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## Graduate Mobility vs. Regional Return: Labor Migration Patterns in Kazakhstan

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**Abstract.** The article examines the causal relationships, and cultural, economic, and social patterns of why some graduates aged 20-23 return to their home regions, while others remain in large cities such as Astana and Almaty for career development. This study analyzes the influence of the "internal brain drain" factor on megacities and regional development in Kazakhstan through the concepts of pushing and pulling factors and the theory of rational choice. The research used a mixed method, including qualitative and quantitative methods based on surveys and in-depth interviews of students and graduates of universities in Almaty and Astana. Additionally, the study includes state regulation, regional strategic development programs, and statistical data. By analyzing recent data on the regional dynamics of graduates' return migration, the authors offer a fresh perspective on how economic and non-economic factors influence their decision-making processes. This research enhances our understanding of the interdependence between educational migration and regional economic development. The findings highlight those economic conditions are crucial in graduates' choice of residence. Key factors influencing this decision include the reputation of universities, the availability of educational grants, and career opportunities. This study contributes to the ongoing scientific discussion surrounding internal migration and its socio-economic implications.

**Keywords:** Public administration, educational migration, graduate mobility, regional disparities, return migration, internal brain drain, quality of life

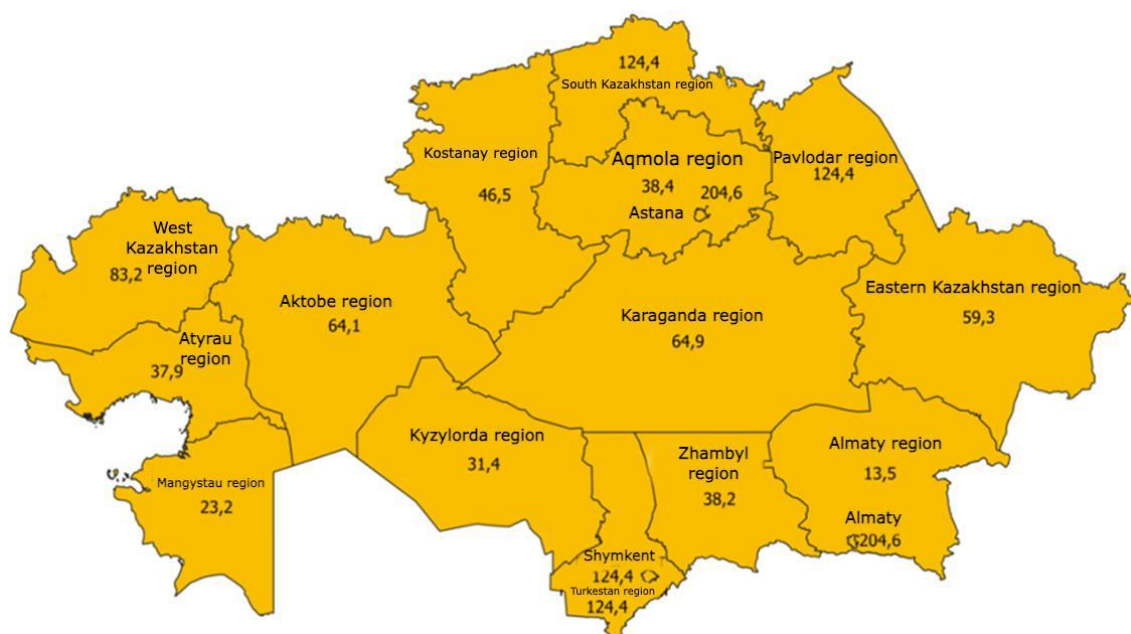
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## Introduction

One of the most acute problems of Kazakhstan's socio-economic development is the uneven development of its regions, where conditions and quality of life are becoming increasingly different. Over the past 20 years, although GDP per capita has grown due to economic growth, this growth has not been uniform across all regions. The main factor exacerbating regional differences is the uneven distribution of educational migration flows, mainly directed to large cities. It is noteworthy that the largest and most prestigious universities are concentrated in two megacities – Astana and Almaty, attracting applicants from all over the country.

According to the OECD report “OECD Territorial Surveys: Kazakhstan” (2017), the concentration of educational resources and human capital in urban centers is one of the most important drivers of internal migration, which leads to overpopulation of urban areas and depopulation of rural areas. The growing preference for studying and living in cities such as Astana and Almaty highlights the urgent need to address these regional differences through a more equitable distribution of resources and development opportunities across the country [1].

The World Bank's report “More, Better and more Inclusive Jobs in Kazakhstan” (2023) notes that trends in internal migration further increase population concentration and economic activity in cities such as Astana, Almaty and Shymkent. Such overpopulation creates problems for urban infrastructure and puts a strain on public services. In addition, the report highlights the need to align migration policy with market forces to mitigate these problems and support effective spatial transformation and structural change [2].



