

CENTRAL ASIA: MIGRANTS AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The economic crisis has caused millions of migrant labourers from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan to lose their jobs in the boom economies of Russia and Kazakhstan. Remittances that kept their relatives afloat have plummeted and many migrants have returned home to certain destitution, putting weak Central Asian governments under severe strain. In Tajikistan half the labour force is without work, while Kyrgyzstan suffers from massive rural unemployment. Before the crisis hit, up to five million people from these countries left home for Russia and Kazakhstan to take on poorly paid and unskilled jobs, often the unpleasant tasks that local people no longer wished to do. Yet at home they were viewed with respect: the most daring members of their society, who were willing to take a jump into the unknown to pull themselves and their families out of poverty. Remittances also boosted their home countries' economic data, allowing governments with little ability or interest in creating jobs to claim a modest degree of success. By 2008 remittances were providing the equivalent of half Tajikistan's gross domestic product (GDP), a quarter of Kyrgyzstan's GDP, and an eighth of Uzbekistan's.

The economic crisis of 2008-2009 destroyed this semblance of prosperity. First oil prices plummeted, then the crisis rolled through the highly leveraged banking sectors of Russia and Kazakhstan, finally bringing construction – the single largest source of migrant employment – to a near standstill. Migrant labourer quotas were cut, xenophobia increased in Russia, companies laid off migrants or in some cases simply stopped paying them. In the migrants' home countries, governments first refused to believe the crisis would affect them, then slowly began to assemble a package of largely symbolic and ultimately unsuccessful palliatives. At least several hundred thousand and possibly as many as one million migrant labourers were believed to have returned home by the end of 2009.

The crisis has focused attention on one of the crucial weaknesses of Central Asian governments: the ability of states like Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan to survive a crisis depends on good external conditions, not good policy. They handled unemployment, for example, by exporting

it, did little to create jobs at home, and are now floundering in the face of the crisis. In the past they would have just muddled through. Now problems are building up, and muddling through is becoming less of an option. Migrant labourers also unwittingly performed a valuable political service for Central Asia's leaders. The export of surplus labour allowed governments to rid themselves for part of the year of the segment of society – especially young men – that is the most likely source of unrest.

The financial crisis and the return of labour migrants sparked predictions of unrest, intensifying the concern that radical Islamists had been making inroads into the labour diaspora. Though there are strong indications of attempts by radical Islamists to recruit among migrant labourers, particularly in Russia, there is not enough data to ascertain the breadth of their success. And while many labourers have returned home, many more are waiting it out in Russia and Kazakhstan, taking even more menial and lower paying work, or surviving on family handouts in the hope that the situation will improve. Many work illegally, at the mercy of corrupt police, officials and dishonest employers; in Russia they are also subject to considerable discrimination and even violence. Opposition leaders in the region have long believed that migrant labourers would one day form the spearhead of an attack on the entrenched and incompetent regimes. This shows no sign of happening yet.

All groups affected by the crisis hope that one day the boom years will come back. The hiring nations look forward to a time when they will again be serious players on the world economic stage. The labourers need the work, because their own countries cannot provide it. The labour exporting governments need, as usual, outside assistance to solve their problems: none of them under their present dispensations are likely to come up with a successful strategy either to reintegrate migrant labourers or find an alternative source of income. The chances are, however, that the story will not end so neatly. Russia and Kazakhstan are likely at best to achieve a sort of sub-optimal recovery – assuming that a second round of economic crisis does not, as many economists predict, hit in Russia.

In all three countries covered in this report, society has been politically inactive or silent for many years. In Tajikistan this is attributed to the still-fresh memories of a brutal civil war; in Kyrgyzstan to disillusion and cynicism that followed the so-called Tulip Revolution of 2005; in Uzbekistan because of a ruthless and often brutal system of top-to-bottom social control. Western pressure has done little to mitigate this behaviour in the past, and pressure is likely to diminish even further as NATO and the U.S. look to Central Asia to host crucial military supply lines to Afghanistan. Past performance in the region is, however, no guarantee of future behaviour. Insecurity is growing, in part domestically generated, in part because of proximity to Afghanistan; infrastructure is collapsing, weak economies are slipping still further. The governments of the region need to take energetic measures to carry out sweeping reforms. The international community needs to pressure them to do so. At the moment, neither seems likely.

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CENTRAL ASIA: MIGRANTS AND THE ECONOMIC CRISIS

I. INTRODUCTION

Labour migration from Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan has been a political and social lifeline both for the people of these countries and their rulers – an unusual convergence of interests.¹ The flourishing economies of Russia and Kazakhstan provided millions of Central Asians the work they could not find at home. This defused tensions and muted protests against government ineffectiveness. In 2004-2008, the height of the boom years, 800,000 Kyrgyz, 1.5 million Tajiks and 2.5 million Uzbeks left to work in Russia and Kazakhstan,² in construction and retail, agriculture and housing services, usually in low paid work that local people had rejected.

When the global economic crisis hit in 2008, many lost their jobs and up to a million had probably returned home by the end of 2009, to near certain unemployment. Others stayed, accepted lower wages, slipped into illegality or moved to other parts of the country in order to find any sort of work that would allow them to keep sending money home. The potential return of migrants and the effect of dropping remittances raised the spectre of social and political turmoil.

This report investigates the impact of the global financial crisis on migration from Central Asia. It also considers potential dangers of a protracted decline in migration for political and social stability in the region. Interviews and research were carried out in Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan from October to December 2009. Interviews were conducted with migrant workers, government officials, analysts, journalists, scholars, civic activists and members of the international community who work with migrants. Due to the sensitive nature of some questions, most requested anonymity in order to provide more candid opinions. Verified information on Uzbekistan was difficult to obtain, because outside access is severely restricted and the government statistics are highly unreliable.

¹For earlier Crisis Group reporting, see Asia Report N°162, *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure*, 12 February 2009; Asia Briefing N°79, *Kyrgyzstan: A Deceptive Calm*, 14 August 2008.

²The figures on migrants are imprecise due to the poor quality of data gathering at the sending and destination countries. Following is the range of estimates for the sending states: Kyrgyzstan – from 300,000 (officially) to 500,000-800,000 (informal estimates); Uzbekistan – from 250,000-300,000 (officially) to 2-3 million (medium-range estimate), 5-6 million (high-end estimate); Tajikistan – 600,000 (officially) to 1.5 million (high-end estimate). See Crisis Group Report, *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure*, op. cit.; Kursad Aslan, “Labour migration and its potential consequences for Central Asia”, *Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 16 April 2008, at www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/4836; Иван Донис, “Айгуль Рыскулова: В России на заработках официально находятся около 300 тысяч трудовых мигрантов из Кыргызстана” [Ivan Donis, “Aigul Ryskulova: 300,000 labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan are officially working in Russia”], 24.kg News Service, 6 October 2009, at <http://24.kg/community/63748-ajgul-ryskulova-v-rossii-na-zarabotkax-oficialno.html>; Umida Hashimova, “Financial crisis hits Uzbekistan”, *Central Asia Caucasus Analyst*, 28 January 2009, at www.cacianalyst.org/?q=node/5025; “Узбекистан: Кому выгодны новые меры властей по контролю за трудовой миграцией?” [“Uzbekistan: Who benefits from new government rules on controlling labour migration?”], Ferghana.ru, 2 July 2007, at www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=5206; “Background Note: Uzbekistan”, U.S. Department of State, October 2009, at www.state.gov/r/pa/ei/bgn/2924.htm; Crisis Group interview, government official, Dushanbe, November 2009.

