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**“MIGRATION AS A TOOL OF PUBLIC DIPLOMACY IN CENTRAL ASIA:
CHALLENGES, STRATEGIES, AND PROSPECTS”**

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the growing role of migration as a tool of public diplomacy in the Central Asian context. As millions of Central Asian citizens live and work abroad, they become informal ambassadors of their home countries, contributing to international perception, cultural exchange, and bilateral cooperation. The paper analyzes how labor migration, diaspora engagement, and transnational networks are increasingly intertwined with states’ soft power strategies. Drawing on the experiences of Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan, the study highlights both the opportunities and risks associated with diaspora-driven public diplomacy. It argues that to harness migration as a strategic diplomatic instrument, Central Asian governments must adopt coordinated policies that link migration governance with public diplomacy objectives. The article concludes with policy recommendations for building sustainable, people-centered international engagement.

Index Terms: Migration diplomacy; public diplomacy; soft power; Central Asia; diaspora engagement; labor migration; bilateral relations; remittances; informal diplomacy; migration governance.

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**“МИГРАЦИЯ КАК ИНСТРУМЕНТ НАРОДНОЙ ДИПЛОМАТИИ В
ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ: ВЫЗОВЫ, СТРАТЕГИИ И ПЕРСПЕКТИВЫ”**

АННОТАЦИЯ

В данной статье рассматривается возрастающая роль миграции как инструмента публичной дипломатии в контексте Центральной Азии. Поскольку миллионы граждан центральноазиатских стран живут и работают за рубежом, они становятся неформальными посланцами своих государств, влияя на международное восприятие, способствуя культурному

обмену и двустороннему сотрудничеству. В работе анализируется, как трудовая миграция, вовлеченность диаспоры и транснациональные сети все теснее переплетаются со стратегиями государств в области «мягкой силы». На примере Узбекистана, Кыргызстана и Таджикистана исследование освещает как возможности, так и риски, связанные с народной дипломатией, осуществляемой диаспорой. В статье утверждается, что для эффективного использования миграции в качестве стратегического дипломатического инструмента правительствам стран Центральной Азии необходимо принять скоординированную политику, связывающую управление миграционными процессами с целями народной дипломатии. Статья завершается рекомендациями по выстраиванию устойчивого, ориентированного на человека международного взаимодействия.

Ключевые слова: миграционная дипломатия; публичная дипломатия; мягкая власть; Центральная Азия; вовлечение диаспоры; трудовая миграция; двусторонние отношения; денежные переводы; неформальная дипломатия; управление миграцией.

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“МИГРАЦИЯ МАРКАЗИЙ ОСИЁДА ХАЛҚ ДИПЛОМАТИЯСИ ВОСИТАСИ СИФАТИДА: МУАММОЛАР, СТРАТЕГИЯЛАР ВА ИСТИҚБОЛЛАР”

АННОТАЦИЯ

Ушбу мақола Марказий Осиё контекстида миграциянинг халқ дипломатияси воситаси сифатидаги тобора кучайиб бораётган аҳамиятини тадқиқ этади. Марказий Осиёлик миллионлаб фуқаролар чет элларда яшаб, ишлаётгани сабабли, улар ўз ватанларининг норасмий элчиларига айланиб, халқаро тасаввур, маданий алмашинув ва икки томонлама ҳамкорликка ҳисса қўшмоқдалар. Мақолада меҳнат миграцияси, диаспора фаолияти ва трансмиллий алоқалар давлатларнинг “юмшоқ куч” стратегиялари билан қандай узвий боғланиб бораётгани таҳлил қилинади. Ўзбекистон, Қирғизистон ва Тожикистон тажрибасига асосланган ҳолда, тадқиқот диаспорага асосланган халқ дипломатияси билан боғлиқ имкониятлар ва хатарларни ёритиб беради. Мақолада таъкидланишича, миграциядан стратегик дипломатик восита сифатида фойдаланиш учун Марказий Осиё ҳукуматлари миграция бошқарувини халқ дипломатияси мақсадлари билан боғлайдиган мувофиқлаштирилган сиёсатни ишлаб чиқишлари лозим. Мақола якунида барқарор ва инсонпарвар халқаро ҳамкорликни йўлга қўйиш бўйича сиёсий тавсиялар келтирилади.

