

HISTORY OF COOPERATION BETWEEN UZBEKISTAN AND SOUTH KOREA (ON THE EXAMPLE OF LABOR MIGRATION)

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Abstract:

This article analyzes the political, economic and cultural relations between South Korea and Uzbekistan. In particular, it examines the migration processes between the two countries, the flow of labor migration, its causes and consequences, and the impact of these processes on bilateral relations. The article uses an analytical approach based on official cooperation agreements, the role of the Korean diaspora, and the conditions created for labor migrants. During the study, statistical data, intergovernmental agreements, and social processes are analyzed and recommendations are made to improve migration policy. This article serves to highlight new stages and prospects for cooperation between the two countries.

Keywords: Republic of Korea, migration, demographics, marriage migrants, migrant, gender, DESA.

International migration is becoming a necessity in the Republic of Korea, driven by demographic changes such as a rapidly aging population, low marriage and birth rates, and economic and human development¹.

In recent years, diplomatic, economic and cultural relations between South Korea and Uzbekistan have been developing steadily. Since the establishment of diplomatic relations in 1991, cooperation between the two countries has been strengthened in various fields and has risen to the level of strategic partnership. In particular, the flow of labor migration from Uzbekistan to South Korea and the activities of the Korean diaspora in Uzbekistan have become an important component of bilateral relations. Thousands of Uzbeks working in South Korea are of not only economic importance, but also have a direct impact on the development of socio-cultural relations. This article analyzes the historical development of relations between

¹ Lee, H. (2015). An Overview of International Migration to South Korea. In: Social Transformation and Migration (Castles S., D. Ozkul and M.A. Cubas, eds.). Migration, Diasporas and Citizenship Series. Palgrave Macmillan, London.



the two countries, the status and prospects of migration processes. It also describes existing problems and proposals for their solution.

Koreans were forced to migrate from the Russian Far East to Central Asia in the first half of the 20th century due to the economic and political situation in Korea. This situation began to give rise to mutual relations between the two countries. In particular, the Republic of Korea, the first among the countries of the Asia-Pacific region to recognize the independence of the Republic of Uzbekistan on December 30, 1991, led to the establishment of diplomatic relations between Uzbekistan and South Korea in January 1992, and extensive cooperation in all areas has been ongoing to this day. State visits of heads of government have played an important role in relations between the two countries. In particular, in 1992, after the official visit of the First President of the Republic of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov to Seoul, the foundation for mutual cooperation between the two countries was laid. From the very first visit, an agreement was signed "On the Fundamentals of Interstate Relations and Cooperation between Uzbekistan and South Korea"². Currently, more than 200,000 Koreans live in Uzbekistan. This diaspora ranks fourth in the world after China, Japan and the United States. The Korean diaspora and Uzbekistan's wealth of labor and resources, as well as Korea's experience in manufacturing technologies and rapid development in a short period of time, have served to improve relations between the two countries³.

In recent years, labor shortages in Korea, such as manufacturing and shipbuilding, have attracted migrants, but this has also led to an increase in the number of illegal immigrants. One of the reasons for the worsening demographic situation in Korea is the rapid increase in the country's labor shortage.

The Republic of Korea has undergone extensive demographic and social changes over the past six decades. The working-age population aged 15-64 decreased from 327.8 million to 327 million for the first time, and this decrease has been decreasing since then. In addition, the proportion of Koreans aged 65 and older has increased significantly from 3.3 percent in 1960 to 16.5 percent in 2021. In 1993, the Korean government introduced the "Industrial Internship System" to allow small companies to hire foreign workers from China and Southeast Asian countries. However, the government failed to provide alternatives to guarantee interns' labor rights and social protection, due to the high costs of recruitment⁴. To address the above shortcomings, two official guest worker programs were introduced through the Foreign Worker Employment Act (2004), which is a work permit system that allows the entry of foreign workers (unskilled workers under the E-9 visa category) from 15 countries. As of 2020, 33.8 percent of the total number of registered foreigners (387,000 foreigners) were residing in the Republic of Korea under these visas. According to DESA (2020), the number of international migrants in the Republic of Korea has increased by almost forty-fold in the past 30 years, from 43,000 in 1990 to 1,730,000 in 2020⁵.

