trends in Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. Previously rural countries saw the emergence of large urban centres, transforming their demographic landscapes and reducing rural populations. Between 1959 and 1979, the populations of all three capitals of the South Caucasian Soviet republics nearly doubled (King, 2008). The Soviet authorities encouraged migration across republics for various reasons, including labour demands, industrialization, and administrative policies. As a result, people from other Soviet republics, including Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians, migrated to Georgia, particularly to urban areas and industrial centres. This was part of the broader Soviet policy to promote economic integration and socialist development across the Union.

Unlike Georgia, Armenia experienced limited immigration from other Soviet republics, largely due to its geographical isolation and a strong emphasis on fostering an Armenian ethnic identity. This strategic focus on national identity contributed to a less diverse demographic landscape in Armenia compared to Georgia and Azerbaijan. The mono-ethnic composition, coupled with Armenia's relatively small

economy and lower levels of industrialization, made it a less attractive destination for migrants from other Soviet republics (Suny, 1988).

The Soviet Union's intensive policies of internal population movements played a dual role in shaping the ethnic landscape. Paradoxically, both despite and because of these policies, the three South Caucasian republics became more mono-ethnic than at any other point in their history. For instance, one of the significant events contributing to the ethnic homogenization of Azerbaijan and Armenia was the campaign of mass resettlement of Azerbaijani collective farm workers from the Armenian SSR to the Kura-Araks lowlands in the Azerbaijan SSR. Between 1948 and 1950, the USSR Council of Ministers planned the relocation of around 100,000 Azerbaijanis. By 1953, around 53,000 Azerbaijanis had been relocated, though many struggled to adapt to the new environment and were forced to flee to other Soviet republics (Council of Europe, 2023).

Additionally, voluntary family and labour-related migration between Soviet republics reinforced the trend toward building mono-ethnic states. This process stimulated the outflow of non-titular ethnic groups, while simultaneously encouraging Georgians, Armenians, and Azerbaijanis from other Soviet republics to move to their respective homelands.

## Independence Era: Transformation and Challenges in the South Caucasus

After the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the newly independent post-Soviet states remained interconnected, despite the emergence of new borders that separated millions from their ethnic homelands, relatives, and disrupted long-standing economic and cultural ties. Migration between the former Soviet republics has persisted throughout the post-Soviet period driven by economic disparities and social development differences among newly independent states. The unequal economic growth rates across the region became the main push factor, leading to continued migration, particularly to the Russian Federation. With the fall of the Iron Curtain, these countries also opened to global migration, diversifying the regional migration landscape. However, despite these new global patterns, the Eurasian migration system remains centred on CIS (Commonwealth of Independent States) countries, although it is gradually weakening (Denisenko, Mkrtchyan and Chudinovskikh, 2020).

The dissolution of the USSR in 1991 marked a critical turning point for migration in the region. Economic decline, a dramatic deterioration in living standards, shifting political and regulatory frameworks, and ethnic tensions forced many to relocate both within and beyond the former Soviet republics. The South Caucasus states were among the hardest hit by the collapse of the Soviet Union, as they grappled not only with economic disruption but also with armed conflicts and ethnic tensions (Ioffe, 2020).

## **Armenia**

Post-Soviet migration in Armenia followed a similar scenario as in many other former Soviet republics. Economic collapse, declining living standards, and armed conflicts were the main drivers of outmigration, while the resettlement of ethnic Armenians to Armenia served as a key factor driving immigration. What distinguishes Armenia from other post-Soviet countries is its large Armenian diaspora, which, in some cases, has functioned as a magnet for migration flows. According to the Statistical Committee of the Republic of Armenia, the country's officially registered population is 2,977,130 (ArmStat, 2024), while the global Armenian diaspora is estimated at over 7 million people (Sahakyan and Lieberman, 2022). This demographic imbalance stems from historical migration waves, both voluntary and forced, which took place during the 19th and early the 20th centuries. Many Armenians originally residing in Ottoman-controlled territories migrated to Europe and America, while others resettled in the South Caucasus under Russian rule (Suny, 1993).

Following the dissolution of the USSR, Armenian diaspora communities expanded further, with ethnic Armenians relocating to former Soviet republics such as Ukraine and Uzbekistan, as well as to European countries with little or no pre-existing Armenian diasporas (World Bank, 2019). Although precise data on the total Armenian diaspora is unavailable due to varying methodologies in population estimation, the largest estimated diaspora communities are found in the United States (approximately 700,000 to 1 million), the Russian Federation (1.1 million to 1.9 million), Georgia (400,000), and France (500,000) (IOM, 2022). These diaspora communities continue to shape Armenia's contemporary migration patterns.

After Armenia became a part of the Soviet Union in 1922, its population grew significantly, partly due to the internal migration of ethnic Armenians from other Soviet republics, particularly from the South Caucasus region. Over the next 50 years, Armenia's population more than tripled, reaching approximately 2.5 million

by the 1980s. During the 1970s and 1980s, economic stagnation and systemic crises in the Soviet Union, combined with the liberalisation of migration policies following the Helsinki Agreements, led to changes in migration patterns. These changes included a rise in seasonal migration within the USSR, where many Armenians worked in construction in other Soviet republics during the warmer months, and an increase in long-term migration, particularly to the United States, where up to 100,000 Armenians resettled, relying on existing diaspora resorting to the networks. Migration surged even more after the 1988 Spitak earthquake, which prompted approximately 200,000 Armenians to leave the country. However, many returned in the 1990s (IOM, 2008).

Following Armenia's independence from the Soviet Union, the country, like many other former USSR republics, experienced a significant rise in labour emigration due to economic decline and high unemployment rates. The unemployment rate grew from 1.6% in 1991 to almost 20% in 2010 (World Bank, 2020). Russia became the primary destination for Armenian labour migrants, as economic and social factors mirrored those driving migration from other post-communist republics. These factors included shared state and social structures, familiarity with the Russian language, and economic disparities and greater job opportunities in Russia. Given these circumstances, Armenia fostered strong cooperative ties with the Russian Federation, which emerged as the primary destination for Armenian labour migrants. The bilateral cooperation allowed Armenia to secure a comparatively high standard of social and legal protection for its citizens residing in Russia (IOM, 2008).

