

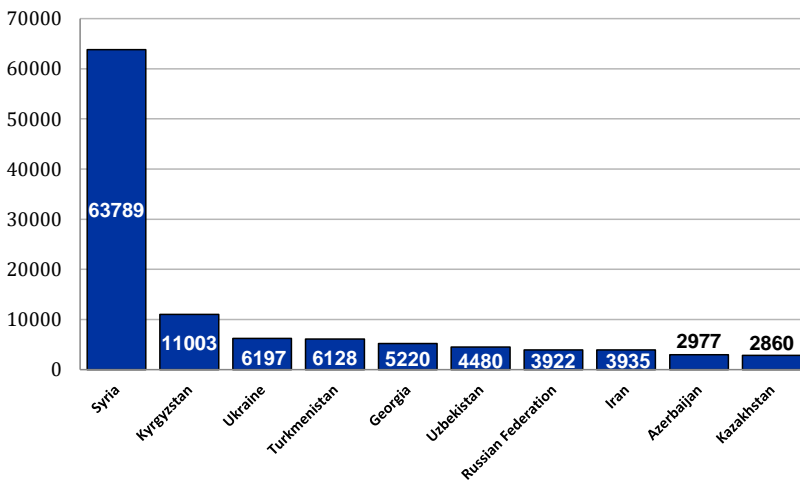


**CENTRAL ASIA – TURKEY MIGRATION CORRIDOR:
REBOOTING REGIONAL COOPERATION UNDER THE
ALMATY PROCESS**

BACKGROUND

Over the past years the migration corridor between Central Asia and Turkey has grown with the considerable contribution of Central Asian labor migration to Turkey. Although the Russian Federation remains the primary recipient of Central Asian migrants, other destination countries have increased their share of the migrant population over the last few years, with the following factors at play. First, a devaluation of the Russian ruble and economic downturn in the Russian Federation reduced the attractiveness of the Russian Federation’s labor market for Central Asian migrants. Secondly, public sentiments towards migrants from Central Asia have frequently been negative which led to more discrimination and in some cases violence against migrants¹. The Russian Federation has also introduced more restrictive regulations for labor migrants from non-EAEU Central Asian countries, which creates additional barriers for foreign workers². At the same time, Turkey has become a more appealing country of destination for the Central Asian citizens due to less restrictive regulations as well as the presence of cultural ties³. In 2019, Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan were reported among the top 10 countries whose citizens have held work permits in Turkey, with Kyrgyzstan being the second top nationality given work permits in the country⁴ (Figure 1). The number of Uzbek labor migrants who moved to Turkey for work purposes increased from 1993 in 2014 to 4480 people in 2019⁵. The number of Central Asian citizens with permanent residence permits in Turkey has increased as well (Figure 2).

Figure 1. Top 10 nationalities with work permits in Turkey, 2019



Source: <https://www.csqb.gov.tr/media/63117/yabanciizin2019.pdf>

¹ To Russia or Turkey? A Central Asian Migrant Worker’s Big Choice <https://thediplomat.com/2019/01/to-russia-or-turkey-a-central-asian-migrant-workers-big-choice/>

²The Eurasian Economic Union: Repaving Central Asia’s Road to Russia? <https://www.migrationpolicy.org/article/eurasian-economic-union-central-asia-russia>

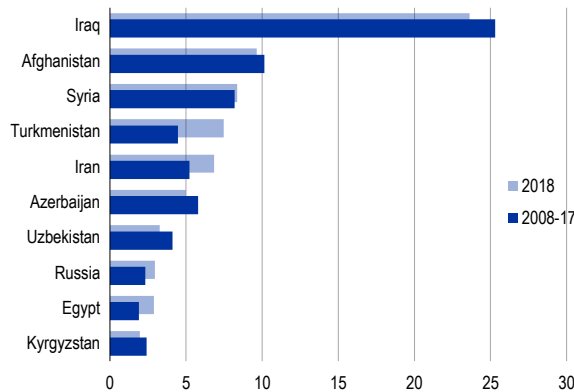
³ Turkey has eased the visa restrictions for citizens of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan by allowing a 90- day stay <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/visa-information-for-foreigners.en.mfa>

⁴ <https://www.csqb.gov.tr/media/63117/yabanciizin2019.pdf>

⁵ <https://www.csqb.gov.tr/istatistikler/calisma-hayati-istatistikleri/resmi-istatistik-programi/yabancilarin-calisma-izinleri/>

Figure 2. Residence permits in Turkey.

