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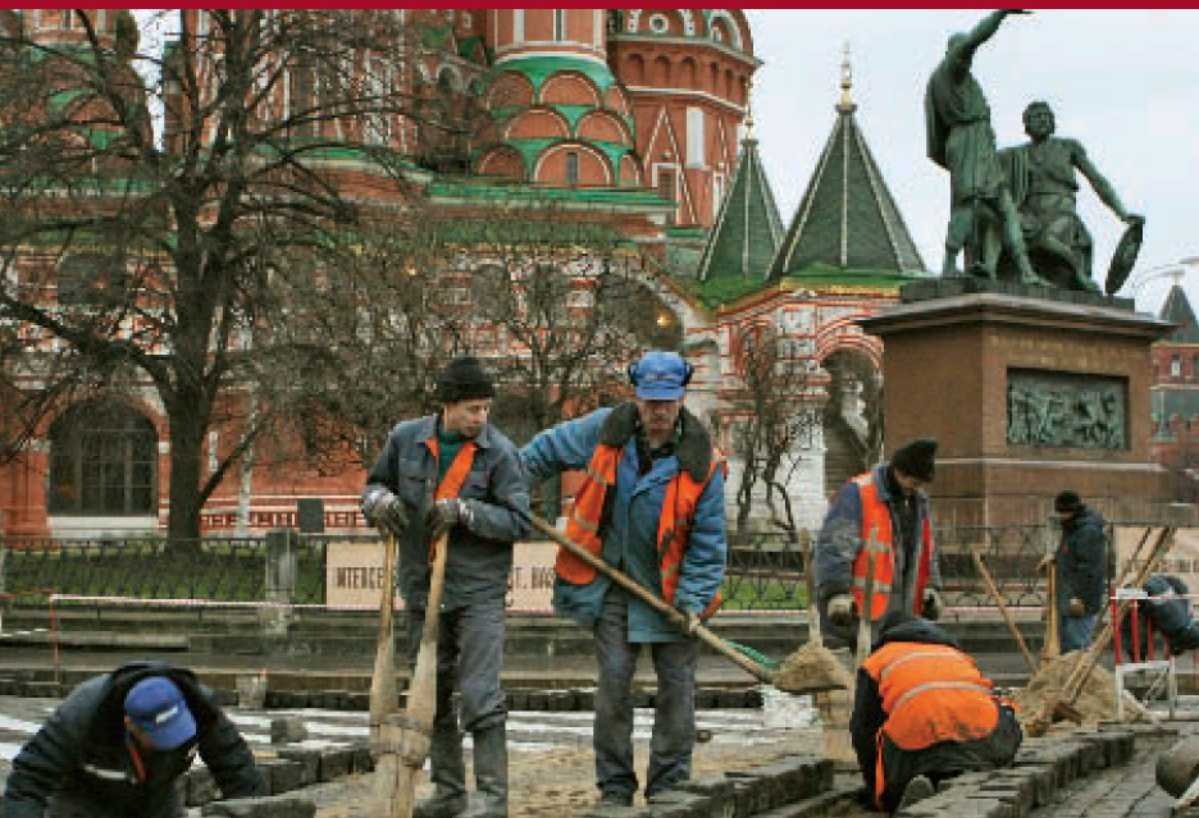
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REMITTANCES, RECESSION... RETURNING HOME?

The Effects of the 2008 Economic Crisis on Tajik Migrant Labor in Moscow



Eurasian Migration Papers
Number 4

Hilary Hemmings

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Cover Photograph: A team of migrant workers repaving Red Square. Seen in the background is the Intercession Cathedral (St.Basil's). Moscow, Russia; 2006; Reproduced with permission from ITAR-TASS; Photographed by Marina Lysteva

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Introduction

In early 2008, Russia looked to be on the fast track to increased prosperity, with high gas and oil prices contributing to its gross domestic product (GDP) of \$1,677 billion,¹ and with an impressive GDP growth rate of 5.6 percent.² However, by late 2008, oil and gas prices had fallen sharply, causing a major private capital outflow from the country. In 2009, Russia reported negative GDP growth, with the fall in the economy greatly affecting its banking and credit institutions. This in turn caused an almost immediate and widespread contraction in the building sector, because Russia's banks financed 80 percent of construction in the country.³ Though many Russians were left unemployed as a result of this near halt in construction, it was the Tajik migrant workers who were disproportionately affected by the downturn.

Each year, Tajikistan provides the greatest number of Russia's unskilled and low-skilled seasonal migrant laborers, the majority of whom work in the construction industry, along with other types of manual labor. With almost 60 percent of the population of Tajikistan living in poverty, with almost half the country suffering from unemployment,⁴ and with little hope for domestic job creation, Tajikistan avoids potential economic ruin by sending 83 percent of its migrant workers to Russia.⁵ Because of complications with the Russian bureaucracy, along with employer preferences, most Tajik migrant laborers work illegally, leaving them vulnerable to extortion by the police, exploitation by employers, dangerous work conditions, and harassment and violent attacks from right-wing nationalist and neo-Nazi groups. And because almost half of Tajikistan's GDP is generated by remittances from these workers, the country is heavily dependent on migratory labor.⁶

With the economic downturn in Russia, many important economic institutions—such as the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, and the International Monetary Fund—feared that the fate of Tajikistan would be especially grim, and thus they forecast a huge drop in remittances, an increase in poverty, and mass starvation. The Russian press predicted a huge outflow of Tajik migrants back to their home country, leading international observers and political risk analysts to question how the largely apathetic

government of President Emomali Rahmon would respond to the influx of unemployed workers streaming back into Tajikistan. Some analysts worried that the prospect of revolution or a rise in radical Islam was waiting in the wings. For those laborers who did remain in Russia, human rights organizations feared an increase in xenophobic attacks against the migrants amid a background of Russian unemployment, along with even harsher working environments and near-slave labor conditions as payments from employers decreased severely or were withheld altogether. The portrait painted of the future of Tajikistan was overtly dismal: a failed state running rampant with hunger and poverty, and perhaps a rehashing of the severe political unrest that had led the country to be involved in a civil war from 1992 to 1997.

Yet against all odds, none of these predictions (excluding the human rights violations) came to pass. Though a portion of Tajik migrant workers have left Russia, about two-thirds have remained, either working for a reduced salary and benefits under more hazardous working conditions or waiting out the crisis in Russia on savings they have accumulated.⁷ Though remittances from Tajikistan decreased by almost one-third in 2009,⁸ and the prices of its principal exports, aluminum and cotton, have fallen dramatically on the world market, the Tajik nation has managed to survive. Tajikistan has managed to keep its head above water through a combination of international aid; a crucial change from its status as a net importer of food to a more self-sustaining position; and, on a very microeconomic level, financial support for the households of migrant workers through family and kinship networks. It should be noted, however, that this dire yet manageable status quo is not sustainable in the long term. The effects of the recent global financial crisis on Tajik migration are not expected to be permanent, and thus will last only as long as it takes for the Russian economy to rebound. With Russia recording moderate GDP growth in early 2010, and less yet still positive growth predicted for 2011,⁹ there is some cause for hope; however, a return to the level of the pre-recession boom economy is unlikely.

