Transnational human trafficking in Central Asia: Scale, causes and solutions

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Abstract. Human trafficking is a severe transnational issue in Central Asia, where vulnerable populations, particularly women, children, and migrant workers, are frequently trafficked for sexual exploitation, forced labour, and other forms of abuse. The purpose of this study was to examine the dynamics of transnational crime in the Central Asian region and to systematise recommendations for minimising the risks of human trafficking. This study employed statistical data in addition to legislative documents, reports from civil society organisations, and regional mapping studies, utilised qualitative analysis and statistical methods to assess the efficacy of anti-trafficking initiatives in Central Asia. The research findings revealed considerable variations in anti-trafficking initiatives across Central Asian countries. Kazakhstan has achieved significant advancements in victim support systems and legislative frameworks, whilst Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan persist in facing challenges related to insufficient victim identification and assistance infrastructure. Trafficking routes in the area are varied, with victims being exploited in neighbouring countries like Russia and Turkey, as well as more distant locations such as the United Arab Emirates and India. Women and children are the most susceptible demographics, with an excessive proportion of trafficking victims emerging from economically deprived homes. The research highlighted the critical necessity for increased inter-agency collaboration, refined data-gathering systems, and robust victim protection protocols. Moreover, it underscored the necessity of using international best practices to efficiently address human trafficking throughout Central Asia. These findings can inform policymakers, law enforcement agencies, and non-governmental organisations in Central Asia and abroad to formulate more focused, coordinated strategies for combatting human trafficking, especially through enhanced victim identification and protection mechanisms

Keywords: modern slavery; modernisation of legislation; public administration; cotton harvesting; sexual exploitation; complex threats

Introduction

In modern democratised world, it is still extremely difficult to counter numerical transnational threats such as drug trafficking, money laundering, trafficking in arms, animals, rare plants and others. For the international community, these problems pose a particularly serious threat that requires coordinated efforts and strategies. Not the least of these is human trafficking, the threat of which has only increased over the years. As the global trend towards high-technology development becomes more and more evident, these preferences can also be exploited by organised criminal groups.

For example, they can use the latest advances in artificial intelligence, make payments in cryptocurrencies and remain virtually undetected by blockchain systems. Male victims of organised criminal groups are often subjected to the hardest labour and women are in most cases sexually exploited (UNODC is the leading…, 2021).

The Central Asian region, according to the UN, is the region with the highest percentage of sexual exploitation of women, but the real figures, according to the UN Special Rapporteur for Kyrgyzstan, are much higher, due not so much to inaccessibility and inaccuracies in information as to the reluctance of victims to report (UN helps Central Asian…, 2023). Ulan Nogoibaev also noted that as of 2023, the money turnover of human trafficking offenders already exceeds that of narcotics and arms smuggling. Traffickers from organised criminal groups often have an understanding of the political, social, economic and cultural particularities of a particular community or even region (Khamzin *et al.*, 2022). In this way, they exploit the local population and can take advantage of the plight of some of the family members who are unable or unwilling to turn to law enforcement in the event of a threat (Spytska, 2023).

Human trafficking persists as a widespread international menace that confronts legal frameworks and cultures globally. Notwithstanding global initiatives to criminalise and reduce trafficking, researchers contend that law alone has been inadequate in diminishing its prevalence. Y. Dandurand (2024) critically evaluated the effectiveness of criminalising human trafficking, arguing that these laws frequently lead to law enforcement shortcomings rather than substantial decreases in trafficking occurrences. This viewpoint highlights the intricacy of trafficking networks and indicates that a comprehensive strategy, above simple regulation, is necessary for effective intervention. The structure and functioning of criminal networks engaged in people trafficking have been a primary subject of scholarly investigation. E. Loibl and S. Mackenzie (2023) examined the complex frameworks of global adoption markets, emphasising how organised crime exploits legal gaps and employs advanced techniques to enable trafficking. Their investigation indicated that traffickers have leveraged technological breakthroughs, including artificial intelligence and blockchain, to improve their operating secrecy and efficiency. C. Gibson (2024) examined the dynamics of transnational organised crime in the Caribbean, demonstrating how regional characteristics and socio-economic factors enhance the resilience of trafficking networks. This underscores the flexibility of criminal organisations and the necessity for international collaboration and new tactics to eradicate their activities.

The topic of transnational threats, in particular human trafficking, is a significant one and is regularly analysed by scholars and researchers (Fernández-Villarán & Cuenca, 2023). In a paper authored by A.B. Izbasova *et al.* (2021), the authors highlighted the actual manifestations of the problem of trafficking in persons, the role of State Governments and the range of measures taken by them, as well as the different objectives of organised criminal groups in exploiting men, women, and children. Y. Buribayev and Zh. Khamzina (2023) analysed national mechanisms to ensure the rights of trafficked persons and access to specialized social services. They also highlighted the need to modernise Kazakhstan's legislative and regulatory framework by introducing optimal procedures for assisting victims of human

trafficking in countries such as the USA, Canada, Australia, Sweden, and New Zealand. Z.S. Seitaeva and R.S. Balashov (2020) compared the work of inter-agency anti-trafficking commissions in Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan and analysed the reform of individual structures in these countries.