Калит сўзлар: Миграция дипломатияси; халқ дипломатияси; юмшоқ куч; Марказий Осиё; диаспорани жалб қилиш; меҳнат миграцияси; икки томонлама муносабатлар; пул ўтказмалари; норасмий дипломатия; миграцияни бошқариш.

Relevance of the Problem. Migration is no longer a phenomenon to be understood purely through the lenses of economics or demography. In the 21st century, migration has evolved into a critical dimension of international relations and a potent instrument of public diplomacy. This is especially evident in Central Asia, where large-scale labor migration and the formation of transnational communities have begun to shape the region’s external image and diplomatic positioning.

Central Asian states – particularly Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan – have experienced significant outflows of labor migrants since the collapse of the Soviet Union. These migrants, through everyday interactions in host societies, play a subtle yet impactful role in fostering cross-cultural understanding and promoting the values, identity, and image of their home countries. This dynamic process –whereby non-state actors such as migrants and diasporas engage

in intercultural communication across borders – is increasingly recognized as a form of “people-to-people” or informal diplomacy.

At the same time, governments in the region are beginning to understand and leverage the strategic potential of their diasporas and migration networks. Bilateral labor agreements, cultural diplomacy initiatives, and diaspora outreach programs all reflect attempts to integrate migration into broader public diplomacy strategies. However, this emerging form of diplomacy also comes with complex challenges: irregular migration, overreliance on remittances, brain drain, and the politicization of migrant communities in host countries.

This article explores the interplay between migration and public diplomacy in Central Asia. It seeks to identify how mobility can serve as a platform for international dialogue and influence, while outlining the institutional and strategic shifts necessary to manage migration as a diplomatic resource. Through a combination of theoretical insights and regional case studies, the study provides a comprehensive understanding of migration’s evolving role in Central Asia’s international engagement.

Degree of Study of the Problem. Migration issues in Uzbekistan and Central Asia have been the subject of extensive scholarly research from historical, economic, demographic, legal, and gender perspectives. A substantial body of work has emerged in recent decades that reflects the growing academic interest in understanding the dynamics of migration processes both within and beyond the region.

In Uzbekistan, one of the leading scholars in this field is R.X. Murtazayeva, whose numerous studies have significantly contributed to the historiography of migration[1]. Her works include detailed analyses of migration patterns in Tashkent during the late 1980s and early 1990s, the transformation of Uzbekistan's ethnic composition due to migration, female participation in labor migration, and the feminization of migration under globalization. She has also addressed the development of Uzbekistan’s interstate cooperation in the field of labor migration and the gender dimensions of migration governance.

Additionally, Uzbek researchers such as D. Junaydullaev, Z. Tojiev, X.X. Mamadalieva, D.N. Muydinov, L. Isokov, and A. Saliev have explored various aspects of internal and external migration processes. Their research covers areas like regional migration regulation, demographic and social impacts of family migration, migration and social stability, the protection of migrants’ rights, and labor redistribution mechanisms. These contributions are often backed by dissertations and policy-focused studies that analyze migration governance in the context of socio-economic development[2].

From a demographic perspective, L.P. Maksakova is recognized for her foundational work on employment-related population issues in Soviet Uzbekistan, laying the groundwork for understanding contemporary migration challenges[3].

Statistical data and policy reports from institutions such as the Agency of Statistics under the President of the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Turkish Migration Service, and the Development Strategy Center have also been used to monitor and assess migration trends, gender dynamics, and labor export mechanisms.