The Economy of Tajikistan: Forced to Work Abroad

Immigration into Russia for employment has been vital to Tajikistan throughout its short history as an independent nation, due to its poverty, stagnant job market, and booming youth population. Tajikistan also suffers from a dearth of easily exploitable, profitable resources. The country's overdependence on its two principal goods, aluminum and cotton, are both holdovers from the collective planned economy of the Soviet Union; these two goods make up 75 percent of the country's total exports.¹⁰ As for other agricultural products, only 7 percent of the country's land is arable, and 40 percent of this land is already being used for cotton farming.¹¹ Due to heavy cotton cultivation, Tajikistan lacks affordable domestic food production and is a net importer of cheaper food products from countries such as Russia and China. Aluminum remains Tajikistan's prime extractable resource, despite its wealth of mineral resources such as gold, zinc, lead, molybdenum, coal, petroleum, and gas. However, only a fourth of all known deposits of these minerals have been exploited due to lack of technology and investment. The dearth of innovation in technology and small number of investors is also a factor in Tajikistan's deficiency in modern or diverse heavy industry. In fact, the largest industrial plant in the country and greatest revenue producer, the aluminum smelter in Tursunzade, TADAZ, was built in the 1980s under Communism.¹² In 2003, it was working at one-third of its operational capacity while still constituting almost 10 percent of Tajikistan's GDP and 60 percent of its export revenues.¹³

International investors are hesitant to invest in Tajikistan for a number of reasons, including poor infrastructure due to geography, communist legacies, and destruction left over from the 1992–97 civil war, which devastated the country. Tajikistan's heavily mountainous terrain separates the north and east of the country from the center during the winter months, and industry only arises in small pockets around the river valleys that lie between the mountain chains. Central Asia in general suffers from a lack of infrastructure networks compared to the rest of the former Soviet Union, a problem that has its roots in the collective planning of

the communist economic system. The main transportation routes that are available for entering and exiting the country are roads built in the 1960s and 1970s, which are currently in a serious state of disrepair, and railroads that run through Uzbekistan, which has had consistently tenuous relations with the Tajik government.¹⁴ During the civil war, almost all industrial production came to a standstill and transportation across the country was disrupted. Following the war, the majority of Tajik industries had become obsolete through years of idleness; their products were no longer competitive with the quality and price found on the world market. Infrastructure has continued to fall into further decay, and little has been done by the current government to improve the situation.

The lack of domestic business and foreign investment are just a few of the factors that have led to widespread unemployment in Tajikistan, particularly in the rural areas. The problem of unemployment is especially acute in Tajikistan due to its high concentration of youth; the median age of the population is just under twenty-two years old.¹⁵ During the 1980s, Tajikistan had one of the highest birthrates in the Soviet Union, with a natural population growth rate of 3 percent. The country experienced a decline during its civil war, to 1.85 percent, but since the late 1990s the rate has averaged about 2 percent. As of 2006, Tajikistan's demographics show that the majority of the population, 57.5 percent, is of working age (i.e., 15 to 59 years old).¹⁶ Adding to the demographic pressures, virtually no jobs have been created by domestic industry since the end of the civil war in 1997. Though the official unemployment rate hovers around 2 percent of the population, this is a misleading estimate because it is derived from those who sign up for welfare benefits, and given that the welfare benefits provided by the state are miniscule, many Tajiks do not bother to notify the government when they lose their jobs. In a study conducted by UNESCO in 2006, the actual unemployment rate was closer to half the entire population.¹⁷

High unemployment, underdeveloped industry, and sizable population growth have all contributed to Tajikistan's severe poverty. Almost 60 percent of the country's population lives below the poverty line, defined by the International Monetary Fund as living on less than \$1.40 a day.¹⁸ This makes Tajikistan the poorest country in the former Soviet Union and the poorest non-African country in the world.¹⁹ This poverty is concentrated in the country's rural areas, where 70 percent of the population resides,

where unemployment is highest, and where the greatest number of low-skilled, undereducated youth originate.²⁰ Several international financial institutions—such as the World Bank, IMF, and Asian Development Bank—agree that unemployment in these rural areas has been the main source of migratory labor for Russia during the past decade.

Labor Migration: A Difficult Yet Necessary Way of Life

In an effort to escape constant unemployment and persistent poverty, a substantial proportion of Tajiks have chosen to migrate to other countries for work. With the permission, if not outright blessing, of the government, nearly 30 percent of the adult male working population of Tajikistan goes abroad each year to support their families through remittances.²¹ With 98 percent of these remittances originating in Russia, according to the Asian Development Bank, it is prudent to examine Tajik labor migration into Russia, and particularly into Moscow.²²

According to the World Bank, Russia has the second-largest migrant labor population in the world, only surpassed in number by the United States.²³ Half of that working population originates in Central Asia, with the biggest sending countries being Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Uzbekistan. Russia also has one of the loosest immigration policies in the world, allowing post-Soviet citizens to enter the country without a visa (except those from Georgia and Turkmenistan). In 2007, a new law was passed that made it easier for migrant workers to register themselves, in an effort to curb the common practice of working without a permit. Russia is highly dependent on migrant labor, as anywhere from 7 to 20 percent of its workforce is made up of immigrants, both legal and illegal.²⁴ Although Russia has an ambivalent attitude at best toward these migrant workers (this situation is discussed more fully below in the section “The Un-Welcome Wagon: Worsening Relations between Russians and Migrant Workers”), there is no question that Russia needs these immigrants to survive. Because of its severe demographic decline, having lost 6.6 million people between 1992 and 2008 and continuing downward,²⁵ Russia has been advised by several leading financial institutions, including the World Bank, that the only real means of combating the imminent reduction of its workforce is to allow more migrant labor. Voicing an opinion that is deeply unpopular within the country, President Dmitri Medvedev begrudgingly admitted in late December 2009: “We have a huge country, which makes finding enough workers difficult. We are forced to rely on foreign workers.”²⁶

Tajikistan has had a regular history of sending migrant laborers to Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union. Migration from Tajikistan has come in three waves. The first, occurring in the early to middle 1990s, was caused by a massive downturn in living conditions, a decline in domestic salaries, and the start of the economic boom in Russia. It represented an exodus of highly educated individuals coming from the capital of Dushanbe and its surrounding areas. This immigrant wave—made up of ethnic Russians, Germans, and Jews, along with native Tajiks—found work in the health and education sectors, as well as highly skilled construction and industrial workers who went to work in the oil and gas, engineering, and construction industries.²⁷

