

THE ROLE OF UZBEK CITIZENS IN THE LABOR MARKET OF SOUTH KOREA

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Abstract

Uzbekistan has become an essential part of the South Korean labor market under the Employment Permit System (EPS). From early diplomatic ties and internships, worker mobility between South Korea and Uzbekistan has been increasing day by day since the 1990s. Uzbek workers impacted economically and socially in manufacturing, agriculture, and other important industries, as well as governmental agreements have influenced legal migration patterns. However, there were numerous difficulties they encountered, such as unstable employment, legal limitations, and the COVID-19 pandemic's effects. Notwithstanding these challenges, Uzbek immigrants have helped to sustain South Korea's output in trying times. Looking to the future, this article examines opportunities for creating a fairer and more sustainable migration system through improved professional preparation, support, and policy refinement. Beyond economic aspects, this labor migration serves to strengthen cultural connections and mutual trust between the two countries.

Keywords: Uzbek migrants, South Korea, labor migration, Employment Permit System (EPS), COVID-19, low-skilled workers, Korea-Uzbekistan relations, migrant labor, labor policy, cultural exchange.

Introduction

In today's life, thousands of people want to learn about the culture of South Korea, plan to travel, and of course study or work there as South Korea is one of the most developed countries in the world. Most people if not all expect good job opportunities and satisfactory salaries. Additionally, for this reason, more than a thousand of Uzbek citizens leave their homeland in order to search for or get better jobs for themselves. It also has to be mentioned that Uzbek citizens have been attracted by many employment programs that are legal and in terms of the demand for foreign labor, it has to be said that Uzbek workers have shown a noticeable occurrence in many of Korea's farms, factories, and other constructive sites. Moreover, this labor migration not only benefits from the economic side but also plays a crucial role in shaping families and creates a strong bridge between two nations as a means of cultural exchange.



Therefore, this article will explore the Uzbeks' role in South Korea's labor market while focusing on where they work, what challenges they face, how they can contribute to the country economically and socially, and last but not least, what can be the future of this workforce between two countries.

Routs of Labor Migration

In recent years, many Uzbek citizens have lived, worked, or studied in South Korea. However, the question of when and why the actual migration started is interesting to all of us. As it is known to all on December 30, 1991, South Korea was one of the first countries to recognize Uzbekistan's independence. According to Rakhimov (2020), shortly after the independence of Uzbekistan which was in 1992, diplomatic ties were established and long-term political dialogues were conducted between the two republics. In addition, among leaders of two nations, Uzbekistan and South Korea have held sixteen meetings between 1992 and 2019. Moreover, the changing point of migration happened around the early 1990s when South Korea experienced high rates of economic growth and low unemployment and brought in low-skilled foreign workers to fill positions that the local populace didn't want to do (Kadirova, 2020). Furthermore, Korea first established the 'Industrial Trainee Scheme' for low-skilled migrants which means they were treated not as workers but as trainees. Then later, the name changed to 'Training-Working Scheme' which gave the opportunity to work for a certain time after finishing the training or becoming qualified trainees (Young-bum, 2016). The findings of Young-bum (2016) demonstrate that the Asian financial crisis of December 1997 revealed to Korea that some sectors of the economy were not viable. The unemployment rate rose from 2.1 percent in October 1997 to 8.6 percent in 1999, leaving nearly two million people jobless. Kadirova (2020), explains that under the Industrial Training Program, Uzbek citizens were also sent to the Korean Republic from 1995 to 2007. However, some shortcomings of the industrial training program created difficulties for migrant workers, as a result, the number of illegal migrants increased sharply. In particular, the requirement to work as an intern during the first year resulted in receiving lower wages than regular workers in the labor market. This situation forced the interns to illegally seek other employment. This led to the adoption of a new law on the employment of foreigners in Korea. In 2003, the "Employment Permit System" was introduced, as a social consensus had formed that there should be legal ways to employ low-skilled migrant workers with appropriate treatment. Moreover, as reported by Young-bum (2016), South Korea's Employment Permit Scheme (EPS) has two branches: the Ordinary EPS for non-Korean and low-skilled workers (E-9 visa) and the Special EPS for overseas Koreans (H-2 visa).

Sending countries under Korea's Employment Permit System (EPS). From Global Skill Partnership, n.d. Retrieved from <https://gsp.cgdev.org>

Although the system has been commended for improving working conditions and reducing illegal labor, critics continue to highlight issues such as restrictions on changing jobs.

