

CHANGING PATTERNS OF LABOUR MIGRATION IN TAJIKISTAN

SUMMARY

This briefing summarises some of the main findings of the research conducted by the Civil Society Contact Group, Tajikistan (CSCG). The CSCG was established by International Alert in 2014 and is made up of representatives from NGOs, analytical agencies and independent media. The purpose of establishing the CSCG was to provide a platform for analysis and a mechanism for collaborative problem solving with state structures. During 2015, the CSCG researched a number of topics on various aspects of the socio-economic situation in the country, as well as a range of humanitarian issues. The issue of changing labour migration patterns and their consequences featured heavily in the research findings, and thus form the focus of this paper.

INTRODUCTION

Post-Soviet Central Asia is currently entering a new phase of development and facing a number of new challenges, which are characterised by a deepening socio-economic crisis caused by the devastating impact of the Russian economic downturn, as well as geopolitical changes and enhanced integration processes promoted by Moscow in the form of the Eurasian Economic Union and the Shanghai Cooperation Organisation.

Labour migration plays a decisive role in keeping Central Asian economies afloat. For example, in 2014 remittances from labour migrants constituted approximately 50% of Tajikistan's gross domestic product (GDP) (the highest percentage in the world), 30% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP and, according to different estimates, between 16% and 30% of Uzbekistan's GDP.¹

The economic crisis and the ensuing shrinking labour market in Russia, where the majority of Tajik migrants are employed, create a new set of challenges for both migrants and locals. There is an increasing possibility of the forcible return of a considerable proportion (at least 30%) of labour migrants to all three countries: Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan. The considerable drop in remittances from migrants – and their return to local economies that have limited abilities to absorb them – could cause a larger social, humanitarian and potentially political crisis in the region, and in Tajikistan in particular.

Such a complicated socio-economic and geopolitical situation increases the significance of research initiatives

intended to explore the situation, define the most pressing issues and develop a set of innovative approaches for their peaceful resolution.

SOCIO-ECONOMIC IMPACTS

The deepening economic and financial crisis in Russia has a two-fold impact on the Central Asian countries, including Tajikistan. In particular, the most problematic outcome is the sharp reduction in remittances from labour migrants. In Tajikistan, by the end of 2015 the actual value of transferred funds (the overwhelming majority of migrants transfer their remittances in roubles) was almost two times less than it was one year earlier, resulting in inflation and social tension in the country. The lack of remittances leads to the deflation of the local currency, unlimited inflation and a considerable decline in people's living standards.

The deepening economic and financial crisis in Russia has led to a sharp reduction in remittances from labour migrants, resulting in inflation and social tension in Tajikistan.

Secondly, if the Russian economic downturn continues, Tajikistan faces the possibility of the return of a potentially large number of labour migrants to a domestic market that has little capacity to absorb them. A considerable proportion of Tajik migrants will be forced to return if their income in Russia continues to decrease – mainly due to the devaluation of the Russian rouble and rising

unemployment. Furthermore, according to unofficial sources, the total number of Tajik labour migrants who received an official re-entry ban has increased considerably – in 2013, there were about 100,000 Tajik migrants with re-entry bans, with that number rising to 200,000 by the end of 2014. However, according to the Russian Migration Service, the ‘blacklist’ could amount to 400,000 Tajik citizens in 2016, or about 30% of the Tajik citizens working in Russia.²

If the Russian economic downturn continues, Tajikistan faces the possibility of the return of a potentially large number of labour migrants to a domestic market that has little capacity to absorb them.

Research conducted by members of the International Alert CSCG reveals that the number of returnees in some regions already amounts to 20–30% of the total number of Tajik migrants living abroad. A study conducted in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region examined the potential of the returning migrants to be employed in the domestic market, revealing that only about one-third of the existing returnees would be able to find employment in the region given the scarcity of job opportunities. The return of an even larger number of labour migrants would further exacerbate the problem and increase the level of unemployment. Furthermore, the research shows that jobs advertised through the state employment agency do not fully reflect the local labour market. Not all employers send information about vacancies to the Labour and Employment Agency, and the vacancies that are advertised are usually for poorly paid work.