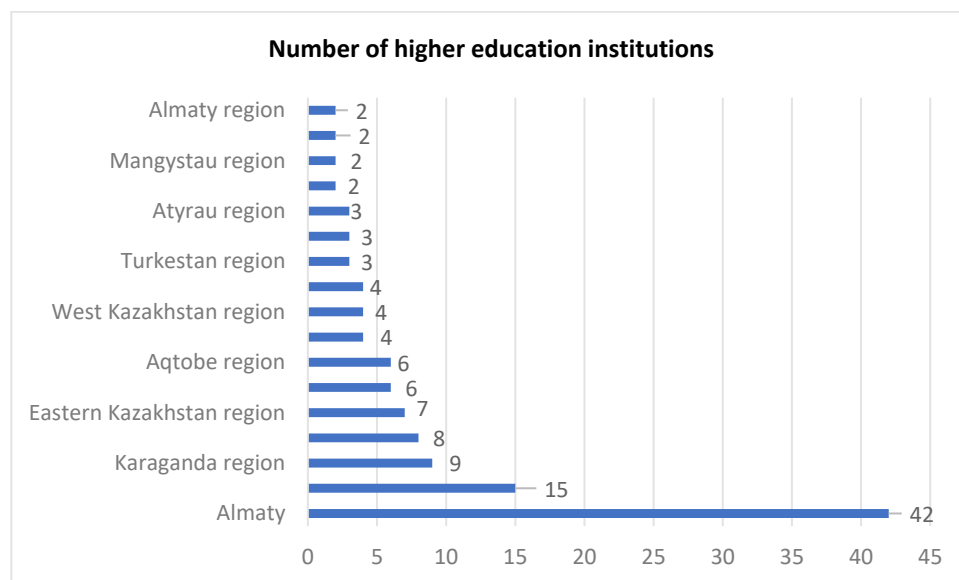
**Figure 1. The total coefficient of higher education institutions**

Source: Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan [3]

Astana and Almaty are industrial, financial, scientific, technical, cultural and educational centers where the average per capita income is significantly higher than in other regions. Figure

1 shows that the overall higher education enrollment rate in Almaty and Astana is 204.6%, respectively [3].

In addition, Figure 2 shows the number of higher education institutions as of the 2021-2022 academic year – 42 in Almaty and 15 in Astana.



**Figure 2. Number of higher education institutions (as of the 2022-2023 academic year)**

Source: Bureau of National Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan [3]

The analysis of educational migration shows trends of interest and raises a number of obvious but important issues related to graduates' career choices and their decisions to return to their home regions. The main factors influencing graduates' decision to stay in megacities or return home are high wages, economic stability, and family ties.

**This paper aims to** study the factors influencing the decision-making process of university graduates in Kazakhstan – whether to return to their native regions or stay in large cities with built infrastructure based on the recent data on the regional dynamics of return through the lens of the concepts of "push and pull factors" (1966) and "theory of rational choice" (1766) [4].

*Justification:* Internal youth migration in Kazakhstan is a relatively underexplored topic in the scientific literature. Studying this phenomenon is essential due to its significant impact on regional development within the country and its potential to inform more effective policies aimed at reducing socio-economic inequalities between urban centers like Almaty and Astana and underdeveloped rural areas. By analyzing the underlying causes and patterns of internal migration, this study enhances our understanding of how regional differences influence migration flows and offers valuable insights for policymakers.

Additionally, the increasing trend of urbanization and the concentration of economic opportunities in large cities necessitate a thorough analysis of internal migration to address the challenges of brain drain in rural areas. The findings of this study are crucial for developing targeted measures that can promote balanced regional growth.

**Novelty:** This study employs a mixed research approach combining both qualitative and quantitative methods. The integration of statistical data, in-depth interviews, and case studies provides a comprehensive understanding of the factors influencing migration decisions.

The study also highlights the need for multisectoral collaboration to effectively address regional differences.

## **Literature review**

The concept of "Push and Pull factors" was first introduced by Lee (Lee, 1966) and has since been widely used in migration studies (Ryazantsev, 2007) [5]. In the context of Kazakhstan, the dynamics of regional migration was reviewed in the reports of the OECD and the World Bank, which highlighted the impact of regional differences on the structure of internal migration.

For greater clarity and depth of the article, the following section provides specific definitions of key terms and links to existing research:

Key terms:

1. Push Factors: Factors that force people to leave their home regions due to adverse circumstances such as unemployment, low income and poor infrastructure. For example, in the context of migration within the CIS, such factors have been carefully analyzed (Ryazantsev, 2007) [5].

2. Pull factors: Conditions that attract people to new places, such as higher wages, better educational opportunities, and better living conditions. The dynamics of these factors have been well-documented in previous studies (Ryazantsev, 2007) [5].

