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INTEGRATION WITHOUT PROTECTION? EAEU MEMBERSHIP, MIGRANT RIGHTS AND HOUSEHOLD RESILIENCE IN KYRGYZSTAN AND UZBEKISTAN (2008-2026)

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Abstract. Regional economic integration is expected to protect labour migrants by turning informal mobility into rights-based mobility. This paper tests that expectation by comparing Kyrgyzstan, a member of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) since 2015, with Uzbekistan, an EAEU observer whose citizens remain subject to Russia's patent regime. Using a structured literature review and a comparative-historical analysis of three external shocks (2008-2009, 2014-2016 and 2024-2026), the paper finds, first, that the membership “rights premium” was real during the ruble crisis: in 2015-2016 the number of Kyrgyz citizens in Russia rose by 7.6%, while the numbers of Tajik and Uzbek citizens fell by 10.6% and 16.3%. Second, status-blind securitization has reversed this premium: Kyrgyz entries into Russia fell by 23.9% between the third quarters of 2024 and 2025, against 15.0% for Uzbekistan. Third, membership coincides with a concentration trap, as about 93% of Kyrgyz remittances originate in Russia, whereas Uzbekistan has diversified its destinations faster. The paper conceptualizes integration status as a migration institution whose protective value depends on the destination state's political choices, and it proposes household-level research designs and policy measures for both countries.

Keywords: Eurasian Economic Union; labour migration; migrant rights; remittances; household resilience; securitization.

HIMOYASIZ INTEGRATSIYA? YEVIROOSIYO IQTISODIY ITTIFOQIGA A'ZOLIK, MEHNAT MUHOJIRLARINING HUQUQLARI VA UY XO'JALIKLARI BARQARORLIGI: QIRG'IZISTON VA O'ZBEKISTON (2008-2026)

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Toshkent davlat iqtisodiyot universiteti

“Jahon iqtisodiyoti va xalqaro iqtisodiy munosabatlar” kafedrasi dotsenti,
siyosiy fanlar doktori (DSc)

Annotatsiya. Mintaqaviy iqtisodiy integratsiya norasmiy mehnat migratsiyasini huquqlarga asoslangan migratsiyaga aylantirib, mehnat muhojirlarini himoya qiladi, deb taxmin qilinadi. Maqolada ushbu taxmin 2015-yildan buyon Yevroosiyo iqtisodiy ittifoqi (YeOI) a'zosi bo'lgan Qirg'iziston hamda fuqarolari Rossiyada patent tizimi asosida ishlaydigan, YeOI'da kuzatuvchi maqomiga ega O'zbekistonni taqqoslash orqali tekshiriladi. Adabiyotlarning tizimli sharhi va uchta tashqi zarbaning (2008-2009, 2014-2016 va 2024-2026-yillar) qiyosiy-tarixiy tahlili asosida quyidagilar aniqlandi. Birinchidan, rubl inqirozi davrida a'zolikning “huquqiy ustunligi” real bo'lgan: 2015-2016-yillarda Rossiyadagi

Qirg'iziston fuqarolari soni 7,6 foizga oshgan, Tojikiston va O'zbekiston fuqarolari soni esa mos ravishda 10,6 va 16,3 foizga kamaygan. Ikkinchidan, maqomdan qat'i nazar qo'llanayotgan sekyuritizatsiya choralari bu ustunlikni teskarisiga o'zgartirdi: 2024-2025-yillarning uchinchi choraklari oralig'ida Qirg'iziston fuqarolarining Rossiyaga kirishi 23,9 foizga, O'zbekiston fuqarolariniki esa 15,0 foizga qisqargan. Uchinchidan, a'zolik “konsentratsiya tuzog'i” bilan birga kechmoqda: Qirg'izistonga keladigan pul o'tkazmalarining qariyb 93 foizi Rossiyadan tushadi, O'zbekiston esa migratsiya yo'nalishlarini tezroq diversifikatsiya qilmoqda. Maqolada integratsiya maqomi himoya qiymati qabul qiluvchi davlatning siyosiy tanloviga bog'liq bo'lgan migratsiya instituti sifatida talqin qilinadi hamda ikki mamlakat uchun uy xo'jaliklari darajasidagi tadqiqot dizaynlari va siyosiy choralar taklif etiladi.

Kalit so'zlar: Yevroosiyo iqtisodiy ittifoqi; mehnat migratsiyasi; muhojirlar huquqlari; pul o'tkazmalari; uy xo'jaliklari barqarorligi; sekyuritizatsiya.

