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Navigating Fluid Borders: Kazakhstan's Labour Migrants in Transnational Mobility Regimes

Albina Aidarkhankyzy*

This article examines Kazakhstan's external labour migration through the lens of transnational mobility and socio-legal governance. While Kazakhstan is often analysed as a destination for migrant labour within Central Asia, it is increasingly connected to international labour markets as a country of origin for outward labour migration. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Kazakh migrants working in Russia, South Korea, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium and the United States, the study explores how migrants navigate diverse regulatory environments that structure contemporary transnational labour mobility. Adopting a socio-legal perspective, the article focuses on how formal migration regimes are interpreted and enacted through migrants' everyday practices. The findings demonstrate that, while wage differentials and labour-market inequalities remain key motivations for migration, migrants' experiences are also shaped by complex visa regimes, temporary work programmes and differentiated migration policies across destination countries. Migrants rely heavily on transnational social networks, diaspora communities and digital communication platforms to interpret bureaucratic procedures, access employment opportunities and manage legal uncertainty. By foregrounding migrants' narratives, the study shows how migration governance operates in practice through the interaction of formal regulations and socially embedded informal infrastructures, contributing to broader debates on migration regimes and transnational mobility.

Keywords: Kazakhstan, labour migration, transnational mobility, migration regimes, socio-legal governance, migrant networks

* Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan.
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Introduction

Over the past several decades, cross-border labour mobility has developed into a fundamental element of global economic restructuring and integration (de Haas, Castles and Miller 2019). Expanding labour markets, transnational recruitment infrastructures and digital communication technologies have enabled workers from a wide range of countries to participate in increasingly interconnected migration systems (de Haas *et al.* 2019; Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci and Pellegrino 1999; Vertovec 2004). At the same time, states have intensified efforts to regulate migration through complex visa regimes, temporary worker programmes and digitalised border-management systems (Geddes and Scholten 2016; Ruhs 2013). As a result, contemporary labour mobility unfolds within a paradoxical landscape where opportunities for international migration expand while the institutional frameworks governing migrants' movement and employment become increasingly differentiated and conditional (Fontanari 2022; Gren, Abdelhady and Joormann 2023; Hollifield 2004; Sassen 1999).

Within these global processes, much migration scholarship has traditionally focused on well-established labour-exporting countries or major migration destinations (IOM 2019). By contrast, less attention has been devoted to semi-peripheral states whose migration systems simultaneously encompass both emigration and immigration dynamics (Boucher and Gest 2015; Düvell 2020; Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022). Kazakhstan represents an instructive case in this regard. While the country is often analysed as a regional destination for migrant workers within Central Asia due to its relatively strong economy (Dave 2014; Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022), it is also increasingly connected to international labour markets as a country of origin for outward labour migration (Alpysbaeva, Abylkasimova and Kalimova 2015; Delovarova 2024, Pokidaev 2025). Growing numbers of Kazakh citizens seek employment opportunities abroad, particularly in Russia, South Korea, Turkey and European countries, reflecting broader transformations in global and regional labour mobilities.

The expansion of external migration from Kazakhstan raises a number of analytical questions that extend beyond the economic motivations commonly associated with labour migration (Lee 1966; Massey, Arango, Hugo, Kouaouci, Pellegrino and Taylor 1993; Todaro 1969). Outward mobility intersects with broader structural processes including labour-market inequalities, demographic change and the reconfiguration of state–society relations in the post-Soviet period (Bokayev, Torebekova, Davletbayeva and Kanafina 2021; Laruelle 2013, Sadovskaya 2016). At the same time, migrants from Kazakhstan increasingly navigate diverse regulatory environments that differ significantly across destination countries. These environments range from relatively open regional labour-mobility frameworks (Ryazantsev 2016; Ryazantsev and Korneev 2013) to highly regulated temporary migration schemes and complex visa systems (Bokayev 2023; Chu 2024; Isaeva and Eun 2025). Such variation highlights the importance of examining migration not simply as a demographic flow but as a socially embedded process shaped by multiple institutional and regulatory contexts. Understanding how Kazakh migrants interpret and adapt to these differing regulatory environments is therefore crucial for engaging with broader debates in migration studies about how migration regimes operate in practice. This perspective shifts analytical attention away from migration policies alone and towards the everyday strategies through which migrants navigate and negotiate the institutional landscapes of transnational mobility.

Accordingly, this article addresses the following research question: *How do Kazakh migrants navigate the complex regulatory environments that structure contemporary transnational labour mobility?* While migration regimes are frequently examined through the lens of national policy frameworks or international governance arrangements, the practical operation of these regimes becomes visible in

migrants' everyday encounters with bureaucratic institutions, employers, recruitment intermediaries and migrant networks. Examining how migrants interpret and navigate these interactions provides important insights into how regulatory frameworks are translated into lived experiences of mobility across different institutional contexts.

To address this question, the article adopts a socio-legal perspective (Urinboyev 2020) that focuses on the interaction between formal migration governance and the everyday practices through which migrants organise mobility. Theoretically, the article brings together socio-legal scholarship on migrants' relationships with law (Kubal 2013; Urinboyev 2020) and research on migration regimes (Boucher and Gest 2015; Düvell 2020; Natter 2018) and migration infrastructures (Leurs 2019; Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022; Xiang and Lindquist 2014). Rather than treating migration regimes as fixed policy frameworks, the study conceptualises them as lived governance environments that are interpreted and enacted through everyday encounters with bureaucracies, employers, intermediaries and migrant networks. This framework enables the analysis to examine how Kazakh migrants translate formal regulations into practical strategies and how informal infrastructures shape legal navigation across different destinations.

Studies have emphasised that migrants rarely engage with a single coherent legal framework or social field. Instead, they encounter multiple and overlapping normative orders involving immigration law, labour regulations, organisational rules and informal community practices (Kubal 2019; Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022; Vertovec 2004). Within such layered governance environments, migrants develop adaptive strategies that combine formal compliance with socially embedded knowledge and networks.