II. THE CRISIS

A. RUSSIA AND KAZAKHSTAN: BOOM TO BUST

From 2004 to 2008, Russia enjoyed explosive growth that projected it into the ranks of the world's major economic powers. The boom was oil-led, and brought with it an influx of foreign investment. In 2004, Russia's gross domestic product (GDP) was about \$592 billion in dollar terms; by 2008 it was \$1,677 billion. In the same year its gold and hard currency reserves reached \$427 billion – the world's third largest, behind only Japan and China, and over five times more than the U.S. (Just under ten years earlier, it had \$11 billion in foreign currency reserves).³ In mid-2008, however, the oil price collapsed. Prices plummeted from \$129.7 a barrel in August 2008 to \$39.2 that December.⁴ This in turn sent the capital flow into reverse. Private capital had been flooding in at the rate of around \$50 billion a year. By the end of 2008 the outflow amounted to \$131 billion.⁵

Kazakhstan, a major oil producer, is highly vulnerable to fluctuations in Russia's economic well-being – the International Monetary Fund (IMF) estimates that a 1 per cent change in Russian GDP brings about a 0.8 per cent change in Kazakhstan's growth.⁶ In the ten years prior to 2008, the country's GDP grew at an annual average of 8.7 per cent.⁷ The crisis surprised and confused leaders in both countries. Russia's finance minister, Alexei Kudrin, warned grimly that his country had passed a historical boundary: "Abundance is ending. 2008 was the peak in terms of [government] incomes, and will not come again".⁸ Ten days later Prime Minister Vladimir Putin, however, predicted that Russia would be among

the leaders of economic growth in 2009, with 5.5 per cent.⁹ The drop in oil prices was not a big problem, he claimed. Speaking to the parliament in October 2008, Kazakhstan's prime minister, Karim Masimov, said the country had not only been spared by the economic crisis, but was also experiencing modest GDP growth.¹⁰

Both countries reported negative GDP growth in 2009. Russia's GDP, which had grown by 8.1 per cent in 2007 stood at between minus 6 and minus 7 per cent as 2009 drew to a close. Kazakhstan's GDP slipped from 8.9 per cent growth in 2007 to minus 2 per cent in 2009.¹¹ The slump in Russia and Kazakhstan quickly affected their banks and the construction sector. Russia's banks financed 80 per cent of its booming building sector, while in Kazakhstan housing loans constituted over one third of banks' credit portfolio.¹² By 2007, the construction sector amounted to 31 per cent of Kazakhstan's GDP.¹³ When the housing bubble burst as a result of the economic crisis, the growth rate in Kazakhstan's construction industry declined from 16.4 percent in 2007 to 1.9 per cent in 2008,¹⁴ and mortgages fell by 319.3 billion tenge (\$2.13 billion) from 2007 to 2008.¹⁵

³Gold and hard currency reserves can be found in the CIA World Factbook at www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/rankorder/2188rank.html. For the GDP estimates, which have been rounded up, see IMF World Economic Outlook database, at www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/weo/2009/02/weodata/index.aspx.

⁴Анатолий Гордеев, "Нефть – зыбкая опора" [Anatoliy Gordeev, "Oil is a shaky base"], *Novaya Gazeta*, 21 October 2009, at www.novayagazeta.ru/data/2009/117/16.html.

⁵"Russian Federation: 2009 Article IV Consultation – Staff Report; Staff Statement, Public Information Notice on the Executive Board Discussion", IMF, 7 August 2009, at www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2009/cr09246.pdf.

⁶"Republic of Kazakhstan: 2009 Article IV Consultation – Staff Report; Supplement; and Public Information Notice on the Executive Board Discussion", IMF, October 2009, at www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2009/cr09300.pdf.

⁷Ibid, p. 33.

⁸Элина Билевская, "Страхи Министра Кудрина" [Elina Bilevskaya, "The fears of Minister Kudrin"], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 8 October 2009, at www.ng.ru/politics/2008-10-08/1_kudrin.html.

⁹"Владимир Путин не опасается падения цен на нефть" ["A drop in oil prices does not make Vladimir Putin apprehensive"], *Kommersant*, 20 October 2008, at www.kommersant.ru/doc.aspx?DocsID=1044778.

¹⁰Анатолий Вайскопф, "Казахстан: экономический кризис и теневая экономика" [Anatoliy Vaiskopf, "Kazakhstan: the economic crisis and the 'grey economy'"], *Deutsche Welle*, 30 September 2008, at www.dw-world.de/dw/article/0,,3682238,00.html.

¹¹Ibrahim Awad, "The global economic crisis and migrant workers: impact and response", ILO International Migration Program, 2009, p. 4, at www.ilo.org/public/english/protection/migrant/download/global_crisis.pdf.

¹²"Вспомнить всё" ["Total Recall"], *Stroitelnyj Expert*, 26 June 2009, at www.a-s-r.ru/tabid/223/EntryID/12195/Default.aspx; "Качество ипотечных кредитов продолжает ухудшаться, констатирует АФН" ["The quality of housing loans continues to decline, the AFN declares"], *Gazeta.kz*, 25 September 2009, at www.gazeta.kz/art.asp?aid=137761.

¹³"Employment of Migrant Workers in the Informal Economy of Kazakhstan – A Study of Southern Kazakhstan", International Labour Organization (ILO), September 2008, p. 22.

¹⁴Kiyoshi Taniguchi and Asset Nussupov, "Kazakhstan" in *Asian Development Outlook 2009: Rebalancing Asia's Growth*, Asian Development Bank, p. 142, at www.adb.org/Documents/Books/ADO/2009/KAZ.pdf.

¹⁵Светлана Грибанова, Анастасия Моторина, "Прощенное воскресенье для ипотеки" [Svetlana Gribanova, Anastasia Motorina, "The Sunday of Forgiveness for the Mortgage Sector"], *Expert-Kazakhstan*, 9 March 2009, at www.expert.ru/printissues/kazakhstan/2009/09/ipoteka/.

