

Tajikistan: economic migration and social change

Description

Since the 1990s, economic migration to Russia has been an integral part of Tajik life. This social component has brought many changes within this patriarchal and hierarchical society.

In 2018, the number of Tajik migrant workers was estimated at 1.7 million, which is quite considerable for a country with a population of less than 10 million. Remittances from workers, most of whom have gone to Russia, represent the equivalent of a third of the country's GDP, fuelling the economy of this heavily indebted, landlocked country with limited resources.



The shocks of the end of the USSR and the civil war

Since the brutal collapse of the Soviet Union and the civil war that raged from 1992 to 1997, Tajikistan has seen its social system collapse, leading to an impressive increase in inequality. These two brutal events in the country's recent history were the precursors of a phenomenon of economic emigration that has been firmly rooted in this post-Soviet society for more than two decades⁽¹⁾. Today, Tajikistan remains one of the poorest states in the former USSR, with a largely rural population struggling to survive (less than 10% arable land).

On the other hand, this small country has the highest fertility rate in Central Asia: 3.36 children per woman in 2016, giving it an abundant young workforce. This should be seen against the backdrop of the demographic deficit that has characterized Russia since the early 1990s, generating a multitude of vacancies, both skilled and unskilled, that the Russians themselves need to fill.

Because of its indebtedness and tendency to predatory appropriation of the country's resources, the Tajik state cannot offer a viable future to its younger generations. This situation is helping to stimulate economic emigration, which is primarily made up of young male workers. Although this emigration is often seasonal, it can lead to the long-term integration of Tajik workers in their host country.

Tajik economy on life support

For most departures, one return trip a year is planned, lasting from one to three months, depending on religious festivals and family events such as weddings, funerals, and circumcisions. These events set the pace for Tajik society, and families are prepared to spend pharaonic sums to celebrate their offspring's wedding in opulence bordering on indecency, given the scale of the economic difficulties faced by the vast majority of the population.

In this context, remittances from workers who have left for Russia are vital to the survival of Tajik households. In 2007, Dushanbe passed legislation to combat this type of spending, which is considered unreasonable (particularly for weddings) and worsens the financial situation of families

whose income is often very modest.

In the poorest households, return journeys are often more spaced out due to a lack of funds to pay for transport: it costs 6,700 roubles (around €97) to travel to Dushanbe from Moscow by train (for a journey of three days and twenty hours), compared with around 12,893 roubles (around €187) by plane. In the past, this crossing of Central Asia was one of the trickiest stages in the economic emigration process, as it involved crossing several borders (Russian, Kazakh, Uzbek), and workers were regularly subjected to racketeering by customs officials. These obstacles could seriously erode the wealth accumulated throughout the year. Nowadays, emigrants transfer their money via companies like Western Union, which have revolutionized their lives and families.

The Russian language and the Soviet legacy

Economic emigration, which has thus become systematic in many Tajik households, has taken Russia as its preferred destination because of the migrants' shared Soviet past and knowledge of the Russian language. At the same time, the exacerbation of tensions in the region, particularly between Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, has drastically reduced the opportunities for emigration to neighboring countries.

Despite the difficulties, Tajik workers can look forward to long-term integration in Russia. This can be seen in the frequency of mixed marriages and the steady increase in the number of Tajiks becoming Russian citizens. This does not prevent Tajik workers from working illegally in Russia, reflecting the difficulties encountered by some of them in obtaining legal status. This status is difficult to obtain because Tajikistan is not a member of the Eurasian Economic Union. It enjoys a different ease of migration to Russia than, for example, Kyrgyzstan.

This makes estimating the number of Tajik workers on Russian soil difficult. This characteristic also contributes to precariousness among Tajiks in Russia, where abuses and exploitation cases are relatively frequent. Without status, migrants cannot refuse short-term contracts (generally three months) [\(2\)](#).

Skills that are appreciated but not sufficiently valued

In addition, the professional skills acquired in the workplace in Russia often do not lead to the issue of a certificate of aptitude for the worker who, if they return to Tajikistan or change company on Russian soil, risks being given a lower-paid and less qualified job.

