



MIGRANT WORKERS AND THE PANDEMIC: THE NEED FOR CENTRAL ASIA TO EASE DEPENDENCE ON REMITTANCES FROM RUSSIA

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Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to cause major disruptions to the global economy and movements of people. This reality has had specific consequences in the Caspian region where each year hundreds of thousands of Central Asian migrant workers travel north to Russia, seeking to take advantage of its need for labor. In addition to the millions of citizens from Caspian countries who are long-term residents and workers in Russia, there are significant numbers in other countries such as Turkey and the Republic of Korea. The Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan are among the world's most remittance-dependent countries, relying in varying degrees on financial transfers from their workforce abroad to support their domestic economies.

Developments in 2020 show the downsides of such arrangements and the need to consider reducing this dependency once the pandemic is under control. While preliminary analysis suggests such moves will include the need for further market-based economic reforms to foster the private sector and job growth at home, governments of countries sending workers abroad as well as those receiving them may be advised to bolster social and legal measures for long- and short-term migrant workers to improve the resilience of these institutions.

Economic Impacts of Labor Migration

The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted questions about the long-term sustainability of a continued reliance on the outflow of workers from Central Asia and subsequent inflow of remittances, particularly from Russia. Overdependence on remittances sent back from their citizens working abroad can leave countries more vulnerable to bilateral disputes or to economic, health, or other crises arising internationally. Thus, disruptions in Russia's economy due to the COVID-19 pandemic as well as the severe drop in first quarter 2020 oil prices were felt in other countries in the region via the significant numbers of foreign workers and other economic ties the Russian Federation.

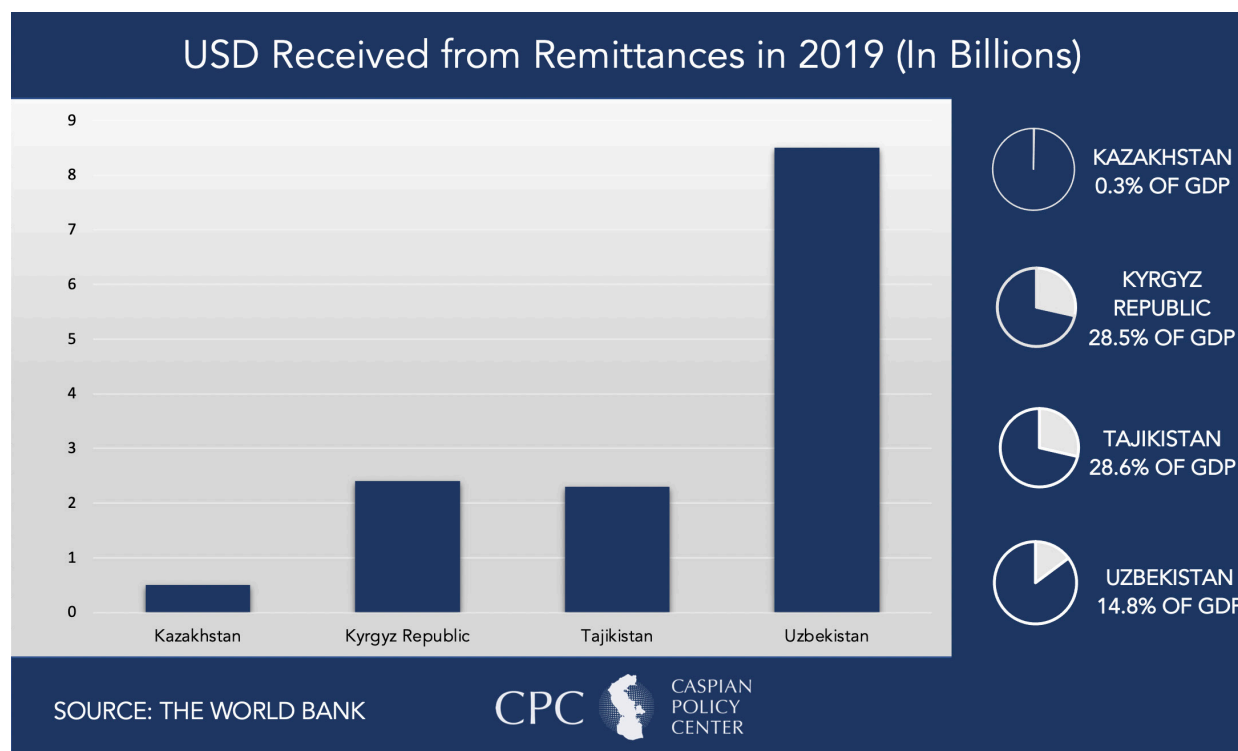
Russia's Federal Security Service (FSB) reported that from January 2019 to June 2019, 265,000 people entered Russia from the Kyrgyz Republic (4.20 percent of the Kyrgyz Republic's population), 524,000 people entered from Tajikistan (5.76 percent of the population), and 918,000 people entered from Uzbekistan (2.79 percent of the population).¹ Clusters of labor migrant populations are centered around Moscow and other large Russian cities. There are also migrant workers in Russia's Far East, but their numbers are not comparable to the migrant populations of the larger metropolitan areas.² Russia's oil-rich Tyumen oblast bordering Kazakhstan and the Khanty-Mansi Autonomous Okrug also have significant migrant worker populations whose presence tends to revolve around the schedule for work on oil production.

