

Written immigration policies VS actual lived experiences

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ABSTRACT

This paper presents a comparison of the policies toward Central Asian migrants in Russia and the US and explores some of the realities that these migrant workers experience based on both personal experience as an Uzbek immigrant and the use of scholastic and journalistic sources that indicate legal safeguards offered by such policies (e.g., CIS Agreement, EAEU Framework and US policies such as the F-1 Visa, FLEX and Muskie) cannot stop widespread mistreatment, exploitation and discrimination against migrant workers. The main contention of this research paper is that the social dehumanisation of migrant workers is, in large part, responsible for connecting policy to actual lived experiences of migrant workers. This academic paper develops four psychological perspectives to clarify why many people in the host country dehumanise migrant workers; these include: (1) insecure attachment and a lack of empathy, (2) generational trauma, (3) scapegoating/group fantasy, and (4) moral exclusion. This paper also presents a number of case examples that illustrate how the aforementioned psychological constructs are displayed in daily events associated with migrant workers. These case examples address the exploitation of migrant workers in the workplace, housing, harassment in exchange programs, and public humiliation because of language barriers to illustrate how these psychological constructs are demonstrated in everyday life. In addition to providing evidence to support the relationship between dehumanisation and migrant worker policy, this research provides evidence of ongoing effects of dehumanising policies on migrant workers (e.g., poor mental health, reluctance to access social service institutions, poor cultural identity). Ultimately, the paper posits that dehumanising migrants is an unfortunate consequence of both migrant policy and migrant experience and provides recommendations for future research on intergenerational trauma, developing empathy, and seeking accountability in migration and exchange programmes.

INTRODUCTION

This paper will discuss “What is the gap between the official immigration policies of Russia and the USA and the lived experiences of Central Asian immigrants, and how does social dehumanization bridge that gap?” While Central Asia is taken as a broader context, the focus will often narrow to Uzbekistan - the country I am from and know closest. Rather than relying on formal empirical methods like structured surveys or interviews, this research is built on stories that are often ignored and hidden from the public eye. While other researchers have documented dehumanization from a distance, this paper brings lived reality straight to the page to encourage readers to recognize these hidden patterns in everyday life.

As a qualitative study combining personal experience with scholarly and journalistic sources it argues that dehumanization is the root problem, caused by several factors - attachment styles, historical connections, cultural context, and more. “Dehumanization is the psychological process whereby opponents view each other as less than human and are therefore stripped of basic human rights, making them not deserving of humane treatment” (Wilde et al., 2014, p. 302). Multiple theories explain the causes of this condition: Insecure Attachment and Empathy Deficit, Intergenerational Trauma, Scapegoating and Group Fantasy, and Moral Exclusion - all of which will be analyzed here.

We often see in social media or documents how Central Asian immigrants are welcomed in major countries - Russia and the USA. As an immigrant who lived in Russia for 5 years, I would say that not everything written is often done, and nobody wishes to talk about what's not accomplished. This research will focus on comparing both: effective implementations versus what Central Asians and I have experienced ourselves in reality.

On paper, the protections exist: The CIS agreement between Russia and Central Asia guarantees equal labor rights, social protection, and access to healthcare for migrant workers from member states, “creating a free trade area, aligning military doctrines via the CSTO, managing migration, and preserving the Russian language's status” (Djamalov, 2024). The EAEU (Eurasian Economic Union), though Uzbekistan isn't a full member, “has removed obstacles to labor migration among Member States” (MPI). The United States follows a similar pattern of formal promise - the F-1 Student Visa operates within a regulatory framework of rights and compliance (SJKP), while programs like FLEX, Global UGRAD, and Muskie explicitly promise merit-based opportunity, cultural exchange, and a pathway to build skills.

And yet, despite all these governmental regulations, the reality on the ground tells a different story. My parents worked both night and day, but would end up being scammed or undervalued for their labor, receiving no or low salary. Once, the owner of the house we lived in took our things to the street without warning while we had left for our home country. After searching for a new place, we learned that many owners don't allow immigrants to rent because of stereotypes. I, similarly to other migrants, was discriminated against because of my appearance - often laughed at for what people of my nation are usually associated with: cooking plov, lavash, or being a menial worker. Language barriers belong on this list too, for which immigrants are often heavily disrespected and ignored.

