

# COVID-19 PANDEMIC AND UZBEKISTANI MIGRANTS IN TURKEY

## COVID-19 PANDEMİSİ VE TÜRKİYE'DEKİ ÖZBEK GÖÇMENLER

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### Abstract

The world discusses the possible impact of COVID-19 pandemics on public health and well-being as well as on the economy of the countries. In this paper, I investigate how the COVID-19 pandemic affects Uzbek migrants in Turkey in the short-term. As social distancing and lockdown made constraints, I used remote/online methods on these conditions. Findings reveal that pandemic had negative effects on Uzbek migrants, who work in the service sector and textile factories. Migrants working in care-work and household chores in Turkey had not been affected by the pandemic.

**Keywords:** Uzbek migrants, Turkey, COVID-19, Pandemic

### Öz

Dünyada COVID-19 salgınının halk sağlığı ve refahının yanı sıra ülkelerin ekonomisi üzerindeki olası etkileri tartışılmaktadır. Bu makalede, COVID-19 salgınının Türkiye'deki Özbek göçmenlerine kısa vadedeki etkisi araştırılmaktadır. Makalede sosyal mesafe ve kısıtlamalardan dolayı mevcut koşullarda uzaktan/çevrimiçi yöntemler kullanılmıştır. Bulgular, salgının hizmet sektörü ve tekstil fabrikalarında çalışan Özbek göçmenleri üzerinde olumsuz etkisi olduğunu ortaya konmaktadır. Türkiye'de bakım ve ev işlerinde çalışan Özbek göçmenler pandemiden ekonomik anlamda etkilenmediği bulunmuştur.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Özbek göçmenler, Türkiye, COVID-19, Pandemi

### Introduction

In last years the world has witnessed some pandemics, which are H1N1, Polio, Ebola, and Zika. This time, a new type of virus was reported first time in December 2019, in Wuhan, China. The virus has rapidly spread around the country, posing health challenges to China. The government of China decided to quarantine 11 million people in Wuhan and maintained a lockdown. The World Health Organization (WHO) called this virus COVID-19.

According to up-to-date information from the WHO on 22 December 2020, the COVID-19 had spread over the world. The WHO reported that approximately 76,250,439 confirmed cases and 1,699,236 had died in more than 200 countries over the world (WHO, 2020). The COVID-19 pandemic did not affect only some countries or economies, but also entire humanity. The COVID-19 outbreak disrupts the global economy. Governments maintain complete or partial lockdown, restrict gatherings, and protect their people from the transmission of the disease by testing.

Uzbekistan government decided to halt national and international flights on March 16th, 2020. It is important to protect Uzbek citizens not only inside the country but also outside, who are mainly labor migrants. Labor migrants from Uzbekistan figure economic, social, and health issues out through this lockdown in migrant-receiving countries. To protect

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Uzbekistani citizens, the government organizes flights from China, Russia, Turkey, and other countries to bring Uzbek citizens back.

Officials declared that there are 44,000 Uzbek migrants in Turkey by the end of 2019. This number does not include thousands of irregular migrants. Researchers estimate that number of migrants from Uzbekistan in Turkey might be around 300 thousand to 1 million. Considering this estimation, it makes Turkey the third migrant-receiving country for Uzbekistani people after Russia and Kazakhstan (Eraliev & Urinboyev, 2020). Thousands of Uzbekistanis officially visit Turkey for tourism, work, education, and business every year. Most of them overstayed in Turkey: neither registered in Uzbek authorities/embassy nor Turkish authorities. Besides, the majority of Uzbek migrants are invisible for researchers for estimation and forecast the situation, who works in care-work or household chore (Nuridinova, 2018). Unlike Brazilian domestic workers, Uzbekistani care-workers or domestic workers do not identify their status in race or class (Alcorn, 2020; Teixeira, 2020).

The absence of reliable data on migrants from Uzbekistan makes it hard to evaluate the situation on Uzbek migrants during pandemics for policymakers and researchers. That makes it hard for the Uzbek government to arrange to bring back Uzbek citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic. In this paper, we investigate the impact of COVID-19 on Uzbek migrants in Turkey in the short-term.

## COVID-19 and Turkey

The first case of the coronavirus outbreak in Turkey was reported on 11 March 2020. Travelers to Turkey are considered as possible COVID-19 infected and controlled at their houses by family doctors ((Budak & Korkmaz, 2020). As the number of the infected is increasing, Turkey listed at the top of countries infected COVID-19 (See Table 1).

**Table 1:** The top of the list of countries infected with COVID-19

No	Country	Cases
1.	United States of America	17 712 290
2.	India	10 099 066
3.	Brazil	7 263 619
4.	Russian Federation	2 906 503
5.	France	2 436 873
6.	The United Kingdom	2 073 515
7.	Italy	1 964 054
8.	Spain	1 819 249
9.	Argentina	1 547 138
10.	Germany	1 530 180
11.	Colombia	1 518 067
12.	Mexico	1 325 915
13.	Turkey	1 229 366
14.	Poland	1 214 525
15.	Iran (the Islamic Republic of)	1 170 743

Source: The World Health Organization, 2020

The Health Ministry of Turkey has confirmed 2,062,960 cases of coronavirus infection, 1,866,815 recovered from the diseases, and 18,602 deaths in the country (HMT, 2020). People at the age of 65 and over are self-isolated. Big cities and the Zonguldak region were in lockdown for several days (Celenay et al., 2020). These limitations on mobility within

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the country/among countries negatively affected on industrial and service sectors in Turkey. In spite of the significant financial downturn, sectors like food and beverage, real estate investment, wholesale are the less influenced(Ozturk et al., 2020).

