

HISTORICAL STAGES IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF EXTERNAL LABOUR MIGRATION FROM UZBEKISTAN (1991–2025)

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Abstract. The article constructs a five-stage historical periodisation of external labour migration from Uzbekistan during 1991 to 2025. The identified stages encompass spontaneous post-Soviet emergence between 1991 and 2000, Russia-dominated mass migration between 2001 and 2010, institutional formalisation between 2011 and 2016, strategic transformation between 2017 and 2021, and geopolitical reconfiguration between 2022 and 2025. The empirical analysis traces the growth of migrant numbers from approximately 280 thousand in 2000 to a peak of 2.5 million in 2019, accompanied by the decline of the Russian Federation share of total flows from 85 per cent to 57 per cent over the same period. The proposed framework integrates classical migration theories with the institutional and geopolitical dynamics specific to the post-Soviet Central Asian context, contributing to regional migration historiography.

Keywords. External labour migration, Uzbekistan, historical stages, Central Asia, remittances, periodisation, 1991 to 2025.

Introduction. The development of external labour migration from Uzbekistan during the post-Soviet period constitutes one of the most consequential socio-economic phenomena in the recent history of Central Asia. As of 2024 approximately 2 million labour migrants from Uzbekistan were working abroad, representing nearly 6 per cent of the total population. The remittances generated by these migrants have transformed the economic structure of households and communities across the country, reaching 16.9 billion US dollars at the 2022 peak [9].

Despite the magnitude of this phenomenon, its historical evolution has not been subjected to a comprehensive periodisation framework grounded in internationally recognised migration theory. The year 2025 marks an opportune moment for retrospective analysis, as it represents the completion of a third decade of post-independence migration. Furthermore, the period from 2022 to 2025 has witnessed unprecedented geopolitical events that have substantially reconfigured the architecture of Central Asian labour migration and necessitate scholarly explanation.

The aim of this study is to construct a systematic historical periodisation of external labour migration from Uzbekistan during the period 1991 to 2025. The study identifies the distinguishing characteristics of each stage, the underlying drivers, the quantitative indicators of migration flows, and the broader socio-economic implications. The research questions concern the distinct historical stages that can be identified, their principal demographic and institutional characteristics, the evolution of geographic patterns, and the theoretical frameworks that best explain the observed periodisation.

Literature Review. International migration scholarship offers several theoretical frameworks for the analysis of labour migration trajectories. The classical neoclassical economic framework conceptualises migration as the rational response of individuals to wage differentials between origin and destination economies [3]. This framework was further developed through the Todaro model of urban-rural migration in less developed countries. The new economics of labour migration framework subsequently reconceptualised migration as a household-level strategy for diversifying income sources and mitigating risk, rather than as the decision of isolated individuals [7].

The dual labour market theory explains the persistent structural demand in destination economies for migrant workers in segmented secondary labour markets, particularly in construction, services, and agriculture [5]. Cumulative causation theory posits that migration generates self-reinforcing transnational networks that perpetuate flows even when initial economic drivers diminish [4]. The comprehensive synthesis of international migration in the contemporary era integrates these classical frameworks with attention to globalisation, gender dynamics, and the diversification of destination regions [1].

Within Central Asian migration studies, scholarly attention has focused on the specific contexts of Russian-bound flows, the role of Soviet-era networks in shaping initial migration corridors, and the everyday experiences of migrants navigating informal legal regimes. Ethnographic and historical research on Central Asian migration has documented the consolidation of village-based and ethnic networks, the gendered dimensions of migration, and the embedding of migrant practices in transnational social fields [6]. However, a systematic five-stage historical periodisation covering the full 1991 to 2025 period for Uzbekistan has not been developed in the existing literature. This study addresses that gap.

Material and Methods. The study is grounded in the historical and comparative approach to migration studies, combining systematic chronological analysis with the analytical frameworks of migration theory. The empirical base draws upon primary statistical sources from the State Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan [8], the Agency for External Labour Migration Affairs of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Central Bank of Uzbekistan for remittance flows, and the Federal State Statistics Service of the Russian Federation. International institutional sources include the World Bank Migration and Remittances Factbook and the International Organization for Migration country reports for Uzbekistan [2].

Several analytical methods were employed in the study. Periodisation analysis identified turning points based on three criteria, namely significant changes in migration scale, qualitative shifts in destination structure, and institutional reconfiguration. Quantitative time-series analysis examined the trajectories of key indicators such as migrant numbers, remittances, and sectoral distribution across the 35-year period. Comparative analysis placed Uzbekistan's experience alongside other major migrant-sending states. The 2024 and 2025 data should be regarded as preliminary, although drawing on the most recent available sources.

Results. The empirical analysis of external labour migration from Uzbekistan during the period 1991 to 2025 reveals five distinct historical stages, summarised in Table 1. Each stage is characterised by a particular configuration of scale, geographic structure, institutional framework, and political and economic context.

