

ETF Research forum for Evidence-based Policies on Skills and Migration

9-10 June 2026

Thon Hotel EU, Brussels

Invisible Skill Transfers: Female migration, informal economies and gender-sensitive skills recognition in Central Asian migration

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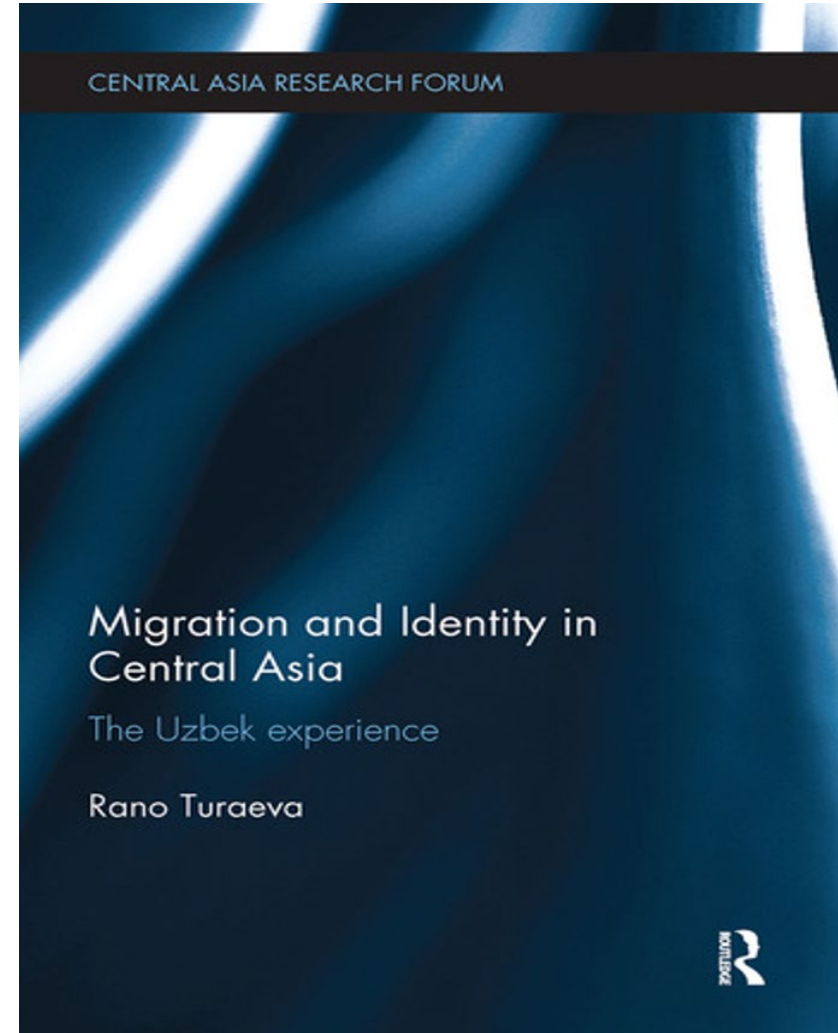
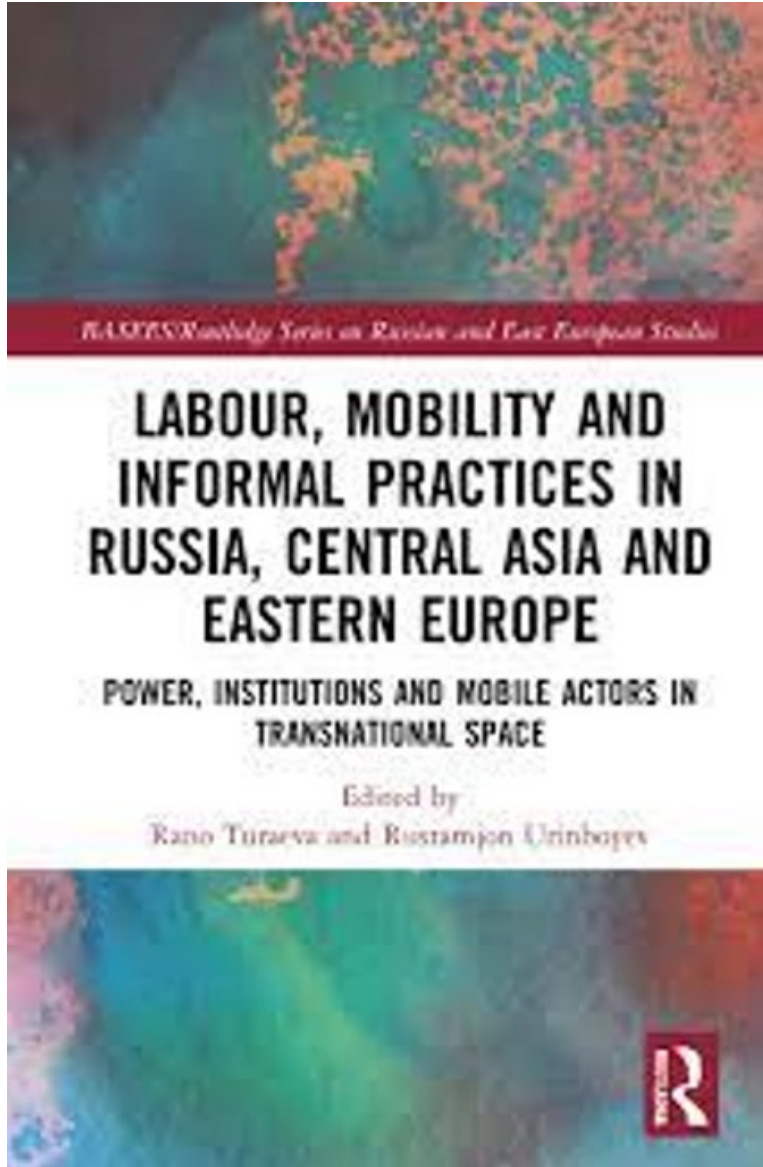
RESEARCH QUESTION AND CORE CLAIM