Though Russia is their primary destination, migrants from the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan also travel to other countries seeking employment. Recently, Kazakhstan has become a popular destination for some of these migrant workers. In some months of 2018, remittances to Uzbekistan from Kazakhstan doubled compared to those same months in 2017. In addition, Tajikistan received twice the volume of remittance payments from Kazakhstan in the summer of 2018 as in the summer of 2017.³ Migrants are also moving to South Korea following bilateral agreements with the Kyrgyz Republic and Uzbekistan to ease restrictions on foreign workers in the country. Predominantly Central Asian neighborhoods such as Seoul's Wolgok-Dong are becoming more prevalent in major Korean cities. Between 2016 and 2019, South Korea issued 18,444 work visas to Uzbek citizens, 1,295 to Kyrgyz citizens, and 559 to Kazakhstani citizens. China and Turkey also draw large numbers of Central Asian migrants for university and work.



Predominantly Central Asian neighborhoods have grown in South Korea, sporting small businesses and restaurants serving regional cuisines. Source: Eurasianet

Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the percentage of GDP attributed to remittances was the highest in the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. In 2019, the Kyrgyz Republic received \$2.4 billion in remittances (28.5 percent of its GDP), Tajikistan received \$2.3 billion (28.6 percent of its GDP), and Uzbekistan received \$8.5 billion (14.8 percent of its GDP).



The annual movement to Russia or other countries serves as a relief valve for unemployment and can help boost wages and the well-being of families in the home countries. However, there are down sides. While there are important economic and financial gains, the exodus of workers can have an impact on family cohesion and supporting vulnerable populations, including women, children, and the elderly, as well as leading to a potential financial and national security vulnerability. There is also the possibility that the outflow of workers can contribute to brain drain. Tajikistan suffers from a large outflow of medical professionals from the country, something which can hamper the country's health care systems amidst a global pandemic. Numbers also show more older Tajiks with a higher education background living in the country than younger Tajiks, an alarming statistic. Furthermore, approximately 80 percent of Tajik students expressed a desire to continue their studies abroad.⁴ While the exodus of people relieves the strain on Tajikistan to provide employment for its entire populace, it impedes the country's ability to take full advantage of its most educated populations.

Central Asia's Response to Labor Migration

The exodus of Central Asians to Russia in search of work is in part a legacy of agricultural practices from the Soviet Union.⁵ Importantly as well, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 disrupted essential supply chains and industrial links among the Central Asian republics. Historical ties to Russia and stagnating employment levels spurred by resistance to change ineffective practices are contributors to the large influx of Central Asian migrants that seek employment in Russia each year. The Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan thus rely on Russia to welcome workers from their countries. This high dependence, however, erodes the economic sovereignty of these three Central Asian states and makes them dependent on the stability of Russia's economy to keep their own economies afloat.