Figure 3. Inflows of top 10 nationalities (national definition, % of total inflow of foreign population)



Source: <https://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/sites/1cc2aeef-en/index.html?itemId=/content/component/1cc2aeef-en>

Despite this, migratory movements from Central Asia are largely to the Russian Federation and the migration corridor between Central Asia and the Russian Federation remains one of the biggest and most stable. Based on available official data, there were just under 5 million migrants born in Central Asia who were living in the Russian Federation in 2019⁶. The corridor is reinforced by existing social networks, demand for labor and geographic proximity. For instance, in addition, demographic factors in the Russian Federation, namely the ageing population and low growth of the working-age population, will further contribute to an increase in the demand for labor migration⁷.

Currently the weakening Russian economy, as a result of the economic sanctions and launch of war, will dampen the employment and incomes of migrant workers and their ability to send remittances. Despite RF's stated position that they will continue to need migrant workers for the country's economic development and plan to facilitate regular migration channels for workers from CA, the reality of migration trends and expectations as reported through media indicates that the future of migrants in RF remains uncertain. Many migrants have already been laid off due to the fast-shrinking economy after sanctions came into place and the sharp depreciation of the ruble. Declining economic activity and employment opportunities in RF will also encourage migrants and prospective migrants to seek other destination countries, including, in particular, Kazakhstan and Turkey, which are large and growing countries of destination for Central Asian migrants.

⁶ Based on the available data from UN DESA. World Migration Report, 2020. https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf, p.100, p.100

⁷ <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/1%20Role%20of%20Labour%20Eng%20report%20v3-2-E.pdf>



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Turkey was the first country that recognized the independence of the Central Asian states after the collapse of the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR). Turkey and Central Asian countries have been working on increasing engagement on a broad range of issues including energy, trade, transportation and communications⁸. There are bilateral and international platforms such as the High-Level Strategic Cooperation Councils with Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan in place which contribute to an effective dialogue between the states. In 2009, Turkey established the Turkic Council with four members including Turkey, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan, which was later joined by Uzbekistan. Additionally, member states of the Turkic Council established the Turkic Chamber of Commerce and Industry in 2019.

To facilitate better trade and cooperation with Central Asia, Turkey has established visa-free regimes with the countries of Central Asia and has progressively been easing visa requirements. For instance, in 2018 the government extended the visa-exemption period from 30 days to 90 days for citizens of Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan holding regular passports. Mutual Visa Exemption Agreement between the Government of Republic of Turkey and the Government of Republic of Azerbaijan has been established since 2020.

Educational migration has been increasing as well with more students from Central Asian countries choosing Turkey as a country of destination. The Government of Turkey has also established a fully funded government "Turkey Scholarships" programme at Turkish universities accessible to students from Central Asia⁹. Students from Turkmenistan form the largest group of foreign students in Turkey¹⁰ with 10966 student residence permits given to citizens of Turkmenistan as of 2021. Turkey is the third most popular destination for educational migration from Kyrgyzstan and one of the prevalent destinations¹¹. There are two joint universities (Turkish-Kazakh International Hoca Ahmet Yesevi)¹².

Figure 3. International students in Turkey by nationality, top 10 (student residence permits)

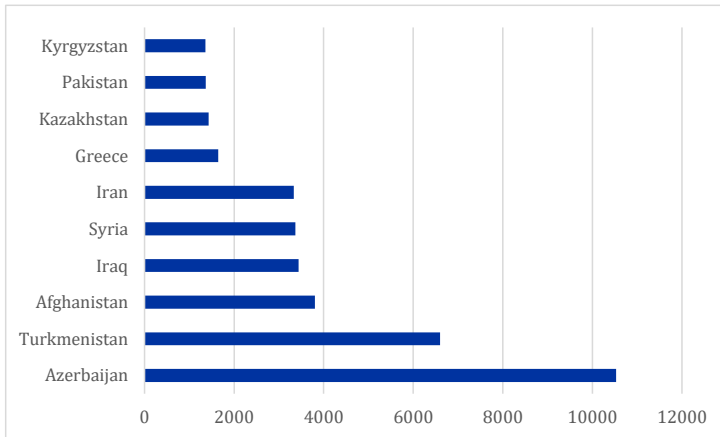
⁸ <https://www.mfa.gov.tr/sub.en.mfa?3eefbf43-15c9-4ad7-8572-7a9fd7940659>

⁹ Turkey's Relations with Central Asian Republics, Republic of Turkey, Ministry of Foreign Affairs https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-relations-with-central-asian-republics.en.mfa