Another study examines the issue of pension provision for Tajik migrant workers, delving into how Tajik pension legislation affects long-standing labour migrants, what policies should be adopted and what personal strategies would ensure a dignified old age for the migrants. The study revealed that, given the seasonal nature of migrant workers’ stay in Tajikistan and the often unregistered labour arrangements, it is not feasible for most migrant workers to accumulate the legally required length of pensionable service. In general, Tajik migrant workers

are almost universally unaware of the pension reform and many of them expect to receive a much larger pension than the basic state social pension. This means that the majority of Tajik migrant workers constitute an at-risk group of people, whose expectations do not match reality.

Most migrants see a way out of this problematic situation in the signing of an inter-governmental agreement between Tajikistan and Russia on social security for Tajik migrant workers, so they can accumulate national insurance contributions in Russia that can go towards their pension when they retire in Tajikistan. The Tajikistan government is taking steps to negotiate the signing of such an agreement, but in the meantime has not taken any alternative decisive actions.

Migrants – and the population at large – lack reliable information on economic issues that affect them. Another CSCG study focuses on one of the most challenging areas of analytical journalism in Tajikistan: coverage of economic issues. The research looked at articles about economic issues printed in two leading Tajikistan newspapers – the largest independent Russian-language newspaper *Asia-Plus* and the leading government newspaper *Jumhuriyat*. The main finding of the study was that publications on economic issues are in great demand among the public in Tajikistan. However, Tajik journalists are unable to fully meet the demand for quality and timely coverage of socio-economic issues. In addition, the study revealed that, to date, there has been little cooperation between journalists, local experts and economists in Tajikistan. All these factors affect both the overall quantity and quality of publications in the contemporary Tajik press.

CONCLUSION

The complicated socio-economic and political situation in Central Asia increases the possibility of new conflicts in the region. As a result, the governments of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan will find themselves facing a set of unprecedented challenges, triggered by the forcible return of hundreds of thousands of labour migrants. In this situation, both national governments and the international community will need to reconsider their approaches to the issue of labour migration.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The main strategies pursued by the Tajik government and national and international stakeholders do not reflect the most recent changes and their associated challenges, as outlined above. Most strategies have been based on the assumption that labour migration as a social phenomenon would continue for at least the next decade without significant changes. Such rapid shrinking of the Russian labour market and the considerable reduction in remittances was not predicted. The international community should:

1. Support the Tajik government in the urgent redirection of its employment policy. Current policies are intended to facilitate labour migration outside the country – the main approach being to teach migrants the skills needed in the Russian labour market and to prepare them for working abroad. Today, in light of the shrinking labour market in Russia, the policy should be reoriented to the needs and specifics of the internal labour market. This would require, for example:

- conducting a range of comprehensive research projects and studies aimed at understanding the real situation in the field of labour migration in Tajikistan and in the region;
- assisting interested official agencies and institutions in the development of an effective mechanism of registration and record-keeping of returning migrants, including a regularly updated database with information on the real number of deported and

returned migrants, and the number of returnees employed in the domestic labour market, etc.; and

- supporting the establishment and further development of a network of reintegration centres for returning labour migrants, which would provide the returnees with legal advice, professional orientation and training, etc.

2. Develop measures aimed at increasing resilience and mitigate social consequences for the population – the majority of which is living on the migrants' remittances. This could include:

- allocation of land plots to returning migrants, and increased social support to marginalised and vulnerable communities, especially rural women;
- promoting and enabling the establishment of labour-intensive economic enterprises in rural areas, which could absorb a significant proportion of the workforce;
- promoting and enabling microcredit provision to support self-employment; and
- revising tax legislation to encourage investment and the small business sector, and competitive production that is oriented towards import substitution.

3. Promote social partnerships and close cooperation between civil society, state institutions and research groups. In this regard, developing the analytical capacity of civil society institutions to work alongside government in devising strategies to mitigate the most negative effects of the global economic downturn will be of particular importance.

Endnotes

1 D. Trilling, Tajikistan: Migrant remittances now exceed half of GDP, Eurasia Net, 15 April 2014, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68272>

2 L. Gaisina, Migratsiya vo vseh podrobnostyakh [Migration in detail], Asia-Plus, 29 January 2015, <http://news.tj/ru/news/migratsiya-vo-vseh-podrobnostyakh>

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