



THE IMPACT OF BREXIT ON MIGRATION FROM UZBEKISTAN: THREATS AND OPPORTUNITIES

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Article history:	Abstract:
Received: 10 th October 2026 Accepted: 8 th November 2026	The United Kingdom's departure from the European Union (Brexit) has reconfigured its immigration policy and labor market demands, with important implications for migrants from Uzbekistan. This study examines migration trends from Uzbekistan to the UK from 2020–2025, using official statistics, reports, and academic literature. It reviews legal, labor (including seasonal and skilled), student, and other migration categories. Results show a dramatic rise in Uzbek nationals entering the UK under new temporary work schemes: for example, Seasonal Worker visas grew from only 556 in 2021 to 6,278 in 2024[1][2]. Migration flows in this period were heavily shaped by UK labor shortages after Brexit, with 1,900 Uzbeks employed in the UK in 2023 and bilateral agreements on recruitment[3]. Key opportunities include high wages and legal migration channels for Uzbek workers and students, as well as strengthened UK–Uzbek cooperation (e.g. recent memoranda)[4]. Major threats involve migrant exploitation risks, high fees/debts, and precarity due to tied visas[5]. The paper concludes that while Brexit has opened new labor migration routes for Uzbekistan, robust protections and oversight are needed to ensure mutual benefit.
Keywords: Brexit, Uzbekistan, migration, seasonal workers, labor migration, student migration, United Kingdom, Central Asia, visa policy[2]	

INTRODUCTION

Brexit has profoundly reshaped UK immigration rules: free movement of EU citizens ended on 31 December 2020 and was replaced by a new points-based system requiring non-UK nationals (including Uzbeks) to meet skill and salary thresholds for work visas[6]. This shift coincided with policy efforts to address labor shortages by recruiting workers from outside Europe. While Uzbekistan is not an EU member, its citizens are affected by these changes through the UK's new migration routes (e.g. Skilled Worker and Seasonal Worker visas). Meanwhile, Uzbekistan (pop. ~36 million) is a major labor-exporting country: remittances from overseas workers (mainly in Russia and Kazakhstan) form a significant share of GDP[7][5]. The COVID-19 pandemic and geopolitical shifts (e.g. war in Ukraine) further altered Central Asian migration patterns, prompting governments to seek new labor markets[8][5]. For Uzbeks, Britain presents both promising opportunities and novel challenges. This paper analyzes trends in Uzbek–UK migration from 2020 to 2025 and assesses the threats and opportunities Brexit has created for different migrant categories.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Existing literature on Brexit's migration impact tends to focus on Europe and the UK labour market as a whole. Analyses note that net EU migration to the UK has declined since 2020, while non-EU migration (skilled workers, students, temporary workers) has risen[9][10]. Studies of Central Asia emphasize the region's heavy reliance on labor migration and remittances, and the risks of over-dependence on Russia. Dastanbekov (2025) argues that post-2022 geopolitical shifts motivate Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to diversify migration destinations, citing opportunities to expand agreements with countries like the UK[8]. Policy reports and news media document the UK's growing seasonal worker programs: e.g. by 2023, ~70% of the UK's Seasonal Worker visas went to Central Asian nationals[11]. Seasonal visa evaluations by UK government show a surge in horticultural workers from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan after 2020[12][13]. Several recent articles highlight both positive and negative aspects of these schemes: higher earnings (up to £12,000 in a season[14]) but also worker vulnerabilities (debt, tied visas, exploitation)[5].



However, literature specifically on Uzbek migration to Britain is scarce. No peer-reviewed studies directly address this nexus, so we synthesize relevant sources (government data, IOM and World Bank reports, regional news) to fill the gap.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a mixed-methods approach combining quantitative data analysis with qualitative review. We compiled immigration statistics from UK Home Office releases and government surveys, focusing on visas issued by nationality (UZ) from 2020 through 2025. Key sources include UK Seasonal Worker Survey reports (2022–2024)[12][2] and quarterly immigration statistics[13][15]. We also examined official Uzbek government announcements and labor migration reports (e.g. Uzbekistan’s Agency for External Labor Migration data cited by TimesCA[3]) and reputable international data (World Bank, IOM).

