

The Image of Labor Migrants in Social Media and Internet Journalism: Cultural and Ethnic Dimensions

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Abstract: This article analyzes the formation of the image of labor migrants in Internet journalism and social media from cultural, ethnic, and social perspectives. Specifically, it examines how the topic of labor migration is covered in Uzbek and Russian online publications, the emergence of media frames regarding migrants, factors influencing public opinion, and issues related to the socio-cultural identification of migrants. In addition, the article analyzes media materials on crime, education, religious freedom, and cultural adaptation involving migrants, and explores their impact on audience consciousness. The findings indicate that the image of the labor migrant is being formed in a hybrid manner in media discourse — simultaneously as an economic resource, a subject in need of social protection, and a member of an 'alien' social group.

Keywords: Labor migration, Internet journalism, social media, media frame, migrant image, ethnic identification, cultural integration, xenophobia, media discourse.

Introduction

In the contemporary information space, the topic of labor migration manifests not only as an economic process, but also as an essential component of social, cultural, ethnic, and political relations. In particular, Internet journalism and social media have become one of the primary discursive arenas for shaping perceptions of labor migrants. The manner in which migration is covered in the mass media directly influences public opinion, interethnic relations, and social dynamics.

In media studies, analysis of the migrant image proceeds from the premise that media does not merely reflect reality but reconstructs specific meanings and images. From this perspective, the image of the labor migrant is also constructed on the basis of social and cultural context.

In the media of receiving states, labor migrants are frequently depicted in the context of security threats, illegal migration, crime, or cultural conflict, whereas in the media of labor-sending states, they tend to be portrayed as an economic resource, a socially vulnerable class, or national labor heroes. This dynamic generates a 'us versus them' dichotomy in media discourse, which shapes social attitudes toward migrants.

Research Methodology

The study employed content analysis, discourse analysis, and comparative analysis methods. The objects of analysis comprised materials published on Uzbek online platforms such as Kun.uz, Daryo.uz, Qalampir.uz, and Gazeta.uz, as well as Russian information platforms including TASS, Izvestia, Vedomosti, Gazeta.ru, and Forbes Russia.

Main Discussion

The coverage of labor migration in online media and social media is not merely a reflection of labor market issues in the information space, but also an expression of complex processes — interethnic relations, cultural inequality, social conflicts, and even religious identification —

within a media context.

The nature of information flows varies depending on which state the media outlet or social platform belongs to: whether it operates in the information space of a receiving, sending, or transit country. For instance, in the media of receiving states, materials concerning labor migrants are frequently covered from the perspective of social pressure, security, illegal migration, or cultural conflict. Such coverage tends to generate suspicion, caution, and in some cases hostility toward labor migrants among the local population.

In such materials, national, religious, cultural, and geographical origin factors are linked to the economic and social problems of labor migration. The labor migrant is portrayed not merely as a worker, but as the 'other' — a foreigner, an 'alien,' a bearer of a 'different culture.' This manner of presenting information reinforces the 'us versus them' dichotomy in the media space, which in turn intensifies cultural estrangement and integration challenges.

The national, cultural, religious, social, and legal obstacles encountered by Uzbek citizens engaged in temporary labor activities abroad must be examined not only as personal problems but also from the perspective of collective, systemic migration policy. In certain cases, information about problems involving migrants in the receiving state circulates only on social media or personal blogs, while official media outlets do not cover these issues, and events are interpreted in a one-sided manner — all of which leads to the formation of inaccurate general perceptions.

In this regard, it is expedient to pay attention to the following aspects when analyzing information related to labor migration:

1. The extent to which and the context in which national, cultural, and religious factors are mentioned in migration-related information on Internet publications and social media;
2. The opportunities for labor migrants to express their personal views through social media and how their subjective voice is taking shape in the information environment;
3. The general representation of labor migrants in media materials of the receiving state (for instance: as a threat, as a victim, as a hero, etc.);
4. How measures taken by official authorities of the receiving state — particularly cultural adaptation, legal protection, and anti-discrimination measures in the workplace — are covered through social media.

