

# Post-Soviet Migration: Remaking National Identities, Financing National Economies

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## Post-Soviet Migration: Remaking National Identities, Financing National Economies

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**Overview:** Tajikistan is the world's most remittance-dependent economy. Aid from the Soviet Union once amounted to 40% of GDP; remittances from Tajik laborers working in Russia now account for 45% of GDP.<sup>1</sup> These funds have not turned into enduring investments. Instead, families spend remittances directly in the local economy, often on basic needs. While this has led to reductions in poverty over the last decade<sup>2</sup>, Tajik laborers (who are 95% male) normally lack all of the numerous documents required for legal employment and habitation in Russia.

Informed by Title VIII-supported fieldwork in Tajikistan in 2012, the main question posed is: Given the importance of migration, and its attendant hardships, what actors (government agencies, diaspora groups, local and international NGOs) are assisting Tajik migrants before, during and/or after their time working abroad?

**Research Findings:** International and local NGOs have projects in place but their impact is limited. Their services reach a very small segment of the migrant population. Efforts to promote investment and community development have been even less fruitful. Migration to Russia is mired in bureaucratic inconsistencies, corruption and dangerous xenophobia, pushing migrants toward informal means of employment. This illicit migration pattern limits migrants' prospects for long-term investment, while undermining the efforts of migration assistance projects run by local agencies and the international institutions that support them. These NGOs mostly provide information, not substantive assistance. The Tajik government has created a ministry to assist migrants that should eventually take over from the NGO sector. Policy makers should work to strengthen the Tajik government's capacity to assist migrants, so that it can do even more than what NGOs achieve now.

*International and Regional Projects are in place but are not making a significant impact*

- A key facet of international support involves the IOM's migration assistance centers. Migration centers have provided very targeted assistance when institutional intervention may expedite bureaucratic predicaments (such as detention, missing relatives or difficulties with border security). From my research, they have been effective in aiding migrants only in singular instances. Commonplace concerns and dangers inherent in illegal employment, illicit housing, criminality, or physical violence are not met by these centers.
- For the majority of migrants, the centers provide only basic information (in clear and concise booklets) on officially recommended pathways to resolving migration, labor

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<sup>1</sup> Slay, Ben, and Alessandra Bravi. 2011. Recent trends in remittances and migration flows in Europe and Central Asia: The best protection against economic crisis? In Regional Bureau of Europe and Central Asia Senior Economist's Report: UNDP.

<sup>2</sup> Jones, L., R. Black, and R. Skeldon. 2007. Migration and Poverty Reduction in Tajikistan. Institute for Development Studies, Sussex Centre for Migration Research.

Mughal, Abdul Ghaffar. 2007. "Migration, Remittances and Living Standards in Tajikistan: A Report Based on Khatlon Remittances and Living Standards Measurement Survey (KLSS 2005)." Dushanbe: International Organization for Migration (IOM).

and health issues. Most centers only receive between 0.5-1 visitors per day. To reach a wider audience, centers also employ radio advertisements, videos at airports, mass SMS campaigns, a migration hotline (based in Dushanbe), and mobile trainings aboard Russia-bound trains. But these informational campaigns still do not reach the majority of the one million Tajiks currently working abroad.

*Impact of institutional agents on households is minimal*

- In the country as a whole, support from migrants' remittances has not succeeded in improving the local business climate. Likewise, microfinance and microcredit organizations have not been able to translate remittances into significant financial deposits. Local NGOs are providing training on family budgeting to try to encourage investment. Projects guiding community-led or diaspora-driven investments are almost nonexistent. Almost all remittances are still going toward basic household goods, housing, cars and livestock – not enterprises or savings.

*Tajik Ministry of Migration (M.o.M.) has been established but is not having an impact on migrants wellbeing*

- IOM experts have helped create a new ministry that reports directly to President Rahmon. Most M.o.M. staff have been transferred from other ministries – particularly police or security services – and are lacking in skills and experience on migration issues. Local NGOs run current migration projects and typically receive better pay than the government can offer; few of their employees seem willing to transfer to the M.o.M., leaving it lacking in expertise. While NGOs and M.o.M. are meant to collaborate closely, the intent is to hand over the duties to the M.o.M in a few years. The M.o.M. needs to be better-funded and staffed in order to take over these duties in the future.

*Russian border migration database in effect, creating new problems for migrants*

- Migrants are increasingly migrating at a younger age and those from rural areas often have poor Russian-language skills. Run-ins with police are more likely and these infractions are now being stored in a database accessed by Russian border guards. Migrants are being checked, though not universally, against the database and some are being refused entry. Russia's focus on intensifying its policing of borders will only create more need for assistance in the future, which the Tajik M.o.M. must handle diplomatically and with tangible support services.

**Conclusion:** The network of actors who currently help migrants is growing but continued support from international donors is temporary. The efforts of these NGOs are limited in efficacy, such that migrants rely on relatives, neighbors and friends to navigate the tangle of laws and dangers associated with working in Russia. Worrisome is the fact that migration corridors may become more stringent, pushing migrants into even more illicit work and informal migration channels. The Tajik government needs to work against these trends by formalizing and regularizing the migration corridor and eventually supplant NGOs to help migrants directly.