The second wave of migration came at the end of the 1990s, when the rural population began to leave Tajikistan as a result of the devastation of the countryside caused by the civil war. This wave was made up of older individuals, mostly fathers and heads of households, who were significantly less educated compared with those in the first wave. Despite their lack of education, these second-wave migrants knew Russian from their days in the Soviet Union, and thus they were able to find work relatively easily in the service sector, private construction, and agricultural sector.²⁸

The third wave of migration, from the early 2000s until 2008, has been dubbed the “brawn drain” by the World Bank. The majority of the workers are eighteen to twenty-nine years of age, speak little to no Russian as a result of Tajikistan’s aggressive national language programs, and typically come to Russia immediately following the completion of secondary school, with no specialized education or training in the fields in which they hope to find work.²⁹ This third migrant wave is worth examining further because this was the last wave before the recent economic downturn and thus can serve as an index of the changes that occurred following the crisis. The vast majority of migrant workers in this wave are male (93%);³⁰ work seasonally, from February and March in the spring to October and November in the fall (73%); and work in construction (74%).³¹ The average salary for a Tajik migrant worker is 12,000 rubles per month,³² or around \$420 a month, the same as the average Russian monthly salary; however, Tajik migrant workers work 20 or even 30 hours more per week than their Russian equivalents. This average salary is more than four times what the common worker makes in Tajikistan per month.³³ Tajik workers usually find their jobs through migrant networks within Russia, when messages of

employment opportunities are relayed home. At the peak of migration in 2008, the majority of the workers in individual construction brigades came from their foreman's families or villages.³⁴

Although it is a hard population to quantify accurately, it is thought that around 70 percent of all migrant laborers in Russia work illegally.³⁵ However, there are varying degrees of illegality, dealing with both registration and employment. According to Russian law, Central Asians can work without a visa, but they must have a temporary registration card, which they file for at the local post office upon arrival. This temporary registration card extends to ninety days for Tajik citizens, and many seasonal workers simply overstay their registrations. These registration cards do not grant a right to employment within Russia, and quota restrictions have been placed on the number of immigrants allowed to work in the country. Many Tajik laborers, registered or not, choose to work in the "gray economy," meaning that they have little to no legal protection. These migrants' bosses pay no taxes on wages, can hire or fire the migrants at will, and frequently withhold a migrant's salary and passport until the completion of his work.³⁶ These workers are often housed by employers in subhuman conditions, such as in barracks, storage containers, inside the factory or construction site itself, or even in cardboard boxes or shelters constructed of corrugated metal. Despite these grueling conditions of work in Russia, migrant labor continues due to the importance of the remittances sent back to Tajikistan.

Remittances: Lifeblood of a Nation

Remittances are undeniably crucial to the economy of Tajikistan and the personal well-being of its citizens. According to the National Bank of Tajikistan, 46 percent of the national GDP in 2008 was generated by remittances,³⁷ and up to 70 percent of the country's trade deficit was financed through remittances.³⁸ Remittances have strongly helped to alleviate poverty in the country more than any governmental program has done thus far. For those living in the Tajik countryside, where the poorest strata of society are found, remittances constitute at the very least 25 percent of household income, although in actuality the proportion is probably a great deal higher.³⁹ Most remittances are used hand to mouth and only barely cover the cost of living for the average Tajik family. Savings are infrequent and are usually used to finance the expenses of sending the migrant worker abroad or returning him home at the end of the season.

Remittances have filled the gap left by the government of President Rahmon in providing for the citizens of Tajikistan. Though the state budgeted \$201 million for public education and \$74 million for health care in 2008, this appropriation was meager in comparison with the \$2.6 billion sent home in remittances that year. Remittances, though eclipsing what the government can provide to the people, have also proved more flexible in times of hardship. For instance, in the harsh winter of 2007–8, when the nation was plagued with power outages and freezing temperatures, government services all but stopped operating, whereas numerous reports described an increase in the amount of remittances being sent home.⁴⁰ Because the government has been able to be less responsive to the needs of the population due to the cushion of remittances, a serious concern cropped up when the economic crisis hit Russia: how or if the government would respond to a near-certain dramatic decrease in the amount of remittances being sent to Tajikistan.

Russia and the 2008 Global Economic Crisis

The 2008 economic crisis was the worst to hit Russia since the fall of the Soviet Union. Even compared with the 1998 crisis, which led to a huge devaluation of the ruble and the default by the government on \$40 million of debt, the 2008 crisis still struck harder. It led to an 8.7 percent decline in GDP in 2009, as compared with a 5.3 percent decline in 1998.⁴¹ As in the 1998 crisis, Russia, as a near petro-state, was first hit hard by the falling oil prices, which dropped from \$129.7 for a barrel of oil in August 2008 to \$39.2 a barrel in December of that same year. This caused a huge reversal in the private capital flows into and out of the country. Private capital had been previously streaming into the country at around \$50 billion per year. But by the close of 2008, there was a net capital outflow of \$131 billion.⁴² Russia's response to the fall in oil prices was mixed. Finance Minister Alexei Kudrin warned that the prosperity of 2008 had been a peak for Russian incomes and would never come again,⁴³ while Prime Minister Vladimir Putin assured the public that the drop in prices was "not a big problem" and that Russia would be a leader in economic growth in 2009, with a 5.5 percent increase.⁴⁴

However, positive growth did not come to Russia, and as the economy continued to decline, the banking sector and credit providers were the next to be seriously affected. Given that 80 percent of the building sector was funded by Russian banks, construction looked to take a big hit as a result of the crisis. With 40 percent of the construction workforce being made up of migrant labor, what this meant for Tajik migrant workers and their job security was unclear—yet inescapably negative.⁴⁵ Interestingly enough, the situation remained unchanged in the European half of Russia; in the cities along the Volga River, such as Samara, Saratov, and Volgograd; in the Southern Federal district; in Siberia; and in the Far East—with the crisis only affecting employment in the major cities of Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg.⁴⁶ In Moscow, as construction slowed, and many workers had their salaries cut or withheld or were fired altogether, many international observers wondered if this would lead to a mass exodus of migrant laborers back to Tajikistan. This turned out not to be the case.