Armenian labour migration predominantly involves male outmigration. Temporary migrants tend to be older and less educated than permanent or long-term migrants, yet both groups share similar socio-demographic traits, primarily consisting of young adults (20–40 years old) with general secondary education (World Bank, 2019). During the 2000s, labour migration from Armenia was substantial. By 2010, an estimated 600,000 to 700,000 long-term migrants and 80,000 seasonal labour migrants had left the country, with 85% to 95% working in Russia (Chudinovskikh and Denisenko, 2020). The Russian Federation remains the primary destination for both temporary and permanent Armenian migrants. Several factors make migration to Russia more accessible, including cultural ties from the shared Soviet past, a visa-free regime, extensive migrant networks, affordable transportation, and Armenians' proficiency in the Russian language. Another key factor is the large Armenian diaspora in Russia, estimated at 1.2 million people, representing 10-12% of the global Armenian population. In 2017, Russian authorities recorded 232,247 Armenian citizens residing in Russia for work purposes (World Bank, 2019; Chudinovskikh and Denisenko, 2020).

Armenia's economy relies heavily on remittances. Between 2009 and 2013, personal remittances accounted for 21% of the country's GDP, making Armenia the fourth highest remittance-dependent country globally, following Nepal, Moldova, and Haiti (Grigoryan and Khachatryan, 2022). In 2019, the World Bank confirmed that remittances continue to play a crucial role in the livelihoods of Armenian households, with international migrants contributing over 40% of their household income. (World Bank, 2019).

Multiple armed conflicts in the South Caucasus have significantly influenced migration flows in and out of Armenia. Between 1989 and 1990, about 170,000 ethnic Azerbaijanis left Armenia, due to the escalation of conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, while about 360,000 ethnic Armenians arrived from Azerbaijan. However, soon after, many of these newcomers migrated further, mainly to Russia and the United States (IOM, 2008). The Syria civil war also triggered population movements to Armenia. According to UNHCR, since 2011, Armenia hosted over 22,000 displaced persons, mostly ethnic Armenians from Syria. By 2020, 14,000 remained in the country (Hayrapetyan, 2020). Fewer than one thousand Syrian refugees were still registered in Armenia (UNHCR, 2024a).

The largest recent migration influx occurred in September 2022, when more than 100,000 refugees fled to Armenia within days following the surrender of the de-facto Armenian government in Nagorno-Karabakh, when Azerbaijan restored its territorial integrity during the Second Karabakh War (Kucera, 2023). By December 2023, Armenia was hosting over 140,000 refugees from Azerbaijan (UNHCR, 2024a). Despite efforts to support these refugees, the Armenian government faces significant challenges in managing the mass resettlement, as one in every thirty residents is now a refugee (Vartanyan, 2024). Additionally, a shortage of job opportunities is exacerbating labour emigration from the country.

Russia's invasion of Ukraine has also affected migration in Armenia. In 2022, there was a notable rise in the issuance of temporary residence permits, with Russian citizens making up the majority: 12,877 in 2022 vs 2,508 in 2021 (ICMPD, 2023).

The lack of consistent data poses significant challenges for migration research in Armenia. Organizations responsible for data collection do not share centralised information, and each collects only partial data. Additionally, seasonal migration is difficult to measure, particularly due to the absence of visa requirements with Russia. Discrepancies between survey data and employment statistics further complicate analysis, with many researchers citing the lack of reliable data as a major obstacle.

## Azerbaijan

Following the disintegration of the USSR, mobility patterns in Azerbaijan largely mirrored those of other former Soviet republics during the initial period. **Ethnicity-based** migration was prominent, with non-titular ethnic groups departing and ethnic Azerbaijanis returning from other newly independent states, including a group of Meskhetian Turks who fled Uzbekistan due to inter-ethnic violence (IOM, 2023a). **Economically driven** migration also played a significant role, as declining living standards and employment difficulties pushed people to seek opportunities elsewhere. A key distinction, however, was the large-scale displacement of refugees and **internally displaced persons** (IDPs) caused by inter-ethnic armed conflicts and the war with Armenia. While displacement was a common feature across the South Caucasus, Armenia and Azerbaijan experienced massive forced migration due to their ongoing conflict, while Georgia was affected by regional instability.

According to official data from November 2023 provided by the State IDP Committee of Azerbaijan, the country had a significantly high number of IDPs. The report indicated that 658,793 individuals, comprising 175,034 families, remained displaced, accounting for approximately 6.5% of the national population (JIPS, 2023). This displacement stems from the First Karabakh War (1992-1994) and subsequent border conflicts between Armenian and Azerbaijani military forces. However, forced migration in Azerbaijan began even before the dissolution of the Soviet Union. In 1988, amid escalating tensions over Nagorno-Karabakh, around 250,000 ethnic Azerbaijani were forced to flee Armenia. Following the collapse of the USSR in 1991, the conflict escalated into a full-scale war between the two newly independent states, leading to the occupation of 20% of Azerbaijan's territory and the forced displacement of about 600,000 Azerbaijanis (Isayev, 2023).

The Second Karabakh War between Azerbaijan and Armenia erupted in September 2020. By the time a ceasefire agreement was signed in November 2020, Azerbaijan had regained control of most of the territories lost in the 1990s. In December 2022, Azerbaijan launched the State Programme on the 'Great Return'. The first phase of the program, running from 2022 to 2026, aims to resettle 10,270 families in Karabakh and East Zangezur by 2026, and 34,500 families by 2027. The programme includes the construction of 34,500 modern homes and apartments for future returnees, extensive demining operations, and the development of necessary infrastructure (Heybatov, 2024).

Unlike Georgia, which saw a significant influx of Russian citizens following the Russia-Ukraine war, Azerbaijan experienced a relatively minor increase in Russian migration. Between September and October 2022, 100,306 Russian citizens arrived

in Azerbaijan, however, many eventually returned home or travelled to third countries (Chaib De Mares, 2023).

