

**KAZAKHSTAN'S LABOUR MIGRATION POLICY AND LEGAL
FRAMEWORK: A MULTI-DIMENSIONAL ANALYSIS OF REGIONAL
DYNAMICS AND STRATEGIC REFORMS**

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ABSTRACT

Labour migration in Kazakhstan has gradually evolved from an unstructured mechanism of economic adaptation into a more formalised component of national policy. This article examines the institutional and legal framework of migration governance through an analysis of Kazakhstan's migration policy concepts and regulatory mechanisms. Particular attention is given to the foreign labour quota system, preferential migration arrangements for nationals of the Eurasian Economic Union, and the emergence of relocation migration following recent geopolitical developments. The study also analyses regulatory distinctions between corporate and individual labour migration and considers the broader regional dynamics of labour mobility in Central Asia. In addition, the article explores the role of bilateral labour agreements and international organizations in shaping migration governance and protecting the socio-economic rights of migrant workers. Despite ongoing reforms, informal labour practices continue to limit the effectiveness of state regulation. The findings suggest that Kazakhstan's migration policy aims to balance labour market protection with the need to attract qualified foreign labour.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, Relocants, Migration policy, Ethnopolitical stability, Eurasian integration.

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INTRODUCTION

People tend to move to countries where wages are higher than in their countries of origin, as well as to those with more favourable conditions for professional opportunities and employment (Lee, 1966). Labour migration, also known as economic migration, constitutes the predominant voluntary form of mobility in the contemporary international labour market (Trachtman, 2009). Unlike other migration modalities, this form of mobility is driven by uncoerced economic imperatives, with individuals pursuing enhanced living standards through employment in more secure or remunerative economic environments (Zhaksybayeva & Nurzhanova, 2018). The shortage of qualified workers in certain sectors of the economy contributes to the attraction of foreign labour, which is typical of both developed countries and countries with economies in transition (Aleshkovski, 2017). Along with economic reasons, social factors such as a higher standard of living, access to quality healthcare and education, a stable social environment, and security play an important role (Castles et al., 2020). These conditions create a stable motivation for labour migration (Mate et al., 2018).

In the Central Asian context, this phenomenon is increasingly defined by shifting regional demographics and the necessity to harmonize national labour markets with the broader integration objectives of the Eurasian Economic Union (Bokayev & Akhmetova, 2024). In the Central Asian region, Kazakhstan emerges as a cornerstone of stability and functions as the principal destination for intraregional labour inflows that sustain its demographic vitality and economic advancement (Tatibekov & Hanks, 2018). However, the sustained influx of human capital also necessitates a rigorous calibration of state-level oversight to mitigate potential social friction and ensure the effective integration of these foreign populations into the national labour market (Amrin et al., 2020).

Specifically, the state authorities currently implement a robust set of administrative and legal measures designed to identify, suppress, and eliminate pervasive violations of migration legislation (Kappassova, 2018). These efforts are further bolstered by advances in digital monitoring systems, which aim to enhance the transparency of employment contracts and ensure the equitable treatment of migrant personnel across diverse industrial sectors (Shapievich et al., 2023). Despite these administrative efforts, significant discrepancies remain between official statistical assessments and the actual volume of labour movement, largely due to the persistence of informal cross-border activities. Consequently, these spontaneous flows often operate outside the purview of formal regulatory frameworks, complicating the implementation of comprehensive socio-economic protections for a significant portion of the transient workforce (Djorobekova et al., 2020).

The issues of labour migration are becoming particularly relevant for the Republic of Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan is a multi-ethnic state and simultaneously both a recipient and a donor country of migrant workers. In terms of its participation in regional integration associations, primarily in the Eurasian Economic Union, labour migration has an impact not only on the labour market and economic development, but also on the sphere of interethnic relations. Hence, the ethnopolitical aspect must be considered when developing immigration policy and the legislative framework that aims to maintain public harmony and prevent social unrest.

The control of labour migration, the adaptability of migrants, and the protection of their labour and social rights in the context of globalization and increased international mobility of the population are particularly important because labour migration continues to be one of the major factors impacting the social and economic aspects of countries (Vaculovschi, 2021). Most migration studies consider Kazakhstan either as a country with free mobility within the EAEU or as an economy importing labour (Djorobekova et al., 2020). However, few studies pay attention to how ethno-political dynamics, broadly defined as relations between ethnic groups mediated by state institutions, symbolic hierarchies, and boundaries of identity, interact with the legal regulation of the movement of labour (Tolesh, 2023). The process of nation-building in Kazakhstan involves achieving a balance between civic inclusivity and the Kazakh ethno-cultural renaissance, where migration provides both opportunities for integration and requires the recognition of differences (Kappassova, 2018; Sordi, 2016: 72–90).

