



THE OXUS SOCIETY FOR CENTRAL ASIAN AFFAIRS



INTRODUCING THE CENTRAL ASIA MIGRATION TRACKER

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Central Asia's population continues to grow rapidly, with around half of the population now under 30 years old. A lack of employment options and underdeveloped education systems, combined with economies wracked by nepotism and capital flight, mean many younger Central Asians are forced to migrate to find work or develop their skill-sets for the modern job-market.

Russia remains the primary destination point for these migrants, particularly those from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, the most remittance-dependent countries in the region. In 2016, 6,679,515 Central Asians registered with Russia's migration authorities.¹ By 2019, that number grew to 9,504,176, a 42-percent increase over four years.² Familiarity

with the Russian language and culture, stemming from a shared Soviet past, geographic proximity, and Russia's acute need of labor migrants continues to pull Central Asia within Moscow's orbit. Streamlined citizenship processes for highly-qualified cadres from former Soviet republics, such as doctors and engineers, adds to Russia's allure - the annual number of Central Asians who receive Russian citizenship grew from 94,155 to 125,319 between 2016 and 2019.

But Asia and Europe, though far behind Russia, are also important - and often overlooked - destinations for Central Asian migrants. Between 2016 and 2019, the number of Central Asian citizens who received a permit to work, study, or live in the EU grew by 14 percent; over the same period, the number of Central Asians, mostly Kazakhs and Uzbeks, who relocated to South Korea grew from 10,779 to 20,694, a 92-percent increase. Turkey, the Gulf states, and China, while excluded from this report, have also seen a large increase in Central Asian migrants.

The long-term effects of migration from Central Asia are more negative than positive. Socially, migration is resulting in a brain drain, particularly in Kazakhstan,³ with the most talented and qualified Central Asians staying abroad permanently, degrading their countries' social fabric. Economically, migration is making the region, particularly Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, even more vulnerable to external shocks and is disincentivizing the government from developing the economy. Politically, migration is serving as a pressure valve that prevents the buildup of unemployment-fueled social and political frustration and helps the undemocratic regimes to stay in power.⁴

Methodology

This report draws from data collected in the Central Asian Migration Tracker (CAMT), a research project by the Oxus Society for Central Asian Affairs. CAMT focuses on long-term migration - defined in this report as trips of 6 months or longer - out of Central Asia for the purposes of work, study, residence; short-term employment, study programs, or tourist trips were thus excluded from the tracker. While out of scope of this report, the issue of asylum - an important part of migration from Central Asia - will be covered by a subsequent report.

At present, due to the availability of data, CAMT focuses on the period between 2016 to 2019. Countries that have detailed work, study, and residence migration data for the 2016-2019 period - the United States, Canada, the European Union, South Korea, and Japan - were included in CAMT. Other countries that are known to have large Central Asian migrant communities - namely China and Turkey - were excluded due to unavailability of adequate data.

The project team considered three levels of intent behind migration - applying for a visa/permit, receiving a visa/permit, and making the actual trip. Because data on issued visas was the most available and

comprehensive, in addition to other considerations, the project team used issued visas as a proxy for the intent to migrate. However, by focusing on official long-term migration gleaned from clear-cut visa categories, CAMT doesn't account for informal activities, e.g. students engaging in remunerated activities instead of studying or migrants staying past visa expiration date. A more detailed overview of the methodology for data collection and coding is available in the project's codebook.⁵

Kazakhstan

Despite having the highest GDP per capita in Central Asia, Kazakhstan has witnessed a negative net migration from 2016 to 2019.⁶ The net migration of people with higher education and older than 15 years old remains similarly negative, showing a 38 percent loss between 2016 and 2019.⁷ Around 91 percent of migrants in 2019 chose the Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) as their final destination,⁸ 97 percent of whom migrated to Russia.⁹

Work and resident visas were two of the most commonly issued visas in Kazakhstan. Economic instability, a weak national currency, poor social protection, corruption, and other factors became the main motivations behind people's decision to migrate. At the same time, the country's open policy towards international education and experience encourages younger generations to seek opportunities abroad. Strong economic, cultural, and historic ties with Russia makes it a top destination across work, study, and permanent residence immigration.

