

GLOBAL CRISIS AND LABOUR MIGRATION : THE CASE OF TAJIKISTAN

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The financial and economic crisis that the world has experienced since 2008 greatly impacted the field of labour migration, including a remote country as Tajikistan, which recently become one of the greatest contributor of labour migrants. Unsurprisingly the relation between the global crisis and the field of migration has raised academic interest. In spring 2009, the research centre Shark conducted a study on the effects of the financial crisis on the labour migration and remittances in Tajikistan, including the following issues: protectionist policies of countries of destination, decreasing number of migrants, decreasing volume of remittances, and changes in behavioural patterns of migrant workers.

Over the last decade, the presence of Tajik labour migrants in Russia has rapidly increased and reached its maximum in 2008. Out of an estimated total number of 800,000 migrant workers from Tajikistan, 97% of them work in Russia. The slump in business activity in construction, manufacturing, agricultural production, financial services, trade and tourism had a negative impact on migrants, since the majority of them work in these sectors of the Russian economy.

Protectionist policies

Usually governments adopt protectionist policies to protect domestic labour markets in an effort to overcome the financial crisis. The wide-spread beliefs among local population that migrants “take away” jobs force governments of destination countries to toughen their migratory policy. Since these beliefs are broadcasted by mass-media, they promote discrimination, xenophobia, and increase tensions between countries of destination and origin.

As a result, labour migrants face increasing political and administrative risks in their countries of destination. For instance, in Russia the administrative barriers to obtain registrations and other legal documents for labour migrants have recently increased. In particular, there is a 7-10 fold increase in the amount of informal fees that migrant workers have to pay to Russian law enforcement authorities (Federal Migration Service and local police officers) to get residence permits on the territory of the Russian Federation.

The dynamics of labour migration

The first stage of the financial crisis, which directly affected labour market in Russia in October 2008, coincided with the time when labour migrants from Tajikistan returned back home. These seasonal migrants, who comprise 73% of all Tajik migrants, usually work in Russia from March-April until October-November. However in 2008 local authorities and transport companies pointed out that the number of returning migrants was three times less than previous years. For instance according to the Ministry of Transport of Tajikistan, the number of passengers in the period November-December 2008 was three times less than in 2007. One of the reasons for this slowdown is the incapacity of seasonal workers to gather

enough money to come home, since many of them did not get paid at all or experienced holdbacks in their salary. Another reason is that some migrants preferred to stay in Russia and observe the situation of the labour market in an attempt to obtain better employment in the following year. Seasonal workers started to go back to Russia only at the very end of February 2009, and continued to go back to Russia for several months up to June. The number of season workers was however 35-40% less than in 2008.

In general, our estimates show that the total number of migrants from Tajikistan working in Russia in summer 2009 decreased by 20%. This figure correlates with the data from the Department of Migration of the Ministry of Internal Affairs of Tajikistan, which estimates that the number of Tajik migrant workers in Russia decreased by 120,000 people. Despite the constraints of the financial crisis, migrants obviously continue to leave abroad for work. Therefore, in the nearest future, we can expect the recovery of the total number of Tajik migrants working in Russia.

Remittances

According to the National Bank of Tajikistan, the amount of remittances to Tajikistan decreased by more than 30% in the first half of 2009. One third of all migrants continued to send home the same amount of money as before, 40% sent lower amounts, 20% did not send money at all, and only 5% increased their amount of remittances.

Among those who lost their jobs, 25% continued to send money from their own savings, 10% took loans to be able to send money to their families. The rest, i.e. more than a half, did not send anything.

Changes in behavioural patterns of migrant workers

In order to analyze behavioural changes, we have focused on three different categories of migrant workers: those who decided to stay in Russia, those who returned to Tajikistan, and those who left for work during the period of the financial crisis.

