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# IMPACT OF THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON LABOR MIGRATION AND MIGRATION POLICY IN CENTRAL ASIAN COUNTRIES

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**Abstract.** *The research aims to determine the impact that the global COVID-19 pandemic had on labor migrants and the migration policy in Central Asian countries. During the research, the authors use statistical and sociological methods. Thus, the authors determine the number of arrivals and departures for a particular period, the composition of migrants, and the migration direction. The restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic have exacerbated many issues of migration from Central Asia and the situation of migrants in Russia. If the impact of COVID-19 restrictions continues and the income of migrants continues to decrease, migration participants will be forced to take emergency measures by actively returning to their homeland. Under these conditions, socio-economic tension in the donor countries may grow. The research establishes that the existing sanitary and epidemiological restrictions could contribute to the transformation of migration processes in the countries of Central Asia, including the reorientation of labor migrant flows to new directions and the strengthening of the tendency to receive the right to obtain a Russian passport. The authors propose several practical recommendations to reduce the negative impact of the pandemic on the migration processes in Central Asia. As the research shows, creating and developing new jobs in Central Asian countries is an issue of prime necessity, as is a high dependence of the economy on remittances from migrant workers.*

**Keywords:** *migration policy, labor migration, remittances, Central Asia, Coronavirus pandemic*

## Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has raised a host of questions for the governments of many nations, in addition to public health concerns, about the need to level the socio-economic impact on society and populations. Central Asian countries are no exception. Since most Central Asian countries do not have strong and diversified national economic systems, the COVID-19 pandemic can cause significant damage to the working population and have a long-term impact on the economic structure [1]. The reason is the importance of labor migration for ensuring the economic sustainability of the countries in the region. The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on labor migration began in the spring of 2020 and turned out to be the most pressing issue for Central Asian countries in general and local

communities that are heavily dependent on remittances from migrant workers, in particular<sup>1</sup>.

The sanitary and epidemiological restrictions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the temporary suspension of international passenger traffic have become important factors in reducing the influx of labor migrants from the countries of Central Asia to the Russian Federation by 1.5–2 times in 2020, as well as a growth in the flow of returning labor migrants to their homelands in the first months of the COVID-19 pandemic. As a result, the socio-economic processes in the region, strongly dependent on labor migration, escalated during the pandemic: unemployment and poverty increased the volume of remittances from abroad, and therefore household incomes and domestic consumption of goods and services decreased. As research shows, in Russia, these negative trends were temporary and smoothed out as labor migration and adaptation of labor migrants recovered.

This research aims to identify the impact and degree of dependence on the socio-economic development of Central Asian countries from migration labor during the COVID-19 pandemic. The research object is labor migration and migration policy in the context of combating the COVID-19 pandemic. The research subject is a set of possible political solutions that can, on the scale of the current migration policy, help solve the discussed problem to the greatest extent.

The authors analyze the role of labor migration and its influence on the situation in three Central Asian countries: the Kyrgyz Republic, the Republic of Tajikistan, and the Republic of Uzbekistan.

The paper proves that labor migration affects the socio-economic condition of the countries in the region. This conclusion is also relevant regarding measures to respond to the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic.

### **Methodology**

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on international population migration has been studied in the works: M. B. Denisenko and V. I. Mukomel [2]; N. Imanbekova [3]; A. D. Filippov [4]; and S. V. Ryazantsev, Z. K. Vazirov, and F. M. Garibova [5]. Labor migration plays an important role in the economic development of sending Central Asian countries and receiving countries. This problem has been studied in the works of K. V. Arshin [6]; K. P. Kurylev, R. M. Kurbanov, A. B. Makenova, and A. A. Khotivrishvili [7]; and V. I. Mukomel [8–9].

To better understand the specifics of the functioning of a national economy of this type, it is necessary to focus on several theoretical aspects. The emergence of the phenomenon of labor force donor countries is closely related to the categories of labor costs inside and outside the national economy. At the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the economic growth of the countries of East and Southeast Asia was associated with the transfer of industrial production from the developed countries of Western Europe and North America<sup>2</sup>, when

<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 crisis response in Central Asia // OECD: [site]. 16.11.2020. URL: [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/covid-19-crisis-response-in-central-asia\\_5305f172-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/covid-19-crisis-response-in-central-asia_5305f172-en.html) (accessed on 03.09.2024).