ИНТЕГРАЦИЯ БЕЗ ЗАЩИТЫ? ЧЛЕНСТВО В ЕАЭС, ПРАВА ТРУДОВЫХ МИГРАНТОВ И УСТОЙЧИВОСТЬ ДОМОХОЗЯЙСТВ КЫРГЫЗСТАНА И УЗБЕКИСТАНА (2008-2026)

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Аннотация. Предполагается, что региональная экономическая интеграция защищает трудовых мигрантов, превращая неформальную мобильность в мобильность, основанную на правах. В статье это предположение проверяется путём сравнения Кыргызстана, члена Евразийского экономического союза (ЕАЭС) с 2015 г., и Узбекистана, государства-наблюдателя в ЕАЭС, граждане которого по-прежнему работают в России по патентной системе. На основе структурированного обзора литературы и сравнительно-исторического анализа трёх внешних шоков (2008-2009, 2014-2016 и 2024-2026 гг.) установлено следующее. Во-первых, «правовая премия» членства была реальной в период рублёвого кризиса: в 2015-2016 гг. численность граждан Кыргызстана в России выросла на 7,6%, тогда как численность граждан Таджикистана и Узбекистана сократилась на 10,6 и 16,3%. Во-вторых, секьюритизация, не учитывающая статус мигрантов, обратила эту премию вспять: между третьими кварталами 2024 и 2025 гг. въезды граждан Кыргызстана в Россию сократились на 23,9%, Узбекистана- на 15,0%. В-третьих, членство сопровождается «ловушкой концентрации»: около 93% денежных переводов в Кыргызстан поступает из России, тогда как Узбекистан быстрее диверсифицирует направления миграции. Интеграционный статус концептуализируется как миграционный институт, защитная ценность которого зависит от политического выбора принимающего государства; предложены дизайны исследований на уровне домохозяйств и меры политики для обеих стран.

Ключевые слова: Евразийский экономический союз; трудовая миграция; права мигрантов; денежные переводы; устойчивость домохозяйств; секьюритизация.

1. Introduction

Labour migration to Russia has been one of the most consequential economic processes in post-Soviet Central Asia. Remittances approached one-third of Kyrgyzstan's gross domestic product (GDP) for most of the 2010s, and

Uzbekistan received an estimated US\$16.6 billion in 2024, placing it among the ten largest recipients in the world (ESCAP, 2026; World Bank, 2026b). The welfare of millions of households, particularly rural households, therefore depends not only on domestic economic conditions but also on the rules that govern access to a foreign labour market (Murzakulova, 2020; Sagynbekova, 2017). For both countries, labour migration is also a channel through which human capital is accumulated, used and, in part, lost abroad.

These rules differ sharply across the region. Since August 2015, Kyrgyz citizens have enjoyed the free movement of labour guaranteed by Section XXVI of the Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union: they require no work permit or patent, are taxed at resident rates, have most of their qualifications recognised and, since 2021, accumulate portable pension rights (Poletayev, 2019; Rakhimov and Azizova, 2022). Uzbek citizens, by contrast, continue to enter Russia’s labour market through the patent regime, even though Uzbekistan obtained observer status in the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in December 2020. The United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific describes the resulting arrangement as a “multi-tier labour migration system” in North and Central Asia (ESCAP, 2026, p. 6).

This institutional divergence raises the question of whether, and under what conditions, regional integration protects migrant-sending households. The question has acquired new urgency. Since the Crocus City Hall attack of March 2024, Russia has reframed migration primarily as a security issue, introducing a register of “controlled persons”, shorter permissible stays, a compulsory geolocation application, biometric border controls and language testing for migrant children entering schools (IOM, 2026). Most of these measures apply to foreign nationals as such, regardless of EAEU membership. This securitization of migration policy therefore directly tests whether migrant rights guaranteed by a regional treaty survive when the destination state changes its priorities.

The aim of the study is to assess whether membership of the Eurasian Economic Union protects labour migrants and their households and how this protective value changes across different types of external shock. To achieve this aim, the study sets the following objectives: to review the evidence on the legal and practical effects of EAEU membership on labour migration; to compare the migration outcomes of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan during three external shocks; to assess the concentration of migration and remittances in the Russian corridor; and to propose policy measures and a household-level research agenda. The object of the study is labour migration from Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to Russia and the remittance flows it generates; the subject of the study is the effect of integration status on migrant rights, migration flows and household resilience.

The paper makes three contributions. Conceptually, it treats integration status as a migration institution and distinguishes between the de jure “rights premium” of membership and its de facto protective value. Empirically, it uses

a comparative-historical design built around three external shocks to show that the premium was visible during the ruble crisis of 2014-2016 but has since been reversed. Methodologically, it connects this macro-institutional argument to the literature on household resilience based on the Life in Kyrgyzstan (LiK) panel survey and sets out research designs for identifying household-level effects.

The rest of the paper is organized as follows. The literature review assesses research on regional integration, migrant rights, migration networks and household resilience and formulates the hypotheses. The research methodology section describes the research design, case selection and data. The analysis and results section presents the evidence for the three shocks, the concentration of the Russian corridor, and Uzbekistan’s diversification. The discussion interprets these results, and the final section presents the conclusions, policy suggestions, limitations and directions for future research.

2. Literature review

2.1. Regional integration and labour mobility: promises and limits

The EAEU was explicitly modelled on the European Union, and its common labour market shares the EU’s legal logic of non-discrimination and freedom of movement (Rakhimov and Azizova, 2022; Sagynbekova, 2017). Comparative analysis, however, shows that the two unions diverge in practice: EAEU migrants receive a modest social package determined largely by host states, low-skilled flows dominate, and common rules were widely ignored at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (Rakhimov and Azizova, 2022). In an assessment prepared for the Prague Process, Poletayev (2019) concludes that labour-market integration among EAEU members “is far from complete”: entry bans, weak pension portability, limited access to health care and kindergartens, and the absence of organized recruitment continue to constrain mobility, while “the protection of the rights of migrant workers and their family members in the EAEU has not received sufficient attention” (Poletayev, 2019, p. 12).