Migrants who stayed in Russia during the crisis

In general, the older migrants with higher levels of education, skills, relatively high salaries, and longer experience in labour migration were more likely to maintain their residence in Russia during the crisis. Nevertheless, the opportunities to stay in Russia did not depend on the current salary level, but rather on the ability to retain one's position or find a new job. Such qualities as entrepreneurship skills, activeness, low risk aversion, ability to change one's speciality or move to another region appeared to be important factors determining the likelihood to stay in Russia. Other qualities such as patience, willingness to work in harsh conditions, ability to reconcile with lower salaries may appear to be even more important. Among those who stayed in Russia, 60% said that they would be ready to accept lower salaries, while among those who returned to Tajikistan only 30% would have accepted such conditions. Another important factor determining the likelihood to stay in Russia is the

positive attitude towards Russia. Two thirds of those who managed to stay in Russia stated that they would like to get Russian citizenship. In terms of plans for migration, only one third of respondents said they would like to return to Tajikistan. Half of respondents were not going to return, 10% said they would like to return to Tajikistan when they earned more money and when the situation in Tajikistan got better.

Migrants who returned to Tajikistan during the crisis

The wave of return migration to Tajikistan took place in March 2009. Two large sub-groups can be distinguished among all returnees. The first group consists of young individuals between 18 and 26 years old, whose stay in Russia was the first one in their life. These individuals make up 20% of all returnees. They do not speak Russian, do not have any prior migration experience, and have low or no professional skills. During the financial crisis, the members of this group were the first ones to lose their jobs. The second group consists of highly skilled workers, who lost their high-paying jobs and returned to Tajikistan in order to rest and wait until the end of the crisis. Respondents pointed out that many employers appreciated high skilled specialists and tried to give them work even during the crisis. Most employers maintained connections with these workers even after their return to Tajikistan. They would invite these workers back as soon as the industry starts reviving again. Migrants of this second group consider their return to Tajikistan as a temporary rest, and do not plan to look for permanent jobs in Tajikistan. In this group only 10% of the respondents claimed that they would never work abroad anymore.

Migrants who departed to Russia during the crisis

In our study, we examined various features of the current Tajik migration to Russia: its socio-demographic characteristics, preferences, values, and strategies. The data reveals that 64% of the respondents arranged their work before they departing for Russia. Members of this group include qualified workers in manufacturing, construction, trade, catering, transportation, housing and public and other types of services. Two thirds of these workers are above 30, speak Russian, and have experience in labour migration from two to nine years. As for the migrants who departed for Russia without any previous job arrangement (36%), they agreed to do any work for any salary and in any working conditions. They planned to wait in Russia until the end of the crisis and get better job when the economic situation improves. Half of migrants from this group did not care at all about the type of their work, the associated salary, and working conditions. We named these migrants "hopeless" because they have the lowest salaries and reside in extreme poverty.

Strategies and plans of migrants

Migration strategies have changed noticeably since the beginning of the crisis. Currently only 50% of the migrants are willing to do seasonal work in Russia. The second half plan to look for long-term employments, ranging from 1 to 2 years. As a 46-year old carpenter told us “There is always some work in Russia. It may be better or worse, but it will be some work anyway. While here in Tajikistan there is nothing.”

The plans for future jobs show that migrants quickly adapt to the changing labour conditions of the Russian market. The most important evidence is the willingness of 36% of the migrants to do any work. This implies that one of the most crucial strategies of the migrants is their ability to change occupations and the development of various professional skills. Thus migrants who depart for Russia have different qualifications and can quickly respond to changing labour demand in Russia. Additionally they are ready to do any job and plan to learn the required skills at the workplace.

Conclusions

The current developments in labour migration allow concluding that the main factor determining changes in labour migration is the Russian protectionist policy rather than the financial crisis itself. The protectionist policy includes a worse attitude of police authorities towards migrants, the employers' attempts to reduce their losses by underpaying migrants, and the increasing proportion of formal and informal payments. All these factors raise stakes to migration and make employment in Russia less profitable.

In response to this, some migrants prefer to return home, cut on their expenditures and wait until the end of the crisis. Other migrants prefer to stay in Russia, accepting lower wages and worsening working and living conditions. Young labour migrants without professional skills are being laid off the first and most of them decide to return to Tajikistan. The most skilful workers, however, continue to work, even despite worsening working and living conditions in Russia. Thus the major impact of the crisis on Tajikistan is likely to be in financial terms as a result of a lower volume of remittances, rather than in socio-demographic terms such as an increased number of labour returnees.