

Tajikistan: the impact of labour migration on internal peacebuilding dynamics

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Introduction

Tajikistan is the poorest country in Central Asia and is still affected by multiple internal challenges which are a legacy of the civil war from 1992-97. The country attracted international attention in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, when the international military coalition in Afghanistan sought to secure political support and logistical routes in the region and to prevent a spillover of the conflict. Later, the prospect and then the actual withdrawal of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) from Afghanistan generated a lot of interest and debate, notably with regards to potential risks for Central Asian states, and especially Tajikistan given its geographic proximity with Afghanistan. While analyses differ on the relevance of the spillover threat from Afghanistan into Tajikistan and the impact of the broader transition in Afghanistan on its northern neighbours (specifically in terms of refugees, insurgencies, rise of extremist and/or criminal groups), another external factor seems to be more pressing for Tajikistan's stability and development: labour migration.

A stagnating economy and lack of employment opportunities in the country, among other reasons, led more than one million Tajiks (out of eight million) to seasonal labour migration as a survival strategy. While the majority head to Russia, the geopolitical and socio-economic challenges Moscow is currently facing are causing many to question the sustainability of labour migration as a viable source of income. And while labour migration has provided a certain level of stability to the people and the government of Tajikistan, a severe economic crisis and political stagnation affecting the country risk putting its already fragile social, economic and governance structures under more strain.

In the framework of the European Union-funded 'Capacities for Peace' project, Saferworld accompanied a group of civil society organisations from Tajikistan to analyse dynamics around labour migration in the country. This briefing provides an overview of workshop discussions, as well as follow-

up research (involving desk research, key informant interviews, focus groups discussions in Dushanbe, Khatlon, Gorno-Badakhshan and Sughd regions), undertaken between June 2014 and September 2015.

The analysis finds that labour migration greatly determines Tajiks' well-being and livelihood opportunities, and so it can exacerbate the country's existing fault-lines and structural weaknesses and, at a time of economic downturn, contribute to increased levels of fragility. This briefing concludes that the Tajik authorities and the international community should seek to better understand the challenges surrounding the decrease of labour migration on the country's social, economic, and governance structures, as well as the nature of emerging security threats in Tajikistan. It further concludes by calling Tajik authorities and international partners to prioritise support for internal economic, governance and socio-cultural reform, as well as the adequate mechanisms that will enable Tajik communities to constructively engage with and hold authorities to account.

1. Labour migration: a survival strategy under threat?

Protracted economic stagnation and a lack of employment opportunities in Tajikistan have led over one million people to seek work in neighbouring countries – predominantly in Russia – for over twenty years. For Tajik families, labour migration has become the most common survival strategy to secure livelihood opportunities. In addition, the remittances sent home by labour migrants constitute approximately half of Tajikistan's GDP – making it the most remittance-dependent country in the world.¹ As such, seasonal labour migration is considered to be a 'safety valve' not only for Tajik citizens but also for the government by relieving it of the pressure to address underlying economic and structural problems, and

¹ The World Bank (October 2, 2013), "Migration and Remittances Flows in Europe and Central Asia: Recent Trends and Outlook, 2013-2016", April 7, 2015, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/feature/2013/10/02/migration-and-remittance-flows-in-europe-and-central-asia-recent-trends-and-outlook-2013-2016>; <http://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2015/04/13/remittances-growth-to-slow-sharply-in-2015-as-europe-and-russia-stay-weak-pick-up-expected-next-year>; <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68272>

alleviating or postponing social and political tensions related to widespread unemployment.²

However, in the face of an economic crisis and a shrinking labour market in Russia – resulting from the global slump in oil prices and Western sanctions following Russia's actions in Ukraine – remittances, and consequently people's living standards, are severely declining. Indeed, the shrinking labour market in Russia, compounded by the devaluation of the rouble, has made it more difficult for Tajiks to find well-paid jobs.³ This has led to a 25 per cent drop in labour migration to Russia between 2014 and 2015.⁴ In addition, due to inflation, migrants are forced to spend more money in Russia and are unable to send as much money as they used to back home. Notably, in the first six months of 2015, the World Bank announced that remittances had dropped by 32 per cent.⁵ This situation has in turn contributed to high inflation in Tajikistan and the devaluation of the Tajik somoni, which are further affecting the population's living standards.