For the past three decades, most Central Asians migrating to work in Russia were young, single men. However, in recent years a new trend emerged with entire families increasingly migrating to Russia for work and then choosing to remain where they settled. According to data on Central Asian migrants, 40 percent of migrants live in Russia for two years and 25 to 30 percent stay longer. In addition, 33 percent of male migrants and 50 percent of female migrants are accompanied by their spouses. About 10 percent of migrants have their children with them. Moreover, approximately 50 percent of migrants have children before embarking for Russia. The formation of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) in 2014 provided an easier process for migrant workers from Armenia, Kazakhstan, and the Kyrgyz Republic to bring their entire families to Russia, but it is no longer uncommon for migrant workers from non-EAEU members Tajikistan and Uzbekistan to do the same. The migration of entire families to Russia poses new challenges for the sending states. Central Asian governments must now account for entire families that may require legal, financial, and emergency support abroad, not just young and healthy male migrants.⁶



The demographic of Central Asian migrants seeking employment in Russia has experienced a shift with many women and children embarking on the journey. Source: The New York Times.

Members of parliament in the Kyrgyz Republic have talked about labor migration as harming the country's economic potential and have appealed to Kyrgyz workers to return home from Russia. Government-affiliated organizations, on the other hand, state an increased number of Kyrgyz migrant workers choosing to remain at home instead of moving to Russia would be detrimental to the economy. They assert that the Kyrgyz Republic's job market would not

be able to absorb the migrants who decide to stay and would thus drive up unemployment and increase the burden on domestic social welfare systems. Government organizations assert that the emigration of excess labor heads off potential social unrest. In addition, they note migrant workers are provided with higher-paying opportunities abroad that allow them to provide for their families and gain professional expertise that is beneficial to attaining better jobs when returning to their home countries.⁷ These divergent views within the Kyrgyz Republic itself illustrate the difficulty for governments relying on inflows of remittances and the exports of workers to enact policy changes that would better safeguard their economies and financial independence.

Tajikistan was the poorest of the 15 Soviet republics, had one of the highest birth rates in the Soviet Union, and had its economic development hampered by mountainous terrain that made travel and trade difficult. Migration to Russia by young laborers serves as an outlet to provide for their families and the number of Tajik migrants moving to Russia each year increased. To help ensure Tajik migrant workers in Russia were protected, Tajikistan and Russia signed a slew of bilateral agreements in 2005 to support Tajik migrants in obtaining employment and retaining legal status in the country. The Tajik government has also established legal institutions to shield its citizens from discrimination.⁸ Migrant workers sometimes encounter legal problems in Russia when engaging with law enforcement or registering for work and residence permits. In addition, the number of xenophobic attacks against migrant workers in Russia is growing. Dushanbe and Moscow have signed bilateral agreements to ensure that Tajik migrant workers are guaranteed that their rights are protected by regional governments and that they have suitable living conditions. However, these agreements also compel Tajikistan to send skilled workers, such as doctors, teachers, and nurses to Russia. While these agreements provide measures of security for Tajik migrants in Russia, they also deplete Tajikistan's pool of educated workers who are essential to the country's development.⁹

In Uzbekistan, President Shavkat Mirziyoyev is attempting to reverse the loss of talent resulting from millions of Uzbek citizens choosing to work abroad. President Mirziyoyev established an expert council in May 2018 to formulate a development model for his country's political, economic, and social spheres. He hopes market reforms and inviting job opportunities in the legal, financial, medical, academic, and public sectors will persuade skilled Uzbeks to return and convince workers to seek employment domestically.¹⁰

Russia's Response to Labor Migration

Russia utilizes this labor migration to bolster its declining population. Russia's population is projected to drop from 146 million to 128 million by 2030. An aging population and low birth rate burden its economy. Thus, migration provides a channel for Russia to increase its working population. In October 2018, President Vladimir Putin signed the Concept on Migration Policy, promising to prioritize liberalizing immigration and migration processes.

