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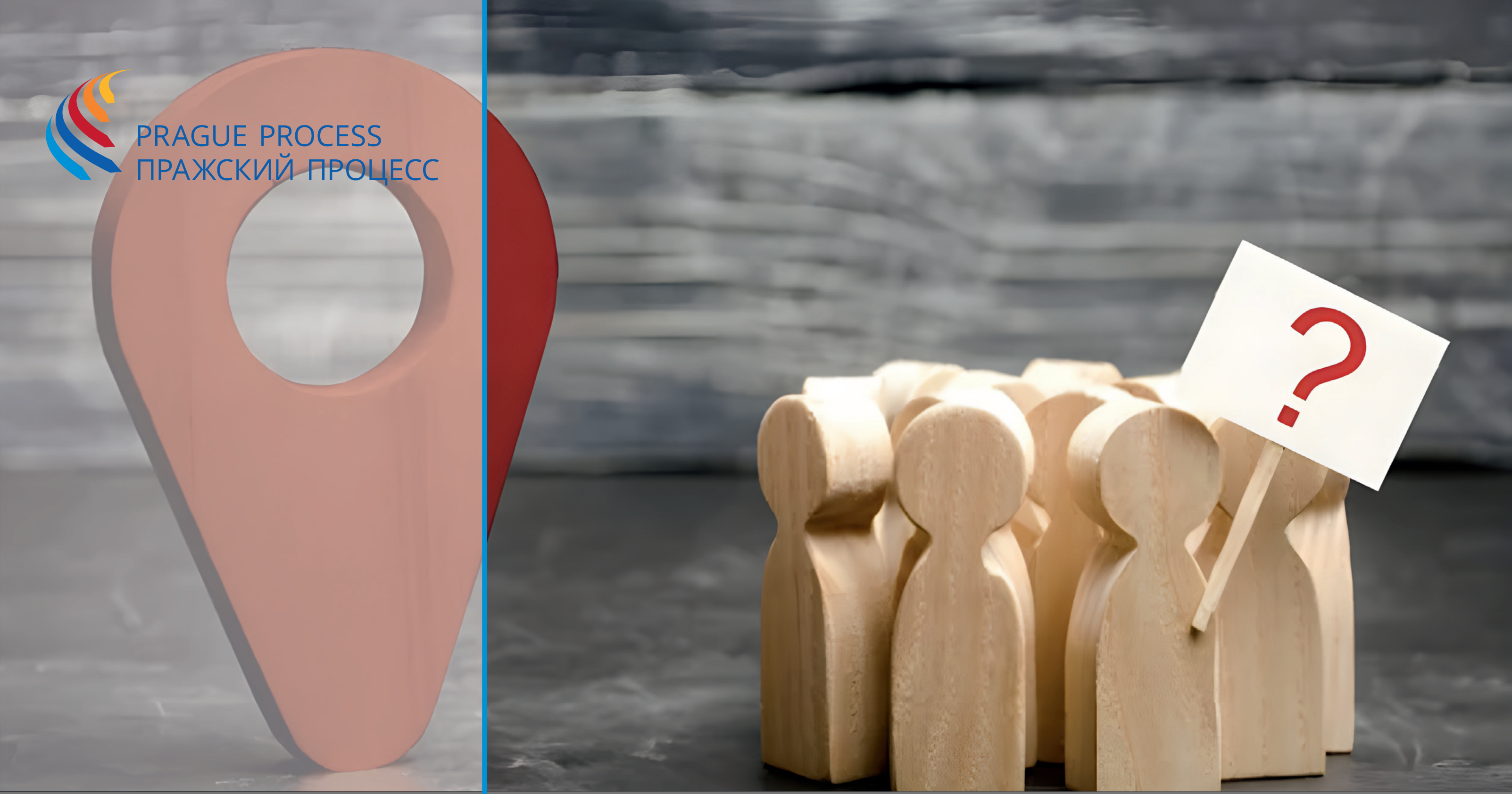

POLICY BRIEF

Impacts of Russia's War in Ukraine on Migration in Central Asia

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After two decades of relying on Russia as a destination for its active labour force, Central Asia now faces new challenges and opportunities as a result of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine. Although several million migrant workers from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan continue to live and work in Russia, many are starting to seek alternative destinations. Within the region, Kazakhstan is emerging as a new hub for labour migration while continuing to send migrants abroad. At the same time, new communities of Russian migrants have emerged in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, having fled political repression and military mobilisation at home. Amidst an unstable geopolitical situation, the migration landscape is rapidly changing as countries in the region become both countries of origin and destination. Central Asian states and their partners will need to rethink their approach to migration management to adapt to this new reality.

