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*Irina Malyuchenko*

LABOUR MIGRATION FROM CENTRAL  
ASIA TO RUSSIA: ECONOMIC AND  
SOCIAL IMPACT ON THE SOCIETIES  
OF KYRGYZSTAN, TAJIKISTAN, AND  
UZBEKISTAN

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**OSCE Academy in Bishkek,**

Botanichesky 1A, Bishkek,  
Kyrgyzstan, 72004

Tel: 996 312 54 32 00

Fax: 999 312 54 23 13

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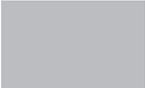
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ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL  
IMPACT ON THE SOCIETIES OF  
KYRGYZSTAN, TAJIKISTAN,  
AND UZBEKISTAN

**By Irina Malyuchenko**

Irina Malyuchenko is an alumna of the MA in Politics and Security programme at the OSCE Academy in Bishkek, class of 2013. Currently she is an assistant at the Department of Trade and Investment of the Embassy of the Federative Republic of Brazil in Astana. Irina's academic interests include Central Asia, economic and social aspects of regional security. She can be reached via e-mail at [irina.malyuchenko@gmail.com](mailto:irina.malyuchenko@gmail.com).



## KEY POINTS

Labour migration from Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to the Russian Federation has grown into a phenomenon unprecedented in its scale. Playing a crucial role in transforming the lives of individuals, family structures, communities and society as a whole, migration has ambiguous implications for the societies of these countries, resulting in both risks and opportunities for those directly related to the trend.

While the positive economic effects of migration are easily measurable in terms of increases to income and spending power, the negative effects such as the effects on the family unit, demographic aspects, and women's and children's psycho-emotional and physical health are less immediate and tangible, making them more difficult to demonstrate.

The issue of migration is characterized by dangerous dependencies for Central Asian countries. Workers' remittances cannot be considered as a stable source of development. This is illustrated by the latest tendencies in the Russian economy and their consequences for neighboring countries. The sharp decline in the value of Russian rouble since the beginning of 2014 hit countries dependent on money transfers from labour migrants in Russia hard, and contributed to the devaluation of local currencies and increases in food prices across the region.

# INTRODUCTION

The topic of labour migration from Central Asian countries has become a popular theme in political and social discourses in Russia. According to the Russian Federal Migration Service, there were about 4.5 million citizens from the former Soviet republics of Central Asia residing in Russia as of December 4, 2014.<sup>1</sup> This number accounts for 40 per cent of the total number of foreign citizens staying in Russia. The actual number of those who live and work in Russia is harder to calculate due to high rates of illegal migration, which some estimates place at up to 3.7 million people,<sup>2</sup> and poor registration of labour migrants. These numbers are even more staggering when compared to the populations of these remittance-receiving countries. Tajikistan, for instance, has more than 15 per cent of its population working in other countries, mostly in Russia.<sup>3</sup>

Given the scale of labor migration from Central Asian states, there is a clear need for more knowledge about the implications of this process for the societies of the above mentioned countries. This policy brief discusses the economic and social impacts of migration on the societies of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan, and examines the new challenges faced by migrant workers and their families.

- 1 Statistical data on foreign citizens on the territory of the Russian Federation, Federal Migration Service, 2 July 2014; <<http://www.fms.gov.ru/about/statistics/data/details/54891/>> (accessed 21 July 2014).
- 2 "FMS naschitala v Rossii 3,7 mln nelegal'nykh migrantov" (FMS counted 3.7 million illegal migrants in Russia), Ria Novosti, 29 April 2014; <<http://ria.ru/society/20140429/1005882745.html>> (accessed 21 July 2014).
- 3 Rakhmon Ulmasov, "Economic Risk: Migratory Aspect," *Geopolitics* No. 1, 2013: 2.

# ECONOMIC CONSEQUENCES OF MIGRATION

## Remittances as a mechanism to address poverty

Starting with the economic implications, it is logical to mention first that labour migration and remittances are a key mechanism to address poverty. The beneficial effects of remittances on the researched countries' economies during the difficult years of building their independence have been recently widely regarded by the international organizations as the dominant factor for their economies.<sup>4</sup> According to World Bank data, tens of millions of people live below the poverty line in Central Asia. In Tajikistan the figure is 35.6 per cent, in Uzbekistan - 17 per cent, while Russia had 11 per cent in 2013.<sup>5</sup> In addition to this, GDP per capita in Tajikistan is \$1,037, in Kyrgyzstan - \$1,263, in Uzbekistan - \$1,878 compared with \$14,612 in Russia in 2013.<sup>6</sup> The lowest average wage in the CIS area in 2013 was registered in Tajikistan: 164 USD, more than six times lower than in the Russian Federation.<sup>7</sup> Tajikistan (1st place in 2013) and Kyrgyzstan (3rd place) are two of the most remittance-dependent countries in the world, dependencies echoed in the two countries' political relations with Russia.<sup>8</sup> In 2013 money transfers from Russia to Uzbekistan were 6.689 billion USD (which equates to 11% of GDP at current rates)