<sup>2</sup> Europe and Central Asia Economic Update, Spring 2021: Data, Digitalization and Public Administration. Washington : World Bank, 2021. 172 p.

cheap labor was required to be used together with the relocated production capacities. Nowadays, the post-industrial service economy requires greater mobility of labor resources, whereas, in accordance with the principle of service production, their consumption occurs directly together with production [10]. Accordingly, there is a request for the outflow of population from countries with cheap labor resources to countries with a growing service sector in the national economy, where the residents' employment brought additional costs while not bringing a significant increase in gross net profit for the company due to low qualification requirements<sup>3</sup>. If economic growth continues in the country receiving migrant workers, then the incentives for employment there are increasingly greater for the migrants who derive increased economic rents from the growth without having to increase labor productivity. Labor migration becomes one of the most profitable occupations for the population of the labor donor country, as well as the washing out the maximum possible number of able-bodied citizens of the economy. When a country that serves as a source of permanent migration, regardless of seasonal or year-round outflows, manages its economic structure based on the importance of migrants' income as the primary or dominant source of national income, the country, in accordance with generally accepted terminology, can be designated as a labor donor state.

## Results

The influence of migration on the economic structure is a much more powerful irritating factor for a source state than for any other institutionalized actor in this process [11]. The reason for this is that if (on the part of the receiving community) a fairly small part of the population is migrants (especially those who live and participate in the economic division of labor permanently), which is segmented by origin and possession of certain professional skills, then the source country, depending on its capacity and the development of the economic environment, loses a significant segment of the most able-bodied and active population. There is a more pronounced trend indicating the migration of young people. As a more socially and economically active category of the population, young people strive to gain and retain a privileged position in their community in the shortest time from a material and status point of view, which is not always possible due to the limited number of such positions for youth and a large number of young people, which leads to additional and not always economically justified competition.

Due to the specific effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, most migrant workers were forbidden to enter the Russian Federation, which left most migrants in their home country without a permanent income source<sup>4</sup>. Accordingly, if the coronavirus restrictions persist and the standard of living continues to decline, migrants will be forced to take emergency measures, becoming economic refugees, because the social infrastructure of Central Asian countries cannot manage the influx of many new consumers of state aid and the economic system cannot provide the able-bodied population with jobs. However, the issue affects not only the Central Asia countries, but Russia too, because the restrictions

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<sup>3</sup> Study of Labour Migration Dynamics in the Central Asia – Russian Federation Migration Corridor. Consolidated Report 2021. Moscow : IOM, 2021. 90 p.

<sup>4</sup> COVID-19 and Central Asia: Socio-Economic Impacts and Key Policy Considerations for Recovery. New York : UNDP, 2020. 22 p. URL: [https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/eurasia/COVID19report\\_CentralAsia.pdf](https://www.undp.org/sites/g/files/zskgke326/files/migration/eurasia/COVID19report_CentralAsia.pdf) (accessed on 03.09.2024).

have shortened the amount of the workforce available for the country. As a result, some of the spheres where migrant workers have usually dominated, have become understaffed.

The problem is exacerbated by specific obstacles to resuming the mechanism of cross-border movement of people [8].

First, the resumption of passenger traffic occurred disproportionately to demand. The number of people wishing to leave Central Asian countries exceeds the capacity of the flights and railroads launched. For various reasons, including non-purely market grounds, the transfer cost for potential migrants has become incongruously high in relation to their financial capabilities.

Second, because of the COVID-19 pandemic, illegal methods of crossing the border have become popular despite some easing of the migration policy in the host countries. This trend can lead to deportation and prohibition of legal (and most beneficial in terms of potential benefits) employment, which entails certain legal consequences because of expulsion from the host country and a ban on subsequent entry.

The number of foreigners expelled from Russia reached 252 thousand people in 2019. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, about 250 thousand people were expelled from Russia in 2020.

Accordingly, under conditions of insufficiently active regulatory state policy, a change of permanent residence and employment seems a much more promising outcome in terms of potential gain. For instance, the Republic of Tajikistan occupies a special place among Central Asian countries. Every year about 200 thousand young people enter the labor market, 90% of whom are forced to look<sup>5</sup> for a source of income abroad<sup>6</sup>. Additionally, the existing economic structure also has an impact<sup>7</sup>: vital sectors of the economy, not always privileged from a material and status point of view (e. g., education, healthcare, and logistics), may require more active personnel rotation with the involvement of many young specialists.