In addition to internal displacement caused by armed conflicts, Azerbaijan faces a **rural-urban** migration trend driven by financial and social inequalities between the capital and the rest of the country (Rzayeva, 2020). The growth of the oil industry led to a construction boom, though development remained disproportionately concentrated in Baku, further weakening rural livelihoods and pushing migration. Rural outmigration is difficult to track, since many internal migrants do not update their registration (Allahveranov, Aliyeva, and Sadigov, 2012). However, remittances suggest high outmigration from southern regions of Azerbaijan (IOM 2023b).

Azerbaijan's **economically driven** migration patterns differ from those of other South Caucasian states. After gaining independence in 1991, the country's economy faced severe challenges. The industrial sector collapsed, causing widespread layoffs, unemployment, and inflation. Between 1991 and 1995, real GDP plummeted by 60%, inflation peaked at 1,666% in 1994, and food prices rose by as much as 28,750 times between 1988 and 1998. Azerbaijan, like many post-Soviet republics, became a net exporter of people as emigration outpaced immigration (Allahveranov, Aliyeva, and Sadigov, 2012; Rummyantsev, 2014).

Economic turmoil led many Azerbaijanis to seek work in Russia, leveraging social and business networks established in the mid-1980s, particularly in commerce, where they dominated sectors such as fruit, vegetable, and flower sales (Rummyantsev, 2014). Official figures underreported early numbers, reporting 500,000 Azerbaijani citizens in Russia in 1998. However, unofficial estimates suggest that between 1991 and 1997, over 1.5 million Azerbaijanis migrated, with nearly 2 million in Russia by 1998, equating to almost 25% of Azerbaijan's population. This first wave of migrants mainly consisted of men aged 20-35, many of whom held higher education degrees in fields such as teaching, engineering, or accounting, which were poorly-paid in Azerbaijan (Rummyantsev, 2014).

Following the collapse of the Soviet Union, other popular destinations for Azerbaijani labour migrants included Iran and Turkey. These countries were attractive due to their ethno-cultural and linguistic ties, as well as their geographical proximity.

**Iran** has a considerable ethnic Azerbaijani population due to the Gulistan and Turkmenchay Treaties, which ended the wars between the Russian and Persian Empires, dividing Azerbaijan into northern and southern regions (Vasa, 2024). Estimates of the ethnic Azerbaijani living in Iran range from 16% to over a quarter of Iran's total population, the number remains high and exceeds the overall

population of Azerbaijan itself (Mato and de Lange, 2023; Koknar, 2006). Family ties between Azerbaijanis on both sides of the border initially encouraged many to migrate to Iran for work. However, over time, Iran became a less attractive destination, as its government raised concerns about separatist movements among ethnic Azeris and bilateral relations cooled. As a result, the number of Azerbaijani citizens legally arriving in Iran declined (Rumyantsev, 2014). Meanwhile, certain Persian-speaking populations of Azerbaijan, primarily of Talysh ethnicity, continued to travel to Iran for family visits and labour, often working illegally without permits (Rumyantsev, 2014).

**Türkiye** remained a popular destination for Azerbaijani migrants, facilitated by cultural and linguistic ties. Between 2000 and 2009, 115,000 Azerbaijanis moved to Türkiye, obtaining longer-term residence permits. Migration increased notably in the latter half of the 2000s (Allahveranov & Huseynov, 2013). The first post-Soviet wave consisted predominantly of highly skilled professionals from cultural and scientific sectors, alongside circular migrants and low-skilled permanent labourers (Rumyantsev, 2014; Garibova, 2022). Many emigrants came from the Nakhichevan Autonomous Republic, particularly men aged 20 to 40. Azerbaijani intellectuals worked legally under contracts, while most rural workers were employed informally (Rumyantsev, 2014).

However, Azerbaijani migration to Muslim countries, particularly Türkiye, declined as labour markets became saturated and the excitement about post-Soviet openness faded. Stricter law enforcement in destination countries, combined with lower wages, made migration less appealing, especially for undocumented migrants (Iunusov, 2003). Subsequently, Europe became an increasingly important destination. By 2015, over 42,000 Azerbaijani emigrants resided in the European Union, primarily in Germany, France, the UK, and Sweden (Hosner, Wagner, and Guluzade, 2018). Meanwhile, migration to non-EU post-Soviet states declined, despite the total number of Azerbaijani emigrants in these countries exceeding one million. The three main destinations for Azerbaijani emigrants remain Russia (766,918), Ukraine (83,674) and Armenia (78,560) (IOM, 2024).

Since 2007, Azerbaijan's mobility patterns have shifted, making it a destination for immigrants. The outflow of Azerbaijani labour migrants declined as the economy expanded, driven by the development of new oil and gas fields and the launch of international energy projects (Allahveranov and Huseynov, 2013). As demand for highly qualified specialists grew, Azerbaijan became more attractive to foreign workers. To manage migration, authorities introduced quotas to prioritise local employment while limiting foreign labour. In 2010, the quota was 10,700 workers, mainly in construction, oil and gas, and IT sectors. Nearly 5,000 were from Türkiye,

and around 1,500 from the UK. However, economic growth also led to increased illegal labour migration. Over 60,000 people were estimated to be working informally, mainly from Georgia, Iran, and Türkiye (Chudinovskikh and Denisenko, 2020).

## Georgia

Like other countries of the region, Georgia experienced economic decline, ethnic tensions, and armed conflicts that significantly shaped migration patterns following the collapse of the Soviet Union. Since 1992, rising emigration and a stagnant birth rate have significantly impacted Georgia's demographics and economy. The population has dropped by nearly one-third, particularly in rural areas, while urbanisation and external migration surged, leading to depopulated villages and an ageing population. Emigration, particularly among women and young people, has drained the country's intellectual and economic potential, exacerbating brain drain. Between 1989 and 2000, Georgia's population declined by 19% due to emigration (Sulaberidze, Archavadze and Sulaberidze, 2020; National Statistics Office of Georgia, 2024).

The early 1990s emigration patterns were shaped by three distinct yet interrelated factors. First, ethnic repatriation saw people returning to newly independent states that aligned with their national identities. Second, internal armed conflicts and occupation forced many to flee their homes. Lastly, economic collapse pushed people to seek better prospects abroad (Sulaberidze, Archavadze and Sulaberidze, 2020).