Scholars from the region generally regard the EAEU’s migration mechanisms as the only functioning multilateral framework in Eurasia. Delovarova and Sultanmuratov (2023) argue that migration is a component that “influences the other three” freedoms and that, should Uzbekistan delay accession, strengthening the observer institution is important. Ex ante estimates by the Eurasian Development Bank (2021) suggested that access to the common labour market would raise remittances to Uzbekistan by US\$1.5-2 billion a year and add 0.3-0.4 percentage points to annual GDP growth. Evidence on the wider economic effects of membership is more mixed. Using a Bayesian quasi-experimental design, Bekbolotova et al. (2026) find that EAEU accession increased Kyrgyzstan’s aggregate exports but reduced its agri-food imports and had no conclusive effect on its agri-food exports, owing to persistent intra-union barriers. Mayorova et al. (2024) report that labour migration is positively associated with labour productivity in Armenia and

Belarus but negatively in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan. Bokayev et al. (2020) similarly document the limited efficiency of migration policy in Kazakhstan, where undocumented workers remain widespread.

2.2. Kyrgyz migrants in the EAEU: de jure rights, de facto precarity

The most detailed evidence on the immediate effects of accession comes from Sagynbekova's (2017) survey of Kyrgyz migrants in Moscow. Migrants reported simpler registration, the abolition of language and history examinations, lower document costs and less police extortion; over 70% said that they had not experienced abuse by the authorities since accession, compared with nearly half of respondents in surveys conducted in 2007–2008. According to Kyrgyz officials, the abolition of patents, examinations and medical tests saved each migrant approximately 23,000-25,000 rubles, and the Eurasian Analytical Club put the savings at 30,000-60,000 rubles. Yet the same study found that 26% of respondents still worked without official contracts, that registration at the place of residence remained a major source of deportation risk, and that many migrants were unaware of their new rights (Sagynbekova, 2017).

Subsequent studies confirm a persistent gap between formal migrant rights and lived experience. In a 2016 survey of 1,001 Kyrgyz migrants in Russia, 71% had a written employment contract, but only 43% received their wages officially (Poletayev, 2019). Between 2014 and 2016, the Russian Ministry of Internal Affairs imposed 145,218 entry bans on Kyrgyz nationals, of which only 55,018 were lifted in the same period (Poletayev, 2019). Daniyarova (2023) concludes that, because most Kyrgyz migrants remain undocumented or lack written contracts, they cannot exercise the rights that membership formally provides, and that recruitment through compatriot networks perpetuates informality. At the same time, comparative survey data suggest that the membership premium was real: in a 2017 survey in Moscow, 35% of Kyrgyz women migrants worked without a written contract, compared with 41% of Uzbek and 43% of Tajik women (ESCAP, 2026).

2.3. Networks, persistence and the path dependence of the Russian corridor

A second strand of research explains why the Russian corridor has proved resilient to adverse conditions. Drawing on de Haas's theory of internal migration dynamics, Wrethed (2025) argues that labour migration from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan persisted after the 2014-2015-ruble crisis because networks had assumed quasi-institutional functions, lowered transaction costs and embedded migrants in informal obligations and reputational structures that made rapid exit “materially difficult and socially costly”. Network approaches to macro-scale migration similarly emphasize that flows are structured and path-dependent rather than simply responsive to wage differentials (Danchev and Porter, 2020). For Uzbekistan, Bondarenko (2021) shows that the family and the mahalla community both stimulated and constrained migration, and that its feminization, rejuvenation, and

geographical expansion after 2006 reflected changing sociocultural norms; she nevertheless expected Russia to remain the leading destination in the medium term.

Macro-level studies confirm the economic drivers. In a panel of Central Asian countries for 2013-2023, Kuldasheva (2024) finds that GDP per capita, unemployment, inflation, remittances, and a shared language are significant determinants of net migration, and she notes Uzbekistan's progress in reducing migration pressure through growth. Studies using Kyrgyz household data add important nuance. Kimsanova et al. (n.d.) find a non-linear relationship between well-being and migration, with middle-income households most likely to migrate internationally and the poorest constrained by financial barriers. Karymshakov et al. (2024) show that the 2021 drought increased international migration from affected households in the following year, a response they attribute to pre-existing networks leading to Russia, and they warn that restrictions in traditional destinations may limit this coping option.

2.4. Migration, remittances and household resilience

A third strand links migration to household resilience. Using LiK data for 2011-2016 and the Resilience Index Measurement and Analysis (RIMA-II) approach of the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), Egamberdiev et al. (2023) and Egamberdiev (2025) find that resilience capacity mitigates the adverse effects of shocks on food security and that remittances from migrants are among the major contributors to the social safety nets and adaptive capacity pillars of household resilience. Murzakulova (2020) shows that migration has turned rural Kyrgyzstan from a local periphery into territories “deeply interconnected with global processes, as well as extremely vulnerable to external economic shocks”, and criticizes migration policy for viewing migration only through the prism of migrant rights and “the most liberal regime of stay in the host country by joining various international unions”. Mogilevskii (2020) stresses the pervasive informality of Central Asian labour markets, which shapes both the incentives to migrate and the capacity of returnees to reintegrate and use the human capital acquired abroad. Analyses of remittances and human development in Eurasia reach similar conclusions about the dual nature of migration (Tay, 2021), and research on Tajikistan examines how migration and remittances interact with climate resilience (Babagaliyeva et al., 2017).

