

RETURN MIGRATION TO TAJIKISTAN: FORMS, TRENDS, CONSEQUENCES

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to study the trends of labor migration (voluntary and forced) from Russia to Tajikistan and the peculiarities of the reintegration of returning migrants into Tajik society. Labor migration is the main driver of economic growth for Tajikistan and the most effective tool in the national fight against poverty. However, many migrants from Tajikistan do not have a formally documented status in Russia, which makes their predicament extremely difficult and vulnerable. One of the most sensitive measures for Tajik labor migrants was the introduction of administrative penalties through expulsion and the imposition of a massive ban on labor migrants from entering the Russian Federation. This has led to an increase in the return migration of Tajik migrants to their homeland. The article clarifies the concept of return migration, reveals the reasons for the return of labor migrants

from Russia to Tajikistan and identifies the specific features of reintegration and the socio-economic situation of returning migrants in Tajikistan. The authors establish that a significant share of returning migrants have already reached retirement age after working in Russia for decades, but they do not receive a pension either in Tajikistan or in Russia. Unfortunately, as of today the Government of Tajikistan has not developed any special programs for the reintegration of returning migrants due to lack of funds and lack of experience in this area. Most returning migrants are forced to solve their problems on their own or resort to the help of their families and relatives. In fact, the government does not hold an interest in the massive return of labor migrants, since the increase in their number worsens the socio-economic situation and the general state of the labor market.

KEYWORDS: *return migration, voluntary and forced migration, deportation, expulsion, labor migration, Republic of Tajikistan, Russian Federation.*

Introduction

Relevance of Research

Departure of labor migrants to the Russian Federation has become a widespread phenomenon and a significant socio-economic phenomenon for the Republic of Tajikistan. According to the Ministry of Labor of Tajikistan, 600,000 labor migrants work in Russia, including 70,000 women. Russian sources believe that the figure may be as much as 1 million people.¹ Many migrants from Tajikistan to Russia do not have a formally documented status, which makes their predicament extremely difficult and vulnerable. It is no coincidence that the Government of Tajikistan continuously insists on carrying out immigration amnesties for its citizens in Russia, including deported migrants.

¹ See: S. Rukhullo, "Dushanbe i Moskva prorabatyvaiut vopros amnistii trudovykh migrantov," Radio Ozodi, 8 February, 2020, available at [<https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30423883.html>].

Labor migration is the main driver of economic growth for Tajikistan and the most effective tool in the national fight against poverty. About a third of the country's GDP is generated by remittances.² In 2019, labor migrants sent over \$2.7 billion home to Tajikistan.³ The Government of the Republic of Tajikistan attempts to support and stimulate external labor migration in every possible way. Meanwhile, Tajik authorities are gradually attempting to expand the geography of countries receiving labor migrants, i.e. to diversify labor export. The countries of the Middle East (Qatar, UAE), East Asia (Japan, Republic of Korea), and Turkey are becoming new directions of labor emigration of Tajik citizens. However, Russia and Kazakhstan are still the main importers of labor migrants.

The measures taken by the Russian Federation to tighten the regulation of migration and migration policy are extremely sensitive for the socio-economic and political life of the Tajik society. Despite numerous arrangements and signed agreements between the Republic of Tajikistan and the Russian Federation, as well as Russia's declared migration policy (i.e., the Concept on Migration Policy until 2025 indicates that Russia attracts labor migrants from the republics of the former U.S.S.R.), there is a tightening of migration practices and procedures, which significantly complicates the predicament of labor migrants, including Tajik citizens. One of the most sensitive measures for Tajik labor migrants was the introduction of administrative penalties up to and including expulsion, and the imposition of a wide-sweeping ban on labor migrants from entering the Russian Federation. This has led to an increase in the return migration of Tajik citizens to their homeland. Due to the pandemic, in March 2020 the state border was closed for Tajik citizens who could not enter Russia. Despite the increase in the scale of return in recent decades, the problems of reintegration of returning labor migrants remain a poorly understood topic.

Scope, Objectives and Methods of Research

The paper aims to study the trends of return labor migration (voluntary and forced) from Russia to Tajikistan and the peculiar features of the reintegration of returning migrants into Tajik society. The following tasks were completed for that purpose: clarification of the concept of return migration; identification of the reasons for the return of labor migrants from Russia to Tajikistan and the specifics of reintegration and the socio-economic situation of return migrants in Tajikistan.

In the course of the study, interviews were conducted with experts and returning migrants in Moscow, the Moscow region and Tajikistan. Due to the pandemic, some respondent interviews, including with deported/expelled labor migrants, were carried out remotely via telephone and Skype. Along with Tajik citizens, the sample included several citizens of Uzbekistan, many of whom are ethnic Tajiks, who often work together, and their cases are tried in "collective courts." In-depth interviews were conducted with 43 citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan and 12 citizens of the Republic of Uzbekistan, who were returned to their homeland by the decision of Russian courts (deported).⁴ We also used some of the initial results of a sociological study of labor migrants in Russia, con-

² See: "The Amount of Remittances in Tajikistan are Decreasing, Incomes of Citizens Are Falling, and Prices Are Rising," Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting, 1 December, 2020, available at [<https://cabar.asia/en/the-amount-of-remittances-in-tajikistan-are-decreasing-income-of-citizens-are-falling-and-prices-are-rising>].