In this context, this study aims to examine the evolution of Kazakhstan's labour migration policy, its convergence with international norms, and its role in upholding domestic stability. To this end, it addresses the following research questions: (1) how has the progression from the 2017–2021 Concept to the 2023–2027 Concept advanced Kazakhstan toward a selective human capital paradigm? (2) what multifaceted determinants beyond wage disparities underpin migration flows from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan? (3) what regulatory distinctions characterize the quota system for enterprises versus the special regime for EAEU nationals, including post-2022 relocants? and (4) what legislative gaps persist, and how do international organizations shape the reform trajectory?

LITERATURE REVIEW

The core of Kazakhstan's migration strategy is to strike a balance between migrants' need to adapt to a new society and the economic benefits of an influx of labour. This approach aligns with the general theoretical framework for migration analysis developed by Castles et al. (2020), where international migration is interpreted as an integral element of global socio-economic processes, and migration policy as a tool for managing population mobility, rather than its complete limitation. Kazakhstan's migration policy has experienced a substantive evolution across its key strategic frameworks (Bokayev & Akhmetova, 2024; International Organization for Migration, 2023). The Concept of Migration Policy 2017–2021 emphasized the “regulation” of migratory flows alongside the formalization of the legal status of ethnic returnees and temporary labourers (Bokayev et al., 2020). It prioritized foundational control mechanisms but remained predominantly reactive in addressing social protections. The Concept of Migration Policy 2023–2027 embraces a “selective model” (Shapievich et al., 2023), targeting the recruitment of highly qualified professionals via dedicated visas while imposing stringent annual quotas on low-skilled workers to safeguard the domestic labour market (Mussina et al., 2022). Furthermore, this strategy explicitly integrates legislative enhancements designed to refine legal frameworks and ensure the robust protection of migrants' fundamental rights, thereby fostering a more secure and predictable environment for both the domestic workforce and incoming professionals (Delovarova, 2024).

The research on ethnopolitics focuses on how states use institutional, administrative, and symbolic mechanisms to mediate interethnic relations (Duara, 2016). In multilingual and multiethnic contexts, language regimes shape access to labour and education, while diaspora networks facilitate informal integration. Kazakhstan's ethnopolitics produce both inclusivity and distinction along linguistic and cultural axes by fusing civic nation-building with ethnic rebirth. Migration adds new actors to this balance, which could alter identity politics and symbolic boundaries. Moreover, the surge in migrant labour demands a meticulous evaluation of the state's regulatory mechanisms to alleviate potential socio-economic frictions and to advance the vocational integration of foreign experts. Additional perspectives are gleaned from prior scholarly inquiries into integration dynamics, impediments to the legal enforcement of labour rights, and governmental responsibilities in assisting labour migrants. These academic endeavours highlight the imperative to align administrative quota regimes with the tangible exigencies of upholding the social and juridical entitlements of the migrant labour force. Furthermore, Kazakhstan's strategic objective to formalize bilateral labour agreements, such as the 2024 accord with Qatar and proposed frameworks with the Republic of Korea, underscores a proactive shift toward internationalizing its labour protection standards. These initiatives are complemented by evaluations of regional migration governance, underscoring the importance of tracking ethnic identity and cultural integration as essential factors for sustaining enduring civic unity.

Analytical robustness is ensured through system-structural analysis, enabling a holistic evaluation of migration as a complex socio-political process (Shapievich et al., 2023). Moreover, by integrating these varied perspectives, the study bridges macroeconomic migration policy with the intricate socio-political dynamics of Central Asia's migration context (Kappassova et al., 2024). Consequently, this investigation delineates the nexus between sovereign regulatory frameworks and the broader regional imperatives that characterize current labour mobility patterns. Research on the topic identifies three main models of migration regulation: liberal, restricted, and selective. Castles and Miller (2009) describe this typology, which is widely used in comparative analyses of migration regimes across states. Kazakhstan uses aspects of the selective model, which combines quotas for certain categories of workers (such as skilled workers) with an open labour market (Castles & Miller, 2009). Recent research articles highlight both the advantages and disadvantages of labour migration (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2022). On the one hand, migrants provide economic flexibility by filling labour shortages in seasonal and low-wage sectors (Amuedo-Dorantes et al., 2023). However, competition in the labour market can exacerbate social tensions and discriminatory practices, especially during economic downturns.