In the work of B.Z. Kyzdarbekova and A.K. Orazbekova (2022), the authors conducted a comparative study of the definition of "trafficking in persons" under Kazakhstan's national legislation and the Palermo Protocol. The need to adopt a special law as an important component of the "anti-trafficking" policy in Kazakhstan was voiced in the work of A. Bekmagambetov *et al.* (2021). D. Utepov and B. Karimov (2022) put forward in their work recommendations to supplement national legislation with provisions related to trafficking in persons through the use of the Internet. At the same time, A.B. Bekmagambetov (2021) noted in his work that anti-corruption and anti-drug policies existed in the general legal system, but there was no so-called "anti-trafficking" policy.

Based on the above, the aim of this study was to analyse the efforts of Central Asian states in combating the transnational threat of human trafficking to determine the effectiveness of the measures taken. The objectives of the study were to analyse legislation, statistics and the socio-economic context in the region.

Materials and methods

The study analysed statistical indicators on the number of trafficking victims in Central Asia, based on information from the Institute for War and Peace Reporting's Central Asia Regional Unit (60 per cent of…, 2022). In order to determine the degree of effectiveness of public administration in Central Asian governments, performance indicators developed by the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons at the US Department of State were analysed in detail (Trafficking in Persons Report, 2023). Additionally, the provisions of the UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol (Protocol to Prevent…, 2000), which governments must meet in order to effectively combat trafficking in persons, were analysed. To understand the official number of registered victims of human trafficking in the Central Asian region who have been assisted or reported to specialised civil society organisations, the statistics of the Counter Trafficking Data Collaborative (CDTC) (CDTC: Global dataset, 2024) were analysed in detail.

Analyses of the scale, recommendations, geographical coverage and other aspects of trafficking in human beings in Central Asia have been conducted through the annual reports of the Office for Monitoring and Combating Trafficking in Human Beings. This enabled the identification of both advantages and disadvantages of state administration in the Kyrgyz Republic (Trafficking in Persons Report: Kyrgyzstan, 2023), the Republic of Uzbekistan (Trafficking in Persons Report: Uzbekistan, 2023), Turkmenistan (Trafficking in Persons Report: Turkmenistan, 2023), the Republic of Tajikistan (Trafficking in Persons Report: Tajikistan, 2023) and the Republic of Kazakhstan (Trafficking in Persons Report: Kazakhstan, 2023). A workshop in Kyrgyzstan aimed at building the capacity of law enforcement structures and a general understanding of the risks and threats posed by trafficking in persons was also analysed (A training seminar on…, 2023). In addition, national legislation plays a pivotal role in strengthening the capacity of national Governments

to combat trafficking in persons, and the Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 55 "On the National Plan to Combat Trafficking in Persons in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2022-2024" (2022) and Program to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2022-2025 (2022).

The educational brochure Combating trafficking in children in Kazakhstan (2023), published by Winrock International, was examined with the aim of reducing the number of cases of human trafficking, particularly among children and adolescents in Kazakhstan. Analysis of this resource has provided insight into what actions can be taken to minimise the incidence of child trafficking not only in Kazakhstan but also in the rest of the Central Asian region. Statistical analysis was used to identify a sample of countries that were final destinations for victims of trafficking from the Central Asian region (UNODC, 2024). For this purpose, a joint report by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID), the anti-trafficking platform Freedom Collaborative, and the non-profit organisation Winrock International, "Regional Mapping of Human Trafficking and Migrant Routes of Unprotected Groups: Collective Data from Civil Society Organizations on Migration Routes in Central Asia" (UN: Human Trafficking, 2024), was examined in detail.
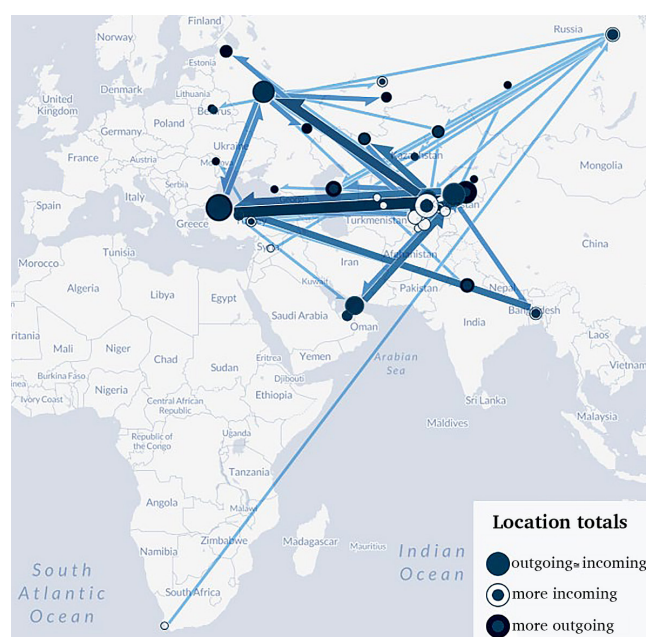
Results

