D. Kozhabekova¹ , **S. Akhantayeva²** ,

Zh. Argynbayeva³* , **G. Karimova⁴**

¹ Scientific Research Center "Youth", Astana, Kazakhstan
² Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President
of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Astana, Kazakhstan
³Narxoz University, Almaty, Kazakhstan
⁴Andijan Institute of Agriculture and Agrotechnology, Tashkent, Uzbekistan
*e-mail: zhanar.argynbayeva@narxoz.kz

TRACKS OF YOUTH LABOR AND EDUCATIONAL MIGRATION: OVERVIEW OF PREFERENCES

The purpose of the study is to review the key areas of youth migration in Kazakhstan. Youth migration goes beyond the traditional understanding of mobility, reflecting not only socio-economic differences between regions and countries, but also the formation of sustainable migration trajectories that affect the structure of national human capital.

Methodology: the research employed comparative analysis, descriptive statistics, and content analysis to explore current trends in youth migration.

The originality of the study lies in identifying a dual structure of migration mobility, expressed in the discrepancy between declared preferences and actual migration decisions. A shift in migration preferences of young people has been revealed from traditional destinations (Russia, the USA, Turkey) to countries with stable legal mechanisms for labor and educational mobility, such as South Korea, Germany, and the United Kingdom. Similar trends can be traced in educational migration.

The results of the study generally emphasize the need to move from a migration deterrence strategy to a managed mobility concept focused on return, knowledge transfer, and institutional support for youth migration trajectories. In the context of global competition for human capital, Kazakhstan needs to form a proactive migration policy based on an analysis of the motives, barriers and opportunities for youth mobility.

The value of the data obtained lies in identifying the youth's demand for security in professional self-realization, stability of legal status and predictability of career trajectories. Special attention should be paid to the "revolutionary" factor of the GenZ generation, which strives for changes in the structure of work and career models, reflecting the need for rapid adaptation to new conditions. This highlights the need for the State to create institutional and economic conditions that meet international standards in order to preserve and develop human capital within the country.

The practical significance of the work lies in the fact that the results can be used to develop measures aimed at ensuring the safety of young people's career paths, as well as creating a flexible labor relations system that takes into account the needs and demands of the new generation.

Keywords: youth migration, Kazakhstan, internal and external tracks, human capital, managed mobility, return migration.

Д.А. Қожабекова¹, С.Ж. Ахантаева²,
Ж.Ж. Аргынбаева³*, Г.А. Каримова⁴

¹«Жастар» ғылыми-зерттеу орталығы, Астана, Қазақстан
²Қазақстан Республикасы Президенті жанындағы
Қазақстан стратегиялық зерттеулер институты, Астана, Қазақстан
³Нархоз университеті, Алматы, Қазақстан
⁴Андижан ауыл шаруашылығы және агротехнология институты, Ташкент, Өзбекстан
*e-mail: zhanar.argynbayeva@narxoz.kz

Жастардың еңбек және білім беру көші-қонының тректері: таңдауларға шолу

Зерттеудің мақсаты – Қазақстан жастарының көші-қонының негізгі бағыттарына шолу. Жастар көші-қоны мобильділіктің дәстүрлі түсінігінен шығып, аймақтар мен мемлекеттер арасындағы әлеуметтік-экономикалық айырмашылықтарды ғана емес, ұлттық адами капиталдың құрылымына ықпал ететін тұрақты миграциялық траекториялардың қалыптасуын да көрсетеді.

Әдіснама: жастар көші-қонының заманауи трендтерін зерттеу аясында салыстырмалы талдау, сипаттамалық статистика және контент-талдау әдістері қолданылды.

Зерттеудің ерекшелігі – декларацияланатын артықшылықтар мен нақты көші-қон шешімдері арасындағы алшақтықта көрінетін көші-қон ұтқырлығының қос құрылымының болуы анықталды. Жастардың көші-қон артықшылықтарының дәстүрлі бағыттардан (Ресей, АҚШ, Түркия) Оңтүстік Корея, Германия және Ұлыбритания сияқты еңбек және білім беру ұтқырлығының тұрақты құқықтық тетіктері бар елдерге ауысуы анықталды. Ұқсас тенденциялар білім беру көші-қонында да байқалады.