Based on these considerations, the article examines Kazakhstan's external labour migration through the lens of transnational mobility (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Vertovec 2004) and migrants' everyday navigation strategies (Kubal 2013; Urinboyev 2020). Drawing on macro-level migration indicators and qualitative interviews with Kazakh migrants working across several international destinations, the study explores how migrants navigate heterogeneous regulatory landscapes and construct practical strategies for managing legal uncertainty. The article argues that migrants themselves play an active role in shaping the social infrastructures through which transnational mobility operates. Rather than viewing migrants solely as subjects of regulation, the study highlights how they interpret legal frameworks, mobilise networks and develop everyday strategies that enable them to navigate complex migration systems. By analysing these experiences, the article seeks to contribute to broader debates on migration regimes, socio-legal studies of migration and the governance of transnational labour mobility.

This article contributes to ongoing debates on migration regimes and socio-legal governance by shifting analytical attention from state-centred understandings of migration governance and towards migrants' everyday navigation of transnational mobility regimes. Existing migration-regime scholarship has often focused on policy architectures, border controls and state regulatory frameworks (Geddes and Scholten 2016; Hollifield 2004), while socio-legal studies have demonstrated that legal systems are enacted through everyday practices (Ewick and Silbey 1998). Building on these perspectives, the Kazakhstan case refines existing frameworks by showing how migrants operate across multiple and highly differentiated regulatory environments that span post-Soviet, East Asian and Western migration corridors. Rather than treating migration regimes as coherent national systems, the findings highlight how governance is produced through the interaction of formal regulations and migrant-led social infrastructures, including transnational networks, diaspora communities and digital communication platforms. In this sense, the article extends socio-legal approaches to migration by demonstrating how

migrants actively translate, interpret and operationalise regulatory frameworks across borders, thereby contributing to a more actor-centred understanding of transnational mobility governance.

The remainder of the article proceeds as follows. The next section examines the historical trajectories and institutional foundations of Kazakhstan's outward migration while situating these dynamics within broader global processes of transnational labour mobility and migration governance. The methodology section then outlines the research design, data sources and qualitative interview approach used in the study. An ethnographic vignette provides an entry point into migrants' lived experiences, followed by the empirical analysis based on interview data with Kazakh migrants working across several international destinations. The discussion section reflects on the broader implications of these findings for understanding transnational labour mobility, migration governance and socio-legal navigation in the Central Asian context. The article concludes by summarising the main contributions and identifying directions for future research.

Understanding Kazakhstan's external labour migration in the context of transnational mobilities

Kazakhstan's external labour migration must be understood within broader historical and institutional processes while also being situated within the expanding systems of transnational mobility that connect regional and global labour markets. Although outward migration has intensified in the decades following independence, the social capacity for mobility and adaptation has deeper historical roots in Kazakh society (Finke, Sanders and Zanca 2013; Olcott 1995). Long-standing patterns of movement, reliance on dispersed networks and strategies for coping with uncertainty have historically shaped how mobility is organised and interpreted (Cameron 2018; Khazanov 1994; Martin 2012). These historical experiences provide an important backdrop for understanding how contemporary migration from Kazakhstan is embedded within wider global processes of labour mobility.

Historically, mobility was a defining feature of social and economic life across the Eurasian steppe. Nomadic and semi-nomadic pastoralism required seasonal movement across large territories in search of grazing lands and ecological sustainability (Finke *et al.* 2013; Finke 2024; Khazanov 1994). Cyclical transitions between *zhailau* (summer pastures) and *qystau* (wintering grounds) structured labour organisation, kinship cooperation and resource management across dispersed communities (Finke 2021; Olcott 1981a, 1995). These practices fostered the capacity to coordinate social relations across space and adapt to uncertain conditions. While contemporary international labour migration operates within very different institutional contexts, the historical centrality of mobility contributed to enduring social repertoires in which movement is often perceived as a pragmatic response to economic and environmental change (Finke 2021, 2024).

Transregional exchange networks further reinforced these mobility traditions. Cities such as Taraz, Otyrar and Sairam functioned as important nodes along Silk Road trade routes connecting the steppe to broader Eurasian commercial systems (Frankopan 2015; Kurmanaliyeva, Aljanova and Manassova 2018). Through these exchanges, local communities interacted with multiple political authorities, markets and cultural traditions. These historical forms of connectivity helped to cultivate a social orientation towards movement and adaptation across different institutional environments – an orientation that continues to shape how mobility is understood and practised today.

The Soviet period fundamentally transformed these earlier patterns of mobility. Collectivisation and sedentarisation dismantled pastoral movement while producing large-scale displacement (Olcott 1995). The famine of 1931–1933 triggered significant population movements and represented one of the earliest episodes of external migration from Kazakhstan in the modern period (Cameron 2018;

Pianciola 2001). Subsequent Soviet industrialisation institutionalised labour mobility through centrally planned allocation systems that redistributed workers across industrial centres, mining regions and urban enterprises throughout the Soviet Union (Olcott 1981b). Although contemporary migration now occurs primarily through market-based mechanisms, these experiences familiarised populations with bureaucratic systems of labour allocation, recruitment procedures and documentation practices.

Following independence in 1991, economic restructuring and labour-market liberalisation reshaped migration dynamics across the country. The collapse of Soviet industrial networks, enterprise closures and broader economic transformations generated new forms of both internal and international mobility (Anderson and Hancilová 2011; Delovarova 2024; Sadovskaya 2016). While early post-Soviet migration flows were partly driven by the departure of ethnic minorities to historical homelands, outward labour migration among Kazakh citizens gradually expanded (Laruelle 2013; Pokidaev 2025; Ryazantsev 2016). Over time, migration increasingly became a strategy for income diversification and social mobility among households facing labour-market uncertainty (Abuova, Baigabylov, Abdikakimov, Aubakirova and Assylkhanova 2024; Syzdykbekov, Jazykbayeva, Matayeva and Rakhimova 2021). Wage disparities between Kazakhstan and more-developed labour markets continue to encourage outward mobility, particularly among younger and educated workers seeking higher earnings and professional opportunities abroad (Delovarova 2024; Kelinbaeva, Sarsenova, Jumagulov, Tolekov and Kasymgaliev 2025).

