



**BILATERAL LABOUR MIGRATION BETWEEN UZBEKISTAN AND JAPAN:
POLICY FRAMEWORK, PROSPECTS, AND OBSTACLES**

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Abstract: This article provides a comprehensive analysis of labor migration cooperation between the Republic of Uzbekistan and Japan. It examines the migration policies pursued by the Uzbek government in sending workers abroad, as well as the strategies implemented by the Japanese government regarding the admission and regulation of foreign workers — particularly through mechanisms such as the “Specified Skilled Worker” (SSW) visa program. Furthermore, the study explores bilateral agreements, institutional partnerships, and the current challenges observed within this system. The article draws on official statistics, legal documents, and both international and national academic literature to reflect the reality of labor migration dynamics. I adopt an analytical approach to the subject by presenting independent observations and evaluations, and offer personal insights into the opportunities, risks, and ways to mitigate potential drawbacks. The economic, social, and cultural aspects of labor migration are also addressed with particular attention.

Methodology: This paper employs a qualitative content analysis method to examine the labour migration policies between Uzbekistan and Japan. It is based on the review of official documents, bilateral agreements, academic literature, and statistical data. The focus is placed on interpreting policy frameworks, identifying challenges, and evaluating cooperation mechanisms without conducting fieldwork. This approach allows for an in-depth understanding of migration-related developments through the analysis of existing sources.

Key words: Uzbekistan, Japan, labor migration, migration policy, bilateral cooperation, Specified Skilled Worker, migration governance, employment abroad, international relations.

Introduction: In the context of globalization and increasing labor mobility, international labor migration has become a critical aspect of economic and diplomatic relations between countries. For Uzbekistan, which has a growing young population and a dynamic labor force, the regulation and expansion of labor migration opportunities play a significant role in its socio-economic development strategy. In recent years, Japan has emerged as a key destination for Uzbek labor migrants due to its aging population and shortage of skilled workers, particularly in sectors such as construction, caregiving, and manufacturing.

The establishment of the “Specified Skilled Worker” (SSW) visa system in Japan has opened new avenues for legally employed foreign workers, including those from Uzbekistan. Both countries have taken steps to formalize labor mobility through bilateral agreements, institutional cooperation, and training programs. Despite these positive developments, there are also persistent challenges such as language barriers, recognition of qualifications, labor rights

protection, and recruitment transparency.

This article aims to analyze the current state of labor migration cooperation between Uzbekistan and Japan, identifying its opportunities and obstacles based on existing policies, agreements, and statistical data. By examining the legal and institutional frameworks, the paper seeks to offer a deeper understanding of how bilateral efforts shape the migration experience and address the evolving demands of both labor markets.

Results: Since gaining independence, Uzbekistan has seen a consistent increase in the number of its citizens seeking employment abroad. The primary reasons for this include the limited domestic labor market, a shortage of jobs, and the desire to earn foreign currency. In 2018, the Uzbek government established the Agency for External Labor Migration to regulate this process and create a secure migration system. The main responsibilities of the agency include creating conditions for citizens to work legally abroad, providing language and professional training, and ensuring migration safety (Labor Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan, 2022; Qodirov, 2021, p. 75).