Зерттеу нәтижелері миграцияны шектеуге бағытталған саясаттан бас тартып, керісінше, жастар мобильділігін басқаруға, білім мен тәжірибені қайтаруға және институционалдық қолдауға негізделген жаңа тәсілдің қажеттілігін көрсетеді. Адами капитал үшін жаһандық бәсекелестік жағдайында Қазақстанға жастардың мотивтері, кедергілері және мүмкіндіктерін талдауға негізделген проактивті миграциялық саясат қалыптастыру қажет.

Алынған деректердің құндылығы жастардың кәсіби өзін-өзі жүзеге асырудағы қауіпсіздікке, құқықтық мәртебенің тұрақтылығына және мансаптық траекториялардың болжамдылығына деген сұранысын анықтау болып табылады. Жаңа жағдайларға тез бейімделу қажеттілігін көрсете отырып, еңбек құрылымы мен мансаптық модельдердегі өзгерістерге ұмтылатын GenZ буынының «революциялық» факторына ерекше назар аудару керек. Бұл мемлекеттің ішкі адами капиталды сақтау және дамыту үшін халықаралық стандарттарға сәйкес келетін институционалдық және экономикалық жағдайлар жасау қажеттілігін көрсетеді.

Практикалық маңыздылығы – нәтижелер жастардың мансаптық траекторияларының қауіпсіздігін қамтамасыз етуге және жаңа буынның сұраныстарына жауап беретін икемді еңбек жүйесін қалыптастыруға бағытталған шараларды әзірлеуде қолданылуы мүмкін.

Түйін сөздер: жастар көші-қоны, Қазақстан, ішкі және сыртқы тректер, адами капитал, басқарылатын мобильділік, қайтарымды көші-қон.

Д.А. Кожабекова[1], С.Ж. Ахантаева[2],
Ж.Ж. Аргынбаева[3*], Г.А. Каримова[4]
[1]Научно-исследовательский центр «Молодежь», Астана, Казахстан
[2]Казахстанский институт стратегических исследований
при Президенте Республики Казахстан, Астана, Казахстан
[3]Университет Нархоз, Алматы, Казахстан
[4]Андижанский институт сельского хозяйства и агротехнологий, Ташкент, Узбекистан
*e-mail: zhanar.argynbayeva@narxoz.kz

Треки трудовой и образовательной миграции молодежи: обзор предпочтений

Цель исследования – обзор ключевых направлений миграции молодежи Казахстана. Молодежная миграция выходит за рамки традиционного понимания мобильности, отражая не только социально-экономические различия между регионами и странами, но и формирование устойчивых миграционных траекторий, влияющих на структуру национального человеческого капитала.

Методология: в рамках исследования современных трендов молодежной миграции были применены методы сравнительного анализа, дескриптивной статистики и контент-анализа.

Оригинальность исследования заключается в том, что установлено наличие двойственной структуры миграционной мобильности, выражающейся в расхождении между декларируемыми предпочтениями и фактическими миграционными решениями. Выявлен сдвиг в миграционных предпочтениях молодежи от традиционных направлений (Россия, США, Турция) к странам с устойчивыми правовыми механизмами трудовой и образовательной мобильности, таким как Южная Корея, Германия и Великобритания. Аналогичные тенденции прослеживаются и в образовательной миграции.

Результаты исследования в целом подчеркивают необходимость перехода от стратегии сдерживания миграции к концепции управляемой мобильности, ориентированной на возврат, трансфер знаний и институциональное сопровождение молодежных миграционных траекторий. В условиях глобальной конкуренции за человеческий капитал, Казахстану необходимо формировать проактивную миграционную политику, основанную на анализе мотивов, барьеров и возможностей молодежной мобильности.

Ценность полученных данных заключается в выявлении запроса молодежи на безопасность в профессиональной самореализации, стабильность правового статуса и предсказуемость карьерных траекторий. Особое внимание следует уделить фактору «революционности» поколения GenZ, которое стремится к изменениям в структуре труда и карьерных моделях, отражая потребность в быстром адаптировании к новым условиям. Это подчеркивает необходимость государ-

ству создавать институциональные и экономические условия, соответствующие международным стандартам, чтобы сохранить и развивать человеческий капитал внутри страны.

Практическое значение работы заключается в том, что итоги могут быть использованы для разработки мероприятий, направленных на обеспечение безопасности карьерных траекторий молодежи, а также создания гибкой системы трудовых отношений, учитывающей потребности и запросы нового поколения.

Ключевые слова: молодежная миграция, Казахстан, внутренние и внешние треки, человеческий капитал, управляемая мобильность, возвратная миграция.