Though oil prices are gently improving, neither country is expected to achieve more than a modest recovery in 2010. As of late 2009 Kazakh banks owed \$40 billion in external liabilities, a quarter of which was due by the end of the year.¹⁶ Many Russian economists and entrepreneurs believe that the country will face a second round of crisis in the next few years. Meanwhile, the construction and housing sectors as of the end of 2009 remained weak. The shares of major players in the development and property sectors were reported to have dropped by 80 per cent in value since the start of the crisis; the rent of commercial space decreased by 30-50 per cent.¹⁷ The slump was an even greater blow for Central Asia, however: 40 per cent of all workers on Russian building sites were migrant labourers.¹⁸

B. CENTRAL ASIA: GROWING DEPENDENCE ON REMITTANCES

In the years leading up to 2008, labour migration came to play an important role in Central Asia. This was particularly true of Tajikistan, the region's poorest and most vulnerable state, and Kyrgyzstan, where the situation is not much better. It also had a considerable impact in Uzbekistan, though the exact contours here are less clear. Because of its jealously guarded self-image as Central Asia's leader, and its tightly controlled authoritarian system, Uzbekistan consistently refuses to discuss, or even admit, the existence of any problems.¹⁹ While Tajikistan

actively embraces the export of its surplus labour, and Kyrgyzstan happily countenances it, Uzbekistan is deeply sensitive to the suggestion that its population has to leave the country to find work.²⁰

The remittances made a major difference. By 2008 they were the equivalent of 27 per cent of Kyrgyzstan's GDP, around 49 per cent of Tajikistan's, and about 13 per cent of Uzbekistan's.²¹ And they were growing fast. From 2006 to 2008, remittances to Kyrgyzstan increased from \$481 million to \$1.2 billion; in Tajikistan from \$1 billion to \$2.6 billion; and in Uzbekistan, from \$1.4 billion to \$3.3 billion.²² The National Bank of Tajikistan boosted its net international reserves by \$125 million,²³ while 70 per cent of Tajikistan's trade deficit was financed through remittances.²⁴ The influx of migrant labourers' earnings was also credited for a noticeable decline in poverty in both Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan.

There was also a downside to the influx of money. In Tajikistan it triggered the appreciation of somoni, the national currency, making the few goods produced in the country even less competitive vis-à-vis those produced in Russia and China.²⁵ Between 2005 and 2008, imports more than tripled in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan. The

¹⁶“Republic of Kazakhstan: 2009 Article IV Consultation”, IMF, p. 4, at www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2009/cr09300.pdf.

¹⁷“Строительные компании выбираются из-под бремени долгов” [“Construction companies are getting out of the debt burden”], *Vedomosti*, 16 October 2009, at www.smoney.ru/analytics/index.shtml?2009/09/16/14192; Михаил Оверченко и Ольга Кувшинова, “Пальцем в небо” [Mikhail Overchenko and Olga Kuvshinova, “Random Pick”], *Vedomosti*, 7 October 2009, www.vedomosti.ru/newspaper/article/2009/10/07/215623.

¹⁸“According to official data, 40 per cent of construction workers are migrants, 20 per cent of retail workers, 10 per cent of those employed in the service industry, and 7 per cent in both agriculture and production”. Russia National Human Development Report, Russian Federation 2008, “Russia Facing Demographic Challenges”, United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), at http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/nationalreports/europethecis/russia/NHDR_Russia_2008_Eng.pdf.

¹⁹For the volumes of remittances, see “Remittances Data”, World Bank, July 2009; Kiyoshi Taniguchi and Iskandar Gulamov, “Uzbekistan”, in *Asian Development Bank Development Outlook 2009: Rebalancing Asia's Growth*, Asian Development Bank, p. 156, at www.adb.org/Documents/Books/ADO/2009/UZB.pdf; Parviz Khakimov and Moensho Mahmadbekov, “Economic Dynamics of Labour Migrants' Re-

mittances in Tajikistan”, International Organisation for Migration (IOM) Tajikistan, April 2009, p. 34, at www.iom.tj/publications/Economic%20Dynamics%20of%20migrants%20remittances%20in%20Tajikistan.pdf; Hashimova, op. cit.

²⁰A UN report quotes one Uzbek official summing up his government's view of labour migrants: “Migrants are people who do not like to work, but look for an easy way to earn money. We have enough work; there are no jobs with a low salary”. See “Оценка нужд и потребностей женщин трудящихся-мигрантов” [“Needs Assessment of Female Migrants”], UNIFEM, 2009, p. 55.

²¹See “Remittances Data”, World Bank, July 2009; Taniguchi and Gulamov, op. cit.; Hashimova, op. cit.; Khakimov and Mahmadbekov, op. cit.

²²“Remittances Data”, World Bank, July 2009; Taniguchi and Gulamov, op. cit.; Hashimova, op. cit.; Khakimov and Mahmadbekov, op. cit.

²³“Republic of Tajikistan – 2009 Article IV Consultation, Final Review Under the Staff-Monitored Program, and Request for a Three-Year Arrangement Under the Poverty Reduction and Growth Facility – Staff Report; Staff Supplement; Public Information Notice and Press Release on the Executive Board Discussion; and Statement by the Executive Director for the Republic of Tajikistan”, IMF, 3 June 2009, p. 11, at www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2009/cr09174.pdf.

²⁴Материалы по круглому столу на тему “Влияние мирового финансового кризиса на трудовую миграцию из Таджикистана”, Душанбе, 13-14 марта 2009 г. [Materials on the round table meeting, “The influence of the world financial crisis on labour migration from Tajikistan”, Dushanbe, 13-14 March 2009], IOM, 2009, p. 108.

²⁵“Republic of Tajikistan: 2009 Article IV Consultation”, IMF, p. 17.

abundance of migrant dollars inflated domestic demand for goods and their prices. In 2008, the year of a dramatic increase in remittances, consumer prices in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan recorded the highest growth in the region.²⁶ Basic commodities thus became less affordable for those who had not yet migrated, possibly forcing more of them to leave the country.²⁷ Before the financial crisis, however, migration created an illusion of growing, very relative, but nonetheless sustainable affluence.²⁸ As long as the money kept flowing in, Central Asia's labour exporting states were willing to overlook the damage to domestic economies, as well as other oft-cited problems, like violence against migrants in Russia, and negative impact on their families or communities of the mass departure of working-age males (see below).

For the majority of migrant labourers, for example those from Tajikistan, where about 60 per cent of the population survive on less than \$1.40 a day – the poverty line defined by the IMF – remittances were the only lifeline available. The lifeline started to fray almost as soon as the crisis broke. International observers estimate that in 2009 remittances fell by around 30 per cent in Uzbekistan and Tajikistan, and about 25 per cent in Kyrgyzstan, as compared with the previous year.²⁹

C. REMITTANCES AS SURVIVAL MECHANISM: THE EXAMPLE OF TAJIKISTAN

At their best remittances are a flexible, responsive and well-targeted support mechanism for the poorest segments of society – more efficient, generous and honest than anything the state can offer. The situation in Tajikistan illustrates this particularly well. A total of 17 per cent of the population survives on less than \$26 per month.³⁰ The bulk of remittances are thought to go to families in rural areas – where 70 per cent of the country's population try to eke out a living on the country's less than 7 per cent of arable land. Remittances constitute at the very least 25 per cent of income for those living in the Tajik countryside; and as this figure, still used in official reports, refers to 2005, the actual proportion is probably much more.