Furthermore, recent debates about the image of migrants in the media environment also display distinctive tendencies. For example, positive stories about successful migrants receive little coverage, while lately only negative events — violations of the law, conflicts, and workplace tragedies — enter media circulation. This leads to the formation of a one-sided negative image of the labor migrant in the public consciousness.

In these circumstances, Uzbekistan's media outlets and state bodies must strive to establish a balanced, humane, and sustainable media environment in the information policy on migration matters. To this end, it is important to review information policy in accordance with international media ethics standards, to monitor information flows on social networks, and to cover images related to migrants with empathy, objectivity, and adequate analysis.

According to Professor Sherzod Eraliev, an international expert on migration,[1] labor migration encompasses not only economic and legal but also socio-psychological and cultural-identification challenges. In particular, the children of labor migrants — both children and adolescents — face numerous difficulties in adapting to the educational systems of receiving states, including issues related to language proficiency, lifestyle, food, and religious observance. This situation is especially pronounced in societies where national, cultural, and religious affiliations are overtly expressed.

In countries such as Finland, Sweden, and Japan, parents from diverse cultural backgrounds have

the opportunity to request that school administrations refrain from providing certain products or to be informed in advance about their contents. This is the result of an educational policy built on cultural tolerance and respect for diversity.

However, in certain other countries — Russia in particular — such matters are generating social and political controversy. For instance, debates surrounding a proposed law that would restrict the admission to schools of migrant children who do not speak Russian were widely discussed in the media. This situation illustrates the role that media plays in shaping public opinion regarding assimilation and integration dynamics, national and language policy in the receiving society.

From this perspective, the difficulties encountered by children of labor migrants in accessing education or adapting socially should be viewed not merely as personal or family matters, but as circumstances inextricably linked to institutional, cultural, and political mechanisms. Analyses, discussions, and content in Internet publications and social media demonstrate that these problems are organically connected to national and cultural dimensions.

At the same time, observing religious beliefs — particularly the consumption of halal products and organizing children's nutrition during the holy month of Ramadan — is of considerable importance for the families of labor migrants. In some countries, the insufficient development of halal infrastructure and the application of standard meal programs in school cafeterias compel parents to seek alternative solutions.

Under such circumstances, practical solutions may include purchasing from specialized halal stores, communicating with school administrations, and submitting petitions through organizations that protect children's rights. These situations once again confirm the need for cultural respect, tolerance, and institutional support for labor migrants and their families.

For this reason, covering issues related to labor migrants and their children in media and social media requires an approach that is not only legal and economic, but also cultural and humanitarian. After all, every image in the media environment invariably leaves an impression on the public consciousness, and this is one of the primary factors influencing general attitudes toward migrants.

For example, when analyzing coverage of this topic in Russia's TASS ('Children of migrants may be required to undergo mandatory language diagnostics'[2]; 'Rosobrnadzor stated that children of migrants must enroll in school with knowledge of Russian'[3]), Izvestia ('Ministry of Education recommended limiting the number of foreign children in classes'[4]; 'Migrants' children will not be admitted to schools without knowledge of the Russian language'[5]), Vedomosti ('A bill prohibiting the admission of children without knowledge of Russian was submitted to the State Duma'[6]; 'More than 58% of migrant children demonstrated good knowledge of the Russian language'[7]), Gazeta.ru ('"Not a word in Russian." Russia seeks to limit the number of migrant children in schools'[8]) — as well as in Uzbekistan's Kun.uz ('Migrant children who do not speak Russian may be denied admission to schools in Russia'[9]; 'The Russian language proficiency of migrant students in Russia was tested'[10]; 'Schools are being closed to the children of migrants who do not speak Russian in Russia. How justified is this initiative?'[11]), Daryo.uz ('A bill to ban the admission of migrant children who do not speak Russian to schools was submitted to the Russian State Duma'[12]), Qalampir.uz ('Admission of migrant children in Russian schools has become more difficult'[13]; 'It may become prohibited for migrant children to attend school in Russia'[14]; 'The Russian language proficiency of migrant students in Russian schools was checked'[15]), and Gazeta.uz ('A proposal was made in Russia to refuse school admission to children of migrants who do not know Russian'[16]) — one can observe a lack of professionalism, blind support for the draft legislation, the simple republication of materials from one another, as well as an absence of distinctive approaches, views of independent experts, and additional analyses of causes and consequences.