3. Internal brain drain: migration of qualified specialists and students from less developed regions to large urban centers within the country. This phenomenon weakens the development potential of donor regions and exacerbates urban overpopulation (Ledeneva, 2014) [6].

4. Regional disparities: Differences in economic and social development levels across regions, contribute to migration imbalances. In Kazakhstan, regions like Atyrau exhibit high income levels due to the oil and gas sector, while others struggle with lower economic activity (Temirova & Abdimomynov, 2016) [7].

Intervening obstacles – such as financial difficulties, geographical barriers, or immigration laws – can also influence migration processes. Individual characteristics, including age, gender, and education, further amplify or diminish the impact of push and pull factors. This theory provides a nuanced understanding of the migration decisions of graduates in Kazakhstan, shedding light on the reasons for staying in metropolitan areas or returning to their home regions.

The Rational Choice Theory complements the Push-Pull framework, explaining why graduates from economically advanced western regions of Kazakhstan – characterized by a well-developed energy sector and high salaries – might choose to return home. While Almaty and Astana offer promising career opportunities, the high cost of living, which is 190% and 240% higher than the national average, respectively, poses a significant financial burden for newcomers.

The existence of highly developed cities and metropolises is a natural phenomenon. However, it creates challenges for sustainable regional development. Scholars like David Harvey have

addressed urban concentration issues, arguing that economic structures in capitalist cities exacerbate inequality by concentrating wealth and resources, deepening social divisions and overpopulation [8].

In Kazakhstan, urbanization and overpopulation in megacities have also been the focus of contemporary research. Scholars such as Bekenova and Seithamzina emphasize the need to improve urban infrastructure using modern technologies and create better living and working conditions, which could mitigate brain drain [9].

Barriers to employment for graduates – including the importance of social networks, entrepreneurial skills, and challenges such as lack of experience and limited job opportunities in rural areas – have been widely discussed by Kazakhstani [10]. Additionally, state regulation of educational migration requires further refinement of its legal and policy aspects [11].

Interestingly, the very concept of "educational migration" is interpreted differently by scholars. Ryazantsev (2007) considers educational migration a social type of migration rather than an economic one, as its goal is not to achieve material gain [5]. Rybakovsky (2016) agrees, classifying educational migration as a social type of migration process, alongside religious, marital, and ethnic migration [12]. Ledeneva (2014) views educational migration as a form of intellectual migration, focusing on the issues of adaptation faced by foreign students in the host country [6].

## Methodology

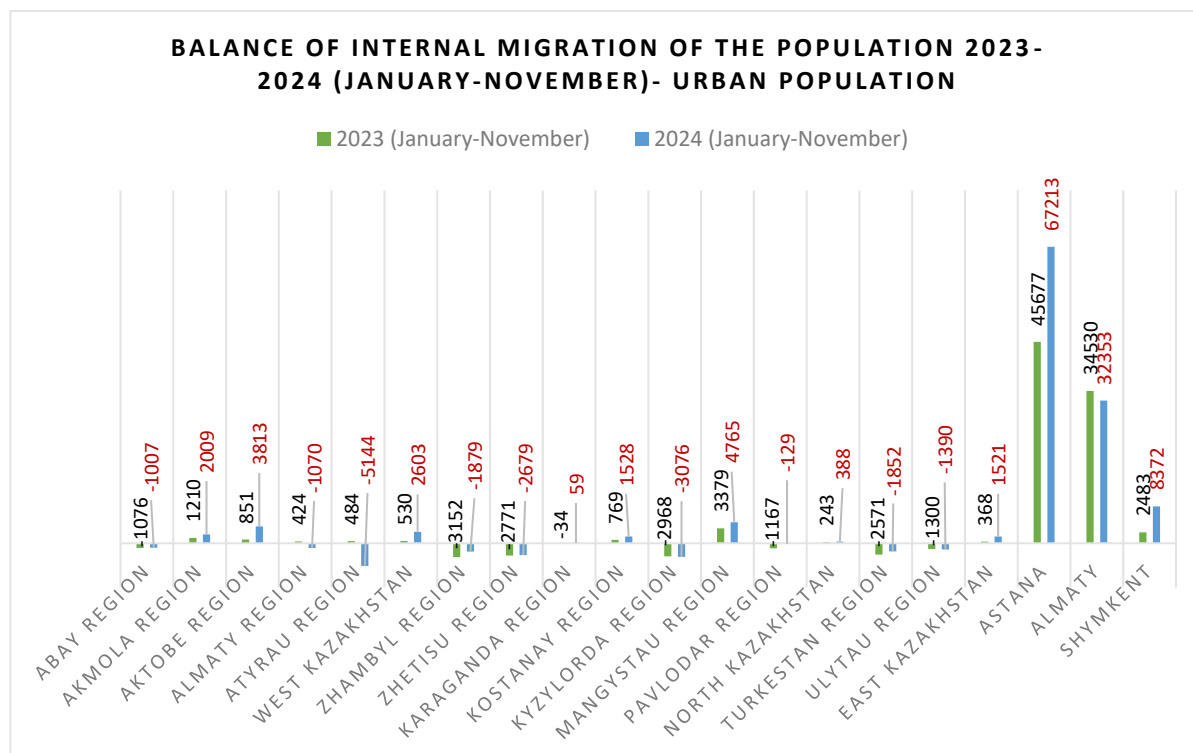
Quantitative and qualitative methods are the core of this research which includes an analysis of government migration policy, strategic programs, statistical data, and in-depth interviews with third- and fourth-year students, as well as graduates from various universities in Astana and Almaty.