The digitalisation of migration processes, the increase in illicit labour, post-pandemic shifts in migration patterns, and the influence of global crises on Kazakhstan's migration situation are some of the new issues that have been brought to light by recent studies (Bokayev et al., 2020). International Organization for Migration research (2023) argues that Kazakhstan's relative economic stability, simplified visa requirements, and need for low-skilled labour have made it a migration hotspot in Central Asia. State pragmatism and migrant-related concerns, particularly with regard to labour and social protection, are combined in Kazakh-

stan's institutional features of migration management (Mussina et al., 2022). At the national level, migration policy and labour migration are examined in the works of Kazakhstani researchers, including Batyrbayev and Kozhirova (2025), Delovarova (2024), Askhat and Aitimbet (2025), and Shapievich et al. (2023). Their research examines the institutional, legal, and socioeconomic facets of Kazakhstan's migration regulations, as well as the challenges in upholding state migration policy and safeguarding migrant workers' rights. The integration of migrant workers into the host society remains a concern. According to Human Rights Watch (2023), migrants have low levels of legal literacy, limited access to health care and education, and experience exploitation.

METHODOLOGY

The methodological framework for this study is based on a multidisciplinary approach that combines theoretical foundations, empirical data, and comparative analysis to provide a comprehensive understanding of Kazakhstan's labour migration policies and legal framework. The research combines both quantitative and qualitative methods, ensuring a better understanding of the socioeconomic and political factors influencing migration processes and documenting their main statistical patterns. On a theoretical level, the study relies on established migration theories that help explain the reasons people migrate from their home countries and why they decide to settle in Kazakhstan. One of the fundamental frameworks is the "push-pull" paradigm, the development of which is associated with the work of Lee (1966) and the earlier laws of migration by Ravenstein (1885). This concept helps to understand the factors that lead to labour migration (economic difficulties, unemployment, and political instability in the country of origin), as well as the attractive aspects of Kazakhstan (higher wages, relative stability, and simplified procedures).

The economic approach uses elements of the neoclassical theory of migration, presented in the Hypothesis of Harris and Todaro (1970), according to which migration decisions are based on income expectations and wage differences between countries and regions. Additionally, the theory of the segmented labour market (Piore, 1979) is applied to explain the steady demand for foreign labour in certain sectors of the economy characterized by low wages and limited attractiveness to the local population. The theory of world systems (Wallerstein, 1974) and the theory of migration networks explain how migration flows depend on the connections between the countries of Central Asia and how diasporas assist their compatriots in finding work and gaining a foothold in a new country. Thus, the use of these theories provides a solid and understandable conceptual basis for research. Modern interpretations of migration processes, presented in the works of Castles et al. (2020), enable an understanding of migration as a sustainable and structural element of global development, as well as an analysis of the role of public policy and legal mechanisms in migration management. The combination of these theories creates a comprehensive conceptual framework for the research, enabling an examination of labour migration in Kazakhstan from several angles. The study employs both statistical and documentary analysis at the empirical level. The primary data consists of official data from the Bureau of National Statistics, the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population, and the National Bank of Kazakhstan. These data allow for an assessment of the scale of labour migration, the distribution of migrants by industry, and changes in remittances over the years 2020–2024. Reports from international or-

ganizations (International Organization for Migration, ILO, United Nations and United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees) are used for data verification and cross-national comparison. Statistical series are analysed using descriptive and comparative methods, and graphical visualization is used to identify trends and correlations.

Regarding the legal and institutional component, the study is based on an analysis of laws and government documents regulating migration in Kazakhstan. The main sources are the Law on Population Migration, the Migration Policy Concept 2023–2027, as well as government resolutions and international agreements signed by the country (for example, the Global Compact for Safe and Regular Migration) (Shapievich et al., 2023). This approach makes it possible to assess how effective existing laws and regulations are, what their strengths and weaknesses are, and whether they comply with international standards. In addition, the study employs an institutional analysis to review the work of key government agencies: the Ministry of Labor, the Ministry of Internal Affairs, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Justice, and the Ministry of Science and Higher Education. This helps to understand how their functions are distributed, where there are intersections, and what problems arise in coordination between them.