How do Central Asian women migrants acquire skills in informal care/service and hybrid digital livelihoods—and why are these skills misread as “low-skilled”?

Informal work is a site of skill formation (care, organisational, linguistic, digital, bureaucratic) but recognition systems fail to read these competences.

Why it matters: misrecognition → downgrading (“brain waste”), weak matching, repeated precarity—so the policy problem is not only training, but recognition.





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Methodology: empirical basis (qualitative)

Long-term multi-sited ethnography across Central Asia and key destination contexts; continuous conversations with Uzbek, Kyrgyz and Tajik migrants.

Re-reading ethnographic material through a “skills lens”: care/domestic work, services, informal entrepreneurship, platform-mediated work.

Triangulation with secondary evidence (IOM, ETF, UN ESCAP, OECD + academic literature).

Stance/limit: analytic mechanism-tracing (no unified N; not measurement) — identifying recurring patterns and policy entry points.



METHODOLOGICAL APPROACH

MECHANISM TRACED:

TASKS IN INFORMAL WORK
→ SKILL BUNDLES →
MISRECOGNITION
(EMPLOYERS,
CLASSIFICATIONS, RPL,
REINTEGRATION) →
DOWNGRADING.

TRANSLATION PROBLEM:

MAKE TASKS
DOCUMENTABLE AND
LEGIBLE WITHOUT
FORCING FULL
FORMALISATION OF
INFORMAL LABOUR.

PILOT-READY TOOLS:

PORTFOLIO-BASED RPL
FOR CARE/SERVICE;
PORTABLE SKILLS
PASSPORT; SHORT
MICRO-MODULES (RIGHTS,
LANGUAGE, DIGITAL
SAFETY).



