

# CENTRAL ASIAN SEASONAL WORKERS ON UK FARMS – BRIEF 1: HISTORY AND LANGUAGE

The Central Asian region includes the countries of Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan<sup>1</sup>. As the British agricultural sector increasingly engages with seasonal workers from this region, it becomes crucial to understand how workers' identity and culture derive from their history and language. This knowledge will not only foster a more inclusive and respectful working environment but also enhance the well-being and productivity of Central Asian employees.

## HISTORY AND IDENTITY

The four countries have distinct and diverse histories in the pre-Soviet era, shaped by their geographies, climate, economies and trade. A commonality is that all four countries were part of the Silk Road, the ancient trade route that connected East and West, bringing with it a blend of cultures, ideas, and goods enriching their cultural landscapes. All four countries also share a joint history of being socialist republics as part of the USSR and then gaining independence from the Soviet Union in 1991.

*Kazakhstan's* nomadic past plays a significant role in shaping the country's modern-day identity and culture. The nomadic lifestyle emphasized mobility, adaptation, and a deep connection to the land. This connection to the land is reflected in the cultural importance of pasturelands, particularly in rural areas. The concept of "steppe" is integral to national identity and is frequently referenced in music and art as a symbol of freedom and resilience.

*Uzbekistan* has a rich history shaped by its position along the Silk Road, which facilitated trade and cultural exchanges between East and West for centuries, and was part of many ancient civilizations and empires. During the Timurid Empire, Samarkand became a centre of art, science, and architecture.

*Kyrgyzstan's* history is marked by a tapestry of nomadic traditions, conquests, and resilience. The Kyrgyz people have roamed these lands of pastures and mountains for centuries, their nomadic lifestyle deeply influencing their culture and customs. Today Kyrgyzstan is home to more than 100 different ethnic groups.

*Tajikistan* is the smallest of the four Central Asian countries, and with more than 90% of its land covered by mountains it has the most (and highest) mountains in the whole region. This has influenced the history and culture of its peoples. The Pamir mountains are sometimes called 'the roof of the world'.

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<sup>1</sup> Turkmenistan is the 5<sup>th</sup> country in Central Asia; it is not included here as currently there are not many seasonal workers from this country to the UK.

Across the Central Asian region, the emphasis on respect for elders, hospitality, and collective decision-making is rooted in traditions, where the interests of family and community are prioritized.

### *Cultural legacy of the Soviet influence*

The Soviet era's emphasis on collectivism, discipline, work ethic and centralized state control often translated into a strong sense of communal responsibility. Workers were accustomed to following strict orders with minimal autonomy. These values continue to shape cultural norms among workers. This legacy is reflected in the workforce's relationship with authority, **where respect for hierarchy and deference to leaders is often still prevalent**. Today, while many workers still exhibit a blend of collective values, such as group cohesion, a growing sense of personal autonomy and entrepreneurial spirit exists.

### MIGRATION

The Central Asian region has a very young population (over 50% under 30 years), a large rural demographic, and high unemployment rates, especially among rural youth. This fuels labour migration. Remittances have become a lifeline for families and are crucial for national economies, accounting for between 20-40% of GDP across the region. For a long time, the Russian market was the main source of income for young labor migrants from Central Asia, but since the war in Ukraine the region's workers are actively seeking work in other parts of the world, including the UK.

### LANGUAGE

Each of the four countries has their own main language. **Uzbek in Uzbekistan; Kazakh in Kazakhstan and Kyrgyz in Kyrgyzstan are Turkic languages. Tajik is similar to Farsi (Persian)**. Historically, Tajik, Uzbek, Kazakh and Kyrgyz were written in Arabic script. Some switched to Latin, and later all used Cyrillic script under Soviet rule. The Latin script was reintroduced after independence in some countries (e.g. in Uzbekistan for tourism and business) but **the Cyrillic alphabet remains the official alphabet in all four countries**.

**Russian is the second official language of communication in all four countries**, and is generally widely spoken and used, especially among the older generation who lived through Soviet rule, as well as by younger workers who have since worked as migrant labour in Russia). People may mix their own language and Russian in their daily communication. However, there are important differences, for example younger workers from Tajikistan are unlikely to speak Russian; Russian is more of an everyday language in Kazakhstan. Many of the region's main languages, as well as different languages held by minority ethnic communities, are spoken in all four countries. **English is not widely spoken in the region** (though this is increasing with the younger generation).

*Relevance to UK farms:*

- There are many overall cultural similarities between workers from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kazakhstan; however there are also linguistic differences.
- Workers carry their cultural heritage, such as Islamic traditions and rural work ethic, to their workplaces abroad.
- Be patient with language barriers and avoid complex terminology.
- Be aware of the workers' different languages. Ideally contracts should be in their languages. Older workers are more likely to also speak Russian.
- Do not expect workers to speak/ read English.