The analysis is based on two key theoretical foundations: *push-pull theory* and *rational choice theory*. The push-pull theory explains migration by factors that "push" people out of their home regions (for example, unemployment, lack of opportunities, low income), and factors that "pull" them to new places (for example, economic opportunities, access to education, high standard of living). Compelling factors force people to leave their home regions, such as poverty, unemployment, political instability, or environmental problems. On the other hand, the Pull factors of attraction are the conditions that attract migrants to new places, such as economic opportunities, security, and access to education.

## Results and discussion

The situation with youth migration within the country is closely linked to the uneven development of regions, which has changed little since the 2000s [13]. Apart from Astana and Almaty, the most competitive regions are Mangystau and Atyrau oblasts, rich in mineral and hydrocarbon reserves and home to major oil-producing companies, which is why per capita incomes there are the highest [7]. Atyrau and Mangystau oblasts stand out for their economic stability, due to a developed oil and gas sector that, according to the Bureau of National

Statistics [14], generates some of the highest wages in the country. These regions provide young specialists with competitive conditions for building professional careers, offering advantages that are not always available in megacities. It is therefore unsurprising that the majority of our respondents, particularly students from this region, firmly decided that they would return home after completing their studies, as the pull factors outweigh the push factors.



**Figure 3. Balance of internal migration of the population 2023-2024 (January-November) – urban population**

Note: Compiled by the author based on [15].

However, such a promising picture is not observed across the entire western part of the country. In the Aktoobe and West Kazakhstan regions, a different situation has emerged due to a high percentage of self-employed individuals without sustainable growth in real income, which has led to population outflows [13].

According to the Bureau of National Statistics, the highest urban migration balance is in Akmola, Aktoobe, West Kazakhstan, Mangystau, Astana, Almaty, and Shymkent (Figure 3)

Internal migration in Kazakhstan not only reflects regional disparities but also exacerbates them. Donor regions lose their most talented workforce, leading to economic stagnation, while recipient cities struggle with infrastructure overload and rising inequality. This dynamic is closely tied to the decision-making processes of university graduates, whose choices are often influenced by the interplay of economic opportunities, living conditions, and personal aspirations.

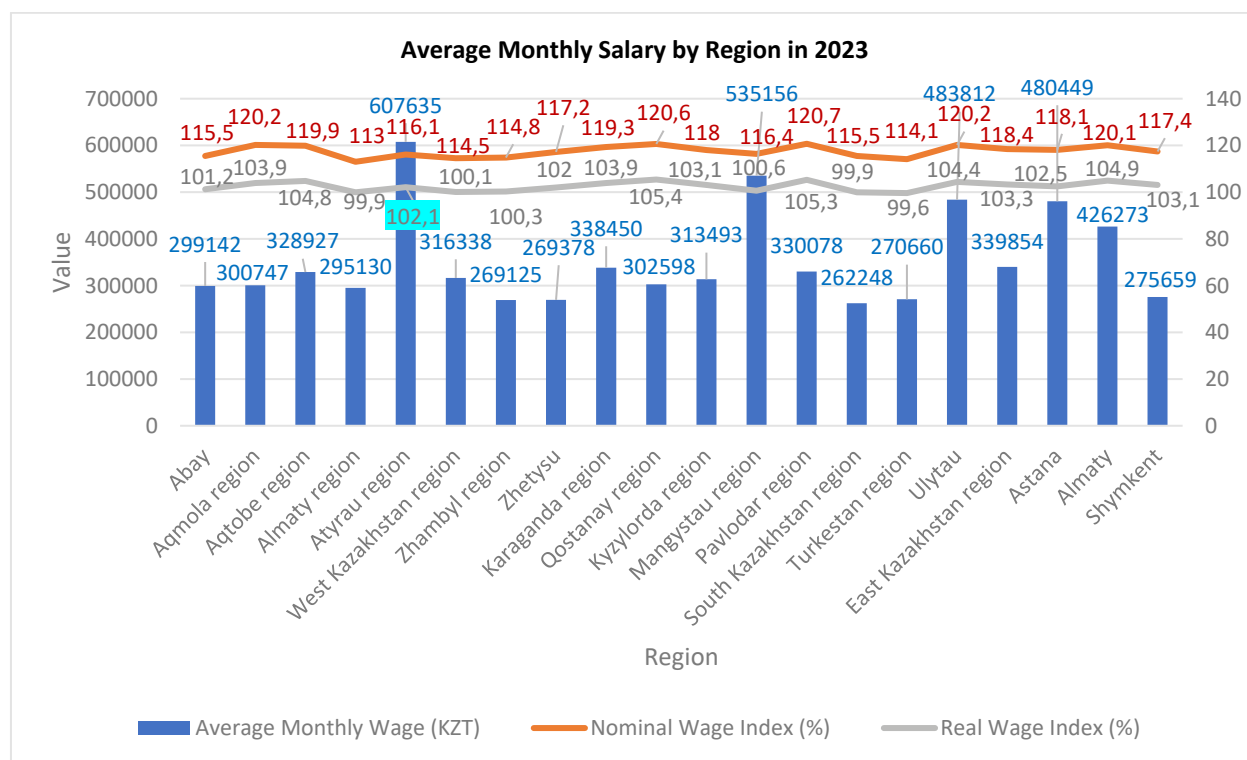
### Research Problem Justification and Key Points from the OECD Report

