

TAJIK MIGRANT WORKERS IN RUSSIA: MAJOR HURDLES

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Abstract

Tajikistan is a post-soviet republic situated in Central Asia. It is largely an agricultural country which has suffered a vicious civil war in the early 1990s which led to not only much bloodshed but increased poverty. In order to survive many Tajiks sought employment elsewhere. The main attraction was Russia due to linguistic factors as well as the legacy of the Soviet Union. Tajik migration focused on Russia and enormous amounts of foreign currency came to be sent back to Tajikistan in the form of remittances. The hundreds of thousands of Tajik migrants experienced many obstacles and tremendous difficulties. This paper identifies these factors and explores them in detail.

Keywords:

Tajikistan;
Migration;
Central Asia;
Russia.

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Introduction

The ending of the cold war meant that the fifteen republics of the Soviet Union became independent entities. This had many implications. For some it meant great opportunities to become attached to west European institutions for others, a huge downsizing of their newly established national economies. These national economies were located in the internal borders of the Soviet Union, which has just been transformed into international borders. One of the implications of this concerned labour migration, especially for the central Asian states. Heading this list of high dependence on migrant works was and remains Tajikistan (Yiğit, 2013a). Largely an agricultural region with heavy reliance on manual labour, Tajikistan suffered not only from economic decline but a terrible civil war in the immediate years after its independence.

For more than seventy years Tajikistan was part of a great state – the Soviet Union. Almost all sectors - political, social, and economic – of all the Soviet Socialist Republics were constructed dependent on each other. This is why migrant workers from Tajikistan, as from other post-Soviet Republics mainly choose Russia and other CIS countries as their destinations. Main reasons behind this are mainly historical ties, visa-free regimes among states (in most cases), Tajik diasporas, friends and relatives in those countries and Russian being used as a lingua franca, psychological easiness and closeness of societies, and others. The Russian Federation (RF), Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan attract the majority of the migrant workers from Tajikistan (Yigit, 1997). The migrant workers from Tajikistan choose countries of their destination according to the job opportunities there, and its availability and demand for foreign labour.

Apart from the RF, the migrant workers from Tajikistan also go for work to other CIS countries, to their neighbor Central Asian countries. Because of close ties between societies, similar culture, and history, before 2002 Uzbekistan was the second major destination for Tajik migrant workers (Jones et al. 2007). Tajiks traditionally traded in Uzbek bazaars in urban areas in Tashkent, Samarkand and Fergana (Ryazantsev et al. 2014). Unfortunately, as Tajik-Uzbek relations started to deteriorate since 2001, and the introduction of a visa regime for the citizens of Tajikistan by Uzbekistan, the flow of labor fell dramatically (Suyarkulova, 2011). Uzbekistan receives practically no migrants from Tajikistan.

As Kazakhstan started to develop very quickly after the oil-boom of 1998, it also became a very attractive destination for the migrant workers from Tajikistan, as from all other Central Asian countries. Year by year its popularity with Tajik migrants is steadily growing. In 2003 only 1% of the Tajik migrant workers went to Kazakhstan, whereas by 2004, 14% (World Bank, 2005). In Kazakhstan, Tajik migrants work mainly in construction, especially in the fast growing urban centers, such as Astana and Almaty, but also in trade infrastructure. Kyrgyzstan mainly attracts Tajiks engaged in shuttle trading. Traders mainly go to Bishkek, the capital of Kyrgyzstan, which became a center for wholesale and retail goods from China.