Based on the definition used by UN agencies, human trafficking involves the recruitment, transportation, harbouring, transfer, or theft of individuals through force, fraud, or deception for the purpose of exploitation or profit (Improving protection for…, 2015). Victims of this type of crime can be men and women, and not infrequently even adolescents and children, anywhere in the world. In addition, it is crucial to understand that human trafficking exploitation is understood in a broad sense and includes sexual exploitation, involuntary labour or services, as well as slavery (Safe Migration in Central Asia, 2019). The problem of human trafficking in the Central Asian region has been noted in UN documents for a very long time. In 2005, the International Organization for Migration, as part of the UN system, issued a report on human trafficking in the Central Asian region (Kelly, 2005). At that time, the problems that the states of the region had inherited from the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics, such as planned economies, authoritarian governance, imperfect markets and limited privatisation and democratisation, were already mentioned. Alongside these problems, the lack of transparent visa application schemes and recruitment procedures meant that the movement of people in the region was a disorderly and uneven process. This created a favourable environment for the operation and development of the now massive phenomenon of human trafficking. According to a study by the Institute for War and Peace Reporting's Central Asia Regional Unit (60 per cent of…, 2022), about 60% of citizens of Central Asian states who were enslaved were women as of 2022. These women were often in difficult situations and had to put up with what was happening, and did not seek help for fear of stigmatisation.

In 2023, 111 cases of trafficking in persons were reported by representatives of relevant structures in Kazakhstan (Trafficking in Persons Report: Kazakhstan, 2023), 102 in Uzbekistan (Trafficking in Persons Report: Uzbekistan, 2023) and 90 in Tajikistan (Trafficking in Persons Report: Tajikistan, 2023). The Government of Kyrgyzstan reported only three cases of trafficking in persons, while civil society identified 66 victims (Trafficking in Persons Report: Kyrgyzstan, 2023). For the Government of Turkmenistan, as of 2023, no victims of trafficking had been identified for four consecutive years, while representatives of international organisations reported assisting 21 victims of trafficking (Trafficking in Persons Report: Turkmenistan, 2023). There are many classifications of the effectiveness of national governments' anti-trafficking measures. One of the most significant statistics and one that can be based on official data is the reports on human trafficking published annually by the Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons at the U.S. Department of State. As a result, none of the states in the Central Asian region has reached the first level of government effectiveness in combating human trafficking. Although Level 1 is the highest assessment rating, it would not mean that the problem of human trafficking does not exist in a particular state, but it would indicate the best efforts of state authorities to address the problem. Level 2 and Level 3 respectively mean that governments are not making enough effort to even minimally comply with the UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol (Protocol to Prevent…, 2000).

A characteristic feature of the Central Asian region was high migration activity. Migrants could travel both within and outside the region. At the same time, there remained a problem of insufficient information on migration, exploitation, and human trafficking in the region. Winrock International launched a five-year project, "Safe Migration in Central Asia", in 2019, implemented in Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan (Shashkina, 2022). The objective was to enhance mutual responsibility and effectiveness among governments, non-governmental organisations, and the private sector in preventing human trafficking in the region. The report, released in August 2023, was an important resource for identifying the geography of trafficking routes (Fig. 1).

Figure 1. Data from civil society organisations on migratory journeys in Central Asia
Source: UN: Human Trafficking (2024)

The data from figure 1 indicated high migration activity both within and outside the Central Asian region. In 17 of the cases studied, the traffickers left their victims in Kazakhstan. In another 10 cases, the victims travelled to the Russian Federation and in 6 cases to Turkey. In the remaining 17 trafficking cases, the victims may have remained in Kyrgyzstan or Uzbekistan, or may have been sent in transit to India, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Bangladesh, Belarus, and Moldova (UN: Human Trafficking, 2024). Based on data from another organisation that provides open datasets on victims of trafficking, in Kazakhstan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan, women trafficked into slavery accounted for 74%, 60% and 60% respectively. The gender dimension was virtually equal only in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, with 47% and 48% respectively. When it comes to the routes of further exploitation of victims, 42% of Kyrgyz citizens go to the Russian Federation, 23% to Kazakhstan, and 12% to Turkey. However, in Kazakhstan, for example, as many as 80% of victims remain within the state, while about 10% go to the Russian Federation and the UAE. In general, the main routes of organised criminal groups for further exploitation of the population of Central Asian states are the Russian Federation, Turkey, less frequently the UAE or further stay in the region (CDTC: Global dataset, 2024).

In conformity with a US Department of State investigation (Trafficking in Persons Report: Kyrgyzstan, 2023), the greatest risk of being trafficked in Kyrgyzstan is among labour migrants. Men, women, and children have been forcibly exploited in the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, and to a lesser extent in Ukraine, Turkey, and a number of European countries. Some Kyrgyz families who were blacklisted, i.e., banned from entering and staying in the Russian Federation, continued to send their children there to work, which left them in an extremely vulnerable situation and at risk of trafficking. It was also reported that due to the poor economic situation of the Kyrgyz population, girls, and adolescents were forced to go to work as nannies or domestic workers in the Russian Federation and Kazakhstan, which also added to the risk of sexual slavery. Another important reason for the actualisation of the issue of human trafficking in 2022-2024 was the fact that Kyrgyz migrants in the Russian Federation could be fraudulently or forcefully recruited to participate in the aggressive war against Ukraine (Kuznetsova *et al.*, 2024). The same applies to labour migrants in the temporarily occupied territories of Ukraine.