Kazakhstan has also become a new work migration destination for Central Asian migrants from neighboring republics - although the net migration continues to be consistently negative.¹⁰ One of the most effective strategies to boost immigration to Kazakhstan has been the Oralman (Kazakh for "returnee") program, designed to repatriate ethnic Kazakhs mostly from China and Uzbekistan. From 1991 to 2020, the program brought some 1,057,280 ethnic Kazakhs.¹¹

Work

When compared with other Central Asian countries, the number of Kazakh citizens migrating in search of better employment opportunities has doubled over the past 5 years, likely due to oil price changes and an economic crisis.¹² Kazakhstani labor migrants tend to leave in search of high-skilled jobs and, according to 2018 data, those who left were usually professionally qualified.¹³ In the first half of 2018, 13,000 people over 15 years of age left the country for permanent residence - 40 percent of these had higher education degrees and 32 percent had secondary professional degrees.¹⁴

Work Visas, Kazakhstan	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Russia	71,600	88,202	111,464	136,208	407,474
EU	2,803	3,193	3,790	4,639	14,425
United States	195	234	249	332	1,010
Canada	185	205	220	255	865
South Korea	134	127	170	128	559
Japan	66	68	84	102	320
Year total	74,983	92,029	115,977	141,664	424,653

South Korea has been gaining in popularity in recent years as a destination for both legal and illegal Kazakh labor after the two governments established a 30-day visa-free regime in 2014. According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 19,000 Kazakh citizens were legally present in South Korea in 2019, including tourists, while 12,000 were present illegally.¹⁵ Due to a higher volume of migrants overstaying short-term visas, the South Korean government implemented stricter rules and regulations for entry and denied more than 5,000 entry attempts in 2017.¹⁶

Study

The Kazakh government actively promotes international education experience. Since joining the Bologna Process - a system promoting intergovernmental cooperation between European countries in the field of higher education - in 2010, Kazakh higher education institutions have implemented new academic mobility programs. Additionally, the Bolashak scholarship, funded by the Ministry of Education, has sponsored around 11,000 students since the establishment of the program in 1993 for undergraduate and graduate education in the highest ranked universities around the world.

Study Visas, Kazakhstan	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Russia	77,812	73,752	86,447	90,782	328,793
EU	5,527	5,298	5,531	5,517	21,873
United States	1,236	1,455	1,461	1,650	5,802
Canada	585	272	378	475	1,710
South Korea	328	301	370	395	1,394
Japan	199	207	230	261	897
Year total	85,687	81,285	94,417	99,080	360,469

According to the IOM survey among Central Asian youth located abroad, 62 percent cited education as their main reason for migrating.¹⁷ In 2019, around 9 percent of all Kazakh students had studied abroad,¹⁸ with the most popular study destinations being Russia and China (which combined account for 83 percent of Kazakh students who were abroad in 2016).¹⁹

Permanent Residence

Around 73 percent of migrants leaving Kazakhstan in search of permanent residence elsewhere are ethnically Russian, a natural migration process that started after the collapse of the Soviet Union.²⁰ In 2019, amendments to Russia's migration policy allowed citizens of Kazakhstan to obtain permanent residence visas without prior temporary residence permits.²¹ The main eligibility requirements include: foreign citizens born in Soviet Russian territory, children of Russian Federation citizens, native Russian speakers, highly qualified specialists, and others.