The qualitative component of the study involves a thematic analysis of policy documents, NGO reports, and media discourse. The analysis of publications from organizations such as Human Rights Watch and the OECD, and local NGOs, helps to identify recurring themes such as migrant integration, access to services, and labour rights. The study also uses elements of discourse analysis to understand the narratives and public perceptions of migration, revealing how official rhetoric and societal attitudes influence the environment in which policies are developed and implemented. The study compares Kazakhstan's approach with those of neighbouring countries (Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan) and individual OECD countries. This allows for an evaluation of the effectiveness of Kazakhstan's migration policy and helps identify best practices in areas such as labour market regulation, migrant integration, and institutional development. To ensure validity and reliability, the study uses triangulation, which involves verifying information from different sources and using various methods. Official data are compared to international statistics, and the results of analysing laws and policies are compared to expert opinions and practical examples. This helps reduce the risk of errors and bias in the findings. However, the study acknowledges limitations: underreporting of irregular migration, reliance on secondary data, and the narrow temporal (2020–2024) and geographic (Kazakhstan) scope, which may restrict long-term generalizations.

In summary, the methodological approach integrates theoretical models of migration, empirical statistical analysis, legal and institutional assessment, and discourse-based interpretation, supported by comparative perspectives and triangulation. This multi-dimensional design ensures a thorough, rigorous, and comprehensive examination of Kazakhstan's labour migration policies and legal framework, connecting national practices with regional and global debates on migration governance.

RESULTS

Table 1
Key ministries of Kazakhstan involved in migration policy

Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population	Development and implementation of migration policy, including the Concept, and strategic documents. Application of labour migration quotas. Implementation of internal labour mobility programs. Social adjustment of migrants.
Ministry of Internal Affairs	Control over the entry, stay, and departure of foreign nationals; registration of migrants and the issuance of residency permits; implementation of expulsion procedures; and migration supervision.
Ministry of Foreign Affairs	International cooperation on migration, involvement in regional and international fora; defence of the rights of Kazakhstanis overseas; execution of the Global Compact on Migration.
Ministry of Justice	Provision of legal expertise and law creation regarding migration. Ensuring the legal status of foreign nationals. Regulation of issues of citizenship and refugee matters.
Ministry of National Economy	Assessment and forecast of the economic impact of migration. Development of economic measures to manage migration. Support for regional development and labour mobility programs.
Ministry of Science and Higher Education	Expansion of educational migration, attracting foreign teachers and students, recognizing degrees earned abroad, and academic mobility.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan (n.d.), United Nations (2018), Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan (n.d.), Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan (n.d.), Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2022, 2023, 2026), and Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan (n.d.).

The migration policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan is implemented within a multi-level institutional system of public administration, with powers distributed among relevant ministries and departments, as enshrined in the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan “On Population Migration” (Adilet, 2011). The Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan plays a key role in regulating labour migration. It is responsible for developing and implementing strategic documents in the field of migration and employment, including government programs and concepts, and for setting annual quotas for attracting foreign labour and implementing internal labour mobility programs (Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2017; Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2026).

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan is responsible for administrative control over migration processes. This includes registering foreign nationals, controlling their entry, stay, and departure, issuing temporary and permanent residency permits, and applying administrative measures if migration laws are violated (Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d.). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan provides the foreign policy and international components of migration policy. It oversees global collaboration on migration, participates in national and international migration events, defends the rights of Kazakh citizens overseas, and ensures the country fulfils its commitments abroad, such as the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Legal Migration (United Nations, 2018). The Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan provides legal and administrative support for migration policy. It handles citizenship, asylum, and refugee status matters, establishes the legal status of foreign nationals and stateless individuals, and offers legal expertise on migration legislation (Ministry of Justice of the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d.).

The Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan is responsible for economic evaluation and strategic assessment of migration processes. It considers migration elements when creating socio-economic strategies and analyzes migration's impact on macroeconomic indicators, the labour market, and regional development (Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d.). Educational migration is regulated with the participation of the Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, which is responsible for developing academic mobility, attracting foreign students and teachers, and recognizing foreign educational qualifications (Ministry of Science and Higher Education of the Republic of Kazakhstan, n.d.). By combining economic regulation, administrative control, legal support, and international co-operation, these organizations' combined efforts create an extensive regulatory structure for managing migration that enables the integration of migration policy into the nation's overall plan for socioeconomic growth. An analysis of the current policy and legal framework shows that the regulation of labour migration in Kazakhstan is built as a multi-level system, the core of which consists of several interrelated elements. The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan "On Population Migration," which describes the main categories of migration, delegates duties to governmental organizations, and creates guidelines for state regulation, making it the initial component of the system (Toleuov, 2020).

This legal foundation is reinforced by a number of bylaws that annually outline the requirements for attracting foreign workers, administrative processes for granting and renewing employer permits, and systems for guaranteeing adherence to immigration laws and stay regulations by internal affairs organizations and approved migration services. Second, the annual quotas are crucial for regulating the inflow of foreign workers and protecting the domestic labour market. These quotas serve as the key policy instrument to protect the domestic labour market, manage the scale and structure of foreign employment, and formalize labour relations involving foreign workers.