While the number of male immigrants in the Republic of Korea has consistently been higher than the number of female immigrants (in 2020, approximately 56% of total immigrants were

² V.S.Xan. Koreya tarixi.Toshkent-2011.125-b.

³ Li Dji Yun. Koreya va O'zbekistonning iqtisodiy hamkorlik shartnomasi.Jamiyat va boshqaruv, 2009. №1. 23-b

⁴ Yi, S. (2013). Low-skilled labor migration: Korea's Employment Permit System.

⁵ United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. (2020). International Migrant Stock 2020. (United Nations database, POP/DB/MIG/Stock/Rev.2020).



men), the number of marriage migrants is very high, with over 80% of them being women (Stat2020; Korea). Demographers estimate that by 2050, the proportion of Koreans aged 65 and over will account for 35% of the total population, making it the second largest in the world, and the working-age population will decline by 9% from 2005 to 2030 and by 26% by 2050. Currently, there are 7.6 potential workers for every retiree: this ratio is projected to fall to 2.8 by 2030 and 1.6 by 2050⁶.

Although there was a massive influx of unskilled migrant workers into Korea, the government did not have a system for managing migrant labor until 1991. This also led to an increase in the number of illegal migrants during this period. However, in 1991, the Industrial Skills Training System was established to mitigate the negative effects of migration. Later, the system was renamed the Industrial Internship Program. Under this program, small and medium-sized enterprises with a capacity of 300 people were provided with migrant labor.

In 2003, the government introduced the Employment Permit System to replace the Industrial Internship Program in order to strengthen control over migrants and improve their legal protection. "As of February 2013, the number of visa types for entering and staying in Korea has reached 36. The official immigration information website divides all visa types into six categories according to the purpose of visit: tourism/transit, temporary visit, business, work, family visit and stay (including overseas Koreans), education, and others."

For migrant workers who want to work in unskilled jobs in Korea, E-9 and H-2 visas are established, but the H-2 visa is issued only to ethnic Koreans living in China and the CIS countries. However, although these types of visas are similar in purpose, they are fundamentally different in terms of requirements for issuance, features, quota places, etc. Migrants with E-9 visas mainly work in jobs classified as 3D (dirty, dangerous, difficult). Therefore, the government does not allow migrants who come under such visas to change jobs. They mainly work in the agricultural, processing and fishing sectors. Migrants who come to Korea through the employment permit system are allowed to change jobs or extend their stay in the country for another 1 year and 10 months only with the written consent of the employer. Migrants also have the right to change jobs if the employer mistreats the migrants and closes the company. This will improve the living conditions of migrants in Korea, providing them with a special profession.

In July 2013, the President of Uzbekistan Islam Karimov signed a decree "On measures to further expand cooperation with the Republic of Korea in the field of labor migration." According to it, a number of state bodies are tasked with assisting citizens wishing to engage in labor activities in the Republic of Korea. Currently, the following requirements are imposed on Uzbeks wishing to work in Korea: applicants must be between 18 and 39 years old; have no criminal record or prohibition on leaving the Republic of Uzbekistan; and be in good health both medically and physically. Candidates who meet the above requirements will be tested to determine their level of Korean language proficiency. Such tests are carried out through accredited centers authorized by the Ministry of Employment and Labor Relations of the Republic of Uzbekistan. Applicants who score high in the tests are awarded special certificates.⁷ This process will allow them to take the Korean language proficiency test conducted by the Korean Human Resources Development Service. It is worth noting that in