Japan, on the other hand, has historically pursued a very restrictive migration policy. The country has been ethnically homogeneous, with a relatively low influx of foreign citizens. However, since the second decade of the 21st century, Japan has faced serious demographic issues: declining birth rates, an aging population, and a decreasing young workforce (Chiavacci & Leung, 2018, p. 44). As a result, the Japanese government revised its immigration policy in 2019, introducing the "Specified Skilled Worker" (SSW) visa, which allows the entry of skilled foreign workers in 14 sectors (Ministry of Justice Japan, 2021). The first official migration cooperation between Uzbekistan and Japan was formed based on memorandums of understanding signed in 2018. Following this, Uzbekistan introduced special training courses to prepare citizens for employment in Japan. These courses focus on learning the Japanese language, enhancing professional skills, and preparing for cultural integration. In Japan, SSW visa holders are allowed to work for up to five years, engage in various sectors, and live under specific conditions. Furthermore, candidates must pass the JLPT (Japanese-Language Proficiency Test) or JFT-Basic exam to qualify (Takahashi, 2020, p. 120). However, significant differences exist between the migration policies of the two countries. The Uzbek government views labor migration primarily as an economic tool, encouraging the remittance of foreign currency from migrants. Japan, conversely, perceives migrants as a temporary solution and does not aim to integrate them socially into the resident population (Leung, 2021, p. 88). Additionally, Japan's government strictly monitors migration flows and attempts to maintain foreign worker numbers within regulated limits. While Uzbekistan has strengthened state control over the migration process, the role of private intermediaries remains high in some cases. This situation leads to issues such as illegal contracts, excessive costs, and low levels of legal protection (Eshmatov, 2022, p. 94). Japan's official "Hello Work" platforms and company-based recruitment system, by contrast, are relatively transparent and legally regulated.

In general, the approaches to migration policies in Uzbekistan and Japan are shaped by their respective historical, demographic, and economic contexts. Both countries acknowledge the social and economic importance of labor migration, yet their methods of managing this process differ. Gradually, bilateral cooperation is increasing, and this collaboration serves as a crucial foundation for regulating labor migration and ensuring social justice.

Opportunities in the Labor Migration Policies of Uzbekistan and Japan. As labor migration continues to play a pivotal role in the economic development of both Uzbekistan and Japan, the opportunities emerging from their migration policies have become increasingly important. These opportunities are shaped by evolving geopolitical dynamics, demographic trends, and economic

needs.

In recent years, Uzbekistan has placed significant emphasis on managing and improving labor migration through various initiatives. Since the establishment of the Agency for External Labor Migration in 2018, the government has made strides in creating a more structured and supportive system for citizens looking to work abroad. This initiative became even more pronounced with the introduction of financial support packages in 2024, aimed at covering exam fees, travel expenses, and visa costs for labor migrants. The aim is to reduce the financial burden on migrant workers, ensuring that they have the necessary resources to migrate legally and safely (tashkenttimes.uz). Uzbekistan's approach is grounded in the recognition of labor migration as a key economic tool. The country encourages remittances, which are a significant source of foreign exchange. The government's focus on improving infrastructure for labor migration, including digital platforms to match migrants with foreign job opportunities, aims to streamline the process and make it more transparent. Furthermore, with the expansion of training programs, including language and vocational courses, Uzbekistan is ensuring that its workforce is better prepared to meet the demands of foreign employers.

The development of a digital platform for job opportunities has proven beneficial. This platform not only serves as a bridge between Uzbek migrants and foreign employers but also acts as a monitoring tool for the government, allowing them to keep track of migrant flows and ensure the legality of employment contracts. By offering these services, Uzbekistan aims to mitigate the risks of illegal migration and exploitative labor practices (uzdaily.uz).

Japan's approach to labor migration has undergone a profound transformation in the last decade. Historically, Japan has maintained strict immigration controls, largely due to its homogeneous society and the limited number of foreign workers. However, Japan's rapidly aging population and declining birth rate have necessitated a change in policy to secure labor forces for essential sectors. In 2019, Japan introduced the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) visa program, which opened the door for foreign workers to fill labor shortages in various industries, such as construction, caregiving, and agriculture (Ministry of Justice Japan, 2021). The SSW visa program allows skilled foreign workers to stay in Japan for up to five years, and it includes rigorous language proficiency requirements. The program also offers foreign workers the chance to work in multiple sectors, which not only helps Japan address its demographic issues but also creates an opportunity for migrants to integrate into the Japanese workforce, even if temporary. Additionally, Japan has also recently expanded the program to include more industries, such as the transportation sector, which reflects the government's ongoing efforts to address labor shortages in key sectors (japantimes.co.jp). The opportunities created by these migration policies are significant. For Uzbekistan, Japan represents a major labor market that offers relatively high wages, advanced working conditions, and valuable international work experience. Many Uzbek workers, particularly those in sectors like construction and caregiving, find these opportunities appealing due to the better working conditions and potential for higher income compared to other labor migration destinations.