Kazakhstan faces significant regional disparities, which are among the highest in the OECD comparison. These disparities are driven by the concentration of economic activity in resource-rich regions, such as Atyrau and Mangystau, and major urban centers like Almaty and Astana, while other regions struggle with limited economic opportunities and infrastructure deficits. According to the OECD report *"OECD Territorial Reviews: Kazakhstan"* (2017), these imbalances not only hinder the socio-economic development of less developed regions but also exacerbate internal migration trends, leading to the depopulation of rural areas and overpopulation in urban centers.

The report highlights that internal migration in Kazakhstan often leads to the concentration of human capital in a few cities, creating further disparities in access to jobs, education, and healthcare across the country. For example, while Almaty and Astana thrive as economic hubs, rural regions face declining population trends and shortages of skilled labor [1].

It is also important to note that one of the pull factors for migration is the level of wages in the region.

Regionally, the highest average nominal monthly salary in 2023 was recorded in the Atyrau region, amounting to 607,635 tenge, followed by the Mangystau region with 535,156 tenge (Figure 4) [16].

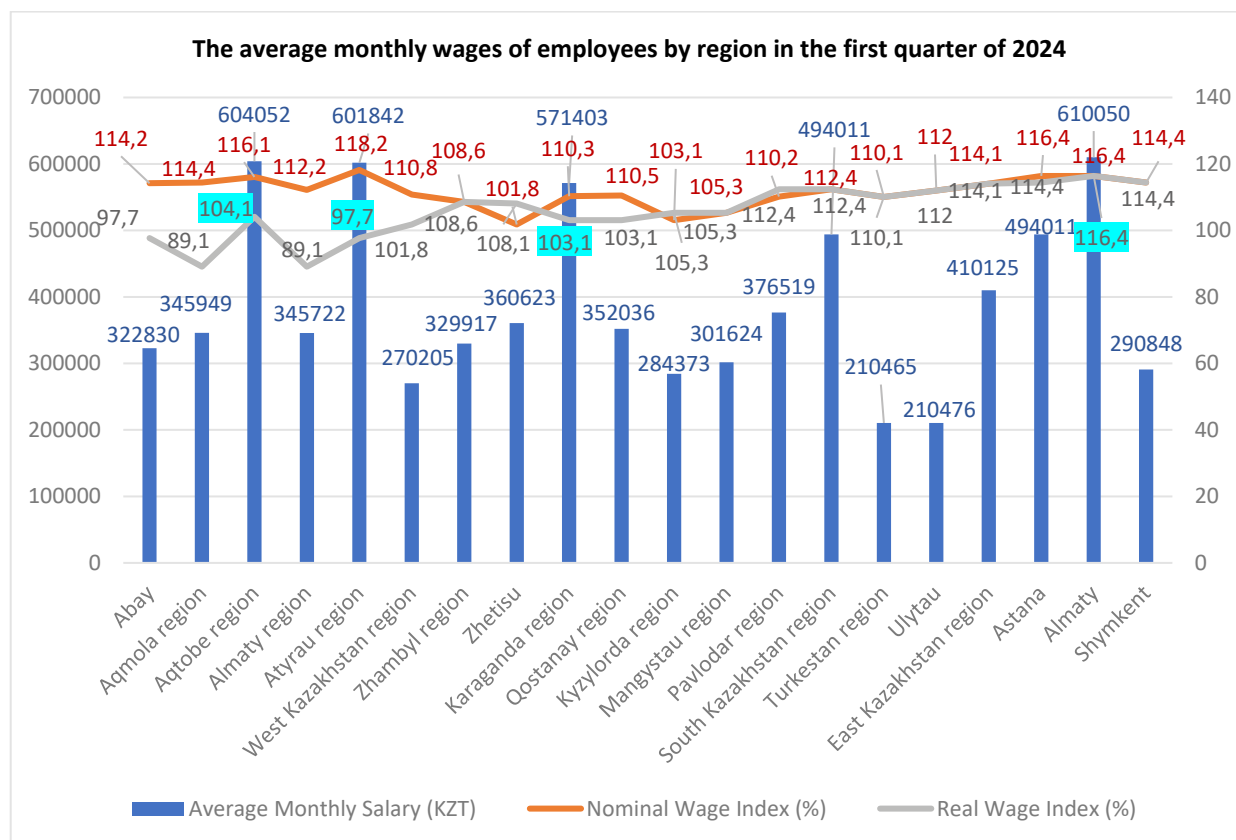