The money mostly covers an extended family's basic needs; any surplus goes for small luxuries, or to supplement what is available from the disastrously underfunded health and education systems. Unlike state funds, remittances are more adaptable in times of crisis: during the terrible winter of 2007-8, when state services all but ceased to function, there were frequent reports of more money being sent back. They also dwarf state services. In 2008, migrant workers sent about \$2.6 billion home; the state budgeted \$201 million for public education and \$74 million for health.³¹

²⁶ Prices increased by 24.5 per cent in Kyrgyzstan and 20.5 per cent in Tajikistan. See "Key Indicators for Asia and the Pacific 2009", Asian Development Bank, p. 199, at www.adb.org/documents/books/key_indicators/2009/pdf/Key-Indicators-2009.pdf.

²⁷ Crisis Group interview, local economist, Dushanbe, November 2009.

²⁸ Alexei Kireyev, "The Macroeconomics of Remittances: The Case of Tajikistan", IMF Working Paper, 2006, p. 17, at www.untj.org/library/?mode=details&id=420.

²⁹ "Republic of Tajikistan – 2009 Article IV Consultation", IMF, p. 13. The updated Kyrgyz figure is from «Воздействие мирового экономического кризиса на трудовую миграцию из Кыргызстана в Россию» ["The impact of the world economic crisis on labour migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia"], Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), Bishkek, December 2009 (not yet available on internet). Russian Central Bank figures confirmed this trend. Both the absolute figures and the average size of a remittance had diminished sharply as at the end of the third quarter 2009 as compared with the same period in 2008. For example, Uzbeks had sent back \$1.16 billion in the third quarter of 2008, compared to \$699 million in 2009. In the same quarter both years, the figures for Tajikistan were \$914 million in 2008, \$569 the next year, and for Kyrgyzstan, from \$379 million down to \$273 million. The amount being sent home each time had also declined significantly. Again comparing third quarter statistics from 2008 and 2009, an average Uzbek remittance went down from \$861 to \$613, a Tajik remittance from \$720 to \$444, and a Kyrgyz one from \$588 to \$406. These figures can be found in: www.cbr.ru/

statistics/print.aspx?file=CrossBorder/Rem_countries_08-3.htm&pid=svs&sid=TGO_sp_post.

³⁰ "Republic of Tajikistan – 2009 Article IV Consultation", IMF, p. 5, at www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2009/cr09174.pdf.

³¹ Mavjouda Hasanova, "Tajik parliament passes budget for 2008", Asia-Plus, 2 November 2007, at www.asiaplus.tj/en/news/49/24332.html. It is reasonable to assume a considerable amount of these funds were lost to corruption.

III. GOVERNMENTS REACT

A. CUTBACKS IN RUSSIA AND KAZAKHSTAN

One of the first responses of the Russian and Kazakh authorities to the crisis was to reduce their migrant labour quotas. Russia cut its 2009 quota from 3.9 million to 1.95 million for all workers.³² Kazakhstan halved its figure, to 66,300.³³ But in practice, many migrants, not just from Central Asia, work in Russia and Kazakhstan illegally. About 65 per cent of all migrants working in Russia are said to be in this situation.³⁴ The proportion in Kazakhstan appears even higher. Experts claim that the number of migrants reaches up to three million annually, and only about 200,000 to 300,000 of them are in the country legally.³⁵

There are various gradations of illegality. As Central Asian nationals are allowed into Russia without a visa, some work on the basis of a temporary registration card,³⁶ but without permission to hold a specific job. A considerable number are employed in the so-called “grey economy” where the workers have little if any protection, and the employer pays no taxes, can hire and fire at will, and often withholds both the migrant’s pay and passport until completion of the work. Some observers

see the quota restrictions remaining for some time, even if there is a sudden economic upturn. If this happens, they say, the reasons would be political not economic. For instance, the Moscow city government cut its 2010 migrant quota to 250,000, even though local employers had requested 1.38 million. Officials said the decision was designed to ensure that Muscovites were not “squeezed out” of the job market.³⁷ A Kazakh government expert on migration noted that authorities were too fixated on the present unemployment numbers to be concerned about labour migrants or future labour shortages.³⁸

Many migrants will simply take their chances. Accustomed to avoiding officials in their own country, where they are more likely to be the victims of petty extortion than receive assistance, migrant workers show the same lack of enthusiasm for engagement with Russian bureaucrats.³⁹ A civic activist who works with migrants in Russia says that when many clients hear of the cumbersome requirements for legalisation, they say, “We will work out something else” and quickly disappear.⁴⁰ Some migrants will be deterred by the crisis, demoralised by racism and dismayed by the even harsher working conditions and lower wages endured by illegals. Most will almost certainly keep coming while there is any hope of employment. Some economists and specialists on migration believe the crisis has passed its worst and destination countries have already implemented their harshest measures against labour migration.⁴¹ This presumes, of course, that there is not a second-round economic shock in either Russia or Kazakhstan. Even relatively optimistic officials in Central Asian capitals assume, however, that it may take two to three years before the Russian economy is able to absorb foreign migrants at previous levels.⁴²

³² “В Россию будут звать меньше иностранных рабочих” [“Russia will invite fewer foreign workers”], CA-News, 22 July 2009, at <http://ca-news.org/news/187351>.

³³ Тулкин Ташимов, “Чужие здесь не ходят” [Tulkin Tashimov, “Strangers don’t come here”], *Expert-Kazakhstan*, 9 March 2009, at www.expert.ru/printissues/kazakhstan/2009/09/trud/.

³⁴ Cited in “Russia Facing Demographic Challenges”, UNDP, p. 94. The 65 per cent illegal rate is attributed by the report to an expert assessment. http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/nationalreports/europethecis/russia/NHDR_Russia_2008_Eng.pdf.

³⁵ For the unofficial estimate see Tashimov, *op. cit.* The calculation of legal migrants is based on “Информационно-справочные материалы к научно-практической конференции на тему: ‘Актуальные вопросы международной трудовой миграции в Республике Казахстан и пути их законодательного регулирования’” [“The informational material for the Conference ‘Critical Questions of International Labour Migration in the Republic of Kazakhstan and Ways for Their Legislative Regulation’”], Senate of the Parliament of the Republic of Kazakhstan, Committee on International Relations, Defence and Security, 23 December 2008, p. 13. The authorities claim a much lower general figure (600,000) of labour migrants and say one third of them are illegal.

³⁶ Kazakhstan and Russia have a visa-free regime with Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, but all Commonwealth of Independent States (CIS) citizens have to register on arrival. Depending on bilateral agreements, temporary registration can range from 30 to 90 days. A temporary registration card does not grant a right for employment.