¹⁰ <https://en.goc.gov.tr/residence-permits>

¹¹ External Youth Migration in the Countries of Central Asia: Risk analysis and minimization of negative consequences <https://publications.iom.int/books/external-youth-migration-countries-central-asia-risk-analysis-and-minimization-negative>

¹² https://www.mfa.gov.tr/turkey_s-relations-with-central-asian-republics.en.mfa



Source: DGMM, 2016, www.gov.goc.tr/raporlar3

While the international spotlight may be focused on Turkey’s role as the largest refugee host country with an estimated 4 million refugees (including 3.6 million Syrians under Temporary Protection), the Turkish Government has made significant, forward-looking changes to its immigration policies and programmes over the past few years in order to better govern international labour flows, protect migrant workers, and position Turkey to better reap the benefits of international labour migration. In working towards a stronger labour migration management strategy, Turkey ratified the “Law on International Labour Force” in August 2016. The law resulted in the establishment of the Directorate General on International Labour Force (DGILF) under the Ministry of Labour and Social Security (MoLSS) as the central authority aiming to identify, implement and monitor policies on international labour force as well as regulate foreigners’ work permit applications and labour market integration. The mentioned law has a two-fold vision including: a) counter irregular labor migration, protect rights of foreign workers and promote registered employment and b) attract qualified foreign labor in line with the sectoral needs. Thus, utilization of skills of fresh graduates as well as accelerated skills partnership at regional level would be under the radar of the mentioned legislative and administrative processes.

Central Asia’s population continues to grow rapidly, with around half of the population now under 30 years old. Many younger Central Asians choose to migrate to find work or develop their skillsets for the modern job-market due to labor market challenges in their hometowns. For example, recent study by the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung (FES) shows that 26.7% of young people in Kazakhstan indicated they



plan to live or study abroad with quality education, living standards and higher salaries being the top-3 reasons¹³. Increases in population migration would also impact the volumes of migrants to Turkey from the region. The studies show that the main factors motivating migrants to relocate to Turkey were similar to those driving them to migrate to Russia: the high level of unemployment in Central Asia, the availability of trade, and higher wages in Turkey, which can further impact increase volumes of migration in Central Asia- Turkey route.

The strengthening of relations between the states through institutionalized platforms and initiatives such as the Turkic Council and bilateral agreements can serve as a basis for a stronger diplomatic and economic relations in the future, which can contribute to enhanced connectivity and cooperation. Coupled with further easing of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions on travel, migration flows from Central Asia are expected to increase¹⁴, which subsequently can result in further increased volume of migration in the Central Asia-Turkey corridor. In addition, United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (United Nations Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific) research findings¹⁵ show that established social connections and migration networks play an important role in driving further migration and in integration of migrants. As migrant networks in Turkey grow, the country can become an increasingly attractive destination for migrants from Central Asia. Considering these trends, cooperation between the Central Asian states and Turkey is essential to ensure safe and orderly migration flows between these countries and protect the rights of migrants. Below discusses some of the challenges that have been persisting and newly emerging due to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic in regard to migration of populations between Central Asia and Turkey.

CHALLENGES

With the growing volume of migration flows in the Central Asia- Turkey corridor, migrants from Central Asia face numerous challenges which have been exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Challenges associated with the legal, economic and social status of migrants add to increased vulnerabilities in the face of crisis situations¹⁶. Estimating the scope of migration challenges and trends in the Central Asia – Turkey corridor is complicated by the inadequate provision of migration data and the COVID-19 pandemic. However, considering the deteriorating economic situation in the Central Asian countries it is expected that once COVID-19 restrictions are abolished outward labour and educational migration to other countries, including Turkey will intensify.

A considerable number of migrants continue their stay in Turkey on irregular basis for employment purposes after the expiration of the visa-exemption period. For instance, in 2021 Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan were among the top ten countries whose citizens were identified as irregular migrants with 2943 and 2504 citizens identified in Turkey respectively¹⁷. With the current projected growth of migrants from Central Asia to Turkey as a result of the economic downturn in the Russian Federation, this challenge could be further exacerbated.