Another reason for the involvement of the Kyrgyz population in sexual exploitation and forced labour was the so-called practice of "bride kidnapping" by the male population for the purpose of further forced marriage. In terms of the geography of sexual and labour exploitation of Kyrgyz women outside the Central Asian region, the final destinations were often India, Kazakhstan, the Russian Federation, the Republic of Korea, Turkey, and the UAE (Trafficking in Persons Report: Kyrgyzstan, 2023). Based on the above, the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic has taken appropriate qualitative decisions to counter such a transnational threat as human trafficking. For example, Program to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2022-2025 (2022). In particular, the provisions of the Programme established a framework for State policy in the area of combating trafficking in persons with a view to ensuring the best systematic approach and increasing the

effectiveness of measures taken both against perpetrators and victims of trafficking. Seminars and training seminars on preventing human trafficking have been organised in Kyrgyzstan. For example, in July 2023, a training seminar on preventing human trafficking in Kyrgyzstan took place in Batken oblast (2023), aimed at developing and approving unified principles and mechanisms for dealing with individuals affected by human trafficking, making joint efforts to establish the facts of involving children in forced labour, and so on. The event was organised jointly with international representatives of the UN on drugs and crime, as well as the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic and the Public Security Service under the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Kyrgyz Republic. However, according to the U.S. Department of State (Trafficking in Persons Report: Kyrgyzstan, 2023), Kyrgyzstan still lacked a unified system for collecting data on anti-trafficking efforts. Nevertheless, in a positive development, a National Rapporteur on Combating Trafficking in Persons was established in the Kyrgyz parliament. Such a position is essential for States with serious trafficking problems. Despite some positive aspects of the Kyrgyz government's anti-trafficking efforts, the U.S. Department of State has noted (Trafficking in Persons). The U.S. Department of State noted (Trafficking in Persons Report: Kyrgyzstan, 2023) that the government is not fully meeting even minimum standards for eradicating the problem, although it is making significant efforts. Among the negative factors for the lack of efforts, insufficient assistance and very few resources for victims of trafficking were noted, as well as the lack of convictions of trafficked persons between 2022 and 2023.

The trafficking situation in the Republic of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan has one distinct feature: forced labour in the cotton harvest. The U.S. Department of State (Trafficking in Persons Report: Uzbekistan, 2023) noted a positive aspect in the context of the abolition of systematic forced labour in the cotton harvest by the government of Uzbekistan, but from time to time there were still isolated cases of forced labour in the cotton harvest by local officials. In the case of Turkmenistan (Trafficking in Persons Report: Turkmenistan, 2023), teachers, health workers, workers of public utilities, people with registered mental disorders are recruited to pick cotton, and if they refuse, they may be dismissed, their wages withheld and so on. Geographically, traffickers use Uzbek nationals for forced labour and sexual exploitation in Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Estonia, Latvia, Georgia, the Russian Federation, as well as in India and Sri Lanka (Trafficking in Persons Report: Uzbekistan, 2023). In the case of Turkmen victims of trafficking, the final destinations were often Turkey, India, and the Russian Federation (Trafficking in Persons Report: Turkmenistan, 2023).

The U.S. Department of State explicitly encouraged the Government of Uzbekistan to implement several measures to address human trafficking (Trafficking in Persons Report: Uzbekistan, 2023). Initially, it advocated for the criminalisation of forced labour involving trafficked individuals. Secondly, officials must be educated to recognise victims of trafficking. Third, it is imperative to enforce the prohibition against forced labour in cotton production. The government should enhance investigations and prosecutions for trafficking offences. Creating a fund for the reintegration of victims into society is crucial. The research underscores the

necessity of granting access to impartial observers and guaranteeing that trafficking victims are not coerced into forced labour. The Government of Turkmenistan was advised to let impartial observers' access to the cotton cultivation and harvesting processes. The administration should eliminate mandatory involvement in public works by revoking the pertinent clause in the State's Labour Code. It is imperative to train law enforcement authorities to recognise victims of trafficking. Moreover, formulating a thorough national action plan to address trafficking is essential (Trafficking in Persons Report: Turkmenistan, 2023).

Citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan are often exploited abroad rather than within the state. This is due to the economic migration of men, women and sometimes entire families with children, which multiplies the risk of being involved in forced labour or sexual exploitation. Geographically, Tajik men and women provide services in the service sector, agriculture, and construction in the Russian Federation, Kazakhstan, Saudi Arabia and neighbouring Central Asian states. In terms of sexual slavery, Tajik women and children are often subjected to this type of violence in Turkey and the UAE, as well as India or even Afghanistan (Trafficking in Persons Report: Tajikistan, 2023). The Government has made efforts to counter trafficking in persons. For example, the Resolution of the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 55 (2022). In particular, the norms of this resolution focused on regular events with the participation of public and international organisations, awareness-raising activities, television and radio dialogues, training for citizens intending to migrate, and so on.

Priority recommendations made by the U.S. Department of State were (Trafficking in Persons Report: Tajikistan, 2023) to adopt uniform step-by-step guidelines for identifying victims of trafficking, increase funding for specialised shelters, continue and improve mechanisms for inviting outside observers to the cotton harvesting and cultivation process, increase the timing and quality of training for government officials, including diplomatic personnel, implement a victim assistance programme, and raise awareness of the problems of trafficking in persons. The Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan has also not fully recognised and taken appropriate measures to eradicate the problem of human trafficking, although it has made significant efforts. Among the positive measures taken, the Office for Monitoring and Combating Trafficking in Persons reported that the status of police units that dealt with trafficking in persons had been upgraded and the staff of the relevant police units had been increased (Trafficking in Persons Report: Kazakhstan, 2023).