In some ways, Moscow is looking to post-Soviet states to encourage their citizens to apply for seasonal work in Russia.¹¹ One objective of the EAEU is to address the free movement of labor among member states. The EAEU implemented uniform rules to grant migrant workers access to health care and preschool education.¹² The Kyrgyz Republic's

accession to the EAEU allowed it to benefit from extended windows for registering labor migrants at new places of residence and a reduction in required paperwork. Similarly, an agreement was signed on labor migrants' pension rights in December 2019. Still, migrants from EAEU countries noted significant shortcomings. For example, the mechanisms to handle migration are not as developed in the EAEU as such processes are within the European Union. Furthermore, illegal migration, lack of transparency on migrant issues, and the existence of informal employment in Russia all remain problems.¹³ Russia imposed more than 50 new laws and regulations between 2012 and 2015 to curb undocumented migration. The new regulations placed limitations on the movement of migrants and limited the number of times migrants could cross the border.

Tajikistan and Uzbekistan are not members of the EAEU, but Uzbekistan became an observer state in December 2020. Full membership may follow in the coming years which would likely cause Tajikistan to follow suit.¹⁴ The benefits of standardized rules and improved migration regulations would be attractive to Uzbekistan, which sends the most seasonal workers to Russia each year. Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, however, also have bilateral agreements with Russia on labor migration. In 2007, Uzbekistan and Russia inked several agreements outlining the process Uzbek citizens must undergo before obtaining legal permission to enter the country for work. These agreements were also an effort to curb illegal immigration and human trafficking. In addition, Uzbekistan and Russia signed an agreement to protect the rights of Uzbek workers who are injured or killed while working abroad. Nearly half of all Uzbek migrant workers in Russia are employed in heavy industries, such as construction, where accidents are frequent.¹⁵ Similarly, in 2019, Tajikistan and Russia signed a bilateral agreement to allow Tajik migrant workers who have undergone Russian-language and skills training to work in Russia.¹⁶



Uzbekistan sends the most seasonal workers to Russia annually. Uzbek migrant workers often find employment in heavy industries or the service sector. Source: Kun.uz

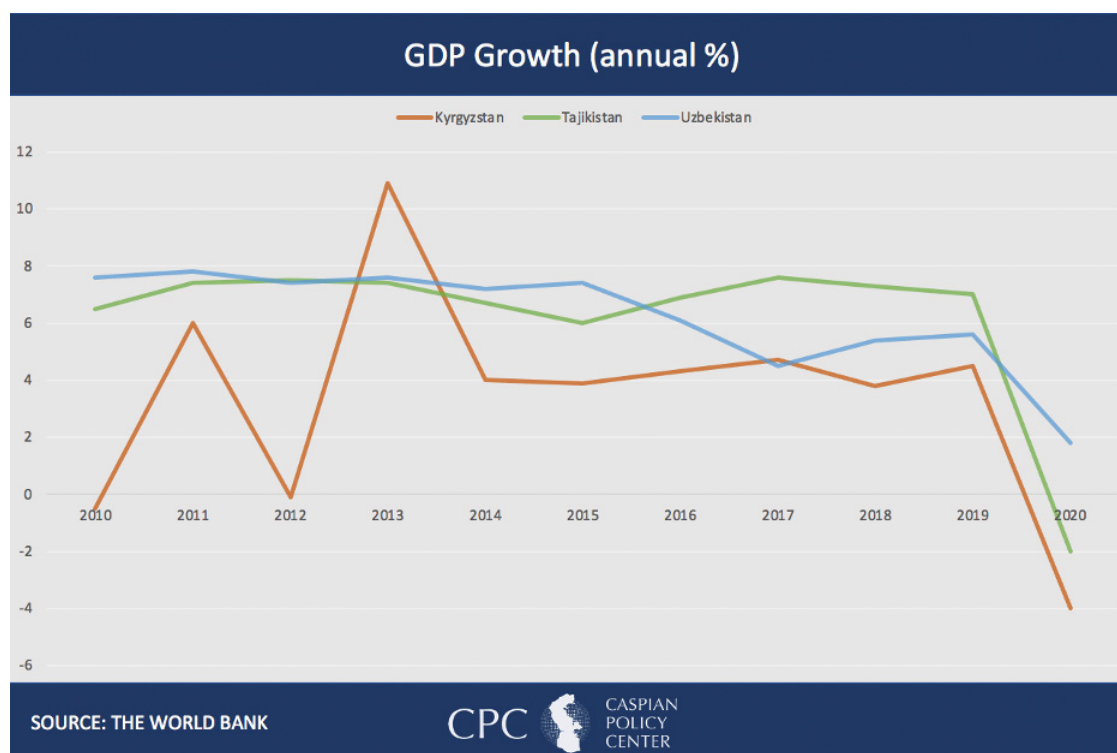
While the government is taking these actions, Russians' opinions on foreign laborers worsened from 2007–2017. The foreign workers may be needed, but that does not necessarily translate into being liked. Russians increasingly perceive the migrant population as competitors in a shrinking job market. Those who said they saw migrant workers as hardworking dropped from 30 to 26 percent, and those who saw foreign workers as providing for their families fell from 38 percent to 25 percent.¹⁷ The downward trend in Russians' opinion on foreign workers has continued. In a 2019 Levada Center survey, 72 percent of respondents said Russia should take steps to curb the influx of migrants.¹⁸ The same survey found that 29 percent of Russians felt Central Asians should not be allowed in Russia at all, while a further 30 percent thought that they should only be allowed to stay on a temporary basis.