Introduction

Youth migration in contemporary conditions constitutes a key element of socio-economic transformations and has become a subject of increasing scholarly attention. In the Republic of Kazakhstan, the processes of youth mobility are becoming stable and systemic, reflecting both internal structural changes and the influence of global transnational factors. The dynamics of movement of young citizens has a multidimensional impact on regional development, the functioning of the labor market, education system and the reproduction of human capital, which underscores the importance of this phenomenon in the context of the national strategy for sustainable development.

The relevance of this research is amplified by the intensive growth of external migration. According to the data from the Scientific Research Center "Youth", recent years have seen an increase in the share of young people seeking to move abroad for educational and employment purposes. The most attractive destination countries for migration include Russia, the United States, South Korea, Turkey, and Canada (Analytical Report, 2024). At the same time, internal migration remains highly dynamic, predominantly directed toward Kazakhstan's major metropolitan centers – Astana, Almaty, and Shymkent. These migration flows are driven by ongoing urbanization processes, regional socio-economic disparities, unequal access to quality education, employment opportunities, and social infrastructure.

Despite the availability of a substantial body of statistical and sociological data, a comprehensive study of youth migration that incorporates legal, social, and economic factors remains fragmented and requires further systematization. In particular, the distinctions and interconnections between internal and external migration routes, as well as the institutional mechanisms influencing young people's migration decisions under contemporary conditions, have not been sufficiently examined. In this regard, the need to develop an integrated model that accounts for all key aspects of youth migration processes including legal, social, and economic constraints and opportunities, becomes especially relevant. Such a model would enable a deeper understanding of the motivations and characteristics of youth migration and facilitate the development of more effective governmental and societal strategies aimed at optimizing migration processes and retaining talented young people within the country.

Literature review

In foreign literature, youth migration is considered an interdisciplinary phenomenon encompassing socio-economic, cultural, demographic and legal aspects (Heckert, 2015). In this context, youth, having a high degree of mobility and adaptability, acts as both an object and a subject of transformations taking place on the context of globalization and the changing structure of the labor market, education and social integration.

Modern research confirms that migration processes among young people have a significant impact on the reproduction of human capital, the dynamics and structure of the labor market, as well as on regional and national development models (World Migration Report, 2024). The analysis of motives, barriers and conditions of migration mobility helps not only to understand current trends, but also to predict their socio-economic consequences amid globalization and local changes (King, 2018).

Nevertheless, despite the prevalence of the approach based on the dichotomy of "pushing" and "pulling" factors, its explanatory power is limited. This view does not reflect the full complexity of youth migration and does not take into account age specificities. In particular, the existing theoretical models of migration, although offering various explanatory frameworks, do not provide an exhaustive analysis of the multilevel and interdisciplinary characteristics of migration processes, especially in relation to youth groups (Hervé, 2022).

There is a growing interest in the issue of youth migration among Kazakhstan's scholars, but the research is still fragmentary. Most publications focus

on describing migration flows, identifying socio-demographic characteristics of young migrants, and analyzing basic migration attitudes. For example, a number of studies focus on regional aspects of youth migration. The analysis of regional data makes it possible to understand, in particular, why the southern regions of the country are the main donors of migration flows (Ivanov, 2021).

Sociological measurements are systematically carried out by the Scientific Research Center "Youth" under the Ministry of Culture and Information of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Their results enable researchers to track migration sentiments, identify prevailing trends, and form a holistic view of youth migration mobility.

Nevertheless, there remains a shortage of in-depth qualitative research in Kazakhstani and Russian scholarship on the consequences of youth migration, especially in the context of educational mobility and professional realization of young migrants. At the same time, there is a clear understanding that youth migration is an independent area of research, primarily closely related to education (Argynbek et al., 2024). Despite the availability of data on motives for studying abroad, the processes of social adaptation, cultural integration, as well as the further trajectory of employment and career growth have not been sufficiently studied. Research on return migration (International Organization for Migration, 2021) remains an important area, which allows us to assess how the experience of staying abroad affects the socio-economic development of the regions of Kazakhstan.

In general, despite the availability of a number of empirical works, including the findings of systematic sociological research by the Scientific Research Center "Youth", as well as scientific projects on migration conducted during 2022-2024 (for example, "Transformation of educational migration policy: development of strategies for applying the intellectual potential of Kazakhstanis living abroad", "Study of demographic and migration processes in the northern regions of the Republic of Kazakhstan: identification and analysis of fundamental factors and development of methods for their regulation", "Interculturalism and tolerance in multiethnic Kazakhstan in the context of globalization and new migration challenges"), youth migration in Kazakhstan remains a poorly systematized topic, which requires an interdisciplinary approach and an expansion of the research base.