Despite the breadth of existing research, the specific link between migration and public diplomacy—particularly how Central Asian migrants act as informal ambassadors contributing to international dialogue and image-building – remains relatively underexplored. This gap underscores the need for more targeted academic inquiry into migration diplomacy as an evolving tool of soft power and international engagement in the region.

Methods of Writing the Article. The scientific article is based on theoretical and empirical research methods, specifically analysis and synthesis, specification and generalization, induction and deduction. Empirical methods include the study of literature, documents, and activity results, expert assessments, and a retrospective perspective.

Objectives of Writing the Article.

To analyze migration as a strategic element of public diplomacy in the context of Central Asia, moving beyond traditional socio-economic interpretations of migration.

To explore how labor migration and diaspora engagement contribute to shaping international perceptions and enhancing the soft power of Central Asian countries, especially Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan.

To assess the opportunities and risks associated with using migration as an informal diplomatic tool, including its impact on bilateral relations, cultural exchange, and international image-building.

Main Part. Migration was always a part of human history. Societies as we know them are a mix of people whose predecessors came from other locations. There is a variety of reasons, types, and forms of migration. We move in search of better economic opportunities, some of us to study and others do it to escape conflicts or due to environmental factors. People may do it as individuals or in groups. Most humans migrate internally, meaning within a single country. The great migration of people took place during the twentieth century in the process of urbanization (and is still undergoing). Urbanization is a form of internal migration. By some sources at the beginning of the century (twentieth), less than 13% of all humans lived in urban areas. While today, about a half of the global population inhabits urban centers. External migration means leaving one country to move to another. The global number of international migrants has grown faster than the world's population. As a result, migrants comprise 3.5 percent of the global population today[4].

There are several types of migration and the most common are:

Labor migration in 2019 there were more than 169 million international migrant workers in the world.

Forced migration or displacement, by the end of 2020, 55 million people were living in internal displacement as a result of conflicts as well as disasters.

Human trafficking and modern slavery the 2017 report estimates that 40 million people were victims of modern slavery on any given day in 2016.

Environmental migration around 7 million people in 104 countries and territories were living in displacement as a result of disasters that happened not only in 2019 but also in previous years.