In addition, qualitative recommendations were also offered to the Government of Kazakhstan that, in the short term, could significantly improve the efforts of the relevant authorities to combat trafficking in persons. For example, it was advised that initiatives to identify victims of transnational crimes among the most vulnerable groups of the population be significantly intensified, and that special attention be paid to cases of forced labour of victims of foreign origin and to facilitate further assistance for them (Trafficking in Persons Report: Kazakhstan, 2023). It was also an important recommendation to allocate sufficient financial resources to shelters for victims of trafficking of foreign origin to provide comprehensive assistance as required by law, including

temporary residence and work permits. Training seminars should be held for law enforcement officials on the application of the legislation of the Republic of Kazakhstan on trafficking in persons, especially in cases involving psychological coercion into forced labour. It was recommended that the capacity of the Labour Inspectorate to identify victims of forced labour be strengthened, and that they be given unrestricted access to factories, plants, industries, and farms for unannounced inspections to detect potential cases of forced labour and theft. Strengthen oversight of recruitment agencies, and establish a centralised, unified data collection system to combat human trafficking.

The U.S. Department of State in Kazakhstan also noted (Trafficking in Persons Report: Kazakhstan, 2023) that the exploitation of Kazakhstani men and women occurs predominantly in the Russian Federation, and to a lesser extent in Bahrain, the Republic of Korea, Turkey, and the UAE, extending the geographic scope of further trafficking to East Asia and another state in the Middle East. In addition, it was not uncommon for PRC authorities to detain and forcibly labour Kazakh nationals who were visiting relatives in Xinjiang province. In 2022, representatives of non-governmental and international organisations stated that the number of criminal cases of forced and sexual exploitation is much higher than the number of criminal cases opened for these offences. Marat Akhmetzhanov, former Minister of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Kazakhstan stated (Shashkina, 2022) that everything is broken (referring to the system of proceedings and prosecution), there is no special law, comprehensive legal information is not available either to state officials or victims, authorised bodies are not defined and there is no clear competence.

In March 2023, the President of Kazakhstan stated (Bassarova, 2023) that the current growing problem of regional and global forced migration required the adoption of a special law that would fully provide protection and social support for citizens who were victims of such a transnational threat as human trafficking. By March 2024, the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan adopted in the first reading a draft law (Khalbarova & Ilibarova, 2024) providing for the introduction in general education institutions of programmes aimed at combating trafficking in persons. These norms were incorporated into the draft law "On Combating Trafficking in Persons in the Republic of Kazakhstan", which had been proposed earlier by the President of the State. Importantly, the draft law introduced a new conceptual apparatus, including definitions of "victim of human trafficking", "potential victim of human trafficking", "vulnerable situation", "subjects of combating human trafficking" and others. The new Minister of Internal Affairs, Yerzhan Sadenov, stated that the norms of this draft law are fully in line with international standards and the UN Palermo Protocol. In May 2024, the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 110-VIII "On Countering Human Trafficking" (2024) was passed in the second and final reading by the Majilis, and then sent to the Senate for consideration.

The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 110-VIII "On Countering Human Trafficking" (2024) establishes a comprehensive framework to combat human trafficking within the country. Article 1 defines human trafficking as "the purchase and sale or commission of other transactions with respect to a person, including a minor, as well as his/her exploitation

or recruitment, transportation, transfer, concealment, receipt, as well as the commission of other acts for the purpose of exploitation". Criminal Code of the Republic of Uzbekistan (1994), specifically Article 135, criminalises human trafficking but includes measures that are inconsistent with international norms. For example, Article 135 recognises the use of force, fraud, or coercion as aggravating factors rather than basic parts of the offence. This is in contrast to Kazakhstan's legislation, which, in Article 1, presents a more expansive description consistent with the Palermo Protocol, highlighting exploitation and recruitment as fundamental elements of trafficking offences. Kazakhstan's legislation adopts a more systematic methodology for victim support. Article 9 delineates a structure for the provision of temporary accommodation, medical treatment, and psychological support to victims of trafficking. The Law of the Republic of Uzbekistan No. 154 "On Combating Trafficking in Persons" (2008) has comparable measures but encounters considerable implementation difficulties, especially in remote regions with underdeveloped infrastructure. This disparity underscores Kazakhstan's comparatively developed institutional capacity to assist victims.

Articles 130 and 132 of Criminal Code of the Republic of Tajikistan (2015), which prohibit trafficking and provide punishments for associated crimes, primarily outline the country's strategy for addressing human trafficking. notwithstanding these legislative frameworks, the execution of anti-trafficking legislation is uneven due to substantial difficulties, including corruption and insufficient inter-agency cooperation. The Ministry of Internal Affairs has created a dedicated unit inside its Combating Organised Crime Directorate to detect trafficking incidents (Trafficking in Persons Report: Tajikistan, 2024). However, official complicity and insufficient resources compromise the overall efficacy of law enforcement initiatives. Although Tajikistan's legislation includes measures for victim protection, it lacks the comprehensive, victim-centred approach prevalent in neighbouring Kazakhstan. Kazakhstan's legislation requires the participation of healthcare organisations and educational institutions in victim identification, whereas Tajikistan mostly depends on law enforcement authorities for this task. This disparity underscores a significant deficiency, as a multi-sectoral strategy is typically more efficacious in tackling the intricacies of trafficking situations. Systemic deficiencies in law enforcement and victim care systems obstruct the effective implementation of Tajikistan's legislative measures against human trafficking.