The migration situation in 2020 has undergone a cardinal change due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the termination of communications between the countries of departure and Russia<sup>8</sup>. About 6–7 million foreign citizens, labor migrants, and their families could not leave the Russian Federation. The number of potential migrants who could not enter Russia may be about 2 million people.

A large and quite stable migration corridor – one of the largest in Eurasia and the world – has formed between the Central Asian countries and the Russian Federation. The stability of this corridor is determined by historical, socio-economic, socio-cultural, and geopolitical factors. Even the pandemic situation, as well as economic and geopolitical

<sup>5</sup> Assessing the Foreign Labor Needs of Employers in Key Regions of the Russian Federation. Moscow : IOM, 2021. 112 p.

<sup>6</sup> COVID-19 crisis response in Central Asia // OECD : [site]. 16.11.2020. URL: [https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/covid-19-crisis-response-in-central-asia\\_5305f172-en.html](https://www.oecd.org/en/publications/covid-19-crisis-response-in-central-asia_5305f172-en.html) (accessed on 03.09.2024).

<sup>7</sup> Assessing the Foreign Labor Needs of Employers in Key Regions of the Russian Federation. Moscow : IOM, 2021. 112 p.

<sup>8</sup> Мигрантам из стран Центральной Азии, оставшимся без средств к существованию, срочно требуется помощь // Новости ООН. Организация Объединенных Наций : [сайт]. 15.05.2020. URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2020/05/1378202> (дата обращения: 03.09.2024).

crises, cannot yet radically change the direction of migration flows, which are directed from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan to the Russian Federation and partly to the Republic of Kazakhstan (Table 1).

According to the accounting system, about 19.5 million foreigners were registered in Russia through the offices of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Russia in 2019. The COVID-19 pandemic in 2020 reduced the number of registered to 9.8 million people. Similarly, the number of migrants from Central Asia decreased from 9.5 million to 6.6 million people, although the whole number of registered migrants increased from 50% to 68% (due to a greater reduction in migrants from other countries).

Table 1

**Number of registrations of Central Asian labor migrants in the Russian Federation in 2019–2022**

Countries of citizenship	Migrant registration with the purpose of entry “work”			
	2019	2020	2021	2022 (January–March)
Kazakhstan	136 208	60 461	163 938	37 734
Kyrgyzstan	453 702	190 312	884 133	214 805
Tajikistan	1 179 423	507 255	2 439 198	822 006
Turkmenistan	4 813	3 906	7 880	2 094
Uzbekistan	2 107 302	1 011 028	4 519 618	1 370 499

Source: developed and compiled by the authors based on ICMPD<sup>9</sup>

In recent years, the number of migrants from Central Asian countries has progressively increased and naturalized in the Russian Federation (Table 2).

Table 2

**Citizens of Central Asia who received migration status in the Russian Federation in 2019–2021 (people)**

Countries of citizenship	Temporary residence permit			Residence permit			Citizenship of the Russian Federation		
	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021	2019	2020	2021
Kazakhstan	48 901	22 311	31 788	14 450	25 278	27 406	50 492	43 404	49 862
Kyrgyzstan	7 638	3 814	7 141	5 086	9 087	10 072	9 371	11 865	19 241
Tajikistan	46 004	31 416	43 342	29 635	48 691	57 444	44 707	63 389	103 681
Turkmenistan	1 824	2 085	2 371	1 972	2 271	1 966	1 361	2 451	3 628
Uzbekistan	25 022	14 624	14 693	20 888	24 055	23 817	19 388	23 131	31 867

Source: developed and compiled by the authors based on the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation<sup>10</sup>

Over the past 20 years, labor migration has been the main migration flow in the Central Asian region in terms of scale and consequences. According to approximate estimates, more than 80% of all labor migrants are sent to the Russian Federation. In recent years, Kazakhstan has also begun actively accepting labor migrants from Central Asia.

<sup>9</sup> ICMPD Migration Outlook 2021: Seven Things to Look Out for in 2021. Vienna : International Centre for Migration Policy Development, 2021. 20 p.

