

Intra-Regional Labor Migration : The Socio-Economic Implications for Tajik and Kyrgyz Migrant Workers in Kazakhstan and Russia

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ABSTRACT

This research paper discusses the migrant labor movements from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Russia and Kazakhstan by identifying the main causes, socio-economic effects, and policy aspects of this migration through a qualitative comparative analysis based on secondary sources. It determines that the main economic reason for continued migration from these border economies to the more developed ones is the regional economic disparity, especially differences in income levels, industrial capacity and labor market opportunities. Migration becomes both a household survival strategy and a major source of national income through remittances, which along with supporting poverty reduction and macroeconomic stability, also develop significant dependence and exposure to external shocks, especially those related to Russia. The analysis also reveals that the social welfare of the migrants is determined by the institutional settings with Kyrgyz workers getting the advantage of the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU) membership while Tajik migrants being subjected to more stringent rules and facing greater insecurity. Besides the material consequences, migration has also significant social impacts, both at the level of the individual

through the separation of families and at the level of the community through changes, while the migrants in the host countries usually have to confront being exploited and working under precarious conditions with their rights being limited. The article further states that labor migration to and from Central Asia is a manifestation of a wider system of regional inequality and interdependence, and that for the realization of the full potential of migration, the less developed countries will be required to carry out economic diversification while at the same time, the region will have to cooperate more intensively and ensure better protection of the migrants.

Keywords: *Labour Migration, Central Asia, Remittances, Regional Inequality, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, Kazakhstan, Migrant Workers, EAEU, Socioeconomic Impact*

INTRODUCTION

One of the most important demographic and economic phenomena in Central Asia is the movement of labor from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Russia and Kazakhstan. This movement is primarily caused by economic stagnation and the absence of jobs available to the migrants at home. For instance, in the second half of 2024, a total of 618,097 Tajik nationals were recorded to have gone abroad for economic activities, of which 98% indicated Russia as their destination. Kyrgyzstan also has a similar case but by the end of 2024, 600,000 had gone abroad and 379,949 were in Russia, while roughly 70,000 were in Kazakhstan (Kwan S., 2025).

The significant economic disparities are the driving forces of the noted patterns of movement. A large portion of the population from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are economically draining themselves as they leave to work in other countries. In contrast, Russia and Kazakhstan are destination countries for these migrants as they are able to provide jobs to migrants especially in construction and service jobs, and are paying considerably better.

The Tajik economy has shown the benefits of these large outflows as the other side of the coin to these economies are the large inflows of remittances. The World Bank claims that labor migrants' remittances accounted for around 45% of Tajikistan's GDP and ~24% of Kyrgyzstan's GDP in 2024 (World Bank, 2025b). This shows that both economies are primarily relying on the economic activities and remittances that foreigners send back, to provide foreign currency.

Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan's macroeconomic balance and the poverty alleviation and trade deficit direct relation is the significance of these remittance inflows and for Tajikistan the inflow of remittance to GDP of 45.3% is used to sustain the domestic consumption and substitute for the and the large trade deficit for the importing of higher cost goods of the 2024 (World Bank, 2025).

This significant imbalance, however, proves the large structural socially negative concerns of labor migration reliance of this of the individual household and to the national level. The prolonged absence of the migrant worker is transforming the lives of millions of families and the axial alteration of the spatial approximation of the generational division of the family members and the daily face to face interaction within distant communication.

It is also characterized by an irregular communication that is at least partially replaced in site absence. Most of these changes are felt especially by children that grow up parentless. Primary caregivers' absence ends up creating a lot of emotional void and also the disruption of child-rearing of the cycle in the development of the children. The alteration of the development of the children also aggregates the responsibilities to other adult family members, including mothers, grandparents and other relatives; Asia Plus, 2025a.

In Tajikistan, about 30% of school-age children are being looked after by grandparents or older siblings, and 60% of grandparents are convinced that they can manage their caregiving responsibilities without jeopardizing their mental health. This is without considering the absence of social care support in the rural areas of the migrants' origins. It is critical that social support is available. Research has shown that using remittances to provide minimum

living standards to family members left behind is important. I think that a lot of kids and teenagers from Tajik families get into trouble when they are not supervised by adults. This happens to 10 percent of them.