The **armed conflicts** in independent Georgia caused significant internal displacement. As of 2024, there are 292,887 IDPs in Georgia, constituting 7.84% of the population (Ganatra, 2024). This number has grown since the conflicts with South Ossetia and Abkhazia in 1991 and 1992 respectively. By the time of the Sochi Agreement ceasefire on June 24, 1992, the Georgia-South Ossetia conflict had killed approximately 5,000 people on both sides, forcing about 26,000 South Ossetians to flee to other parts of Georgia or North Ossetia in Russia, while around 20,000 were internally displaced within South Ossetia. Additionally, some 12,000 ethnic Georgians fled as refugees to other regions of Georgia (UCA Political Science, 2025b).

At the same time, tensions escalated in Abkhazia, leading to 15,000 deaths and the displacement of around 350,000 people (UCA Political Science, 2025a). The next major conflict erupted between Georgia and Russia on August 7, 2008, lasting five days. While many displaced people returned after the ceasefire, approximately 22,000 people remained permanently displaced in Georgian-controlled areas (Finke,

2022). These conflicts, marked by intense violence and large-scale displacement, reshaped Georgia's demographic landscape, leaving a lasting legacy of refugees and IDPs that continues to influence the region. In addition to IDPs, Georgia currently hosts 27,330 Ukrainian refugees and asylum seekers (Ganatra, 2024).

**Mass emigration of various ethnic groups** further changed Georgia's demographic composition. Between 1994 and 2001, Russians accounted for 69.1% of the negative net migration (GeoStat, as cited in Sulaberidze, Archavadze and Sulaberidze, 2020). Between 1989 and 2014, the proportion of Russians in the Georgia declined from 5.5% to 1.5%, Armenians from 7.5% to 4.5%, and Azerbaijanis from 6.4% to 6.3%. Meanwhile, the proportion of ethnic Georgians rose substantially from 70.1% to 84.6% (ibid.).

**Economically driven emigration** has played an important role in shaping Georgia's mobility patterns. Approximate statistical data indicate that Russia was the main destination for Georgian emigrants, with 69.1% of negative net migration between 1994 and 2001 attributed to movement toward Russia. Labour and study-related emigration from Georgia to Russia remained high until Moscow introduced a visa regime for Georgia citizens in December 2000. Other major, less significant, destination countries included Israel, Greece, Ukraine, Armenia, and Azerbaijan (Sulaberidze, Archavadze and Sulaberidze, 2020). As a result of negative net migration, Georgia's population decreased by 19% between 1989 and 2000, equivalent to one in five people leaving the country (ibid.).

The 2008 war between Georgia and Russia further disrupted regular circular migration between the two states. In 2012, Georgian authorities unilaterally lifted visa requirements for Russian citizens to promote peace, allowing them to stay in Georgia for up to 90 days without a visa (Civil.Ge, 2012). Despite political tensions, Russia remained the main destination for Georgian labour migrants.

Migration dynamics changed in 2017 when the EU introduced a visa-free regime with a 90-day limit with Georgia. Between 2017 and 2018, Germany, Italy and Greece became the top destinations for Georgian citizens (The State Commission on Migration Issues, 2019). However, this shift also led to a rise in irregular migration to the EU. According to Georgia's Department of Border Protection, between March 28, 2017, and March 2019, 390,175 Georgian citizens visited the EU/Schengen zone, with over half overstaying illegally. According to the latest Eurostat data, 21,815 Georgians sought asylum in EU countries in 2023, down from 25,940 in the previous year, with most applications filed in Germany, France, Italy and Ireland (Eurostat, 2025).

Before the dissolution of the Soviet Union and in early post-Soviet years, labour migration from Georgia was predominantly male. However, as migration expanded geographically, the **feminisation** of labour emigration emerged, with women surpassing men (54.6%) (Sulaberidze, Archavadze and Sulaberidze, 2020; Tukhashvili, 2018). This shift was partly due to higher demand for female workers in traditionally female-dominated sectors, such as elderly care, cleaning services, and domestic work. Since the early 2000s, Georgian women's migration routes have shifted from Azerbaijan and Russia to the EU and the USA. According to 2014 census data, women accounted for 83% of Georgian migrants in Greece, 85.7% in Italy, and 67.1% in Türkiye, while men primarily migrated to Russia (71.1%), Ukraine (79.8%), and Azerbaijan (60.5%) (Sulaberidze, Archavadze and Sulaberidze, 2020).

**Remittances** constitute a significant share of Georgia's economy. In 2023, remittances amounted to \$4.5 billion, accounting for 14.7% of the country's GDP (World Bank, 2024). The top three sending countries were Russia, the United States, and Italy, followed by Germany, Greece, Israel, and Kazakhstan (The National Bank of Georgia, 2024). However, remittances from Russia have steadily declined since the start of the Russia-Ukraine war.

Along with high dependence on remittances, Georgia's economy continues to suffer from high emigration rates. The country has lost 23% of its population, equal to one-fifth of its labour force (Shamanauri, 2022). The Russia-Ukraine war initially triggered a sharp increase in immigration to Georgia. Following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, many Russians fled, fearing repression, economic sanctions and conscription. With visa-free entry and geographic proximity, Georgia became a first-choice destination for many. By the end of 2022, approximately 110,000 Russians had relocated to Georgia, primarily settling in Tbilisi and Batumi, where Russian language use became more visible in public spaces. The influx of Russians drove up rental prices and boosted Georgia's economy, contributing to over 10% GDP growth, with 2% directly linked to the Russian arrivals (Kucera, 2024). However, official data in 2023 showed that over 30,000 Russians left Georgia, reducing the number of wartime Russian immigrants by nearly one-third.

Since 2022, the combined effects of emigration and demographic shifts have significantly influenced Georgia's social and economic development. Between 1992 and 2014, population outflow and stagnant population growth led to a nearly one-third population decline, especially in rural areas. Emigration has also aged the population, with Georgia's median age rising by 8 years, the highest increase among the post-Soviet states. Young people, especially students and professionals,

increasingly seek migration due to unemployment and low wages, leading to a 'brain drain' of highly skilled workers.