This Policy Brief explores the status quo of migration in and out of Central Asia two years since Russia invaded Ukraine, focusing on anticipated and unexpected developments that continue to shape migration realities in this part of the Prague Process region.

POLICY BRIEF

CENTRAL ASIAN WORKERS IN RUSSIA: SUSTAINED MIGRATION AMID UNCERTAINTY

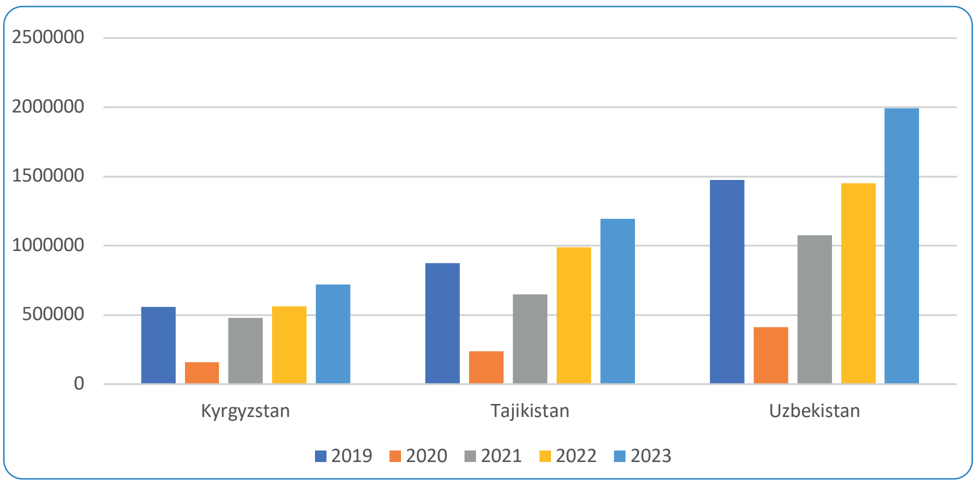
Since the mid-2000s, Russia has been the primary destination for labour migration from the Central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In 2019, prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, over 4 million migrants indicated work as their purpose of stay when entering Russia. In addition to temporary labour migrants, the same year there were over 300,000 citizens of these three Central Asian countries residing in Russia on long-term residence permits.[1] If undocumented migrants are also considered, the total number of Central Asian migrants present on the territory of the Russian Federation was likely even higher.

The launch of Russia's full-scale invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 was expected to create a complex impact on migration flows in and out of Central Asia. Following the imposition of economic and trade sanctions against Russia in the immediate aftermath of the invasion in 2022, the value of the Russian rouble plummeted, leading many to predict an economic crisis that would harm the livelihoods of Russia's migrant labour force. Though the rouble has not reached pre-war levels, the exchange rate has remained relatively stable and Russia has so far avoided economic collapse. Remarkably, personal remittances sent from Russia to Central Asia have continued to increase year-to-year since 2021, reaching all-time records in 2022.[2] While some of this increase may be due to financial activity related to sanctions evasion, a substantial portion is attributed to remittances sent by labour migrants to their family members back home.

In contrast to many predictions labour migration from Central Asia to Russia has continually increased since the start of the war in 2022.

In contrast to many predictions, labour migration from Central Asia to Russia has continually increased since the start of the war in 2022. In 2023, there were 3.9 million crossings into Russia for employment purposes by citizens of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, an increase of just under 1 million compared to 2022. Based on statistics published by the Russia's Federal State Statistics Service, labour migration to Russia in 2023 surpassed pre-pandemic levels. Despite the geopolitical and economic uncertainties facing Russia's future, the lack of employment opportunities in Central Asia and the deepening labour deficit in Russia - exacerbated by the ongoing war, military conscription and mounting casualties - have reinforced existing dependencies between the Russian labour market and a young Central Asian workforce.