<sup>10</sup> Статистические сведения по миграционной ситуации // Министерство внутренних дел Российской Федерации: [сайт]. URL: <https://мвд.пф/dejatelnost/statistics/migracionnaya> (дата обращения: 03.09.2024).

However, Kazakhstan has not been able to switch over the flows of labor migrants entirely.

An average of 3.9 million migrant workers from Central Asia worked on the Russian territory annually [12]. The role of labor migration is significant in developing the socio-economic sphere of Central Asian countries sending migrants and the receiving state, the Russian Federation<sup>11</sup>. Migrant workers fill the needs of the labor market for qualified specialists and unskilled workers in the host countries [13], relieve tension in labor markets with a labor surplus, and contribute to poverty reduction in the Central Asian region. Central Asian countries, their industries and regions are closely linked to labor migration. On the other hand, in Russia such workers satisfy the demand for the workforce in various fields, including the construction sector, delivery services and other spheres, which are either unpopular among the Russians or require rather cheap workforce thus making it more beneficial to recruit migrant workers.

Research shows that job loss during the COVID-19 pandemic was a major factor pushing Central Asian migrants from Russia in 2020. The situation has changed dramatically for migrants who have returned to their homeland. At the beginning of June 2020, only 40% worked in their home country, and more than 50% did not have a job. Returned migrants faced the same difficulties as at their former place of work abroad due to the restrictive measures taken against COVID-19. More than 30% of the migrants who returned home were construction workers; more than 19% were service workers; about 10% were students. Among all respondents, about 52% were employed, 25% looked for a job, 6% were unemployed, 7% were students, 6% were homemakers, and 5% were pensioners [9]. At home, labor migrants retained high motivational attitudes toward new migration to Russia despite the difficult situation. While at home during the COVID-19 pandemic, many migrants looked forward to returning to Russia for work and did not even try to find a job there. At the time of the survey, it was revealed that about 54% of potential migrants from Central Asia planned to come to Russia for more than three months; 11% planned to return for less than three months; the rest did not decide. Among the migrants who were going to leave for Russia for the first time, 35% were going to spend more than three months in migration, about 23% planned to spend less than three months, and the rest of the respondents did not decide on the answer. About 57% of migrants who returned from Russia in 2019 and 2020 planned to return there for more than three months [9]. This indicates that over the years of active labor migration, the Central Asian countries formed a stable category of “circulating labor migrants” who consider work abroad as their main life strategy.

The research also shows the peculiarities of the migration attitudes of highly skilled workers from Central Asian countries in Russia, who showed the highest rates of social adaptation during the COVID-19 pandemic [2]. Highly qualified Central Asian migrants have strengthened their position in the labor market of Russia, considering the situation as temporary during the first wave of the pandemic (spring 2020), making sure to find work in Russia, and being unwilling to leave it even temporarily. During the second wave of the COVID-19 pandemic in the fall of 2020, the optimism of migrants increased even

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<sup>11</sup> Assessing the Foreign Labor Needs of Employers in Key Regions of the Russian Federation. Moscow : IOM, 2021. 112 p.

more based on the assessment of opportunities to find a decent job in Russia with favorable conditions and good wages. The mass departure from the Russian labor market of skilled migrants from Ukraine, Belarus, and Moldova, the main competitors of highly skilled Central Asian migrants, played no small role. Considering the uncertainty of the prospects for the return of qualified migrants to the Russian Federation from other post-Soviet countries, we can predict that the “migrant” niches of highly skilled labor will be filled by qualified migrants from the Central Asian countries in the coming years. Considering the abovementioned lack of alternatives for the Russian market this is likely to be true for the spheres where migrants have the significant share of workplaces. This is true even considering the tensions with migrants within the Russian society and attempts to curb their numbers on the market. Lack of alternatives makes migrant workers from Central Asia essential for Russia and that’s likely to remain intact.

The procedure for the return of Central Asian migrants to their home countries was significantly complicated during the COVID-19 pandemic<sup>12</sup>. By the end of 2021, the cost of air tickets to the capitals of Central Asian countries from Moscow averaged 18–25 thousand rubles, which is 10%–15% higher than in 2019–2020<sup>13</sup>. According to experts, during the COVID-19 pandemic, migrants were forced to spend money on leaving Russia (e. g., air tickets cost 300–400 euro, tests for COVID-19 cost 2.5 thousand rubles, etc.). With a decrease in the incidence figures in 2022, ticket prices dropped to 10–15 thousand rubles.