³ See: S. Rukhullo, op. cit.

⁴ See: F.T. Khonkhodzhayev, "Institutsionalnye problemy migratsionnoi sistemy: sravnitelny analiz Rossiiskoi Federatsii i stran Sredney Azii," *Nauka. Kultura. Obshchestvo*, No. 1, 2019, p. 119, available at [<https://www.elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=37166665>].

ducted by scientists from the Institute for Demographic Studies of the Federal Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences in January 2021 (sample N = 245 people).

The reports of the NGO Civic Assistance Committee, which actively monitors and analyzes the problems of expulsions and the protection of the rights of migrants, were examined.⁵ For a more in-depth study of the problems of expulsion of foreign citizens and trends of return migration from Russia to Tajikistan, we have summarized the official statistics of the state authorities of the Russian Federation (the Main Directorate for Migration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, the Federal Migration Service of Russia, Rosstat) and the Consulate of the Republic of Tajikistan in Moscow. We also collected data from media reports and public reports of organizations and the articles by Russian and foreign lawyers and scientists who work in the field of labor migrant rights protection in Russia.⁶

Return Migrant Categories and Reasons for Their Return to Tajikistan

The work defines a returning migrant as “a migrant, a citizen of Tajikistan who previously worked and/or lived in Russia for over a year and returned to Tajikistan voluntarily or forcibly with the assistance of state bodies.”

Returning migrants to Tajikistan can be divided into two categories:

- (1) those who return voluntarily;
- (2) those whose return was forced (deported and expelled).

The legal categories of expulsion and deportation differ significantly in terms of grounds and procedures. Expulsion is a type of administrative punishment and is carried out only by a court decision. Deportation is carried out on the basis of the decision of an official of the migration authority (General Administration for Migration Issues of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia) or the border service (FSB of Russia).

The first category of voluntarily returning workers comprises approximately 80% of the total flow of Tajik labor migrants returning to Tajikistan. This category of returning migrants is quite diverse. It includes migrants who have completed their labor activities in Russia or other countries; migrants who are tired of working and are returning home for a break; migrants who fall ill or become disabled abroad; migrants who returned for family and other reasons; as well as victims of human

⁵ See: K. Troitskiy, *Administrativnye vydvoreniia iz Rossii: sudebnoe razbiratelstvo ili massovoe izgnanie*, Grazhdanskoe sodeistvie Committee Report, available at [https://refugee.ru/wp-content/uploads/2018/11/Doklad-o-vydvoreniyakh_pchat.pdf].

⁶ See: A.A. Babayev, T. Dzhurazoda, *Vozvrashchenie trudiashchikhsia migrantov—grazhdan Respubliki Tadjikistan: problemy i novye vyzovy*, Dushanbe, 2016, p. 41; L.F. Delovarova, “Vozvratnaia migratsiia v Tsentralnoi Azii: osnovnye faktory i potentsial razvitiia programm dobrovolnogo vozvrashcheniia i reintegratsii v regione,” *Nauka. Kultura. Obshchestvo*, No. 1, 2020, pp. 6-16, available at [<https://www.elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=42923606>]; B.I. Ismatulloev, “Pravo na svobodu peredvizheniia i vybor mesta zhitelstva v konstitutsionnom zakonodatelstve Rossiiskoi Federatsii i Respubliki Tadjikistan: sravnitelny analiz,” *Yuridicheskie issledovaniia*, No. 7, 2020, pp. 42-53 [DOI: 10.25136/2409-7136.2020.7.33207], available at [https://nbpublish.com/library_read_article.php?id=33207]; *Vozvratnaia migratsiia: mezhdunarodnye podkhody i regionalnye osobennosti Tsentralnoi Azii*, ed. by S. Ryazantsev, The International Organization for Migration (IOM)—U.N. Migration Agency, Almaty, 2020, p. 242; F.T. Khonkhodzhaev, “Otsenka sotsialno-ekonomicheskikh posledstviy migratsii naseleniia Respubliki Tadjikistan,” *Nauka. Kultura. Obshchestvo*, No. 3-4, 2019, pp. 98-109, available at [<https://elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=42834815>]; M. Yaroshevich, P. Kazmerkevich, F. Irnazarov, et al., *Vozvratnaia migratsiia i vyzovy v Tsentralnoi Azii: analiz riskov 2017*, IOM, Astana, 2017, p. 68, available at [<https://www.elibrary.ru/item.asp?id=32274824>].