These developments have unfolded within broader transformations in global labour mobility. Expanding economic integration, digital communication technologies and transnational recruitment infrastructures have enabled workers from semi-peripheral economies to access employment opportunities across multiple regions (de Haas *et al.* 2019; Massey *et al.* 1999; Vertovec 2004). Kazakhstan has become increasingly embedded in these transnational mobility systems, linking its workforce to labour markets across Eurasia, East Asia and parts of Europe and North America.

This positioning reflects Kazakhstan's intermediary location within contemporary migration systems. On the one hand, the country participates in regional mobility frameworks such as the Eurasian Economic Union (Kudaibergenova 2016), which facilitates relatively open labour mobility between member states (Ryazantsev 2016). On the other hand, Kazakh migrants increasingly engage with labour markets governed by more-restrictive immigration regimes in countries such as South Korea or the United Kingdom (Chu 2024; Delovarova 2024; Isaeva and Eun 2025). These overlapping migration corridors connect Kazakhstan simultaneously to post-Soviet regional mobility structures and to global labour-migration regimes characterised by differentiated visa systems and temporary labour programmes.

The diversification of migration destinations reflects these broader transformations. Russia has historically remained the primary destination for Kazakh migrants due to geographic proximity, linguistic familiarity and shared institutional legacies (Ryazantsev 2016). In recent years, however, migration routes have expanded significantly. Increasing numbers of Kazakh citizens now work in South Korea, Turkey and the United Kingdom, while smaller flows extend to the United States and several European countries (Astana Times 2025). These evolving migration geographies illustrate how Kazakhstan has become integrated into a broader transnational-mobility system linking multiple labour markets.

These migration flows are shaped not only by economic incentives but also by evolving systems of migration governance. As global labour mobility has expanded, states have developed increasingly sophisticated mechanisms for regulating cross-border movement. Visa regimes, employer-sponsored work permits, seasonal labour programmes and digital documentation systems now structure migrants'

access to employment and residence rights (Geddes and Scholten 2016; Ruhs 2013). Such regulatory frameworks organise labour mobility while simultaneously maintaining state control over migration flows.

Consequently, Kazakh migrants encounter highly heterogeneous regulatory environments across different destinations. While regional mobility arrangements allow relatively open access to labour markets in countries such as Russia, migration to other destinations often involves more-restrictive institutional frameworks. Temporary work programmes, quota-based recruitment systems and employer-tied visas structure migrants' opportunities and legal status in different ways across countries. Within these regulatory landscapes, migrants rarely rely exclusively on formal institutional channels. Research on migration governance highlights the importance of social infrastructures – including recruitment agencies, labour intermediaries, diaspora organisations and digital communication networks – in facilitating cross-border mobility (Eraliev and Urinboyev 2023; Xiang and Lindquist 2014). For migrants from Kazakhstan, co-ethnic networks and peer communities frequently function as key sources of information about employment opportunities, visa procedures and working conditions abroad. Online platforms and messaging applications further enable migrants to exchange practical knowledge about migration processes and labour markets (Abuova *et al.* 2024; Delovarova 2024).

These practices illustrate how contemporary labour migration unfolds within layered normative environments where formal regulatory frameworks intersect with socially embedded informal practices. Migrants often navigate overlapping institutional contexts involving immigration law, labour-market regulations, employer expectations and community norms (Appadurai 1995; Gardner 2010; Killias 2010; Kubal 2012; Urinboyev 2021). Through everyday interactions within these environments, migrants develop practical strategies for interpreting legal frameworks and managing the uncertainties associated with transnational mobility. Hence, Kazakh migrants frequently rely on social networks, diaspora communities and digital communication platforms to navigate the practical complexities of international mobility. These socially embedded infrastructures play a key role in translating formal regulatory frameworks into workable everyday practices.

Thus, these historical, economic and institutional dynamics illustrate how Kazakhstan's external labour migration is embedded within broader systems of transnational mobility. Long-standing traditions of movement, post-Soviet economic transformations and expanding global labour opportunities have collectively shaped contemporary migration patterns. At the same time, migrants must navigate diverse regulatory environments that structure opportunities for mobility across different labour markets. Understanding these interconnected processes provides an important foundation for analysing how Kazakh migrants organise migration and adapt to the complex governance landscapes that characterise contemporary global labour mobility.

Methodology and data collection

This study employs a qualitative socio-legal research design to examine Kazakhstan's external labour migration and the everyday practices through which migrants navigate transnational labour markets. The methodological approach relies on micro-level qualitative evidence derived from in-depth interviews with Kazakh migrants working abroad. Such an approach reflects broader socio-legal research traditions that emphasise the importance of understanding how formal legal frameworks operate in practice through the lived experiences of individuals who interact with them (Ewick and Silbey 2003; Kubal 2013; Urinboyev 2020). Rather than analysing migration primarily through policy

documents or institutional frameworks, the study focuses on migrants' narratives in order to capture how regulatory systems are interpreted, negotiated and enacted in everyday life.

The empirical core of the study consists of qualitative interview data collected between 2023 and 2025 from 23 Kazakh citizens with recent labour-migration experience in Russia, South Korea, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium and the United States. These destinations represent diverse migration regimes and labour-market contexts, enabling the study to examine how migrants from Kazakhstan navigate different regulatory environments across regional and global mobility corridors. The geographical diversity of the sample is particularly important given Kazakhstan's increasing integration into Eurasian, East Asian and Western labour markets (Delovarova 2024; Syzdykbekov *et al.* 2021). Interview data were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke 2006), involving the repeated reading of transcripts, open coding, the development of thematic categories and systematic comparison across destinations. This process facilitated the identification of recurring themes related to migration governance, legal navigation, migrant networks and adaptation strategies.