³⁷ “Москва сократит квоты на гастарбайтеров на треть” [“Moscow will cut the gastarbeiter quota by one third”], *rb.ru business network*, 15 July 2009, at www.rb.ru/news/economics/2009/07/15/143422.html.

³⁸ Crisis Group interview, government analyst, Almaty, October 2009.

³⁹ Crisis Group interviews, international official, local civic activist, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁴⁰ Crisis Group interview, civic activist, Yekaterinburg, October 2009.

⁴¹ Crisis Group interviews, international observer, Dushanbe, October 2009; international expert, Almaty, October 2009.

⁴² Crisis Group interview, government official, Dushanbe, November 2009.

B. LABOUR EXPORTING NATIONS: LETHARGIC RESPONSE

Central Asian governments responded to the crisis with a mixture of complacency and denial. “Due to its [Tajikistan’s] weak dependence on the international financial system, the impact of the financial crisis will be insignificant”,⁴³ senior researchers at a Tajik government think tank said in October 2008. Kyrgyzstan took the same line.⁴⁴ Uzbek officials refused to admit any problems or participate in joint meetings on the matter, a foreign donor said. They claimed their economy had enough resilience to handle the crisis.⁴⁵ The Uzbek foreign ministry’s news agency, Zhakhon, summed up the official view: “[D]espite the profound economic crisis that has gripped almost all countries of the world, including those bordering on Uzbekistan, the republic’s economy, based on the five principles elaborated by the President of the Republic Islam Karimov, is developing successfully”.⁴⁶

Anxiety, in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan at least, set in by the end of 2008.⁴⁷ Kyrgyzstan’s cabinet of ministers set up an inter-agency commission on the crisis, but said its deliberations would be confidential so as not to cause panic.⁴⁸ Prices for cotton and aluminium, Tajikistan’s two

main exports other than labour, fell sharply in 2009.⁴⁹ From January to September 2009, exports declined by 43 per cent in Tajikistan and 20 per cent in Kyrgyzstan.⁵⁰ The decline of exports in Uzbekistan is insignificant, only because the revenue from gas is expected to offset the decrease in non-hydrocarbon exports.⁵¹

In Tajikistan the government pledged to create 180,000 new jobs. This proposal was met with scepticism.⁵² The government ordered private businesses to create positions they did not necessarily need.⁵³ Employers reportedly split one position (and its salary) into two or announced the elimination of fake redundancies only to add those positions as new jobs later.⁵⁴ Government job fairs offered only low-paid employment.⁵⁵ Several donors noted that the government committed no money of its own to job creation. Moreover the plan seemed to ignore the fact that 120,000 Tajiks enter the job market every year.⁵⁶ In October 2009 Saudi Arabia offered to take a large number of Tajik workers – up to one million according to one press account.⁵⁷ The Tajik government, however, was reportedly deterred by Saudi Arabia’s reputation as the home of the Wahhabi school of Islam.⁵⁸ An agree-

News Service, 21 November 2008, at <http://24.kg/economics/42514-2008/11/21/98689.html>.

⁴⁹“ТАЛКО при экспорте своей продукции экономит на транспортных расходах” [“TALCO saves on transportation cost in exporting its production”], CA-News, 12 November 2009, at <http://ca-news.org/news/258501>.

⁵⁰See Расул Шодон, “Рост без развития” [Rasul Shodon, “Growth without development”], Asia-Plus, 25 September 2009, at www.asiaplus.tj/articles/240/4094.html; Антон Лымарь, “По итогам 9 месяцев 2009 года ВВП Кыргызстана превысил 137 миллиардов сомов” [Anton Lyumar, “Based on the results of 9 months in 2009 Kyrgyzstan’s GDP exceeded 137 billion som”], 24.kg News Service, 9 October 2009, at <http://24kg.org/economics/63924-po-itogam-9-mesyacev-2009-goda-vvp-kyrgyzstana.html>.

⁵¹Taniguchi and Gulamov, “Uzbekistan”, ADB, op. cit.; “Regional Economic Outlook: Middle East and Central Asia”, IMF, October 2009, p. 55, at www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/reo/2009/MCD/eng/mreo1009.pdf.

⁵²Crisis Group interviews, international officials, NGO leader, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁵³Crisis Group interviews, international observer, Dushanbe, October 2009.

⁵⁴Crisis Group interviews, local researcher, international officials, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁵⁵Crisis Group interviews, international official, local researcher, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁵⁶Crisis Group interview, foreign official, Dushanbe, November 2009; international expert, Almaty, October 2009.

⁵⁷Мунавара Рябикина, “На работу в Саудовскую Аравию” [Munavvara Ryabikina, “Off to work to Saudi Arabia”], Asia-Plus, 25 September 2009, at <http://asiaplus.tj/articles/127/4100.html>.

⁵⁸Crisis Group interviews, local expert, civic leader, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁴³“Затронет ли глобальный финансовый кризис Таджикистан?” [“Will the global financial crisis affect Tajikistan?”], Khovar, 9 October 2009, at www.tajinfo.ru/tema/1223542830/pindex.shtml.

⁴⁴Наргиза Юлдашева, “Улугбек Ормонов: Из-за слабости банковского сектора Кыргызстана нас не затронул мировой финансовый кризис, но мы должны быть к нему готовы” [Nargiza Yuldasheva, “Ulugbek Ormonov: due to the weakness of Kyrgyzstan’s banking sector, we have not been affected by the world financial crisis, but we have to be ready for it”], 24.kg News Service, 17 October 2008, at <http://24.kg/politic/40979-2008/10/17/95617.html>; Наргиза Юлдашева, “Правительство Кыргызстана завершает разработку проекта программы действий страны в случае негативного влияния мирового финансового кризиса на республику” [Nargiza Yuldasheva, “The government of Kyrgyzstan completes the development of an action plan for the country in case of the negative influence from the world financial crisis on the republic”], 24.kg News Service, 28 October 2008, at <http://24.kg/parlament/41379-2008/10/28/96419.html>.

⁴⁵Crisis Group interview, foreign official, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁴⁶Cited by “Черствый хлеб родины” [“Homeland’s stale bread”], Uzmtronom, 17 October 2009, at www.uzmtronom.com/2009/10/17/cherstvyjj_khleb_rodiny.html.