Residence Visas, Kazakhstan	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Russia	56,384	58,870	61,410	63,351	240,015
EU	39,259	40,314	40,746	41,273	161,592
United States	569	738	809	911	3,027
Canada	400	338	342	450	1,530
South Korea	1,541	2,318	2,718	3,063	9,640
Japan	72	77	84	90	323
Year total	98,225	102,655	106,109	109,138	416,127

Kyrgyzstan

Poverty, poor social protection, absence of good educational opportunities, and chronic unemployment are the main explanations for the rising out-migration of Kyrgyz youth. According to the latest data by the National Statistical Committee, in 2019, 20.1 % of the population lived under the poverty line.²² Labor migration is more prominent, particularly in rural regions, where poverty is especially persistent.²³ The government's inability to provide a safety net to migrants is partly explained by its tendency to view labor migration as the management of "excess population" - the population groups whose needs the government does not have the capacity to meet.²⁴ Additionally, rising feminization of migration to Russia demonstrates that despite social constraints that might prevent females from becoming labor migrants, Kyrgyzstan's youth have come to regard emigration as a convenient way to enhance their well-being.²⁵ In 2019, revenues from worker remittances accounted for 28 percent of GDP, with each labor migrant sending on average 3000 USD per year to Kyrgyzstan.²⁶

Work

Unemployment in Kyrgyzstan currently hovers around 6 percent. For the young unemployed population, labor migration appears the most viable way of earning an income. After the country's accession to the Eurasian Economic Union in 2015, Kyrgyzstani citizens were allowed to remain in Russia for up to 30 days without need of temporary work permits. The number of Kyrgyzstani citizens who indicated work as their purpose of entry to Russia subsequently grew from 361,875 in 2016 to 453,702 in 2019. However, because of economic stagnation in Russia and the

growing popularity of Kazakhstan as a destination for labor migration, the number of Kyrgyz labor migrants in Russia reached a historic low in 2018.²⁷

Work Visas, Kyrgyzstan	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Russia	361,875	376,863	351,959	453,702	1,544,399
EU	1,408	1,660	2,230	2,668	7,966
United States	29	18	12	13	72
Canada	10	15	15	25	65
South Korea	309	285	452	249	1,295
Japan	78	97	113	119	407
Year total	363,709	378,938	354,781	456,776	1,554,204

Study

Overall, the number of study visas issued to Kyrgyzstani citizens almost doubled over the reported period, which demonstrates the growing popularity of studying abroad as an alternative to Kyrgyzstan's higher educational institutions. Russia remains the top destination for educational migration due to its geographic proximity and shared culture and language, accounting for over 90 percent of all study visas issued over the reported period.

Study Visas, Kyrgyzstan	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Russia	12,512	14,508	16,654	21,543	65,217
EU	922	979	1,085	1,156	4,142
United States	168	158	238	330	894
Canada	40	148	181	144	513
South Korea	48	82	93	97	320
Japan	250	259	304	292	1,105
Year total	13,940	16,134	18,555	23,562	72,191

Among EU countries, the largest number of long-term study permits were issued by Germany, Czechia, France, and Hungary. While the number of visas issued by the U.S. and South Korea doubled, and the number of Canadian study visas tripled over the reported period, these three countries remained far behind the EU as a popular destination for educational migration.

Permanent Residence

According to an agreement between Kyrgyzstan and Russia, new, simplified procedures allow Kyrgyzstani citizens with permanent residence permits to acquire Russian citizenship within three months.²⁸ Although there is no official agreement on dual-citizenship between the two governments, Kyrgyzstan's ambiguous citizenship law allows acquisition of a Russian passport without renunciation of Kyrgyzstani citizenship. Although plans for the introduction of de jure dual citizenship were in place by 2017, they have yet to materialize.²⁹

Residence Visas, Kyrgyzstan	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Russia	13,463	12,558	12,777	12,724	51,522
EU	5,603	5,730	5,812	5,854	22,999
United States	355	440	610	596	2,001
Canada	245	145	162	105	657
South Korea	523	436	613	558	2,130
Japan	49	54	59	65	227
Year total	20,238	19,363	20,033	19,902	79,536

Compared to Russia and the EU, who together account for more than 95 percent of all permanent residence permits issued over the reported period, the U.S. and Canada remain far less popular destinations for long-term residence.