Qualitative analysis draws on academic and policy literature on post-Brexit migration, news accounts, and expert commentaries (e.g. FPC policy briefs[8]). Where possible, trends are illustrated with tables and graphs; for example, Figure 1 (below) plots annual Seasonal Worker visa issuances for Central Asia versus Ukraine. All data cited are the most recent available, covering January 2020 – mid-2025.

ANALYSES AND RESULTS

Migration Trends 2020–2025

Brexit-era immigration statistics show a sharp shift in source countries for UK temporary work visas. After 2020, the Seasonal Worker scheme rapidly expanded. In 2021 only 556 Uzbek nationals received Seasonal Worker visas, but by 2024 this number reached 6,278 (17.7% of all SW visas)[2]. Table 1 summarizes the surge in Uzbek seasonal visas:

Table 1
Seasonal worker visas granted to Uzbek nationals, 2020–2024

Year	Uzbek Seasonal Worker visas (UK)
2020	2 (first half)
2021	556
2022	4,228
2023	4,091
2024	6,278 ¹

The give Figure 1 below illustrates the broader context: after 2019, seasonal visa counts from Central Asia (including Uzbekistan) eclipsed those from Ukraine and all other countries, reflecting targeted recruitment. Seasonal workers from Uzbekistan constituted about 12–18% of the UK’s total seasonal intake between

2022–2024[16][13]. This boom is due to UK farm labour shortages post-Brexit; as domestic and EU seasonal labor declined, growers lobbied for new workers[17][15]. The UK government increased the annual quota (to 45,000 for 2024/25) and operators recruited heavily in Uzbekistan[10][15].

¹ Department for Environment, Food & Rural Affairs, & Home Office. (2025, July 16). *Seasonal workers survey results 2024*. GOV.UK. <https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/seasonal-workers-pilot-review/seasonal-workers-survey-results-2024>

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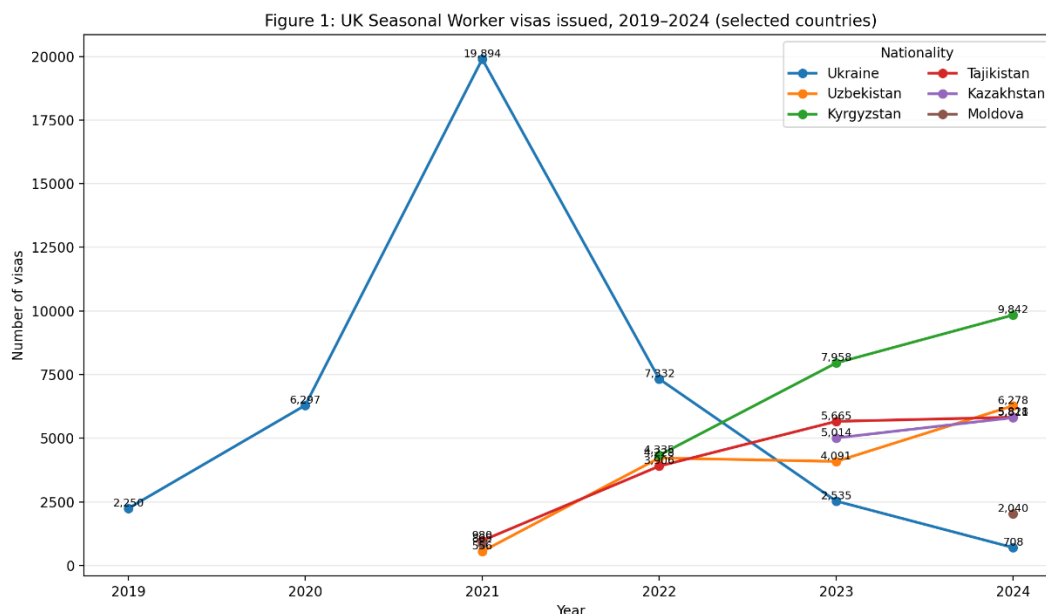