The Republic of Kazakhstan sets an annual quota for attracting foreign labour, which is determined by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population (International Organization for Migration, 2023). These quotas can be adjusted and may vary by worker categories such as managers, specialists, and

skilled workers, including seasonal employment (Kwan, 2025). In 2025, the quota was set at approximately 0.2% to 0.3%, and approximately 0.25% was announced for 2026 (Ministry of Labor and Social Protection, 2026). According to Articles 96–98 of the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union, citizens of member states, including the Russian Federation, are entitled to work in Kazakhstan without obtaining a work permit, subject to compliance with national registration and employment procedures (Rakhimov & Azizova, 2022). Furthermore, this framework is complemented by specialized legislation, such as the Law “On Employment,” which establishes the legal status of foreign nationals and defines the procedural requirements for employers seeking to recruit international personnel. This legislative architecture is further bolstered by the 2023–2027 Concept of Migration Policy, which integrates bilateral labour agreements to enhance the protection of migrant rights while formalizing international recruitment pathways (International Organization for Migration, 2023).

Table 2
Regulatory mechanisms and the 5-Year quota overview

Year	Quota (% of workforce)	Status and Commentary
2021	0.3%	Regulated under the <i>Concept 2017–2021</i> ; focused on basic labour market balance.
2022	0.31%	Post-pandemic recovery; focus on agriculture and construction.
2023	0.32%	Slight increase reflecting gradual economic recovery and demand for specialized labour in infrastructure and industrial sectors (Shapievich et al., 2023).
2024	0.23%	Stability in numbers; emphasis on technical specialists (Shapievich et al., 2023).
2025	0.25% (approx.)	Planned reduction to 0.2% to incentivize local content and domestic professional development (Shapievich et al., 2023).

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from Bokayev and Akhmetova, 2024; Shapievich et al., 2023

The Eurasian Economic Union’s special regime and relocants

Pursuant to Articles 96–98 of the EAEU Treaty, nationals of Russia, Kyrgyzstan, and Armenia are entitled to employment in Kazakhstan without work permits or subjection to quotas (Rakhimov & Azizova, 2022). This framework accommodated a substantial influx of Russian relocants post–2022. Although the descriptor relocant characterizes individuals evading mobilization and economic sanctions, official rhetoric is progressively adopting foreign specialists to circumvent political sensitivities (International Organization for Migration, 2023). These relocants augment the service and information technology sectors, notwithstanding their exemption from the prevailing 0.2–0.3% quota regime (Bokayev et al., 2020). Within the Eurasian Economic Union, labour migration is governed by provisions fostering the unrestricted mobility of workers across member states, thereby obviating work permit requirements and conferring access to diverse social and labour entitlements (Rakhimov & Azizova, 2022).

This has engendered a parallel conduit for labour mobility that largely bypasses the conventional quota system. Such a dichotomous regulatory paradigm is particularly salient in the recruitment of migrants from Central Asian states benefiting from visa-free arrangements with Kazakhstan (Virkkunen, 2017).

Between 2020 and 2024, labour migration to the Republic of Kazakhstan exhibited pronounced quantitative and structural transformations. The Bureau of National Statistics documented a precipitous contraction in migration mobility in 2020, consequent to COVID-19 travel impediments. Thereafter, foreign labour inflows expanded from 2021 to 2023, with core migration metrics stabilizing by 2024, denoting a resurgence in cross-border labour exchanges. Despite these developments, state management of labour migration has struggled to mitigate persistent challenges, such as the legal vulnerability of migrants and the widespread underreporting of income taxes (Khamzin et al., 2023). Furthermore, high levels of informal employment continue to undermine the effectiveness of regulatory frameworks, complicating efforts to transition vulnerable workers into the formalized labour sector. These informal arrangements often rely on personal networks and kinship ties, which frequently leave labourers susceptible to exploitation and diminished legal protections (Molodikova & Chupik, 2023). Consequently, the government has increasingly prioritized the digitalization of labour contracts and the implementation of automated monitoring systems to enhance fiscal transparency and ensure institutional oversight of these transient workforces (Amrin et al., 2020).