Tajikistan

With an average population growth rate of 2.1 percent in the past 20 years,³⁰ and almost half of its population younger than 25 years old, Tajikistan is one of the youngest and fastest growing countries in Eurasia.³¹ In 2020, over a tenth of the entire labor force, including over a fifth of the country's youth aged 15-24, is unemployed.³² Over half of the entire labor force has not completed general secondary education, making their employment prospects even worse. As a result, over a quarter of people in Tajikistan live in poverty.³³

In search of better employment and education opportunities, Tajikistan has turned outward, becoming a major exporter of labor and registering a constantly negative migration rate in the years following the collapse of the USSR.³⁴ Unable, and often unwilling, to improve the country's economic and education systems, the government of Tajikistan encourages emigration to use remittances as a crutch for the country's struggling economy. The government's failure to establish mechanisms to facilitate migrants' return and reintegration within the domestic economy further locks Tajik migrants in the cycle of seasonal labor migration.³⁵

Work

Tajikistan's export of labor serves as a substitute for domestic production of goods or services, making the country one of the most remittances-dependent in the world. In 2019, around a third of the country's GDP came from labor migrants, with 80 percent of remittances spent on basic necessities like food and medicine.³⁶

Work Visas, Tajikistan	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Russia	837,695	936,752	1,018,497	1,179,423	3,972,367
EU	395	633	868	1,146	3,042
United States	15	14	23	21	73
Canada	5	0	5	5	15
South Korea	14	38	22	28	102
Japan	8	12	18	24	62
Year total	838,132	937,449	1,019,433	1,180,647	3,975,661

Labor migration has been steadily growing in the past two decades. In 2016, 837,946 citizens of Tajikistan received work visas to foreign countries - in 2019, that number grew to 1,180,110. Russia remains the main destination for annual labor migration from Tajikistan, capturing 99 percent of Tajiks looking for employment opportunities abroad. The actual number of Tajiks working in Russia is difficult to calculate - some estimates put the number at 1.3 million,³⁷ with as many as 40 percent working illegally, and therefore not showing up in the official statistics recorded here.³⁸

Study

The exodus of qualified education workers in the post-Soviet years to Russia, fiscal deficit, endemic corruption, and transition from Russian to Tajik as the primary language of instruction have severely hampered Tajikistan's education system. The level of education of older generations in Tajikistan is currently higher than that of its youth – an uncommon trend for the traditional road to economic development.³⁹ The number of Tajiks looking for better education opportunities abroad has almost doubled over the reported period, with the vast majority of them ending up in Russia (25,250 in 2016; 44,661 in 2019).

Study Visas, Tajikistan	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Russia	25,250	30,223	34,763	44,661	134,897
EU	537	641	744	848	2,770
United States	174	177	155	186	692
Canada	10	22	52	78	162
South Korea	18	22	20	18	78
Japan	113	128	139	159	539
Year total	26,102	31,213	35,873	45,950	139,138

Low levels of English literacy and inadequate English-language instruction (Tajikistan ranks last in a global English proficiency index), and higher costs of education in the West, prevent Tajik citizens from studying there.⁴⁰ While the number of Tajiks with student visas in the EU and the U.S. has grown between 2016 and 2019, it is nowhere near the number of

Tajiks studying in Russia.

Permanent Residence

Russia's resettlement programs are a popular way out of Tajikistan. Applicants for those programs must be fluent in Russian in addition to being qualified in a high-skilled, high-demand profession. These programs offer a streamlined citizenship process, especially appealing under the current dual-citizenship agreement between Tajikistan and Russia. A more drawn-out citizenship process of living, working, and paying taxes in Russia for a period of at least five years is also quite popular in Tajikistan. As a result, the number of Tajik citizens with a residence permit in Russia grew from 51,039 in 2016 to 75,639 in 2019; during that period, over 132,000 Tajiks received Russian citizenship.