Should I Stay or Should I Go? Fewer Tajik Laborers Than Anticipated Return Home

Despite widespread reports, especially within the Russian press, that the economic crisis would cause a massive flood of migrant workers returning to their home countries, a study conducted by the Russian Higher School of Economics' Demography Institute showed that only 3.8 percent of those surveyed decided to return home directly after being fired.⁴⁷ However, as a result of protracted unemployment, poor working conditions, harassment by law enforcement officials, and lowered or withheld salaries, 20 to 30 percent of Tajik migrant workers (around 120,000 to 150,000 people) returned home in the first half of 2009.⁴⁸ Additionally, in January 2010, 30 percent fewer migrant workers were expected to arrive in Russia than had arrived at the beginning of the spring working season in 2009.⁴⁹ Though significant, these numbers are nowhere near what analysts predicted at the onset of the crisis.

According to the Demography Institute study, the main reasons for migrants returning home in 2008 were family problems back in Tajikistan (54.9%), parents or older relatives requesting that they return home (48.5%), and a worsening of their health (11%). The motives for returning to Tajikistan in 2009 were inextricably related to the crisis; 42.4 percent of respondents lost their job, 15.3 percent had their salary lowered, and 13.6 percent were deceived regarding job opportunities or had their pay completely withheld by employers. Only 15.3 percent of those surveyed in 2009 returned home for reasons unrelated to the economic downturn in Russia.⁵⁰

On the whole, almost a majority of the migrants who left for Tajikistan were young, eighteen to twenty-nine years old (47.3%), and more than a third had previously been employed in the construction industry (36.8%). They are either low-skilled, having only completed secondary school (52.7%), or conversely, very highly skilled businessmen who decided to wait out the crisis on their savings in Tajikistan, where the cost of living is cheaper. More than one-third of the returning migrants are unmarried, meaning they are not likely heads of household with families to support back home. The average family savings of a migrant returning

to Tajikistan is higher than that of a migrant deciding to stay in Russia, meaning that their family can afford to have them not work, as unemployment (or in the rare instance of finding a job in Tajikistan, extremely low pay) awaits almost all the returnees. Finally, the bulk of these returnees do not speak Russian, and almost half have only one to four years of experience in Russia, with an additional 17.1 percent having less than a year of experience, indicating that they decided to return after their first foray into migratory labor. In this sense, a Darwinian natural selection process can be seen among the returnees, as those less skilled, less educated, less experienced, with a lesser need to provide for a family, and with a poorer handle on the Russian language left after their unsuccessful, and sometimes first, attempt to find employment in Russia.

Those Who Remained: Seasoned Workers Surviving through Worsening Circumstances

From the data collected in the study done by the Russian Higher School of Economics, whose findings were reached in conjunction with the Ministry of Labor and Social Protection of Tajikistan, a sketch can be made of the new, fourth wave of immigration into Russia. This wave represents those who have remained in Russia since December of 2008 and/or those who returned in the spring of 2009 for the first working season since the onset of the crisis. With the crisis acting as a catalyst for a type of natural selection, weeding out those not best suited for migratory labor or those not most in need of remittances to send home, this current fourth wave of migrants varies greatly from those who arrived during the peak of migration in 2008.

Of the migrants who returned to Russia in the spring of 2009, the majority, 64 percent, came back to jobs that they had lined up in advance; 26.9 percent returned to the same job they occupied every year; 15.4 percent came as a result of their boss's request for labor in a specific job; 17.9 percent were foremen of construction brigades; and 3.8 percent were self-employed (e.g., taxi drivers or truck loaders). The other one-third of migrant laborers, who left for Russia without predetermined work, fell into two categories: low-qualified individuals who were to join up with family or acquaintances in a work crew, agreeing to any kind of work (16.8%); or "despairing" individuals, whose remittances or savings in Tajikistan had been completely used up and, with their households on the verge of collapse, opted to flee from extreme poverty in Tajikistan (19.2%).⁵¹

There is a noticeable change in the demographics of the migrant workers who returned to Russia following the crisis, compared with those who left. Those returning to Tajikistan were on average 18-29 years old. Most of these returning migrants were male, although a small amount of female migrants (11.4%) returned to Tajikistan as well. Of the returnees, over one-third were unmarried. The average level of education among those returning to Tajikistan was 10 to 11 years, or completion of second-

ary school (52.7%). Over one-fourth of returnees to Tajikistan reported their level of savings to be higher than average or very high. They also had a lower level of experience, with 65.7 percent having less than 5 years of experience with migratory work in Russia, and 17 percent of those having worked less than one full year in Russia.

On the whole, those who returned to Russia to find work were older; six times more 50- to 59-year-olds returned to Russia, with the average migrant's age being between 30 and 39. The migrants were overwhelmingly male (96.2%). In addition, the vast majority of returning migrants to Russia were married (92.3%), with an average of 3.6 children back in Tajikistan. With the exception of the outlier of highly qualified professionals returning to Tajikistan, the migrants returning to work in Russia possessed a higher level of education than those who went home. A total of 38.5 percent of returning migrant laborers to Russia had completed secondary school, and an additional 38.5 percent had completed technical school or some form of specialized education, which was two times greater than those returnees who went back to Tajikistan. The immigrants going to Russia were on average poorer than those who returned to Tajikistan, with very low rates of savings in comparison to those migrants returning to Tajikistan. The incoming migrants in the spring of 2009 were also far more experienced laborers, with 23.1 percent having worked previously in Russia for 9 to 15 years. In short, those who returned to find employment were overwhelmingly male, better adapted to working in Russia, possessed a higher level of education and skills (including a greater knowledge of the Russian language), and had vastly more experience in migratory labor. They were also the ones who needed the work and the remittances the most, as they were heads of household with children and possessed extremely limited financial resources.⁵²

Figures 1 through 6 illustrate the data recorded in the study performed by the Russian Higher School of Economics' Demography Institute.