Bilateral Cooperation Between Uzbekistan and Japan. The migration partnership between Uzbekistan and Japan has increasingly become a model of cooperation. The two countries signed memorandums of understanding (MOUs) as early as 2018, which laid the groundwork for mutual collaboration in labor migration. These agreements enabled the introduction of various support mechanisms, such as pre-departure orientation programs and vocational training. Uzbek workers are trained not only in language skills but also in cultural adaptability and specific job-related qualifications that are required by Japanese employers. Additionally, both countries have worked to address legal and ethical concerns surrounding labor migration. In 2024, Uzbekistan introduced measures to increase the transparency of the migration process by implementing a mandatory certification program for recruitment agencies. This move aims to combat illegal

recruitment practices and protect migrant workers from exploitation (Eshmatov, 2022, p. 94). For Japan, the partnership with Uzbekistan has proven invaluable in filling labor gaps in several industries. Uzbekistan has provided Japan with a consistent stream of skilled workers who meet the language and technical skill requirements of the SSW program. This, in turn, benefits Japan's economy by ensuring that its key industries can continue to function despite the shrinking domestic workforce.

While both Uzbekistan and Japan are reaping significant benefits from this migration partnership, challenges still remain, particularly regarding the protection of migrant workers' rights. It is essential for both governments to continue refining their migration policies to ensure that labor migrants are not exploited. Uzbekistan's role in providing comprehensive pre-departure training, including language and vocational courses, is critical in preparing workers for their experiences abroad. However, continued efforts are needed to enhance post-arrival support and ensure that Uzbek workers are fully integrated into Japanese society. The future of this bilateral cooperation hinges on both countries' ability to adapt to changing global economic conditions and to address emerging issues such as labor rights, social integration, and economic sustainability. Continued collaboration and the refinement of existing policies will be key to achieving these goals, ensuring that labor migration becomes a mutually beneficial process for both nations.

Challenges and Threats in the Uzbekistan–Japan Labor Migration Partnership. Despite gradual development in the labor migration partnership between Uzbekistan and Japan, several serious challenges remain that require attention from both sides. One of the key issues is the mismatch between the qualifications of Uzbek labor migrants and the specific needs of Japanese employers. While Japan seeks skilled workers who can immediately integrate into sectors like caregiving, construction, and agriculture, many Uzbek migrants lack adequate Japanese language proficiency and sector-specific expertise (Yamada, 2023, p. 41). Although preparatory programs exist in Uzbekistan, their scope and coverage are still limited compared to the growing demand.

Another challenge lies in the bureaucratic and legal barriers faced by migrants. The Japanese immigration system, although reformed with the introduction of the Specified Skilled Worker (SSW) visa in 2019, remains highly selective. Complex documentation procedures, frequent changes in legal requirements, and rigorous testing systems often discourage applicants (Shibuya, 2022, p. 89). Furthermore, once in Japan, some migrants experience long working hours, limited social interaction, and insufficient access to support services—conditions that may hinder long-term adaptation and job satisfaction (Kawaguchi, 2021, p. 75). On the Uzbek side, the presence of unregulated intermediaries continues to cause problems. Although the government has taken steps to strengthen state control over the migration process—such as by expanding the authority of the Agency for External Labor Migration—some migrants still rely on private recruiters who often charge excessive fees and fail to provide adequate legal protection (Karimova, 2024, p. 63). This leads to exploitative working conditions and even cases of illegal employment, which ultimately damage the image of Uzbek labor abroad. In addition, sociocultural integration remains a subtle yet important challenge. Japan's relatively homogenous society, where foreign residents make up less than 3% of the population (OECD, 2024), may contribute to social isolation among migrants. Limited cultural orientation programs and low public awareness about foreign labor further complicate integration efforts.