Figure 1 Seasonal Worker visas in the UK, 2019–2024 (Central Asia, Ukraine, other countries).¹

In figure 1 values shown are the year-by-year counts provided in the cited UK government materials; blank years indicate that a value was not provided in the excerpted figures used for this chart (not necessarily zero)

In parallel, general work visa categories saw rising participation from Uzbek nationals, though on a smaller scale. The Home Office reports that around 1,900 Uzbek citizens were employed in the UK via organized recruitment programs in 2023[3]. This made Uzbekistan the third-largest Central Asian source after Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. Skilled Worker and Health/Care Worker visas have also been accessible: for instance, UK Health & Care Worker visas surged during 2021–22 (peaking mid-2023) but later fell[18]. It is plausible that some Uzbek healthcare and IT professionals benefited from post-Brexit shortages, though detailed nationality breakdowns are limited. Student migration, while modest, has potential: UK universities actively recruit from Central Asia. The British Council offers scholarships (e.g. Chevening, GREAT) for Uzbeks[19]. British education is a draw, aided by reinstated post-study work rights after Brexit.

Uzbekistan's Perspective

From Uzbekistan's side, the 2022–2024 period saw intensified labor migration. According to official data, 17,336 Uzbeks emigrated in 2023, primarily as workers[20][3]. Russia remained the top destination

(29,200 under formal programs), but significant numbers went to South Korea (4,900) and the UK (1,900)[3]. Uzbekistan's Agency for External Labor Migration noted a "sharp increase" in organized foreign employment, with 38,400 migrants placed abroad in 2023[3]. While most head to Russia/Kazakhstan, the UK now ranks among the active destinations. This shift reflects Uzbekistan's economic reforms encouraging overseas labor (remittance-driven growth) and responses to regional instability (e.g. declining Russia attractiveness)[21][3].

DISCUSSION

Brexit has created both opportunities and challenges for Uzbek migrants.

Opportunities: The main opportunities stem from new UK labor channels and high wages. Seasonal work in UK agriculture offers Uzbek (and other CA) workers legitimate jobs with far higher earnings than at home. In 2024, quotas rose to 45,000 (nearly 30% to Kyrgyzstan alone)[10], and UK farms needed workers urgently. Uzbek participants stand to earn roughly £12–15 per hour, allowing monthly take-home pay of ~\$3,000 in peak harvest season[22][23]. After accounting for modest accommodation costs (~£10/day) and travel expenses, an Uzbek seasonal worker can save around \$10–12k in a six-month stint[4][14]. Such earnings are nearly 30 times the average Uzbek wage (~\$400)[23]. This financial

¹ UK Seasonal Worker vizalari bo'yicha millatlar kesimidagi yillik ma'lumotlar **House of Commons Library** tadqiqot brifingi hamda **DEFRA & UK Home Officening** 2022–2024 yillardagi "Seasonal workers survey results" hisobotlaridan olindi.



incentive benefits Uzbek households and the national economy via remittances. In addition, the UK reinstated post-study work visas (Graduate Route) and expanded student scholarships, potentially attracting more Uzbek students – a category that was less constrained by Brexit than by global competition. Enhanced UK–Uzbek institutional ties (British Council, education forums) are also fostering academic exchange. Importantly, UK authorities and civil society have made some efforts to protect Central Asian workers: for example, Britain’s Gangmasters and Labour Abuse Authority (GLAA) signed memoranda with Uzbekistan in 2023 to crack down on unscrupulous recruiters[24]. These cooperative frameworks can improve transparency and worker rights over time. Formally, Uzbeks now have clearer legal routes (seasonal, skilled) to enter the UK, often with required government endorsement, reducing the need for irregular migration.