Residence Visas, Tajikistan	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Russia	51,039	60,450	64,732	75,639	251,860
EU	744	820	946	1,011	3,521
United States	322	524	808	1,087	2,741
Canada	30	40	58	46	174
South Korea	28	53	62	77	220
Japan	9	11	13	14	47
Year total	52,172	61,898	66,619	77,874	258,563

Turkmenistan

Like other Central Asian countries, Turkmenistan has had a negative net migration rate since the collapse of the Soviet Union.⁴¹ However, in the absence of state transparency, independent media, and freedom of information, it is quite difficult to track migration from Turkmenistan. While widely accepted current official statistics put the population of the country at 5.4 million, classified information gathered by the state statistics committee estimates that between 2008 and 2018, over 1.8 million people left the country permanently.⁴² If true, the new estimates would further highlight the dire conditions in Turkmenistan.

As more and more people try to leave the country in search of a better life, the government attempts to stop this potentially destabilizing population drain by any means necessary. Until around 2004, the government operated an unofficial system of exit visas and travel bans, requiring people to obtain permission to leave the country.⁴³ And while the government has since denied the existence of such a system, reports from inside the country suggest renewed attempts at slowing down the tide of people leaving. In 2018, there were reports of Turkmen citizens below the age of 40 not being allowed to go abroad.⁴⁴ Ticketed passengers with visas in hand being told that they cannot board the planes and crowds outside of

the National Migration Service office wanting to know why they were blocked from leaving the country have become almost daily scenes⁴⁵ at the Ashgabat International airport.

Work

While data for Turkey is unavailable, 2014 estimates put the number of Turkmen citizens residing in Turkey at over half a million, with many remaining in the country illegally for employment purposes upon the expiration of the one-month period during which they can stay in the country without a visa.⁴⁶ The number of Turkmen citizens seeking employment in Turkey is so high that the city of Bursa's market of foreign migrant labor reportedly consists mostly of citizens from Turkmenistan. The Turkmenistan government has been reportedly attempting to halt labor migration to Turkey, with around 90 percent of those headed to Istanbul over land or air stopped at the border.⁴⁷

Work Visas, Turkmenistan	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Russia	2,085	1,951	2,779	4,813	11,628
EU	176	193	245	346	960
United States	23	28	33	13	97
Canada	0	10	0	10	20
South Korea	11	10	10	18	49
Japan	5	6	6	7	24
Year total	2,300	2,198	3,073	5,207	12,778

Russia is only the second most popular destination after Turkey for labor migrants because, unlike Turkey, Russia requires a visa from incoming Turkmen citizens. Another reason is the status of the Russian language in the country. As ethnic Russians left Turkmenistan in large numbers after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the state switched from Cyrillic to Latin script in 1993 and continued de-emphasizing Russian in the country's education system throughout the next decade and a half.⁴⁸

Study

Like other countries in the region, Turkmenistan's population is young, with an estimated 46 percent under the age of 24. The local institutions of higher education, however, are unable to accommodate this demographic situation - in 2014 they took in only around 7 percent of the 100,000 annual graduates.⁴⁹ Despite the lack of domestic educational capacity, the government refused to recognize foreign diplomas between 2004 and 2014 in an attempt to discourage Turkmen citizens from studying abroad.⁵⁰ In 2009, only 2,700 Turkmen citizens left to study abroad; by 2019, the number of Turkmen citizens studying in Russia alone jumped to over 49,000.

Study Visas, Turkmenistan	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Russia	22,401	29,792	39,992	49,444	141,629
EU	475	481	559	566	2,081
United States	235	247	192	166	840
Canada	10	16	21	23	70
South Korea	10	8	11	10	39
Japan	26	26	27	33	112
Year total	23,157	30,570	40,802	50,242	144,771

In the past five years, the Turkmen government made several attempts to halt educational migration. In 2015, the government decided that young men who have not yet served in the country's military will no longer be able to leave the country to study abroad.⁵¹ In 2019, the government announced that it will only recognize diplomas from certain foreign universities and will not recognize certain degrees of study.⁵² The list of approved foreign universities includes dozens of schools in Russia, India, and China, but only two in Kazakhstan, and no universities in Western European countries, the United States, or Canada.