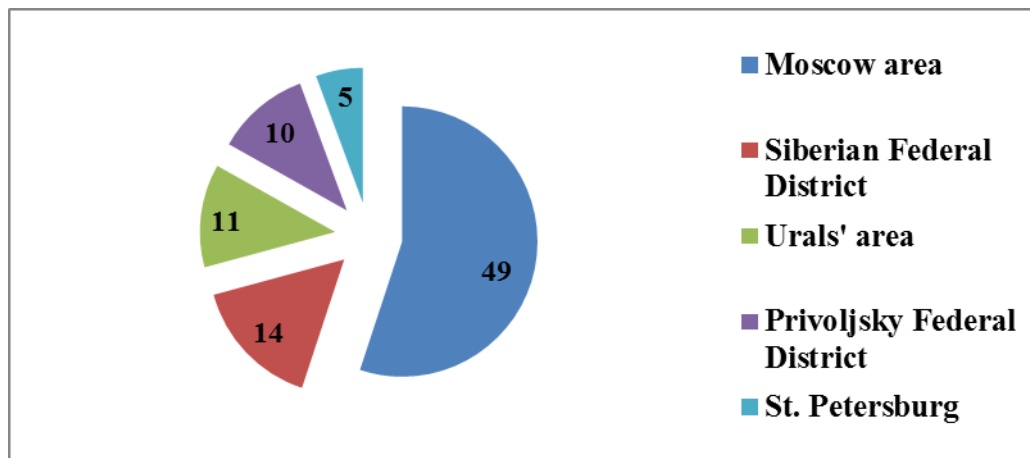
In addition to all above mentioned countries, Tajik labour migration outspreads to Belarus, China, the United Arab Emirates, Malaysia, India, Pakistan, Iran and Turkey, and even to European countries such as Germany or Poland, or the United States, Canada and Australia (Ivakhnyuk, 2006).

The main destination for the Tajik migrant workers, however, remains Russia, which from the beginning was doing comparatively better in its transition to the market economy and stabilization of socio-economic situation in comparison to most of the other CIS states. In early 1996, the average monthly salary in Russia was 30 times higher than in Tajikistan, and one of the main reasons for most migrant workers to leave Tajikistan was and remains low salaries, this is why RF was the most attractive destination. The second most important pull factor for the migrant workers is a favorable labor market in the receiving country, i.e. stable demand for foreign labor (Olimova and Bosc, 2003). In one poll 84% of all migrant workers from Tajikistan work in Russia, and the most common region is Moscow. After the United States, Russia is the second-largest migrant-receiving country in the world (Marat, 2009).

It is better for them to work in the regions with established links. Most of the time, these are the regions where there is a Tajik community or even ethnic Russians who formerly have lived in Tajikistan, or contacts between former partner enterprises, whose links date back to the Soviet era. Other criteria for choosing a destination can be said to be related to transport routes. One of the largest Tajik migrant worker communities has emerged in Volgograd, the end point of a rail line from Dushanbe and a transit hub on the Dushanbe - Moscow line (Human Rights watch,

2009). Other popular regions of RF with the Tajik migrants are areas of concentration of major industries such as oil and gas, metallurgy, chemical industries, and heavy machine building, because these regions are surrounded by infrastructure, housing, services etc. These mainly include cities such as Samara and Kazan in Central Russia; Yekaterinburg and Krasnoyarsk in the Urals; Tyumen and Nizhnevartovsk in the oil-rich far North, and Vladivostok in the Far East (Human Rights watch, 2009).

Tajik Migrant Workers in the RF (%)



Source: State Agency for Social Protection, Employment of Population and Migrations, (Dushanbe, 2008)

In RF, nearly half of all Tajik migrants work in the construction sector, another third is shuttle traders, while 6% work at oil and gas exploration sites and 6% in the agricultural sector. Only 3% work in highly professional sectors, such as education and medicine (Olimova, 2009).

In the post-Soviet period there has been formed a number of coherent and mutually beneficial relations between Russia and Tajikistan in many spheres. However, the problem of labor migration from Tajikistan to Russia still remains unsolved. The main obstacle in the regulation of migration exchange between the countries is the lack of an appropriate legal framework. The agreement between the two governments on labor activity and protection of the rights of citizens of RF in Russia and citizens of RF in Tajikistan, signed in 2004, has changed little in the practice of regulating the migration of migrant workers from Tajikistan (Nuraliev, 2005). Large numbers of the migrant workers are subjected to abuse and exploitation by employers, employment

agencies, and other intermediaries, and are victims of extortion and abuse by police and other officials (Ismayilova, 2014).