Migrants from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan have a tough time in the countries where they go to work especially in Russia. They face a lot of problems in their lives. They have to work in jobs that're not safe and do not pay well. These jobs do not give them money and they also face unfair treatment and discrimination. In 2025 the Associated Press said that people in Russia started to think of migrants after a terrorist attack on Crocus City Hall. This made people more suspicious of migrants from Central Asia. As a result migrants from Central Asia started to face more social problems. Starting from March 2024 migrants from Central Asia in Russia started to experience a lot of harassment because of their nationality. They were subjected to hate speech and physical attacks in public. The social environment became more hostile because of what the media, the government and the public were saying about migrants.

Kyrgyz and Tajik migrants were treated unfairly especially when they dealt with the authorities. By 2025 migrants were not allowed to work in 13 regions of Russia including in hotels, transportation, shops and entertainment. At the time the police were checking the identities of migrants in areas where many Kyrgyz, Uzbek and Tajik migrants lived. The head of Russias Investigative Committee also said that 20,000 young men from Central Asia were forced to fight in the war in Ukraine.

Russia started to make laws and rules that affected all migrants. The State Migration Policy for 2026-2030 which was signed by President Vladimir Putin in October 2025 aims to stop migration and control crimes related to migrants. It also wants to provide education for the children of migrants. More rules were made that gave the police power, including the power to expel migrants without following the proper legal process. Migrants, from Central Asia including migrant families and Kyrgyz migrants are really struggling in Russia. They face challenges, including Tajik migrant families who have to deal with their kids getting into trouble when they are not supervised.

Employment bans were imposed on thirteen strategically important industries – hospitality industry, transport industry, retail trade, and entertainment sector. The registration of the “list of controlled persons” has significantly restricted the possibility of accessing financial services and public utilities for migrants.

In light of the fact that more and more regulations are being introduced, governments of Central Asian states try to reevaluate their labor migration policies. One of the steps in this direction is reducing dependence on Russia as a leading country of destination and looking for new migration routes. In addition, there is an obvious need in adopting new policies that would provide greater protection for their citizens who work abroad (Times of Central Asia, 2025).

In general, the described trends provide another interesting angle on the problem of migration from Central Asia. Instead of counting migration figures and evaluating the economic impact of migrants' remittances, one should pay attention to policies of host countries, geopolitical realities, and everyday social relations.

Labour migration from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is the focus of this paper. The paper broadens the scope to the socioeconomic consequences attending labour migration from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan in the originating countries as well as in the major destination countries including Russia and Kazakhstan. The paper illustrates how migration, which is economically motivated, is also influenced by an array of other factors hence, it is a multi-layered process.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Central Asian labor migration cannot be viewed as mere movements of individuals across international borders. Rather, this process should be considered within the context of an intricate cycle, dictated by survival imperatives, as well as legal and economic realities. As illustrated by Kangas et al. (2025), most workers from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are forced into what is known as the “vicious cycle of labor migration,” failing to improve their quality of life and being stuck in the demanding and oppressive work of Russian employers, where they function as cheap labor with severe consequences for their social position. One’s vulnerability in the process of migration is related to one’s legal status. As described by Nicharapova (2025), the workers from Kyrgyzstan can easily exploit the benefits offered

to members of the EAEU by avoiding bureaucratic issues, whereas migrants from Tajikistan are faced with severe legal restrictions. Nevertheless, the ease of labor migration also implies the danger of dependency on the one economic union.

In terms of economics, there are many things to consider when talking about migration's effects. According to Sugz & Talantbekova (2024), although remittances play a vital role in the process of development, the openness to international business transactions has not been able to create robust industries within these nations. As for households, remittances form the major source of their income. Nawaz et al. (2024) state that, in the absence of remittances, the number of poor people in Tajikistan would have doubled due to their heavy reliance on remittances to meet their basic necessities like health care and education.