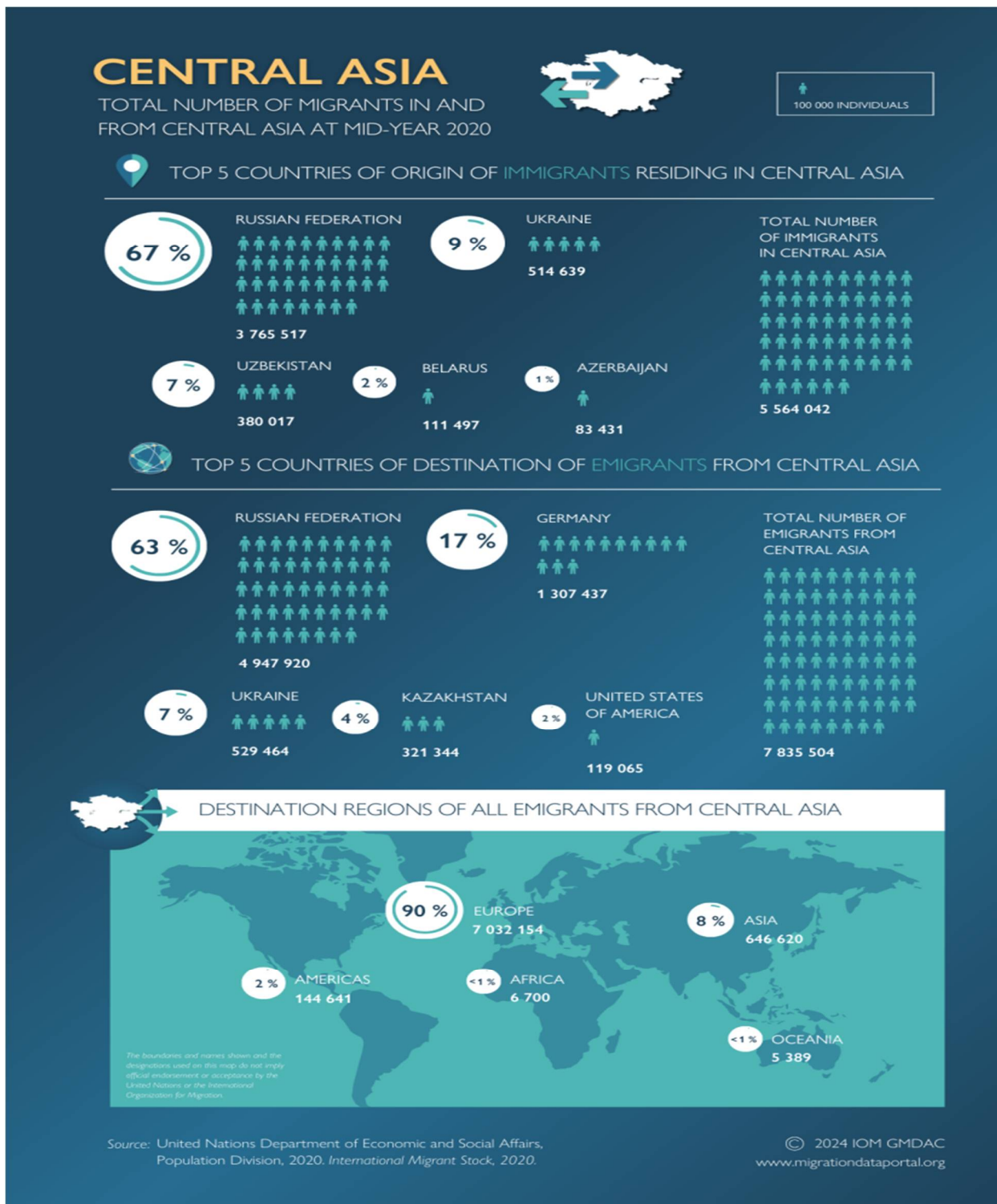
Migration is becoming one of the key dimensions of states' diplomatic relations, especially with the rising numbers of migrants. As migration becomes a more prominent part of foreign policy strategies, countries are using diplomatic tools and procedures to manage the cross-border movement of people[5].

In international relations, migration diplomacy is the use of diplomatic tools, processes, and procedures to manage cross-border population mobility, including both the strategic use of migration flows as a means to obtain other aims, and the use of diplomatic methods to achieve goals related to migration[6]. Migration has come to constitute an increasingly-important area of states' engagement with one another, with bilateral multilateral strategies including the promotion or discouragement of bilateral migratory flows; agreements on preferential treatment to certain foreign nationals; the initiation of guest-worker programs or other short-term labor migration schemes; the deportation of foreign nationals; and so on.

From the perspective of foreign ministries, diplomats, and governments, the challenges to diplomacy are numerous. Above mentioned need to be more proactive in resolving concerns of migration. Promoting dialogue and cooperation are the most important roles of diplomacy. Such is the case concerning issues of migration. It should be conducted on a local and global level by including international organizations and civil society agencies.

This should be handled as an issue with complex inter-linkages with many other subjects and areas, in bilateral, regional, and global relations. It needs to be integrated closely with political, economic, and public diplomacy.

Historically known for being part of the Silk Road trade route which facilitated the movement of goods and people between Europe and Asia, Central Asia had an estimated population of 75.9 million people as of mid-year 2021 (UN DESA, 2022). As of mid-year 2020, there were an estimated 5.6 million international migrants in the five Central Asian countries of Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan.[1] Nearly nine per cent of the international



migrant stock hosted in Central Asia were from within the sub-region (UN DESA, 2020).

Central Asia (CA) remains a region reliant on mobility, with millions on the move in search of better work and life opportunities. Migration is recognized as an undeniable source of prosperity, innovation, and sustainable development, becoming a major contributing factor to economic

development. At the same time, this mobility creates challenges and risks for the countries of origin, transit and destination, and for the migrants themselves[7].