Semi-structured qualitative interviewing was selected as the principal method because it enables a detailed exploration of migrants' experiences, motivations and strategies for navigating complex institutional environments. The interview protocol was designed to elicit comprehensive migration narratives. Participants were asked to reflect on several key aspects of their migration experiences. These included the factors influencing their decision to migrate, the channels through which they obtained employment abroad, interactions with recruitment agencies and intermediaries, encounters with immigration authorities and experiences within host-country labour markets. The interviews also explored how migrants obtained information about visa procedures, labour regulations and documentation requirements, as well as the role of social networks, diaspora communities and digital communication platforms in facilitating mobility. Such questions were designed to capture not only migrants' interactions with formal regulatory systems but also the informal practices and knowledge networks that frequently shape migration processes.

Particular attention was paid to how migrants described the relationship between formal legal frameworks and everyday practices. Many respondents distinguished between official migration rules – such as visa requirements or employment regulations – and the practical knowledge required to navigate these systems in everyday life. This distinction between formal law and lived practice is central to socio-legal scholarship, which emphasises that legal systems are interpreted and enacted through everyday social interactions rather than implemented solely through state institutions.

Interview participants were recruited through snowball sampling and personal networks, a widely used strategy in migration research where migrant populations are geographically dispersed and difficult to access. Initial contacts were established through professional networks, migrant associations and online communication platforms used by Kazakh migrants abroad. Subsequent participants were identified through referrals from earlier interviewees. Although snowball sampling does not produce a statistically representative sample, it is particularly effective for accessing transnational migrant communities and generating detailed qualitative insights into migration experiences.

The final sample includes 12 women and 11 men ranging in age from approximately 25 to 63 years old. Most participants possess higher-education qualifications, including university degrees and, in several cases, postgraduate training. This reflects an important characteristic of Kazakhstan's contemporary migration flows, where a considerable share of migrants are relatively well educated and engage in migration not only for manual labour but also for seasonal work, service-sector employment or professional opportunities abroad. Interviewees represented diverse occupational backgrounds, including agricultural seasonal workers in the United Kingdom, construction and factory workers in

South Korea, service-sector employees in Turkey and the United States and skilled professionals working in European labour markets.

The sample also reflects geographical variation across migration destinations, including respondents with experience in Russia, South Korea, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium and the United States. This distribution enabled comparison across different migration regimes, although the number of interviewees within each destination varied. Several methodological limitations should therefore be acknowledged. Snowball sampling may have privileged migrants embedded in active social networks, while the relatively high educational attainment of many respondents means that the findings may not fully capture the experiences of more-marginalised migrant groups. The study does not aim for statistical representativeness; rather, it seeks analytical insight into how migrants interpret and navigate diverse regulatory environments.

Because participants were geographically dispersed across several countries, most interviews were conducted online via Zoom or WhatsApp, while a smaller number were conducted in person when migrants were temporarily visiting Kazakhstan. Online interviewing proved particularly useful for transnational research because it enabled communication across different time zones and allowed participants to speak from their everyday environments of residence and work. Interviews were conducted in Kazakh or Russian depending on participants' preferences and typically lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were recorded with the informed consent of participants and subsequently transcribed for analysis.

Ethical considerations were central to the research process. The study received ethics clearance from the Ethical Review Board of Al-Farabi Kazakh National University, Kazakhstan. The informed consent procedures were duly followed. Participants were informed about the objectives of the study, the voluntary nature of participation and the confidentiality of their responses. Given that some interviews addressed sensitive issues such as irregular employment, visa overstays or experiences with fraudulent recruitment intermediaries, particular attention was paid to protecting participants' anonymity. Pseudonyms are therefore used throughout the study and identifying details have been removed from interview excerpts.

Ethnographic vignette: Navigating mobility across borders

On a damp spring morning in rural Kent in the United Kingdom, rows of temporary caravans stand along the edge of a strawberry farm. Inside one of them, a 27-year-old migrant from Almaty checks the weather forecast on his phone before the start of the workday. Only a year earlier he had completed a university degree in economics and briefly worked in a local office job in Kazakhstan. The salary, however, barely covered living expenses and, through a friend, he learned about seasonal agricultural work in the United Kingdom. Within a few weeks he had joined a group of other Kazakh migrants travelling through the UK's Seasonal Worker programme. His visa allows him to stay for six months – long enough, he hopes, to save more money than he could earn in a year at home.

The visa itself appears straightforward: a temporary work permit tied to a specific employer and limited to agricultural labour. Yet for him, as for many migrants interviewed in this study, the formal document represents only the beginning of a much more complex process of navigating everyday life within a foreign labour market. During the first days on the farm he quickly realised that understanding the official rules was not enough. The most useful information came, instead, from fellow migrants – Ukrainians, Russians and other Kazakhs – who explained the unwritten routines of the workplace: which

supervisors strictly monitored productivity, how piece-rate payment actually worked in practice and how to organise shifts to maximise earnings before the visa expired.

During lunch breaks, workers exchange advice in a mixture of Russian and Kazakh. Someone shares a message received from friends on another farm about changes in inspection procedures. Another migrant explains how to calculate daily picking quotas. These conversations illustrate how migration, as discussed in earlier sections, is embedded not only in formal visa regimes but also in informal social infrastructures that help migrants to interpret bureaucratic systems and labour-market expectations (Griffiths 1992; Merry 1988; Urinboyev 2020). In practice, the farm becomes a small transnational space where migrants collectively translate formal regulations into workable everyday routines.

