

## As a compatriot, not a foreigner, I wish to be embraced by my homeland

As Korea's international reputation has grown, so has the number of overseas Koreans visiting their homeland. More and more overseas Koreans want to stay in their proud country, which has developed into a great place to live, to engage in economic activities, such as employment and investment, or to spend the rest of their lives in peace, alongside their families.

The Ministry of Justice reported there were more than 860,000 overseas Koreans living in Korea as of the end of October 2024, but the number exceeds 1 million if you include those who have already established a new life in their home country through nationality restoration or dual citizenship. As a country facing a demographic decline due to a declining birthrate and aging population, there is no reason why we shouldn't welcome our compatriots back to their homeland, along with their abundant capital and labor.

In June 2023, the government recognized the importance of overseas Korean policy and established the Overseas Koreans Agency as a control tower for overseas Korean policy. In particular, the Basic Law on Overseas Koreans was enacted, making it the responsibility of the government to support the stable stay of overseas Koreans returning to their home countries. However, the Korean diaspora community, which had hoped for a major change in the policy of overseas compatriots staying in Korea, has been frustrated by the slow pace of the government.

In this context, the "Dialogue with the Government, Academia, and Civil Society Organizations on Domestic Compatriots Policy (2024 Overseas Koreans Policy Academic Forum)" hosted by the OKA for the first time at the end of last year was a meaningful event. In particular, it was announced that lowering the permissible age for multiple citizenship would have a positive effect on the Korean economy, as the current system only allows for Koreans over 65, for whom participation in economic activities is more difficult and only increases costs. The issue of the F-4 visa (Overseas Korean visa) and the H-2 visa (Work and Visit visa), which are specifically applied to overseas Koreans, were also discussed in detail, including issues with how the visa and employment policies are causing great suffering to the lives of overseas compatriots residing in Korea.

However, the Ministry of Justice's Immigration and Foreign Affairs policy division, the department in charge of these policies, has maintained the policy position that compatriots living in their home

countries should be strictly managed and regulated as "foreigners, not compatriots," emphasizing "social consensus" as a prerequisite. The Ministry of Justice's statement that policy will be implemented once social consensus is achieved raises the question of whether it perceives compatriot policy as a means of maintaining and controlling the status quo rather than as a major tool for social change and national development. Despite the establishment of the OKA, participants expressed their disappointment that compatriot policy is still decentralized and not efficiently coordinated across ministries and that the Ministry of Justice's policy stubbornness to manage compatriots within the framework of immigration and alien policy remains.

In particular, the Korean diaspora has criticized the Ministry of Justice's "turf war" to block the OKA's domestic compatriot support projects, even though there is a legal system and budget in place for the OKA to support the stable residence of Korean compatriots in Korea. The Ministry of Justice is of the position that they are already operating a domestic compatriot program in the form of the Overseas Korean Support Center using private organizations, and therefore, it is not advisable for the OKA to carry out another domestic compatriot support project. However, it is a fact that the overseas Korean community already knows that the Ministry of Justice's Overseas Korean Support Center is a hollow system that has been operating for a long time without a proper budget and without a single successful project.

If overseas Koreans are treated as foreigners rather than compatriots in their home countries, how will it affect their social integration? The resentment and frustration that accumulate in their hearts as they struggle through their days in welfare blind spots, as well as how this will possibly aid the national task of building a community and establishing an identity for the Korean people, should be soberly reflected on. 🇰🇷



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\* The contributor's claims or opinions may differ from the position of the Overseas Koreans Agency.