Globally, there were 7.8 million international migrants from Central Asian countries as of mid-year 2020. Of these, 63 per cent (4.9 million) were in the Russian Federation, followed by 17 per cent (1.3 million) in Germany and 7 per cent (529 thousand) in Ukraine as of mid-year 2020 (UN DESA, 2020). In 2020, between 10 per cent and 16 per cent of the economically active population of Central Asia was living outside of their country of origin, primarily in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan (IOM, 2020). The Central Asia-Russian Federation migration corridor is one of the most significant labour migration corridors in the world (IOM, 2021a), with the Russian Federation hosting an estimated 6.6 million international migrants from Central Asia in 2020 (Ministry of Interior of the Russian Federation, 2021). The numbers and shares might have changed since February 2022 due to the Russian war in Ukraine[8].

Migration is an important issue for Central Asia. Between 10% and 16% of the economically active population of Central Asia is living outside of their country of origin, primarily in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan. Therefore, the political importance of migration cannot be understated, it makes migration a pertinent subject and a tool for political leverage. The Central Asia-Russian Federation migration corridor is one of the most significant labor migration corridors in the world, accommodating an estimated 6.6 million international migrants from Central Asia in 2020. People from Central Asia also migrate to Europe and an increasing number of Central Asians are moving to destinations such as Turkey and the Republic of Korea through organized labor migration programs.

Central Asia is one of the most vulnerable regions to climate change, with warming levels projected to be higher than the global mean, leading to more heat extremes. Migration – in its different forms – is and will continue to be shaped by climate impacts and environmental degradation.

At the same time, when enabling conditions are present, migration can support climate change adaptation and build climate resilience. These mobility related issues extend beyond national boundaries and need to be addressed regionally. In addition, internal migration in some countries of Central Asia, particularly rural-to-urban migration, is increasingly contributing to urbanization. There is a growing demand for public services (e.g., health, education, employment etc.) and amenities in larger cities. For example, in Kyrgyzstan internal migrants comprise 18% of the population. It is important to note that internal migration can be a significant development factor.

Labor migration is one of the most sensitive issues for the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The three Central Asian republics were the ones that have had the largest population growth after the collapse of the Soviet Union. For instance, over the three decades since 1990, Kyrgyzstan's population has increased by nearly 50%. For Tajikistan, this figure stands at 80.1%. Uzbekistan's population has grown by about 67% adding 13.7 million people while the average population growth for the rest of the USSR over the last three decades, except for Baltic states, was only at 15.8%. At the same time, these countries were severely affected by the overall economic crisis that all former Soviet states had to face as soon as they became independent. The transition from a planned economy to a market economy, a huge contraction in the public sector, and falling incomes led to the collapse of large industrial and agricultural enterprises, which strongly were largely oriented to other former Soviet republics. A sharp decline of industries accompanied by boosting demographics led to massive unemployment, which unleashed a large labor migration from these Central Asian states[9].

The policies of the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan regarding labor migration were different and often inconsistent throughout the period of independence. Most of the time, labor migration was viewed by the governments as alleviation because outmigration of excessive labor certainly released internal socio-economic tensions and greatly helped the government in coping with acute socio-economic issues such as unemployment, poverty, lack of infrastructure, etc. Therefore, the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan were

usually silently satisfied with the large-scale out-migration of labor and even were willing to push the excessive labor out to other countries, incentivizing them to do so. Therefore, labor migration often was an issue that authorities of Central Asian states did not want to disclose in order not to damage the image of the government.