Research on earlier shocks shows how quickly this source of household resilience can be interrupted. During the 2008-2009 crisis, Russia cut quotas for foreign workers and prioritized domestic labour, with direct consequences for Kyrgyz migrants (OSCE and ACTED, 2009). During the COVID-19 pandemic, gross remittance inflows to Kyrgyzstan fell by 25.2% in January-May 2020 (IOM, 2023), and mobility restrictions affected seasonal workers and household food security across the region (FAO, 2021). Re-entry bans have

also pushed returnees into alternative destinations such as Kazakhstan and have created long-term vulnerabilities for their households (IOM, 2016).

2.5. Research gap

The literature thus establishes that EAEU membership changed the legal status of Kyrgyz migrants, that the change was only partially implemented, that remittances are a central component of household resilience, and that the Russian corridor is path-dependent. What remains unexplored is how the protective value of integration status varies across different types of shock, and whether a status that protected households during an economic shock continues to do so when the destination state reframes migration as a security problem. A systematic comparison with Uzbekistan, an outsider that has pursued state-led diversification, has also not been made. This paper addresses these gaps.

2.6. Analytical framework and hypotheses

The analytical framework combines three perspectives. In the new economics of labour migration, migration is a household strategy for diversifying income risk (Stark and Bloom, 1985); institutional status matters because it affects the variance as well as the level of migration income. In the political economy of labour migration, destination states face a trade-off between the number of migrants they admit and the rights they grant them (Ruhs, 2013), so that migrant rights granted on paper may be offset by tighter control of admission and stay. In the literature on migration systems, networks generate path dependence that concentrates flows in established corridors (Wrethed, 2025). Integrating these perspectives with the RIMA-II view of remittances as a pillar of household resilience (Egamberdiev et al., 2023), the paper advances four hypotheses:

H1-Rights premium. EAEU membership reduces the cost of legal status, raising formality, earnings, and remittances per migrant relative to non-member sending countries, especially during economic shocks in the destination country.

H2-Concentration trap. By lowering the cost of the main corridor and reinforcing existing networks, membership concentrates labour migration and remittances in a single destination and increases exposure to destination-specific risks.

H3-Status-blind securitization. When the destination state treats migration as a security issue, measures that apply to all foreigners erode, and may reverse, the protective value of membership.

H4-Outsider diversification. Non-members, having less to lose in the dominant corridor, invest earlier in state-led diversification, which increases resilience at the household and national levels.

Table 1 summarises the legal position of Kyrgyz and Uzbek labour migrants in Russia that underlies these hypotheses.

Table 1

Legal position of Kyrgyz and Uzbek labour migrants in Russia²

Dimension	Kyrgyzstan (EAEU member since 12 August 2015)	Uzbekistan (EAEU observer since December 2020)
Right to work	No work permit, patent or quota (EAEU Treaty, Art. 97)	Monthly patent with advance tax payments
Taxation	Resident income tax rate from the first day (Art. 73)	Fixed advance payments under the patent
Qualifications	Recognised without procedures, except in education, law, medicine and pharmacy	Recognition through national procedures
Social protection	Health care and social insurance on equal terms; pension portability since 1 January 2021	Bilateral arrangements only
Entry requirements	No language, history or law examination	Language, history and law examination for the patent
Organised recruitment	Largely absent; recruitment through networks	2017 intergovernmental agreement; state agency channels
Exposure to post-2024 measures	Largely exposed: controlled-persons register, stay limits, Amina application, biometrics, school tests	Fully exposed

3. Research methodology

3.1. Research approach and design

The study follows a deductive approach: hypotheses derived from the literature are tested against observable outcomes. It adopts a comparative-historical design that contrasts the two countries across three external shocks with different origins: an economic demand shock (2008-2009), a currency and demand shock that coincided with Kyrgyzstan’s accession (2014-2016), and a political and security shock (2024-2026). If membership functions as a protective institution, Kyrgyz outcomes should deteriorate less than those of non-member sending countries during the second and third shocks. The first shock, when both countries were outsiders, serves as a baseline.

3.2. Case selection

Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan are selected as a pair of most-similar cases. Both are post-Soviet, labour-exporting Central Asian economies whose migrants have historically worked mainly in Russia and whose households depend heavily on remittances. The key difference between them is integration status: Kyrgyzstan has been a full member of the EAEU since August 2015, whereas Uzbekistan has been an observer since December 2020 and its citizens remain within Russia’s patent regime. Tajikistan, another non-

²Source: compiled by the author based on Treaty on the Eurasian Economic Union (2014), Poletayev (2019), Daniyarova (2023) and IOM (2026).

member, and Kazakhstan, another member, are used as additional points of comparison where comparable data are available.