Despite the significant contribution of these studies, there is currently a lack of comprehensive analyses that would combine various aspects of youth migration in the context of legal, social and economic factors. In this regard, there is an increasing need for deeper integration of existing data and the expansion of research for the development of holistic models of youth migration. An important area of future research should be an in-depth study of the long-term social and economic consequences of migration, as well as factors influencing the formation of sustainable youth mobility both within and outside the country. These studies will contribute to the creation of effective state and social policies aimed at optimizing migration processes and retaining key human capital.

Comprehensive reforms are needed to develop effective public policy strategies for managing youth migration, including improving living and working conditions, investing in education and science, creating programs to retain and return young people, as well as developing regions (Zhumashbekova, 2025). Such an integrated approach will not only mitigate the negative effects of migration, but also turn it into a resource for sustainable socio-economic development of the country.

Materials and methods

The purpose of this study is to identify key indicators of the migration activity of young people in Kazakhstan and identify the main directions of migration trajectories. Since migration intentions can be subjective and lead to distortions, a combined methodology was applied that includes objective and subjective indicators of migration choice.

1. Indicators and measurement tools

Following the logic of international research approaches, respondents were offered a number of standardized questions aimed at identifying migration attitudes and preferences. The main questions included:

(1) "What country are you thinking of or planning to move to?"

(2) "What is the main reason for your desire to move?"

The question about the destination country made it possible to identify key migration destinations, including Russia, the United States, Turkey, Europe, Asia, the CIS states, and others. Additional specification for the countries of the European region, Asia and other areas was estimated by analogy with the data in the expanded list (for example, Germany, Great Britain, South Korea, the United Arab Emirates, Japan, etc.). These questions formed the

basic subjective indicators of migration pathways and made it possible to classify migration tracks in educational, labor and general motivational terms.

2. Statistical procedures

To evaluate the reliability of the questionnaire, internal consistency checks were applied. Data processing was performed using SPSS Statistics and Microsoft Excel. The analytical framework included descriptive statistical techniques, comparative assessments, and the examination of relationships between variables.

3. Sample estimation

The target population of the study comprised young people in Kazakhstan aged 14 to 34. In both waves of data collection, the sample included 2,000 participants. Quotas were established based on the following characteristics:

- region of residence,
- gender,
- age group,
- type of settlement (city/village).

In 2022, the coverage included 12 border regions, and in 2024 – 17 regions and 3 cities of republican significance: Astana, Almaty and Shymkent. This approach ensured the territorial and socio-demographic representativeness of the data.

Data collection took place during May–June of 2022 and 2024 through face-to-face interviews with participants. The questionnaire was offered in both Russian and Kazakh, which ensured accessibility for respondents. The principles of voluntary participation and anonymity were strictly observed, creating conditions that enhanced the credibility and openness of the responses provided.

Table 1 – Distribution of the sample population in 2022, respondents*

Regions	Total	Urban	Rural	Men	Women
Kazakhstan	**2000**	**794**	**1206**	**1039**	**961**
Aktobe	**137**	92	45	70	67
Almaty	**316**	64	252	164	152
Atyrau	**108**	55	53	55	53
West Kazakhstan	**100**	48	52	52	48
Zhambyl	**195**	73	122	100	95
Kostanay	**122**	66	56	63	59
Kyzylorda	**142**	59	83	74	68
Mangystau	**123**	48	75	63	60
Pavlodar	**105**	70	35	54	51
North Kazakhstan	**79**	34	45	41	38
Turkistan	**385**	74	311	203	182
East Kazakhstan	**188**	112	76	98	90

According to the Bureau of National Statistics of the Agency for Strategic Planning and Reforms of the Republic of Kazakhstan, data as of January 1, 2022.