Thousands of kilometres away, in the industrial suburbs of Incheon, in South Korea, another Kazakh migrant begins his shift on a construction site before sunrise. Unlike the seasonal worker in the United Kingdom, he arrived initially on a tourist visa and later remained to work informally after hearing about higher wages from friends already living in Korea. The pay is several times higher than what he could earn in Kazakhstan but the work is physically demanding and the legal situation uncertain. At the construction site, the workforce includes migrants from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Mongolia, many of whom share similar experiences of navigating complex migration regimes.

Here, too, practical knowledge circulates through social networks rather than official institutions. Workers share information through Telegram groups about immigration inspections, new job opportunities and housing options. When rumours spread about police checks in nearby neighbourhoods, messages quickly circulate advising migrants which metro stations to avoid. These informal communication channels form a crucial layer of what scholars describe as migration infrastructures – networks of actors, institutions and digital platforms that facilitate mobility across borders (Xiang and Lindquist 2014).

In Istanbul's textile district, another migrant from Kazakhstan works in a small garment factory alongside Turkish and Central Asian colleagues. She moved to Turkey several years earlier after completing a degree in linguistics and initially found work through acquaintances within the local Kazakh diaspora. Her legal work permit provides a degree of stability compared with migrants working informally elsewhere, yet daily life still depends heavily on community support networks. When a newly arrived student from Kazakhstan needs temporary accommodation, she contacts members of the diaspora through a WhatsApp group. When someone hears about a reliable employer hiring foreign workers, the information quickly spreads through the same network.

These experiences highlight how migrants often operate within what socio-legal scholars describe as plural normative environments. Formal immigration rules coexist with labour-market practices, employer expectations and community-based norms that guide migrants' everyday decisions (Griffiths 1992; Merry 1988). Rather than relying exclusively on official legal frameworks, migrants draw on socially embedded forms of knowledge to interpret unfamiliar institutions and manage potential risks.

A similar pattern emerges in the narratives of migrants living in Western Europe and the United States. One interviewee, now working in the IT sector in Germany, describes how even highly skilled migrants must learn to navigate complex administrative procedures. Although he holds a legal work visa, many bureaucratic steps – such as renewing residence permits or registering with local authorities – require practical knowledge that is often obtained through informal advice from other migrants rather than through official government guidance.

In New York City, a Kazakh couple who migrated through an educational programme recount how their early months were shaped by constant exchanges of information with other migrants. Through Russian-speaking community networks they learned how to apply for health insurance, file taxes and

identify trustworthy employers. Despite operating within a highly institutionalised legal system, their everyday navigation of migration governance still depended heavily on peer knowledge and community support.

Across these diverse locations – farms in the United Kingdom, construction sites in South Korea, factories in Turkey and professional workplaces in Europe and North America – similar patterns of adaptation emerge. Migrants encounter different migration regimes, visa systems and labour-market institutions, yet their everyday strategies share important common features. Formal regulations define the boundaries of legal mobility but the practical ability to navigate these systems often depends on socially embedded networks, digital communication and trust-based relationships.

These narratives illustrate how Kazakhstan's external labour migration unfolds within the broader context of transnational mobilities discussed in earlier sections. As global labour markets expand and migration corridors diversify, migrants increasingly move through complex regulatory environments shaped by multiple legal systems and institutional actors (Geddes and Scholten 2016; Ruhs 2013). At the same time, migrants themselves actively participate in organising mobility by creating informal knowledge networks that help to translate abstract legal frameworks into everyday practices.

In this sense, the experiences of Kazakh migrants reveal how global mobility is sustained not only through formal migration policies but also through the everyday practices of migrants navigating life across borders. Their stories demonstrate how transnational labour mobility is embedded simultaneously in global economic structures, national migration regimes and the social networks that migrants build as they move between them. The following section builds on this vignette by examining the interview findings in greater analytical detail, showing how migrants interpret and negotiate the regulatory landscapes encountered across different migration destinations.

Interview findings: Everyday practices of mobility and the navigation of transnational labour markets

The interview material provides important insights into how Kazakhstan's external labour migration unfolds in practice. As the earlier sections of the article demonstrate, Kazakhstan is increasingly embedded in transnational labour corridors that connect Eurasian, East Asian and Western labour markets. While macro-level migration indicators reveal the expansion and diversification of these migration routes, the interviews illustrate how the migrants themselves experience and navigate the institutional environments associated with transnational mobility. Across different destinations – Russia, South Korea, Turkey, the United Kingdom, Germany, Belgium and the United States – participants consistently emphasised that migration involves not only economic decision-making but also the ability to interpret complex legal systems, adapt to different labour-market cultures and rely on socially embedded networks.

Migration as a household strategy and economic opportunity

Many respondents described migration primarily as an economic strategy shaped by wage disparities between Kazakhstan and higher-income labour markets. Although interviewees had diverse professional backgrounds – including university graduates, service-sector workers and skilled professionals – their narratives consistently highlighted the importance of income differentials in motivating migration decisions. One respondent who had worked seasonally in the United Kingdom explained:

> *In Kazakhstan I had a normal job but the salary was not enough for long-term plans. When my friend told me about seasonal work in England, it seemed like a good opportunity. In a few months you can earn what might take a year at home.*

Another interviewee who had spent several years working in South Korea described a similar calculation:

> *I didn't plan to stay long. The idea was simple: work hard for a couple of years, save money and return. Even if the work is difficult, the income difference makes it worthwhile.*

Such accounts reflect the broader migration scholarship emphasising how wage differentials and labour-market inequalities create strong incentives for cross-border mobility (de Haas *et al.* 2019; Massey *et al.* 1999). For many interviewees in this study, migration was perceived as a temporary strategy for improving household economic stability rather than a permanent relocation. Several respondents described their plans to invest savings in housing, education or small businesses upon returning to Kazakhstan.