Uzbekistan

With about 30 million people, Uzbekistan is the most populous country in Central Asia. Since the change of government in 2016, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev has introduced a number of measures to open the country up. These include a reduction in trade tariffs, relaxation of visa requirements, as well as strides in reducing forced labor. International migration has since become central to these reforms, making it an important step for a country that has not recognized the existence of migration since its independence. The government has also undertaken important moves, including elimination of government permission to travel abroad, empowering the Agency for External Labor Migration, under the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations, establishing a fund to protect the rights and interests of Uzbek labor migrants abroad, and introducing preferential fees and subsidized loans for the purchase of plane tickets for temporary labor migration.

Work

The World Bank study released in 2019 shows that the primary reason behind labor migration from Uzbekistan is weak local labor markets.⁵³ Migration is driven by low life satisfaction, job insecurity, and unemployment. Furthermore, the restrictive propiska policies and unaffordable urban housing limits internal migration in the country, and forces labor surplus abroad.⁵⁴

As for other Central Asian countries, Russia remains the principal destination for labor migrants from Uzbekistan, and continues to grow annually. The number of Uzbek citizens with issued Russian work visas

grew from 1.4 million in 2016 to 2.1 million in 2019. The Uzbek economy is highly dependent on remittances, accounting for at least 10 percent of its GDP - in 2016 alone, migrants sent \$2.7 billion from Russia.⁵⁵ In fact, without remittance income, the level of poverty would have been much higher, likely increasing from 9.6 to 16.8 percent. The continuous inflow of Uzbek migrant workers is critical for the Russian economy as well. According to Russian officials, around 45 percent of all work permits issued in 2016 were given to Uzbek citizens.⁵⁶

Work Visas, Uzbekistan	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Russia	1,433,557	1,822,933	2,007,407	2,107,302	7,371,199
EU	3,702	3,988	4,649	5,680	18,019
United States	129	123	80	85	417
Canada	20	15	15	25	75
South Korea	3,617	4,858	4,674	5,295	18,444
Japan	263	316	439	544	1,562
Year total	1,441,288	1,832,233	2,017,264	2,118,931	7,409,716

Bureaucratic hurdles in both Uzbekistan and Russia have forced many Uzbek workers to live in Russia illegally with no substantial legal protection, making them vulnerable to both law enforcement agencies and unsafe labor conditions. In light of these hurdles, Uzbeks increasingly seek employment opportunities elsewhere, particularly in the EU and South Korea. Starting from 2004, South Korea has been opening up its labor markets by signing a bilateral labor agreement with Uzbekistan and allowing foreign nationals of Korean heritage to live and work in the country.⁵⁷

Study

Although the majority of Uzbek citizens departing the country are labor migrants employed in low-skilled jobs, there are thousands of Uzbeks pursuing higher education abroad. While Russia continues to be the main destination for Uzbek students, other Central Asian countries (not displayed in the table) are major recipients, too. In Shymkent alone, there are about 15,000 Uzbek students. Unable to enroll into universities at home due to overcrowded classrooms, the students look for opportunities abroad.

Study Visas, Uzbekistan	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Russia	24,623	28,960	34,203	50,080	137,866
EU	2,249	2,406	2,622	2,889	10,166
United States	429	534	403	332	1,698
Canada	35	164	182	263	644
South Korea	539	1,134	1,688	2,730	6,091
Japan	1,298	2,231	2,917	2,626	9,072
Year total	29,173	35,429	42,015	58,920	165,537

Concerned by this “brain drain,” the government hopes that some of these high-skilled workers will return to advance Uzbekistan’s economy. In an effort to retain its talent, the government has established El-Yurt Umidi to train the specialists abroad and to engage in dialogue with expat Uzbeks.⁵⁸ Despite these efforts, and several notable Uzbeks coming back to occupy high-level government positions, a significant portion of educated Uzbeks are reluctant to return, citing corruption, bureaucratic ineffectiveness, lack of economic and political reforms, and standards of living.

Permanent Residence

Uzbek citizens received 277,000 residence visas from this study’s chosen destination countries between 2016 and 2019. Like with other Central Asian countries, the bulk of them emigrate to Russia. However, the number of residence visas from Russia during this period decreased from 61,465 in 2016 to 45,910. The number might rise again however, since Russia eased its migration policies in 2019 to allow Uzbek citizens to obtain a permanent visa without a temporary residence permit.⁵⁹ Almost 90,000 people from Uzbekistan received Russian citizenship over the past four years.