**Figure 4. Average monthly salary by region in 2023.**

Source: [16]



Regionally, the largest increase in average monthly nominal wages in the first quarter of 2024 compared to the corresponding quarter of 2023 was observed in West Kazakhstan region (18.2%), Almaty city (16.4%) and Aktoobe region (16.1%) (Figure 5). Thus, a steady trend of wage increases is observed in Atyrau, Mangystau and Ulytau regions, as well as in the cities of Almaty and Astana [17].



**Figure 5. Average monthly wages of employees by region in the first quarter of 2024**

Source: [17]

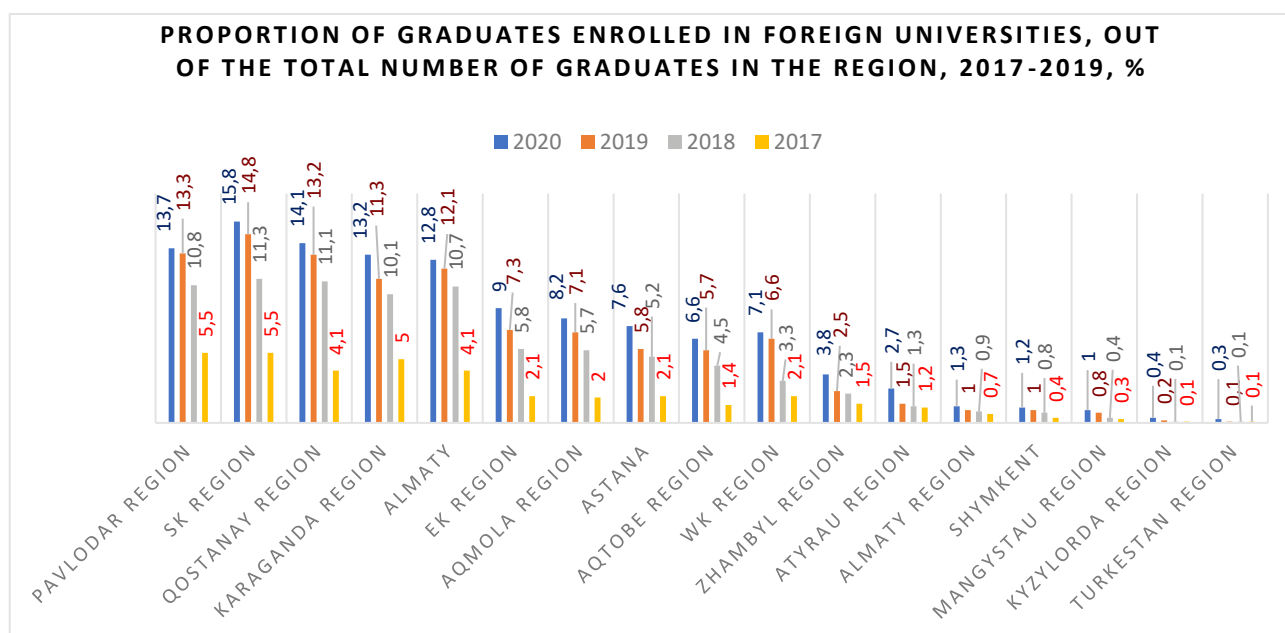
The correlation between competitive wages and the retention of the workforce in the region highlights the need for targeted development strategies, especially in regions with high economic potential. When regional economic policy is aligned with these findings, it becomes obvious that increasing wages and creating attractive employment opportunities in areas rich in natural resources can serve as a powerful tool for stabilizing the local population. Regions with strong economic potential, such as Atyrau and Mangystau, demonstrate that focusing on key industries such as oil and gas not only reduces migration, but also promotes sustainable economic growth. Moreover, replicating such targeted strategies in other regions with untapped potential can help overcome existing imbalances and promote balanced national development.