A migrant who had worked in Germany summarised this logic:

> *Many people go abroad not because they want to live there forever but because they want to create opportunities back home. You work abroad, save money and then maybe start a business or help your family.*

These narratives confirm that migration decisions are often embedded within broader household economic strategies rather than being purely individual aspirations.

Transnational social networks and the organisation of mobility

A second major theme emerging from the interviews concerns the crucial role of transnational social networks in organising migration. In most cases, migrants learned about employment opportunities abroad through friends, relatives or acquaintances who had already migrated. These networks often provided practical guidance about application procedures, travel arrangements and expected working conditions. One interviewee who had worked in Turkey explained how personal connections shaped his migration pathway:

> *My cousin had been living in Istanbul for several years. He told me there were many job opportunities and helped me to find my first job when I arrived. Without that connection it would have been much harder.*

Similarly, a migrant who had travelled to the United Kingdom through a seasonal agricultural programme described how former classmates shared information about the application process:

> *Students who had gone before explained everything – what documents are needed, how the agency works, what kind of work you should expect. That information is very important when you are deciding whether to go.*

Such accounts illustrate how migration flows are sustained through social infrastructures that facilitate the circulation of information and resources across borders. Research on migration infrastructures emphasises that mobility is organised through networks of actors – including the migrants themselves – who connect labour supply with employment opportunities abroad (Xiang and Lindquist 2014, Eraliev and Urinboyev 2023). Our interviews confirm that these informal networks often function as key mechanisms for reducing uncertainty and enabling migrants to access international labour markets.

Viewed through a socio-legal lens, these interview accounts demonstrate that migrant networks function not merely as channels of information but also as informal governance mechanisms through which migrants collectively interpret legal requirements, assess risks and develop practical strategies for navigating regulatory uncertainty. In so doing, they mediate the relationship between formal migration rules and everyday mobility practices, highlighting how migration governance is enacted not only through formal institutions but also through socially embedded infrastructures that facilitate access to mobility.

Learning to navigate bureaucratic systems

Another recurring theme in the interviews was the challenge of navigating unfamiliar bureaucratic systems in destination countries. Although migrants often had access to official information about visa regulations and labour rights, many participants emphasised that formal documentation rarely provided sufficient guidance for everyday interactions with state institutions. A migrant working in Germany explained:

> *When you read the official rules, everything seems clear. However, when you start dealing with offices, you realise that there are many procedures that are not obvious. Other migrants explain which documents you need and how the system actually works*.

Similarly, a respondent living in the United States described how community networks helped migrants to interpret complex administrative requirements:

> *There are many rules – taxes, insurance, work permits. Most people learn about them from other migrants who have already gone through the process.*

These narratives reflect socio-legal scholarship highlighting that individuals often navigate plural normative environments rather than a single coherent legal system (Griffiths 1992; Merry 1988). Migrants frequently encounter overlapping institutional frameworks involving immigration law, labour-market regulation, employer policies and local administrative procedures. Understanding how to navigate these systems often requires practical knowledge that circulates through social networks rather than through formal legal channels.

Informal practices and workplace adaptation

Interviewees also emphasised that everyday working conditions often differed from formal contractual arrangements. Migrants described learning informal workplace norms through observation and interaction with more-experienced workers. This process was particularly evident among seasonal agricultural workers in the United Kingdom, as one participant explained:

> *When you arrive, the contract explains your duties but the real work culture is something you learn from other workers. They show you how to pick faster, how to organise your day and how the supervisors expect things to be done.*

Another seasonal worker described how experienced migrants helped newcomers to adapt to productivity requirements:

> *If you don't know the system, it's difficult at first. However, older workers explain how the payment works and how to meet the quotas.*

Similar patterns were reported by migrants working in South Korea's construction and manufacturing sectors. Respondents noted that, although formal labour regulations existed, everyday workplace practices were often shaped by informal hierarchies and cultural expectations. One migrant working on construction sites in Korea explained:

> *You learn quickly that respect and hierarchy are important. Older workers and supervisors expect you to follow instructions without argument. Understanding that helps you to avoid problems.*

These experiences demonstrate how migrants must adapt not only to legal frameworks but also to workplace cultures and informal organisational practices.

Diaspora communities as support infrastructures

For migrants working in Turkey and several European destinations, diaspora communities played an important role in facilitating integration and access to resources. Participants frequently described how co-ethnic networks provided assistance with housing, employment and bureaucratic procedures. A migrant living in Istanbul explained:

> *There is a strong Kazakh community here. When someone new arrives, people usually help them to find accommodation or work. It creates a sense of support.*

Another respondent described how community organisations assisted migrants with administrative procedures:

> *Sometimes the paperwork can be confusing. In those situations, people from the community help to translate documents or to explain what steps you need to take.*

These experiences highlight the importance of diaspora infrastructures in mediating migrants' encounters with formal institutions. Scholars emphasise that diaspora networks often function as parallel systems of governance that provide information, support and conflict resolution for migrants (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004; Urinboyev and Eraliev 2022).

Digital communication and the circulation of migration knowledge

Digital communication platforms emerged as a critical tool for organising migration and sharing information among migrants. Many respondents described using messaging applications such as WhatsApp or Telegram to exchange advice about job opportunities, housing and immigration procedures. A migrant working in South Korea described the role of these platforms:

> *We have Telegram groups where migrants share information about jobs and living conditions. If there are immigration inspections or problems somewhere, people post warnings so others can be careful.*

Similarly, migrants in the United Kingdom described using online groups to exchange practical advice about seasonal work:

> *There are many online communities where workers share their experiences. People discuss which farms have better conditions and what to expect during the season.*

These digital communication networks create transnational information flows that connect migrants across different countries and facilitate the rapid dissemination of practical knowledge, contributing to the development of collective strategies for navigating migration systems (Hunter 2015; Urinboyev 2021). The interview material suggests that digital platforms have become important socio-legal infrastructures through which migrants exchange information about documentation requirements, inspections, employment opportunities and administrative procedures. Rather than relying exclusively on official sources of information, migrants use these technologies to generate collective forms of legal and migration-related knowledge that help them to navigate fragmented regulatory environments, adapt to changing migration rules and workplace conditions and manage mobility across borders. This finding further demonstrates how migration governance is mediated not only by formal institutions but also by digitally enabled networks that support migrants' everyday legal navigation.