Table 2 – Structure of the 2024 sample population (respondents)*

Regions	Total	Urban	Rural	Men	Women
Republic of Kazakhstan	**2000**	1247	753	1021	979
Abai Region	**53**	33	20	27	26
Akmola	**74**	42	32	38	36
Aktobe	**93**	69	24	48	45
Almaty	**148**	23	125	76	72
Atyrau	**72**	39	33	37	35

Regions	Total	Urban	Rural	Men	Women
West Kazakhstan	**65**	36	29	33	32
Zhambyl	**123**	52	71	63	60
Zhetysu	**65**	29	36	33	32
Karaganda	**108**	88	20	55	53
Kostanay	**77**	47	30	40	37
Kyzylorda	**85**	39	46	44	41
Mangystau	**81**	36	45	41	40
Pavlodar	**68**	48	20	35	33
North Kazakhstan	**47**	23	24	25	22
Turkistan	**228**	55	173	120	108
Ulytau	**21**	17	4	11	10
East Kazakhstan	**62**	41	21	32	30
Astana city	**159**	159	0	80	79
Almaty city	**238**	238	0	114	124
Shymkent city	**133**	133	0	66	67

Analytical Strategy

The analytical approach combined quantitative analysis of migration intentions with an assessment of the factors influencing the choice of a potential destination country. This allowed us to structure the main migration trajectories, capture changes in preferences between 2022 and 2024, and relate them to actual flows of educational and labor mobility.

The results of the study serve as a basis for recommendations aimed at improving migration, education, and regional policies in the Republic of Kazakhstan, directed toward the effective use of youth potential amid increasing global mobility.

Results and discussion

The data obtained make it possible to more clearly outline the nature and direction of migration attitudes among Kazakhstani youth. Against the backdrop of intensifying socio-economic transformations in the country, young people's migration intentions are closely linked to the search for more favorable conditions for personal development. In particular, the analysis of the structure of migration motives (Table 3) shows that migration choices are shaped primarily by economic and professional factors. The most common reasons for relocation include the desire to improve one's standard of living (51.1%) and to access broader employment opportunities (41.8%). A significant share of young people (31%) considers migration for educational purposes, which confirms the high demand for quality education abroad.

Additional motives include interest in cultural diversity, aspiration for entrepreneurial activity, and a more favorable environmental setting. Motives related to local conflicts, language difficulties, or corruption are rare, indicating their low significance within the broader migration landscape.

Table 3 – Distribution of responses to the question: "What is the main reason for your desire to relocate?" (this question was answered only by respondents who want to move from their current place of residence), 2024, %

Reason	%
Desire to improve the economic standard of living	51.1
Broader employment opportunities	41.8
Desire to have a higher quality of education	31.0
Desire to have more cultural diversity	21.4

Reason	%
More opportunities to start one's own business	19.8
Changes in climate and environmental living conditions	14.3
Desire to avoid conflicts in the village/city where you currently live	4.4
Corruption	0.3
Change of environment	0.3
Own housing	0.5
Language barrier	0.3
Difficult to answer / No answer	2.5
Note – source (Analytical Reports, 2024)	

The predominance of socio-economic and educational motives aligns with current data on the scale of external labor mobility among citizens of Kazakhstan. According to the official information from the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of the Population of the Republic of Kazakhstan, as of March 1, 2025, approximately 140,000 citizens of the country are employed abroad. However, data from the International Organization for Migration adjust this figure upward. According to their estimates, the total number of Kazakh citizens engaged in international labor migration may reach 194,000 (Yesenalieva, 2021). Such a discrepancy between national and international statistics indicates a high share of informal employment among migrants abroad. This, in turn, highlights the need to revise and improve existing mechanisms for monitoring, support, and legal protection of external labor migration.

This issue is particularly relevant for youth, as they represent the most mobile and vulnerable category of the population actively involved in migration processes. One of the key aspects of youth migration is country preferences, which demonstrate a stable trajectory in the choice of potential migration destinations. Based on the results of sociological studies conducted by the Scientific Research Center "Youth" in 2022 and 2024 (Analytical Report, 2022), several dominant destinations have been identified, which have maintained their popularity over recent years.

Russia, the United States, and Turkey continue to occupy leading positions among preferred destinations for youth migration; however, the internal dynamics of these preferences reveal several noteworthy shifts.

Interest in the United States has shown a marked rise – from 15.3% in 2022 to 21.6% in 2024 – which may reflect expanding educational possibilities, diversified career trajectories, and the country's sustained reputation as a global center of academic mobility. Turkey, by contrast, which previously ranked among the most favored destinations, has experienced a decline in attractiveness over the same period: from 20.8% to 16.7%. This change may signal intensifying competition among transit and temporary-residence countries, alongside evolving expectations and strategic orientations within the migration intentions of Kazakhstani youth.