trafficking. From our point of view, in order to define the boundaries of the return migrant cohorts more clearly, it is necessary to exclude migrants who leave for their homeland for an annual leave. Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, many labor migrants from Tajikistan came to work in Russia and Kazakhstan as seasonal workers in construction and agriculture in the spring, and then returned to their homeland in the fall or winter.⁷

We presume that the people who returned to Tajikistan due to physical disability, illness, retirement age, family reunification, etc. should be considered voluntarily returning migrants. The exact number of such migrants returning to Tajikistan is unknown, but it is clearly in the range of several tens or even hundreds of thousands of people. The number of migrants of pre-retirement age provides a relatively accurate estimate of the size of this category. Thus, according to the 2015 report of the Federal Migration Service of Russia, the number of foreign citizens working in the Russian Federation in the 50-59 age category was approximately 6.2%, and at the age of 60 or more—0.3%, including about 10,000 citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan.⁸ According to a survey by the Institute for Demographic Studies of the Federal Research Center of the Russian Academy of Sciences, conducted among labor migrants in January 2021, about 1.6% of respondents were aged 50 and over. According to the Main Directorate of Internal Affairs of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, 1,934,000 citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan were registered for migration in 2020, including 649,000 initially, including 507,000 people for work purposes.⁹ It means that if we extend the results of the sociological survey to the general population, approximately 31,000 Tajik migrants in Russia were of pre-retirement age (50 years and older). Potentially, these migrants can join the ranks of returning voluntary migrants to Tajikistan.

The number of migrants forcibly returned to their homeland is also significant. In 2015, Russia introduced a re-entry ban for certain categories of foreigners, which covers approximately 2 million people (mostly immigrants from Central Asia, including Tajikistan). The entry ban can extend for up to 10 years.¹⁰ According to the Main Directorate for Migration Issues of the Ministry of Internal Affairs, in 2019, 250,000 immigrants were banned from entering Russia (see Table 1).

The number of returning migrants forcibly deported or expelled to Tajikistan was unstable and depended primarily on the tightening of migration practices in Russia. Police often intensify checks, and courts make quick decisions on expulsion from the country under the pretext of registration rule violation or other circumstances. Our research in March-April 2020 demonstrated that with the onset of the isolation regime in Russian cities during the COVID-19 pandemic, the police intensified checks on migrants, and many were expelled for formal violations. For example, our April 2020 research showed that, although the Russian authorities have simplified migration procedures (registration, patents, work permits, temporary residence permits, visas have been extended until 15 June, 2020), in reality, the police increase pressure and the frequency of checks of labor migrants in Russian cities. According to human rights activist Valentina Chupik, with the beginning of the self-isolation regime, the number of reports from foreigners about illegal detention and extortion of bribes from the police,

⁷ See: S. Ryazantsev, "Labour Migration from Central Asia to Russia in the Context of the Economic Crisis," *Russia in Global Affairs*, 31 August, 2016, available at [<https://eng.globalaffairs.ru/articles/labour-migration-from-central-asia-to-russia-in-the-context-of-the-economic-crisis/>].

⁸ See: *ItoGovyy doklad o migratsionnoi situatsii, rezultatakh i osnovnykh napravleniakh deiatel'nosti Federalnoi migratsionnoi sluzhby za 2015 g.*, Moscow, 2016, p. 22, available at [https://pda.guvm.mvd.ru/upload/site1/document_file/ItoGovyy_doklad_na_19.02.16.pdf].

⁹ See: *Otdelnye pokazateli migratsionnoi situatsii v Rossiiskoi Federatsii za yanvar-dekabr 2020 goda s raspredeleniem po stranam i regionam*, Data of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia dated 21 January, 2021, available at [<https://xn--b1aew.xn--p1ai/Deljatelnost/statistics/migracionnaya/item/22689602/>].

¹⁰ See: *Uiazvimost migrantov i potrebnosti integratsii v Tsentralnoy Azii: osnovnye prichiny i sotsialno-ekonomicheskie posledstviia vozvratnoi migratsii. Regional'naya polevaya otsenka v Tsentralnoi Azii 2016*, IOM, Astana, 2016. 288 pp.

as well as requests for legal advice from the Tong Jahoni NGO in March-April 2020 grew sharply (twofold) compared with 2019.¹¹

Table 1

**Number of Foreign Citizens Under Administrative Penalty
in Russia in 2015-2019, people**

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
Banned from entering Russia	490,893	229,013	210,708	253,581	250,823
Expelled and deported	117,493	60,042	68,998	130,131	125,200
Held civilly liable	369,287	271,014	334,145	n/a	n/a

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data from the Main Directorate for Migration Issues of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, available at [https://xn--b1aew.xn--p1ai/Deljatelnost/statistics/migracionnaya]; judicial statistics data of the Judicial Department at the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, available at [http://www.cdep.ru/index.php?id=79], as well as on the basis of the Survey of Judicial Statistics on the Activities of Federal Courts of General Jurisdiction and Justices of the Peace in 2019, Department at the Supreme Court of the Russian Federation, available at [http://www.cdep.ru/userimages/sudebnaya_statistika/2020/Obzor_sudebnoy_statistiki_o_deyatelnosti_federalnih_sudov_obshchey_yurisdiktсии_i_mirovih_sudey_v_2019_godu].