The impact of Russia's economic crisis is being compounded by the Russian authorities' introduction of stringent new regulations to control migration from Central Asia. These measures have been adopted in response to increasing xenophobia in Russian society but also in an apparent move to create leverage over Tajikistan in the Eurasian Economic Union (EEU) membership negotiation process.⁶ Since January 2015, new regulations – which include obtaining an international passport, applying for a work permit costing three to four times more than before, signing up for expensive health insurance and passing a test on Russian language, history and law – have been introduced for migrant workers from countries with no visa regime with Russia. Exceptions however have been made for members of the EEU, a regional economic integration project spearheaded by Russian President Vladimir Putin.⁷

In addition to adopting tougher measures, Russian authorities have been striving to implement them

more strictly. This has led to an increase in the numbers of migrants that have been found to be in breach of Russian migration regulations and that have in turn received re-entry bans. In 2013, the list of Tajik migrants with re-entry bans included around 100,000 people; by the end of 2014 the list included 200,000 Tajik citizens.⁸ However, according to the Russian Migration Service the 2015 list contained the names of 400,000 Tajik citizens, which constitutes approximately 30-40 per cent of Tajik citizens working in Russia.⁹

Although these measures may become obsolete if/when Tajikistan joins the EEU, in the meantime they are exacerbating the dire conditions of migrants in Russia and their families back home. Moreover, these regulations combined with the economic slump may provide migrants with no alternative but to return to Tajikistan. While it has been reported that the rate of return migration in 2015 was not as high as expected,¹⁰ the domestic market would have little capacity to absorb even a small percentage of returning migrants. According to interviewees, even if only 20-30 per cent of labour migrants came home, it would create serious problems for local authorities in terms of service provision and livelihoods.¹¹ This is especially true in certain regions of Tajikistan, such as the Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Region (GBAO), where the number of migrants working abroad is estimated at approximately 60,000 out of a population of 213,000. Here, infrastructure on the ground is insufficient to accommodate the return of even 20 per cent of the migrants working abroad.¹²

2. The weak responses from Tajik authorities

So far, the response from the Tajik government has been limited. The government's attempts to negotiate with Russia on re-entry bans have been unsuccessful despite Tajikistan's potential leverage over Russian military bases in the country.¹³ The government recently announced that it had developed an 'anti-crisis programme' aimed at preventing the negative impact of the Russian economic crisis. The programme has not been made public. However, according to available information,¹⁴ the anti-crisis programme sought to create 200,000 jobs in Tajikistan in the course of 2015. It is apparently the

² Aslan K (April 16, 2008), "Labour migration and its potential consequences for Central Asia", April 1, 2015 <http://old.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4836>; and EurasiaNet (November 27, 2012), "Tajikistan: Mass Migration Good for Regime, Argues Political Scientist", April 1, 2015 <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/66225>

³ Eurasianet (March 24, 2014), "Russian blacklists keep the labour migrants out", April 1, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/68184>

⁴ Eurasianet (March 24, 2016), "Tajikistan: Annual Remittance Data Confirm Worst Fears", <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/77921>

⁵ World Bank (Fall 2015) Tajikistan Economic Update, "A moderate slowdown in economic growth coupled with a sharp decline in household purchasing power", <http://www.worldbank.org/en/country/tajikistan/publication/economic-update-fall-2015>

⁶ Paul Stronski (February 1, 2016), "Tajikistan at Twenty-Five: Rahmon Consolidates Power", Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2016/02/01/tajikistan-at-twenty-five-rahmon-consolidates-power/ivh1>

⁷ Matthew Luxmoore (February 27, 2015), "Ruble ripple: New Russian laws make life difficult for migrant workers", Aljazeera America, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/2/27/new-russian-laws-make-life-difficult-for-migrant-workers.html>; Eurasianet (February 9, 2015), "Central Asians Leaving Russia: Flood or Trickle?", April 8, 2015, <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/71981>

⁸ Olimova S (February 12, 2015), "Krizis v Rossii i tajikskaya trudovaya migratsia (Crisis in Russia and Tajik labour migration)", April 1, 2015, <http://faraj.com.tj/opinion/1847-krizis-v-rossii-i-tadzhikskaya-trudovaya-migraciya.html>

⁹ Bakhtiyor Kh (April 6, 2015), "Expert: Rossiya ne obyazana prinimat vseh migrantov" (Expert: Russia is not obliged to accept all migrants), Asia-plus, April 8, 2015, <http://news.tj/ru/news/ekspert-rossiya-ne-obyazana-prinimat-vseh-migrantov>

¹⁰ Catherine Putz (January 5, 2016), "Tajikistan: Remittances Values Fall", The Diplomat, <http://thediplomat.com/2016/01/tajikistan-remittance-values-fall/>