- 4 Abdul-Ghaffar Mughal, Migration, Remittances, and Living Standards in Tajikistan. A Report Based on Khatlon Remittances and Living Standards Measurement Survey (KLSS 2205). (Dushanbe: IOM, 2007): 73.
- 5 Population before poverty line, CIA Factbook; <<https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/fields/2046.html#ti>> (accessed 21 July 2014).
- 6 World Development Indicators, World Bank; <<http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.CD>> (accessed 21 July 2014).
- 7 Alexandr Mukha, "Reyting srednikh zarplat rabotnikov v stranakh SNG i Pribaltiki v 2013 godu" (Rating of average wages of workers in the CIS area and Baltic countries in 2013), Tut By Media, 25 March, 2014; <<http://finance.tut.by/news392172.html>> (accessed 20 July 2014).
- 8 Remittances Data, World Bank; <<http://econ.worldbank.org>> (accessed 21 July 2014).

and 2,106 billion USD to Kyrgyzstan (30% respectively), while Tajikistan became the leader in this area, receiving 4,173 billion USD of remittances: or over half of the GDP.<sup>9</sup>

These figures only account for funds sent through formal channels (bank transfers). However, since many people transfer money in cash or goods, the true scale of money transfers is likely larger than officially indicated.<sup>10</sup> As a result, voluntary labour migration from poor to rich countries almost always benefits the migrant because of the difference in wages and living standards. Migrants working abroad can earn salaries that reflect, to some extent, economically advanced host-country prices, while their relatives can spend the money in their economically less developed home countries, where the prices of goods and services are much lower. In this sense, remittances fuel consumption and tend to be spent primarily on food and clothing, to be invested in home repairs and improvements. Even though the remittances increase purchasing power and thus elevate living standards, of the sense of financial stability they create in households is partly illusory, subject as they are to exogenous factors over which migrants themselves have no influence. Moreover, at home, the inflow of remittances create a false sense of comfort for regimes in remittance-receiving countries and according to a 2006 International Monetary Fund working paper authored by Alexei Kireyev “diminish pressure for reforms” in those countries.<sup>11</sup>

### Boosting regional development

One undeniably positive influence of migration is improved access to education and health services among the members of families receiving remittances. As indicated in the IMF

9 Cross-border remittances via money transfer operators and post offices in breakdown by countries in 2013, Central Bank of the Russian Federation, <[http://www.cbr.ru/statistics/print.aspx?file=CrossBorder/C-b\\_trans\\_countries\\_13.htm&pid=svs&sid=TGO\\_sp](http://www.cbr.ru/statistics/print.aspx?file=CrossBorder/C-b_trans_countries_13.htm&pid=svs&sid=TGO_sp)> (accessed 13 December 2014)..

10 Mughal, supra n. 4, 68.

11 Alexei Kireyev, *The Macroeconomics of Remittances: The Case of Tajikistan*, IMF Working Paper No. 06/2. Washington: International Monetary Fund, 2006: 17, <<https://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2006/wp0620.pdf>>

paper, “children usually enjoy better education through private tutoring, and all family members tend to have access to better healthcare and other personal services.”<sup>12</sup> Migration also generates growth in wages in the private sector because of the reduction of local labour supply.<sup>13</sup> The benefits of this go beyond individuals and benefit communities as a whole. According to the Strategic Research Center under the President of Tajikistan, 85 per cent of Tajiks going to Russia received some kind of professional skills that they can use upon returning back home.<sup>14</sup> An opportunity to work in Russia leads to the alleviation of unemployment and underemployment pressures, especially in the densely populated Ferghana Valley region, which is associated with periodic instability in the three Central Asian countries (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan) that share it. In this sense, migration acts as “a social shock absorber<sup>15</sup>”.