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From Migration to Telemigration: Mapping the Skills and Policy Challenges of Uzbekistan's Platform Workforce

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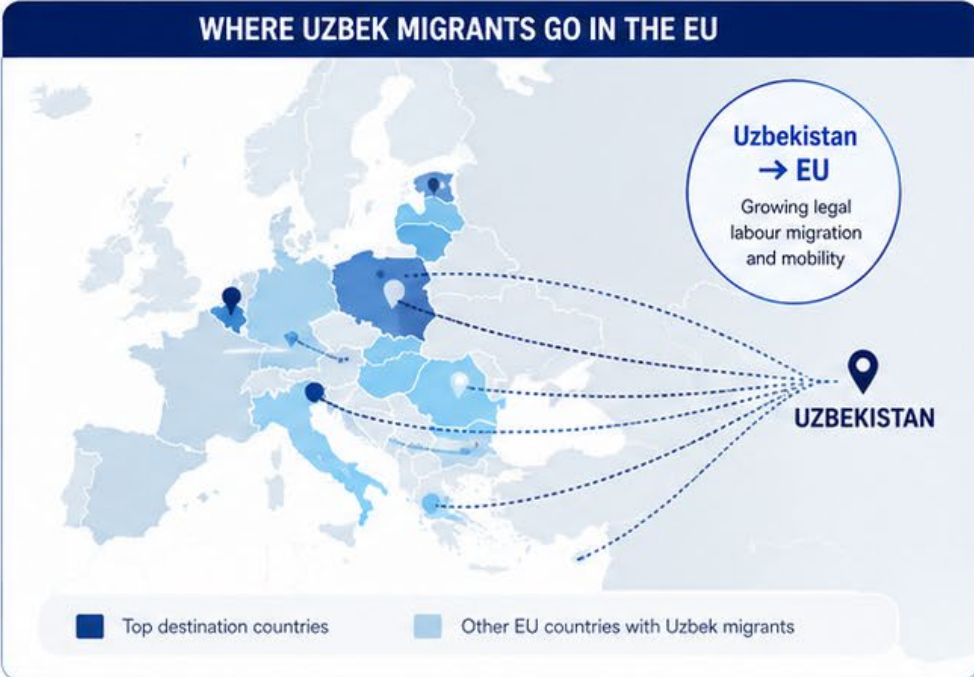
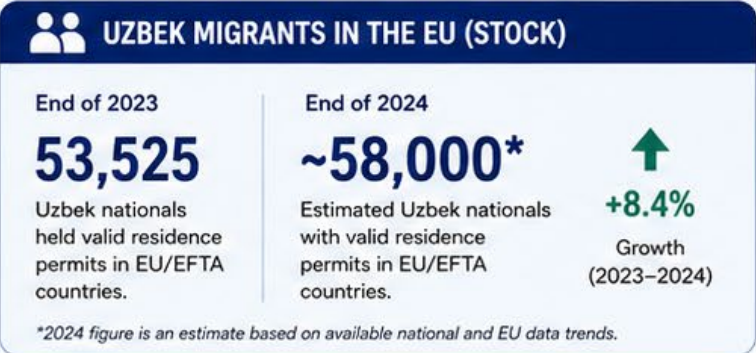




UZBEK MIGRATION TO THE EUROPEAN UNION

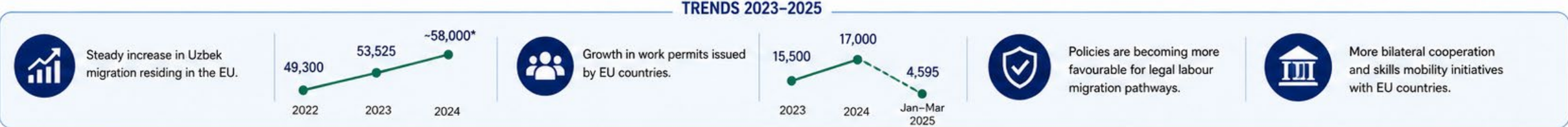
KEY FIGURES 2024–2025 (JANUARY–MARCH)

Based on official data from the National Statistical Committee of Uzbekistan, EU/EFTA statistics and international sources.



Around 1.35 million Uzbek citizens were working abroad at the end of 2024.

The EU remains one of the key destinations for Uzbek labour migrants.



Source: National Statistics Committee of Uzbekistan (UzStat), Ministry of Employment and Poverty Reduction, Eurostat, national authorities of EU/EFTA countries, IOM.

*2024 figure is an estimate.