A downward trend is also evident in preferences for European destinations, where interest decreased from 10.7% to 8.2%. This reduction is plausibly linked to tighter visa and migration regulations introduced across EU member states, as well as to the limited employability prospects faced by migrants who do not possess sufficient professional or linguistic preparation. At the same time, the appeal of Russia remains remarkably stable – 26.1% in 2022 compared to 25.3% in 2024 – reflecting the continued influence of historically rooted cultural, linguistic, and educational affiliations, as well as the presence of well-established formal and informal mobility networks.

Well as the presence of specific geopolitical, institutional, and socio-economic factors influencing migration choices. However, it is important to note that abstract country preferences do not always correlate with the actual plans of young people. A follow-up question regarding countries, posed in the 2024 survey to those respondents who expressed an intention to leave the country, revealed a significant discrepancy between the perceived desirability of certain countries and specific migration intentions. Because of this stage of the survey, a different "top three" list of priority destinations emerged, reflecting a more pragmatic approach to migration.

Table 4 – Distribution of responses to the question: "Which country are you thinking of or planning to move to?" (only respondents who want to move from Kazakhstan answered this question), 2022-2024, %

Country	Percentage of those willing to move, %	
	2022	2024
Russia	26.1	25.3
USA	15.3	21.6
Turkey	20.8	16.7
European countries	10.7	8.2
Asian countries	0	5.9
China	3.3	4.8
Canada	5.5	3.7
CIS countries	1.3	1.9
Other countries	0	1.1
Difficult to answer	3.3	10.8
Note – source (Analytical Reports, 2022, 2024)		

Among respondents planning labor or educational migration, South Korea ranked first, with 28.3% of young Kazakhs considering it as a realistic future destination. This may be associated with the expansion of bilateral cooperation in labor migration, the availability of accessible employment programs, and the active presence of Korean companies and educational institutions in Central Asia.

Germany ranked second (13%), which can be explained by its high standard of living, professional opportunities, and the wide range of academic and exchange programs available. The United Kingdom ranked third (10.9%), maintaining its attractiveness in terms of high-quality higher education, despite the challenges posed by visa policies and the high entry barriers to the labor market.

Table 5 – Distribution of responses to the question: "Which country are you thinking of or planning to move to?" (only respondents who want to move from Kazakhstan answered this question; including countries in Europe, Asia, CIS, and others), %

Country	Percentage of those willing to move, %
South Korea	28.3
Germany	13.0
United Kingdom	10.9
UAE	6.5
Japan	4.3
Note – source (Analytical Report, 2024)	

Such a divergence between value-oriented preferences (e.g., the USA, Turkey, Russia) and rational migration intentions (e.g., South Korea, Germany, the United Kingdom) suggests the existence of two levels of migration choice. The first level is shaped by perceptions associated with the "successful West," including a high standard of living and cultural affinity. The second level is based on a realistic assessment of the accessibility of visa regimes, employment programs, and educational opportunities.

This multilayered nature of migration motivation calls for the development of a more differentiated and targeted migration policy. Such a policy should simultaneously foster conditions for youth self-realization within the country and provide institutional support for those who view migration as a strategy for personal and professional development.

In the context of understanding youth migration choices, it is important to note that the study's findings indicate a significant impact of the host countries' external migration policies, the level of informational transparency, and the accessibility of legal employment channels. These factors play a decisive role in selecting a specific destination country. In particular, the growing interest in South Korea can be explained not only by its economic attractiveness but also by the prospects of legal employment through the Employment Permit System, which Kazakhstan is currently seeking to join (Gulyaeva, 2025).

At the same time, the growing interest in mobility has been accompanied by new challenges.

In 2024 the authorities of South Korea carried out large-scale measures resulting in the deportation of roughly 15,000 Kazakhstani citizens who were residing in the country without appropriate legal documentation (Shashkina, 2024). This situation reveals not only the magnitude of the existing migration stream, but also its structural fragility, which stems from insufficient legal awareness among migrants and the lack of comprehensive institutional mechanisms supporting their mobility from the country of origin.

Within the European landscape, Germany remains one of the most appealing destinations for young migrants. This is largely explained by its consistently high living standards, the diversity of academic and professional trajectories available to international applicants, and opportunities created through programs such as the EU Blue Card, which facilitates skilled labor migration and long-term career development.

The United Kingdom, in turn, has in recent years become a new center of labor migration from Central Asian countries, a development resulting from changes in the composition of the seasonal workforce amid the military conflict in Ukraine. Whereas previously the majority of migration quotas were allocated to citizens of Russia and Ukraine, by 2023 the UK government had issued 45,000 visas for migrants from Central Asian countries, including Kazakhstan (Kozenko, 2024). This shift was accompanied by extensive information and awareness campaigns, including the use of personalized video testimonials on social media, which contributed to increased interest among Kazakh citizens in seasonal employment opportunities in the UK agricultural sector. The growth in visa applications serves as confirmation of this trend: whereas only four applications were registered in 2019, the number increased to 2,711 in 2022, and reached 3,994 in the first half of 2023 (Protenge Telegram Channel, 2025).