Migration has a positive influence on the development of infrastructure, communication and public service delivery. For many people, especially in rural areas, receipt of remittances represented their first contact with the banking system. Kireyev notes that remittances have helped to strengthen the banking system in Tajikistan and enhanced competition in the financial sector. Specifically, mass out-migration has encouraged the development of simplified regulations for money transfers in the country, whereby the recipient does not need to have a bank account to receive remittances. On this basis, local banks compete with each other and other financial intermediaries already established internationally (i.a., Western Union, Quick Pay, Unistream, Migom, Moneygram). While only a small proportion of remittances are deposited, even these amounts have helped the banks to expand credit access to the private sector and

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12 Ibid. 15.

13 Ibid. 15.

14 “O vliyaniy migratsii v Rossiyu na Tadjikistan” (About the impact of migration from Tajikistan to Russia), Demoscop Weekly, 26 September 2012; <<http://www.demoscope.ru/weekly/2012/0525/gazeta014.php>> (accessed 24 November 2013).

15 Kireyev, supra n. 11, 13.

further develop banking services. Microfinance institutions and small businesses have thus grown a stronger financial base.<sup>16</sup> Finally, the phenomenon of migration has spurred the development of many migration-related businesses: IP-phones, internet cafes that facilitate communication between migrants and their families at home, currency exchange bureaus, travel agencies providing air, bus and train tickets and others. Like migrants' families, however, this small, flourishing private sector is dependent on the same factors that determine migration flows and remittance volumes.

### Facing new problems and challenges

With a significant portion of their workforce abroad, Central Asian societies face other problems such as lower tax revenues and a lack of funds to ensure the normal functioning of the state social insurance system, the central component of social protection for citizens. The question of pension provision is a looming one, as a generation of people that have worked as labour migrants, mostly in the informal sector, comes of age. Most migrants are confident that in old age or in case of disability, family and relatives will support them. From 2011 the employer in the Russian Federation is responsible for making pension contributions for the foreign worker, who signed an employment contract for an indefinite term or for a definite period but not less than six months.<sup>17</sup> The issue is that migrant workers from Central Asia are often seasonal workers that go abroad for several months and then return to their country of origin.<sup>18</sup> While a person who is illegally employed abroad does not make any contributions to the pension fund. The migrants that work without a work permit or license make it possible for

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16 Kireyev, *supra* n. 11, 14.

17 "Federal law on the amendments to certain legislative acts of the Russian Federation on tariff setting premium rates to the state non-budgetary funds," December 3, 2011.

18 Marthe Hande Myhre, Labour migration from Central Asia to Russia – State Management of Migration, (Oslo: Norwegian Institute for Urban and Regional Research, 2014): 20.

the employers to reduce their production costs not only by lower wages, but also by evading insurance contributions.<sup>19</sup> The situation with the health insurance is going to improve soon. Starting from 2015 the Russian Federation introduces changes to the Labour Code that requires the policy of voluntary medical insurance in order to obtain working license.

The lack of dual citizenship agreements between countries such as Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan with Russia (only Tajikistan has such agreement<sup>20</sup>) is a problem for Kyrgyz and Uzbek migrants that work abroad. Despite the fact that citizens of Belarus, Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan enjoy simplified procedures for Russian citizenship acquisition following an agreement signed on February 26, 1999,<sup>21</sup> citizens of all three countries should give up their own citizenship to acquire Russian passports. Yet migrants are encouraged to do that by Russian legislation that prohibits foreigners offering goods on epy Russian market, and the need to register regularly as a foreigner working in Russia.<sup>22</sup> While many Central Asians maintain two passports informally it became harder to do this since the introduction of passports with biometric data that started in Kyrgyzstan in October 2014. Even though Tajikistan began to issue biometric passports in 2010, Tajiks could travel to Russia by domestic passports. In 2014 the Russian government issued a decree by which, beginning on January 1, 2015, the citizens of Tajikistan are prohibited

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19 Ibid. 20.

20 "Treaty on the settlement of issues of dual citizenship between the Republic of Tajikistan and the Russian Federation," September 7, 1995, Bulletin of international agreements of the Russian Federation #2, 1997.

21 "Ob uproschennoy skheme polucheniya grazhdanstva RF," (About simplified scheme for obtaining citizenship of the RF), Federal Migration Service of Russia Office for St. Petersburg and Leningrad region, <<http://www.ufms.spb.ru/desc/ob-uproschennoj-dind-68.html>> (accessed 12 July 2014).