FIGURE 1. GENDER DISTRIBUTION OF TAJIK MIGRANT WORKERS, SPRING 2009

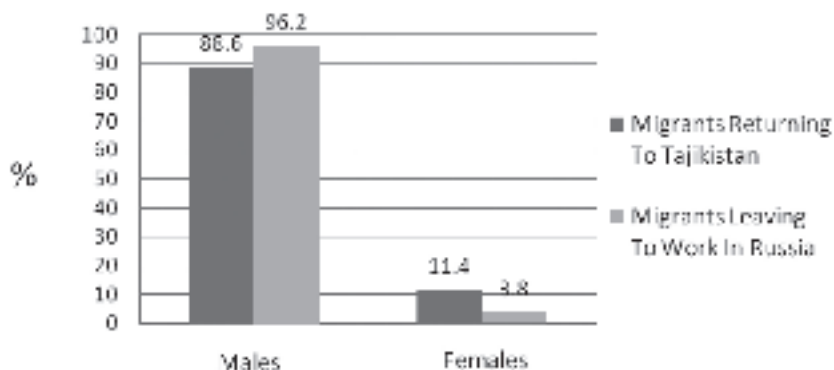


FIGURE 2. AGE DISTRIBUTION OF TAJIK MIGRANT WORKERS, SPRING 2009

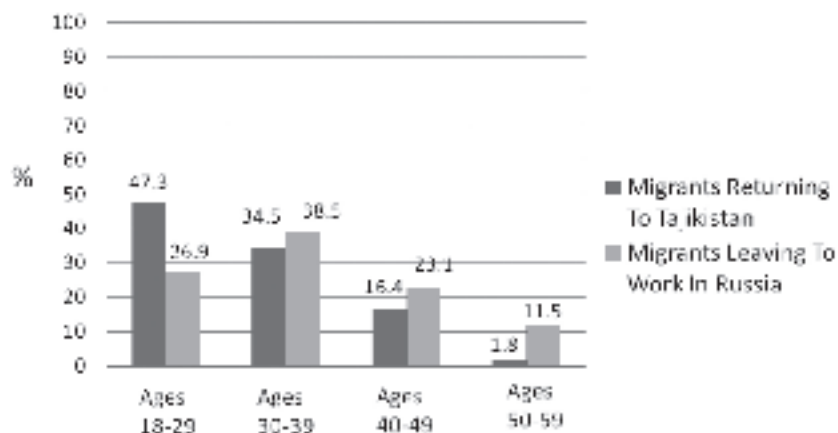


FIGURE 3. EDUCATION LEVEL OF TAJIK MIGRANT WORKERS, SPRING 2009

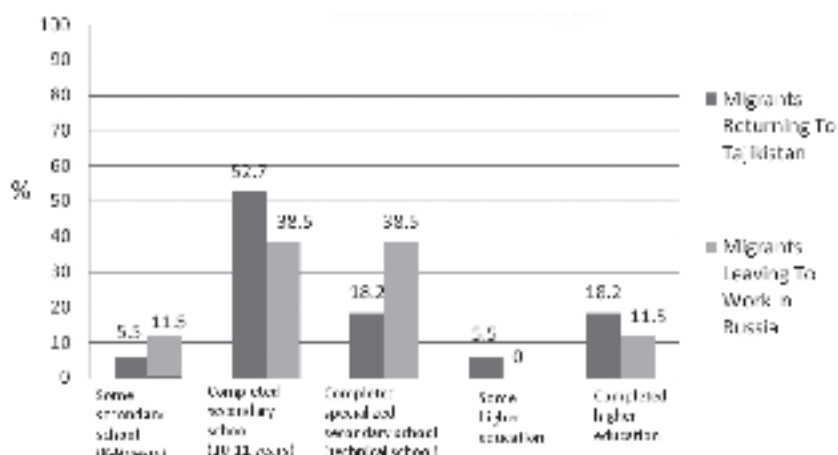


FIGURE 4. MARITAL STATUS OF TAJIK MIGRANT WORKERS, SPRING 2009

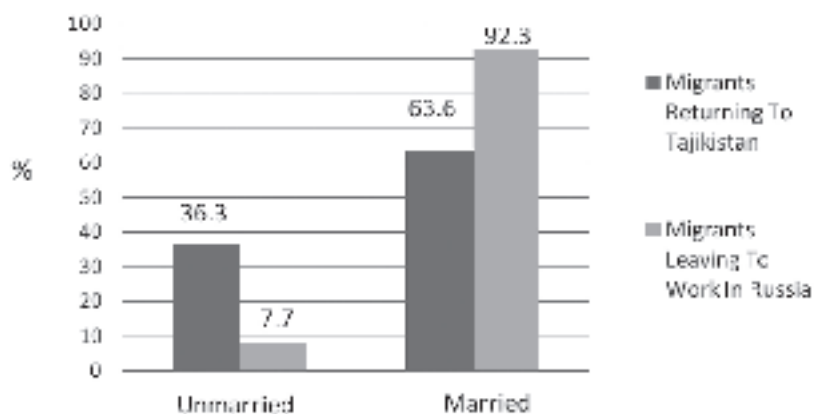


FIGURE 5. LEVEL OF MIGRATORY WORK EXPERIENCE OF TAJIK MIGRANT WORKERS, SPRING 2009

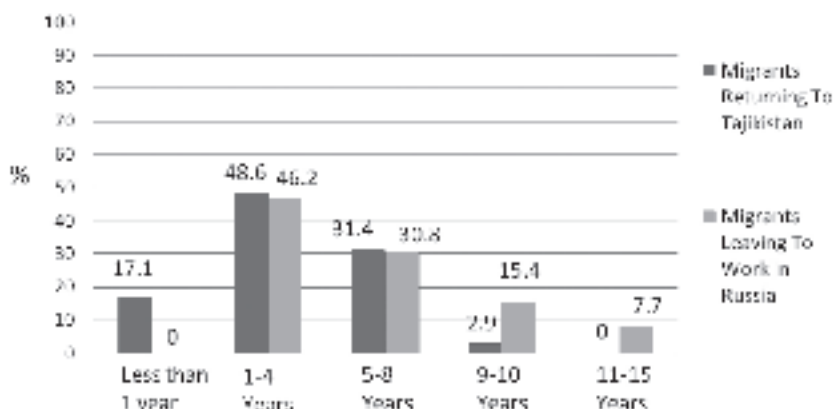
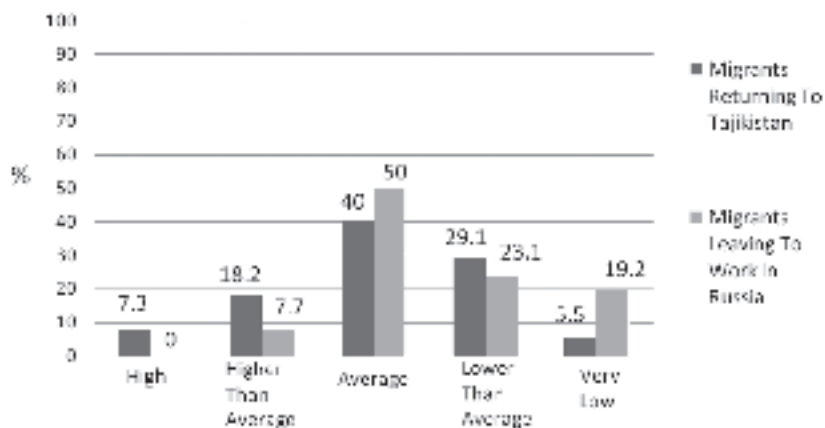


FIGURE 6. LEVEL OF FAMILY SAVINGS OF TAJIK MIGRANT WORKERS, SPRING 2009



Those who arrived in Russia at the beginning of the seasonal work period following the crisis proved to be incredibly flexible as they adapted themselves to the new market conditions within the country. Though the migrants had previously worked mainly in construction in 2008, the majority of laborers chose to work in catering / food services or whatever type of work they could find in the 2009 season. In fact, 41.2 percent of returning migrants agreed to radically change the field they were in so that they would be able to find work, even if that meant acquiring new skills or specialties.