¹¹ Expert on migrant issues in GBAO, KII, January 2015

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Kluczevska K (2014), "Migrants' re-entry bans to the Russian Federation: The Tajik story", OSCE Academy, Bishkek, p.3, 9

¹⁴ http://www.osce-academy.net/upload/file/Policy_Brief_16.pdf

¹⁴ As of June 2015.

government's intention to rely heavily on expected investments from China – mainly in local infrastructural mega-projects¹⁵ including the construction of the Tajik part of the inter-state 'Central Asia-China' gas pipeline and the Rogun Dam. However, these projects alone are unlikely to create large scale employment and significant capital is still needed to make the Rogun Dam a viable option.¹⁶

At the local level, authorities are apparently trying to assist migrants as best they can. According to a local authority representative in Isfara district, the authorities are continuing to implement a programme to support labour migrants – which included 11 job fairs, 27 information meetings and technical training for 360 people in 2014.¹⁷ However, very few respondents appeared to be aware of any efforts by government authorities to mitigate the negative impact of the current situation¹⁸ and if they were, they were not interested in the types of jobs on offer because the salaries were too low to maintain their families.¹⁹ In addition, respondents complained that the practicalities of the assistance were not always well thought-through. For example, technical training was only organised in district centres and few people could afford to go and study there.²⁰ Overall respondents expressed disappointment with the authorities' response to the crisis and did not seem hopeful of receiving assistance from the state.

Implications on internal dynamics

In view of the current context, the Tajik government's dependence on labour migration as a source of stability may thus prove unsustainable. Indeed, the government's lack of willingness to engage in meaningful reforms is increasing dissatisfaction among the population, including returning migrants, who are sceptical of the government's capacity to create jobs and deliver much needed basic services. To add to this, the Tajik government's response to Russia's tightened grip on migration has been limited,²¹ with negotiations on its EEU membership – which would presumably ease migration controls – progressing slowly. Moreover, while the social impacts of labour migration may have been bearable when migration was still a viable strategy for Tajik citizens, workshop discussions and interviews at community level revealed how in the current

environment these and the lack of government response are also adding to the growing discontent.

"At least the laws work in Russia... What I would like to see in Tajikistan is something new concerning business, economic and social issues. I would like to see democracy in action, not just words."²²

The workshop discussions and interviews also highlighted how seasonal migration could be a transformative experience for young migrant workers. Exposure to foreign environments and external influences has sometimes changed their attitudes, outlook and behaviour in ways that may influence, positively or negatively, their response to the lack of economic opportunity as well as social and political tensions in the country. The positive scenario tends to consider that migrants become better connected to the outside world through technology and are exposed to a diverse range of political, cultural and religious influences during their migration experience. Labour migrants said they used Viber, Skype and social media, including V Kontakte, Odnoklassniki and Facebook, to communicate with friends and family, but also for "exploring and just spending time."²³ To some extent these connections with the outside world have made labour migrants more aware of prevailing national, regional and global discourses and have encouraged greater reflection on their own situation. Given space and opportunity, such returnee labour migrants could become important agents for economic and political change in Tajikistan.

The more negative scenario identified throughout workshop discussions and interviews relates to returnees and would-be migrants who, in their desperation, may try to find alternative sources of income through criminal activities or by joining radical religious groups. For example, district authority officials in Khatlon oblast pointed out that there had been an increase in community-level crime and interpersonal violence in the aftermath of the 2013-2014 deportations,²⁴ although we cannot formally attribute one trend to the other.

"If the Russian Federation creates more hurdles, then it will cause instability in Tajikistan. It is because people without income, in particular young people, may be involved in different activities, including engagement in crime for the sake of money."²⁵

In addition, a lot of attention has recently been given to the prospect of a rise in radicalism and violent extremism in Tajikistan, notably due to migrants being exposed to radical and extremist views (in particular

¹⁵ Vecherka (January 26, 2015), "V 2015 godu budet sozdano ne menee 200 tisyach rabochikh mest" (No less than 200 thousand jobs will be created in 2015), Vecherka newspaper, April 1, 2015 <http://vecherka.tj/main/v-2015-godu-budet-sozdano-ne-menee-200-tv-s-rabochih-mest/>

