

# POLICY BRIEF

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## Driving change: Ensuring fair treatment for Central Asian truck drivers in the EU

by Giulio Benedetti

### EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Since 2021, migration from Central Asian countries to the European Union (EU) has been increasing rapidly. The demand for truck drivers has made this sector a popular choice, especially for Kyrgyzstani and Uzbekistani migrant workers. Despite the relatively advantageous economic conditions offered, drivers report several serious shortcomings in their work conditions. Widespread problems include the lack of accommodation facilities, which forces drivers to sleep in their trucks for months, and flimsy health insurance. Firm-specific challenges include episodic withholding of salaries, arbitrary imposition of fines, and discriminatory attitudes.

The difficulties migrant workers highlight are in many cases already addressed by European legislation: the main problem is that of access to information rather than lack of guarantees. Most drivers find themselves in a new environment, do not speak the languages widely spoken in the European Union, and find it difficult to navigate the complex legal system of the different EU countries in which they work. This results in frequent violations of drivers' established rights and leads to the loss of money, time, and a worse migration experience, potentially aggravating the labour shortages that affect the EU hauling sector. In testimony to the seriousness of these problems, in 2023 alone there were two strikes, involving hundreds of workers.

While existing efforts to protect migrants' rights focus on improving pre-departure information, the complex legal landscape of the EU requires increased efforts in the protection of migrants' rights once they have already arrived at their destination. Barriers of language and experience often prevent drivers from accessing services or organizations that are committed to helping them address their concerns.

It is necessary to disseminate information among migrants who are already working, and in cases of violations of their rights, to connect them to existing EU member state institutions and NGOs committed to helping them and upholding EU regulations. Improving information availability is a necessary step to ensure safe and sustainable migration, which respects the legislation of both countries of origin and destination.

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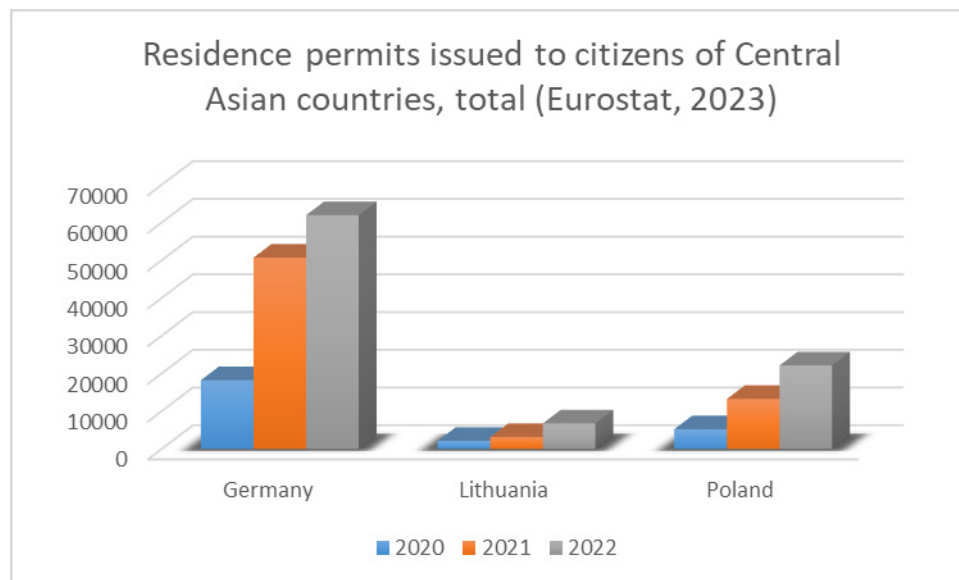
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## Introduction and policy challenge

Migration from Central Asia to the European Union (EU) has increased over the last few years. Between 2020 and 2021, the number of EU residence permits issued to Central Asian citizens rose from 70,420 to 121,905 (Eurostat, 2023). While these numbers are hardly comparable with those of traditional destinations such as Russia, they mark an abrupt increase in arrivals. The countries that

registered the highest numbers of arrivals are Germany, Poland, and Lithuania, which are also major hubs of the European hauling industry, and which recorded the highest number of vacancies in this sector (IRU, 2023). This indicates that vacancies in this sector may have an important role in leading to the increase in migration from Central Asian countries.