Research Question

Telemigration and the Transformation of Labour Mobility in Uzbekistan

Opportunities, Barriers, and Inequalities in the Digital Platform

Economy Policy, Governance, and Skills Recognition Challenges for Digital Labour Mobility

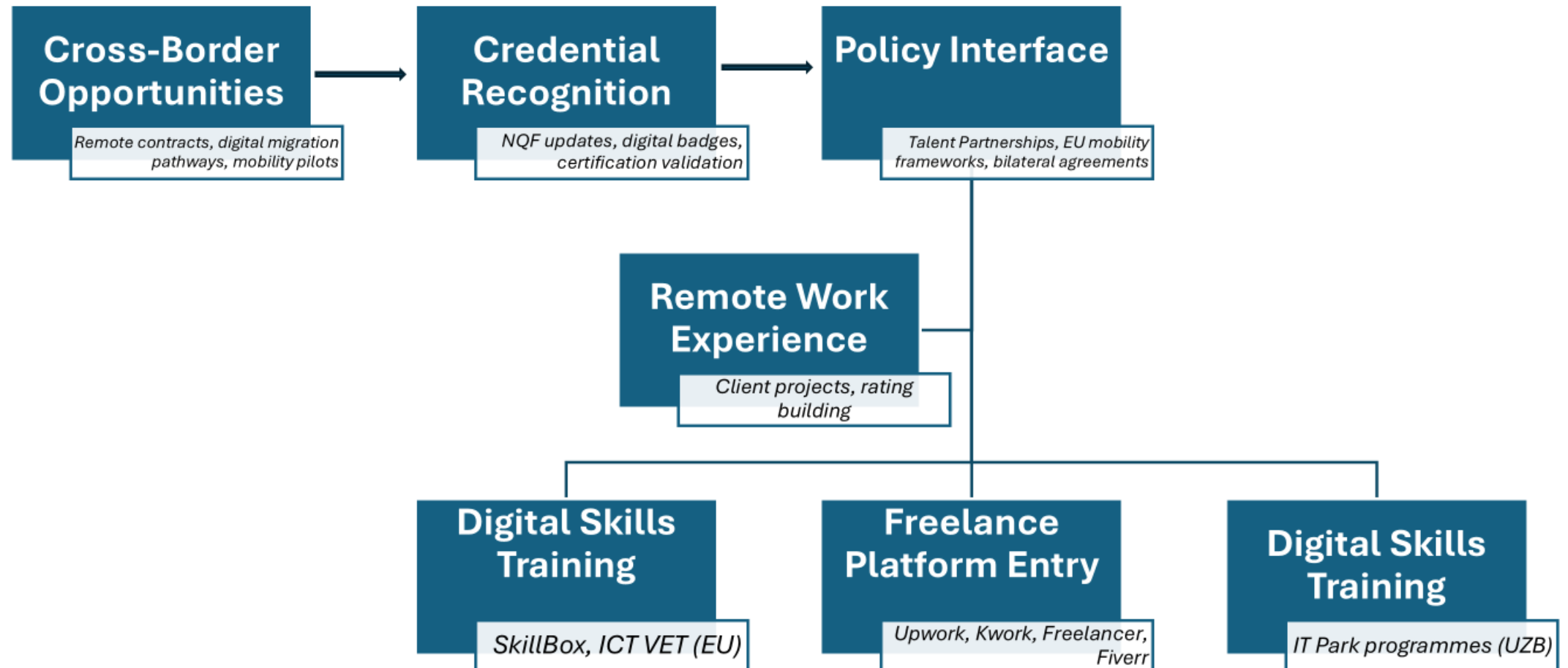
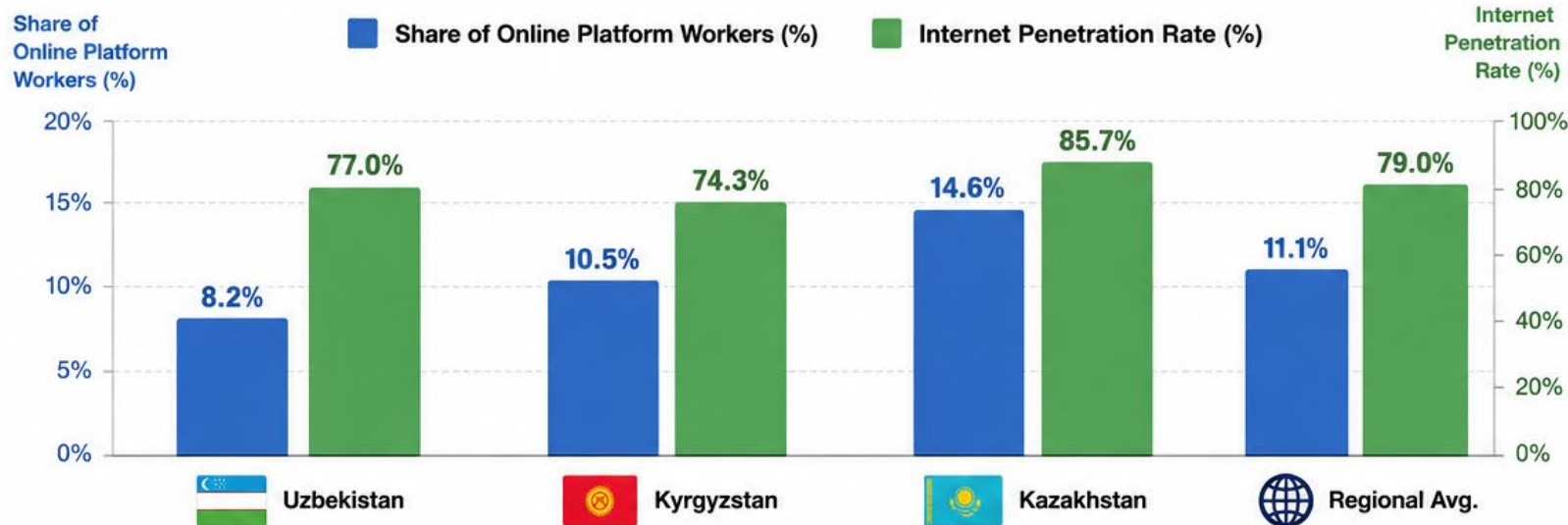