It should be noted that the general trend towards tougher labor migration control measures in Russia began earlier, in 2013, after the amendments made to the Code of Administrative Offenses. Violators were banned from entering Russia for five years. Due to the tightening of migration policy, over 300,000 citizens of the Republic of Tajikistan were deported and expelled from the Russian Federation (see Fig. 1).

The formal reasons for the expulsion and deportation of labor migrants from Russia are varied. Source analysis shows that most of the expulsions are related to regime of stay violations—absence or delayed registration at the place of stay, and the absence of a patent.¹² The share of minor violations is also significant: absence of health insurance, working in a different field than declared (a migrant receives a permit limited to one specialty, and works in another, which is considered illegal labor activity). Migrants were also deported for administrative offenses (fines for road accidents, traffic violations, etc.). In some cases, migrant workers were deported even for the debt on their mobile phone bill. The number of foreigners expelled from Russia reached its peak in 2018, with 253,000 people (see Fig. 2). All of the above testifies to the fact that the excessive rigidity of Russian migration policy leads to ordinary people, who are deprived of information and are unfamiliar with Russian laws or those who cannot register in the apartments that they rent, being turned into illegal migrants instead of malicious criminals.

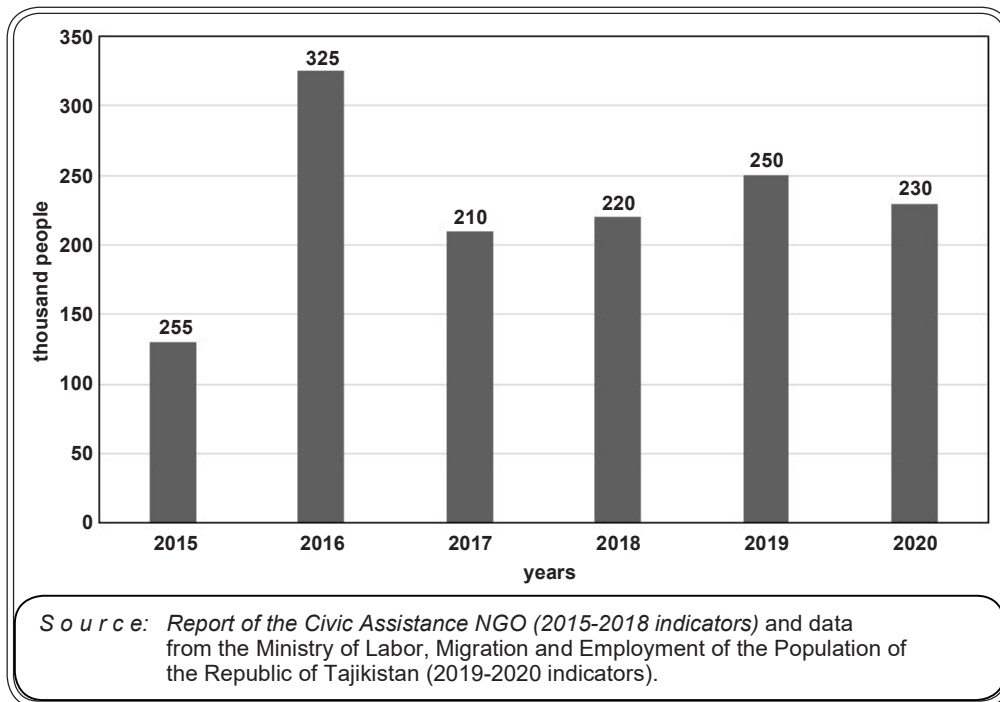
The problems of migrants held in the Temporary Detention Centers for Foreign Citizens (TD-CFC) in Russia deserve special attention. TDCFCs are institutions where foreign citizens await their administrative expulsion (until relatives or friends buy them tickets or, in very rare cases, until they

¹¹ See: S. Ryazantsev, Z. Vazirov, M. Khramova, A. Smirnov, “The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Position of Labor Migrants from Central Asia in Russia,” *Central Asia and the Caucasus. English Edition*, Vol. 21, Issue 3, 2020, p. 66, available at [DOI: https://doi.org/10.37178/ca-c.20.3.06].

¹² See: *The European Court of Human Rights. Case of Kim v. Russia. Judgment of 17 October, 2014* (Application no. 44260/13); *Migranty, migrantofobii i migratsionnaia politika*, ed. by V.I. Mukomelia, Moscow Bureau for Human Rights, “Akademia,” Moscow, 2014, p. 114.