3.3. Data sources and indicators

The study uses secondary data. Evidence is drawn from the reviewed literature and from official and international sources: the World Bank’s World Development Indicators; the National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic; the Central Bank and the Migration Agency of Uzbekistan; the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic; Eurasian Analytical Club data reported by Sagynbekova (2017); and data of the Russian Federal Security Service (FSB) reported by the International Organization for Migration (IOM, 2026). The main indicators are the number of citizens present in Russia, entries into Russia, remittances in US dollars and as a share of GDP, the share of remittances and emigrants attributable to Russia, and the number of workers placed abroad through organized channels. Because the indicators differ in definition (for example, stocks of citizens present versus border entries), the analysis compares directions and relative magnitudes rather than levels.

3.4. Household-level research design

The macro evidence is intended to motivate, not replace, household-level identification. Three designs based on the LiK panel are proposed. The first is an event study around the 2015 accession that interacts households’ pre-accession migration exposure with post-accession survey waves and uses staggered difference-in-differences estimators (Callaway and Sant’Anna, 2021) to study documentation status, earnings, remittances, and consumption. The second is a shock-heterogeneity design that compares household responses to the 2014-2015-and-2022-ruble shocks with responses to the 2024-2025 enforcement turn. The third is a cross-country benchmark that harmonizes core variables with Uzbek household surveys and constructs a synthetic control for Kyrgyzstan’s remittance path from non-member sending countries (Abadie, 2021). Household resilience outcomes can be measured with the RIMA-II approach already applied to LiK data (Egamberdiev et al., 2023).

3.5. Reliability, validity and research ethics

Reliability is supported by using official and internationally published series and by reporting the source of every figure. Validity is supported by triangulation: where possible, national statistics are compared with data reported by international organisations and with survey evidence, and the analysis relies on directions and relative changes that are robust to differences in definitions. The study uses only publicly available aggregate data and published research; it does not involve human participants or personal data.

4. Analysis and results

Figure 1 shows the long-term dependence of the two economies on remittances and the timing of the key institutional and political events.

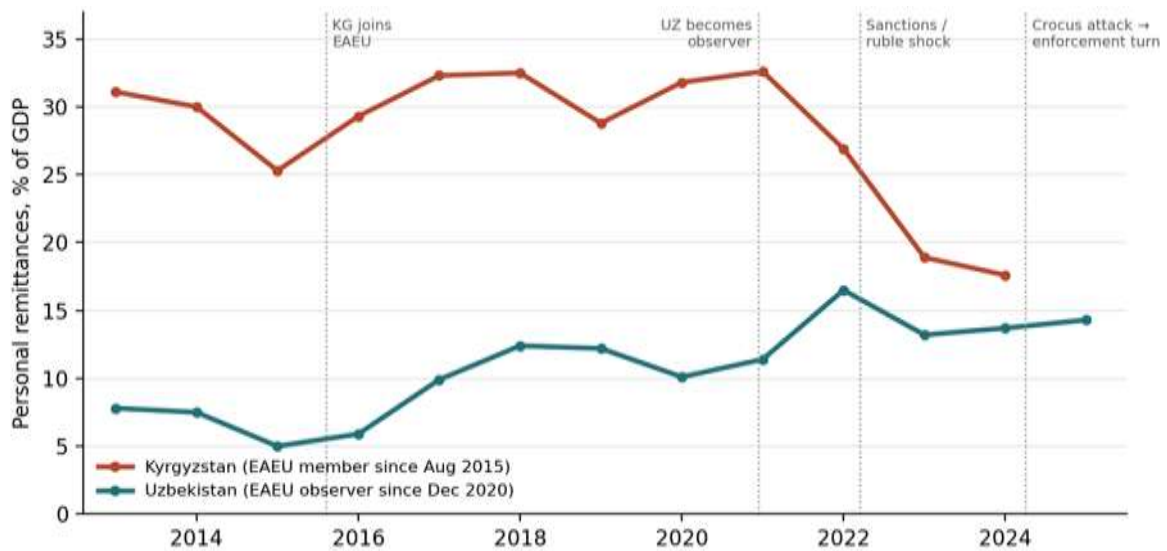


Figure 1. Personal remittances received, % of GDP, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, 2013-2025³

4.1. Shock 1 (2008-2009): two outsiders facing protectionism

Before accession, Kyrgyz and Uzbek migrants faced the same Russian regime. In response to the global financial crisis, the Russian government reduced quotas for foreign workers from November 2008 and sought to replace foreign labour with domestic workers (OSCE and ACTED, 2009). At that time, about 80% of Kyrgyz migrants worked in Russia and generated four-fifths of remittances. The episode illustrates the baseline vulnerability of outsider status: migrants' access to the labour market was adjusted by administrative quotas at the discretion of the destination state.

4.2. Shock 2 (2014–2016): the rights premium becomes visible

The ruble crisis, during which the Russian currency depreciated sharply in 2014, coincided with Kyrgyzstan's accession, and the outcomes diverged. Between March 2015 and February 2016, the number of Kyrgyz citizens in Russia rose from 523,221 to 563,080 (+7.6%), whereas the numbers of Tajik and Uzbek citizens fell from 963,489 to 861,045 (-10.6%) and from 2,131,300 to 1,784,151 (-16.3%) (Sagynbekova, 2017; Figure 2, panel A). The International Organization for Migration likewise reported decreasing migration from all Central Asian republics “except Kyrgyzstan that joined the EEU in 2015” (IOM, 2016). The Eurasian Analytical Club estimated that in the first three quarters of 2015 remittances from non-EAEU migrants fell by more than 11%, while those to Kyrgyzstan rose by 15% (Sagynbekova, 2017). World Bank data in US dollars nevertheless show a decline in Kyrgyzstan's remittances from US\$2.24 billion in 2014 to US\$1.69 billion in 2015, reflecting the devaluation. Together with the reduction in document costs and police

³Source: compiled by the author based on World Bank (2026b), indicator BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS (accessed 24 September 2026).

extortion reported by migrants, this evidence supports H1 for an economic shock: membership functioned as a buffer.

