

Tajikistan: migrations as a 'safety valve'

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The terrorist attack on the Crocus City Hall in Krasnogorsk near Moscow carried out on 22 March by Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K) involved Tajiks as perpetrators. This has provoked uncertainty as regards the future of Tajik citizens' economic migration to the Russian Federation (RF), which is their most popular destination. This uncertainty has been further exacerbated by tensions between the foreign ministries of the two states and an increase in anti-Tajik sentiments in Russia. Large-scale economic migrations have a special economic, social and political role in Tajikistan. They are of fundamental importance in the context of the country's authoritarian system of government, which has proved unable to devise any other instruments to defuse social tensions. Although the risk that the migration channel leading to the RF may collapse is limited, this strong link between the state's stability and economic migrations increases its permanent exposure to turmoil in this sphere.

The phenomenon of migration from Tajikistan to Russia

The large-scale economic migration of Tajik citizens is a systemic issue. In 2000–22, personal remittances from migrants on average accounted for more than 31% of the country's GDP. In 2022, their value stood at \$5.3 bn (up from \$2.9 bn in 2021) and in 2023 it reached a record \$5.7 bn, accounting for almost half of Tajikistan's GDP in that year as a whole. Thus, Tajikistan has become the country in which the proportion of the value of remittances from migrants to GDP is the highest in the world. According to the World Bank, in 2023 more than 40% of Tajik households lived off income earned by migrants.

For more than 25 years, Tajiks have mainly migrated to Russia. In 2023, 80% of remittances from Tajik migrants were sent from that country. These migrations have become a regular practice, as around 800,000 to 1,200,000 citizens of Tajikistan (which has a total of 10 million inhabitants) seek seasonal work in Russia's big cities (75% of all departures annually). The numerous instances of dual citizenship are proof of the close socio-cultural links between Tajikistan and the RF; between July 2019 and June 2023, 452,000 Tajiks were granted Russian citizenship.

The ISIS-K's terrorist attack in Krasnogorsk (see '[Islamic State Khorasan: global jihad's new front](#)') and the fact that the majority of those detained and accused are Tajiks have revealed the dark side of these migrations. It involves the migrants' difficulties in adapting to the new environment in Russia, which result from their separation from their families and local communities (the 'average' Tajik migrant to Russia is a young man from a rural region). Tajik migrants usually live in isolation from Russian society, and are highly vulnerable to violence and corruption by representatives of the state administration, which facilitates their radicalisation. Another important factor is the negative attitude towards economic migrants

shared by some Russians. 26% of respondents surveyed by the Levada Centre in 2022 supported the view that the RF should ban Central Asian economic migrants from entering Russia.

Following the March attack, public sentiment regarding Tajik migrants in Russia has deteriorated. There is no doubt that this decline has been inspired by the dehumanisation of the detainees, including widespread consent to torturing them. Increased pressure on migrants has been accompanied by individual manifestations of xenophobia and instances of improper behaviour on the part of state institutions, such as procrastination in issuing their work permits, increased rates of deportation, and banning migrants from working in specific professions (such as taxi drivers), which have been recorded in several Russian regions. This has confronted Tajikistan's government and society with the question of whether the current scale of migration to the Russian Federation should be maintained, and has prompted the authorities in Dushanbe to adopt a relatively assertive attitude towards Moscow. This included attempts by Tajikistan's foreign ministry to question whether some of the suspects were indeed involved in the Krasnogorsk attack (it should be emphasised that these doubts are not unfounded), and criticism of Russia's 'ill-advised information campaign' in the wake of the attack. The ministry also recommended (on 27 April) that its citizens refrain from travelling to Russia. In addition, the ministry summoned the Russian ambassador to express its concern over reports of large numbers of Tajiks being refused entry to Russia (on 29 April). Telephone conversations were also held on the subject between the foreign ministers (on 30 April) and the presidents of both countries (on 3 May). In addition, nine individuals with links to those detained in the RF were arrested in Tajikistan, and the already tough supervision of the sphere of religion and morals was stepped up.

Migration and the socio-economic situation

Tajikistan has recently seen a dynamic socio-economic transition. In the social sphere the country is experiencing a demographic boom, as its population has doubled to the present 10 million individuals since 1991. In the economic aspect, the past decade saw an impressive rise in GDP; according to the World Bank, during that period the average GDP growth rate was 7.1% annually. The World Bank statistics for 2023 showed even more optimistic results as regards Tajikistan's macroeconomic indicators: its GDP rose by 8.3%, the inflation rate was 3.7% and the unemployment rate 7%. Despite this, the country's GDP stood at just \$10.5 billion (according to IMF statistics for 2023), which ranks Tajikistan 145th among the world's biggest economies in that year (its GDP value was the smallest in the Central Asian region, alongside Kyrgyzstan's). Tajikistan's economic activity is mainly focused on several sectors (agri-food, construction and precious metal mining), while the quality of life remains poor; for example, Tajikistan ranked 126th (out of the 193 countries examined) in the 2022 HDI ranking.

The Tajik economy is grappling with persistent problems. It is mainly characterised by poor investment prospects, an acute shortage of capital & technology and a lack of integration into the global market. It has undergone insufficient liberalisation, and some sectors are still controlled by the president's family members. Corruption is widespread (Tajikistan placed 162nd out of the 180 countries examined in the 2023 Corruption Perceptions Index) as is the 'shadow economy' which is estimated at a third of the country's GDP. Tajik society's perceived scale of crime and criminalisation of life is the biggest among the Central Asian

states (according to the Global Organized Crime Index).