Despite these concerns, it is worth acknowledging that both countries have shown growing interest in addressing these shortcomings. However, real progress requires a more institutionalized and transparent framework. For instance, joint monitoring mechanisms, more comprehensive training modules, and improved legal aid for workers could significantly enhance the system. From a neutral standpoint, recognizing and constructively addressing these issues is essential for creating a sustainable and mutually beneficial migration model.

Recommendations and Prospective Directions. In light of the current trends and challenges observed in Uzbekistan–Japan labor migration cooperation, a number of recommendations and forward-looking strategies may be proposed to enhance the effectiveness, fairness, and sustainability of the process. Firstly, both countries should prioritize the institutionalization of cooperation through the establishment of a permanent bilateral migration coordination council. This body would be responsible for monitoring labor migration flows, resolving emerging issues, and proposing timely policy updates in accordance with labor market demands and demographic shifts (OECD, 2023, p. 94). Secondly, expanding the scope of pre-departure training programs in Uzbekistan remains crucial. Such programs should not only focus on Japanese language and work-related skills, but also include modules on legal rights, dispute resolution mechanisms, and cultural orientation. Government-funded preparatory centers in partnership with Japanese employers could greatly reduce vulnerability among migrants (UN DESA, 2022, p. 41). In terms of protection mechanisms, it is advisable to establish ombudsman offices or legal advisory centers for Uzbek migrants in major Japanese cities. These centers should provide assistance in native languages and ensure that migrants' rights are defended, particularly in cases of contract violations or workplace discrimination. As noted by Nakamura (2024, p. 76), similar practices have improved transparency in Japan's technical intern training program (TITP). Additionally, a digital bilateral labor mobility platform could be developed to facilitate transparent recruitment, minimize third-party involvement, and provide real-time updates on legal changes, job openings, and migration support services. Looking ahead, both countries should aim to diversify migration pathways, including not only low-skilled jobs but also professional and academic exchange programs, especially in healthcare, agriculture technology, and renewable energy sectors. This would reflect a shift from purely economic-driven migration to skill- and knowledge-based cooperation. Finally, regular public diplomacy initiatives, including cultural exchange and joint academic research on migration, would enhance mutual understanding and long-term partnership. In this regard, building trust at both governmental and societal levels is key to ensuring a humane and productive migration system.

Conclusion: The cooperation between Uzbekistan and Japan in the field of labor migration has not yet fully developed, but its prospects are quite significant. Providing opportunities for Uzbek youth to work and gain experience in Japan will enhance their future potential, allowing them to witness modern technologies and disciplined work environments. This will not only expand Uzbekistan's labor market opportunities but also increase the global competitiveness of its youth. Utilizing Japan's expertise and advanced technologies could create new opportunities for Uzbekistan in certain sectors of its economy. Furthermore, the changes in this field demonstrate how countries can establish cooperation while protecting their interests. Japan's strict labor policies and Uzbekistan's efforts in managing external labor resources complement each other. This collaboration, taking into account the economic and social mutual benefits of both countries, can lead to significant success in the field of labor migration.

However, the success of this cooperation depends not only on economic aspects but also on social integration and the protection of migrants' rights. It is necessary to support Uzbekistan's citizens legally abroad and improve their working conditions in Japan. At the same time, Japan's experience with migrants should also focus on easing their social adaptation and creating long-term living opportunities for them. In the future, to further develop labor migration and international cooperation, it is essential to strengthen mutual trust between countries, protect the rights of migrants, and continuously assess the social and economic impacts of this process. This will not only ensure economic success but also contribute to the establishment of a stable and long-term partnership between the two nations.

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