Figure 1

Number of Citizens of Tajikistan Who Are Banned from Entering Russia in 2015-2020



are sent home at the expense of the Russian budget). In Moscow there are two TDCFCs with a combined capacity of 1,400 people, and there is a total of 76 TDCFCs in Russia. The monthly maintenance expenses per foreigner awaiting deportation, amount to about 20,000 rubles, and the expulsion itself costs the budget up to 40,000 rubles.¹³ Paradoxically, migrants may be spending years in TDCFCs as they await their expulsion.

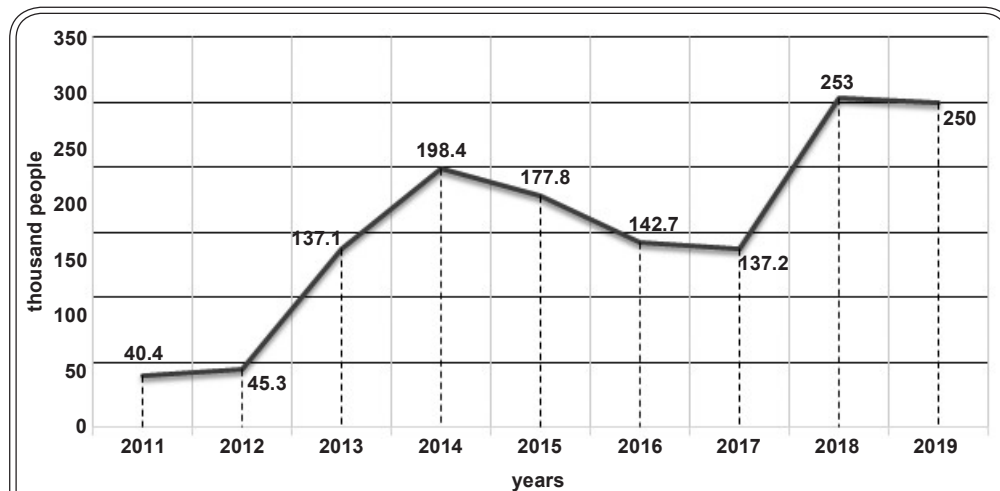
Observations show that the centers are primarily filled with citizens of Tajikistan and Uzbekistan. According to the Muhojir.info news agency, during the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic (19 May-30 May, 2020), the Tajik authorities returned 680 Tajik citizens to their homeland from the Russian TDCFCs on special flights.¹⁴ According to Tajik human rights activists, NGOs and the labor migrants themselves, the organization of return from Russia requires significant amounts of money (300-400 euros for air tickets, 2,500 rubles for COVID-19 tests). Labor migrants who return from such centers also requires reintegration into Tajik society.

Although the economic and political relations between the Republic of Tajikistan and the Russian Federation are close, many agreements have been signed, including those on migration, the predicament of Tajik migrants in Russia remains difficult. Often, the tightening of Russian migration

¹³ See: Interview with A.B. Paskachev, Head of the Congress of the Peoples of the Caucasus, member of the Council for Interethnic Relations under the President of the Russian Federation, *Izvestia*, 28 April, 2017, available in Russian at [<https://iz.ru/news/694817>].

¹⁴ See: "Ostavshikhsia v Rossii v TSVS grazhdan Tadjhikistana vernuli na rodinu," Muhojir.info, 1 June, 2020, available at [<http://muhojir.info/news/1069>].

**Number of Foreign Citizens Administratively Expelled
from Russia by Court Decision in 2011-2019**



Source: From open publications of the Judicial Department of the Russian Federation.

Note: Data for 2011-2019 reflects the number of foreign citizens expelled by decision of the courts of the Russian Federation. (In addition to the decisions of the courts of the Russian Federation, at present, 10 departments have the right to ban foreigners from entering Russia: Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia, the FSB, Ministry of Defense, Rosfinmonitoring, Foreign Intelligence Service of Russia, Ministry of Justice, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Federal Drug Control Service, Rospotrebnadzor, Federal Biomedical Agency of Russia.) 2020 data has not yet been published. In total, at the time of this writing (September 2020), over 1 million people were banned from entering the Russian Federation.

legislation is used to resolve foreign policy issues: when disagreements arise, in Russia, as a rule, a wave of deportations of migrants begins (i.e., the “pilot case”).¹⁵ After official requests from Tajikistan and negotiations, the Russian side usually makes concessions. For example, in 2017, Russia held a migration amnesty. It covered over 100,000 labor migrants—citizens of Tajikistan who were on the black list, including 12,000 who were deported for up to ten years due to the acquisition and use of false patents and other documents, and about 5,000 people who were banned from entering Russia due to being diagnosed with infectious diseases. Many migrants were removed from the list and acquired the opportunity to re-enter Russia.¹⁶ But for the most part, the 2017 amnesty affected those labor migrants who were in Russia with expired registrations or unpaid patents (i.e., who violated Paragraphs 4 and 8 of Art 26 of the Federal Law on the Procedure for Leaving and Entering the Russian Federation).