Migrant laborers (20% of returnees) have also begun to move to other areas of Russia to look for work.⁵³ Migration to Vladivostok and Khabarovsk, the two major cities of the Far East, has experienced a growth in Tajik workers, from 3 to 15 percent in 2009. Though conditions are harsher and pay is lower in the Far East, jobs are readily available and there is a potential for new migrant networks to be set up there in the future.⁵⁴

Following the recession, migrant laborers who went to find work in Russia agreed to a lower salary and more dangerous working conditions, and they frequently experienced withheld payments from bosses. A total of 60 percent of those who remained in Russia agreed to lower salaries, up to half of what they had been previously paid. This may seem surprising, except when it is noted that even 50 percent of the average salary for migrant laborers in Russia is still twice what one can make in Tajikistan, provided that one finds a job at all. When workers are paid by employers, their money is often delayed, as 57.2 percent of respondents said that they had to wait 2 to 5 months to receive payment for their work, with an additional 13.6 percent of workers never receiving payment.⁵⁵ As a result of lowered or withheld pay, significantly fewer remittances have been sent back to Tajikistan. Of those surveyed, 30 percent of migrant workers sent the same amount of money home as before the crisis, 40 percent sent a decreased amount, and 20 percent sent none at all. Of those migrants who had lost their jobs, 25 percent continued to send remittances from their savings and 10 percent took out loans to send remittances home, but more than half of fired migrants stopped sending remittances completely.⁵⁶ The amount of the average remittance sent to Tajikistan fell as well, from \$720 in 2008 to \$444 in 2009.⁵⁷

Working conditions have also drastically declined, and combined with Tajik migrants trying to economize their savings by spending less on medi-

cine, has led to an overall deterioration in the health of the immigrants. There has been a noticeable rise in upper respiratory illnesses such as pneumonia, lung inflammation and chronic bronchitis, tuberculosis, nephritis (inflammation of the kidneys), and hernias. Workplace injuries are also extremely common.⁵⁸ In a peripherally related development, alcoholism within the migrant community is also on the rise. Despite all these hardships, however, 96.2 percent of returning migrants responded that even if the situation in Russia further deteriorated (i.e., they could not find a job and had a very low standard of living), they would still remain in Russia and continue to look for a job. As a forty-six-year-old Tajik carpenter explained, “There, in Russia, I always find bread. More or less—it’s not important. But here [in Tajikistan], there is absolutely nothing.”⁵⁹

The Un-Welcome Wagon: Worsening Relations between Russians and Migrant Workers

Besides unsafe working conditions and lowered pay, another reality that factors negatively into the daily lives of migrant workers is their interaction with the Russian public. Russia has made its hostility toward migrant laborers no secret, ranging from general disdain to outright violence.⁶⁰ For example, on May 26, 2009, a Tajik immigrant was stabbed to death on a bus by two Russian men.⁶¹ From the onset of the economic crisis, relations have only deteriorated, as Russians' fears of unemployment have spurred negative reactions toward the Tajik migrant workers who are believed to be "stealing jobs."

Negative stereotypes of Tajik migrant workers are pervasive in Russia, especially in Moscow. A total of 47 percent of Russians believe that migrants spread crime and disease (particularly AIDS) and 60 percent see them as a wellspring for terrorist groups. Russians are annoyed that illegal migrants do not pay taxes and profit off of their stay in the country. Muscovites in particular worry that large communities of migrant workers will lower the property value of their neighborhoods.⁶² These perceptions are only exacerbated by public officials who corroborate these fears. On February 26, 2010, Yuri Luzhkov, the mayor of Moscow, released a statement saying that 46 percent of all crimes committed in Moscow are perpetrated by illegal migrant workers.⁶³ This is a purposely misleading statistic, since the majority of the crimes are related to violations of migration rules.⁶⁴

This negative stereotype of migrant workers was furthered by an official representative of the Prosecutor General's Office Investigative Committee in Moscow, who said that the number of rapes was on the rise in the capital and was two times higher than in 2007, and that the majority of the perpetrators were Central Asian. He added that 70 percent of rapes were committed by unemployed migrant workers from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Tajikistan. He went on to advise Muscovites to immediately report any suspicious-looking Central Asians to the police.⁶⁵

The negative imagery persists in popular entertainment. In January 2010, the film *Balls of Fate* was released, which is based on a skit in a popular sketch comedy television series, *Nasha Rossiya*. In the series, two bumbling Tajik migrant workers, Ravshan and Dzhumshud, incompetently repair an apartment for a Russian starlet, spending years performing the task with no end in sight. The film takes up a similar theme, with the two characters arriving at Sheremetyevo Airport with only a bag full of power tools and broken Russian, sent to repair the apartment of an oligarch for the “large” sum of 500 rubles (\$16) each. Despite their Russian boss making a huge profit off the laborers and confiscating their passports until the completion of their work, Ravshan and Dzhumshud show a naive and undying devotion to him, traveling across Moscow to find out about his well-being.⁶⁶ Because of the film’s depiction of guest workers as dumb, lazy, and dishonest, the Film Board of Tajikistan declared the film “offensive to our migrant workers and people in general” and banned its showing in Tajikistan.⁶⁷ Nonetheless, the film has received rave reviews in the Russian press and continues to be a box office success.

Another prevalent opinion in Russia that has only become stronger with the economic downturn is that Tajik migrant laborers are flooding the job market and thereby making it impossible for natives to find employment. In an effort to appeal to this belief and curb the amount of migrant workers allowed into the country, Prime Minister Vladimir Putin cut the 2009 quota for legal migrant workers from 3.95 million to 1.95 million,⁶⁸ and he later reduced the quota in 2010 to 1.3 million. Mayor Yuri Luzhkov wanted to reduce Moscow’s 2010 quota even further, from 250,000 migrant workers to 200,000, in order to “give back the priority to Muscovites and candidates from other regions of Russia,” according to one of his representatives.⁶⁹ Luzhkov made this request despite the fact that Moscow employers had requested a quota of 1.38 million guest workers.⁷⁰

Because the reduction of quotas appeals more to sentiment than fact, it has no real effect on the labor market—for several reasons. First, the reality of the situation is that migrant laborers perform jobs that Russians will not do, and for a cheaper price. Many Russians would rather be unemployed than work long hours as construction workers or taxi drivers, dubbing it “horse work.”⁷¹ Second, although Prime Minister Putin reduced the quota to 1.3 million workers, there are not even enough legal migrant workers to fill that allotment, for only 1.2 registered million laborers are expected

to work in Russia in 2010.⁷² Third, another important aspect is that the majority of Tajik migrant laborers work illegally, and, in that sense, the quota system and more stringent restrictions on guest worker employment has backfired from its intended purpose. Instead of motivating the immigrants to return home, the new regulations have actually caused more migrant workers to want Russian citizenship. According to the Demography Institute survey, 61.5 percent of returning migrants would like to get Russian citizenship, primarily to make finding work in Russia easier.⁷³