Interpreting formal rules and everyday reality

Across all interviews, migrants repeatedly emphasised the distinction between formal regulations and everyday practice. Many respondents described learning how to interpret legal frameworks through experience and interaction with other migrants rather than through official guidance. One interviewee summarised this dynamic succinctly:

> *The law is written clearly but real life is more complicated. You need experience and advice from others to understand how things actually work.*

Another participant expressed a similar sentiment:

> *When you first arrive, everything seems confusing. However, after some time, you realise that other migrants already know the system and they explain how to navigate it.*

These narratives illustrate how migrants actively construct practical knowledge systems that enable them to navigate complex institutional environments. Rather than being passive subjects of migration

governance, migrants themselves play an important role in shaping the social infrastructures that sustain transnational labour mobility.

Variation across migration regimes: Regulatory contexts and migrant strategies

While several themes recur across destinations, the interviews reveal important differences in how migrants navigate mobility under distinct regulatory conditions. These differences suggest that migration regimes shape not only migrants' legal status but also the strategies they adopt to secure employment, manage uncertainty and access opportunities abroad.

In Russia, relatively open mobility arrangements, linguistic familiarity and shared post-Soviet legacies make migration comparatively accessible. Here, migrant networks primarily facilitate job matching, accommodation and labour-market integration. In contrast, migrants in South Korea operate within a more restrictive environment characterised by visa controls, employer dependence and intensive immigration monitoring. In this context, informal communication channels such as Telegram and WhatsApp serve as important risk-management infrastructures, helping migrants to navigate legal uncertainty and administrative requirements.

The United Kingdom presents a different configuration. Although seasonal workers enter through formal migration programmes, their temporary status is tied to specific employers and limited periods of employment. As a result, migrants rely on peer networks to understand workplace expectations and navigate programme-specific regulations. In Germany, Belgium and the United States, migrants generally enjoy more-secure legal status but face complex bureaucratic procedures related to residence permits, registration and employment authorisation. Consequently, diaspora networks and community organisations play a key role in facilitating administrative navigation and social integration.

These comparisons demonstrate that migrant strategies vary according to the structure of migration regimes. In relatively open systems, networks primarily facilitate labour-market access; under restrictive regimes, they help to manage legal uncertainty; within temporary migration programmes, they assist migrants in navigating regulatory constraints; and, in highly institutionalised contexts, they support adaptation to complex bureaucratic systems. The findings therefore suggest that migrant agency is shaped not only by economic motivations but also by the specific regulatory environments through which mobility is organised.

Linking migrant experiences to broader transnational mobility systems

Taken together, the interview findings demonstrate that Kazakhstan's external labour migration operates within a multilayered system of transnational mobility. Structural factors such as wage disparities and labour-market demand create incentives for migration, while migration regimes regulate access to employment opportunities through visa systems and labour-migration programmes. At the same time, migrants themselves organise mobility through social networks, diaspora communities and digital communication platforms.

These findings reinforce the broader arguments presented earlier in the article. Kazakhstan's position within contemporary global mobility systems is shaped not only by structural economic transformations but also by the everyday practices through which migrants interpret and navigate migration regimes. By combining formal knowledge with socially embedded informal practices, migrants develop adaptive strategies that enable them to operate within complex transnational labour markets.

In this sense, the experiences of Kazakh migrants illustrate how global labour mobility is sustained through a combination of institutional frameworks and everyday social practices. Migration is not governed solely by state policies or labour-market demand; it is also organised through the practical knowledge, cooperation and networks that the migrants themselves create as they move across borders.

Discussion and concluding remarks

This article examined Kazakhstan's external labour migration through the perspective of transnational mobility and socio-legal governance, focusing on how the migrants themselves navigate complex regulatory environments across different labour markets. Drawing on qualitative interviews with Kazakh migrants working in several countries, the study explored how migrants interpret migration regimes in everyday life and develop practical strategies for operating within heterogeneous institutional landscapes. Rather than approaching migration solely through policy frameworks or macro-level migration trends, the study foregrounded migrants' lived experiences and the social infrastructures that sustain transnational mobility.

The findings demonstrate that Kazakhstan's external labour migration has become increasingly integrated into multiple regional and global labour mobility systems. Economic motivations – particularly wage differentials between Kazakhstan and higher-income labour markets – remain an important driver of migration decisions. Many interviewees described migration as a temporary strategy for improving household economic stability, enabling them to accumulate savings, support family members or invest in future opportunities in Kazakhstan. These patterns correspond with broader migration research emphasising the role of labour-market inequalities and income differentials in shaping international mobility (de Haas *et al*. 2019; Massey *et al*. 1993). At the same time, the diversification of migration destinations illustrates how Kazakhstan has become connected to several transnational labour corridors linking post-Soviet, East Asian and Western labour markets.

However, the empirical evidence also shows that migration from Kazakhstan cannot be reduced to economic motivations alone. Migrants consistently highlighted the significance of regulatory environments in shaping their experiences abroad. Different destinations impose distinct institutional arrangements – ranging from relatively open regional labour-mobility frameworks within the post-Soviet space to more-restrictive temporary migration regimes and visa-based employment systems in other regions. As the interviews reveal, migrants often occupy legal positions that are formally authorised yet temporary and conditional, with access to residence rights, employment opportunities and mobility frequently tied to specific employers or limited visa categories. Such conditions reflect broader transformations in global migration governance in which states simultaneously facilitate labour mobility while maintaining strong regulatory control over migrant workers (Geddes and Scholten 2016; Ruhs 2013).