Table 3
Reasons for labour migration from other countries to Kazakhstan (2015–2025)

Driver	Donor Countries	Trends
Economic & sectoral demand	Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	Consistent growth from 2015 to 2019; a steep drop during COVID-19 in 2020; a quick rebound in 2021–2022; and steady, high demand from 2023–2025.
Demographic	Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan	The number of young labour migrants increased gradually between 2015 and 2019. There was a mobility disruption in 2020. The percentage of migrants under 35 increased between 2021 and 2025, supporting long-term cyclical migration patterns.
Political instability	Russia	There was a low but steady inflow from 2015 until 2020. The number of Russian immigrants increased in 2022. Emergency inflows decreased and stabilized at moderate levels between 2023 and 2025.
Social and educational motives	Russia, Uzbekistan	There was a gradual expansion before 2020; post-pandemic recovery with increased migration of professionals and students (2021–2025).

Legal and status incentives	Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, EAEU states	Legal channel expansion (2015–2019); slowing in 2020; and a resurgence of permit and EAEU-based employment growth (2021–2025)
Regional integration (EAEU)	Russia, Kyrgyzstan	Its significance has been growing since 2015. From 2021, the EAEU advantage over non-EAEU relocants solidified.

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2025)

Throughout the analysed period, Kazakhstan maintained its status as one of the key recipient countries for labour migration in Central Asia (International Organization for Migration, 2025). According to the International Organization for Migration, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan remained the main countries of origin for migrant workers (International Organization for Migration, 2025; International Organization for Migration, 2022). This structure of migration flows remained stable despite short-term external factors. One of the constant factors accompanying the influx of labour migrants to Kazakhstan was the wage differential with neighbouring countries (Alshanov, 2011). The monthly salary in Kazakhstan was 213.003 tenge in 2020, representing a significant increase over five years (Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2024; Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2022). Aggregated data from the CIS Interstate Statistical Committee surveys presented in Table 4 were used for cross-country comparison.

Table 4
Average nominal monthly salary in Central Asian countries, 2020–2024 (USD)

Years	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Kyrgyzstan	Tajikistan
2020	≈ \$500	≈ \$226–268	≈ \$220	≈ \$140–166
2021	≈ \$590	≈ \$310	≈ \$225	≈ \$166
2022	≈ \$730	≈ \$345	≈ \$310	≈ \$166
2023	≈ \$860	≈ \$500	≈ \$370	*
2024	≈ \$817	≈ \$424	≈ \$411	≈ \$243

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan (2024); Interstate Statistical Committee of the CIS (2024).

*Data not publicly available for 2023

These data demonstrate that the average salary in Kazakhstan exceeded the corresponding indicators in Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan by approximately 1.5–2 times, and in Tajikistan by more than 3 times. This wage gap persisted throughout the analysed period and represented a stable characteristic of the regional labour market. Migrants' employment is largely governed by administrative processes like registration at the place of residence and temporary residence

permits, as official routes for low-skill migrants employed by enterprises are limited (Joo, 2022). In recent years, forced migration has also become a notable component of Kazakhstan's migration landscape. This includes the arrival of Russian citizens following mobilization measures in 2022 (International Organization for Migration, 2023).

According to the International Organization for Migration (2023), a large inflow of Russian citizens was recorded in 2022 (over 200.000 entries reported in some estimates). A substantial share of these relocants stayed for extended periods, contributing to increased demand for housing and employment. Since then, adaptation and support services for forced migrants have expanded, including legal counselling, employment support, and language training (Kazakh and Russian). The management of migrant flows directly impacts interethnic relations through a number of interrelated routes, demonstrating the connection between labour migration and ethnopolitics: the structure of arrivals by country of origin and the degree of cultural and linguistic proximity; labour market segmentation and the risk of stigmatization of specific migrant groups; the spatial distribution of migrants across regions and their interaction with local communities. National migration statistics further indicate that Kazakhstan's migration flows are predominantly oriented toward CIS countries; one official release by the Bureau of National Statistics reported that arrivals from CIS countries accounted for 81.8% of total arrivals (Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025).

Within this configuration, the ethnopolitical dimension of state policy is expressed not through ethnic selection mechanisms but through the creation of an institutional framework to maintain social harmony and facilitate integration amid increasing population mobility. The normative reference point in this area is state policy on interethnic relations, consolidated in strategic documents, including the Concept for the Development of the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan until 2030 (President of the Republic of Kazakhstan, 2025). In practical terms, this means that the effectiveness of labour migration policy is assessed not only by economic indicators such as filling labour shortages, formalizing employment, and collecting fees and payments, but also by social outcomes, such as ensuring social protections for migrant workers and protecting their labour rights (International Organization for Migration, 2023). These outcomes include lowering the likelihood of conflict, stopping discriminatory labour market practices, boosting clarity about lawful work statuses and migration routes, and enhancing institutional capacity (akimats, labour inspectorates, and migration services) to prevent the formation of "shadow" employment enclaves (Kappasova, 2018). At the same time, the interpretation of statistical data on labour migration is subject to certain limitations. Underreporting in official statistics results from a sizable portion of migrant work remaining informal or semi-formal, especially in home services, agriculture, and small companies (Insebayeva & Beysembayev, 2023). In addition, administrative data do not always fully capture short-term and circular migration flows, which warrants consideration when assessing the scale and structure of labour migration in Kazakhstan.

