

COMMENTARY



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Tajik labour migrants looking for greener pastures

By Nigorai Fazliddin

Tajik labour migration to Russia is well-known. Less familiar is the still small, though increasing, number of labour migrants going to the European Union (EU) and the United Kingdom (UK). As jobs become scarce in Moscow, some Tajik workers are moving back home, some are paradoxically finding work in the reconstruction of Russian-occupied parts of Ukraine, while others are finding their way to the European continent to work in a variety of sectors that seek highly educated professionals as well as season labourers. Who are these people, what do they do, and what should Tajikistan and Europe take into account while recognising this trend?

Whereas the trend of Central Asian labour migrants seeking opportunities in Europe predates Russia's war in Ukraine, the conflict is impacting labour migration in Tajikistan in different ways. Before the war, Russia was treasured by Tajikistan, not only as a source of remittances that are essential for the economy, but also as an opportunity for on-the-job-learning for young men who could eventually bring knowledge back home. Today, labour migrants in Russia run the risk of ending up at the front in Ukraine, either as soldiers or as construction workers as Russia seeks to undertake some reconstruction of occupied and destroyed parts of Ukraine. Faced between the choice of staying in Russia or returning home to Tajikistan, some labour migrants are choosing a third option: moving to Europe. While some are arriving in Europe from Russia, a larger number seems to be emigrating directly from Tajikistan. Numbers still remain low, as migration to Russia has always been considered easier from a perspective of language, travel and local network, while entering Europe is much more complicated.

Labour migration from Tajikistan (and Central Asia in general) to Europe consists of both highly skilled workers (academics, scientists, doctors, nurses, accountants) and blue-collar workers (maids, truck drivers, seasonal workers, plumbers, security guards, utility workers). While the former arrives in Europe at the invitation of a European employer, the latter enters Schengen with the hired assistance of a recruiting firm or by being in direct contact with the host employer. The number of blue-collar workers is not included in the official statistics of neither international institutions nor the Tajik labour ministry.

A recent study entitled 'Migrants from Central Asia in the EU countries', published by CABAR Asia, argues that, between 2018 and 2019, the number of work permits issued to Central Asian citizens in EU countries nearly doubled. Uzbekistan leads 'labour exports' to Europe (except to the UK). In 2018, 1,116 Uzbek citizens left for different European countries for work. By 2019, this figure had nearly doubled to 3,008 people. In contrast, Tajikistan has the lowest numbers: from 461 people in 2018 to 635 in 2019.

The Baltic states, Germany, and the UK are among the most popular destinations for Tajik labour migrants. Let's look at these three cases.

Estonia, Latvia, and Lithuania are currently struggling to find the workforce needed to sustain their economies. Ironically, many Baltic citizens are migrant workers themselves, having relocated to other parts of the EU in search of higher wages, aggravating the labour shortage at home. For instance, in 2022, there was a shortage of 30,000 truck drivers in Lithuania, reports transport association 'Linava'. To bridge the gap, Lithuanian authorities increased the number of job quotas for non-EU drivers from 11,600 in 2021 to 16,000 in 2022.

One of these new truck drivers is Navruz from Tajikistan, who is now based in Lithuania. Navruz manages a YouTube channel, 'Caravan', offering free tutorials explaining the steps to find a job in the Baltic states. In his videos, he claims that there are more than enough jobs for qualified truck drivers in Lithuania and neighbouring states. Navruz's YouTube channel already has 11,000 subscribers; one can suspect that Navruz is trying to inspire Tajiks to make the jump to Europe instead of Russia.

Some labour migrants use the Baltic states as a stepping stone to other European countries. Germany, which hosts over 6,000 Tajiks, is for many Tajik workers the favourite choice. Currently, Germany is in need of blue-collar workers, for instance, to fill positions as personnel in healthcare. In order to facilitate staffing in this and other areas, the German government offers vocational on-the-job-training programmes. In 2019, the Ausbildung programme announced 500,000 placements in different companies throughout Germany. According to 2020 statistics, Germany adopted a new migration law for non-EU residents in response to a labour shortage of one million positions.

Abdusattor Abduqahhorov resides in Stuttgart, where he has been making a living since 2018. He was a student of the Ausbildung programme. Over the years, Abdusattor has worked as a plumber and handyman in a hotel. More recently, he was promoted to the position of chauffeur and personal bodyguard of the CEO of the hotel. Abdusattor makes a good living in Germany. He has managed to buy a new car and an apartment in Dushanbe, and he is opening a poultry farm in his native village in western Tajikistan. Not only is he investing in the German economy, but he is also contributing to that of Tajikistan.

In 2022, the United Kingdom became the first country in the European continent to open its doors to Central Asian seasonal workers as a result of the severe shortage of farm workers after Brexit. To address this labour crisis and better support farmers in need of workers, the UK government established a six-month seasonal worker visa programme for up to 40,000 foreign workers from Eastern Europe and post-Soviet countries. Soon after the Russian invasion of Ukraine, citizens of Belarus and Russia were no longer eligible for the programme, which facilitated the recruitment of more seasonal workers from Central Asian countries.

The UK government does not have a labour agreement with Tajikistan, and some farming companies have preferred to deal directly with the Tajik labour ministry. According to Radio Liberty's Tajik Service, in 2022, one British company signed an agreement with the Tajik Ministry of Labour expediting the exportation of around one thousand workers that same year. However, most British companies work with recruiter middlemen who identify applicants and hire workers abroad.

Initially, Tajik labour migrants had high expectations of working in Britain. One of them is Firdavs Barotov, who recently returned to Tajikistan after working for six months for a private agricultural company in the UK. According to him, working in the UK is not easier than in Russia, while life is more expensive. Labour migrants have trouble getting by as the costs of accommodation, utilities, insurance, and food are high. Furthermore, the price of the trip to and from the UK vastly reduced their earnings, especially as migrants are only allowed to stay up to six months.

While Tajik labour migrants look for greener pastures, they also run the risk of becoming victims of human trafficking, exploitation, and scams. In 2018, Tajik police revealed two scam cases perpetrated by private companies 'Sayri Sayyora' and 'Mehr-2017', which provided illegal services to labour migrants. Dozens of people who were promised jobs in Europe fell victim to the first company, and two people to the second. Later in 2019, there was another case perpetrated by the company 'Garduna', which promised employment to 80 Tajik citizens at Skoda, the Czech car manufacturer. In 2019, Lithuanian law enforcement revealed a case of slavery-like working conditions of 19 Tajik migrant labourers who worked for a local construction company. The employer withheld their passports and forced them to work in awful conditions.

Both the trend of labour migration to Europe as well as the opportunities and risks that are part and parcel of this trend should be taken into account by the authorities in Tajikistan and in Europe on a national basis and possibly within the European Union framework. Here, both the EU Delegation in Tajikistan and the Tajik Embassy in Brussels could play a role by putting the matter on the agenda and potentially developing local awareness-raising campaigns about the risks connected to labour migration.

At this point, it is difficult to say whether Europe will become a real alternative to Russia for Central Asian labour migrants. Whereas it is highly unlikely that Russia will offer the same amount of opportunities as before the war, it is also doubtful that the need for external labourers in Europe will be sustainable, given the high inflation and unemployment rates in Europe. This does not bode well for the Tajik economy, which is highly dependent on remittances from labour migration. It does seem that labour migration from Tajikistan (and Central Asia more broadly) will be diversifying more and more. Whereas Russia will remain a destination for many young Tajik men, some of them will seek employment in Europe and elsewhere in the hope of a better future.

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