The 2022 World Migration Report recorded nearly 690,000 emigrants left Georgia, with Russia as the major destination, followed by Greece (IOM, 2021). The 2024 IOM World Migration Report 2024 shows similar figures, confirming that Russia remains the main receiving state, despite ongoing tensions between the two states and the Russia-Ukraine war where Georgia has maintained a clear anti-Russian stance (IOM, 2024).

## Conclusion

The historical legacy of the South Caucasian states continues to shape mobility trends in the region, with ethnic movements and post-Soviet ties playing a central role in migration patterns. The interplay of political, regulatory, economic, demographic, and social factors has significantly influenced migration flows in all the former Soviet republics, creating complex push-and-pull dynamics (Ioffe, 2020; Denisenko, Mkrtchyan, and Chudinovskikh, 2020). However, the Russia-centric mobility framework within CIS states is shifting, driven by the ongoing war in Ukraine, stricter migration policies, emergence of alternative migration destinations, and rising xenophobia in Russia.

In recent years, labour migration, displacement due to conflict, and demographic decline have emerged as major concerns for Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia. While Russia has historically been the primary destination for migrants from the region, the EU, the USA, and Türkiye have become increasingly significant alternatives, especially for highly skilled workers and women. The economic reliance on remittances remains high, particularly in Georgia and Armenia, where labour migration continues to fill employment gaps abroad while draining the local workforce.

At the same time, unresolved territorial disputes and ethno-political tensions could trigger new waves of migration at any moment. The Armenia-Azerbaijan conflict over Nagorno-Karabakh, despite the ongoing normalization between the two states, remains a source of potential displacement. Similarly, internal tensions in Georgia, particularly in Abkhazia and South Ossetia, present ongoing risks for forced migration. The demographic shift caused by long-term emigration and low birth rates poses a serious challenge to the economic and social stability of the region. The region's future migration landscape will depend not only on economic and political

developments but also on the ability of each state to navigate geopolitical uncertainties while fostering economic resilience and social cohesion.

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# Migration in the Gulf Cooperation Council Countries: Dynamics, Trends and Challenges

*Dilaver Khamzaev*<sup>62</sup>

## Introduction. The Gulf Cooperation Council Countries

In recent years, Western Asia—specifically the Arabian Peninsula—has gained increasing global attention, driven by high-profile expositions, international sporting events, sustainability initiatives, and technology summits. At the heart of this global focus is a group of nations—Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—collectively known as the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). These countries have positioned themselves as key players in regional and global affairs, drawing attention not only for their economic prowess but also for their evolving socio-political and technological landscapes.

Formed in 1981 in the wake of the 1970s oil boom, the GCC was established to facilitate economic development and regional integration. As a regional intergovernmental organisation, it plays a crucial role in fostering collaboration across economic, political, and social spheres.

The GCC member states share a deeply rooted Islamic identity and a common Arab heritage, which shape their cultural and social frameworks. Economically, these nations rank among the world's high-income countries, a status largely attributed to their vast oil and gas reserves that continue to drive their economies (Alharthi, 2023). However, one of the defining characteristics of the region is its profound dependence on migrant labour. Expatriates constitute a significant portion of the workforce, particularly in labour-intensive sectors such as construction, services, and domestic

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work (Strabac, Valenta and Awad, 2018). This demographic reality creates a unique socio-economic structure in which a large expatriate workforce coexists with national citizens, shaping labour policies and societal dynamics.

Beyond economic interdependence, GCC nations grapple with shared environmental challenges, including water scarcity and food security concerns (Ahmed and Karanis, 2020; Hassen and Bilali, 2019). Given the region's arid climate and reliance on imported food supplies, resource management has emerged as a central theme in regional cooperation. At the same time, the GCC continues to serve as a platform for addressing broader regional security issues and geopolitical tensions, reinforcing its role in ensuring stability in the Middle East (Abdelkhalek, 2022; Pontes et al., 2024).

Thus, the GCC presents a compelling case study due to its unique migration patterns, growing global influence, and rapid economic transformation. This chapter aims to explore the recent migration trends and evolving migration policies in the GCC countries, focusing on labour mobility, government strategies, and socio-economic impacts. As the region navigates demographic challenges, labour reforms, and shifting migration policies, it continues to play a pivotal role in shaping global migration patterns. Understanding these trends and policy shifts is critical for assessing the broader implications of migration governance in this highly interconnected region.

## Migration Trends in the GCC Countries

According to data from the Population Division of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (2024), the total number of individuals residing in a country other than their country of birth or citizenship has gradually doubled, increasing from 153.9 million in 1990 to 304 million in 2024 - growing by more than 100 million in the last two decades (Figure 1).

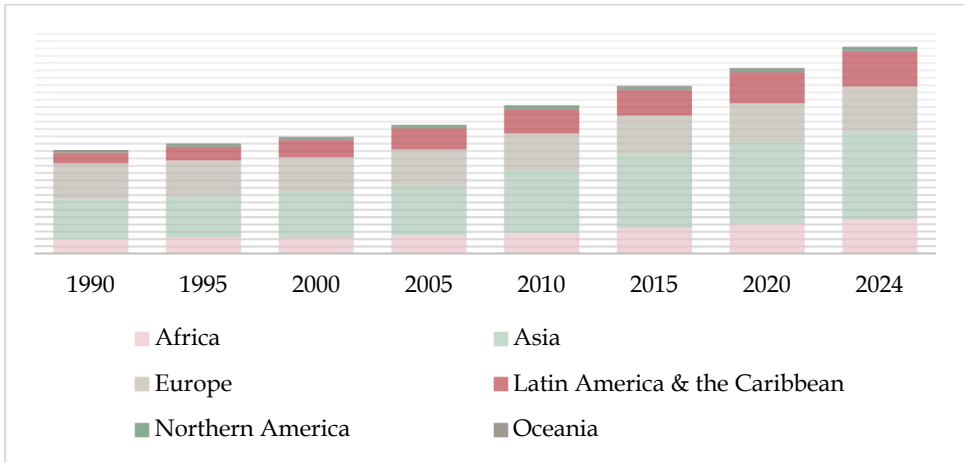


Figure 1. Global migration trend by the region of origin  
 Data compiled from: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

As of 2024, Asia and Europe are the primary regions of migrant origin, with approximately 121 million and 61 million individuals, respectively (Figure 1). Together, they account for nearly 60% of global migrants. However, migration in both regions remains predominantly internal—around 81% of Asian migrants and 74% of European migrants relocate within their respective regions.