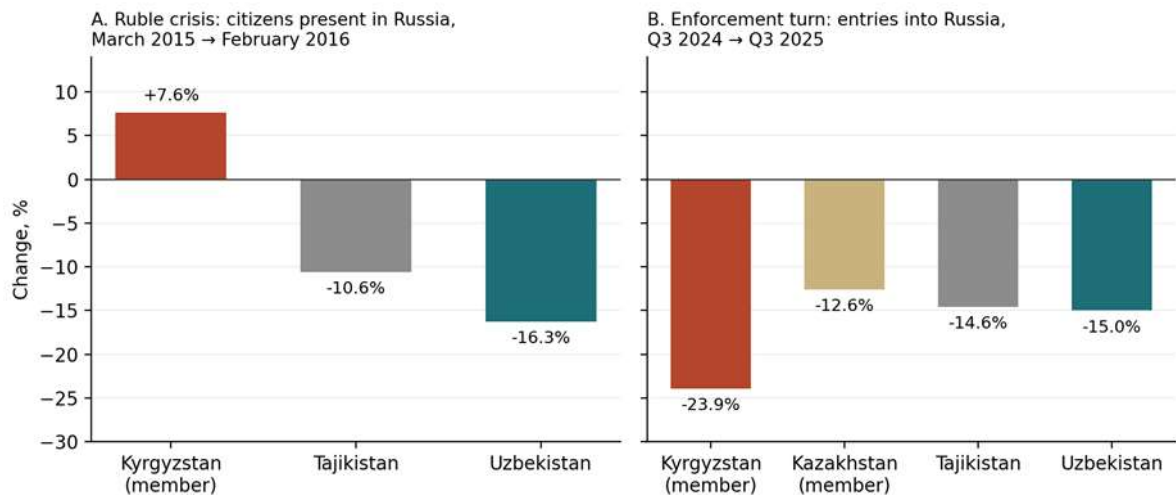


Figure 2. Change in the migration of Kyrgyz and non-member citizens to Russia during two shocks: (A) the ruble crisis and (B) the enforcement turn, %⁴

4.3. Shock 3 (2024-2026): status-blind securitization reverses the premium

The third shock differs in kind. It followed a first disruption in 2022, when the ruble’s depreciation and fear of conscription prompted some Central Asian migrants to leave Russia, although many returned later in the year (ICMPD, 2023). According to the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic, the number of Kyrgyz citizens registered in Russia fell from 680,599 in 2021 to 408,448 in 2023 and to 350,916 in the first half of 2024 (24.kg, 2024). Russia reduced the permissible stay without grounds from 180 to 90 days within a calendar year, created a register of controlled persons, required visa-free migrants in the Moscow region, including Kyrgyz citizens, to install the Amina geolocation application from September 2025, introduced biometric controls at all border crossings, and extended the minimum period of legal employment required for free medical care from three to five years (IOM, 2026). By November 2025, at least 128,497 Kyrgyz nationals were listed in the register of controlled persons, mostly for overstaying. Between April and August 2025, only 12.6% of migrant children whose applications had been submitted passed the new school language test and met the documentation requirements (IOM, 2026), despite Article 98 of the EAEU Treaty, which guarantees workers’ children access to education “in accordance with the legislation of the state of employment”.

⁴Source: panel A-Eurasian Analytical Club data reported in Sagynbekova (2017, Table 2); panel B-FSB data reported in IOM (2026, Figure 4); author’s calculations. The panels use different measures (stock of citizens present versus entries) and are not directly comparable in levels.

As a result, the premium has been reversed rather than merely eroded. FSB data show that entries of Kyrgyz citizens into Russia fell from 339,000 in the third quarter of 2024 to 258,000 in the third quarter of 2025 (-23.9%), compared with declines of 15.0% for Uzbekistan, 14.6% for Tajikistan and 12.6% for Kazakhstan (author’s calculations based on IOM, 2026; Figure 2, panel B). Russia’s migration policy concept for 2026-2030 prioritizes the prevention of migrant “enclaves”, and Moscow has begun recruiting workers from alternative sources such as India (IOM, 2026). These developments support H3: securitization measures that apply to all foreigners neutralize treaty-based advantages and may weigh more heavily on groups whose migration strategies relied on visa-free, permit-free entry rather than on formal recruitment.