Threats: Despite these prospects, significant threats persist. A chief concern is vulnerability to exploitation inherent in tied visas. Seasonal visas require sponsorship by a single employer, giving that employer disproportionate power over Uzbek workers. Reports indicate workers may endure poor conditions or refrain from complaining (for fear of job loss)[25]. High upfront fees and debts are another problem. The UK survey found ~40% of seasonal workers took loans to fund travel, and nearly half of Uzbek respondents reported extra charges (training, medical, or visa facilitation fees)[5]. With some recruits borrowing heavily or using informal agencies, workers carry financial risk. Combined with minimal legal recourse, this could lead to labor abuses. Indeed, cases of recruitment scams and illegal work are noted: some have used the six-month visa to remain illegally after harvest[24][26]. Although the UK aims to ensure high return rates, anecdotal evidence suggests a small leak into the black economy (as has occurred with other seasonal schemes).

Other threats include geopolitical and social factors. Brexit has fueled anti-immigrant sentiments in parts of the UK; while much rhetoric has focused on “illegal Channel crossings,” some Central Asian migrants may face xenophobia or prejudice. Uzbekistan itself has limited domestic protections or complaint mechanisms for emigrants, raising human rights concerns. On a broader scale, over-reliance on seasonal migration could impact Uzbekistan’s workforce and economy: if many young people leave during harvest months, local agricultural or other sectors might suffer. Conversely, the UK’s post-Brexit policy may change: recent UK immigration policy shifts show tightening of some

visas[6]. For instance, tougher qualification criteria (higher skill thresholds, English tests) could inadvertently bar some Uzbeks. Any reduction of UK quotas (for fiscal or automation reasons) would directly diminish this opportunity.

In the category of student migration, competition is stiff. While UK universities remain prestigious, Uzbek students also have options in China, Russia, Germany or Turkey, which may seem more accessible. Visa fees and living costs in the UK are high, possibly deterring some applicants. For labor migrants, the Seasonal Worker route is strictly time-limited (6 months, no dependents), so it is not a pathway to permanent settlement. This can be a disincentive for those wishing to emigrate long-term.

Nevertheless, recent policy moves attempt to mitigate threats. For example, since April 2023 UK sponsors must guarantee at least 32 hours/week to seasonal migrants[27], reducing exploitative underemployment. The aforementioned GLAA agreements and transparent online portals (in Kyrgyzstan; Uzbek government has signaled similar openness) aim to block fraud. The UK has also shown willingness to negotiate labor cooperation: e.g. September 2025 saw a new MoU to expand legal Uzbek labor migration and enforce rights protections. Such bilateral engagement is promising for addressing shared risks.

CONCLUSION

Brexit has opened unexpected doors for Uzbek migrants. On one hand, the UK’s post-EU immigration regime created new routes (especially the seasonal workers program) that have rapidly become important for Central Asian migrants, including Uzbeks[2][10]. Many Uzbek workers have seized these opportunities, earning substantial incomes legally in Britain, while Uzbek authorities have begun to diversify migration destinations. On the other hand, these changes carry clear dangers: tied visas, high fees, and debt burdens risk placing Uzbekistan’s workers in precarious situations[5]. To realize the potential benefits, both countries must strengthen safeguards. Recommendations include continued monitoring of migrant welfare (e.g. UK labor inspections, Uzbek reporting of abuses), support for ethical recruitment, and programs (education or training) to reduce migrants’ vulnerability. Future research should track long-term outcomes: do Uzbek migrants return with new skills and savings, or become trapped in exploitative cycles? In sum, Brexit has reframed Uzbek–UK migration as a “mixed picture” of threat and opportunity. Careful policy design and bilateral



cooperation will determine whether this new chapter delivers mutual gains or entrenched challenges.

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