However, it can be said that the governments of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are generally rather accurate at evaluating the risks and are conscious of the importance of labor migration for the economy. The remittances sent by labor migrants to sustain their families have become an essentially important support mechanism and made significant contributions to household incomes in these countries. For example, remittances comprised 11.6% of the GDP of Uzbekistan in 2020. For Kyrgyzstan this figure stood at 31.1%, making it the third country in terms of remittances to GDP ratio in the world, followed by Tajikistan with 26.7%. These earnings by labor migrants greatly contributed to the socio-economic situation in these countries. But on the other hand, this kind of dependence on remittances from abroad is clearly a factor of serious economic risk that the governments of Central Asian states have acknowledged in 2020 when many borders around the world were suddenly closed. Moreover, the vast majority of the labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan work in one country – Russia[10].

Migratory movements occur in large part as out migration, and most noticeably to the Russian Federation, while intraregional migration is also becoming easier and more common. With significantly higher wages and better employment opportunities, as well as historical links that facilitate communication and networking, the Russian Federation is a preferred destination for migrants from Central Asia; today 6.6 million Central Asians live in the Russian Federation. While the majority are lower-skilled labor migrants, there are also highly skilled labour migrants, for example migrants from Kazakhstan are largely composed of students and highly skilled professionals.

Central Asians also migrate to Europe and to China, where work and family ties are relatively strong. An increasing number are moving to Turkey and the Republic of Korea to find work, facilitated by labor agreements with governments in the region. Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are all seeking to diversify migration destinations by signing bilateral agreements, such as the one between Uzbekistan and Japan. Within the region, Kazakhstan is predominantly a country of transit and destination, attracting skilled workers and becoming a destination for lower-skilled migrant workers from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. In recent years, policies have been developed intraregional migration, including bilateral agreements on entry and readmission and cooperation on management of mixed migration flows, border management, return migration, migrants' rights and protection and irregular migration.

Kyrgyzstan is one of the members of the Eurasian Economic Union, which allows its citizens to work freely in other member-states, including Russia. When it comes to Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, labor migration has always been subject to bilateral agreements and negotiations with Russia. The majority of the labor migrants from Tajikistan and Uzbekistan in Russia get work permits and work legally. The government thus regulates labor migration by issuing quotas for work permits.

However, the number of migrants willing to stay and work in Russia exceeds the work permits quotas in the labor market leading to illegal migration.

The International Organization for Migration as the UN Migration Agency, works with its member states in the region - Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan - to maximize the positive impacts of good migration governance. IOM will work to build regular, safe and dignified migratory channels, particularly to key destinations for migrant workers such as the Russian Federation, and leverage mobility, including the economic benefits and skills of migrants and diaspora, to support sustainable development at national and community levels, in line with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

In conclusion, Migration diplomacy is therefore becoming essentially important in the overall diplomacy of Central Asian countries in their relations with other regional actors in Eurasia and world community.

Conclusion. Migration in Central Asia has evolved beyond its traditional socio-economic framework to become a crucial element of public diplomacy and regional soft power. As labor migrants and diaspora communities engage in intercultural communication abroad, they unintentionally yet effectively contribute to shaping the international image of their home countries. This people-driven engagement forms the foundation of a dynamic and informal public diplomacy that operates parallel to official diplomatic channels.

Countries such as Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan are beginning to recognize this potential by developing diaspora outreach mechanisms, signing labor agreements, and engaging in cultural diplomacy efforts. Despite these positive developments, the region continues to face multiple challenges: inconsistent migration governance, overdependence on remittances, irregular migration, and limited institutional coordination between migration and foreign policy frameworks.

Understanding migration as a tool of public diplomacy requires a paradigm shift – from treating migration as a temporary economic fix to viewing it as a strategic long-term asset. Such a shift would help Central Asian states strengthen their soft power, diversify international partnerships, and foster mutual understanding with host countries.

Recommendations. Central Asian governments should institutionalize migration as part of their foreign policy by linking migration management with public diplomacy objectives across ministries and agencies. Governments should support the establishment of cultural centers, diaspora associations, and online platforms that help maintain ties with citizens abroad while promoting national identity and heritage. Providing robust consular support and legal assistance for migrants abroad will improve state legitimacy and protect the rights of citizens, thereby reinforcing positive international perceptions.

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