Besides restrictive governmental decrees, Tajik migrant workers have found it increasingly difficult to deal with police officers and employers following the crisis. A total of 80 percent of those surveyed reported that their relationship with law enforcement has taken a huge dive in 2009, with 39.6 percent of migrant workers reporting a noticeable increase in the amount of bribes they have to pay to police officers. Though it has been a common practice for police officers in Moscow to prey on illegal migrant laborers—especially those from Tajikistan because they are generally the poorest and most vulnerable—by extracting money through made-up tariffs and fees, the amount of these extortions has increased by up to seven to ten times what they were asking for in 2008. Tajik migrant workers have also experienced a decline in their relationships with their bosses, with 47.2 percent responding that interactions have become more negative since the crisis.⁷⁴

Meanwhile, Back in Tajikistan . . .

As the crisis was beginning to hit Russia in the fall of 2008, Tajikistan remained in denial that the global financial downturn would affect them. Because of the large absence of bank credit, an almost entirely cash-only economy, and a lack of Tajik investment in international markets, many people believed that the country's economic isolation would shield them from the blow of the crisis. In September 2008, the National Bank of Tajikistan issued a statement reiterating these beliefs, saying that "this crisis will not influence directly the financial system of our country as there is no participation of domestic banking capital in these [affected] markets." For a while, the country's financial seclusion did delay the effects of the crisis, along with Tajikistan's lack of petroleum exports, whose drop in prices greatly affected the economies of Russia and its regional neighbor, Kazakhstan. Many Tajiks, government officials included, failed to realize or admit the important connection between Russian remittances and their domestic economy. When asked about the global economic downturn in an interview, one female Tajik seller at the local bazaar responded, "On the news I see what's happening and I worry for the people in America and Russia."⁷⁵

However, the reality of the situation began to hit at the start of 2009, as world prices for cotton and aluminum, Tajikistan's two main exports, fell greatly. From January to September of that year, the volume of exports declined by 43 percent,⁷⁶ and the profits gained from these exports fell 60 to 70 percent compared with the previous year.⁷⁷ Also in the beginning of 2009, the somoni, the national currency of Tajikistan, experienced a devaluation of 25 percent compared to the dollar. Combined with the external rise of food product prices by 20 to 30 percent in China and Russia, Tajikistan's status as a net importer of food was in grave danger, as many international observers became concerned about where Tajikistan would get its food.⁷⁸ The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs noted that the amount of severely food-insecure people, meaning individuals who receive less than 80 percent of the average calorie requirement and

live below the poverty line, had risen from 400,000 in January 2009 to 480,000 in July.⁷⁹

On top of these consequences of the economic downturn, remittances began to fall in late 2008, although the effect was not felt until mid-2009. The National Bank of Tajikistan admitted that remittances received in Gorno-Badakhshan, one of the country's poorest regions, fell by 50 percent in the last quarter of 2008.⁸⁰ On a national level, remittances fell 30 percent by mid-2009, which the World Bank predicted would lead to a 5 percent rise in the already-large 60 percent of the nation living in poverty.⁸¹

In response to the country's severely worsening economic situation, the apathetic government of President Emomali Rahmon, not surprisingly, did very little. In response to the increase in food prices, which was making daily consumption next to unaffordable, Rahmon urged his people, who already lived hand to mouth, to stockpile a two-year food reserve on their own. As a way of addressing the rise in unemployment that was projected for 2009, Rahmon promised to create 180,000 new jobs. When more closely examined, however, this decree called on private business to create unnecessary jobs by cutting one position into two and dividing the salary in half. Government jobs that became available were extremely low-paid positions, and it was discovered that the government set aside no money of its own for this endeavor.⁸² In October 2009, the prospect of employment was created by Saudi Arabia, which offered to take up to 1 million Tajik workers for various projects. The Tajik government, which was suspicious of Saudi Arabia's Wahhabi Islamic practices (which many Central Asians consider inextricably linked to terrorist practices), reached an agreement to greatly lower that number to 1,000 migrants, mostly medical specialists who had been rigorously screened by the government.⁸³

Another of President Rahmon's projects, the Rogun Dam, which was meant to go across the Varkhsh River in southern Tajikistan, has thus far done more harm than good with respect to the country's prosperity. The Rogun Dam, started under the Soviet Union and taken up under Rahmon as a supposed source of revenue and hydroelectric power, has only made the economic situation for most families tighter. In late 2009, he mandated that every family should buy shares in the construction of the dam for no less than \$690 each.⁸⁴ Tajik businessmen and professionals, who had been "willingly forced" to contribute even more money to the project, almost completely stopped returning to Tajikistan by the end of 2009, staying in

Russia or moving to another country to avoid the heavy payments.⁸⁵ Thus this potential influx of capital and entrepreneurship has been lost due to unwise governmental policy.

Despite the decline in remittances, increase in food prices, and largely unresponsive government, Tajikistan has managed to survive the global financial crisis thus far—never recording negative GDP growth⁸⁶—through a combination of international aid, domestic food production, and inter-personal loans and assistance. Through governmental requests, by late 2009 Tajikistan was given \$80 million by international donors and nongovernmental organizations; loaned \$116 million by the IMF's three-year credit program; given \$120 million by the Asian Development Bank; given \$46.5 million by the U.S. Agency for International Development; all with China promising \$1 billion in investments within the country.⁸⁷

Besides direct assistance from foreign financial institutions, the people of Tajikistan helped solve their food crisis themselves through a combination of market forces and governmental initiatives. Because the value of the somoni had decreased and the price of imported food stuffs had increased, buying food from foreign countries was no longer a viable option. Given that the market price of cotton had heavily decreased, it no longer made economic sense to grow cotton as a cash crop. As a result, the Tajik people used some of the 40 percent of land designated for cotton to instead cultivate grains, and in particular wheat, for which the land was better suited. Thanks to a particularly abundant growing season in 2009, the Tajik people were able to better feed themselves and their livestock through an unexpected move toward self-sufficiency.⁸⁸ This beneficial change seems as if it could become permanent, because cotton output, which fell from 115,600 metric tons in 2008 to 92,300 in 2009, is only making a slow recovery, with an additional thousand metric tons predicted for 2010 and 2011. This is in contrast to Tajikistan's other main export, aluminum, whose growth fell from 392,400 metric tons in 2008 to 348,700 in 2009, and is predicted to regain its output in 2010 to near-2008 levels and surpass that growth in 2011 to reach a record 410,000 metric tons.⁸⁹

On a smaller scale, the Tajik people have largely made it through the global financial crisis with the help of family, friends, and neighbors. Because they are well aware of the government's indifference toward their well-being, 76.5 percent of migrant workers who returned to Tajikistan in the spring of 2009 planned on getting financial help from family, rela-

tives, and friends, while only one respondent planned on seeking aid from the government's employment bureau.⁹⁰ The majority of households, 52.4 percent, survived by consuming less, living off what little savings the migrants brought back with them, and growing or raising most of what they ate in their own backyards. A total of 9.5 percent of respondents lived entirely off the sales of their agricultural products or handicrafts at the local markets. However, despite their best efforts, 19 percent of households with returning migrant workers remained completely impoverished.⁹¹ Though the country did not fall into a famine or complete chaos as a result of the crisis, the economic situation of the average Tajik remains abysmal.