22 Thomas Kunze and Nuru Packmohr, "Taking Stock of the Work of the Legislative Assembly of the Russian Duma in the Legislative Period from 2003 to 2007," International Reports, (6 December 2007): 2.

to enter Russia without international travel passports.<sup>23</sup> The price of obtaining an international passport is \$240–330, that will put a severe strain on the income of many Tajiks.<sup>24</sup>

## DRASTIC CHANGES IN SOCIETIES

### Tajikistan's missing men

One of the important social consequences of migration in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan, is the so-called “missing men” phenomenon.<sup>25</sup> Given that the majority of migrants are men, massive migration has had a dramatic effect on women's role in the families of Central Asian countries. First, it creates acute problems of gender imbalance, with concurrent implications for families. Second, it empowers women by increasing their role in the family.

In the particular case of Tajikistan gender imbalance was already present before massive out-migration began at the turn of the millennium, due to a civil war that lasted from 1992 until 1997 and claimed between 40,000 and 80,000 lives, most of them men.<sup>26</sup> Current migration statistics suggest that 83 per cent of migrants from Tajikistan are men.<sup>27</sup> Because of the resulting gender imbalance in

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23 John C. K. Daly, “Russia's New Passport Regulations Impose Additional Hardships on Tajik Migrant Workers,” The Jamestown Foundation, 26 November 2014; <[http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx\\_ttnews%5Btt\\_news%5D=43128&tx\\_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=27&cHash=058ae6444f30d5141e071ca8f696b3b7#.VKKDVsgM](http://www.jamestown.org/programs/edm/single/?tx_ttnews%5Btt_news%5D=43128&tx_ttnews%5BbackPid%5D=27&cHash=058ae6444f30d5141e071ca8f696b3b7#.VKKDVsgM)> (accessed 30 November 2014).

24 Ibid.

25 “Tajikistan's missing men,” Aljazeera, 2 August 2013; <<http://www.aljazeera.com/programmes/101east/2013/07/201372393525174524.html>> (accessed 20 November 2013).

26 Lena Jonson, *Tajikistan in the New Central Asia. Geopolitics, Great Powers Rivalry and Radical Islam* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 41.

27 Statistical data on foreign citizens on the territory of the Russian Federation, supra n. 1.

Tajikistan, parents are reportedly concerned about their daughters' chances of getting married, and thus agree on marriage at a younger age. In some cases, the minimum age has dropped to 15-16 years old.<sup>28</sup> Many schoolgirls do not finish high school and get married, despite the fact that marriage for persons under 18 years of age is prohibited by national law.<sup>29</sup> In agricultural economies the absence of men means that women have to do the hard work in the fields in addition to carrying the burden of looking after the family, and the house. This blurring of the boundary between what is considered men's and women's work in societies that are traditional in nature is one of several poorly-documented but substantial effects of migration on families and households.

### **New life – new wife**

Another problem is the increasing number of divorces that migration has caused. Men working abroad find new families and divorce their wives, or simply never return. Every year 14,000 Tajik migrants establish new families in Russia and abandon their wives.<sup>30</sup> According to the International Organization for Migration (IOM), about 1/3 of migrants' wives were abandoned by their husbands due to them permanently settling in the host country.<sup>31</sup> Divorces via SMS (phone text) have grown widespread. Many marriages are registered via Nikkah, a traditional Muslim ceremony, in addition to or instead of a formal registration with the relevant state agencies. Religious custom allows divorces if the word "talak" is repeated three times by a man, even via SMS or phone conversation. Nevertheless, the Chairman of the Council of Ulema in Tajikistan, Saidmukaram

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28 Anora Sarkorova, "Migration from Tajikistan has created a gender imbalance," BBC Russian, 22 March 2013; <[http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2013/03/130321\\_tajikistan\\_demographics](http://www.bbc.co.uk/russian/international/2013/03/130321_tajikistan_demographics)> (accessed 15 December 2014).

29 Impact of Labour Migration on "Children Left Behind" in Tajikistan (Dushanbe: UNICEF, November 2011): 72.

30 Tajikistan's missing men, 25.

31 Abandoned wives of Tajik labour migrants. (Dushanbe: International Organization for Migration, 2009): 7.

Abduqodirzoda, regularly uses his sermons to reprimand men for doing this and even issued a religious directive on the topic, which indicates that this trend is on the rise.<sup>32</sup>

The issue of abandoned wives is not only a matter of personal relations, but societal ones. In many rural communities in Central Asia, it is almost impossible for a woman to get married again if she has been divorced once. Moreover, if a woman has not registered the marriage with the state, she can be left without rights to property or childcare payments. The institution of alimony is hard to enforce for many reasons, including the basic problem of locating a woman's former husband in Russia. Moreover, there are a number of cases wherein women agree to become a man's second or third wife. Polygamy, illegal but common in these remittance-receiving Central Asian states leaves these women with even less legal protection than in a regular marriage.