Internet journalism occupies an important position in constructing and interpreting social reality in the contemporary information space. In particular, the topic of labor migration in the mass media is covered not merely as an economic process, but in close connection with social, cultural, and ethnic factors. An analysis of materials from Kun.uz, one of Uzbekistan's leading online

publications, shows that the image of the labor migrant is constructed through several interrelated media frames.

First and foremost, labor migrants are interpreted from an economic perspective as a significant resource. Specifically, the role of migrants in the country's economy and the volume of remittances they send are highlighted with particular emphasis. This situation constructs the migrant image as an 'economic donor' and indicates that their economic function has taken on primary importance.[17] As a result, the identity of the labor migrant is to some degree reduced to economic indicators.

At the same time, in the analyzed materials, migrants are also depicted as a socially vulnerable class in need of protection. Specifically, the growing xenophobia toward migrants in Russia, the formation of an 'enemy image,' and issues related to their legal protection are widely discussed.[18] This situation presents labor migrants as subjects who are being stigmatized by external society and who are in need of institutional protection.

However, an entirely negative approach is not observed in media discourse. Some materials present data indicating that negative attitudes toward migrants are not predominant in public opinion. For example, it is noted that the majority of the Russian population does not hold a sharply negative stance toward migrants.[19] This shows that the image of the labor migrant is being shaped in a balanced and multifaceted manner.

An analysis of the article 'The average labor migrant turned out to be a married man from Uzbekistan' published in Forbes Russia[20] reveals that the image of the labor migrant is presented not as an individual person, but as a particular ethnic and social type. The article depicts the 'average portrait' of labor migrants in Russia based on statistical data, putting forward the model of 'a 28-year-old married man from Uzbekistan' as the central image. The repeated emphasis on the image of 'a man from Uzbekistan' in the text serves to associate labor migration with a particular nationality in the minds of the audience.

In the global context, migrants are frequently portrayed as subjects at the center of socio-economic and cultural problems. In particular, analyses pointing to the deteriorating attitudes toward migrants in developed countries are presented.[21] This situation reflects the tendency to perceive migrants as 'alien' or 'unwanted' social groups.

At the same time, the dangerous dimensions of the migration process are also highlighted with particular emphasis. Specifically, statistical data from international organizations on the number of people who have perished during migration are cited.[22] This situation constructs the image of the labor migrant as tragic and as a victim, and reveals the humanitarian dimensions of migration.

Media materials about the alleged involvement of labor migrants in crimes in host countries directly influence the formation of public opinion. In particular, the emotional and selective coverage of news about crimes involving migrants may reinforce stereotypes and negative attitudes among the local population toward them. At the same time, analyses reveal that no unified and systematic information policy on this issue has been established in Uzbek Internet publications.

For instance, some publications noted that the number of crimes committed by labor migrants in Russia increased in 2023. Specifically, Kun.uz reported that crimes involving migrants had 'reached a record level over the past five years'[23] and that 'migrants were proposed to be sent to the front due to a rise in murders'.[24] Materials with such headlines and content may foster the impression among audiences that labor migrants are one of the primary sources of crime. In particular, presenting statistical data without context — without explaining the types of crimes, their proportion relative to the total number of migrants, or the discrepancies between reports from official agencies — leads to a one-sided media discourse.

However, by 2025, entirely contradictory materials on this very topic can also be observed. For example, certain reports from Kun.uz noted 'a decrease in crimes committed by migrants in Russia'[25] and that 'the level of crime among them is not high'.[26] At the same time, the

publication Qalampir.uz referred to 'Uzbek citizens as the nationality committing the most crimes among migrants.' [27] This shows that one and the same reality in a given time and place is being interpreted differently across various media outlets.