One important factor encouraging migration to Europe is the severe shortage of truck drivers that the continent is experiencing (IRU, 2023). As was recounted by drivers during interviews, information about hauling jobs is available on the Internet, and interviews with potential job candidates are conducted over the phone after they have submitted a completed questionnaire.<sup>1</sup> A network of travel agencies and informal intermediaries in Central Asia is ready to help with obtaining documents from European consulates in the region, with some companies even opening their own offices in the countries of origin. Plane connections to Europe are available, and although the whole displacement process comes with a cost, this is still affordable for those who can rely on some initial resources. Drivers typically finance their

journey by selling their car or a land, or by borrowing money, both formally and informally.

As explained by many drivers, most of them have no previous experience in the hauling industry, which means that the salaries offered by European companies are sensibly appealing. Job advertisements typically promise remuneration from €60 to €80 per day, in stark contrast with the mean salaries offered in Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, which range between US\$400 and US\$300 per month, respectively (Uzstat, 2024; StatKg, 2024). From the Sector side, the types of contracts offered by the companies also contribute to the lowering of their costs while expanding effective working hours.

<sup>1</sup> Information about drivers' working conditions, which appears throughout the text, is the result of research conducted by the author during 2023. The author conducted 22 in-depth interviews with drivers, at a length of around one hour each. Extensive participant observation was conducted both in person and within the drivers' social media channels.

The sharp increase in the inflow of migrant workers poses challenges to the logistical facilities connected to driving jobs. As very few companies have guesthouses where drivers can rest during mandatory resting periods such as weekends, haulers often spend months sleeping in the cabins of their trucks (Butler, 2023). This adds to chronic problems already known to the sector, such as the lack of sufficient parking lots across the continent (Bazace, 2022; Béguerie, 2019), and more specific problems encountered by migrant workers, such as healthcare insurance, which is often deemed insufficient. There are also a number of challenges that have emerged in some cases, as there are firms in which workers have lamented a lack of transparency related to remuneration, the withholding of wages, and arbitrary fines (Gowans, 2023; Santos, 2023). These problems, it is worth highlighting, are firm-specific, but have been reported with vastly increasing frequency (Gardinger and Atema, 2023).

The seriousness of the challenges posed by these conditions is testified to by the fact that, despite most Central Asian drivers being employed in the sector for no longer than two years, there were two strikes of considerable size in 2023 alone that saw their participation. In the first case, roughly 80 drivers stopped their vehicles near Frankfurt (Germany) for no less than six weeks (Benedetti, 2023), while in the second more than 150 workers replicated the same strategy, going on strike for two months (Weirich, 2023). In both cases, they were employees of a consortium of enterprises based in Poland.

Despite these recent initiatives, language barriers and the lack of information often prevent drivers from accessing existing services that could help them address difficulties in the workplace or violations on the road. This is not only detrimental to the drivers' wellbeing, but also an obstacle to reducing the severe shortage of manpower in the sector. In 2023, 62 per cent of European companies surveyed by the International Road Transport Union reported a "severe or very severe" difficulty in filling driver positions due to a shortage of drivers (IRU, 2023). While Central Asian migrants are making a crucial

contribution to combatting this unresolved problem, more efficient protection of their rights is necessary to avoid salary dumping and unfair competition.

## Policy change

Many of the challenges encountered by drivers concerning their working conditions are already addressed by EU regulations. In July 2020, the European Union adopted what is known as the "mobility package," a set of regulations and directives that revise the rules on occupation and cabotage to improve work conditions and safety, and regulate competition among haulers (Eurlex, 2020). Most importantly for what concerns drivers working in the EU, they are no longer allowed to rest in their trucks during weekends, and companies are required to organize the return of the drivers to their headquarters for longer periods of rest at regular intervals. Trucks are also required to return to the member state in which their company is operating at regular intervals, reducing the scope for social dumping and salary dumping. The new mobility package also steps up enforcement by gradually introducing "smart" tachographs, able to track the whereabouts of trucks on a permanent basis (BMDV, 2023).

EU regulations also step up coordination between national regulations, as now drivers operating in countries different from the one of employment need to be granted minimum levels of salary compliant with the regulations of the countries where they operate. In addition to improving contractual conditions, this provision also broadens significantly the actors that could potentially be involved in the protection of rights. For example, if a driver is based in Lithuania or Poland (as often is the case), but loads or unloads cargo in Western European countries, in case of right violations, the driver can resort not only to authorities, labour inspectorates, or trade unions located in Lithuania or Poland, but also has the possibility to lay claim and receive assistance from Western European bodies.