Public Law No. 106-386 "Victims of Trafficking and Violence Protection Act of 2000" (2000) (TVPA), as amended, offers a comprehensive framework for addressing human trafficking on a worldwide scale. It underscores a triadic strategy: prosecution, protection, and prevention. The legislation of Kazakhstan reflects this framework but does not possess the same degree of precision in its stipulations. The TVPA requires annual reporting on trafficking cases and victim assistance through the Trafficking in Persons Report (2023), promoting openness and accountability. Kazakhstan might gain from implementing such reporting structures to improve supervision and public awareness. The TVPA also provides particular safeguards for overseas trafficking victims, including the issuing of T-visas. Kazakhstan's Article 8 offers temporary residency permits for

trafficking victims. However, it does not specifically include foreign nationals, which may restrict the extent of its security measures.

The Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 110-VIII "On Countering Human Trafficking" (2024) introduces significant measures to address various forms of trafficking, including forced labour and sexual exploitation. However, there are several areas for improvement that could enhance the effectiveness of these legal frameworks. The law could benefit from clearer definitions of critical terms such as "coercion" and "exploitation", similar to the precise language used in the TVPA (2000). This clarity would help ensure uniform understanding and application of the law across different agencies and stakeholders involved in combating human trafficking. Another important aspect is implementation mechanisms. While the law outlines robust measures, enforcement remains a challenge due to issues like corruption and weak inter-agency coordination. Kazakhstan could draw lessons from countries like the United States, where specialised task forces ensure effective coordination across various agencies, facilitating a more comprehensive approach to tackling trafficking. Additionally, international collaboration is crucial given the transnational nature of trafficking. Kazakhstan could enhance its efforts by aligning more closely with regional agreements, such as the SAARC Convention on Preventing and Combating Trafficking in Women and Children for Prostitution (2014). Strengthening ties with neighbouring countries and international organisations would improve information sharing and joint efforts in combating trafficking networks.

An AMANAT MP stated (A law against human trafficking…, 2024) that every day the media are reporting more and more cases of human trafficking. Most of the victims of such crimes are women and children who are forced into prostitution, and the main reasons for this are poverty, unemployment, lack of education and a number of other factors (Khamzina *et al.*, 2020). As mentioned above, Yelnur Beisenbaev confirmed that the most frequent victims are people from socially vulnerable groups. In this regard, as well as the decision of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan to gradually introduce anti-trafficking programmes in educational institutions, it is worth paying attention to manuals focused on combating trafficking in children. For example, the international organisation Winrock International (2003) published a booklet on training and exercises to combat trafficking in children in Kazakhstan. This training booklet is divided into several modules, including: an introduction to the concept of trafficking, legal and national framework and understanding of child trafficking, best practices in working with trafficked children, and so on. This manual can be useful for teachers and children in educational institutions, for government officials in line ministries in countering trafficking in human beings, and for improving inter-agency co-ordination and the effectiveness of the child protection system in Kazakhstan.

Given the above, the governments of the Central Asian states continue to make efforts to counter the transnational threat of human trafficking. However, independent and foreign observers, in particular representatives of the U.S. Department of State, have continued to document numerical violations and weak governance in each of the Central Asian states (Table 1).

Table 1. Positive and negative aspects of the activities of the governments
of Central Asian states in combating trafficking in human beings

	Kazakhstan	Uzbekistan	Tajikistan	Kyrgyzstan	Turkmenistan
Achievements	Modernisation of specialised structures, transformation of the regulatory framework	Cancellation of forced cotton harvesting at the official level	National Plan to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2022-2024	Seminars and trainings on preventing trafficking in human beings with the involvement of international organisations	Access for independent observers to monitor the cotton harvesting process
Disadvantages	Lack of a unified data collection system	Risk of forced labour and sexual exploitation abroad due to mass economic immigration, weak national legal and regulatory frameworks	Individual cases of forced labour within the state, risk of forced labour and sexual exploitation abroad due to mass economic immigration	Vulnerable situation of labour migrants in the Russian Federation, risks of sexual exploitation of women and girls due to poverty of certain segments of the population	Lack of investigations into human trafficking, forced mobilisation of labour resources, lack of funding for programmes to assist victims of human trafficking

Source: compiled by the authors based on Trafficking in Persons Report (2023)

In sum, despite the apparent awareness of national governments of the problem of human trafficking, counteraction remained at a rather low level. The problem of human trafficking is a complex threat directly related to the overall economic performance of the region, the economic performance of individual states, and the lack of awareness among the local population, especially in rural areas, of the causes and preconditions for involvement in labour or sexual exploitation. National governments in the region need to pay close attention to the recommendations of international, interregional and non-governmental organisations to understand the risks and threats in order to develop effective anti-trafficking responses.