Unlike Europe, where internal migration is more evenly distributed across different subregions, in Asia, nearly 38 million migrants (51% of overall internal migration in Asia) have chosen Western Asia as their destination (Figure 2). Within Western Asia, around 25 million individuals, originating from other Asian countries have moved to Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. From a global perspective, these six countries account for 8.2% of the global migration stock which makes them a unique case that warrants further examination.

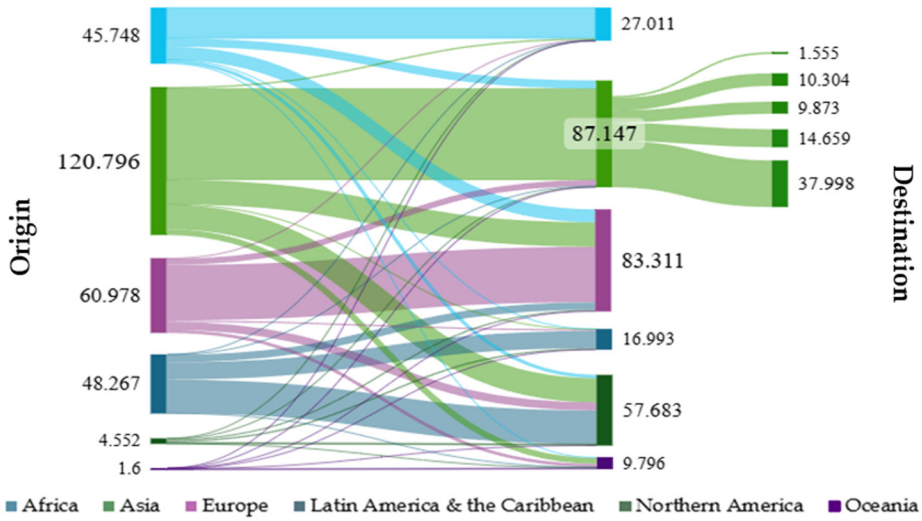


Figure 2. Global Migration Stock for 2024 (in millions)  
 Data compiled from: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

As of 2024, out of the 25 million individuals who have chosen GCC countries as their destination, more than 18 million originate from Southern Asia. This trend of Southern Asians, comprising a significant portion of the migration stock in GCC countries, has been consistent over the last three decades (Figure 3). During this period, all GCC countries experienced exponential growth in migrant populations, reflecting their reliance on foreign labour for economic development.

Saudi Arabia, the largest host, saw its Asian migrant population surge from 3.4 million in 1995 to 10.8 million in 2024, with Southern Asians constituting 63% of this total. Similarly, the UAE’s migrant numbers grew from 1.5 million to 6.8 million, with Southern Asians making up 79% of the total in 2024. Qatar’s growth was particularly striking: its Asian migrant population expanded sevenfold, from 282,557 in 1995 to 2.05 million in 2024, with Southern Asians accounting for 82% (1.7 million) of the total. Currently, more than 80% of private-sector jobs in the GCC are filled by migrants, with a significant share originating from South and Southeast Asia (Ennis and Blarel, 2022, p. 3).



Figure 3. Proportion of Southern Asian migrants in GCC countries  
 Data compiled from: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

These trends align with GCC nations’ economic strategies, such as Saudi Arabia’s Vision 2030 and Qatar’s diversification efforts, which rely heavily on migrant labour in sectors like construction, healthcare, and domestic work. Southern Asian migrants form the backbone of the GCC labour force, representing 70–95% of all Asian migrants in the region. In particular, migrants from Bangladesh, India, and Pakistan constitute the primary labour force from Southern Asia (Figure 4). India is the largest source of migrants in most GCC states, with Indians making up 60.7% of Southern Asian migrants (3.25 million out of 5.35 million) in the UAE and 59.4% (1.23 million out of 2.07 million) in Kuwait. Bangladesh stands out in Oman, where it represents 39.4% of Southern Asian migrants (737,087 out of 1.87 million).

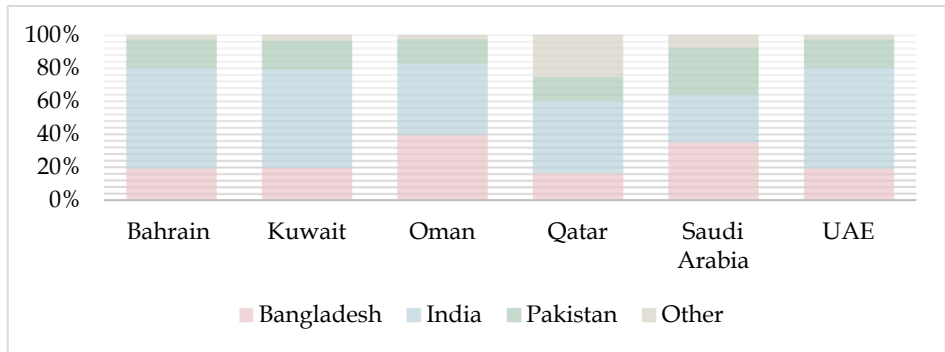


Figure 4. Migration stock in GCC for 2024: proportion of Bangladesh, India and Pakistan  
 Data compiled from: United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs. (2024). International Migrant Stock 2024. <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

The significant presence of migrants has shaped the demographic structure of GCC countries. Available and extrapolated data on the distribution of nationals and non-nationals in the total population stock from 2020 to 2024 indicate a high dependence on foreign labour. Although national populations are rising, the proportion of non-nationals has remained stable across all countries. Oman and Saudi Arabia have the highest percentage of nationals (~57–59%), indicating a relatively lower dependence on foreign labour compared to other GCC states. On the other hand, the UAE and Qatar have the lowest proportion of nationals, with non-nationals making up 73–77% of the population, demonstrating a high reliance on expatriates. In Bahrain, the proportion of nationals remains relatively stable at ~46–48%, while in Kuwait, non-nationals continue to dominate (~68%). This trend has persisted over the last five years under analysis.