A qualitative synthesis of literature review, policy reports, and lived accounts are offered in this paper in order to examine psychological and structural issues during immigration. By combining historical policy analysis and psychological frameworks including attachment theory, intergenerational trauma, and moral exclusion, the study highlights the gap between diplomatic agreements and the individual realities of Central Asian migrants. Following this methodology, the paper is divided into three parts. First, the geopolitical and economic reasons are analyzed for increasing Central Asian migration to Russia and the United States, evaluating the contrast between labor dependency and educational soft power. Next, the paper reveals the real lived experiences of migrants through real cases, emphasizing how legal protections fail to prevent discrimination, violence, and institutional hostility. Culminating in actionable directions for future research, it suggests psychological theories to explain host-country dehumanization and details resulting in mental health and identity consequences for migrants.

CENTRAL ASIAN RELATIONS WITH RUSSIA AND THE UNITED STATES.

The Central Asian region mainly attracts major powers with its natural resources, and despite being sovereign, these five countries remain dependent on either the USA or Russia as an external actor. Caught at the crossroads of Eurasia, they inevitably fall into the trap of conflicting interests, influences, and ideas - without necessarily choosing to. As Qodirov puts it, “they do not want Central Asia to become an arena of rivalry between great powers, but being at the crossroads of Eurasia, the five countries inevitably fall into the trap of different and sometimes conflicting interests, influences and ideas” (Qodirov, 2022). Tolipov goes further, arguing that “the Central Asian five should, to some extent, dictate their conditions and proposals to the ‘+1’ external actor to avoid the rather lopsided nature of the current ‘C5+1’ dynamic” (Tolipov, 2024).

Although Central Asia is politically and economically tied to Russia, it tries to broaden its connections to avoid falling under sole Russian control again. Yet closeness to Russia remains - through historical relevance under the Soviet Union, cultural similarities, and most importantly for immigrants, a dominant shared language.

The United States, by contrast, “appears to be an outsider in Central Asia, to whom they turn when their interests are threatened, or other regional powers act unexpectedly” (Qodirov, 2022). Still, Washington uses soft power - education - as an indirect way to promote Western values such as democracy, market economics, and academic freedom, without direct political or economic intervention.

Uzbekistan, particularly, tries to be neutral or simply an observer in many agreements with global actors, carefully measuring every single step it takes. This can indicate a disorganized attachment style - it pushes and pulls, fears making a mistake, and behaves unpredictably depending on who is asking. Such patterns are visible with Russia, with which Uzbekistan avoids too much closeness, while at the same time readily agreeing to sign a Board of Peace with the USA.

Migration Policies in Russia and USA

The United States uses education as soft power, exporting educational values to extend influence over Central Asia without direct economic or political intervention. “Educated professionals and dissidents are emigrating due to political repression, including restrictions on freedom of expression and civil liberties” (Hasan et al., 2025). American fully-funded programs - FLEX, YYGS, pre-college courses - and full-ride university scholarships serve as the primary pull factors. While Central Asian governments benefit from free world-class education for their citizens, Uzbekistan additionally tries to retain literate population through EYUF and Millat Umidi scholarships, which fund study abroad with a mandatory return requirement.

Russia tells a different story. According to Gazeta.ru, citing Russia’s Ministry of Internal Affairs, approximately 1.5 million Uzbek citizens entered Russia in 2024, with around 1.3 million working there in 2025, making Uzbeks the largest migrant workforce in the country. These are not students, but predominantly young men aged 18-22, leaving after high school due to financial hardship to fill the labor market, such as construction sites and factories. While this contributes an estimated 7-8% to Russia’s annual economy, remittances represent 14% of Uzbekistan’s GDP, illustrating dependency on its most vulnerable citizens abroad. “Uzbekistan is attempting to reduce its dependence on labor migration by offering competitive conditions within the country. However, the wages offered are still lower than what migrants can earn in Russia, especially when overtime and other benefits are factored in” (Stopterror.uz, n.d.).