Migrant workers are aware of this antipathy, reporting, for example, that they are often subject to discrimination, e.g., profiling by Russian law enforcement. Some migrants report they were detained by authorities for allegedly not carrying their travel documents with them at all times. Employers have been known to exploit migrant workers by demanding more work, lowering wages, and delaying payments to take advantage of the vulnerable situation in which the COVID-19 pandemic has left migrant workers. In 2017, the xenophobic tide in Russia prompted then-president Almazbek Atambayev of the Kyrgyz Republic to publicly condemn the increase in anti-Central Asian sentiment. "With deep regret we see that in recent years in Russia, we hear ever louder voices inciting xenophobia and enmity between our brother nations", said Atambayev at a Victory Day event.¹⁹

While the economic pull of Russia has trumped qualms migrants might have about Russian xenophobia, that situation could change. There are signs Russia might, to some extent, be becoming somewhat less attractive for Central Asian migrants. The faltering of the Russian economy starting in 2015 and the emergence of other destinations, such as China, Kazakhstan, and the European Union are drawing migrants away from Russia. The number of migrants entering Russia each year has remained steady, but the number choosing to repatriate grew from 308,000 in 2014 to 441,000 in 2018.²⁰

Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Remittance Payments and Migrant Workers

The COVID-19 pandemic spurred new challenges for Central Asians working abroad as governments quickly scrambled to adapt to travel and trade restrictions, stay-at-home orders, and a disgruntled and suddenly unemployed population. Remittance payments to Europe and Central Asia are projected to fall 28% in 2020.²¹ Additionally, GDPs are expected to contract in the Kyrgyz Republic (-4% GDP growth) and Tajikistan (-2% GDP growth).²² Uzbekistan's GDP is still expected to grow 1.8%, but that is a substantial dip from its 2019 growth of 5.6%.²³ These countries will likely have to contend with the fallout of the COVID-19 pandemic well into 2021 and will need to secure alternate sources of revenue to make up for this steep decline.



The economic consequences of the pandemic are also forecasted to drive up debt-to-GDP ratios in the three remittance-receiving Caspian countries. Projections indicate that debt-to-GDP ratios will increase in the Kyrgyz Republic by 15% (69.2% of GDP), Tajikistan by 7% (51.8% of GDP), and Uzbekistan by 8% (36.9% of GDP).²⁴ Excessive foreign debt can leave countries vulnerable to creditors and reduce the state's ability to funnel finances into social or other programs.

In addition, employment for labor migrants in Russia will likely continue to look bleak in the upcoming months given its own economic problems stemming from the pandemic, as well as from longer term structural issues. Russia has had to institute stringent COVID-19 related lockdowns, e.g., an 82-day stay-at-home or work restrictions order in 2020, drastically limiting movement around the country.²⁵ Migrant workers have endured the brunt of economic hardship caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, many workers live in crowded communal housing that facilitates the spread of COVID-19. To make matters worse, they have limited access to healthcare in Russia if they do test positive for the virus. Some migrants report being refused treatment at medical facilities for lacking adequate insurance. Most migrants lost their jobs and struggled to protect themselves from contracting the virus and struggled to treat it if they did.²⁶



Central Asian migrants often live in crowded communal spaces in Russia that are conducive to spreading the virus. Source: The New York Times

Lessons from other Countries

Countries elsewhere that rely on remittances to sustain their domestic economies have employed numerous strategies to lessen their dependence on income sent from abroad or to benefit more from this imported income. Their experiences could be useful to governments and societies in the Caspian region.