**Table 1. Proportion of Nationals (N) and Non-Nationals (NN) in GCC Countries<sup>63</sup>**

	2020		2021		2022		2023		2024	
	N	NN	N	NN	N	NN	N	NN	N	NN
Bahrain <sup>a</sup>	48.5%	51.5%	47.8%	52.2%	46.4%	53.6%	46.3%	53.7%	46.6%	53.4%
Kuwait <sup>b</sup>	30.6%	69.4%	32.1%	67.9%	33.9%	66.1%	31.7%	68.3%	31.5%	68.5%
Oman <sup>c</sup>	61.1%	38.9%	61.9%	38.1%	58.1%	41.9%	56.7%	43.3%	56.6%	43.4%
Qatar <sup>d</sup>	23.0%	77.0%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	26.3%	73.7%
Saudi Arabia <sup>e</sup>	57.0%	43.0%	59.7%	40.3%	58.4%	41.6%	N/A	N/A	58.8%	41.2%
UAE <sup>f</sup>	22.7%	77.3%	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	N/A	23.6%	76.4%

<sup>63</sup> Table formed using available and extrapolated data from following sources:

<sup>a</sup> Data taken from: <https://bahrain.opendatasoft.com/explore/?sort=modified&refine.theme=Population>

<sup>b</sup> Data taken from: [https://www.csb.gov.kw/Pages/Statistics\\_en?ID=67&ParentCatID=1](https://www.csb.gov.kw/Pages/Statistics_en?ID=67&ParentCatID=1)

<sup>c</sup> Data taken from: <https://data.gov.om/OMPOP2016/population>

<sup>d</sup> Data taken from: <https://www.data.gov.qa/explore/dataset/qatar-monthly-statistics-total-population-of-2022/table/?sort=month> and <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock>

<sup>e</sup> Data taken from: <https://www.un.org/development/desa/pd/content/international-migrant-stock> and

<https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/SP.POP.TOTL?end=2023&locations=SA&start=2019&view=chart>

<sup>f</sup> Data taken from: <https://www.data.gov.qa/explore/dataset/qatar-monthly-statistics-total-population-of-2022/table/?sort=month> and <https://fcsc.gov.ae/en-us/Pages/Statistics/Statistics-by-Subject.aspx#/3Ffolder=Demography%20and%20Social/Population/Population&subject=Demography%20and%20Social>

The continued role of GCC countries as major migration destinations confirms that their economies are structurally reliant on foreign labour. However, governments are introducing policy adjustments to balance nationalisation efforts while ensuring a sufficient foreign workforce to support economic development. These policies will be briefly described in the following section.

## Migration policies in GCC countries

### Regional and national frameworks

The GCC countries share a complex migration policy framework shaped by regional economic integration, labour market demands, and evolving legal reforms. Since the 1990s, international labour migration has been the primary source of labour for GCC states. Over this period, these countries have developed their migration policies in response to economic and demographic shifts. The Gulf economies are characterised by labour markets where foreign workers dominate, particularly in the private sector. While GCC states share foundational migration policy frameworks influenced by historical, economic, and socio-political dynamics, they also exhibit individual differences in their approaches.

At the international level, all GCC countries have committed to the principles of safe, orderly, and regular migration by signing the Global Compact for Migration, a non-binding UN agreement adopted in 2018. Additionally, most countries in the region—except Oman—have ratified the International Labour Organization’s (ILO) *Discrimination (Employment and Occupation) Convention* (1958). However, despite these commitments, none of the GCC states have ratified the *International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families* (1990), which has been primarily endorsed by migrant-sending countries. This reluctance reflects the prevailing approach of GCC states, which prioritise national labour policies over binding international protections for migrant workers.

Regionally, while the GCC lacks a unified migration policy, its member states share common labour market regulations and have facilitated intra-GCC mobility for nationals through visa harmonisation. The *Charter of the GCC*, the original *Unified Economic Agreement of 1981*, and the *New Economic Agreement of 2001* serve as key frameworks for regional cooperation, guaranteeing freedom of movement, residence, and employment for GCC citizens across member states. However, these benefits do not extend to non-GCC migrants, who remain subject to national sponsorship

systems (Babar, 2011). Similarly, while common visa policies—such as the proposed *GCC unified visa*—are designed to boost tourism, they maintain restrictive conditions for labour migrants.

Efforts to enhance regional collaboration on migration governance are evident in various initiatives. The ILO's *Regional Fair Migration Project* and its ongoing partnership with the *GCC Council of Ministers of Labour and Social Affairs* signal a commitment to improving labour standards. Despite these efforts, no formal, binding migration framework has been established at the regional level.

A defining characteristic of labour migration across all GCC states is the *Kafala system*, a legal framework that binds migrant workers to their employers, or sponsors. This system governs key aspects of residency, employment, and mobility, granting significant power to employers. Sponsors control work permits, visa renewals, and exit permissions, creating a dependency that often restricts labour mobility. As a result, migrant workers are unable to change jobs without their sponsor's consent, a limitation that frequently traps them in exploitative working conditions (Wagle, 2024,).

The transnational recruitment process further entrenches these vulnerabilities. Labour brokerage networks in South and Southeast Asia facilitate the migration of low-wage workers to the GCC under standardised contracts, reinforcing systemic dependencies (Wagle, 2024). While some reforms have been introduced—such as Qatar's 2020 labour law, which allows job changes without employer approval—the core mechanisms of the Kafala system remain intact (Bel-Air, 2024; Kagan and Cholewinski, 2022).

The foundation of this system rests on the role of the *Kafeel* (sponsor-employer), who assumes financial and legal responsibility for the worker. By signing binding agreements with the respective country's Ministry of Labour, the *Kafeel* maintains control over the worker's legal status, including their ability to reside and work in the country (Shah, 2009). Originally conceived in the 1950s to protect unskilled national workers in Kuwait, the system expanded and became institutionalised across the Gulf during the 1970s and 1980s (Aarthi and Sahu, 2021). It was designed to facilitate a temporary and rotating labour force, allowing workers to be rapidly recruited during economic booms and expelled during downturns (Baldwin-Edwards, 2011).