THE GAP: LIVED EXPERIENCES OF MIGRANTS.

What are the expectations VS reality for immigrants? Is there a reality or is it just collected experiences?

Good intentions written into law are not enough to protect immigrants from the reality they face. “An Uzbek schoolgirl who traveled to the United States under the FLEX cultural exchange program reported being subjected to sexual harassment by a member of her host family”(Kun.uz, 2026) - a program designed for safety and cultural exchange becoming the site of harm. Beyond individual incidents, false assumptions lead to discrimination: “Political candidates often falsely link undocumented people to crime in the United States. Yet an extensive study of crimes in all 50 states and Washington, DC, from 1990 to 2014, found that undocumented immigration does not increase violent crime” (Vera Institute of Justice, n.d).

Legal status offers little psychological safety. “Three in ten immigrants overall, rising to three-quarters of likely undocumented immigrants, say they or a family member have limited their participation in activities outside the home since January due to concerns about drawing attention to someone’s immigration status” (KFF, 2025). KFF. (2025).

In Russia, security-oriented migration controls have “militarized borders and tightened migration controls, displacing vulnerable populations as it prioritizes security over humanitarian concerns”(Hasan et al., 2025). Following the Crocus City Hall attack in March 2024 by four armed men from the former Soviet republic of Tajikistan, even legally documented Central Asian immigrants faced collective suspicion and deportation - punished for the actions of others simply by sharing a nationality.

Yet violence flows both directions. “The killing prompted a diplomatic response, with Tajikistan’s Foreign Ministry calling it “motivated by ethnic hatred,” and the Russian president offering condolences while describing the attack as an “act of terrorism”. The killer expressed hatred toward society and dehumanised others as “biowaste,” writing: “Lives do not matter, and you people, through your disgusting behaviour toward me, have only confirmed this.” (GNET, 2026). Your nation may become the reason for your death.

I witnessed this personally in Russia, where aviation staff publicly humiliated two immigrants in an airport queue. When one asked to translate for his friend, the worker pulled them aside, slapping the door: “If he doesn’t speak Russian, he will learn it TODAY.” Language becomes the most visible weakness - and dehumanization follows where vulnerability shows.

THE PSYCHOLOGY OF DEHUMANIZATION AMONG HOST-COUNTRY CITIZENS

There are several theories to explain why host-country citizens tend to dehumanize those who have migrated.

Insecure Attachment and Empathy Deficit: A FLEX student was harassed by her host father during the program. The silence around it, neither intervention nor accountability, is just as telling as the act itself. Why does it happen? People raised in emotionally suppressive environments - Soviet-era Russia or conservative American households - develop insecure attachment patterns that limit their capacity for empathy toward outsiders. As psychology researchers note, “Insecure-avoidant children have weaker empathic abilities and act rather aggressively and dominant against weaker ones; one can speak of a precursor of the authoritarian character” (Hopf & Hopf, 1997, p. 53). The host father was probably someone who never learned to recognize or respect other people's boundaries.

Intergenerational Trauma: In post-Soviet Russia, distrust of outsiders was passed down. Generations lived under a system that valued conformity and punished difference. That mindset did not disappear with the Soviet Union. Citizens are often not aware of their prejudice; they are choosing patterns formed long before their time. Regarding the United States, discrimination and nativist attitudes were observed with immigrants from Asia, Southern, and Eastern Europe, along with restrictive laws such as the Chinese Exclusion Act of 1882 and the introduction of quotas in the Immigration Act of 1924. As a result, Early 20th-century anti-immigrant sentiment was fueled by worries about national security, employment competitiveness, and cultural assimilation. (Palencia Ramirez) As Janus observes, “societies are shaped by the intergenerational transmission of trauma, cultural conditioning, and the developmental histories of

individuals within social systems” (Janus, 2025). What seems like xenophobia is often unexamined collective fear that has been passed down over time.