Stage	Period	Approximate migrants	Dominant destination	Key feature
I	1991–2000	50 000 to 280 000	Russia (regional)	Spontaneous emergence
II	2001–2010	280 000 to 1 800 000	Russia (national)	Mass scale, undocumented
III	2011–2016	1 800 000 to 2 300 000	Russia, Korea, Kazakhstan	Institutional formalisation
IV	2017–2021	2 300 000 to 2 500 000	Diversified	Domestic reform turn
V	2022–2025	2 500 000 to 2 100 000	Russia (declining), EU, GCC	Geopolitical reconfiguration

Table 1. Five-stage periodisation of external labour migration from Uzbekistan, 1991 to 2025.

The first stage between 1991 and 2000 witnessed the emergence of labour migration as a spontaneous, undocumented, and regionally concentrated phenomenon. Following independence in September 1991 the economic transformation produced sharp contractions in industrial employment, particularly in the agricultural and processing sectors. By the mid-1990s gross domestic product per capita had fallen by approximately 23 per cent compared to 1990 levels. The geographic destinations were dominated by the Russian Federation, particularly the Moscow and Sverdlovsk regions, where pre-existing Soviet-era networks of familial, professional, and educational character facilitated initial flows [6]. The absolute scale was modest by later standards, with an estimated 50 000 migrants in the early 1990s rising to approximately 280 000 by the year 2000 [2].

The second stage between 2001 and 2010 transformed Uzbek labour migration from a regional phenomenon to a mass nationwide process. The number of migrants grew from approximately 280 000 in 2000 to 1.8 million in 2010, representing an increase by a factor of 6.4 within a single decade [8]. The Russian economic boom propelled by rising hydrocarbon prices generated unprecedented labour demand in construction, services, retail, and agriculture. Demographic pressure within Uzbekistan intensified as the working-age cohort born during the late-Soviet birth peak of the 1980s entered the labour market in successive waves. The Fergana Valley emerged as the principal sending area, with Andijan registering a population density of 796 persons per square kilometre by 2010. Transnational social networks consolidated during this stage, demonstrating the cumulative causation thesis according to which migration generates self-reinforcing flows through information, support, and recruitment channels [4].

The third stage between 2011 and 2016 saw the emergence of substantive institutional frameworks. The Republic of Korea Employment Permit System was extended to Uzbekistan in 2007, with practical implementation expanding significantly from 2011 onwards. The initial annual quota of approximately 3 500 workers grew to 37 000 by 2023, establishing Korea as the second most important destination for documented Uzbek labour migrants. The Russian Federation's migration regime underwent successive reforms during this period, including the 2010 mandatory Russian language testing and the 2015 patent system extension. Remittances rose from approximately 3.7 billion US dollars in 2010 to 5.6 billion US dollars in 2014, before declining to 2.7 billion US dollars in 2016 amid the Russian recession following the 2014 Ukraine crisis and Western sanctions [9].

The fourth stage between 2017 and 2021 marked a turning point in the relationship between the Uzbek state and external labour migration. The accession of President Shavkat Mirziyoyev in 2016 inaugurated a comprehensive policy reorientation. In 2018 the Agency for External Labour Migration Affairs was established, consolidating fragmented authorities and assuming responsibility for pre-departure orientation, vocational training, bilateral negotiations, and migrant protection. Bilateral migration agreements were concluded or expanded with Russia, Korea, Japan,

Türkiye, Poland, Germany, and the United Arab Emirates. The total migrant population reached its historical peak with an estimated 2.5 million in 2019. The Covid-19 pandemic produced a 22 per cent temporary decline in 2020, with approximately 350 000 migrants returning home before flows recovered by mid-2021 [2].

The fifth stage between 2022 and 2025 initiated the most significant reconfiguration of Central Asian labour migration since the dissolution of the Soviet Union. The Russian Federation's share of total Uzbek labour migration declined from approximately 71 per cent in 2019 to 57 per cent by mid-2024. Alternative destinations have absorbed significant portions of the redirected flows, with the Republic of Korea increasing its Employment Permit System quota to 37 000 in 2023, and the European Union, the Gulf Cooperation Council states, and Japan expanding targeted recruitment from Central Asia. The Uzbek state has accelerated the institutionalisation of migration governance through Presidential Decree number PD-87 of 2022 and the launch of the Hijrat External Labour Migration Information System digital platform. Remittance flows reached a historical peak of 16.9 billion US dollars in 2022, equivalent to 17.1 per cent of gross domestic product [9].

Table 2 summarises the key quantitative indicators across the five stages.

Indicator	Stage I (2000)	Stage II (2010)	Stage III (2016)	Stage IV (2019)	Stage V (2024)
Total migrants (millions)	0.28	1.80	2.30	2.50	2.10
Remittances (USD billion)	0.10	3.70	2.70	6.10	13.50
Remittances to GDP (per cent)	1.2	7.8	4.7	11.0	11.4
Russia share (per cent)	85	82	71	68	57
Korea share (per cent)	0.5	1.5	4.2	6.8	9.5
Other share (per cent)	14.5	16.5	24.8	25.2	33.5
Women's share (per cent)	5	8	12	18	23

Table 2. Key quantitative indicators of Uzbek external labour migration across the five stages.