The situation is somewhat different in the East Kazakhstan and North Kazakhstan regions, where the mining and processing industries, as well as mechanical engineering, light industry



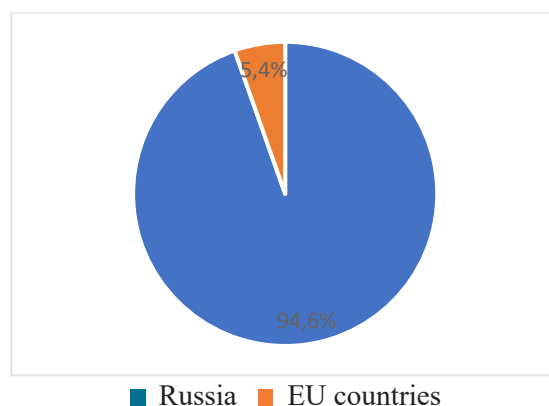
and food production are well developed. Industrial enterprises use local raw materials, as these regions are rich in natural mineral resources. Nevertheless, there is a significant outflow of young people, especially students from border areas who enroll in Russian universities. These educational institutions annually accept about 70,000 Kazakhstani students [18]. According to the National Educational Database (2019), Russian universities compete significantly with Kazakhstani universities in the border regions due to the provision of full scholarships and quality of life. The highest number of applicants comes from Pavlodar, North Kazakhstan, and Kostanay regions.

Figure 6 shows that the number of applicants from these areas has doubled over the past two years and has exceeded 10% in the North Kazakhstan and Kostanay regions. This is a concerning trend, as Kazakhstan's human capital is becoming concentrated outside the country.



**Figure 6. Proportion of graduates enrolled in foreign universities, out of the total number of graduates in the region, 2017-2019, %**

Source: [18]



**Figure 7. A country for higher education graduates of Kazakhstan schools going abroad, 2020, %**

Source: [18]

At the time of the survey, 41.2% of graduates planned to or had already enrolled in foreign universities, despite COVID-19 risks. Of these, 94.6% chose Russian universities, while 5.4% opted for European institutions (Figure 7).

The least competitive regions are the South Kazakhstan, Turkestan, and Zhambyl regions, which are rich in natural resources and have extensive agricultural land. However, the underutilization of large enterprises servicing the agro-industrial complex, self-financing of farms amid frequent irrigation water shortages, and high costs significantly impact the development of these areas. A high percentage of the population here is self-employed, including seasonal workers, whose wages are among the lowest in the country [19], leading to population outflows. Overall, the country has over 2 million self-employed people, 85% of whom earn less than 100,000 tenge per month [13].

Additionally, despite state initiatives to attract human capital to the northern and eastern regions, these southern regions remain overpopulated, where intercommunal conflicts often arise due to everyday challenges [20, 21].

State policy aims to ensure sustainable and balanced development across all regions of the country. Notably, youth are recognized as a critical factor in the state's competitiveness. In this context, the *State Program for Regional Development 2020-2025* [22] outlines strategies and key directions for rural development, including improving living standards and creating jobs to stimulate youth migration to these areas. Efforts are being made to enhance labor mobility from densely populated southern regions to labor-deficient areas under the *Concept for the Development of Rural Areas of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2023-2027* [23]. For example, in 2024, 6,148 people, or 1,769 families, relocated to regions with labor shortages. The main focus of state policy is attracting youth to rural areas, where conditions for growth are claimed to have been created. However, this often does not reflect the actual situation on the ground.

Interestingly, two important documents, the *Concept of State Youth Policy of the Republic of Kazakhstan 2023-2029* [24] and the *Concept for the Development of Local Self-Governance in the Republic of Kazakhstan until 2025* [25], emphasize “creating conditions for the self-realization of youth in rural areas” and advancing local self-governance. These initiatives include measures to improve living standards in rural areas and stimulate economic growth in small towns and rural districts. This encompasses support for education, vocational training, and cultural exchange. Programs are expected to be developed to improve youth employment in rural and small-town areas, which will help reduce pressure on major cities and more evenly distribute labor resources across regions.

The National Project “*Ulttyq Rukhani Zhangyru*” and the Program “*Aul – El Besigi*” include measures to support youth, such as training, employment, and entrepreneurship development programs in rural and small-town areas [26, 27].

## Conclusion

Thus, an analysis of educational migration among youth highlights key push and pull factors influencing graduates' decisions to either remain in megacities after completing their studies or return to their hometowns and villages. These findings underscore the importance of

balanced regional development to reduce disparities between "push" and "pull" factors and ensure sustainable growth across all regions of the country by improving living standards and developing high-quality educational infrastructure in the regions.

The issue of disproportionate regional development in Kazakhstan is closely tied to socio-economic challenges that drive internal migration, particularly to major cities such as Astana and Almaty. The concentration of large and prestigious universities in these cities attracts significant numbers of young people from other regions. Exceptions include the Atyrau and Mangystau regions, which serve as positive examples of economic attractiveness and successful youth integration due to their developed oil and gas sectors and high wages. Despite several important state programs on migration and youth policies—such as the Aul – El Besigi and Ulattyq Rukhani Zhangyru programs, which aim to develop small towns and villages, support youth self-realization, and promote employment in the regions—the effectiveness of these programs is limited by insufficient implementation at the local level and persistent socio-economic disparities between the two major cities and the rest of the regions.