It should be noted, that several empirical studies emphasize that the positive but superficial perception of the European Union among Central Asian youth does not always align with the outcomes of specific EU policies in the region. Perceptions are often shaped by persistent historical and cultural notions of an idealized Europe rather than by an informed understanding of current EU activities and initiatives (Arynov, 2021). In the context of a growing flow of negative narratives concerning the EU's prospects, there is a risk of erosion of this positive image, particularly in the absence of an active communication strategy tailored to a youth audience from Brussels.

The analysis of the obtained results shows the presence of a double structure of migration preferences. On the one hand, the traditional orientations towards the post-Soviet space and the Anglo-Saxon countries remain. On the other hand, there is a shift in real migration behavior towards countries that offer understandable, institutionally designed and economically beneficial mechanisms for attracting labor. This trend is probably due not only to differences in wages, but also to the transparency of legal entry procedures, the protection of migrants' rights, and the presence of diaspora networks.

In examining the nature of youth migration, particular attention should be given to educational migration, which constitutes an independent and significant vector of mobility for Kazakhstani youth. It functions not only as an important socio-demographic phenomenon but also as a key indicator of the development of Kazakhstan's human capital, influencing the country's competitiveness in the global context.

In the context of accelerating globalization and the expanding internationalization of the educational space, the criteria guiding the choice of a study destination increasingly include not only the quality of academic programs but also the international recognition of degrees, access to research or academic internships, and realistic prospects for subsequent employment. These factors intensify competition among countries that offer attractive educational and professional trajectories for young people.

Empirical data from 2024 indicate that one in three young citizens of Kazakhstan identifies the pursuit of high-quality education as the primary motive for potential study abroad. This suggests that youth migration strategies have moved beyond predominantly economic explanations and now exhibit a complex, multidimensional structure shaped by educational and professional aspirations. Under these conditions, the need to revise national strategies for higher education development and to strengthen international academic integration becomes increasingly evident.

International statistical reports show that in 2022 Kazakhstan ranked tenth globally in terms of the number of students studying abroad, with the total figure reaching approximately 80,000 (Serdalina, 2025). Current data indicate that more than 60,000 Kazakhstani students are enrolled in educational institutions in Russia. According to the state broadcaster CGTN, as of October 2024, around 15,000

Kazakh students are studying at higher education institutions in China (Krasnova, 2025).

A significant, though smaller, flow of students goes to the United States and the United Kingdom (around 2,000 students annually), while interest in universities in South Korea, Germany, and Turkey remains steady (Karimova, 2025).

Table 6 – Key destination countries for Kazakhstani youth educational migration

Country	Number of people
Russia	over 60 000
China	approximately 15 000
United Kingdom	2 000
USA	
Note –data based on publicly available statistics for 2025	

The dominance of the Russian educational track is driven by a combination of factors, including historical and cultural proximity, linguistic unity, geographic accessibility, as well as a well-developed network of academic connections and effective mechanisms for mutual recognition of degrees. At the same time, the trend toward diversification of educational pathways among Kazakhstani youth, reflected in growing interest in Western European and East Asian countries, indicates a desire to integrate into more globalized academic and professional communities. This transformation of migration preferences underscores the need to adapt national policies to the emerging challenges and opportunities of the international educational landscape.

In general, the results of the study emphasize the urgent need to form a flexible and proactive migration policy focused on institutional support for young people at all stages of the migration process: from information and counseling to adaptation and professional integration abroad and upon return to their homeland. An important aspect is also the development of international agreements and partnerships aimed at improving the quality of professional training, ensuring transparency and comparability of educational programs, and creating conditions for effective employment of graduates.

In the modern demographic and social dynamics of Kazakhstan, there are stable trends in youth migration, characterized by a complex dual structure of mobility. This structure is manifested in the dissonance between the declarative attitudes of young migrants and their real migration decisions, which stems from a variety of socio-institutional factors. Analytical data show that motivational levels and migration strategies are shaped by institutional conditions, such as accessibility and transparency of migration procedures, legal protection of migrants, as well as the availability of effective support networks in destination countries.