Scapegoating and Group Fantasy: When economic worry increases or national identity feels at risk, societies need a way to deal with that discomfort. In the United States, migrants are blamed for crime rates that statistics do not support. In Russia, ethnic minorities are seen as the source of social disorder. Migrants become the symbolic carrier of everything threatening just because they are psychologically convenient. “Collective emotions such as fear, humiliation, and resentment often resurface in times of social uncertainty and economic instability, creating fertile ground for authoritarian ideologies and violent political movements” (Janus, 2024a; deMause, 2005; Suistola & Volkan, 2017).

Moral Exclusion Once a group is pushed outside the boundary of who “counts,” their suffering stops being seen and heard. For instance, a bystander watches airport humiliation and does not intervene, a host family harms a student and faces no social consequence, an attacker describes human beings as “biowaste” and finds an audience that agrees. None of this requires conscious hatred. That is precisely the point. “Moral exclusion can be subtle and ordinary, enacted by decent people who would be horrified to think of themselves as unjust” (Opatow, 1995, p. 347). Once excluded, immigrants’ suffering becomes invisible - their rights are optional; their humanity is negotiable.

CONSEQUENCES FOR IMMIGRANTS

All of these experiences leave migrants with fear, deteriorating health, and identity confusion. “Across immigration statuses, larger shares of immigrants now than in 2023 say they have avoided things like talking to the police, applying for a job, or traveling due to their or a family member’s immigration status” (Schumacher et al., 2025). The share skipping healthcare rose from 22% to 29% between 2023 and 2025, with reported consequences including “increased stress, anxiety, or sadness; problems sleeping or eating; and/or worsening health conditions” (Pillai et al., 2025). Beyond physical health, dehumanization quietly dismantles identity - migrants hide their accents, grow ashamed of their nationality, and lose confidence in who they are, passing that uncertainty to their children.

CONCLUSION

Governments sign agreements. Programs get funded. Visas get approved. And yet, my parents’ belongings ended up on the street. A FLEX student was harmed by the very host family meant to welcome her. A young man was told he would learn Russian “TODAY” in front of a crowd that did nothing.

This is the gap.

This research asked what causes that gap and how dehumanization bridges it. Host-country citizens do not necessarily wake up and choose to be cruel - many of them probably do not even realize they are. Instead, they grew up in systems that never taught them to see migrants as equals: Soviet-era Russia, which suppressed emotion and rewarded dominance, and American households shaped by decades of racial and immigration fear. That does not excuse anything. It simply explains where the pattern comes from, and why it keeps repeating.

Despite policies such as the CIS Agreement, the EAEU Framework, the F-1 visa and exchange programs - FLEX and Muskie - there is still a gap one layer beneath: in the psychological space between what governments write and what ordinary people do. To be exact, laws protect on paper, while society punishes in person, and dehumanization is what fills that space,

Migrants become targets as the easiest people to blame when something feels wrong in a country, not necessarily because they are dangerous. And once a group is pushed outside the moral circle - once their pain becomes background noise - everything else follows. Examples include a host family harming a student, a landlord throwing someone's belongings onto the street, a worker slapping a door and shouting at a boy who just asked to translate. Bystanders watch and say nothing.

Central Asian immigrants - and Uzbeks especially - leave home already carrying financial pressure, language barriers, and the weight of being far from everything familiar. What they find in Russia or the United States rarely reflects what was written in any agreement. What stays with them instead is a specific kind of constant fear: fear of calling the police when something happens to them, fear of their landlord, fear of walking outside on a bad day when their appearance already marks them as foreign. This is not the fear of danger exactly; it's the fear of being seen and punished simply for being there.

Fixing it requires acknowledging that dehumanization is not a side effect of migration - it is the environment migrants are walking into. Future research should look deeper into how intergenerational trauma shapes public attitudes, how schools in host countries teach - or fail to teach - empathy toward foreigners, and what real accountability looks like when programs meant to protect become sites of harm.

We know how much money Uzbek migrants send home. We track remittances carefully, 14% of an entire country's GDP, built on the backs of 18-year-olds who left after high school because there was no other option. What we do not track is how many of them have stopped feeling human in the process, have learned to hide their accents, and have come to feel ashamed of where they come from.

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