Residence Visas, Uzbekistan	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Russia	61,465	55,074	49,256	45,910	211,705
EU	7,422	7,568	7,583	7,652	30,225
United States	3,412	4,175	2,945	1,676	12,208
Canada	210	185	189	148	732
South Korea	3,650	4,585	4,725	7,923	20,883
Japan	282	321	354	407	1,364
Year total	76,441	71,908	65,052	63,716	277,117

The European Union, South Korea, and the United States constitute other attractive destinations for permanent residence, yet with more difficult paths. The green card lottery⁶⁰ represents a golden ticket for many Uzbek families. In fact, Uzbekistan has a significant lead in the number of lottery entrants from Central Asia - in 2019 alone, Uzbekistan had 876,875 green card lottery entrants, compared to just 27,661 in Kazakhstan and 28,109 in Tajikistan. The Trump administration’s immigration policies made the application process for Uzbek citizens more difficult though, with the

percentage of visas issued decreasing from 55.3% in 2016 to just 23.61% in 2019.

Looking Forward

Central Asian countries lack the funds, institutional capacity, and political will to meet their citizens' needs. The dire social and economic conditions in the region are only getting worse in the wake of Covid-19. Once travel restrictions are lifted, Central Asia is likely to witness an increase in migration, particularly to Russia, which has struggled with the absence of foreign labor migrants in 2020. For Tajikistan, joining the Russia-led Eurasian Economic Union seems increasingly likely, especially if Uzbekistan joins, which will boost labor migration even more by offering Tajik migrants fewer bureaucratic hurdles and higher wages.⁶¹ The increase in migration will make Central Asia more economically dependent on its migrants, and thus more vulnerable to external shocks, in addition to exacerbating the region's political dependence on Russia.

The long-term effects of migration from Central Asia are more negative than positive. Socially, migration is resulting in a brain drain, particularly in Kazakhstan,⁶² with the most talented and qualified Central Asians staying abroad permanently, degrading their countries' social fabric, for example, with divorce rates rising in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, and children not seeing their fathers for years on end.⁶³ Economically, migration is making the region, particularly Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, even more vulnerable to external shocks and is disincentivizing the government from developing the economy.

Politically, migration is serving as a pressure valve that prevents the buildup of unemployment-fueled social and political frustration and helps the undemocratic regimes to stay in power.⁶⁴ This holds less true for Turkmenistan, with Ashgabat unhappy with a wave of protests recently by Turkmen migrants abroad and may choose to target political dissent by tightening migration even further. Predicting the future of migration from Turkmenistan is thus challenging due to the unpredictable nature of the current regime, with its ever-shifting unofficial restrictions on the freedom of movement and lists of approved destinations and universities. The long-term effect of migration is likely a vicious cycle, in which the Turkmen government, unable to accommodate the employment and educational needs of its citizens, will continue to lose the population necessary to build up the institutional capacity for accommodating its citizens' needs.

To mitigate the negative impacts of migration, Central Asian governments should focus on migration reforms. In the short-term, the government should negotiate the prolongation of visas, or the provision of safe travel routes from their host countries back to Central Asia. In the long term, some of the measures could include creating incentives to channel remittance flows to support private businesses and the creation of jobs, as well as investments in human capital.⁶⁵ The governments should also help returning migrants adapt to the local job market by providing training

and other opportunities for acquisition of skills that are vital to getting a job and reintegrating into the local economy.

Endnotes

- 1 “Otdel’nye pokazateli migratsionnoy situatsii v Rossiyskoy Federatsii za yanvar’-dekabr’ 2016 goda s raspredeleniem po regionam” [“Selected indicators of the migration situation in the Russian Federation by region, January-December 2016”], Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, 2017, https://xn--b1aew.xn--p1ai/upload/site1/document_news/009/359/228/stat_2016.pdf
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