Discussion

In the course of the study, it was determined that trafficking in human beings includes a number of illegal activities, ranging from illegal transportation to harbouring people in unknown locations for profit. An important aspect that can be applied to the Central Asian region has been explored in the work of A. Genova and V. Castelli (2022), noting the link between the globalised economy and the thirst for the cheapest labour. This directly correlates with the results of the study, since it is precisely because of the poor economic situation in some states of the region that the population is forced to immigrate, which multiplies the chances of falling into labour slavery. In addition, up to 60% of Central Asian citizens who were victims of human trafficking were women as of 2022 (Shcherbatiuk *et al.*, 2024). The gender dimension of human trafficking has also been studied by M.M. Kakar and F.N. Yousaf (2021), noting the processes of forced marriage that lead to prolonged and multiple exploitation, stigmatisation and social exclusion. Forced marriages were not uncommon in Central Asian states, such as the so-called practice of "bride kidnapping" in Kyrgyzstan.

In studying the problem of human trafficking for the Kyrgyz Republic, it was determined that citizens were often sent for the purpose of labour migration to the Russian Federation, and less frequently to other states. Such forced measures were related to the difficult economic situation for part of the population, and the presence of some on "blacklists" for entry and work in one or another state increased the risk of being involved in illegal labour exploitation. In a study by F.M. Critelli *et al.* (2020), the experiences of migrants and their family members were studied, and the results showed that the fact of migration was determined by the economic needs in the family. In addition, it was stated that male labour migrants on the territory of the Russian Federation can be recruited to serve and wage a war of aggression against Ukraine, which can also be considered illegal human trafficking for certain benefits. This is due to the fact that tens of thousands of citizens of the Kyrgyz Republic found themselves on "black lists" and, accordingly, became extremely vulnerable on the territory of the Russian Federation. In his study, M. Laruelle (2023) came to a similar conclusion, noting the Russian government's strategies for recruiting labour migrants for its armed forces. The study noted that human trafficking is a complex threat and its solution should start from proper schooling to systematic assistance to both people who are about to travel abroad and victims of human trafficking. In their study, J. Ortega *et al.* (2022) came to a similar conclusion that systemic changes should take place to improve the response to care for certain social groups that are potentially vulnerable to trafficking.

Positive aspects of the fight against human trafficking in the Kyrgyz Republic include seminars and training sessions aimed at developing and approving unified principles and mechanisms for dealing with victims of human trafficking, and joint efforts to establish whether children are being forced into forced labour. In addition to the relevant national bodies and departments, experts from leading international organisations were invited to participate in the seminars. A survey conducted by H. Lee *et al.* (2021) showed that discussion trainings on combating human trafficking lead to a short-term improvement in knowledge and a sustained improvement in public awareness of the problem of human trafficking. This confirms the idea expressed in the survey results that such events should take place on a regular basis, which has been actively pursued by the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic in recent years. The study noted that forced

labour in the Republic of Uzbekistan and Turkmenistan was specific to cotton picking, which could involve both citizens of these states and foreigners. A. Zenz (2023a) also studied the issue of forced labour in the cotton harvest in Uzbekistan and noted that forced labour mobilisation is a goal of internal government policy aimed at transferring the population from traditional livelihoods and communities to "modern", state-controlled conditions of work, ideological processing and social control. Furthermore, A. Zenz (2023b) noted in his study of forced labour in Turkmenistan, that recruitment for cotton picking in the state is driven by established production goals, and public sector workers are often involved in the work. This confirms the results of the study, as teachers, health workers, public utility workers and so on are indeed involved in such labour.

D. Esson *et al.* (2023) noted in their study the significant contribution of the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan to countering human trafficking in the 2010s and 2020s. For example, there are shelters for victims of trafficking in Kazakhstan, which offer various assistance and rehabilitation mechanisms for victims, provide social and psychological services, and develop plans to prevent and combat trafficking. These assertions are supported by the findings of the survey, namely the existence of further government efforts, such as the second reading of the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 110-VIII "On Countering Human Trafficking" (2024). Importantly, the norms of the new legal and regulatory framework in the Republic of Kazakhstan were aimed at developing, as part of the educational process, appropriate knowledge, skills, and abilities to combat and prevent trafficking in persons. R.J. Shin *et al.* (2020) investigated the integration of educational projects on human trafficking into training programmes for medical professionals, but the results of their study are similarly crucial for the entire education system. They concluded that education and proper awareness shapes behavioural change, and thus the integration of these types of projects is a critical component in improving the identification of and appropriate assistance to victims of trafficking.

I.B.M. Praditama and I.B.E. Ranawijaya (2023) noted that human trafficking is a violation of one of the most significant international treaties, namely the Palermo Convention on Transnational Organized Crime. In the course of the study, it was learnt that the adoption in the Republic of Kazakhstan of the new Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan No. 110-VIII "On Countering Human Trafficking" (2024) is in full compliance with international standards, including the UN Palermo Protocol. K. Bryant and T. Landman (2020), analysing global anti-trafficking practices, noted the positive role of the Project Lantern programme in the Philippines, which helped to develop new manuals, guidelines, build the capacity of law enforcement structures and so on. Similar recommendations were made by representatives of the Office for Monitoring and Combating Trafficking in Persons to the Governments of Central Asian States. The work of international non-governmental organisations is also important in countering the problem of human trafficking.