Universities and schools are closed for in-person education and classes organized on online/distance learning by 'Education Technology Network' (Özer, 2020). As schools are closed, demand for women's paid and unpaid labor increased apparently to arrange childcare (Bahn et al., 2020).

### **Methodology and Data**

I used data collected by the Representative Office of the International Association of the Youth of Uzbekistan in Turkey. Data was collected through the internet to analyze the situation of Uzbeks in Turkey during the quarantine. Google form survey was anonymized and 362 Uzbekistani responded to an online survey, which was conducted at the beginning of May 2020 and the majority of respondents were students.

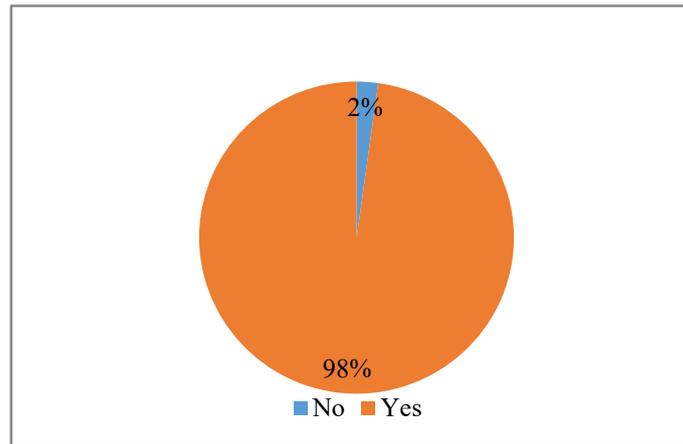
I also carry out qualitative research to show labor migrants' experiences during the COVID-19 pandemic. Considering the current situation, usual research methodologies are impossible to protect the health of me and respondents. I conducted semi-structured interviews through the internet with 10 female migrants in Turkey. Qualitative interviews are not "concerned with statistical generalizability" (Guest, 2006:3). Hagaman & Wutich (2017:1) suggested 16 or fewer interviews were enough to identify metathemes. I reached participants through groups on Facebook and networking. I introduced respondents to oral consent and they allowed making use of their words and perceptions for my research. Interviews are carried out under ethical conditions, and respondents involved in the study are de-identified.

### **Findings**

Respondents were asked about the main purpose of their stay in Turkey. 76.5 percent of respondents are in Turkey because of education, 15.7 percent for work, 5 percent for family, and 2.8 percent for treatment, tourism, and business. When respondents were asked to give information about their economic situation, 58.3 percent indicated that they were unemployed, 25.4 percent were satisfied with their economic situation, and 7.2 percent are working. 8.3 percent indicated as other and 0.8 percent offered their help for those who are under difficult situation. Some respondents, who identify themselves as unemployed have student visas/permits. They are supposed not to work according to Turkish law. However, some foreign students, who do not receive any scholarship/grant, might work illegally after classes. 10.5 percent, those have student permit work to earn. Fifty percent receive money from home. 15.5 percent of respondents got a scholarship from the Turkish government and non-government organizations. Facing difficulties in collecting data that covers the population and lack of information on the number of Uzbek migrants in Turkey made it impossible to quantitative analysis for researchers.

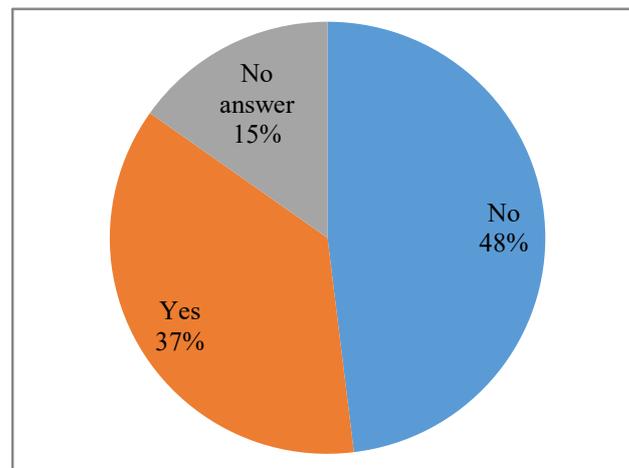
95.3 percent of respondents answered that they do not have any problem to question related to health issues, 1.4 percent had a cough, and 3.3 percent had other health issues

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**Figure 1:** Do you face COVID-19 cases in your neighborhood or among countrymates?

Respondents were asked whether they would go back if it is allowed by charter flights from Turkey. In response, 43.3 percent indicated that they are ready to go back home, while 56.7 percent prefer to stay in Turkey during a pandemic.