Whereas previously Kazakhstan served as a country sending its workers to other regions, it has become a magnet for migrants from other countries, with whom it shares cultural similarities. Nonetheless, such a heavy reliance on migrant workers poses what has been dubbed as a "migration culture," and as stated by Mogilevskii et al. (2018), this phenomenon should be handled with utmost care as it poses certain risks. The need for rapid earning may divert one's focus from investing in education, and therefore, the region will continue to rely on the state of the Russian economy. Finally, as argued by Kuldasheva (2023), the decision to migrate is not anymore a choice for oneself but an issue of family engagement that will impact the social fabric of the region.

METHODOLOGY

This study looks at why people from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan move to Russia and Kazakhstan. It goes beyond numbers and statistics. Numbers are important. They do not show the daily struggles, changes in power and big effects on families and communities. So this study uses stories to understand migration. It sees migration as something people experience, not a number. The study compares cases. One path leads to a place people know while another path shows chances in Central Asia. It highlights how rules and job chances affect people's lives in ways. The study starts with a review of existing research. It uses sources, including migration statistics from the World Bank. Reports from the International Organization for Migration are also used. These sources give a range of information. Official documents are compared with news reports from the Associated Press. Academic views on money sent back home are mixed with stories. This mix helps to understand the picture in the region. This study aims to find out why people move across borders. It looks at the reasons behind people's movement. Migration is an issue in Central Asia and this study tries to understand it better. The study includes stories, from people who have migrated. These stories show the side of migration.

DISCUSSION

Regional Economic Disparities Among Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Kazakhstan in Shaping Intra-Regional Labour Migration Patterns in Central Asia

The economic development of a country plays a role in how labor migration works. For example countries like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are not doing well economically. They have limited industries. Mainly produce a few things. Most of their income comes from farming and money sent back by people working abroad. On the hand countries like Russia and Kazakhstan have a more balanced economy. Their main areas of focus are energy, construction and services.

Labor migration from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Russia and Kazakhstan happens because of the difference in their economies. People from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan need to go to Russia and Kazakhstan to work and make a living.

Russia and Kazakhstan need workers from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to keep their economies going. The movement of workers from one country to another depends on how each country's economy is doing. The economy

of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan is not very strong. On the hand the economy of Russia and Kazakhstan is more developed.

Table 1. A Comparative Overview of Economic Sector Composition in Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Kazakhstan

Country	Agriculture (%GDP/ Labor Force)	Industry (%GDP)	Services (%GDP)
Tajikistan	21-29% / 51%	Low	Dominant
Kyrgyzstan	9-12%/27%	25%	52%
Kazakhstan	4%	32-34%	56-61%
Russia	3-5%	27-31%	57-68%

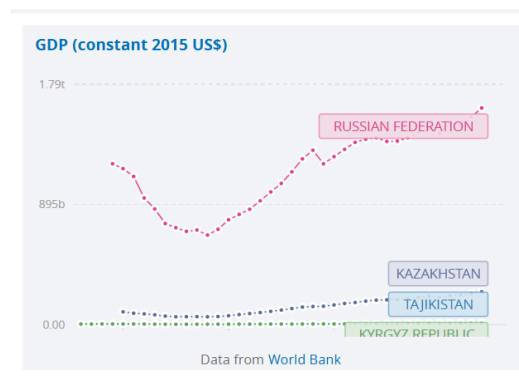
Source: *eurasianresearch.org*

The table shows how different the economies of Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia and Kazakhstan are. It shows that Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are on the side because they depend more on farming and do not have many industries. This is different from Russia and Kazakhstan which're the main countries where migrants go to work.

In Tajikistan farming is a part of the economy making up around 21 to 29 percent of the countrys total income. 51 Percent of the people who work in Tajikistan are farmers. In Kyrgyzstan farming is not as big making up around 9 to 12 percent of the countrys income. This is very different from Kazakhstan, where industry makes up around 32 to 34 percent of the countrys income and farming is only around 4 percent. In Russia industry makes up around 27 to 31 percent and services make up around 57 to 68 percent according to the World Bank in 2025.

The difference in how economies work in these countries leads to people moving from countries with incomes to countries with higher incomes. At a level the difference in income per person also explains why people migrate. Russia and Kazakhstan have higher incomes than Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. Labor migration from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to Russia and Kazakhstan will continue because of these differences in their economies. Labor migration is an issue for these countries and understanding the differences, in their economies can help explain why it happens.