CHART 1

DIGITAL PLATFORM WORKFORCE AND INTERNET ACCESS IN CENTRAL ASIA

Share of online platform workers (%) and Internet penetration rate (%)



Sources: World Bank (2023), Uzbekistan Digital Economy Study; ETF (2023), Central Asia Education and Training Monitor; UZSTAT (2024), Labour Force Reports.

KEY INSIGHTS



Kazakhstan leads the region with the highest Internet penetration (85.7%) and the largest share of online platform workers (14.6%).



Uzbekistan has relatively high Internet access (77%) but the lowest participation in online platform work (8.2%).

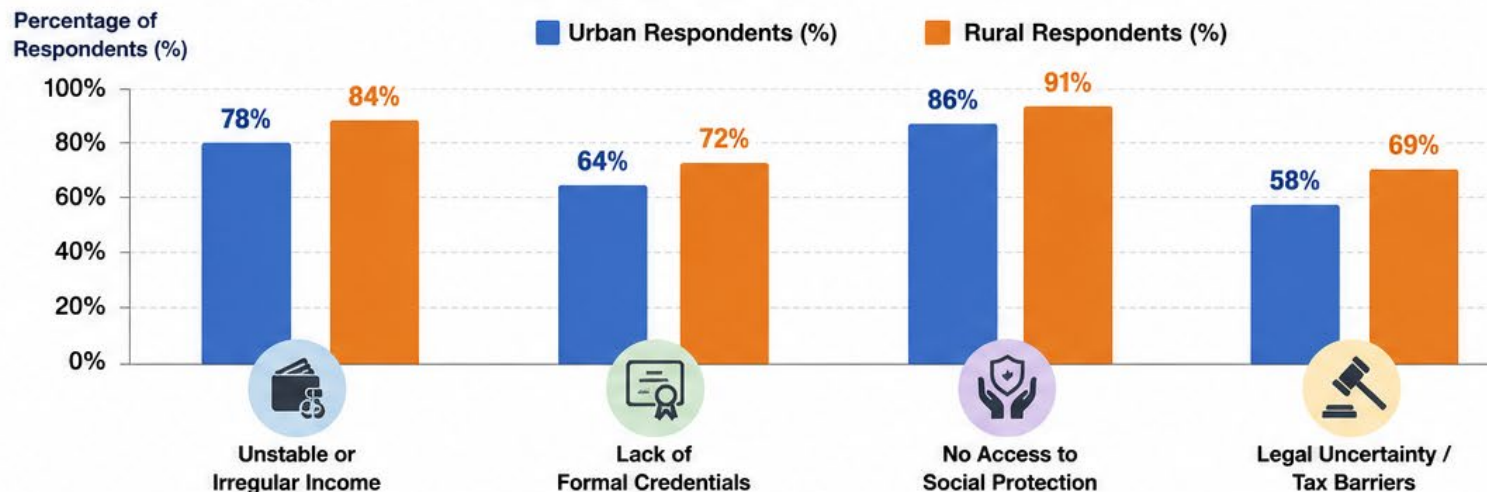


A clear positive relationship exists between Internet penetration and participation in digital platform work.

CHART 2

CHALLENGES REPORTED BY UZBEK PLATFORM WORKERS (2023–2025)

Percentage of respondents reporting each challenge



Note: Data based on Focus Group Discussions (FGDs) and Key Informant Interviews (KIIs) with platform workers, 2023–2025.

KEY TAKEAWAYS



Rural freelancers face greater difficulties across all key areas compared to their urban counterparts.



Lack of social protection is the most critical challenge, affecting over 9 out of 10 rural respondents.



Legal uncertainty and tax-related barriers remain major obstacles, especially in rural areas.



Addressing these challenges is essential for sustainable growth of the digital freelance economy in Uzbekistan.

Beyond the Numbers: Key Insights

Understanding the digital platform economy in Central Asia

- **01 A NEW FORM OF MOBILITY**
Digital platform work is creating “virtual mobility”, enabling workers to access global markets without physical migration.
- **02 SKILLS WITHOUT RECOGNITION GAP**
Many freelancers have in-demand digital skills, but lack formal recognition and pathways to validate their competencies.
- **03 INEQUALITIES PERSIST ONLINE**
Regional, gender and urban–rural divides limit who can benefit from digital opportunities.
- **04 INFORMAL AND UNPROTECTED WORK**
Freelancers often operate without contracts, social protection, or clear legal status.
- **05 GOVERNANCE NOT YET FIT FOR DIGITAL WORK**
Labour, tax and migration frameworks are designed for traditional work and do not address cross-border digital activity.
- **06 ROOM FOR STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS**
Aligning with international frameworks and partnerships can unlock skills mobility and better opportunities for digital workers.

- **IMPLICATIONS FOR POLICY & ACTION**
- **RETHINK MOBILITY**
Recognize digital labour mobility as a complement to physical migration.
- **RECOGNIZE SKILLS**
Create pathways for skills validation and portability across borders.
- **PROMOTE INCLUSION**
Invest in digital infrastructure, digital skills and support for women and rural workers.
- **STRENGTHEN PROTECTION**
Develop fit-for-purpose legal, social protection and tax frameworks for freelancers.
- **BUILD COOPERATION**
Leverage skills partnerships and regional cooperation to expand fair digital work opportunities.

 **THE BIG PICTURE** | Digital labour mobility is here to stay. Turning connectivity and skills into decent work and inclusive growth is the next frontier for Central Asia.



THANK YOU!

For your attention

Stay connected



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The role of migrant education and gender in enhancing financial inclusion of households in Kyrgyzstan

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Research Question & Context

- **Primary Question:** How does migration itself, and specifically the gender and human capital of the migrant, influence the financial inclusion of other household members left behind?
- **Targeted Focus:** Does female migration generate stronger positive spillovers on household financial inclusion compared to male migration?
- **Context for Kyrgyzstan:**
 - Nearly 1 in 6 people are migrants, with a nearly equal
 - gender split. Remittances account for 28–33% of the
 - national GDP.

Despite rapid growth in account ownership (up to 72%), strong domestic disparities in financial access remain between men and women.