⁴⁷Crisis Group interviews, international donor, civic activist, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁴⁸Игорь Горбачев, “Мировой кризис – до нас дошло?” [Igor Gorbachev, “The world crisis – did we get it?”], 24.kg

ment was finally reached to send about 1,000 migrants, mostly specialists in medicine. Applicants were carefully vetted by state security services.⁵⁹

Uzbekistan also announced job fairs, coupling them, somewhat confusingly, with stories of migrants being cheated by unscrupulous intermediaries and employers.⁶⁰ As of late 2009, Kyrgyzstan seemed only to have started developing plans on how to handle returning migrants. Senior officials spoke of creating a centre on overseas employment. Initiatives to create additional jobs in lieu of paying unemployment benefits had not been designed.⁶¹

Many officials do not hide their disinterest in the migrant issue. One senior Tajik official scornfully asked a prominent civic activist, “Why are you so worried about them? Let them go to hell”.⁶² Government officials admit they do not know what to do with returning migrants if they cannot find work.⁶³ Most officials hope they will go back to Russia. Commenting on the 29 June 2009 closure of the Cherkizovo market in Moscow, which employed 11,000 Tajik migrants, a senior state official summarised the prevailing, rather casual official attitude towards his country’s migrant workers: “Our kind will find work anywhere”.⁶⁴ Others view migrant remittances only as a possible source for taxation.⁶⁵

Uzbekistan, as befits its unique view of the world, takes a different approach. When Kazakhstan offered to conclude a bilateral treaty on migration issues, Tashkent was uninterested. But international officials say that the Uzbek security services are keen to track any indications that their citizens are using labour migration as a cover to slip into Afghanistan for training by Islamist guerrillas.⁶⁶

In some places, however, returning migrants are blamed for an upsurge in crime. The evidence seems anecdotal rather than firmly based in statistics, but after several

high-profile robberies in Dushanbe and a reported spike in thefts and robberies in Tashkent, fingers were pointed at returning migrants.⁶⁷ Some Tajik experts and government officials feel migrants’ return will result in a higher crime rate.⁶⁸ Their Kyrgyz colleagues concur.⁶⁹

⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, local expert, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁶⁰ “Черствый хлеб родины” [“Homeland’s stale bread”], *Uzmetronom*, 17 October 2009, at www.uzmetronom.com/2009/10/17/cherstvyjj_khleb_rodiny.html.

⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, senior government official, Bishkek, November 2009.

⁶² Crisis Group interview, civic leader, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁶³ Crisis Group interview, local researcher, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁶⁴ Манижа Курбанова, “Наши нигде не пропадут” [Manija Kurbanova, “Our kind will make it everywhere”], *Asia-Plus*, 23 July 2009, at <http://asiaplus.tj/articles/127/3876.html>.

⁶⁵ Crisis Group interview, local researcher, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁶⁶ Crisis Group interview, international official, Almaty, October 2009.

⁶⁷ Рамзия Мирзобекова, Далер Гуфронов, “Охота на валютчиков” [Ramzia Mirzobekova, Daler Gufonov, “Hunting currency dealers”], *Asia-Plus*, 2 October 2009, at <http://asiaplus.tj/articles/96/4107.html>; Сергей Ежов, “Раковый корпус и его метастазы” [Sergey Yezhov, “The cancer ward and its metastases”], *Uzmetronom*, 30 October 2009, at <http://ca-news.org/news/228981>.

⁶⁸ Crisis Group interviews, local researcher, government analyst, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁶⁹ “Воздействие мирового экономического кризиса на трудовую миграцию из Кыргызстана в Россию” [“The impact of the world economic crisis on labour migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia”], OSCE, op. cit.

IV. THE MIGRANTS AT HOME AND ABROAD: GRIM CHOICES

The reaction in Russia and Kazakhstan, coupled with the lethargic and largely symbolic actions of their own leaders, has made it painfully clear to migrants that they are on their own. They should expect no support or help from either their host countries or their governments at home.

A. PORTRAIT OF A MIGRANT

Migrants usually leave home in the spring and return towards the start of winter. Those from Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are typically young and male, over half are between eighteen and 35 years old.⁷⁰ Most graduated from high school, some had vocational training, but few had received higher education.⁷¹ Younger migrants, educated after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and those from rural areas increasingly have both limited Russian and work skills. City dwellers and migrants in their mid-30s and above have a working knowledge of the language.⁷² Between 10 to 20 per cent are women.⁷³ The decision to leave was sometimes due to a combination of economic and political motives. Thus one Uzbek migrant in Kazakhstan, a university graduate, says that he left because “there were no prospects” for him and his family at home. “The way I saw it there would be no changes for the next twenty years, as long as [Uzbek president Islam] Karimov and whoever is his hand-picked successor are in power”.⁷⁴

⁷⁰ Age statistics: Tajik migrants – 56.1 per cent are eighteen to 29; Kyrgyz migrants – 50 per cent are 21 to 30; 55 per cent of migrants in Kazakhstan claim to be 21 to 35. See Khakimov and Mahmadbekov, op. cit., p. 63; “Assessment of the Social and Economic Situation of Kyrgyz Labour Migrants Returning to their Home Land”, Eurasia Foundation, March 2009, p. 8; “Employment of Migrant Workers in the Informal Economy of Kazakhstan”, ILO, op. cit., p. 15. The figures indicate that migrants are getting younger. A 2005 survey of Tajik migrants stated that the average labourer was male, 34, married with five family members and has secondary or technical education. See, “Republic of Tajikistan: Poverty Reduction Strategy Paper”, IMF, March 2009, p. 11, at www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/scr/2009/cr0982.pdf.

⁷¹ Eurasia Foundation, op. cit.; “Employment of Migrant Workers in the Informal Economy of Kazakhstan”, ILO, op. cit.; Crisis Group interview, local analyst, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁷² Crisis Group interview, social scientist, Dushanbe, August 2009.

⁷³ Crisis Group interviews, civic leader and government analyst, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁷⁴ Crisis Group interview, migrant labourer, Almaty, December 2009.

What sets migrants apart from the local population in their host countries is their willingness to work long hours in the worst conditions. “No matter how severe the crisis is, a Russian will never agree to dig trenches and lay pipes in a minus-twenty-degree cold”,⁷⁵ said a leader of a migrant advocacy NGO in central Russia.

Migrants in Russia work predominantly in construction, manual labour, and in the enormous markets that can still be found in most cities. In Kazakhstan each migrant community is said to occupy its niche. Uzbeks bring their families and work on cotton fields. Kyrgyz work mostly in retail trade and pick tobacco. There is a gender division of labour with women working mostly in trade and as domestic labourers and earning on average 20 per cent less than men.⁷⁶ Most have found their jobs through informal networks or friends, relatives of acquaintances who have come before them.⁷⁷ During the construction boom in both states, more experienced migrants filled their crews with people from their neighbourhoods and villages and secured jobs based on their previous contacts in Russia.⁷⁸

The money may be better than at home, but migrant labourers are definitely second class workers. While they are paid about the same as the average Russian monthly salary of some \$420 dollars, migrants usually work twenty or even 30 hours more a week than their Russian counterparts.⁷⁹ In Kazakhstan a migrant would earn half a local’s salary, and his employer would not have to pay social and pension taxes.⁸⁰ Employers are thus interested in finding people who can be kept off the books. A recent survey of social attitudes to migrants, carried out by the Institute of Sociology at the Russian Academy of Sciences, recorded strongly negative attitudes to migrants,

⁷⁵ Crisis Group interview, civic leader, Yekaterinburg, October 2009.

⁷⁶ “Employment of Migrant Workers in the Informal Economy of Kazakhstan”, ILO, op. cit., p. 24.