Several patterns emerge from the data. The absolute scale of migration grew approximately ninefold from 2000 to 2019, before stabilising at slightly lower levels in 2024. The share of the Russian Federation as a destination declined consistently from 85 per cent in 2000 to 57 per cent in 2024. The Republic of Korea grew from negligible significance at 0.5 per cent in 2000 to nearly one-tenth of total flows at 9.5 per cent in 2024. The feminisation of migration is evident in the data, as the share of female migrants quadrupled from approximately 5 per cent in 2000 to 23 per cent in 2024.

Table 3 provides a comparative perspective on the geographic distribution of Uzbek labour migrants by destination region in 2024.

Destination region	Migrants (thousands)	Share (per cent)	Dominant sector
Russian Federation	1 200	57.1	Construction, services
Republic of Korea	200	9.5	Manufacturing, fisheries
Kazakhstan	180	8.6	Agriculture, services

Destination region	Migrants (thousands)	Share (per cent)	Dominant sector
Türkiye	120	5.7	Services, retail
Gulf states (UAE, Saudi Arabia)	160	7.6	Construction, services
European Union	100	4.8	Healthcare, agriculture
Japan	45	2.1	Technical intern
Other	95	4.5	Mixed
TOTAL	2 100	100.0	-

Table 3. Geographic distribution of Uzbek labour migrants by destination region in 2024.

The data reveal a more diversified geographic profile than at any previous point in Uzbekistan's post-Soviet history. The Russian Federation retains the dominant position, but its share has fallen below 60 per cent for the first time since independence. The Republic of Korea, Kazakhstan, and the Gulf states collectively account for over a quarter of total flows. The European Union and Japan represent emerging documented destinations of growing significance.

Discussion. The five-stage periodisation reveals a coherent historical trajectory in which the development of Uzbek labour migration has proceeded through qualitatively distinct phases shaped by both domestic transformations and external geopolitical reconfigurations. The neoclassical and Todaro frameworks accurately predict the directional logic of migration during Stages I and II, in which rational individuals responded to substantial wage differentials between origin and destination economies [3]. However, this framework alone cannot explain the persistence of migration during periods of relative wage convergence. The new economics of labour migration provides additional explanatory power by conceptualising migration as a household-level strategy for diversifying income sources, while dual labour market theory illuminates the structural demand for migrant workers in segmented secondary markets [7] [5].

The geopolitical reconfiguration initiated by the Russian invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 represents the most consequential exogenous shock to Central Asian migration patterns in the post-Soviet period. The relative decline of Russia as a destination from 71 per cent of flows in 2019 to 57 per cent in 2024 represents the most rapid geographic redistribution of Uzbek migration since independence. The diversification toward the Republic of Korea, the Gulf, and the European Union reflects not merely opportunistic redirection but the maturation of institutional frameworks built during Stage IV. The rebalancing has been accompanied by qualitative changes including a higher share of documented migration, greater sectoral diversification, and improved legal protections. The contemporary phase of Uzbek migration thus integrates classical migration drivers with novel geopolitical and institutional dynamics that international migration scholarship continues to refine [1].

The five-stage trajectory has produced profound socio-economic consequences for Uzbek society. Remittances have contributed to a substantial decline in poverty rates from 27.5 per cent in 2001 to 14 per cent in 2018. The feminisation of migration, reflected in the rise of women's share from approximately 5 per cent to 23 per cent during the period, has produced complex consequences including enhanced economic autonomy for women alongside reconfigured household structures. These dynamics merit further scholarly attention in subsequent research.

Conclusion. This study has constructed a systematic five-stage historical periodisation of external labour migration from Uzbekistan during the period 1991 to 2025. The development of Uzbek labour migration has proceeded through five qualitatively distinct stages, namely spontaneous emergence, mass scale, institutional formalisation, strategic transformation, and

current geopolitical reconfiguration. This trajectory constitutes a coherent historical sequence rather than a series of unrelated episodes.

The quantitative dynamics represent one of the most substantial migration phenomena of the post-Soviet period. The ninefold growth in migrant numbers from 2000 to 2019, the eighteenfold growth in remittances, and the diversification of destinations from approximately 85 per cent Russian share to less than 60 per cent place Uzbekistan among the world's most significant labour-exporting states. The geopolitical reconfiguration of 2022 to 2025 has produced a structural reorientation toward diversified destinations including Korea, the Gulf, the European Union, and Japan, accompanied by improvements in documentation, sectoral diversification, and institutional protection.

From a policy perspective, the periodisation suggests that the maturation of Uzbekistan's external labour migration system has reached a stage where strategic state engagement can substantially shape the future trajectory through bilateral agreements, vocational preparation, documentation support, and migrant protection. The historical record indicates that policy intervention during Stages III and IV produced measurable improvements in documented migration shares, remittance volumes, and worker protection. Continued institutional development during Stage V appears both feasible and warranted.

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