### Abandoned children

While migrants' households enjoy more income through remittances, exerting a positive influence on children's access to health services, education and better nutrition, the absence of parents, and, in particular, fathers, forces children to do heavy work, that deprives them of free time and even school time, contributing to absenteeism in state educational institutions. According to UNFPA, in Kyrgyzstan, 95 per cent of children officially enrolled in primary school becomes 79 per cent when secondary education begins, while in Tajikistan these numbers drop from 99 to 90 per cent for boys and 96 to 80 per cent for girls respectively.<sup>33</sup> A report by UNICEF highlights the negative influences of migration on school results due to the reduction of parental control and care, the disintegration of families, and loss of motivation or deterioration of behavior among children. There are increasing numbers of children who find themselves

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32 Tajikistan's missing men, 25.

33 By Choice not by Chance. Family planning, human rights and development, (New York: UNFPA, 2012): 108, 110.

homeless because both parents earn money abroad, of child labour, and of infant delinquency. Many children have been influenced psychologically by this phenomenon, showing symptoms of isolation and depression, as well as increased aggression and indiscipline. Migrant children can be mockingly called “forgotten” or be subject to harassment because of a lack of paternal “protection.” Fatherless households tend to result in boys’ assuming the role of wage earners. In most cases mothers who migrate abroad do not take their children to Russia because of economic reasons: namely the absence of appropriate living conditions and opportunities for studying, language barriers, and feasible childcare.<sup>34</sup>

## CONCLUSIONS/ RECOMMENDATIONS

- Labour migration to Russia has become the main source of income for many families living in Central Asia. The existence of the possibility for citizens to migrate and work in Russia moreover represents a “safety valve” for countries with unstable socio-political situations in some of the poorest countries in the region, postponing social and political tensions related to widespread unemployment. At the same time, it causes drastic changes in the lifestyle, family structure and population composition of the traditional societies of Central Asian countries.
- Remittances improve living standards and revive local economies through increasing consumption and domestic investment, but delay governmental reforms by removing a stimulus to restructure national economies and develop local industries and production. Moreover, these small-scale improvements are usually insufficient to create serious economic progress and are usually hampered by a lack of basic services such as water,

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34     Supra n. 29.

- roads, electricity and public transport.
- In order to address the new challenges caused by labour migration, the governments of the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan should initiate discussions at the highest level using regional forums to facilitate negotiations with the Russian Federation on issues of social insurance, health insurance, pension provision and citizenship.
  - On the state level governments should clearly formulate the roles and responsibilities of governmental bodies towards migrants and their families. The current changes in Central Asian societies show the need for special governmental programmes for vulnerable groups' social support based on cash and non-cash assistance that should become part of a coordinated state social policy.
  - State bodies responsible for social protection and NGOs should raise awareness among women about the necessity of formally registering marriages instead of accepting marriage via the Islamic Nikah ceremony. Registration of the place of residence (propiska), and the birth certificate are other legal documents, which help to regulate the legal status of women and children, especially in cases of abandoned families and divorces.
  - The ministries of education and health of the respective Central Asian states and international organizations ought to create an effective mechanism to protect the rights of the child. Special attention should be paid to protection of children from forced labour and violence. The development of recreation and out-of-school institutions infrastructure will cushion the impact of parents' migration on their children.
  - Only a multidimensional approach to the issue of migration involving international organizations as well as the national structures of both remittance-receiving and sending states and non-governmental organizations will be able to address the challenges faced by migrants and their families, improve assistance to them and lead to the economic and social development of each country

- and the region as a whole.
- Research on migration from Central Asian countries to Russia has been mainly focused on the effects on the Russian labour market, attitudes of Russian citizens towards foreign workers, and measures adopted by the Russian government to regulate migration flows. Little attention has been paid to the effects of migration on countries of origin. Even though this topic is of special interest to different UN agencies and non-governmental organizations, there is a lack of research and critical discussion on issues pertaining to labour migration, particularly on practical guidelines that could be applied to protect the rights of migrants and their families and deal with the negative consequences of migration.

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*OSCE Academy in Bishkek,  
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