The existing procedure of registration of foreign labor requires the employers, as well as the migrant workers themselves to pass a complex way in the bureaucratic offices of registration of workers, receiving migration cards and work permits. The employers must obtain a permit for the attraction of foreigners to the labor, pay security deposit to guarantee the deportation of migrants, who have violated law of RF, make tax payments, much larger than when using the work of Russians, as well as be responsible for civil and social rights of migrants, which the legislation does not clearly define (Makoka & Kaplan, 2005). Bureaucratic difficulties lead to the wide practice of illegal labor migration and uncertainty of the scale of migration flows. And the most of the problems faced by the Tajik migrant workers in Russia come from their illegal stay and work in the territory of RF. Today, there are no precise data on the number of migrant workers from Tajikistan in Russia and its evaluation ranges from 400 thousand to 1 million people (Marat, 2009).

As a result, the majority of the migrant workers are working illegally, which allows their employers to violate their rights. Many new comers are experiencing increasing difficulties of "slave" labor, living and working without proper wages, proper housing, social security, but with the constant threat of eviction and deception (Tyuryukanova, 2005). This is one of the major problems faced by the Tajik migrant workers in Russia. This is also an implication of lack of legal awareness of Tajik migrant workers; they are not introduced with and informed about their rights, freedoms, and obligations. This is why they just do what their employers tell them to do, and most of the time are cheated by their employers, and left without any money at all. And the reason behind this situation is the low level of education among the Tajik migrant workers, most of which are young people from new generation of war-torn and very young independent Tajikistan. Tajik migrant workers are also cheated and badly treated by the other Tajiks, so-called "New Tajik intermediaries" (Urinboyev & Polese, 2016). They promise good jobs, registration and high wages, but this is not the case. Some of the migrant workers remain in Russia jobless for months, intermediaries fail to provide them with jobs. They take passports of the migrants, who are left without money and homeless (Gilpin, 2012).

The overwhelming majority of migrant workers live in very bad conditions. The very elementary means of hygiene are violated. The majority of Tajik migrant construction workers are living in construction sites. They are cooking in the same place where they are sleeping (Ivakhnyuk, 2006). And about their health conditions, it is awful. Majority of the migrant workers do not have access to healthcare, hospitals, etc. They have to look after themselves by themselves; the employers do not let them go to hospitals. Another case is that migrant workers do not have insurance and other similar social security opportunities, so the medical service is very expensive for them. HIV and AIDS became widespread among the migrant workers; especially those who not married, or are in Russia without their own families (Weine et al. 2008). The working conditions are also very bad. The normal work-hours are not regulated. Migrant workers are forced to work for more than 10 hours a day, and the days-off are very rare.

Another major problem and threat faced by the Tajik migrant workers in Russia is racketeering. These criminal groups that demand money for protecting the businesses are known as “roofs” (Ryazantsev et al. 2015). Actually the threat to those businesses is also coming from the racketeers themselves, so they are protecting the businesses of Tajik migrants from themselves and the similar gangs. They operate in various industrial sectors, trade and transport. The local police are not only informed about the activity of the roofs but in some cases actively participate in it by watching over the collection of the money for protection and resolving any incidents that may arise. And the worst thing here is that often this rackets are most of the times compatriots of those migrant workers, they are also Tajiks. A lot of migrant workers are complaining about them (Light, 2015).

The lack of formal support from the native government and the consular service also brings difficulties to the solution of the problems faced by the migrant workers. In the regions where there is a presence of consular services of Tajikistan their involvement to the issues related to their citizens is good, and the migrant workers working there can also refer to them in a case. But in the majority of cases the migrant workers prefer to refer to their native people, and social organizations established by the networks of Tajik migrants.

Tajiks become the victims of racial discrimination, exclusion and xenophobia (Milikbekova, 2006). There is an expansion of socio-demographic basis of xenophobic sentiments and appeals

to them from virtually all political forces, the selectivity of phobias in relation to certain ethnic groups and tighter forms of harassment towards "others" (Laruelle, 2010). Violent racially-motivated attacks and murders of minorities of non-Slavic appearance have become common occurrences in Moscow and St. Petersburg as well as in smaller cities (Wirtz, 2014).