¹⁶ Radio Ozodi (September 13, 2014) "6 milliardov pryamikh investitsiy v ekonomiku Tajikistana" (6 billions of direct investments in the Tajikistani economy), April 7, 2015, <http://news.eva.tj/economy/24504-6-mlrd-dollarov-pryamyh-investitsiy-kitaya-v-ekonomiku-tadzhikistana.html>; Kimer J (January 13, 2015), "Spurned by Russia, Tajik Labour Migrants Return Home to Build Rogun", April 7, 2015, <http://www.silkroadreporters.com/2015/01/13/spurned-russia-tajik-labour-migrants-return-home-build-rogun/>

¹⁷ District state official, KII, Isfara district, November 2014

¹⁸ Participants of FGD, Kabodiyon district, November 2014

¹⁹ Participants of FGD, Isfara district, November 2014

²⁰ Participants of FGD, Kabodiyon district, November 2014

²¹ Kluczevska K (2014), *ibid*.

²² Interview with 35 year-old male regular labour migrant to Russia, Dushanbe, July 2015.

²³ Interview with 35 year-old male regular labour migrant to Russia, Dushanbe, July 2015.

²⁴ State district official, KII, Kabodiyon district, November 2014

²⁵ Respondent migrant, KII, Isfara district, November 2014

extremist Islamist ideologies) and being ‘recruited’ by violent extremist groups through their use of social media.²⁶ In addition, many experts have warned that the drawdown of the ISAF from Afghanistan would result in a spill-over effect in the region, and specifically that increased Taliban control in the north of the country could lead to radical Islamist movements gaining a foothold to carry out their fight in neighbouring Central Asian countries.²⁷ Being closest to Afghanistan geographically, culturally and linguistically, Tajikistan’s President has warned that Tajikistan will face “a new reality” and “modern threats and challenges” including terrorism and extremism.²⁸

While there is little evidence of an actual rise in radicalism and violent extremism in Tajik society, the government’s authoritarian counter-terrorism policy – which involves mass arrests, restrictions on religious practice and forced shavings – may result in increasing resentment amongst the population. This is notably backed by evidence which has found that Central Asian migrants who have been identified as ‘supporters’ of violent extremist groups are driven not by religion but by a search for identity and solidarity in the face of economic hardship and discrimination – resentment rather than religious zeal.²⁹

Conclusion

The international community has tended to focus its attention on the country’s external security threats, overlooking the complex internal weaknesses and challenges that affect people’s lives. This briefing has pointed out how labour migration influences Tajikistan’s social, economic and governance dynamics in many ways and, as such, is critical to the country’s resilience and fragility. Further research and a deeper understanding of the impact that changing patterns of labour migration has on the country’s internal dynamics is needed. Policy-makers need more evidence of how governance structures respond under strain and what opportunities exist to address deeper structural weaknesses that are being exposed by these changes. Further research is also needed on the nature of emerging security threats in Tajikistan and how they intersect with issues like governance, access to jobs, livelihoods and basic services.

Such research should be used to inform how the national authorities engage and respond to people’s needs and concerns, as well as Tajikistan’s

international partners to ensure initiatives on countering – perceived or actual – security threats, prioritise internal socio-economic and governance reforms, as well as the establishment of adequate mechanisms to enable Tajik communities to constructively engage with and hold their authorities to account. Notably, finding and supporting creative ways to address the particularly sensitive questions of local and national governance could provide the necessary entry point to bring state and society closer. In that respect, civil society organisations in Tajikistan have a crucial role to play in convening constructive dialogues between authorities and citizens.

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This briefing is part of a ‘regional hub’ that works to strengthen local capacities in Afghanistan, Kashmir, Kyrgyzstan, Pakistan, and Tajikistan to analyse conflict risks in the region and recommend action to build long-term peace.

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²⁶ See for instance:

<http://www.crisisgroup.org/~media/Files/asia/central-asia/b072-syria-calling-radicalisation-in-central-asia.pdf>; <https://iwpr.net/global-voices/central-asian-migrants-russia-find-religion>;
<http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/jul/14/russian-migration-law-tajikistan-islamic-state-recruits>.

²⁷ Gjelten T (December 31, 2009), “Afghan war could spill over into Central Asia”, April 1, 2015,

<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=121973427>;

²⁸ Kazemi R (December 12, 2012), “A potential Afghan spill-over: how real are Central Asian fears?”, April 1, 2015 <https://www.afghanistan-analysts.org/a-potential-afghan-spill-over-how-real-are-central-Asian-fears/>

²⁹ <http://centralasiaprogram.org/blog/2015/02/23/islamic-state-messaging-to-central-asians-migrant-workers-in-russia/> (1/4/2015)