If You Build It, They Will Come: Prospects for the Future of Tajik Migrant Labor

Although migrants returned to Tajikistan, remittances fell, and poverty increased domestically, Tajikistan weathered the 2008 global financial and economic crisis better than was expected by international observers. Though the internal situation of the country has stabilized (albeit at a very low quality of life)—with a noticeable absence of riots, political uprisings, religious fanaticism, terrorist cells, or regional conflicts—this current status quo is anything but sustainable. The government of Tajikistan cannot continue to apply for and receive international assistance if it does not have any tangible evidence that it is using the aid in a productive manner. President Rahmon has yet to develop any real job creation strategy within Tajikistan, and with unemployment at 50 percent of the population and rising, there remains a latent potential for the large number of disappointed, jobless young men to join populist movements that could operate under the auspices of anything from dissident movements to terrorist groups. Though the greatest proportion of Tajiks are surviving as a result of receiving monetary assistance from friends and family, protracted hardships will eventually cause even these lifelines of savings to dry up, leading to unavoidable poverty.

The social dynamics within Tajikistan since the return of almost a third of the migrant worker population remain troublesome and will continue to become more intolerable as time passes. According to the study undertaken by the Russian Higher School of Economics, returning migrant workers are not attempting to reintegrate with society and are instead marginalizing themselves as a distinct social group. Because Tajik society is still heavily based on kinship networks, those migrants who have gone abroad have lost their social status within the hierarchy of the community. Returning after the crisis, they are therefore seen as members of the lowest rung of society, individuals who have failed in their task of supporting their families. Instead of joining community groups or traditional male unions, the returnees have created their own social organizations specifically for former migrant laborers, further isolating themselves from the greater community.⁹²

As far as gender relations are concerned, domestic violence has risen with the return of the unsuccessful migrants due to a clash in gender roles.

With such a large percentage of the adult male population leaving for three-fourths of the year, women have been forced to take on the role of head of household in this traditionally patriarchal society. And although this drastic shift in gender roles has slowly become an accepted norm given the necessity of migratory labor for employment, it is now being questioned, sometimes violently, as the male returnees attempt to reclaim their positions in the household.⁹³

The quickest and easiest solution to this large potential problem of societal and political unrest in Tajikistan is for migratory labor opportunities to pick up again in Russia's principal cities of Moscow, Saint Petersburg, and Yekaterinburg. Though Russian economists and entrepreneurs have warned of a second downturn that could hit the country in the next few years,⁹⁴ recent predictions have put these fears to rest and given some hope that the economic situation, for both Russia and the Tajik laborers, could be improving. On March 24, 2010, the World Bank released a statement foreseeing a "robust" recovery for Russia in 2010, with GDP growth of between 5 and 5.5 percent. The price for oil predicted for the next two years will be around \$76 a barrel, which, although nowhere near the high of 2008, represents a significant improvement from the low price of just under \$40 a barrel that was seen at the start of the 2008–2009 recession. Tempering these positive predictions, the World Bank adds that GDP growth will slow to 3.5 percent in 2011,⁹⁵ unemployment will remain high, and credit will remain tight.⁹⁶

This does not necessarily mean a lack of employment opportunities for Tajiks, however. In Russia, the unemployment predictions that have been made are limited to the legal work of Russian citizens, and because the majority of Tajiks work illegally and perform jobs that Russians refuse to do, there is still the likelihood of a large niche market waiting to be filled by unskilled or low-skilled migrant labor. If more than two-thirds of Tajik migrant workers remained in Russia and the majority of them found work during the lowest point of the global financial crisis, when there was a GDP decline of 8.7 percent, then even at the low growth rate predicted for 2011, the employment rate of Tajik laborers should still increase. The crisis has shown that the Tajik migrant worker population is incredibly adaptive to market conditions and demands, switching sectors when beneficial and accepting lower pay or lower standards of workplace safety conditions when necessary. In general, the outlook for Tajik migratory labor in Moscow looks promising because Russia's continual population decline ensures that it will need migrant labor to fill the gap in its rapidly shrinking workforce.

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According to the United Nations, the number of people living in countries other than their birth is approaching 200 million worldwide, up from 80 million three decades ago. While the scale of migration has grown, the nature of international population movements and patterns of migrant adaptation have changed. Migration movements have become part of the permanent fabric of modern society, and bring with them questions of economic, political, and social significance.

Migration is an especially pressing issue for the countries of Eurasia, in which large-scale international migration is a relatively new phenomenon. While the collapse of the Soviet state brought with it expanded freedom of movement, it also resulted in increased restrictions at many destination points for migrants, providing new administrative challenges. Some citizens are driven to leave their places of origin because of conflict, political ambiguity, or economic deprivation. As the region continues its integration into global economic networks, it becomes an increasingly desirable transit route and destination for migrants from Southeast Asia, Africa, and the Middle East.

The Kennan Institute has sponsored a number of activities—such as lectures, workshops, working groups, seminars, and survey research among different migrant communities, native-born populations, and officials—intended to explore the social and official reaction to the presence of migrants within Eurasian countries and to trace the evolving response of migrant communities to life in their new homes. The *Eurasian Migration Papers* publication series seeks to make the results of these efforts widely available to specialists, policymakers, and citizens in Russia, Ukraine, the United States, and elsewhere.

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- *Netradytsiini Mihranty u Kyievi* [Nontraditional Immigrants in Kyiv], Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, 2004, by Olena Braichevska, Halyna Volosiuk, Olena Malynovska, Yaroslav Pylynskyi, Nancy E. Popson, and Blair A. Ruble. [Available in English and Ukrainian; no longer available in printed form]
- *Mihratsiia i tolerantnist v Ukrainy* [Migration and Tolerance in Ukraine], Kyiv: Stylos Press, 2007, edited by Yaroslav Pylynskyi. [Ukrainian; no longer available in printed form]
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