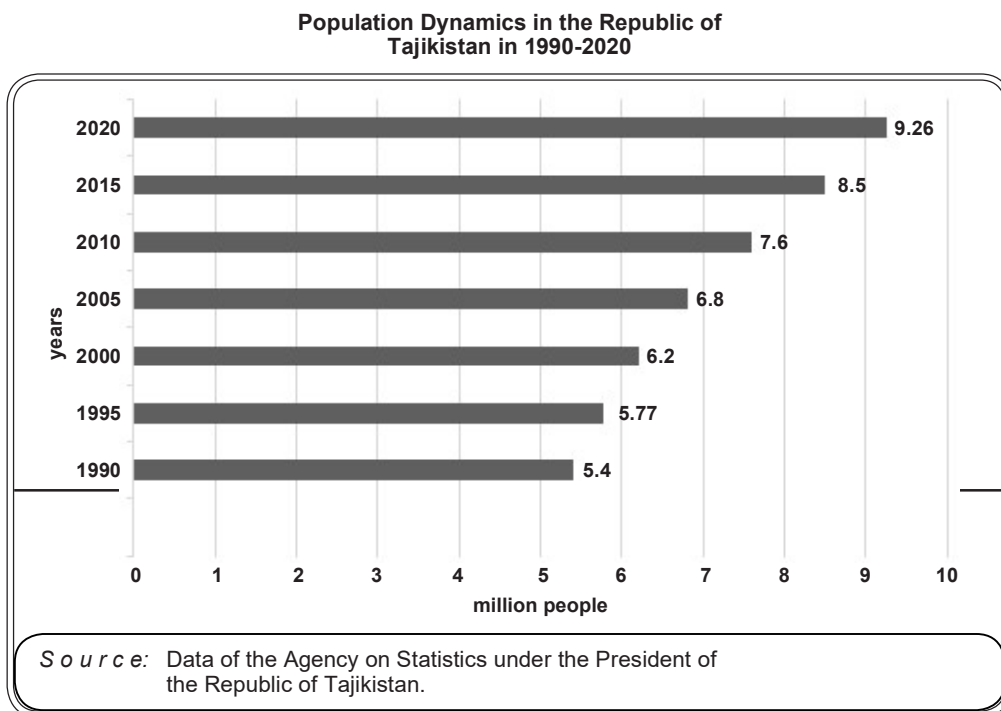
¹⁵ See: O. Gerasimenko, “‘Polëtkorrektnost’ po-russki,” *Kommersant*, 21 November, 2011, available at [<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/1816106>]; M. Yusufzoda, “Tadzhikskikh migrantov nekotorye strany ispolzuiut kak instrument davleniia,” *Radio Ozodi*, 22 November, 2019, available at [<https://rus.ozodi.org/a/30286344.html>].

¹⁶ See: Asia-Plus, 18 April, 2019, available at [<https://asiaplus.tj.info/news/tajikistan/society/20190418/pyat-problem-tadzhikskikh-trudovih-migrantov>].

Returning Migrants on the Tajik Labor Market

In Tajikistan, annual population growth averages 2-2.5%. In 2020, the size of the population reached approximately 9.3 million, while in 1990 it was only 5.4 million (see Fig. 3). In the medium term, the population of Tajikistan continues to grow rapidly and, according to the U.N. Population Division forecasts, in 2023 the population of Tajikistan will cross the 10-million mark.¹⁷ The country's labor resources number 5.8 million people (60% of the total population). Another 2 million people (approximately 33%) are adolescents who will soon join the workforce. People who are older than working age, or retirees, make up 700,000 people, or about 7% of the population.¹⁸ Every year 200,000 young people enter the labor market of Tajikistan, with 90% of them looking for work outside the republic.¹⁹ Meanwhile, only 2.3 million people (about 40% of the population) are employed in Tajikistan. If these migration trends persist, young people will continue to leave the country and look for work abroad. There is an acute problem of creating new jobs in the country, primarily for young people.

Figure 3



¹⁷ See: *United Nations. Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Population Division. World Population Prospects 2019, Volume I: Comprehensive Tables.*

¹⁸ See: TAG News Agency, 1 November, 2019, available at [<https://tajikta.tj/ru/news/v-tadzhikistane-chislo-pensionerov-priblizhaetsya-k-700-tys-chelovek>].

¹⁹ See: F.T. Khonkhodzhayev, "Institutsionalnye problemy migratsionnoi sistemy..." p. 117.