⁶ Yqubov.F. "UZBEKISTAN EXTERNAL MIGRATION: KEY TRENDS AND DIRECTIONS" EURASIAN RESEARCH JOURNAL, ERJ, Vol. 4, No. 1, pp. 27-47, January 2022

⁷ O'zbekiston Respublikasi Bandlik va mehnat munosabatlari vazirligi, 2020



2011, Korea's GDP was \$ 1.25 trillion, but by 2018 it had reached \$ 1.72 trillion. As a result of such rapid development of the country's economy, the flow of immigrants from various countries began to increase sharply. In particular, the growth of the number of small and medium-sized businesses in the country has significantly contributed to the development of external migration. In particular, in 2015, their number reached 5,889,611, while in 2018 this figure increased by 12.7 percent to 6,638,694⁸.

During this period, the number of Uzbek labor migrants wishing to work in Korea also increased.

According to the State Statistics Service of Uzbekistan, in 2010, 4,506 Uzbek labor migrants worked in Korea. Moreover, their number increased almost 5 times between 2010 and 2018. However, according to the Ministry of Labor of Uzbekistan, in recent years, the demand for Uzbek labor migrants in Korea has been decreasing. Several factors influence this process. The main reasons for the decrease in the flow of Uzbek migrants include leaving their jobs for various reasons, staying in the country illegally despite the expiration of their employment contracts and visas, lack of knowledge of the Korean language, customs and culture, disagreements with employers, excessive consumption of alcohol, etc. Currently, the majority of Uzbek migrants work in industry, construction, agriculture, fisheries, warehousing and other sectors.

Relations between Uzbekistan and Korea are improving year by year. As an example, we can say that the visit on November 22-25, 2017 further strengthened relations between the two countries. Because, during the visit to Korea, President Mirziyoyev said: "The children of Uzbeks who came to work in Korea and were born in Korea speak Korean perfectly." This indicates that relations are good. Also, from the very first meeting, President Mirziyoyev emphasized: "Korea and Uzbekistan are brotherly countries," which indicates the improvement of relations. Another reason for the improvement of relations between the two countries is the marriage of Uzbek girls who are engaged in labor and education to Korean men.

In recent years, the number of interethnic marriages has increased in rural areas of the country. As Korea's rural population has been shrinking over the past 30 years, the government has provided subsidies ranging from 3 million won (\$3,600) to 10 million won (\$12,000) to help Koreans pay for foreign brides and cover other expenses necessary for marriage. According to Korea's Ministry of Gender Equality and Family, marrying Uzbek girls is the most expensive compared to other nationalities, averaging 18.3 million won (\$21,960)⁹. One of the main reasons for the introduction of such measures is that Korean girls move to large cities in search of work and stay there, which leads to the destabilization of the demographic situation in the country. The Korean government considered such a demographic situation as one of the economic problems and preferred to solve the problems in the labor market and the shortage of girls to marry Korean men through the immigration factor. Also, currently Korean universities are among the best universities in the world, for example, according to the list compiled by QS World University Rankings in 2021, Seoul National University is in 37th place, Korea University of Technology is in 39th place, and Korea University is in 69th place among more than 1,000 universities in the world. Therefore, many Uzbek students try to enter such prestigious universities in Korea in order to increase academic mobility through external

⁸ Ministry of SMEs and Startups, 2018

⁹ Straits Times, 2019



migration. In particular, from 2010 to 2019, there was a steady increase in the number of Uzbek students at Korean universities.

In conclusion, labor migration from Uzbekistan to Korea has increased on the basis of an intergovernmental agreement. Over the past three years, the volume of cross-border remittances from Korea to Uzbekistan has grown steadily, but the rapid spread of the COVID-19 virus around the world has affected this process. The main reasons for the increase in the number of Uzbeks in Korea are marriages, especially in rural areas of the country, where Uzbek girls marry Korean men, as well as economic reasons. Also, the fact that Korean universities are among the most prestigious for study, training, and academic visits attracts young students.

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