Based on the EU mobility package, some member states have also encouraged initiatives to combat salary dumping and exploitation on the road. This is the case, for example, of the German government, which has been contributing to Fair Mobility, which started as a consultancy initiative promoted by trade unions, since 2020. The project aims to provide help and consultation to migrant workers who find themselves in Germany but are often hired by Eastern European companies. From its establishment, the project has addressed more than seven thousand cases across different sectors of the economy (Fair Mobility, 2023). This is only one example of initiatives taken by member states to combat social and salary dumping.

Despite EU regulations and services available, however, the very same issues addressed by the Mobility Package still resonate among Central Asian drivers in the EU. Sleeping in trucks for months is a widespread practice, and so are precarious job conditions, lack of healthcare, and general conditions that are often below the quality that is prescribed by EU regulations. However, the existence of the recently approved EU Mobility Package itself and the example of Fair Mobility suggests that the most pressing deficiency neither lies in regulation, nor in potentially available services.

In the context of the systematic violation of their rights, a widespread shortage of information appears to be the reason for the distance between regulations and actual conditions reported by drivers. For many of them, this is their first work experience in the European Union, leaving them with a lack of knowledge not only of the many languages spoken on the continent but also of the institutions and organizations that regulate work relations. Most crucially, drivers often have a very imprecise idea of which entities could provide them the best help, as navigating the complex institutional framework of the EU is easier said than done. Different problems may be better addressed by different authorities or organizations depending on each case. While information about the pre-departure process is widely available on WhatsApp and Telegram channels where drivers exchange their experiences, the frequent help requests

regarding labour-related problems are rarely addressed in an organized manner. At the same time, an increase in scam services aimed at drivers in trouble can also be observed.

Lack of information about existing rights and services leads to unfair treatment of workers, unsafe roads due to fatigued drivers, and social dumping. To address these problems, there is a need to create an easier linkage between the drivers and the existing information and services. This linkage should be provided in the native languages of Central Asian drivers, and it should be aimed not only at providing information but also at building trusted procedures for addressing individual cases. The need is not only for the provision of information about how to deal with unfair treatment but also to be able to provide connections with the existing authorities and organizations that can address it.

## Recommendations

Central Asian truck drivers in the EU face systematic violations of their rights, leading to unfair and dangerous working conditions. Despite the existence of an adequate regulatory framework and the availability of existing services that can be offered to drivers in distress, access to the relevant information is still limited.

At the EU level, the most effective actions would be to establish a pan-European consulting service with EU and member states' funding, following the model of what already exists in Germany. This service should be offered in multiple languages and cover all economic sectors. It should provide targeted consultation on individual cases and advice on which authorities or organizations, such as labour inspectorates or trade unions, would be best to address each case. Undertaking this action would contribute significantly to the fight against social obligation and salary dumping, and the gradual harmonization of the internal labour market.

From the side of the countries of origin of migrant drivers, actions could be taken to

facilitate this flow of information. While valuable efforts at providing information to prospective migrant workers are already in place, they usually focus on the process of finding jobs and the requisite documents. There remains an important margin of improvement for what concerns the violation of rights of workers who are already employed. Given the systematic violation of migrant drivers and the complex regulatory environment that characterizes their job, which spans the whole continent, it could be necessary to first offer a screening of individual issues and then to individuate the most appropriate body to which the migrant worker may later appeal. Undertaking this action would require a limited investment of resources, as the key activity would be that of screening and linking up migrants with consulting and operative bodies that are already active within the EU. While most of the infrastructure is already available in the EU, what is lacking in most cases is only the connection to existing state bodies and NGOs. Most importantly, this service should invest in creating reliable procedures, to routinize the interaction with competent bodies within the EU.

## Conclusion

Difficulties encountered by migrant drivers from Central Asia working in the EU pose serious challenges in terms of quality of life, safety on the roads, and social dumping. In the context of the severe shortage of drivers experienced by hauling companies, new EU regulations already exist to address these issues, and so are many services and opportunities that could be offered to drivers in distress. To improve working conditions, tackle labour shortages, and help harmonize the functioning of the common EU market, it is necessary to improve drivers' knowledge about their rights. This can be achieved by stepping up consulting on the EU side, and by scaling up the efforts to provide information to workers already employed, in addition to the existing efforts to disseminate information among prospective workers. This would require a limited investment of financial resources but would have the potential to significantly improve the quality of drivers' jobs and would contribute to EU efforts at internal economic growth and harmonization.

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