Traditional areas of labor migration, including Russia, the United States and Turkey, remain highly relevant for Kazakhstani youth. At the same time, there is a shift towards countries that provide legal and institutionally protected mobility channels, such as South Korea, Germany, and the United Kingdom. This indicates the formation of a behavioral model of migrants focused on stable legal institutions and the predictability of the host country.

Similar trends are recorded in the field of educational migration. Kazakhstani youth demonstrate a steady interest in the neighboring and distant countries, among which Russia, China, the USA, Great Britain and Germany are the leaders. Kazakhstan occupies a significant place among countries with a high level of participation in international academic mobility, which simultaneously generates challenges of "brain drain" and opens up prospects for return migration and knowledge transfer. At the same time, government initiatives, in particular the "Bolashak" International Scholarship Program, show effectiveness in ensuring backward mobility and building human resources with international training.

Conclusion

In light of the identified trends and challenges, the formation of state migration policy requires focusing on the following priority areas:

1. Establishing an integrated system for monitoring and analyzing migration flows, including educational mobility, with the aim of forming a reliable statistical database on the number of Kazakhstani youth residing abroad, their geographic destinations, sources of funding, and rates of return.

2. Developing and enhancing the regulatory and legal framework governing educational migration, addressing the recognition of foreign academic degrees, mechanisms for supporting the social adaptation of returning graduates, and the expansion of bilateral cooperation with foreign universities and governmental institutions.

3. Designing a strategy of managed mobility that incorporates not only regulatory mechanisms aimed at reducing outmigration, but also a system

of incentives that encourages the return of young people with international experience and ensures the effective integration of their acquired competencies into the national economy and academic sphere.

The implementation of these priority directions may form the basis for a sustainable, adaptive, and forward-looking migration policy oriented toward long-term national interests, the needs of youth, and the challenges of global mobility.. Such an approach will ensure a balance between preserving Kazakhstan's human capital and integrating the country into the international educational and professional landscape.

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Information about authors:

Kozhabekova Dinara – Consultant, Scientific Research Center "Youth", Astana, Kazakhstan, e-mail: okane82@mail.ru

Akhantayeva Sagynysh – Senior Expert, Kazakhstan Institute for Strategic Studies under the President of the Republic of Kazakhstan (Astana, Kazakhstan, e-mail: 2000astana@gmail.com)

Argynbayeva Zhanar (corresponding-author) – PhD, Associate Professor, Narkhoz University (Astana, Kazakhstan, e-mail: zhanar.argynbayeva@narxoz.kz)

Karimova Gulbakhar – PhD, Associate Professor, Head of the Department of Agribusiness and Marketing, Andijan Institute of Agriculture and Agrotechnology (Tashkent, Uzbekistan).

Авторлар туралы мәлімет:

Кожабекова Динара Асылхановна – кеңесші, «Жастар» ғылыми-зерттеу орталығы (Астана, Қазақстан, e-mail: okane82@mail.ru)

Ахантаева Сағыныш Жумажановна – аға сарапшы, Қазақстан Республикасының Президенті жанындағы Қазақстан стратегиялық зерттеулер институты (Астана, Қазақстан, e-mail: 2000astana@gmail.com)

Арғынбаева Жанар Жумагаликызы (корреспондент-автор) – PhD, қауымдастырылған профессор, Нархоз университеті (Алматы, Қазақстан, zhanar.argynbayeva@narxoz.kz)

Каримова Гулбахар Абусаттаровна – PhD, доцент, агробизнес және маркетинг кафедрасының меңгерушісі, Андижан ауыл шаруашылығы және агротехнологиялар институты (Ташкент, Өзбекстан).

Сведения об авторах:

Кожабекова Динара Асылхановна – консультант, Научно-исследовательский центр «Молодежь» (Астана, Казахстан, e-mail: okane82@mail.ru);

Ахантаева Сағыныш Жумажановна – старший эксперт, Казахстанский институт стратегических исследований при Президенте Республики Казахстан (Астана, Казахстан, e-mail: 2000astana@gmail.com);

Арғынбаева Жанар Жумагаликызы (автор-корреспондент) – PhD, ассоциированный профессор, Университет Нархоз (Алматы, Казахстан, e-mail: zhanar.argynbayeva@narxoz.kz);

Каримова Гулбахар Абусаттаровна – PhD, доцент, зав. кафедрой агробизнеса и маркетинга, Андижанский институт сельского хозяйства и агротехнологий (Ташкент, Узбекистан).