Multi-factor drivers and regional impact

Although wage disparity constitutes a primary "pull" factor, several other determinants wield comparable influence:

- Demographic pressures: Youth bulges in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan generate surplus labour supplies that exceed domestic market absorption capacities.
- Cultural and network factors: Proficiency in Russian and entrenched diaspora networks diminish migration costs (International Organization for Migration, 2023).
- Informal household employment versus corporate quotas: Central Asian migrants predominantly engage in the informal household sector through simplified labour patents, bypassing the corporate quota system.
- Policy-driven regional incentives: The implementation of targeted housing initiatives and infrastructure investments encourages migration to underdeveloped regions, further diversifying the distribution of human capital.

Table 5
Regional SWOT analysis

Entity	Advantages	Risks & Disadvantages
Donor	High remittances (up to 30% of GDP); reduced domestic unemployment (International Organization for Migration, 2023, 2024).	Brain drain; social fragmentation of families; economic dependency on Kazakhstan/Russia.
Recipient	Filling shortages in seasonal sectors; economic flexibility; regional soft power (Shapievich et al., 2023).	Potential for latent ethnic tension; downward pressure on low-skilled wages; growth of the shadow economy (Kappassova, 2018).

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from International Organization for Migration (2023, 2024), Shapievich et al. (2023), and Kappassova (2018).

Legislative deficiencies and international oversight

A fundamental tension pervades the Law on Population Migration, wherein humanitarian rhetoric frequently conflicts with securitized enforcement measures (Mussina et al., 2022).

- Internal Contradictions: The registration trap binds a migrant’s legal status to a single employer, fostering risks of document withholding and labour exploitation (Human Rights Watch, 2023).
- International Organization for Migration Role: The International Organization for Migration endorses the Global Compact for Migration, prioritizing ethical recruitment and safeguards for vulnerable populations, such as children of temporary migrants (United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, 2023).
- ILO Role: The International Labour Organization urges alignment of Kazakh labour legislation with international norms, particularly regarding healthcare access and unionization rights for temporary workers (Human Rights Watch, 2023). Nonetheless, inadequate systemic coordination among state agencies impedes the full realization of these global recommendations, thereby constraining practical mechanisms for migrant status regularization (Ilyassova et al., 2025). This fragmentation is exacerbated by a notable absence of empirical research that connects the complexities of current migration patterns to the underlying

socio-economic vulnerabilities, increasing susceptibility to human trafficking (Khamzin et al., 2023). Moreover, the lack of rigorous oversight regarding employer liability facilitates an environment where unskilled labourers remain particularly prone to exploitation, especially within the agricultural and domestic work sectors (Khamzin et al., 2023; Ilyassova et al., 2025).

Overall, the results show the following configuration. In addition to strengthening oversight of adherence to immigration and employment laws, Kazakhstan uses quotas and administrative procedures as mechanisms for economic selection and labour market protection, using qualification categories, seasonality, and separate hiring rules. At the same time, the ethnopolitical dimension requires the management of the social consequences of migration through an institutional framework focused on social harmony and interethnic integration, as enshrined in the country's strategic public policy documents (Kappassova, 2018).

DISCUSSION

The results indicate that migration management in the Republic of Kazakhstan is characterized by a multi-level, multi-sectoral institutional architecture that combines economic regulation, administrative control, legal support, and international coordination. This model reflects the complexity of modern migration processes and aligns with international approaches that treat labour migration not only as an element of the labour market but also as a socio-economic and political phenomenon. The distribution of functions among the relevant ministries enables the state to respond simultaneously to the needs of the economy, ensure compliance with migration legislation, and fulfill international obligations, which is especially important for Kazakhstan as one of the key migration centers in Central Asia (International Organization for Migration, 2023).