¹³ <https://library.fes.de/pdf-files/bueros/kasachstan/18450.pdf> , p. 56

¹⁴ Introducing the Central Asia Migration Tracker <https://oxussociety.org/introducing-the-central-asia-migration-tracker/>

¹⁵ <https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/publications/Migration%20report.pdf>, p.27

¹⁶ World Migration report 2020 https://publications.iom.int/system/files/pdf/wmr_2020.pdf

¹⁷ [IRREGULAR MIGRATION \(goc.gov.tr\)](https://www.goc.gov.tr/irregular-migration)

Добавлено примечание ([SST11]): We may update the data for 2021 just before exiting the report and give the exact date.

Добавлено примечание ([HE2R1]): Well noted and looking forward for the exact data.

Some of the most acute issues in the Central Asia – Turkey migration corridor are associated with labour exploitation, physical, sexual and other kinds of abuse arising from increased unregistered employment of Central Asian migrants in Turkey. According to Directorate General on Migration Management (DGMM), 142 Uzbek, 127 Kyrgyz, 28 Azeri, 26 Kazak and 24 Turkmen victims of human trafficking were identified between 2015-2019 in Turkey. Unregistered employment status leads to increased vulnerability of migrants to further suffer from exploitation. DGMM also reports that in 2019 the highest number of victims identified in Turkey were from Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan majority of whom were sexually exploited. As a considerable number of them are undocumented, this creates additional challenges in both estimating the total number of labor migrants from Central Asia as well as in identifying cases of abuse and exploitation. In addition, many Central Asian women migrate to Turkey seeking employment, so gender-based vulnerabilities, including gender-based violence (GBV) and trafficking for the purposes of domestic servitude need to be addressed among the foreigner workers.

Figure 4. Victims of human trafficking by nationalities, 2014-2017

Country	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Syria	9	36	86	15	37
Kyrgyzstan	17	33	31	14	32
Uzbekistan	34	16	19	29	44
Morocco	6	10	25	18	28
Georgia		23	11	1	2
Moldova	5	8	20	1	4
Ukraine	4	7	16	3	10
Russian Federation	3	6	16	1	4
Azerbaijan	4	4	11	3	6
Turkmenistan	3	3	11	3	5
Kazakhstan	2	4	9	7	4

Source: DGMM, 2019, www.gov.goc.tr/raporlar3



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Unregistered employment also exacerbates social vulnerabilities in times of crisis, such as the COVID-19 pandemic. After the outbreak of the pandemic, an increase of attempts to recruit foreign workers by terrorist groups was observed. For instance, many Turkmen foreign workers were left with little or no assistance and exposed to recruitment.¹⁸ The risk analysis conducted by IOM among migrants from Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan has shown that specific vulnerabilities of migrants should be considered for prevention of violent extremism (PVE) activities¹⁹. Such issues highlight the importance of ensuring regularization of employment of migrants as well as providing informational support and harmonization measures, which is important both for PVE as well as to ensure better migration management and improving migrants' rights observance.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR COOPERATION

Turkey and Central Asian countries have been expanding dialogue. Since beginning of 2021, the Minister of Foreign Affairs of Turkey travelled to Kyrgyzstan, Turkmenistan and Uzbekistan to discuss strengthening economic and political ties between the countries. Connectivity between Central Asia and Turkey will potentially strengthen through the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), as Turkey is an important link in the China–Central Asia–West Asia Economic Corridor²⁰. This will likely increase Central Asia-Turkey migration. To enhance the conditions of migrants, there have been established bilateral agreements such as the Agreement between the Republic of Uzbekistan and the Republic of Turkey on the Protection of the Rights of Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families (May 2019).

At regional level, the Almaty Process (AP) on Refugee Protection and International Migration has been established which serves as a reliable consultative forum to manage migration movements that affect the region and its neighbouring areas.²¹ Established in 2013, AP promotes sustained dialogue and exchange of information on migration issues and on refugee protection challenges in Central Asia and the Central Asia-Turkey corridor. The strategic directions of AP clearly state what actions have to be taken to eliminate the number of migration issues within the specified regions:

Strategic Direction 1: Readmission. The first strategic direction aims towards the realization of the right of citizens to return to their homeland. Each Member State²² of the AP supports concluding readmission agreements, joint declarations, memorandum of understandings and standard operating procedures with other interested countries. Given the negative consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic, readmission agreements would support safe return of those in need. Promoting an agreement on a standardized mechanism and terms for readmission across the Almaty Protocol countries would facilitate the way for further bilateral cooperation between corridor countries on regular labour migration.