⁷⁷ “Russia Facing Demographic Challenges”, UNDP, p. 101, at http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/nationalreports/europethecis/russia/NHDR_Russia_2008_Eng.pdf; Eurasia Foundation, op. cit. 70 per cent of Tajik and Kyrgyz migrants say they find jobs in this way.

⁷⁸ Екатерина Добрынина, “Понаехали, понаоставались ... Социологи выяснили, насколько противоречивые чувства россияне испытывают к мигрантам” [Ekaterina Dobrynina, “They came and stayed ... Sociologists found out to what extent Russians have contradictory feelings toward migrants”], *Rossiiskaya Gazeta*, 13 November 2009, at www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1258099080.

⁷⁹ “Russia Facing Demographic Challenger”, UNDP, p. 98, at http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/nationalreports/europethecis/russia/NHDR_Russia_2008_Eng.pdf.

⁸⁰ Tashimov, op. cit.; “Employment of Migrant Workers in the Informal Economy of Kazakhstan”, ILO, op. cit., p. 21.

coupled with a grudging admission that they were cheaper, more disciplined, more reliable and better workers.⁸¹

The importance of remittances is illustrated by public attitudes toward migration. In one survey 57 per cent of Tajik migrants said they had been able to support their families financially and provide more income.⁸² Almost half of migrants from Kyrgyzstan said they would leave for Russia again and would recommend migration to others.⁸³ Few, however, make their fortune. While some families in Tajikistan are said to have accumulated modest savings that may last up to one year, the majority lives hand to mouth and relies on remittances for daily survival.⁸⁴ The numbers of migrants deported from Russia and Kazakhstan are minuscule compared to the actual migrant inflow.⁸⁵ But one Tajik activist remarked that for a labour migrant “a deportation stamp meant a total catastrophe for him and his family”.⁸⁶

B. PROSPECTS AT HOME: DESTITUTION

The few reliable statistics available make it clear that a small proportion of migrant workers have returned home, and that many will leave again the moment conditions improve. A considerable number said they were planning to return to Russia when the situation permits.⁸⁷ The Kyrgyz authorities say 10 to 25 per cent of all migrants came back after the crisis, which may put the number of returnees between 80,000 to 200,000 people.⁸⁸ Unof-

ficial estimates in Tajikistan claim 300,000 (or about 20 per cent of the total flow) returned.⁸⁹ Uzbekistan has not offered any estimates, but the number may well be around 20 per cent.⁹⁰ What is awaiting them however, is clear: very little. Returning migrants can be confident that the situation at home will be worse than when they left. Unemployment is endemic. Living standards continue to drop, and hardship is growing. All three countries have a young population: the median age is 22-24 years; one third of the population is under fourteen.⁹¹ Population density remains high, especially in Tajikistan,⁹² the Uzbek part of the Ferghana valley, and to a lesser degree southern Kyrgyzstan.

1. No job prospects

Official unemployment figures for Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan are deceptively low – 2.8 per cent in Kyrgyzstan and 2.1 per cent in Tajikistan in mid-2009.⁹³ They are also meaningless. Half the workforce in Tajikistan has no job.⁹⁴ Welfare benefits are so small that many do not

жить хорошо” [Viktoria Panfilova, Anton Khodasevich, “Where is life good for a gastarbeiter?”], *Nezavisimaya Gazeta*, 2 October 2009, at www.ng.ru/cis/2009-10-02/6_migrant.html. The estimate given in the text is based on the most frequent unofficial estimate of Kyrgyz labour migrants abroad (800,000) since official statistics almost certainly underestimate the number.

⁸¹For the unofficial estimate, see Хумайро Бахтиер, “Мухаммад Эгамзод: Готов ли Таджикистан принять мигрантов?” [Khumairo Bakhtior, “Muhammad Egamzod: Is Tajikistan ready to take in migrants?”], *CA-News*, 28 August 2009, at <http://ca-news.org/news/207231>. The percentage is calculated based on 1.5 million as the total number of migrants.

⁹⁰The number of migrants decreased not only because of the crisis, but also because of frequent border crossing closures by Uzbekistan with southern regions of Kazakhstan where Uzbeks migrate to pick cotton. Crisis Group interview, international aid official, Almaty, October 2009.

⁹¹“Tajikistan”, “Kyrgyzstan”, “Uzbekistan”, *The World Factbook*, Central Intelligence Agency, 11 November 2009, at www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook.

⁹²In Tajikistan 90 per cent of the population lives on 7 per cent of the territory. See Khojamahmad Umarov, “External Labour Migration in Tajikistan: Root Causes, Consequences and Regulation”, in Roger Rodriguez (ed.), *Migration Perspectives: Eastern Europe and Central Asia*, IOM, 2006, pp. 91-92, at http://iom.ramdisk.net/iom/images/uploads/Website%20version%20Migration%20Perspectives%20eng%20protected_1169046292.pdf.

⁹³“Основные макроэкономические показатели стран СНГ” [“Key macroeconomic indicators of CIS countries”], CIS Inter-State Statistical Committee, January-August 2009 data, at www.cisstat.com/.

⁹⁴A 2008 UNESCO report put the figure for 2006 at 52.8 per cent. See “National Report on Adult Education”, UNICEF, December 2008, at [www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/INSTITUTES/UII/confintea/pdf/National_Reports/Asia%](http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/INSTITUTES/UII/confintea/pdf/National_Reports/Asia%20)

⁸¹Dobrynina, op. cit.

⁸²Khakimov and Mahmadbekov, op. cit., p. 21.

⁸³Eurasia Foundation, op. cit.

⁸⁴Crisis Group interviews, local researcher, civic leader, government analyst, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁸⁵In 2008, 17,000 were deported from Kazakhstan; in January-September 2008 over 14,000 were deported from Russia. See Tashimov, op. cit.; “Трудовые мигранты из СНГ дают 6-8% ВВП России” [“Labour migrants from CIS produce 6-8 per cent of Russia’s GDP”], *Interfax*, 6 November 2008, at www.interfax.ru/txt.asp?id=43927.

⁸⁶Crisis Group interview, civic leader, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁸⁷The figures for returnees jumped sharply towards the end of 2009. The OSCE report quotes officials as saying 10 per cent of migrants had returned, and 60 per cent of this number would go back to migrant labour as soon as possible. “Воздействие мирового экономического кризиса на трудовую миграцию из Кыргызстана в Россию” [“The impact of the world economic crisis on labour migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia”], OSCE, Bishkek, December 2009 (not yet available on internet). Later that same month, however, a senior Kyrgyz government figure said that 20-25 per cent of migrants had now returned. Crisis Group interview, senior official, Bishkek, December 2009.