However, it is essential to note that unskilled jobs are far from being the only ones filled in Russia. Russia is suffering from a demographic deficit and a glaring shortage of doctors. As a result, many Tajik doctors are being asked to leave their country to work in Russia. The Tajik countryside is gradually becoming a medical desert, creating a critical situation in this rural country.

More generally, Tajik workers have access to many jobs in all sectors (construction, services, markets) in Russia. Many graduate workers who have not found a sufficiently lucrative job in Tajikistan choose to retrain in Russia. They enter less prestigious professions, but in this way, they can re-qualify socially thanks to higher incomes.

This workforce, reputed to be "serious, sober and punctual," "reliable and non-alcoholic" [\(3\)](#), is particularly appreciated in Russia. Tajiks, overwhelmingly Muslim, are relatively immune to scourges

such as alcoholism. Moreover, departures to Russia are generally made possible by solid, pre-established network organizations; therefore, immigrant workers have little contact with Russians and are more often content with a Tajik (or more broadly Muslim) intergenerational « entre-soi. »

The impact of migration on the restructuring of Tajik society

The effects of these migrations on Tajik society, which is hierarchical and patriarchal, are considerable. Matrimonial strategies, in particular, take account of these flows and are constantly changing.

Women account for only 5% of the Tajik workforce who leave for Russia. Traditionally sedentary, they marry early so that, despite the absence of men, they can create a family and perpetuate the lineage. The consequences of this migration are far-reaching in terms of the status of the young bride: once the marriage has taken place, she traditionally returns to her husband's family home. Very often, the son who left to work in Russia transferred the money directly to his mother, who was in charge of the household, and not to his wife, whose status needed to be higher. This is even less the case when she has yet to give birth to her first child. In addition to the desertification of the villages, this phenomenon of migration also means that the wives left behind have a difficult daily life, both materially and psychologically. But this traditional family model may also be changing due to economic migration, which is helping to raise the status of the wife, who may sometimes find herself directly in charge of the household finances.

Emigration to Russia and China (a largely academic movement) confronts Tajiks with new lifestyles. Men tended to marry later, which was no real obstacle to their personal development in a patriarchal society. They are much less subject to the imperative of virginity than their female compatriots. Therefore, the imbalances between the sexes in matrimonial strategies have significant implications. Tajik society is very conservative and does little to educate young people about sex. As a result, condom use does not appear necessary for many young people, generating real epidemiological and health risks in transmitting sexually transmitted diseases and HIV infection within families when workers return to Tajikistan⁽⁴⁾.

Despite this, emigration gave rise to the construction of new rites of passage within this codified society, helping to reinforce the need to have a son. A crushing responsibility was placed on the shoulders of the men, and failure was unthinkable for these workers, who had to act as the heroes of an entire family. Suppose a household nominates one of its sons to go and work in Russia. In that case, he will need to be able to raise enough money to pay for the various family ceremonies and his family's education and medical care. If this fails, the economic migration may turn into exile for the man who has failed in his mission.

Notes:

(1) Sophie Hohmann, "Socio-economic migrations and health issues resulting from the Tajik civil war," in *Migration and Social Upheaval as the Face of Globalization in Central Asia*, ed. Marlène Laruelle, Brill, Boston, 2013, pp. 149-166.

(2) Sophie Hohmann, "Migrations polaires et trajectoires générationnelles. De l'Asie centrale vers le Grand Nord russe (Mourmansk et Norilsk)", in *Santé et migration en Asie centrale*, ed. Sophie

Hohmann and Rukhshona Kurbovona, *Les cahiers d'Asie centrale*, no. 27, 2019, pp. 107-142.

(3) Saodat Olimova, "Change in Sexual and Marital Behaviors among Tajik Migrant Workers in Russia," in *Santé et migration en Asie centrale*, ed. Sophie Hohmann and Rukhshona Kurbovona, *Les cahiers d'Asie centrale*, n° 27, 2019, pp. 145-176.

(4) Sophie Hohmann, Saodat Olimova, "Vulnerabilities and HIV/AIDS infection among Tajik migrant workers", *Revue d'études comparatives Est-Ouest*, Vol. 43, No. 1-2, March-June 2012, pp. 167-201.

Thumbnail: Young Tajiks in Moscow.

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