Strategic Direction 2: Labour Migration Agreements. Key areas for development under strategic direction 2 are the formation of consistent and shared mechanisms for administering the residency

¹⁸ Terrorists step up recruitment of Central Asian migrant workers in Turkey https://central.asia-news.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_ca/features/2020/12/10/feature-01

¹⁹ Risk analysis on return migration and challenges in Central Asia 2017

<https://kazakhstan.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl211/files/documents/2017-risk-analysis-eng.pdf>

²⁰ Turkey's Central Asia policy <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/13567888.2021.1934252>

²¹ For more information on Almaty Process, please refer to <https://www.iom.int/almaty-process>

²² Member states of the Almaty Process: Afghanistan, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Turkey and Turkmenistan



and work permits of foreigners. If these mechanisms are consistent between countries, flexible and easy to use by incoming foreign workers, they will reduce irregular migration and respond to national labour needs. Tajikistan, Turkey, Kazakhstan and Azerbaijan are actively working in this strategic direction. Uzbekistan and Turkey signed an agreement on the protection of the rights of migrant workers and members of their families in 2018. A bilateral agreement on the portability of pensions and social benefits was signed between Kyrgyzstan and Turkey in April 2018.²³ Possible solutions to irregular migration challenges include pre-departure information, fast-track procedures for visa applications and work permits, and comprehensive support and monitoring of recruitment agencies to facilitate organized and ethical recruitment.

Strategic Direction 3: Improving Migration Data includes such initiatives as creating a common migration database among all member states as a requirement for more effective cooperation. Also, improving migration data includes exchanging practices and experiences and complying with international policies and standards. This would contribute to identification of migration trends and challenges and further addressing them to improve migration management. The Almaty Protocol would also serve as a good forum for standardizing the calculation and reporting of migration figures across member countries.

Strategic Direction 4: Vulnerable Migrants provides an opportunity to standardize mechanisms for the identification and assistance of vulnerable migrants. This could include agreeing on shared models for identification and assistance of vulnerable migrants that would also ensure appropriate conditions for Turkish citizens abroad. A data sharing agreement on missing persons would also facilitate stronger responses under strategic direction 5 and 6.

Strategic Direction 5: Victims of Trafficking (VOT's) and Travel Bans aims to reduce negative social phenomena, risks, and threats through preventive information campaigns. Raising the awareness of migrant populations in countries of origin and destination of the risks of trafficking and of the options for redress could reduce trafficking in persons. In addition, harmonization measures could provide support to migrants in vulnerable situations through the strengthening of diaspora communities²⁴.

Strategic Direction 6: Development of recommendations for the reintegration of migrants aims to develop recommendations for the reintegration of migrants. Turkey, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Azerbaijan have expressed interest in supporting all activities proposed during the AP strategy meetings. These issues are of particular importance to countries of origin, and as chair, Turkey could support and facilitate the collection and sharing of recommendations on best reintegration practices.

The initiatives included in the framework of the AP indicate that there is extensive space for cooperation in the field of migration among the countries of the Turkey-Central Asia corridor, which would contribute to safe and regular migration in the future.

²³ <https://www.migrationdataportal.org/sites/default/files/2018-09/Migration%20Governance%20Snapshot-The%20Kyrgyz%20Republic.pdf>

²⁴ Risk analysis on return migration and challenges in Central Asia 2017
<https://kazakhstan.iom.int/sites/g/files/tmzbdl211/files/documents/2017-risk-analysis-eng.pdf>