4.4. The concentration trap and double exposure

Membership has coincided with deepening concentration. Between January 2024 and July 2025, 87% of Kyrgyz emigrants went to Russia, and in January–October 2025 Russia accounted for 93% of remittance inflows of US\$2.96 billion; remittances from the Republic of Korea fell from US\$45.5 million in 2024 to US\$1.8 million (IOM, 2026). Kyrgyzstan’s falling remittance-to-GDP ratio, from 32.6% in 2021 to 17.6% in 2024, reflects rapid GDP growth rather than lower remittances, which remained at around US\$3 billion (World Bank, 2026a; 2026b; Figure 3). Part of that growth derived from re-exports to Russia, and the trade gains from accession were concentrated in exports to the EAEU (Bekbolotova et al., 2026). Kyrgyz households are therefore exposed to Russia through both the labour and the trade channel. The network mechanisms described by Wrethed (2025) and the drought-induced reliance on the Russian corridor documented by Karymshakov et al. (2024) suggest how this concentration reproduces itself. These findings support H2.

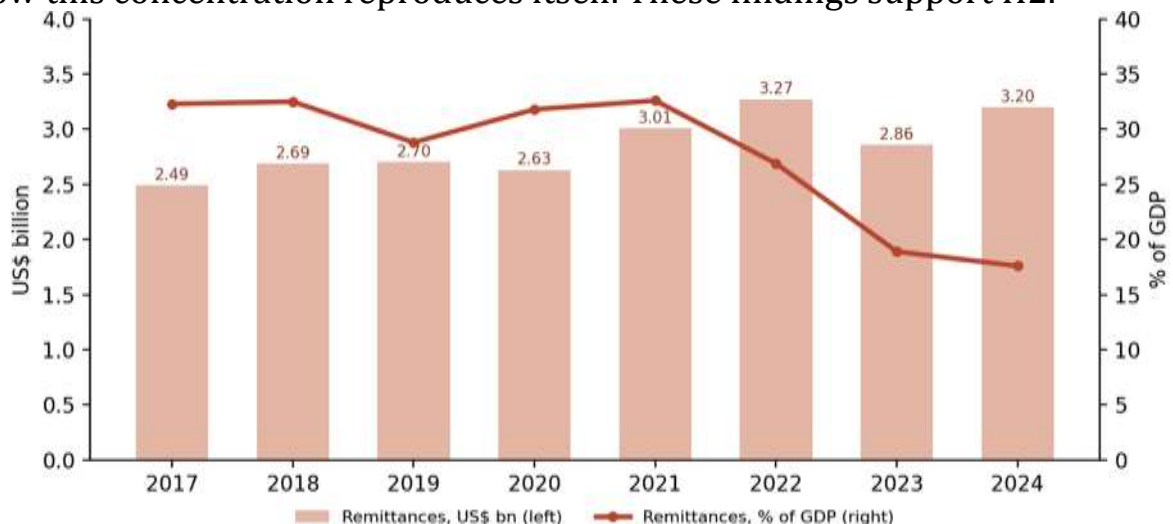


Figure 3. Kyrgyzstan: remittance volume (US\$ billion) and remittances as % of GDP, 2017-2024⁵

⁵Source: compiled by the author based on World Bank (2026b), indicators BX.TRF.PWKR.CD.DT and BX.TRF.PWKR.DT.GD.ZS (accessed 24 September 2026).

4.5. The outsider’s diversification

Uzbekistan illustrates H4. By August 2026, about 1.4 million Uzbek citizens were working abroad, of whom 60% were in Russia and 258,000 in Europe; employment in Europe grew by 42% and in East Asia by 26%, while employment in the CIS countries fell by 29% (Gazeta.uz, 2026). Some 124,500 citizens were placed abroad through organised channels in 2026 under 48 agreements with 23 countries, and Russia’s share of remittances fell from 77.6% in the first quarter of 2025 to 72.4% in the first quarter of 2026 (Gazeta.uz, 2026; Times of Central Asia, 2026). ESCAP (2026) cites Uzbekistan’s deployment of labour attachés as a good practice. Bondarenko (2021) traces the social foundations of this diversification in changing family and community norms, and Kuldasheva (2024) recommends expanding vocational pathways to Europe. Kyrgyzstan has also begun to diversify: its Centre for Employment of Citizens Abroad assisted about 17,200 citizens in 2025, 40% of them women, and the country ratified ILO Convention No. 181 on Private Employment Agencies in October 2025 (IOM, 2026). The scale of these efforts, however, remains small relative to Uzbekistan’s.

Table 2

Three external shocks compared⁶

	2008-2009 financial crisis	2014-2016 ruble crisis	2024-2026 enforcement turn
Nature of shock	Economic demand shock	Currency and demand shock	Political and security shock
Kyrgyzstan’s status	Outsider	Insider (from August 2015)	Insider
Main Russian instruments	Reduced quotas for foreign workers	Patent regime for non-members; EAEU exemption	Controlled-persons register, stay limits, Amina, biometrics, school tests
Relative Kyrgyz outcome	Exposed like other sending countries	Better than non-members (+7.6% vs -10.6% and -16.3%)	Worse than non-members (-23.9% vs -15.0% and -14.6%)
Protective value of membership	Not applicable	High	Low or negative

Tables 2 and 3 summarize the comparison across the three shocks and the latest available indicators.

⁶Source: compiled by the author based on OSCE and ACTED (2009), Sagynbekova (2017) and IOM (2026).