Methodological Approach

- **Data Source:** Panel data from the Kyrgyz Integrated Household Survey (KIHS), covering approximately 5,000 households annually from 2019 to 2023.
- **Dependent Variables:** Financial inclusion measured by formal bank account ownership, mobile banking/e-wallet use, and a composite Financial Inclusion Index (constructed via MCA).
- **Empirical Strategy:**
 - *Model 1:* Employs Instrumental Variables (IV-2SLS) to address the endogenous nature of migration, using the migration network as an instrument.
 - *Model 2:* Utilizes Probit and Random Effects (GLS) models restricted to migrant households to analyze the specific impacts of migrant gender and education.

Main Findings

- **Overall Impact:** Migration has a strong, statistically significant positive effect on household financial inclusion across all measures.
- **The Role of Education:** Migrant human capital (education) is the primary driver of inclusion, acting as a key channel for transferring financial literacy.
- **Gender-Neutral Spillovers:** Female migrants are just as effective as male migrants in fostering financial inclusion; the impact of the migrant's gender is neutral.
- **Persistent Domestic Gap:** Despite migration's benefits, female-headed households left behind remain structurally more vulnerable and less likely to own formal accounts than male-headed ones.

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Transformation of Labour Market in Selected Countries: How Platform Work Reshapes Skills and Cross-Border Mobility

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Research Question

How does the platform economy influence labour mobility and migration dynamics in environments characterised by simultaneous digital transformation, emigration pressures and institutional weaknesses?

- It focuses on **3 key questions**:
 1. How widespread is platform work across the Western Balkans (WB)?
 2. How is platform work structured between online and on-location activities?
 3. In which sectors are platform workers most active, and what does this imply for skills and mobility?
- By examining these questions, the study seeks to understand levels and types of digitalisation, skill availability and mobility potential

The analytical framework - combines a comparative assessment of the EU17 and WB with a conceptual review of how digital platforms influence employment and migration

Methodological Approach

DATA SOURCES

- Official statistics on platform work in the WB are limited - national labour surveys do not systematically track this type of employment
- Eurostat's experimental Digital Platform Employment (DPE) dataset - based on a 2022 pilot survey as a part of LFS
- Gigmetar (2020 & 2025) - active platform workers in WB region on the most popular global online platform - Upwork
- ETF (2022) - country report on platform work in WB
- EUROPEUM Institute for European Policy country papers (2024-2025) - Albania, Montenegro, N. Macedonia, Serbia

METHODS

- Theoretical Background & Literature Review - conceptual framework and review of previous research on platform work, digital labour characteristics & mobility
- Comparative country analysis - 16 EU countries and Norway as EFTA country vs. 5 Western Balkan countries
- Quantitative data - Gigmetar & Eurostat's DPE data (characteristic, scale, structure, earnings of platform workers)
- Qualitative coding - ETF & Europeum - gradational procedure mapping online vs. on-location shares of platform work
- Case study insights - platform worker profiles from Europeum country papers

Coverage: Albania · Bosnia & Herzegovina · Montenegro · North Macedonia · Serbia | Benchmark: EU17 aggregate



Main Findings

01 Scale & Growth

Platform work is expanding rapidly in WB - North Macedonia leads (267 workers per 100k), Serbia & Albania follow (~175–185). Growth fivefold since 2015, accelerated post-COVID.

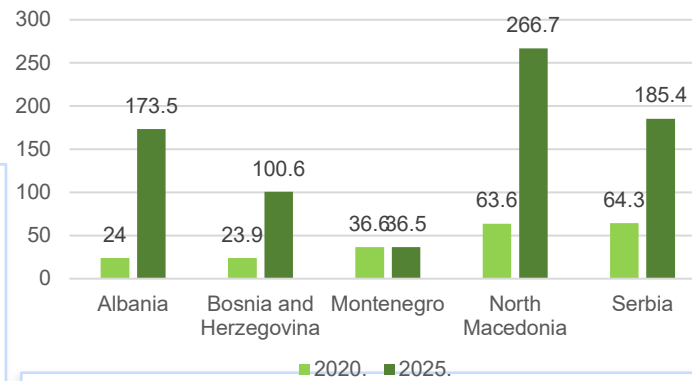


Figure 1. Estimated platform workers per 100,000 inhabitants in the Western Balkans

Source: Gigmeter

02 Structural & Skills Divide

Serbia & N. Macedonia: online-dominant (65–70%). Bosnia & Montenegro: on-location-dominant (55–60%). Online work offers higher-skilled, export-oriented employment; on-location is lower-paid and local.