**Figure 2:** Would you go back if charter flights were organized to Tashkent?

The Uzbek government called on Uzbek citizens in Turkey, who want to back home, to register at the Uzbekistan Embassy in Ankara or consulate in Istanbul. The Uzbek government brought the sick, elder, pregnant, and students home in the first order.

A majority of Uzbeks lives and work without official documentation, legal-status concerns, and restrictions on movement reduce their access to health care. Unregistered employment among domestic workers from post-Soviet Union countries is widespread in Turkey as undocumented care-workers from Asia, Latin American, and Africa in German households (Roig, 2014). Besides, foreigners face greater difficulties than the locals in accessing health services or food, respondents were asked if they need daily food or medical

masks. The most frequent responses were no need for anything (50 percent). 20.4 percent of respondents had needed medical masks, while 39.8 percent need daily food. Uzbek or Turkish charity organizations help migrants, who lost their jobs after lockdown. Respondents were asked whether their jobs/education are temporarily stopped due to quarantine. 54.7 percent indicated that their education is going on an online system. 30.7 percent indicated that their workplace is closed, 5.8 percent still are working, while 4.7 percent lost the jobs. ILO estimates that the wages of informal workers dropped up to 60 percent at the beginning of the crisis (ILO, 2020). The Covid-19 pandemic lay forward on labor segmentation, domestic, and care work (Craig, 2020).

## Impact of COVID-19

Migrants from Uzbekistan faced difficulties in Turkey: a majority of them lost their jobs, who are employed in the textile and services sectors:

“I worked at a beauty salon, because of COVID-19 most business on services stopped. I lost my job, I faced economic issues. My son went to kindergarten, at the beginning of June, the government allowed him to attend kindergartens, and I paid for his fees. After 10 days, kindergartens closed. Some of my clients come to me at home. But the money I earned is enough“(34 years old, married, beauty salon).

Some literature cited that more women lost their jobs compared to men (Carli, 2020). In the Turkish case, Uzbekistani women working in the household kept working, but men working in services lost their jobs:

“My 23-year-old son lost his job. He worked at the restaurant as a chief assistant” (44 years old, married, care-worker).

But ones who are involved in care-work is still working:

“As I am working at home as a care-worker, quarantine does not affect me or other migrants who are care-workers like me. At least I don't feel any economic impact of the pandemic. The only problem is that we work without day-offs, as there are restrictions to go out” (34 years old, divorced, care-worker).

Another Uzbekistani migrant said *“I live with my family in Istanbul, but I stayed where I worked during the quarantine. I do household chores. I don't lose my job”* (44 years old, care-worker). A textile factory worker lost her job and found a job in household chores: *“I worked at the textile factory, my factory was closed. I lost my job, I am working in domestic work right now”* (22 years old, domestic worker).

A participant who works at the Turkish university told:

“It is prohibited to hire employees in Turkey during the quarantine. In the beginning, they offered 3 months package, then it is prolonged. That's why it is impossible to know about economic consequences. But I think that we can know about the number of people, who lost their jobs” (32 years old, lecturer).

Physiologic effects of the pandemic are more seen than economic effects on participants doing domestic work or care-work:

“I worked at home and I didn't go out during the last 3 months. Working for 3 months without day-offs makes me nervous, it is not easy to stay all time with old people. I had a physiologic impact on a pandemic than an economic one. Yesterday neighbors cut trees, I got very nervous. My nervous system was up cause staying at home all the time with an old lady” (32 years old, divorced, care-worker)

Participants were asked about families left behind and remittances after lockdown, *“I am used sent remittances to my family, but I got my remittances back when quarantine started in Turkey”* (23 years old, care-worker). Another participant said: *“Banks and money transfers work during quarantine period in Turkey, but Uzbekistani side had an issue. Remittances we*

*sent from here kept in Uzbekistani banks for a month”* (32 years old, lecturer). A care-worker could not send remittances since quarantine started:

“Western Union or other money transfers didn't work at the beginning of quarantine, but it started to work in April. But I could not send money during the last 3 months as I could not go out. My parents are pensioners, that's why I don't worry, they will receive a pension at least. It is not enough for expenses, but it is still good to cover daily groceries. I will send money next Saturday if I go out” (34 years old, divorced, care-worker).

### Conclusion

As the COVID-19 pandemics have spread across the whole world, understanding the pandemics, as a social phenomenon might be helpful to measure its effects in short and long-terms. Migrants are the most vulnerable people, who directly affect any pandemics or crisis (Haan, 2020). This study focuses on Uzbek migrants in Turkey during COVID-19 pandemics. It addresses empirical gaps in the scholarship of Uzbeks abroad during the COVID-19 pandemic. I used primary qualitative methods and data collected by the Representative Office of the International Association of the Youth of Uzbekistan in Turkey to investigate the situation on Uzbeks in Turkey during COVID-19 pandemics. Findings reveal that majority of Uzbekistanis would not want to return home. Primary data analysis reveals that Uzbek migrants keep working in care-work and household chores in Turkey. Pandemic had negative effects on migrants working in the service sector and textile factories.

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