Chart 1. Number of entries into the Russian Federation for employment purposes from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in 2019-2023



Source: Federal State Statistics Service

POLICY BRIEF

Acute labour shortages in Russia – recent studies estimate Russia needs 4.8 million workers to sustain economic growth – mean that there are significantly more vacancies in Russia for migrant workers from Central Asia.[3] At the same time, with increased job opportunities, there is now also the increased risk of military conscription as Russian authorities attempt to draw migrants into the military as soldiers or support staff. According to a new presidential decree issued in January 2024, foreigners who join the Russian army, as well as their dependents, are now eligible for fast-track naturalisation with a processing period of just one month.[4] While using the prospect of citizenship to recruit among foreign workers, Russian authorities have simultaneously introduced new rules that grant them the authority to deprive naturalised Russian citizens of their newly acquired citizenship for failing to register for military service within 14 days of naturalisation.[5]

Efforts by the Russian authorities to accelerate naturalisations have had mixed results. In 2022, the rate of naturalisation dropped slightly for citizens of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan with a very moderate increase in Kyrgyz applicants. Tajikistan, however, remains an outlier among Central Asian states with rates of Russian citizenship acquisition reaching a record-breaking 173,000 naturalisations in 2022. As the poorest country in the Central Asia, Tajikistan struggles the most to provide for its young and underemployed population. Citizens of Tajikistan have also faced increased fees and barriers to obtaining temporary work permits – known as ***patents*** in Russian – pushing many to consider naturalisation as a more durable solution.[6] Despite the risk of military conscription, Tajik migrants are continuing to naturalise, sometimes in the hope of using their newly acquired Russian passports to transit visa-free to Central and South America on their way to the US-Mexico border.[7] After the Crocus City Hall terrorist attack, reportedly perpetrated by several ethnic Tajiks on 22 March 2024 on the outskirts of Moscow, Tajik nationals in particular and Central Asian migrants as a whole have come under increasing suspicion and repression at the hands of Russian authorities. This heavy-handed response has led to an increase in the number of deportations and re-entry bans for Tajik migrants.[8] In response, the Tajik Ministry of Foreign Affairs has expressed concern at the difficulties and injustices experienced by Tajik migrant workers in Russia.[9]

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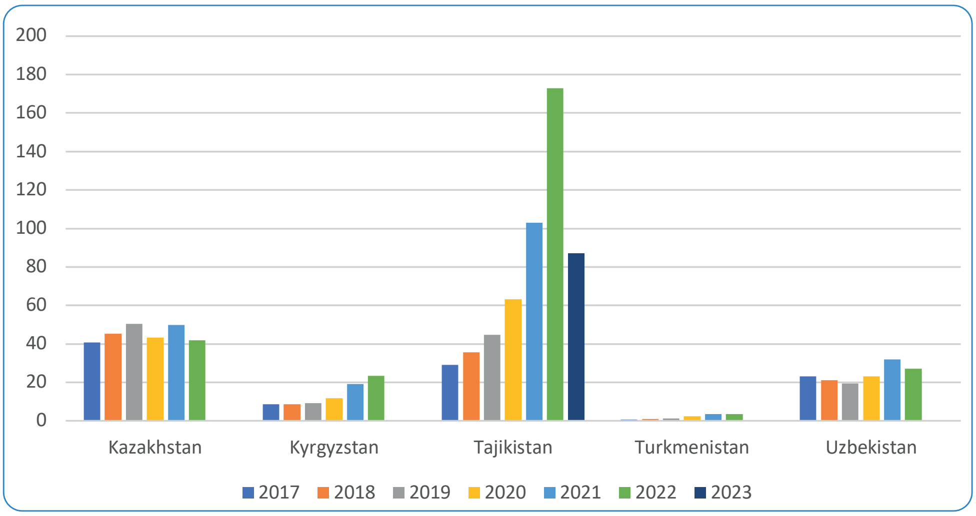
The terrorist attack spurred numerous proposals from Russian authorities, including the Parliament, the State Duma and the Ministry of Internal Affairs, to amend the existing migration policy, legislation and regulations, prioritising stricter migration control. The proposals ranged from implementing biometric identification and reducing the duration of temporary stays, to creating digital profiles for foreigners, increasing employer accountability, and enhancing deportation measures for irregular migrants. [10] Some Russian politicians have renewed calls for the introduction of a visa regime with Central Asian states and an end to the country's reliance on migrant labour.[11] Moreover, even before the attack, the Russian Ministry of Labour developed proposals calling for a shift towards a system of organised recruitment - referred to in Russian as ***orgnabor*** – that would tie migrant workers to specific employers, which would be responsible for housing, oversight, documentation and taxation. Under this system, work permits for migrants would be limited to two years.[12] Despite the harsh rhetoric and demonstrative securitisation of migrants at the official level, Russia continues to rely on migrant labour for key sectors of its economy and is unlikely to make a radical change in its (labour) migration policies, though certain adjustments, especially those related to digital profiles, can be expected.