Conclusions

In the course of the study, it was noted that according to information from the Institute for War and Peace Reporting's regional unit for Central Asia, about 60% of trafficking victims were women. Geographically, regardless of the gender of the trafficked person, people are trafficked for forced labour or sexual exploitation to the Russian Federation, Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain, Republic of Korea, India and some European countries. None of the Central Asian governments were determined to have achieved the first level of effort in countering human trafficking, according to the U.S. Department of State's Office to Monitor and Combat Trafficking in Persons. The governments of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the Republic of Uzbekistan, the Kyrgyz Republic, and the Republic of Tajikistan received Level 2 efforts in 2023, while the government of Turkmenistan only received Level 3 out of three possible. This demonstrates the insufficiency of the measures taken, which do not even meet the minimum requirements of the UN Trafficking in Persons Protocol.

It transpired that the Government of the Republic of Kazakhstan sought to minimise the risks of trafficking in persons on its territory, which led to the adoption of the law "On Combating Trafficking in Persons" in the second reading by Parliament in early 2024. In 2022, the Government of the Republic of Tajikistan adopted a decree "On the National Plan to Combat Trafficking in Persons in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2022-2024", and the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic adopted the Programme to Combat Trafficking in Persons in the Kyrgyz Republic for 2022-2025. It is stated that despite the existence of a legal framework on combating human trafficking, the US Department of State continued to make recommendations to further minimise the risks and threats. These recommendations included increasing funding for shelters, increasing social and psychological assistance, allowing independent observers into the cotton-picking process, raising awareness among citizens who are going to work abroad, training government officials, including diplomatic representatives, to identify and assist victims of trafficking, and so on.

It was concluded that Kazakhstan's Law No. 110-VIII "On Countering Human Trafficking" establishes a thorough framework that conforms to international standards, with an enhanced definition of trafficking and substantial victim assistance provisions. Conversely, the legal frameworks of Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, although addressing trafficking, lack the victim-centric elements present in Kazakhstan's legislation, including multi-sectoral identification and assistance structures. The execution of these regulations is inconsistent, especially in Tajikistan, where corruption and resource constraints impede implementation. Kazakhstan's legislation, while better aligned with international frameworks such as the TVPA, requires more precise definitions and enhanced enforcement tools for successful execution. Furthermore, Kazakhstan should bolster its initiatives by improving reporting frameworks and promoting international cooperation to address transnational trafficking. The research underscores the necessity for continuous legislative enhancements and efficient implementation of anti-trafficking statutes, especially in combating corruption, bolstering inter-agency collaboration, and providing extensive victim assistance.

The limitations of the survey were the closed nature of Turkmenistan's information and government resources. It was also difficult to estimate the actual number of trafficking victims, as most cases remained "in the shadows" from government law enforcement structures or victims were afraid to report the incident. Future research on trafficking in persons in Central Asia can draw on publications by Central Asian

governments after the termination of the terms of the decrees and anti-trafficking programmes, which expire in 2024-2025. Also, useful for research may be the dynamics of trafficking offences and their detection in Kazakhstan after the adoption of the law "On Combating Trafficking in Persons".

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Conflict of interest

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Транснаціональна торгівля людьми в Центральній Азії: Масштаби, причини та шляхи вирішення

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Анотація. Торгівля людьми є серйозною міжнародною проблемою в Центральній Азії, де вразливі групи населення, особливо жінки, діти та трудові мігранти, часто стають жертвами сексуальної експлуатації, примусової праці та інших форм зловживань. Метою цього дослідження було вивчення динаміки транснаціональної злочинності в Центральноазійському регіоні та систематизація рекомендацій щодо мінімізації ризиків торгівлі людьми. У дослідженні використано статистичні дані, звіти громадських організацій та регіональні картографічні дослідження з використанням якісного аналізу та статистичних методів для оцінки ефективності ініціатив у сфері протидії торгівлі людьми в Центральній Азії. Результати дослідження показали значні відмінності в ініціативах з протидії торгівлі людьми в країнах Центральної Азії. Казахстан досяг значних успіхів у розвитку систем підтримки жертв і законодавчої бази, тоді як Киргизстан і Туркменістан продовжують стикатися з проблемами, пов'язаними з недостатньою інфраструктурою ідентифікації жертв і надання їм допомоги. Маршрути торгівлі людьми в цьому регіоні різноманітні: жертв експлуатують у сусідніх країнах, таких як Росія і Туреччина, а також у більш віддалених країнах, таких як Об'єднані Арабські Емірати та Індія. Жінки та діти є найбільш вразливими демографічними групами, а надмірна частка жертв торгівлі людьми походить з економічно неблагополучних родин. Дослідження підкреслює гостру потребу в посиленні міжвідомчої співпраці, вдосконаленні систем збору даних і розробці надійних протоколів захисту жертв. Крім того, воно підкреслює необхідність використання найкращих міжнародних практик для ефективної боротьби з торгівлею людьми в Центральній Азії. Результати даного дослідження можуть допомогти політикам, правоохоронним органам і неурядовим організаціям у Центральній Азії та за її межами сформулювати більш цілеспрямовані, скоординовані стратегії боротьби з торгівлею людьми, особливо за допомогою вдосконалення механізмів ідентифікації та захисту жертв торгівлі людьми

Ключові слова: сучасне рабство; модернізація законодавства; державне управління; збір бавовни; сексуальна експлуатація; комплексні загрози