The environment in Tajikistan has been unfavorable for the development of small and medium-sized businesses. Entrepreneurs point to a high tax burden and frequent inspections by various government agencies among the key problems. According to the World Bank index (Doing Business), the republic has a complicated business environment, which does not allow newly returning migrants to start their own business.²⁰

In 2019 (as of 01.10.2019), 553,100 individual entrepreneurs were registered in the country, of which only 293,400 were actually operating, that is, 260,000 individual entrepreneurs have closed their business.²¹

During the COVID-19 pandemic, in the first half of 2020, 12,600 business entities (460 legal entities [companies, enterprises] and about 12,200 individual entrepreneurs) were liquidated in the republic. The situation in Tajikistan's economy has deteriorated, people were losing their jobs en masse, and the problem of employment was becoming more acute. The return of migrants under these circumstances is an additional burden on the country's social and economic spheres. For example, hundreds of deported migrants in search of work are registered with two large *markdor* (wage earners) markets in Dushanbe. The migration services of Tajikistan have registered 21,000 returning migrants deported from Russia.²²

During in-depth interviews, returning migrants in Tajikistan were asked about employment-related support measures. The responses showed that the measures taken by the Tajik authorities to provide jobs do not cover the bulk of returning migrants. For example, respondents from among the deported stated that when they apply to state bodies, they only receive offers to undergo paid retraining. Upon completion of these courses, they would have to look for work on their own, and the state cannot offer them work for decent wages. According to official data, in 2018, the Ministry of Labor, Migration and Employment of the Population of Tajikistan promoted the retraining of 1,462 people, and offered permanent jobs to only 812 people.²³ These are very insignificant figures against the background of the fact that in 2018 alone 220,000 Tajik citizens were banned from entering Russia, and an additional 200,000 in 2020.

With the introduction of the COVID-19 high alert mode in Russia and the closure of borders, migration flows have sharply decreased, and the socio-economic situation has deteriorated abruptly for most in the face of rising unemployment in Tajikistan. A significant part of potential labor migrants did not manage to leave for Russia for the spring/summer season, when summer cottage and construction work begins.

Other Tajik migrants, who were already in Russia, have lost their jobs. According to our April 2020 survey, about 28% of those surveyed were laid off and unemployed at the time of the survey, and 37% were on unpaid leave. It turns out that 65% of the surveyed labor migrants had no sources of income during the pandemic. As shown by a survey during the COVID-19 pandemic, the overwhelming majority of respondents, or 84%, lost their income.²⁴

Many labor migrants from Tajikistan are currently finding it difficult to survive in Russia without work during a pandemic. The Russian economy also has significant problems, so, after the borders open, Tajikistan should expect a new wave of returning migration of a part of labor migrants who have lost their jobs in Russia.

²⁰ See: F.T. Khonkhodzhaev, "Otsenka sotsialno-ekonomicheskikh posledstviy migratsii naseleniia Respubliki Tadjikistan," p. 104.

²¹ See: Asia-Plus, 22 October, 2019, available at [<https://asiaplustj.info/ru/news/tajikistan/economic/20191022/v-tadzhikistane-zakrili-svoe-delo-260-tisyach-individualnih-predprinimatelei>].

²² See: S. Rukhullo, op. cit.

²³ See: *Report of the Commissioner for Human Rights in the Republic of Tajikistan for 2018*, available in Russian at [<http://www.vhk.tj/images/reports/ru/Doklad-UPCH-RT-2018-rus.pdf>].

²⁴ See: S. Ryazantsev, Z. Vazirov, M. Khramova, A. Smirnov, op. cit., p. 67.

Problems of Reintegration of Returning Migrants and Reintegration Programs in Tajikistan

The situation was also difficult for returning migrants in Tajikistan before the COVID-19 pandemic. Back in April 2019, a report by the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) noted the problem of protecting the rights of migrant workers and members of their families, and expressed concern about the lack of effective reintegration mechanisms and procedures. The Government of Tajikistan received recommendations to implement programs aimed at the reintegration of returning migrants, including providing professional retraining and jobs, as well as developing and stimulating entrepreneurship among them.²⁵

The International Organization for Migration (IOM) in Central Asia is implementing the Assisted Voluntary Return and Reintegration Program (AVRR). So far, AVRR is most successful in Kazakhstan. Despite Tajikistan's participation, many problems of returning migrants remain unresolved in the country. Nevertheless, the current national and international legal framework in the migration sphere can become the basis for the development of the institution of return migration in the Republic of Tajikistan as well.²⁶

Let's consider the key problems of the reintegration of returning migrants in Tajikistan.