Figure 1 Comparative Economic Performance of Russia, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, and Kyrgyzstan Based on GDP (Constant 2015 US\$)



Source: *worldbank.org*

When you look at the numbers the economic differences in Central Asia are really clear. Tajikistan has a GDP of around USD 14.2 billion. Kyrgyzstan has a GDP of around USD 9.22 billion. These numbers are very small compared to Russias GDP of USD 1.61 trillion or Kazakhstans GDP of USD 244.49 billion. Because of this difference most people who leave Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan go to Russia or Kazakhstan to find work. Some people might think this is a move because of the money but the truth is more complicated.

The connections between these countries that were made a time ago after the Soviet era play a big part in this. Over time it has become normal for people to go to countries to work. Things are getting harder in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. They are having trouble getting money from countries to build factories and businesses. Without these there are not jobs even though there are more young people. When people go to countries to work it helps to reduce the number of people without jobs but it does not solve the real problem. Most people who leave go to Russia and end up in paying jobs on construction sites or in stores. This is not about people looking for better pay. It shows how unfair the situation is in this part of the world when it comes to work and growth.

So what keeps this system going? It is the money that people send home. Tajikistan gets half of its money from these transfers. 45 Percent of its GDP. Kyrgyzstan also gets a lot of money from countries. About one dollar, out of four. Central Asias economic gaps are an issue. Central Asias economic gaps are what make people leave their homes to find work. Central Asias economic gaps are the reason why people go to Russia or Kazakhstan.

These monies are not only helping households buy groceries; they are also vital for maintaining the stability of the national currency and compensating for trade deficits. Sending workers abroad as a means of development over time has practically become an informal national strategy. Yet, this also results in a dependence that is very risky. Russia, having started to introduce much more stringent migration laws from 2024, has exposed the vulnerability of this arrangement. When Moscow adopts tighter control, not only the migrants who are more prone to deportation and discrimination, but also countries like Tajikistan who will have to give up their main source of revenue, will suffer.

Kazakhstan has a quite different approach to the challenge. It is the biggest country in the region in terms of economy and has a very powerful energy sector so as a whole it is a much more likeable and often stable choice than Russia. However, the size of its labor market is very small and this means that it simply will not be able to get rid of all of the unemployed. It is true that some workers are moving to Kazakhstan in order to stay away from the increasing risks in Russia. However, it hasn't been sufficient to alter the big picture Russia is still the main center. In the end, as long as there are extremely large differences in wages and job offers, this migration cycle will probably remain, which is a reflection of a regional economy that is very intertwined but at the same time very unequal.

The Social and Economic Impacts of Labor Migration on Tajik and Kyrgyz Migrant Workers and the Socioeconomic Resilience of Origin Countries

Here in Central Asia moving away for work has become a way of life. Jobs at home just don't pay enough so people look elsewhere when farms can't cover their bills. Sending someone feels more like a must than a choice to keep going. The cash coming back is what keeps towns going feeds children and keeps the lights on. In places like Tajikistan nearly every second dollar in the economy comes from abroad. That flow hit 5.8 billion US dollars by 2024 even if fewer people left than before. This money doesn't just sit there. It buys bread, medicine, school supplies and hospital visits. Without those funds coming in over half of Kyrgyzstan might struggle to meet needs.

Still this lifeline comes with a cost. Extreme vulnerability.

Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan rely on money flowing in from abroad so they get affected by changes beyond their borders. If Russias economy. If penalties get tighter elsewhere rural villages here feel it within weeks. Now national calm depends more on things happening far away than on internal strength. What happens socially may be more serious than any financial measure shows. Here years without a parent change how homes work. Kids left behind face times in Tajikistan; every third child missing a working mom or dad shows signs of deep sadness. Some kids trade school for work, under conditions or grow up in elder care.

Although the money sent home can help a family to have a better life, it is a sad paradox where financial benefit is accompanied by family separation and emotional tension. What is more, the migration of the youngest and most productive workers, who are also the energy of the community, reduces the local workforce through a "brain drain," which may even make governments reluctant to undertake the difficult task of economic diversification.