Tajik migrant workers are also experiencing difficulties in adaptation in the host country. As the majority of the migrant workers are young people and haven't received proper education or poorly know the Russian language (Ivakhnyuk, 2006). So, the host population, especially in big cities dislikes and even hates them. Tajik migrant workers face difficulties in communication with the host people. The lack of dignified work, and the illegal nature of migrant employment, contributes significantly to their isolation from the host society (Olimova & Olimov, 2007). Moreover, some groups of the society, for example, promote open-door policies of welcoming a large number of migrants who would play an increasing role in the national economies due to population aging and population decline in Russia and some CIS countries; others fiercely endorse restrictive measures on migration claiming that migrants steal the jobs from local population and dangerously erode the cultural cohesiveness of host communities (Agadjanian & Zotova, 2012). This is not correct as the migration flow to Russia is not that high. But unfortunately, it makes the difficulties faced by migrant workers in communication and good relations with the host people much more difficult and almost impossible.

Another popular stereotype about the migration from Tajikistan, especially illegal, is often associated with the problem of drug-business (Petrova et al. 2014). Indeed, among the migrants from Tajikistan there are drug couriers and traffickers, and they are more likely to appear in cases related to crimes in the illicit drug trafficking. The activities of those who transport and distribute drugs are condemned by the overwhelming majority of the migrant workers, because it forms a negative opinion about all of the Tajik migrants. The migrant workers themselves tend to live and work in Russia legally, but long process of paperwork, first of all, registration and work permits, force them to resort to false firms offering very quick services (Kumo, 2012). As a result the Tajik migrants, seeking to legalize their stay in Russia, have themselves become victims of fake official identity documents and become violators of the law (Bowers, 2013).

Another important problem associated with the migration of Tajik migrant workers in Russia is their high mortality rate. A record number of deaths, according to unofficial data, were in 2002, when more than 800 bodies of Tajik migrant workers were delivered to Tajikistan (Khuseynova, 2013). Most of them have died in incidents at their workplaces, because of violation of the basic rules of safety techniques, bad living and health conditions. Also some of them were killed by gangs.

Thus one can conclude that the main problems of Tajik migrant workers in Russia are sevenfold. Firstly, the prevalence of unregulated, uncontrolled foreign labor migration and the growth of illegal employment of migrants. Under the conditions of visa-free regime with Russia, migrants from Tajikistan enter the host country legally, but by breaking the rules of stay of the migrant workers move into the category of illegal migrants (Abdullov, 2012). Secondly, the lack of infrastructure for serving the potential and existing migrant workers, both in Tajikistan and in the Russia; in sufficient number of official Tajik representatives in the host country to solve their problems and protect rights of the migrant workers (Riester, 2010). Thirdly, the lack of social and legal protections for migrant workers, including lack of social security (insurance), which lead to numerous violations of their rights and freedoms. As a general rule, citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan sent to work abroad often do not have a whole package of documents to ensure their legal status and protection (Macours, 2005). Fourthly, bad working, living and health conditions (Gilpin et al. 2012). Fifthly, as a consequence of reduction of qualification level of labor resources in the republic, there is allow professional qualifications of migrants, which does not correspond to labor market needs of host countries (Kassenova, 2009). Sixthly, the low level of awareness, legal literacy and the lack of a range of skills and knowledge among migrants, which are important for the adaption in new environment, including the lack of knowledge or poor knowledge of languages (Marat, 2009). Seventhly, the dissemination of stereotypes about the criminal background of the export of man power from the RF, its relation with drug-trafficking causes different attitudes of different, especially the marginalized sectors of society of the host country, and undermines the image of workers from Tajikistan (Paoli et al. 2007).

Conclusion

In the final analysis higher levels of economic growth in Tajikistan will reduce the demand for migration to Russia. Furthermore, possible entry into the Eurasian Economic Union for Tajikistan will mean greater ease of access for migrants (Yiğit, 2013). Given the fact that legal hurdles constitute a major hurdle such a future development would be a very positive one. Lastly, any reduction in the need for remittances will also mean less dependence on Tajik migrants in Russia.

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