An important problem for returning migrants is the impossibility of receiving a pension either in Tajikistan or in Russia, despite the fact that many migrants have worked and paid taxes in Russia for many years. Only recently was the Agreement on Pension Provision between the EAEU countries signed, allowing residents of the EAEU countries to make pension contributions both in the national pension systems and in the country of employment, to issue and receive pensions both in their country of citizenship and in the host country. These rules for the formation of pensions came into force in 2020.²⁷ But as you know, Tajikistan is not included in this integration association. Currently, the issue of support for the returning migrants of retirement age remains unresolved. In 2016, the Republic of Tajikistan and the Russian Federation discussed and prepared a draft agreement on the regulation of pensions for Tajik labor migrants, but this document has not yet been signed. Meetings and negotiations are currently being held and public promises are being made about an early resolution of the issue. Most of the returning labor migrants of retirement age we interviewed in Tajikistan stated that they do not have a pension and are unable to sustain themselves. There are currently about 700,000 pensioners in Tajikistan, with the average pension of 315 somoni (about \$31). ~~In 2019, the payout of disability pensions to 4,600 people was suspended in Tajikistan; there~~ was a total of 17,700 such cases since 2014. They need to undergo a second medical examination at the State Service of Medical and Social Expertise in order to start receiving pensions again.²⁸ However, experts testify that this is not always possible due to village inaccessibility, the high transportation costs, and their state of health. By cutting pension expenditures, the state actually shifts social costs to the population.

²⁵ See: *Report of the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights. CPR/C/TJK/CO/3*, available at [https://tbinternet.ohchr.org/_layouts/15/treatybodyexternal/Download.aspx?symbolno=CCPR/C/TJK/CO/3&Lang=Ru].

²⁶ See: *Vozvratnaia migratsiia: mezhdunarodnye podkhody i regionalnye osobennosti Tsentralnoi Azii*, p. 90.

²⁷ See: A. Mainulova, "Pravitelstvo prestupaet granitsu," *Kommersant*, No. 227, 10 December, 2019, available at [<https://www.kommersant.ru/doc/4188167>].

²⁸ See: B.V. Nadirov, "V Tadjikistane pristanovlena vydacha pensiy po invalidnosti bolee 4,6 tysiacham chelovek," *Asia-Plus*, 5 February, 2019, available at [<https://asiaplusj.info/news/tajikistan/society/20190205/v-tadjikistane-pristanovlena-vidacha-pensii-po-invalidnosti-bolee-46-tisyacham-chelovek>].

Many migrants from Tajikistan see obtaining a residence permit in Russia or Russian citizenship as one of the solutions to the problem. Although it is a rather difficult and time-consuming process, many respondents follow this path. For this, many use the State Program for the Return of Compatriots to Russia. Despite all the difficulties and obstacles, several tens of thousands of Tajik citizens receive the citizenship of the Russian Federation annually: in 2018 this number was 35,700, in 2019—44,700, in January-June 2020—31,300. In 2018, over 10,000 Tajik citizens applied to the Pension Fund of the Russian Federation for pensions on the basis of their residence permit (according to the Russian legislation, foreign citizens with a residence permit can receive a pension in Russia).

People of working age who lost their health while working abroad, or who were expelled and deported, also face psychological problems. In addition, returning migrants, who worked abroad under unfavorable conditions, often get sick. Given the limitations of local labor markets, unemployment and poverty, as well as severe psychological stress due to the new life situation, migrants who have been denied re-entry to Russia are becoming one of the most vulnerable groups and are at high risk of recruitment by terrorist, extremist and criminal groups.²⁹

Conclusion

Given the significant scale of labor migration, return migration has always been a noticeable phenomenon for Tajikistan. But it has been particularly actualized due to the intensified deportations and expulsions during the tightening of migration procedures in Russia, as well as the return of labor migrants due to the COVID-19 pandemic before the closure of state borders in 2020. The number of returning migrants depends to a large extent on migration procedures and the economic situation in Russia. As a rule, the tightening of checks by law enforcement agencies leads to an increase in expulsions or deportations of labor migrants from Russia.

Returning migrants face social, economic and psychological difficulties at home, primarily, it is difficult for them to find work and reintegrate into society. A significant part of returning migrants who have worked in Russia for decades, have already reached retirement age, but do not receive a pension either in Tajikistan or in Russia. Upon arrival in their homeland, most returning migrants are unable to receive a pension and are left without a livelihood in old age. The problem of pension payout has been discussed several times between the governments of the Republic of Tajikistan and the Russian Federation, but is unlikely to be practically resolved in the near future.

Unfortunately, at this point, the Government of Tajikistan merely has any special programs for the reintegration of returning migrants due to lack of funds and lack of experience in this area. Most returning migrants are forced to solve their problems on their own or resort to the help of their families and relatives. In fact, the government is not interested in the massive return of labor migrants, since the increase in their number worsens the socio-economic situation of the population and the general state of the labor market. Political, economic and diplomatic measures are required to solve the problems of migrants returning to Tajikistan. It is necessary to continue diversifying labor markets, stimulate job creation, and encourage organized forms of labor migration. Information support and availability of information, including legal, to labor migrants, are required. Tajikistan also needs to intensify the negotiations with Russia on matters of amnesty for labor migrants.

²⁹ See: *Vozvratnaia migratsiia: mezhdunarodnye podkhody i regionalnye osobennosti Tsentralnoi Azii*, p. 145.