Economic migration is of major importance to both the country's GDP growth and the overall situation of the Tajik economy. In 2022–3, spending on domestic consumption, which increased significantly due to record-high levels of personal remittances from migrants, was one of its main drivers. Aware of its dependence on the Russian labour market, Dushanbe is looking for new destinations for Tajik economic migrants, including the Gulf states, South Korea, the UK and the European Union. However, this hoped-for diversification can only materialise in the long term, and thus we should not expect these destinations to replace the well-established migration corridor to Russia in the near future because, unlike Turkey, Russia has not introduced any formal entry restrictions for Tajik citizens following the attack in Krasnogorsk. At the same time, income earned abroad helps to improve the standard of living across Tajikistan and to reduce its extreme poverty figures. Over the past decade, the proportion of those living below poverty line (the minimum subsistence threshold) has fallen significantly, from 32% in 2009 to 12.4% in 2022.

Facing political challenges

Economic migration serves as a safety valve for Tajikistan's extremely authoritarian political system. President Emomali Rahmon has ruled the country continuously since 1994. According to a 2023 assessment by Freedom House, Turkmenistan is the only country where the situation is worse than in Tajikistan. The Tajik political system offers no space for political rivalry; in 2015 the moderate Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan was dissolved. In this context, a serious challenge comes from the risk of Islamic radicalisation, which is the only anti-establishment platform which is genuinely available to dissatisfied citizens. This is one reason why Tajiks are visibly overrepresented in ISIS-K. However, Tajik citizens are mainly being radicalised during their economic migration trips to the RF (and also, albeit to a lesser degree, Turkey) and also when they spend time in neighbouring Afghanistan. Another important problem faced by the government involves the social causes of this process, including poor living standards and demographic pressure; these factors pose a challenge to the social welfare system, the job market and the education sector.

The authorities view any actual or potential manifestations of disloyalty as a pretext to use force, as evidenced for example by the pacification of successive protests in the Badakhshan Mountainous Autonomous Region (most recently in May 2022). In addition, no independent media outlets or civil society organisations are allowed to operate freely. The succession of power, which has been postponed for many years, is the main challenge for the regime. The rule of the country will likely be transferred to another member of the president's family, and his son Rustam Emomali is the most likely candidate. In the context of this succession, maintaining the country's political stability will be the most important task faced by the state apparatus. In its efforts to legitimise its actions the government has been relying on repression, the relatively favourable economic situation (based to a large degree on economic migrations), and on nationalism. This was evident in the successive phases of the border crisis between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan (most recently in autumn 2022) and in the government's response to the intimidation of Tajik migrants following the attack in Krasnogorsk, which emphasised the defence of the dignity of Tajiks in Russia.

In the international arena, despite the growing role of political and economic cooperation in the Central Asian region, Russia and China continue to be Tajikistan's main points of

reference. Moscow and Beijing are interested in preserving the status quo, as evidenced by the fact that following the Krasnogorsk attack both of them declared their readiness to step up security cooperation with Dushanbe. The involvement of Tajikistan and President Rahmon himself in seeking to normalise the relationship with the Kremlin was mainly motivated by the importance of these relations (especially Tajikistan's cooperation with the RF), as well as the essential nature of economic migration in this direction. On 8–9 May Rahmon paid a visit to Moscow, during which both sides emphasised the temporary nature of the recent problems regarding migration and announced their intention to continue their dialogue in this field.

Conclusions and prospects

The foundations of Tajikistan's socio-economic development and political stability are fragile. The desire to reduce shocks to the system (for example regarding economic migration) is the driving force for the actions of the state apparatus. This was evident in the increased diplomatic activity at the top echelons of power which was launched by President Rahmon and the Tajik foreign ministry following the attack on the Crocus City Hall. The succession of power, which will most likely continue to be postponed, will be an important challenge to Dushanbe. Both Tajikistan and the Russian Federation have neither the political willingness nor the practical solutions to radically reduce the intensity of migration. In Russia's case this results from its persistent shortfall of workforce. However, the mounting tensions in this sphere may potentially affect public sentiment in both countries, and could also translate into a temporary reduction in the number of Tajik migrants in the RF if they choose other destinations.

In the international aspect, Russia continues to be Tajikistan's most important point of reference (especially in foreign and security policy). It should be noted in this context that other important factors include the ongoing adjustment of the relationship between Moscow and Beijing in Central Asia and China's growing role in this region, including in Tajikistan itself.

Relations with Afghanistan (especially in the context of the threats posed by the activity of ISIS-K) and Kyrgyzstan can be viewed as potential challenges to Tajikistan's socio-political stability. The relationship between Dushanbe and the Taliban government in Kabul is complex. Despite the signs of normalisation, it is characterised by distrust linked with problems regarding water management in the Amu Darya drainage basin, as this river partially marks the border between the two states. In addition, the process of agreeing upon the border between Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is still ongoing. Although Dushanbe and Bishkek have made significant progress in this sphere over the last year and a half (according to statements from both sides agreements have been reached regarding 90% of the border), a deterioration of bilateral relations cannot be ruled out, which may translate into a deadlock on the matter.