Chart 2. Naturalisation for citizens of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan in Russia in 2017-2023 (in thousands)



Source: Ministry of Interior of the Russian Federation

LOOKING BEYOND RUSSIA

While migration to Russia remains the most accessible option for most Central Asian migrants, alternative destinations in Europe, Asia and the Middle East continue to grow in importance for would-be labour migrants from the region. Under the threat of military conscription and coercive recruitment to work in occupied Ukrainian territories, some Central Asian migrants, particularly dual citizens with Russian passports, are temporarily returning to their countries of origin and looking for alternative migration routes.

Recruitment of Central Asian labour migrants in the EU is on the rise.

In Kyrgyzstan, for example, the Centre for Employment of Citizens Abroad under the authority of the Ministry of Labour, Social Security and Migration facilitates the legal recruitment of Kyrgyz migrant workers in the EU, Türkiye, the United Kingdom, South Korea, Japan, Gulf states, and Egypt.[13] As of 2024, Kyrgyzstan has labour migration agreements with 21 countries and is actively looking to expand its cooperation with other countries in this domain.

Under the UK's Seasonal Worker scheme, citizens of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are eligible to work on six-month visas in horticulture and on poultry farms. In 2023, approximately 6,000 Kyrgyz seasonal workers were selected to work in the UK's agricultural sector. In the first seven hours of online recruitment for the 2024 season, over 26,000 Kyrgyz citizens applied to participate in the program.[14]

Recruitment of Central Asian labour migrants in the EU is also on the rise. In Lithuania, the number of Uzbek migrants went from just 1,800 in 2023 to 9,700 in 2024 with the number of Kyrgyz nationals also increasing 2,000 to 6,000 in the same time period.[15] Similarly, in Bulgaria, Kyrgyz citizens represented the largest contingent of seasonal workers in 2023 with over 2,000 registered arrivals.[16] In 2022, there were almost 5,000 Uzbek and over 3,000 Kazakh migrant workers registered in Poland with recruitment set to increase in the coming years.[17]

Outside of Europe, South Korea offers lucrative employment opportunities for migrant workers from the region. Historically, Central Asia has been home to large community of ethnic Koreans, known as Koryo-saram, deported from the Russian Far-East under Joseph Stalin in the late 1930s. Since the fall of the Soviet Union, many Central Asian Koreans have moved to South Korea, turning the country into an important Central Asian migrant destination. More than 69,000 Uzbek citizens reside in South Korea, comprising the fifth largest diaspora in the country.[18]

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In 2024, South Korea set its quota for Uzbek migrant workers at over 37,000 for a total of 100.000 applicants.[19] Though smaller by comparison, the quota for Kyrgyz nationals looking to work in South Korea increased by 18 % from 2023 to 2024 to more than 3,000.[20] Mandatory Korean language testing remains a barrier for many would-be migrants, but the popularity of Korean language courses is growing in the region. While much smaller in scale, Japan has also signed agreements on labour migration with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan with several hundred migrants already undergoing pre-departure trainings.[21] Though still relatively limited in scale, there is also increasing interest in seasonal employment in Gulf countries such as Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait and Bahrain.

Due to strong economic growth and rising wages, Kazakhstan is also increasingly attracting migrants from neighbouring countries within Central Asia. In 2024, there were over 10,500 Tajik citizens residing in the country, working primarily in construction and retail.[22] According to the Kyrgyz Ministry of Labour, the number of Kyrgyz migrants in Kazakhstan is approximately 30,000.[23] Based on a report published by Uzbekistan's Statistics Agency, an estimated 76,000 Uzbek citizens relocated permanently to Kazakhstan in 2023. Some of this may be due to the ethnic Karakalpak citizens of Uzbekistan fleeing to neighbouring Kazakhstan, where many have personal and family ties, in the wake of the violence and crackdown in the Karakalpakstan, an autonomous republic within Uzbekistan that saw protests in 2022.[24]

Finally, the political and economic instability in Russia is also pushing many Central Asians who used to live and work in the country to search for a better life in the United States. According to US border officials, more than 50,000 citizens of Central Asian states crossed the US-Mexico border irregularly in 2023 – a record high for the region.[25] Many also carry a Russian passport and have applied for asylum in the United States as draft dodgers who refuse to participate in Russia's war on Ukraine. As a result of this unpresented rise in crossings into the United States, Central and South American transit countries have introduced more stringent controls of arrivals from Russia and Central Asia, under pressure from US authorities.[26] Moreover, in early June, some media sources circulated a US border patrol memo instructing border guards at the US-Mexico border in San Diego to disallow entry of irregular migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, along with migrants from Georgia, Moldova and Russia, and proceed with their immediate deportation.[27]

Japan has also signed agreements on labour migration with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan.