In addition, the memorandum of understanding by the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Ministry of Employment and Labor of the Republic of Korea regulates the process of organized deployment of Uzbek citizens in



accordance with the requirements of the Korean employment system. It also defines the responsibilities of the competent authorities of both the sending and receiving parties.

According to Jumaev's (2023), findings, the memorandum aims to establish procedures for intergovernmental coordination of language and professional testing processes, candidate selection, contract conclusion, visa issuance, worker entry, and placement, as well as employment management processes.

On November 8, 2017, a memorandum was signed between the Korean Institute for Skills Development and the Agency for External Labor Migration of the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations of the Republic of Uzbekistan.

Furthermore, several factors contributed to the number of work quotas allocated for South Korea and the actual number of Uzbek citizens that were sent. Some candidates exceed the established age limit, as only those between 18 and 39 years old are eligible to participate in the program. Others are believed unfit for work after undergoing mandatory medical examinations. Additionally, some candidates are prohibited from leaving the country due to legal restrictions, while others voluntarily withdraw from the process due to family circumstances (Jumaev, 2023).

The impact of COVID-19 on Uzbek Labor migration

At the beginning of 2020, when the COVID-19 pandemic hit its peak, the whole world stopped, and along with it, the steady flow of labor migration between Uzbekistan and South Korea also stopped. Borders have been closed, flights suspended, and recruitment processes within the Employment Permit Scheme (EPS) have been temporarily frozen. Moreover, thousands of Uzbek workers who passed the necessary language and qualification exams could not leave and remained at home. At the same time, many workers who have already been in Korea have faced uncertainty in contracts, delayed wages, and reduced working hours due to interruptions in the production and agricultural sectors - in which Uzbeks are mainly employed. Most of the Uzbek migrants, if not all, alongside other foreign migrants, had faced with difficulty in working and earning money in order to survive. Notwithstanding the crisis and hardships, migrant labor kept on working, and workers from Uzbekistan, as well as other migrants from Vietnam, Nepal, Bangladesh, and the Philippines, continued to support and work in essential industries. Furthermore, under the EPS and under the pressure of the pandemic, many Uzbeks were waiting for South Korea. However, test dates were canceled and departures postponed and this disrupted not only the workers' income plan but also added financial pressure to the families who had already invested their money in the process such as paperwork, exam fees, and of course travelling. As mentioned above, the situation in South Korea was not any easier. Many workers lost their jobs due to the struggle in small businesses or just shut down completely. Most importantly, mental health issues occurred among workers as they always stayed in dormitories or were stuck on farms. However, because of migrant workers from Uzbekistan and other countries, food production, agriculture, and other essential factories kept working and this, literally contributed to not only the economy but also increased the trust between the ties of cultures in times of crisis.



Future outlook

As mentioned in the findings of Rahimberdiyev (2024), the UN study of 2024 indicated that the Republic of Korea may require 6.4 million migrant laborers between 1995 and 2050 to sustain industrial development. Moreover, labor migration between Uzbekistan and South Korea provides both countries with an opportunity to enhance the system for future workers. Uzbekistan can better prepare its citizens for working abroad, which is by strengthening training programs, especially in Korean language proficiency and occupational safety. In response, South Korea can increase workplace flexibility, improve living conditions, and confirm fair payments in order to provide better protection to labor migrants. Additionally, if Uzbekistan and South Korea focus on improving monitoring the occupation contracts and assisting employees to reorganize their lives after returning to their homeland Employment Permit System (EPS) could become a fair and successful labor migration in Asia.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Uzbekistan and its citizens have become a vital part of the labor market in South Korea, especially with the Employment Permit System (EPS) which is a legal and well-structured channel for working abroad. From the early days of training programs into today's refined EPS, it can be indicated that Uzbek migrants' journey changed a lot of aspects of international collaboration in labor. Although global events such as job insecurity, legal restrictions, and the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the Uzbek workers' lives which made it challenging, their contribution to Korean agriculture, industry, and service sectors remains substantial. In addition, the relations between the two nations can be seen as not only just economic ties but also can symbolize the trust, resilience, and mutual assistance. In the near future, this type of labor migration can become safer, fairer, and more sustainable with the policies and cooperation of both countries. While Uzbekistan continues to support its workers with skill enhancement and protective measures, South Korea seeks a reliable workforce to develop its economy. Their partnership can serve as an example of effective and humane labor migration throughout Asia.

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