The OECD report emphasizes the importance of adopting a territorial approach to regional development, focusing on decentralization and empowering local governments to address their unique challenges.

Investments in infrastructure, education, and healthcare in underdeveloped regions are critical to reducing migration pressures and promoting balanced regional development[1].

Programs like Aul – El Besigi should be expanded to include comprehensive support for human capital development in rural areas.

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### **Author contributions:**

**Arynova L.K.** – Conceptualization, formal analysis, investigation, writing – original draft preparation, writing – review and editing, visualization.

**Imyarova Z.S.** – Conceptualization, validation, formal analysis investigation, data curation, writing – review and editing, supervision, project administration.

All authors have read and agreed to the published version of the manuscript.

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### **Түлектердің ұтқырлығы және өңірлерге оралу: Қазақстандағы еңбек көші-қоны үрдістері**

**Аңдатпа.** Мақалада 20-23 жас аралығындағы кейбір түлектердің туған аймақтарына оралу себептері қарастырылады, ал басқалары мансапты дамыту үшін Астана және Алматы сияқты ірі қалаларда қалады. Зерттеу "итеру және тарту факторлары" және "ұтымды таңдау теориялары" тұжырымдамаларына сүйене отырып, ішкі ми ағуының мегаполистер мен аймақтық дамуға әсерін талдайды.

**Әдістеме:** Сапалық және сандық әдістерді біріктіретін аралас әдістемелік тәсіл қолданылады. Мемлекеттік саясат, нормативтік актілер және стратегиялық даму бағдарламалары талданады, өзекті ресми деректерге статистикалық талдау жүргізіледі. Зерттеу сонымен қатар Астана мен Алматыда студенттер мен түлектермен сұхбаттар мен терең сұхбаттарды пайдаланады.

**Зерттеудің өзіндік ерекшелігі / құндылығы:** Жұмыс түлектердің оралуының аймақтық динамикасы туралы жаңа деректерді біріктіреді, олардың шешімдеріне экономикалық және экономикалық емес факторлардың әсері туралы жаңа көзқарасты ұсынады. Бұл білім беру көші-қоны мен аймақтық экономикалық даму арасындағы байланысты тереңірек түсінуге мүмкіндік береді.

Нәтижелер: Біздің зерттеуіміз түлектердің тұрғылықты жерін таңдаудағы негізгі фактор экономикалық жағдайлар болып табылатынын көрсетті. Олардың ішінде – жоғары оқу орындарының беделі, білім беру гранттарының қолжетімділігі және мансаптық өсу перспективалары. Зерттеу ішкі көші-қонды және оның әлеуметтік-экономикалық салдарын ғылыми талқылауға ықпал етеді.

**Түйінді сөздер:** мемлекеттік басқару, білім беру көші-қоны, аймақтық айырмашылықтар, түлектердің ұтқырлығы, аймақтарға оралу, мидың ішкі ағуы, өмір сапасы

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### **Мобильность выпускников и возвращение в регионы: Тенденции трудовой миграции в Казахстане**

**Аннотация.** В статье рассматриваются причины, по которым некоторые выпускники в возрасте 20-23 лет возвращаются в родные регионы, тогда как другие остаются в крупных городах, таких как Астана и Алматы, для развития карьеры. Исследование анализирует влияние внутренней утечки мозгов на мегаполисы и региональное развитие, опираясь на концепции «выталкивающих и притягивающих факторов» и «Теории рационального выбора».

**Методология:** Применяется смешанный методологический подход, сочетающий качественные и количественные методы. Анализируются государственная политика, нормативные акты и программы стратегического развития, проводится статистический разбор актуальных официальных данных. В исследовании также используются опросы и глубинные интервью со студентами и выпускниками в Астане и Алматы.

**Оригинальность / ценность исследования:** Работа объединяет новые данные о региональной динамике возвращения выпускников, предлагая свежий взгляд на влияние экономических и неэкономических факторов на их решения. Это позволяет глубже понять взаимосвязь между образовательной миграцией и региональным экономическим развитием.

**Результаты:** Наше исследование показало, ключевым фактором при выборе места жительства выпускников становятся экономические условия. Среди них – престиж вузов, доступность образовательных грантов и перспективы карьерного роста. Исследование вносит вклад в научное обсуждение внутренней миграции и ее социально-экономических последствий.

**Ключевые слова:** государственное управление, образовательная миграция, региональные различия, мобильность выпускников, возвращение в регионы, внутренняя утечка мозгов, качество жизни.

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