Importantly, migrants' ability to exercise agency remains shaped by significant structural constraints. Across destinations, respondents described forms of dependency generated by visa restrictions, employer-linked work permits, temporary migration programmes and the risk of irregular status. Seasonal workers in the United Kingdom faced limited mobility because residence rights were tied to specific programmes, while migrants in South Korea reported concerns about immigration monitoring and documentation status. Even migrants with secure legal status in Europe and North America encountered administrative barriers and complex bureaucratic procedures. These constraints highlight that migrant agency operates within unequal power relations and differentiated systems of control that structure access to rights, employment and mobility.

A central insight emerging from the study concerns the crucial role of social networks and informal infrastructures in mediating migrants' interactions with these regulatory systems. Across different migration destinations, interviewees emphasised that practical knowledge about migration processes rarely comes from official institutions alone. Instead, migrants rely heavily on transnational networks of friends, relatives and fellow migrants to obtain information about employment opportunities, visa procedures and working conditions. Diaspora communities and online communication platforms such as messaging applications function as important channels for circulating migration knowledge, enabling migrants to interpret bureaucratic rules and coordinate mobility across borders. These findings align with research on migration infrastructures that highlights the importance of networks, intermediaries and digital communication in facilitating cross-border labour mobility (Xiang and Lindquist 2014; Urinboyev 2021).

The interviews also illustrate how migrants actively interpret and adapt to overlapping normative environments. Rather than interacting with a single coherent legal system, migrants encounter multiple institutional frameworks involving immigration law, labour regulations, employer practices and informal community norms. Navigating these environments often requires practical knowledge acquired through experience and social interaction rather than through formal legal guidance alone. This dynamic reflects broader socio-legal scholarship demonstrating that legal frameworks are enacted through everyday practices and interpreted through the social contexts in which individuals encounter them (Ewick and Silbey 2003; Kubal 2013; Urinboyev 2020). In this sense, migrants do not simply comply with migration rules; they actively participate in translating regulatory frameworks into workable everyday strategies.

The findings therefore contribute to ongoing debates in migration studies concerning the relationship between migration governance and migrants' agency. While migration regimes establish the formal parameters within which mobility occurs, the practical functioning of these systems depends heavily on the ways in which migrants themselves interpret and navigate institutional constraints. The experiences of Kazakh migrants demonstrate how transnational labour mobility is sustained through the interaction of multiple actors – including migrants, employers, intermediaries, diaspora networks and state institutions – operating across interconnected social fields (Levitt and Glick Schiller 2004). Migration governance thus emerges not solely from state policies but from the everyday practices that migrants develop while negotiating complex regulatory environments.

The findings also have broader implications for understanding migration governance in semi-peripheral contexts. Existing migration scholarship has often focused on either major destination countries in the Global North or traditional labour-exporting states. Kazakhstan occupies an intermediary position within global migration systems, simultaneously connected to regional, East Asian and Western labour markets. The evidence presented here suggests that governance in such semi-peripheral settings cannot be understood solely through formal state policies. Instead, mobility is co-produced through interactions between regulatory institutions and informal infrastructures, including migrant networks, diaspora organisations and digital communication platforms. These infrastructures do not merely supplement formal governance; they actively shape how migration regimes function in practice by translating regulatory requirements into workable strategies for mobility.

Conceptually, the article contributes to migration-regime and socio-legal scholarship in three ways. First, it extends socio-legal approaches to migration beyond their predominant focus on Western destination countries by examining migrants' legal navigation in a semi-peripheral context linked simultaneously to regional and global labour markets. Second, it refines understandings of migration regimes by demonstrating that they are experienced not as coherent policy frameworks but as

differentiated governance environments whose effects vary across destinations. Third, it highlights how migrants actively translate formal regulations into everyday practices through networks, digital platforms and diaspora infrastructures, thereby contributing to a more actor-centred understanding of transnational mobility governance.

Empirically, the study highlights Kazakhstan's distinctive position within contemporary global mobility systems. As a semi-peripheral economy situated between regional post-Soviet labour markets and broader global migration corridors, Kazakhstan occupies an intermediary position within international migration systems. Migrants from Kazakhstan move across destinations characterised by different migration regimes, labour-market structures and regulatory institutions. Their experiences reveal how labour mobility from semi-peripheral states is shaped by the interaction between structural economic transformations and the diverse institutional frameworks that regulate cross-border movement.

From a policy perspective, the findings underscore the importance of recognising the role of informal social infrastructures in shaping migration processes. Government initiatives aimed at regulating labour migration – such as licensing recruitment agencies, negotiating bilateral labour agreements and improving information services for prospective migrants – should take into account the ways in which migrants already rely on networks and digital communication platforms when organising mobility. Strengthening transparent recruitment mechanisms and expanding access to reliable migration information could help to reduce the risks associated with irregular recruitment practices and exploitative employment conditions.

More broadly, our analysis demonstrates the importance of moving beyond purely state-centric perspectives when studying contemporary labour migration. Migration today unfolds within transnational social fields that connect origin and destination societies through networks of migrants, institutions and labour markets. The experiences of Kazakh migrants illustrate how individuals navigate these interconnected spaces while negotiating the institutional constraints imposed by diverse migration regimes.

In conclusion, Kazakhstan's external labour migration reflects the interplay of structural economic incentives, evolving migration regimes and the everyday practices through which migrants organise mobility across borders. By foregrounding migrants' narratives and lived experiences, this study highlights how transnational labour mobility operates not only through formal policy frameworks but also through the social networks, practical knowledge and adaptive strategies developed by the migrants themselves. Understanding these dynamics is essential for analysing how migration regimes function in practice and for developing more effective and inclusive approaches to migration governance in Central Asia and beyond.

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Conflict of interest statement

No conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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ORCID ID

Albina Aidarkhankyzy https://orcid.org/0009-0007-9814-9151

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