While Russia's dependency on Central Asian migrant labour will remain strong in the short to medium term, the migration profile of Central Asian countries is becoming gradually more mixed, diverse and complex. According to forecasts by the European Bank for Development and Reconstruction, Central Asia economies are expected to show strong growth in the coming years, particularly in the case of Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan.[28] As a result, rural-to-urban migration within Central Asian countries will only continue to increase, attracting internal migrants to the large cities in search of higher wages and employment opportunities. As long as sanctions against Russia remain in place, Central Asian economies are set to benefit financially as an economic lifeline between Russia, China and the rest of the world.

CENTRAL ASIA AS AN EMERGING DESTINATION FOR MIGRATION

One of the most drastic and unexpected migration developments in the region has been the arrival of Russian migrants fleeing political repression, economic instability and military conscription. Starting in the immediate aftermath of Russia's invasion of Ukraine, migration from Russia to Central Asia began to gradually increase, reaching unprecedented levels in the weeks following the announcement of partial military mobilisation in Russia on 21 September 2022. A lack of transparency on migration data makes estimating the number of new Russian residents in the region difficult. In Kazakhstan, upwards of 150,000 new arrivals were registered from Russia in 2022, while in Kyrgyzstan it is estimated that approximately 30,000 Russian citizens remained in the country at the end of 2022.[29] Migration authorities in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan have not published any official data on foreign migrants present in the country since that period. There is concern in the region over the possibility of a new influx of Russian migrants in case of more military mobilisation or political repression within the Russian Federation. As migrant-sending countries, Central Asian states are poorly equipped to handle and process large numbers of migrants, particularly since they are already dealing with increased rural-to-urban migration within their countries and own migrant returnees from Russia.

In addition to new arrivals from Russia, Kyrgyzstan is now becoming a destination for migrant workers from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan.

In response to the mass arrival of Russian citizens fleeing the draft, Kazakhstan implemented new migration rules in early 2023 that allow citizens of Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) member states to remain in the country no longer than 90 days within any 180-day period.[30] This has limited the ability of Russians to remain indefinitely in the country without residence permits, but also negatively impacted circular labour migration from neighbouring Kyrgyzstan. In late 2023, Kyrgyzstan also introduced the same 90-day rule for Russian citizens, but has kept a rather liberal registration system in place that allows citizens of EEU to live and work in the country on condition of extending their registration every six months.[31]

In addition to new arrivals from Russia, Kyrgyzstan is now becoming a destination for migrant workers from Bangladesh, India and Pakistan. Despite being a migrant-sending country, Kyrgyzstan is also experiencing labour shortages with many Kyrgyz citizens preferring to work abroad than accept low wages on the local labour market. In Kyrgyzstan's garment industry, in particular, foreign workers from Bangladesh and Pakistan are an increasingly vital source of labour. In 2024, Kyrgyzstan increased its quota for foreign workers to a record-breaking 24,000 compared to just 16,000 in 2023.[32] On 18 May 2024, anti-migrant unrest broke out in Bishkek targeting South Asian migrant workers and students as a result of which several foreign citizens were injured.[33] This unprecedented violence shows the need for Kyrgyz authorities to acknowledge the country's changing migration landscape and develop policies to ensure the protection of migrant workers and their socioeconomic integration.

CONCLUSIONS AND POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The ripple effects of Russia's ongoing war in Ukraine have been felt throughout Central Asia given the region's economic and political dependencies on Russia. While the feared mass return of labour migrants from Russia to Central Asia did not materialise, such a scenario remains possible due to the political and economic risks associated with Russia's invasion of Ukraine. With their national economies continuing to depend on remittances from labour migrants in Russia, the Central Asian states of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan remain incredibly vulnerable to an economic crisis induced by instability within Russia. **A significant drop in money transfers from**

POLICY BRIEF

Russia to Central Asia, combined with a large-scale return of unemployed former labour migrants, would put these countries under severe economic and social strain.

To mitigate this risk, **the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan should develop contingency plans**. The respective ministries of labour and departments responsible for managing outward labour migration should lead these efforts to manage the potential effects of any disruption to labour migration to Russia. Since 2022, Kyrgyz and Uzbek labour ministry officials have taken significant steps in this direction by signing agreements with employment agencies in the United Kingdom, Slovakia, Hungary, Estonia, and Japan in an attempt to diversify the number of destination countries. Tajikistan has also undertaken similar efforts but still relies on migration to Russia to a greater extent than its neighbours.