Beyond its legal and administrative dimensions, the Kafala system is deeply intertwined with socio-cultural practices. Unlike other global labour migration schemes, where an employer sponsors a worker's initial entry into the host country, the Kafala system extends control over crucial aspects of a worker's life. Residency

renewals, contract terminations, job transfers, and even the ability to leave the country often hinge on the sponsor's approval (Kagan and Cholewinski, 2022). This dependency structure exacerbates the precarity of migrant workers, limiting their autonomy and legal protections.

Over the past two decades, the Kafala system has faced increasing scrutiny from civil society and international organisations. Reform efforts have aimed at streamlining labour migration and increasing national workforce participation. However, despite these changes, the fundamental structures of sponsorship-based migration remain deeply entrenched, continuing to shape the experiences of millions of migrant workers in the GCC (Kagan and Cholewinski, 2022).

### **Workforce Nationalisation**

All GCC countries prioritise workforce nationalisation as a strategy to reduce dependence on foreign labour. Programmes such as *Saudisation* in Saudi Arabia, *Emiratisation* in the UAE, and *Kuwaitisation* in Kuwait impose quotas requiring private-sector employers to hire a certain percentage of nationals. Non-compliance often results in penalties, incentivising businesses to meet these targets (Fargues et al., 2018). However, despite these policies, the labour market remains deeply segmented. Nationals predominantly occupy well-compensated government positions, while low-skilled jobs in the private sector continue to be filled by migrant workers, reinforcing a dual labour market structure (Sherman, 2022).

A key challenge of nationalisation efforts lies in the mismatch between the skills of local workers and private-sector demands. Many businesses comply with nationalisation quotas in a tokenistic manner rather than fostering genuine workforce integration. This gap persists as private-sector employers favour the cost-efficiency and specialised skill sets of migrant labour over the often higher wage expectations of nationals (Diop et al., 2018).

### **Exclusionary Social and Legal Protections**

Migrant workers in the GCC face systemic exclusion from social welfare and legal protections, contributing to their precarious status. Citizenship remains largely inaccessible, as naturalisation laws favour individuals with ethnic or tribal affiliations, making long-term settlement for migrants nearly impossible (Beaugrand and Thiollet, 2023). Beyond legal and economic barriers, social segregation further marginalises migrant communities. Many reside in designated labour camps or separate neighbourhoods, limiting their interaction with local populations and

reducing opportunities for integration (Kalush and Saraswathi, 2024). Even recent reforms—such as Qatar’s introduction of a non-discriminatory minimum wage in 2020—have failed to eliminate the structural inequalities embedded within the system (Sherman, 2022).

Migration policies in the GCC are closely tied to state security and political stability, leading to strict enforcement mechanisms. Additionally, GCC states enforce stringent measures against irregular migration, codifying severe penalties for visa overstays and illegal entry. In Oman, for instance, the *Foreigners’ Residence Law* (1995) mandates deportation and bans on re-entry for undocumented migrants. Saudi Arabia takes an even stricter approach, imposing indefinite detention on those who enter the country illegally ‘until s/he is deported from the country’ (Zahra, 2018, p. 5).

### **The Necessity of Migrants**

Despite strict enforcement mechanisms, periodic amnesty programmes are introduced across the region, allowing irregular migrants to either regularise their status or leave without facing penalties. This seemingly contradictory approach—restricting rights while continuing to attract foreign labour—reflects the GCC countries’ ongoing dependence on migrant workers to sustain economic growth. These workers play a crucial role across various sectors, from construction and domestic work to high-skilled industries, ensuring the continued development of the region.

Recognising this dependence, GCC states have actively partnered with the ILO to promote decent work and sustainable development. One key initiative was a series of regional workshops on *End-of-Service Indemnity* (EOSI) reforms, reflecting a growing commitment to enhancing social protection systems for migrant workers. This effort is part of a broader project aimed at improving labour conditions across the region (ILO, 2023).

Further strengthening this collaboration, the ILO and the Executive Bureau of the Council of Ministers of Labour and Social Affairs of the GCC have launched a comprehensive Plan of Joint Activities for 2025-2029. This initiative is designed to enhance cooperation and advance the Decent Work Agenda within GCC countries. By addressing key workplace concerns, such as fair wage systems, gender equality, environmental sustainability in employment, and stronger worker protections, this partnership underscores the region’s increasing engagement in labour reforms (ILO, 2024).

# Conclusion

Migrants make up a significant majority of the population in many GCC states, in some cases even outnumbering nationals. The region's economic structure is heavily dependent on foreign labour, particularly in sectors such as construction, domestic work, and services, making migration an essential pillar of its development. Despite restrictive legal frameworks and the rigid sponsorship system, GCC states have maintained an open migration policy, continuously attracting workers from Asia, Africa, and beyond.

However, this reliance on foreign labour exists within a complex and often contradictory policy environment. On one hand, governments impose strict nationalisation programmes aimed at increasing the participation of citizens in the workforce. On the other hand, the continued preference for migrant workers—due to their lower cost and specialised skills—ensures that foreign labour remains indispensable. Amnesty programmes, periodic labour law reforms, and collaborations with international organisations, such as the ILO, reflect an ongoing attempt to strike a balance between economic necessity and workforce regulation.

At the same time, migration in the GCC is not solely an economic phenomenon; it is deeply intertwined with social and cultural dynamics. The presence of large expatriate communities has transformed urban landscapes, influenced consumer markets, and introduced new social norms. Yet, despite decades of settlement, migrant workers remain structurally excluded from long-term residency rights and citizenship, reinforcing a system of transitory labour rather than permanent migration.

Looking ahead, the sustainability of the region's migration model will depend on how well the GCC states manage workforce nationalisation while maintaining economic growth. The ongoing diversification of Gulf economies—driven by initiatives like Saudi Vision 2030 and Qatar National Vision 2030—suggests that labour markets will continue to evolve, potentially creating new opportunities for skilled migrants while maintaining a reliance on lower-wage workers.

Ultimately, migration will remain at the heart of the GCC's socio-economic fabric. While recent reforms signal a gradual shift in policies towards improving worker rights and labour mobility, structural inequalities persist. The future trajectory of migration governance in the Gulf will be shaped by economic shifts, geopolitical developments, and the ability of policymakers to balance national interests with the realities of a globally interconnected labour market.

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