For Tajik workers, things have become very bleak after the 2024 attack at Crocus City Hall. They are now subjected to a wave of xenophobia, mass deportations, and legal "blacklists" that restrict the locations where they are allowed to work. However, most of them still choose to stay in Russia because they have no other option. Such stress has a huge psychological impact, many migrants are under chronic stress and to such an extent that some even avoid going to the hospital in fear that a simple medical examination may result in their deportation. In the end, these events illustrate that migration involves a lot more than just labor and wages. It reflects clear inequalities between regions, where people often have to trade their basic social rights and legal protection just to make a living.

The Influence of Migration Policy and Socioeconomic Dynamics in Russia and Kazakhstan on the Vulnerability and Welfare of Migrant Workers

The survival of workers from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan really depends on the laws and social environments of Russia and Kazakhstan. Migrant workers from these countries face challenges. The registration system in Russia is very complicated. It involves getting a work permit, which is often called a "patent". This patent costs a lot of money. Requires many bureaucratic steps. These troubles do not only drain a migrant's money. They also constantly worry a migrant. A small mistake in paperwork can lead to deportation without notice. The origin of a worker often decides how hard their struggle will be. Kyrgyzstan is a member of the Eurasian Economic Union. This membership helps its people find work in Russia and Kazakhstan easily. They do not have to go through permit procedures. On the hand Tajik workers do not get this special advantage. They have to follow strict rules and pay more expenses. This situation definitely results in them facing unfair treatment. Tajik workers struggle a lot. Their situation is really tough. Migrant workers, from Tajikistan face challenges. Their struggles are very real.

The everyday lives of these migrants are really connected to the state of Russia's economy and politics besides the paperwork aspect. When the ruble loses worth or global penalties hit Russia's economy migrant laborers feel cuts in pay before other people. This often starts with job losses in building jobs and services which are fields where many migrants find work. When there is trouble at work it spills into life and when people start to fear outsiders it makes routine tasks harder for migrants. This strain shows up fastest on migrants who are already struggling to get by.

Kazakhstan is usually seen as a stable and nearby option for migrants but it is not necessarily a safe place for them. Migrants in Kazakhstan still face a lot of difficulties because they do not have protections and there are legal loopholes that leave them open to exploitation especially when they work in informal jobs. Most migrant workers do not know their rights. When they have to rely on unregulated recruitment agencies they are at a very high risk of being forced into labor. Being part of a bloc, like the EAEU does give Kyrgyz migrants some advantages but it does not fix the underlying problems that migrants face in Central Asia like the structural inequalities that characterize the migrant experience.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

Regional economic inequality among Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, Russia, and Kazakhstan is still a significant factor that influences labour migration in Central Asia. The large disparities in income, stages of industrial development, and supply of jobs exert a constant pressure on the workers of the economically weak countries to move the workers mainly toward Russia and to some extent Kazakhstan. Such movements can be traced back to the uneven post-Soviet development patterns which also mirror the continental configuration of the labour market where certain countries primarily act as labour suppliers whereas others function as employment centers.

In a broad sense, migration acts as a significant channel of economic development, especially via remittances, which not only increase the financial capacity of various households but also contribute to poverty reduction and

the overall stabilisation of the national economies. Yet, a reliance to a great extent on such money transfers also leaves the countries susceptible since any shifts in the economic environment or migration policies of the destination countries can rapidly affect the livelihoods of the source states.

Meanwhile the well-being of migrants is mostly decided by the rules and job conditions of the countries they move to. Workers from Kyrgyzstan will have a time getting into the EAEU countries. However many migrants, like those from Tajikistan have jobs and little legal protection. They also face discrimination.

Migration is not about money. The way countries are governed affects how people move. When workers cross borders their labor rights are often at risk. There are gaps in power between countries that play a quiet but steady role. All these things are connected, whether we realize it or not.

If both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan start fresh they might not have to rely much on people going abroad for work. Of sending people overseas they could grow different parts of their economies. New jobs at home would give people a reason to stay. Training programs can help workers get ready for these roles. With skills people may find work without having to cross borders.

Stronger regional partnerships and agreements with countries where migrants go are also important. These agreements can improve protection. Offer migrant workers stable conditions. A fair and sustainable migration system will depend on reducing differences, between regions and improving institutions.

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