

# Implications of Hospitality Customs for Labor Migration Policy in Tajikistan

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# **Implications of Hospitality Customs for Labor Migration Policy in Tajikistan**

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## **Executive Summary**

Mass labor migration from Tajikistan to Russia in the post-Soviet period has reorganized Central Asian economies and patterns of everyday life across both urban and rural communities. Title VIII-sponsored field research in 2012 underscored that policymakers need to understand the role of social traditions such as hospitality in mediating these changes. This, in turn, can allow us to more fully understand the causes of migration and to craft effective policy responses.

## **The Key Problems**

- How can policy specialists working in Central Asia craft labor migration policies that effectively take into account the culturally and historically relevant factors that influence the decision to migrate?
- How can workers in international organizations and government agencies best communicate and implement their recommended policies in the Central Asian context?

## **Background**

Tajikistan became independent with the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991. A civil war lasting from 1992 until 1997 severely crippled the country's infrastructure and impaired the national economy, creating a situation highly conducive to labor migration. Migration has become an indispensable part of the national economy with migrant remittances now equal to an estimated 35% of Tajikistan's GDP. Agencies wanting to support political and social stability in Central Asia need to reflect on where and how to support this growing economic wing of Central Asian life.

## **Policy Implications of Social Traditions**

In Tajikistan and throughout Central Asia the roles of host and guest are often central to understanding the migration experience. Traditions of Central Asian hospitality frequently include the obligation to treat outside visitors to the best one has to offer. This means that Central Asians have specific expectations about how they will encounter Russians abroad, but it also informs how they are expected to finance often costly rituals and social obligations back home.

- Hospitality rituals are a contributing factor in encouraging consumption and motivating migration because Central Asians save a large percentage of remittances for hosting-related expenditures. While there is tendency among some observers to see this as unproductive expenditure, we should understand the important role such rituals play in ordering Central Asian daily life.
- The same beliefs about the obligations of guests and hosts that inform daily practices are relevant for gauging Central Asian receptions of policy initiatives coming from non-local

organizations that occupy the position of "guests" in Tajikistan. Policy makers must anticipate local evaluations of their initiatives based on the morality-laden discourses of guest and host. Policy specialists that come from elsewhere must always reflect on how to best promote local values given their position as guests in these spaces.

- Central Asians often use the positions of good host and good guest to understand political, economic or social issues that are relevant to them.

### **Recommendations for Policy: Development and Implementation**

- **Provide opportunities for potential migrants to earn lump-sums** when developing migration policy or considering economic alternatives to migration. The economics of hospitality, including hospitality-related expenses such as weddings, make the ability to accumulate these kinds of lump-sum savings important for Central Asian household management. It is entirely to the advantage of stability in Central Asia for international organizations and agencies to promote and facilitate such remittances.
- **Establish long-term, permanent offices and/or representatives in regions and villages** that the organization plans to work in. Recommending a course of action to a community often means the organization must step out of its circumscribed role as guest. Doing this effectively requires time and commitment to achieve a certain degree of belonging in the local community.
- **Invite local leaders to the organization or government's home base outside of Central Asia** and ensure that they are well cared for during their visit. Hospitality is ideally bidirectional, with each party given the opportunity to be host and guest at different times. This action will ease the implementation of new initiatives by placing Tajik leaders and foreign agencies on a more equal footing.

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