However, the findings also demonstrate how much Kazakhstan's immigration strategy depends on administrative and quantitative regulatory instruments, chiefly a quota system to attract foreign workers. Despite its important role in protecting the domestic labour market and formalizing employment, the actual coverage of the quota mechanism remains limited (Dzhooshebekova et al., 2021). A significant share of labour mobility occurs outside the licensing system, particularly through channels related to visa-free regimes and the functioning of the Eurasian Economic Union (Amrin et al., 2020). The formation of a two-circuit regulatory model, in which quota-based labour migration coexists with freer forms of mobility, complicates the integrated management of migration flows and reduces the completeness of statistical accounting.

Economic factors continue to be consistent drivers of labour migration to Kazakhstan (Bokayev et al., 2020). The persistent wage gap between Kazakhstan and neighboring Central Asian countries sustains migration demand and strengthens the country's position as a regional center of attraction for the workforce (Alshanov, 2011). The concentration of foreign workers in labour-intensive, low-skilled sectors indicates that labour migration generally complements rather than displaces the local labour force, filling structural deficits in construction, agriculture, trade, and services (Khamzin et al., 2023). However, the low number of immigrants in highly skilled industries indicates that migration policy is more concerned with meeting immediate labour market demands than with attracting human capital in the long term. From an ethnopolitical perspective, the results indicate that government policy on migration is not based on ethnic

selection mechanisms but is implemented through institutional and administrative tools aimed at maintaining social stability.

The predominance of migration flows from the CIS countries, characterized by cultural and linguistic proximity, reduces potential integration barriers, but does not eliminate the risks associated with segmentation of the labour market, informal employment, and spatial concentration of migrants (Joo, 2022). In the absence of effective integration mechanisms, these factors can have an indirect impact on interethnic relations, primarily at the local level. Special attention should be paid to the growing importance of forced migration in recent years, which has demonstrated the need for adaptability of migration institutions. Kazakhstan's migration system serves not only economic but also humanitarian and sociopolitical purposes, as evidenced by the influx of citizens from the Russian Federation (Shapievich et al., 2023). The limitations identified in the analysis of the results, primarily the underestimation of informal and circular migration in official statistics, are fundamental to assessing the effectiveness of migration policy. These limitations indicate that the actual scale and structure of labour migration may differ significantly from the administratively determined indicators, which requires improved interdepartmental cooperation, data integration, and coordination of migration, labour, and social policies.

Overall, the discussion of the results allows us to conclude that the Republic of Kazakhstan's migration policy combines elements of economic selectivity and administrative control with gradual consideration of the social and ethno-political consequences of migration. The effectiveness of this model stems not only from the use of formal regulatory tools such as quotas and licensing procedures, but also from the State's ability to manage the social consequences of migration through institutional coordination, increased transparency, and the development of integration mechanisms. In this context, migration policy is an integral part of the strategy of socio-economic development and the maintenance of social stability in Kazakhstan (Kappassova, 2018; Muhametzhanova, 2025).

Recommendations include the centralization of governance by integrating the migration strategy under the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population to reconcile tensions between law enforcement imperatives and socio-economic objectives; the formalization of household employment through broadening the patent system to incorporate workers from the informal (shadow) economy, thereby facilitating their contributions to social insurance mechanisms and granting them legal protections in line with International Labour Organization standards; the enhancement of EAEU oversight by establishing improved monitoring protocols for the special regime to prevent the displacement of domestic talent by inflows of relocants within designated urban sectors; and the development of social integration programs by leveraging the Assembly of the People of Kazakhstan to support the proactive incorporation of seasonal labourers and mitigate potential ethnic tensions associated with temporary migration flows.

CONCLUSION

This study examined the institutional and regulatory foundations of labour migration policy in the Republic of Kazakhstan and assessed its role within the broader ethno-political and socio-economic context. The analysis demonstrates that Kazakhstan has developed a relatively structured migration governance

framework that combines legal regulation, administrative coordination, and economic instruments aimed at managing external labour flows.

The findings indicate that migration policy in Kazakhstan increasingly operates as a selective regulatory system designed to balance labour market needs with broader considerations of social stability and demographic management. Rather than relying on ethnic selection mechanisms, the state prioritizes institutional regulation and administrative oversight as the primary tools for managing migration processes.

Overall, the Kazakhstani model of migration governance reflects an attempt to reconcile economic demand for foreign labour with the strategic objective of maintaining social cohesion in a context of growing regional mobility. These findings contribute to the broader understanding of how post-Soviet states institutionalize migration governance while simultaneously addressing ethno-political sensitivities and labour market pressures.

Ethical Commission Approval

This study did not require approval from an ethics committee as it did not involve human participants, animals, or sensitive personal data. All data used in this research were obtained from publicly available sources.

Conflict of Interest Statement

There is no conflict of interest with any institution or person within the scope of this study.

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