Furthermore, official information sources — in particular, materials from the TASS agency — stated that 'the level of crime involving migrants has remained virtually unchanged.' [28] This situation reveals the existence of statistical and substantive contradictions among information in the media. As a result, audiences find it difficult to determine which information is closest to the truth.

Analyzing this situation through the lens of the theory that audiences perceive an issue from the perspective in which media presents that reality, we can say: if labor migration is covered primarily in the context of crime, the image of the labor migrant is constructed as a source of danger. Furthermore, media does not limit itself to reflecting reality but also fulfills the function of reconstructing and assigning meaning to it. Therefore, negative media content about labor migrants may serve to reinforce social stereotypes.

For this reason, fact-checking, comparative analysis of official statistics, and contextual approaches are of great importance when covering crime topics related to labor migration. Otherwise, sensational headlines and one-sided interpretations may not only intensify negative attitudes toward labor migrants but may also cause xenophobic sentiments to grow in society.

From the perspective of cultural and ethnic dimensions, analysis shows that in Kun.uz materials, the concept of 'Uzbek migrant' is used as a stable ethnic category. This situation leads to viewing migrants within the framework of national identification. However, at the same time, this approach — by depicting them as a generalized group — results in a lesser reflection of their individual characteristics.

In the materials, cultural values and social pressure factors also play a significant role. Factors characteristic of Uzbek society — such as family responsibility, the obligation to ensure economic stability, and maintaining social status — directly influence migrants' decisions. This situation presents the migrant not as an individual agent but as a subject fulfilling collective responsibilities.

From the standpoint of language and rhetoric, emotional and expressive vocabulary is widely used in the materials. The social condition of labor migrants is highlighted through concepts such as 'problem,' 'difficulty,' 'protection,' and 'xenophobia.' At the same time, the use of statistical data and expert opinions lends an analytical character to the materials. This ensures a combination of emotional and rational discourse.

Based on the analyses above, it can be concluded that the image of the labor migrant in the Kun.uz online publication has a multifaceted and hybrid character. It simultaneously presents itself as an economic resource, a subject in social need of protection, and a person undergoing cultural transformation. In media discourse, migrants are depicted at the center of the conflict between national values and global processes, and their image as 'alien' is in some cases amplified.

In this way, in Internet journalism the image of the labor migrant manifests not only as a means of conveying information, but also as an important discursive instrument for shaping social consciousness and public opinion.

From this perspective, covering information related to labor migration without taking into account its national and cultural specificities leads not only to a decline in information quality, but also to a further complication of ethnic and cultural relations in society. In particular, a one-sided approach to issues related to education, lifestyle, and religious practice may serve to reinforce stereotypes toward representatives of different nationalities and beliefs, and to present them as an 'alien' group. For example, if the fact that the children of labor migrants do not know the language, and their distinct cultural characteristics, are covered in a negative context in discussions of proposed legislation on children's education, such information serves to form an unconscious negative image in the audience's mind toward a particular social group. This is assessed as a situation contrary to the requirement that information activities be of a scholarly-analytical and professional character.

In some instances, special emphasis on national affiliation, religious belief, or ethnic identification when bringing issues related to labor migrants to the wider public indicates the use of journalistic strategies aimed at attracting audiences through emotional impact rather than through analytical coverage of the topic. Such an approach may intensify national and cultural antagonisms rather than fostering positive attitudes and tolerance in society.

Precisely in the social media space, these tendencies manifest in a more acute form. Linguistic, cultural, customary, and religious differences between citizens of receiving and sending countries are often reflected in the form of personal views, impassioned debates, and even relations based on hatred rhetoric grounded in nationality and religion. In certain cases, these interactions create rivalry, opposition, or discriminatory situations in the mass virtual environment.

Under such circumstances, the task of media and Internet platforms should not merely be to disseminate information, but — by taking cultural diversity into account — to contribute to social stability through covering labor migration processes in an objective, balanced, and responsible manner. This must be regarded as a shared responsibility incumbent upon editorial offices, bloggers, media researchers, and state information bodies.

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