## Conclusion

Evaluating the proposed initiatives in accordance with the criteria formulated above for the effectiveness of migration policy, it is necessary to note the continuing importance of labor migrants from Central Asian countries to the labor market of Russia, to which there are no alternatives in the foreseeable future. Based on this, the strategy for optimizing migration policy should proceed from the principles of close coordination with the Government of the Russian Federation and the general requirements for those employed in the Russian economy.

COVID-19 pandemic has shown some flows that both parties should seriously consider. For Central Asia it is the inability to host the returning workforce, making the people to return to Russia and look for job opportunities there. At the same time, it became obvious for Russia that lack of migrant workers from the Central Asia has a potentially bad influence on the economy, crippling the sectors where these migrant workers dominate.

The pandemics has also shown the issues with migration routes, showing that the capabilities of these routes are way behind the demands, making it hard for all the workers to enter Russia. That’s beside the limitations the pandemics have established. Thus, the illegal routes have been used.

Addressing the issues of migration routes, restrictions for migrants and inability to provide alternatives for them at home in case of such pandemics or other situations that

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<sup>12</sup> Central Asian migration to Russia: Legalization in 2020 // Voices on Central Asia: [site]. 18.02.2021. URL: <https://voicesoncentralasia.org/central-asian-migration-to-russia-legalization-in-2020/> (accessed on 03.09.2024).

<sup>13</sup> Авиабилеты Душанбе – Москва // Tutu [сайт]. URL: <https://avia.tutu.ru/flights/?from=234&to=491> (дата обращения: 15.09.2022).

make the migrants return to their home countries, should become the priority. Russia does need the workforce and Central Asia needs money influx it gets from migrants. So, all the conditions should be made to improve the existing routes and migration flows. One shouldn't forget that pandemics can occur again, so one should be ready for restrictions and the return of migrants to their home countries, where they should be provided with work and income, otherwise these migrants have no reason to return to their homeland.

Additionally, we should consider the low readiness of Russian secondary specialized educational institutions to provide additional professional training. Because of the influx of low-skilled foreign labor, the prestige of the profession and the level of income in several industries have become unattractive to the indigenous population.

Thus, the main steps of Central Asian governments in the framework of migration policy should be, based on an assessment of the current situation, to create conditions to accelerate the resumption of international transport links, which will allow migrant workers to overcome the consequences of the continuing decline in living standards. Additionally, since the economy's dependence on migrant workers' remittances makes it difficult to create and develop new jobs in other industries, it is important to compensate for this by expanding the geography of countries where migrants from Central Asia can be sent for further employment.

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## ВЛИЯНИЕ ПАНДЕМИИ COVID-19 НА ТРУДОВУЮ МИГРАЦИЮ И МИГРАЦИОННУЮ ПОЛИТИКУ В СТРАНАХ ЦЕНТРАЛЬНОЙ АЗИИ

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**Аннотация.** Целью исследования является определение влияния глобальной пандемии COVID-19 на трудовых мигрантов и миграционную политику в странах Центральной Азии. В ходе исследования авторы используют статистические и социологические методы. Так, авторы определяют количество прибывших и выбывших за тот или иной период, состав мигрантов и направление миграции. Ограничения, вызванные пандемией COVID-19, обострили многие вопросы миграции из Центральной Азии и положения мигрантов в России. Если влияние ограничений COVID-19 продолжится и доходы мигрантов продолжат снижаться, участники миграции будут вынуждены активно возвращаться на родину. В этих условиях может усилиться социально-экономическая напряженность в странах-донорах. В исследовании установлено, что существующие санитарно-эпидемиологические ограничения могут способствовать трансформации миграционных процессов в странах Центральной Азии, в том числе переориентации потоков трудовых мигрантов на новые направления и усилению тенденции на получение российского паспорта. Авторы предлагают ряд практических рекомендаций по снижению негативного влияния пандемии на миграционные процессы в Центральной Азии. Как показывает исследование, создание и

развитие новых рабочих мест в странах Центральной Азии является вопросом первоочередной необходимости, равно как и высокая зависимость экономики от денежных переводов трудовых мигрантов.

**Ключевые слова:** миграционная политика, трудовая миграция, денежные переводы, Центральная Азия, пандемия коронавируса

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