Table 3

Key indicators for Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan⁷

Indicator	Kyrgyzstan	Uzbekistan
Remittances, US\$ billion (2024)	3.20	16.58
Remittances, % of GDP (2024)	17.6	13.7
Share of remittances from Russia	93% (January–October 2025)	77.6% (Q1 2025) → 72.4% (Q1 2026)
Share of emigrants going to Russia	87% (January 2024 – July 2025)	60% of 1.4 million abroad (August 2026)
Change in entries to Russia, Q3 2024 – Q3 2025	–23.9%	–15.0%
Organised placement abroad	17,200 (2025)	124,500 (2026, January–August)

5. Discussion

The results suggest that the protective value of regional integration is contingent rather than intrinsic. When the destination state faced an economic shock and still valued access to labour, the treaty-based exemption from patents gave Kyrgyz migrants a visible advantage. When the destination state turned to the securitization of migration, reframing it as a matter of security and social order, the exemption lost much of its value, because the new instruments operate through residence, registration, surveillance and family status rather than through work authorization. In the terms proposed by Ruhs (2013), the destination state has responded to the migrant rights granted by the treaty by tightening control over admission and stay. This finding qualifies the expectations of Delovarova and Sultanmuratov (2023) and of the Eurasian Development Bank (2021) that the EAEU framework would provide durable protection, and it supports Murzakulova’s (2020) skepticism about migration strategies built on union membership.

Two mechanisms may explain why Kyrgyz entries fell more than Uzbek entries in 2025. First, the membership regime encouraged network-based, permit-free circular mobility, which is particularly exposed to stay limits and registration controls; the gap between formal contracts and official wage payments documented by Poletayev (2019) suggests that many insiders never fully converted their rights into documented status. Second, Uzbekistan’s organised-recruitment channels and diversification may have allowed part of its outflow to be redirected rather than suppressed. Both mechanisms can be tested with household data.

The implications for household resilience are serious. If remittances are a central pillar of households’ safety nets and adaptive capacity (Egamberdiev et al., 2023), and if households increasingly rely on international labour migration to cope with climate shocks such as drought (Karymshakov et al., 2024), the narrowing of the Russian corridor removes a key coping

⁷Source: compiled by the author based on World Bank (2026b), IOM (2026), Gazeta.uz (2026) and Times of Central Asia (2026).

instrument at the moment it is most needed. Poorer households, which already face barriers to migration (Kimsanova et al., n.d.), are likely to be the most affected. Murzakulova's (2020) critique acquires new force: a migration strategy centred on securing the most liberal regime of stay through union membership is insufficient if that regime can be hollowed out unilaterally. For Uzbekistan, the results suggest that diversification of destinations and investment in the skills of prospective migrants protect both household resilience and the country's human capital more effectively than reliance on a single corridor.

6. Conclusion and suggestions

6.1. Conclusions

Regional integration can create rights for migrants, but it cannot by itself guarantee them. The comparison of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan across three shocks shows that EAEU membership provided a measurable premium when Russia faced an economic crisis (H1), but that this premium was reversed by the securitization of Russian migration policy (H3). Membership has also coincided with the concentration of labour and trade exposure in a single partner (H2), while the outsider has diversified faster (H4). For households, the relevant question is not only which door they use to enter a foreign labour market, but how many doors remain open when one begins to close.

6.2. Policy suggestions

The findings lead to the following suggestions:

1) For Kyrgyzstan: use EAEU institutions, notably the Eurasian Economic Commission and the Intergovernmental Council, to seek explicit exemptions for EAEU nationals from status-blind measures and to make pension and health-care portability operational; convert formal migrant rights into documented status through pre-departure orientation, legal literacy and contract registration (Daniyarova, 2023; IOM); and combine membership with active diversification through licensed recruitment under ILO Convention No. 181, the Korean Employment Permit System and European schemes.

2) For Uzbekistan: recognize that the labour-migration argument for full EAEU membership, estimated ex ante at US\$1.5-2 billion in additional remittances (Eurasian Development Bank, 2021), is weaker when treaty rights can be neutralized by security measures; continue to prioritise accession to the World Trade Organization, observer-status diplomacy and bilateral agreements on organized recruitment, social insurance and pensions; and expand language and vocational preparation for new corridors (Bakhoviddinova, 2025; Kuldasheva, 2024).

3) At the regional level: establish a consultative process among sending states, harmonize migration statistics and use mirror data, and protect the low cost of remittance corridors, which were among the cheapest in the world at 0.8-1% in 2021-2023 (ESCAP, 2026).

4) For household resilience: integrate migration shocks into social protection and climate-adaptation programmes, particularly for rural and low-

income households that depend on a single corridor (Egamberdiev, 2025; Murzakulova, 2020).

6.3. Limitations and directions for future research

The findings are preliminary. The macro indicators cannot separate composition effects from behavioural responses; the measures used for the second and third shocks differ, and national migration statistics are known to be inconsistent across the region (ESCAP, 2026). The comparison of FSB entry data relies on the author's matching of published figures and should be verified against the original series. Uzbekistan's diversification also reflects domestic reforms since 2017, not only its external status. The next step is household-level analysis using LiK and harmonized Uzbek data, supported by a short module in future LiK rounds on legal status, documents held, transfer channels and intended next destinations.

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