03 Sectors & Hourly rates

Software development & creative/multimedia dominate (30–44% of gig workforce). Shift toward diversification visible across all countries 2020→2025. ICT-strong countries earn USD 19–24/hr on average.

04 Gender & Inclusion

Women represent ~29–40% of platform workers. N. Macedonia shows fastest growth in female participation. **Gender pay gap persists** - men dominate higher-paid tech roles; women concentrated in mid-skill services.

05 Platform Work vs. Migration

Platform work functions as a substitute for physical migration ('stay-at-home globalisation') for skilled youth, but also as a new channel of cross-border mobility (digital nomadism, freelancing for foreign clients).

06 Social Protection Gap

62% of EU17 platform workers lack unemployment coverage; situation in WB is even more fragmented. Workers classified as self-employed - excluded from core labour protections and social insurance.

Main Findings and Conclusion

- Align with earlier research by ETF (2022) and Zwysen and Piasna (2024), which highlighted the rise of atypical work in the WB and its connection to labour market segmentation
- The distinction between high-skilled online work and low-skilled on-location services supports the **dual labour market hypothesis** and reflects Dumančić and Obadić's (2024) argument that digital platforms increase flexibility while deepening inequality
- **Necessity:** transform labour market of platform work in 2 directions:

1.
Ensure the sustainable growth of digital work platforms and the transparency of their work

2.
Ensure decent working conditions for workers, including individuals excluded from the legal presumption of employment and those performing platform work under different legal statuses

- **Necessity:** Apply the directive of The European Commission (EP, 2024) – *the Platform Workers Directive*



Thank you for your attention!

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Overcoming Resistance, Enabling Change: Support Structures for Intangible Remittance Transmission by Female Returnees

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Unlocking Change Through Intangible Remittances?

THE GAP

Policies often support monetary remittances but rarely help returnees share the ideas and practices they acquired abroad.



Tangible Remittances

The money and goods migrants transfer to their origin countries.



Intangible Remittances

The knowledge, norms and practices migrants transfer to their origin countries.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

- 1 Which ideas and practices do female return migrants transfer to their origin countries?
- 2 What enables and hinders transmission?
- 3 Which policies can support them?

DATA

65

QUALITATIVE
INTERVIEWS



with highly skilled female
returnees to Kosovo or Romania

Key Findings: From Experience Abroad to Change at Home?

1 ACQUISITION

Migration is highly transformative. All women acquired a wide range of intangible remittances abroad.

 Socio-cultural  Economic

 Political  Environmental

*„Migration changed me in every respect.“
(Anita, 27, Kosovo)*




2 TRANSMISSION

Almost all women were eager to share the acquired resources upon return. They...

-  encouraged tolerance and gender equality
-  promoted civic engagement
-  introduced new working practices and set up innovative businesses
-  promoted environmental awareness and sustainable practices

3 CHALLENGES

But: women's efforts unfolded in challenging environments. They struggled with...

-  Reverse culture shock
-  Absence of support structures
-  Resistance from families, colleagues and communities

These challenges significantly undermined their ability and motivation to contribute, leading every second to consider re-emigration.

Key Findings: Sustaining Change in the Face of Resistance

4

RESILIENCE

What helps women sustain their engagement despite resistance?



Preparation
before return



More open
professional
environments



Supportive
peers and
allies



Pragmatic
pursuit of
smaller goals



5

SUPPORT MEASURES

How can policies support these women?



Provide psycholo-
gical support before
and after return



Foster peer and
returnee networks



Enhance professional and
institutional support



Invest in public aware-
ness

6

KEY TAKEAWAY

Female returnees in Kosovo and Romania are a valuable but fragile resource of development. Support structures can turn individual motivation into sustained impact.

Thank you for your attention!

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