Almaty Protocol Strategic Objective	Turkey's 11 th National Development Plan 2019-2023	DGMM Strategy Objective	GCM Objective	Opportunities
<p>Strategic Direction 1: Readmission.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Realization of the right of citizens to return to their homeland (readmission) 	661.6	A2H2: Readmission Agreements, joint declarations, memorandum of understandings and standard operating procedures with countries of origin	(5) Enhance availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration (21) Cooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return and readmission, as well as sustainable reintegration (23) Strengthen international cooperation and global partnerships for safe, orderly and regular migration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Establish standardized readmission agreement with CA nations, particularly with Uzbekistan (Agreement already in place with Kyrgyzstan). Establishment of readmission case management system.
<p>Strategic Direction 2: Labour Migration Agreements.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Prompt resolution of labor migration problems of citizens and foreigners Projects -Mandatory nature of distribution of information leaflets for travelers -Creating a mobile application, electronic consular registration system, database of vacancies at home and abroad First Expert Group: Discuss the feasibility of signing cooperation agreements in the field of labor migration 2 Year goal: Registration of all departing citizens for consular registration and 	332, 332.8, 332.9, 442, 442.4, 574, 574.1, 574.2 575, 575.1, 575.2 831. 832. 833.4. 837. 841.	A1H1: Effective Country Entry and Visa System A1H2: Fast and Efficient Residence Permit Processes 2019-2023 Strategic Plan of Ministry of Labour and Social Security A4H4.5 : Efforts to attract qualified foreign labour A4H4.6 : Efforts to establish a network of qualified international labour force	(5) Enhance availability and flexibility of pathways for regular migration (6) Facilitate fair and ethical recruitment and safeguard conditions that ensure decent work (18) Invest in skills development and facilitate mutual recognition of skills, qualifications and competences (20) Promote faster, safer and cheaper transfer of remittances and foster financial inclusion of migrants (22) Establish mechanisms for the portability of social security entitlements and earned benefits (23) Strengthen international cooperation and global partnerships for safe, orderly and regular migration	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> Opportunities for establishing a labour migration agreement with CA countries, including a standard mechanism for ethical labour recruitment (ie. Template contract, employer engagement, pre-departure and post-arrival assistance, etc.). IOM can provide technical assistance under the IRIS²⁵ and CREST²⁶ initiatives and in line with new IOM-ILO guidance on Bilateral Labour Agreements Review and agreement for formal and non-formal skills recognition (including green skills) in line with Turkey's development planning. A facilitated event(s) on post-COVID-19 recruitment of foreign workers and support and certification for private and government recruitment agencies Establish a standardized electronic consular registration system, including mobile app for labour migration and pre-departure preparation. Creation of a fast-track work permit/ residency process for CA foreign workers, prior departure. Post arrival career guidance and labour market integration support for CA foreign workers Facilitation of establishment of Turkey promotion offices in selected countries of origin

²⁵ <https://iris.iom.int/>

²⁶ Corporate Responsibility in Eliminating Slavery and Trafficking <https://crest.iom.int/>



bilateral labor migration agreements				8. Organization of a regional outreach and information campaign on step-by-step work permits & safe and reliable info on labour market integration in Turkey
Strategic Direction 3: Improving Migration Data. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Projects: To understand what types of data we collect & conclude agreements on data exchange 	661.4, 661.8.		1. Collect and utilize accurate and disaggregated data as a basis for evidence-based policies	1. Establish a standardized model for migration data, including a common basis for data collection and indicators. 2. Negotiate agreement on information exchange, including support to a joint government migration data centre for migration analysis
Strategic Direction 4 Regarding Vulnerable Migrants. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> On the basis of research, the creation of an interstate mechanism for identifying and providing assistance to various groups of vulnerable migrants. 	593.7 834.1.	A3H1: Human Focused Individual Protection A3H2: Effective and Rapid Temporary Protection	(7) Address and reduce vulnerabilities in migration (8) Save lives and establish coordinated international efforts on missing migrants (12) Strengthen certainty and predictability in migration procedures for appropriate screening, assessment and referral	1. Agree on a standard system for identifying and referring vulnerable migrants, including common standards for responding to the needs of migrants during a crisis and register for the provision of services to migrants. 2. Agree on a common database for reporting missing migrants, linked to law enforcement and consular systems. 3. Agree on a common SOP for the repatriation of deceased persons.
Strategic Direction 5: Victims of Trafficking (VOT's) and Travel Bans. <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Reduction of negative social phenomena, risks and threats through information 	774, 774.1, 774.2.	A4H1: Combating Human Trafficking A4H2: Victim Focused Protection A4H3: Adequate Victim Support Service	(9) Strengthen the transnational response to smuggling of migrants (10) Prevent, combat and eradicate trafficking in persons in the context of international migration 6 (11) Manage borders in an integrated, secure and coordinated manner	1. Study and development of tailored information campaigns for CA migrants on risks of trafficking, reporting of trafficking and legal redress and compensation. 2. Coordination of campaigns for sector-based counter-trafficking responses in CA/ Turkey. 3. Combined national, international and regional events on counter-trafficking processes to establish trust-based working relationships between competent authorities managing trafficking cases. 4. Study and cross-regional agreement on prosecution of human traffickers 5. Data sharing agreement on smuggling networks and cases, 6. Enhancing cooperation to combat against smuggling activities in the CA corridor.
Strategic Direction 6: Development of Recommendations for the Reintegration of Migrants	96 575.2.		(21) Cooperate in facilitating safe and dignified return and readmission, as well as sustainable reintegration	1. Support AP participant countries to collect and disseminate best practices on reintegration, particularly for countries of origin.