The Philippines in 2019 received \$33.5 billion from remittances, approximately 10 percent of its GDP. Remittance funds were reinvested back into the economy to stimulate domestic economic growth. For example, more than 38 percent of Filipino families put this income into savings which could be tapped into in an emergency. Additionally, 5 percent of Filipino families invested their income from remittances into developing small- and medium-sized enterprises, which make up over 99 percent of operating businesses in the country.²⁷ Small- and medium-sized enterprises stimulate economic activity and employ significant portions of the population in the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan as well.²⁸ Remittance-dependent countries of Central Asia would be wise to bolster efforts to encourage families that receive remittance payments to invest their earnings to establish or otherwise foster local enterprises. The growth of SMEs could expand the domestic job market and entice more people to remain in the country for work instead of traveling abroad. To help achieve this goal, however, would also mean these governments need to act to forge an environment that is more favorable to small business investment.



Microfinancing and other forms of economic stimulation help to support the Philippines' many small- and medium-sized enterprises. Source: NIKKEI Asia

Another remittance-thirsty country, Bangladesh looks to address its deepening dependence on remittance payments for income by bolstering bilateral relations with countries that receive large influxes of Bangladeshi migrants. Safe and welcoming environments for migrant workers stimulated through bilateral agreements, the establishment of legal services for migrants, and cultural awareness programs to avoid discriminatory practices can help migrants in their jobs abroad.²⁹ Remittance-dependent countries in Central Asia should prioritize supporting their foreign workforce abroad by forging official declarations and investing in bilateral support organizations.

Comoros has instituted a formal channel through banks to funnel remittance payments to the respective households within the country. This program eases the process of sending money home, regularizes funds transfers, and grants banks an additional source of capital for productive investment. Banks can also use the money deposited into savings accounts through the official remittance deliverance channel to fund local and national projects.³⁰ Remittance payments can often get skimmed off by companies that traditionally service migrant workers.³¹ The Philippines instituted a similar program to provide discounts on remittance fees imposed on migrant workers. Similar measures established in Central Asia could also ensure remittance payments are transferred

efficiently and with low fees. Central Asian migrant workers in Russia pay about \$2.50 for every \$100 they send home to their families. These fees are currently among the lowest in the world but implementing official programs through microfinance institutions (MFIs) and post offices to service rural communities across the region will greatly ease the financial burden of paying fees for sending money home. Furthermore, Central Asia lags behind the rest of the world in implementing official digital channels to remit money home, which are known to cut remittance fees.³² Building up the digital market will service workers looking to remit their income back home.

Conclusion

The large outflow of workers leaving countries such as the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, or Uzbekistan does not seem completely sustainable over the long term nor the best model for economic growth. Efforts to date do not appear to be providing the advances needed. Furthermore, as in so many other areas, the COVID-19 pandemic also amplifies existing concerns of relying too heavily on remittance payments. The pandemic places an additional layer of challenges that workers must navigate while being subject to xenophobia from Russian citizens and authorities, being vulnerable from exploitation by their employers, and being at risk for contracting the coronavirus while having no health insurance.

The governments of the Kyrgyz Republic, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan should look to other countries that are working to mitigate their reliance on remittance payments and supported initiatives to enrich the livelihoods of their citizens working and living abroad.

Central Asian governments must attain a fine balance of further developing their sectors to make domestic employment more palatable and supporting their large workforces abroad in Russia, Kazakhstan, China, South Korea, Turkey, and elsewhere. The COVID-19 pandemic and its ensuing border closures, high unemployment rates, and economic downturn show a need for thinking and acting to boost the resilience of these three countries.

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