European Union states, particularly those with increasing labour shortages in Central and Eastern Europe, **could play an important role in attracting Central Asian migrant workers for seasonal labour in key industries**. Such efforts are already taking place on a bilateral level with countries such as Germany, Estonia, Latvia, Lithuania, Bulgaria, Poland, and Hungary, but currently, the demand exceeds the number of vacancies offered.

Demand for migrant labour is particularly strong in agriculture, construction, manufacturing, hospitality and transportation. **Central Asian states, migrant-receiving countries, and international organisations should continue to expand vocational training and educational programmes that provide students with marketable practical and linguistic skills useful for employment abroad**. A successful example is the increasing number of Kyrgyz nurses who obtain training and specialisation in Kyrgyzstan by German companies that then help match graduates with German employers.[34] Similar public-private partnerships could be implemented for other in-demand professions as well.

More than a quarter of all seasonal agricultural labourers under the United Kingdom's Seasonal Worker scheme hail from Central Asia, highlighting the growing appeal of alternatives to Russia as a migration destination. Currently, Germany only allows citizens of the Western Balkans, Georgia, and Moldova to work as seasonal labourers on German farms, but this program could be expanded to include citizens of Central Asian countries. **While not an all-in-one solution to Central Asia's dependency on the Russian economy, diversifying legal labour migration pathways remains an important policy tool**.

Migration management and the development of new labour migration pathways are two key areas of future cooperation between Central Asia, Europe, and East Asia.

Beyond Europe, Kazakhstan occupies a particularly important role in the region as both a migrant-sending and increasingly migrant-receiving country. In 2023, Kazakhstan attracted over 18,000 Tajik migrant workers, a significant rise compared to previous years.[35] According to Kazakh authorities, over 200,000 Uzbek migrants, both temporary and permanent, were present in the country in 2023.[36] While rising wages offer employment opportunities for Kyrgyz, Tajik and Uzbek migrants in the cities of Astana and Almaty, residents of rural Kazakhstan embark on labour migration abroad, to destinations like the United Kingdom and South Korea.[37] Therefore, there is **a need to develop Kazakhstan's migration management capacity, both as receiving and sending country**. This would include **developing a modern and transparent labour migration permit system** to allow migrant workers to be legally employed in the country while respecting their rights. Similarly, Kazakh authorities could work closely with third countries to expand seasonal labour migration schemes, similar to those in place in neighbouring Kyrgyzstan.

Increasing support for migrant workers should go hand in hand with ensuring that their rights are respected abroad. The **setting up of Migrant Resource Centres (MRCs)in Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and soon also in Uzbekistan by ICMPD** in tandem with local authorities is an

important milestone for ensuring migrant workers from Central Asia are adequately prepared for their work and life overseas and protected while on-site. MRCs can also provide counselling for distressed migrants, refer returnees to support networks and service providers, and enhance their soft sills for re-migration or local employment.

Central Asian countries should also draw lessons from the sudden arrival of Russian draft-dodgers in 2022, which caused a temporary housing crisis and strained local infrastructure in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Although these countries managed to absorb the influx, as many Russian migrants either returned home or continued onward travel to other destinations, this experience should not be grounds for complacency. The risk of a serious political, social, and economic crisis in Russia because of the ongoing war remains a very real possibility – and one that could undermine the stability of Central Asia as a region. Another round of mobilisation could provoke another exodus into the region. It is therefore crucial for international organisations and partners to work together with local authorities to develop plans to manage such a scenario. **Central Asia should no longer be perceived purely as a net exporter of labour migrants, but as a complex and rapidly developing region with diverse set of migration policy needs that vary from country to country**.

Migration management and the development of new labour migration pathways are two key areas of future cooperation between Central Asia, Europe, and East Asia. However, the current unstable geopolitical climate calls for Central Asian countries to gradually diversify the structures of their economies. While remittances are an important engine of economic development, they are also a potential liability for long-term economic stability, meaning that Central Asian governments should expand other sectors of the economy. Situated at the crossroads between Europe and Asia, the region has enormous potential in trade, manufacturing, logistics and tourism. Investments in sustainable energy and transportation infrastructure are key to enhancing economic development in the region. This shift cannot occur overnight, but the international community should be prepared to assist in this process.

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