⁸⁸The percentage is based on the official data given in Виктория Панфилова, Антон Ходасевич, “Где гастарбайтеру

notify the authorities if they lose their job.⁹⁵ The data from Uzbekistan is widely viewed as so fabricated as to be useless.⁹⁶ Underemployment is pervasive.⁹⁷ Those who do have a job can barely make ends meet. In 2007, one of the boom years of migration, minimum wages in Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan were well below the subsistence level for a worker with family.⁹⁸ In Tajikistan the median income for those employed before migration was \$25 a month,⁹⁹ scarcely enough to cover a worker's daily lunch and transport.¹⁰⁰ Official Commonwealth of Independent States figures put the 2006 monthly minimum wage or Tajikistan at \$35.2 and \$81.4 for Kyrgyzstan.

2. Greater destitution

Already by mid-2009 international observers were raising concerns about Tajikistan. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Relief (OCHA) reported that the number of "severely food-insecure" people in rural areas had increased from 400,000 in January to

20-%20Pacific/Tajikistan.pdf. President Rakhmon painted a similar, though cloudier picture, in a speech in Moscow in February 2008. There he referred to the need to create one million jobs to solve unemployment (See "Речь Президента Республики Таджикистан Эмомали Рахмона на встрече с представителями таджикской диаспоры и студенчества в Российской Федерации" ["The Speech of President of the Republic of Tajikistan Emomali Rakhmon at the meeting with representatives of diaspora and student communities in the Russian Federation"], Moscow, 21 February 2008, at www.president.tj/rus/novostee_210208a.html. The workforce is usually estimated at 2.1 million (see for example CIA World Fact Book).

⁹⁵ Crisis Group interview, local analyst, Dushanbe, November 2009.

⁹⁶ Crisis Group interview, international official, Almaty, October 2009.

⁹⁷ Underemployment: Kyrgyzstan – 12 per cent, Uzbekistan – 25 per cent, Tajikistan – 40 per cent. See "Background Note: Uzbekistan", "Background Note: Tajikistan", U.S. Department of State, October 2009, at www.state.gov; Айзада Кутуева, "Айгуль Рыскулова: Общее число безработных в Кыргызстане составляет 268 тысяч человек" [Aizada Kutuyeva, "Aigul Ryskulova: the total number of unemployed in Kyrgyzstan is 268 thousand people"], 24.kg News Service, 6 April 2009, at www.24kg.org/parlament/48771-2009/04/06/111205.html. The percentage for Kyrgyzstan is calculated based on the total workforce of 2.3 million people.

⁹⁸ "Economic Growth and Decent Work: Recent Trends in Eastern Europe and Central Asia", ILO, 2008, pp. 12-13, at www.ilo.org/public/english/region/eurpro/moscow/info/publ/economic_growth_decent_work_en.pdf.

⁹⁹ Khakimov and Mahmadbekov, op. cit., p. 54.

¹⁰⁰ Crisis Group interview, civic activist, Dushanbe, November 2009. Low salaries were the main reason that 68 per cent of labour migrants in Kazakhstan gave for leaving their country to find work. "Employment of Migrant Workers in the Informal Economy of Kazakhstan", ILO, op. cit., p. 20.

480,000 by July of that year.¹⁰¹ OCHA attributed the deterioration to the "financial crisis, which is affecting both migrants abroad as well as local Tajik entrepreneurs, with findings showing an increased number of bankruptcies".¹⁰² In July 2009, citing the economic crisis, President Emomali Rakhmon called on the population – 60 per cent of whom, as already noted, live in poverty – to create their own two-year food reserves.¹⁰³ The announcement led many diplomats and aid workers to conclude that the leadership had washed its hands of responsibility for future food shortages.¹⁰⁴

In Uzbekistan, the government manipulates currency exchange rates, and ordinary citizens experience two-month salary arrears and a severe lack of cash. State employees have most of their salaries transferred to debit cards, which often cannot be used to withdraw money from ATMs or pay for services and goods. In despair people agree to high commission fees to cash out at least some of their income.¹⁰⁵

C. THOSE WHO STAY: NO SWEET LIFE

Many of the migrants who remain in Russia or Kazakhstan cannot go home. They first need at the very least to recoup the cost of their trip and the debt they have in-

¹⁰¹ Severe food insecurity is defined as less than 80 per cent of the average kilocalorie requirement and expenditures below the poverty threshold.

¹⁰² "Tajikistan Humanitarian Food Security Appeal 2008-2009", UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs, 21 July 2009, at <http://ochaonline.un.org/HUMANITARIANAPPEAL/webpage.asp?Page=1769>.

¹⁰³ Sayrahmon Nazriev and Aslibegim Manzarshoeva, "Poverty Tajikistan's only growth area", Institute for War and Peace Reporting (IWPR), 3 August 2009; Амрита Каргизова, "Э. Рахмон призвал каждую таджикскую семью сделать двухлетний запас продуктов питания" [Amrita Kargizova, "E. Rakhmon called upon every Tajik family to make a two-year food reserve"], Asia-Plus, 28 July 2009, at www.asiaplus.tj/news/16/55213.html. Later in the year Rakhmon called on his impoverished people to contribute generously to the construction of the massive Rogun dam and power plant. See "Рахмон обязал каждую таджикскую семью купить акции Рогунской ГЭС на сумму не менее \$690" ["Rakhmon mandated every Tajik family to buy shares of the Rogun hydroelectric station for the amount no less than \$690"], CA-News, 2 December 2009, at <http://ca-news.org/news/269991>.

¹⁰⁴ Crisis Group interviews, international donor agencies, October-November 2009.

¹⁰⁵ "Узбекистан: зарплаты бюджетников Самарканда полностью перевели на пластиковые карточки" ["Uzbekistan: salaries of state employees in Samarkand completely transferred to debit cards"], FreeUzbek, 23 September 2009, at <http://freeuzbek.org/2009/09/узбекистан-зарплаты-бюджетников-сам/>.

curred to travel to Russia.¹⁰⁶ Some 60 per cent of Tajik migrants say their travel and start-up expenses are financed by families.¹⁰⁷ Kyrgyz migrants are said to need to work two months of twelve-hour days to pay off their travel expenses. Only then can they begin to save and send earnings back home.¹⁰⁸ One Uzbek migrant, who emigrated to Kazakhstan “out of need and despair”, says that many of his compatriots did not return home after the crisis struck “because there is nothing to go back to”.¹⁰⁹

Many do not want to return as failures.¹¹⁰ Migration is strongly associated with success. During the boom years, earnings brought very visible improvements to migrants’ families – a new car, an expanded house, and better food and clothing. They prefer, therefore, to stay on in the hope of a turnaround.¹¹¹ Most know that there is little waiting for them at home. So do their families: there are a number of reports of families scraping together money to send to their migrant relatives, to help them weather the crisis – an ironic reversal of the remittance flow.

Those who stayed included older, more experienced and better skilled migrants. However, they too were forced to make painful adjustments. In Russia a number of fully legal migrant workers had their pay reduced.¹¹² Others have shortened their working season, migrating later in the year and returning earlier, or have accepted illegal status. As jobs at big construction sites became scarce, many migrants with good skills moved to building and repairing private houses.¹¹³ Those less skilled looked

for jobs in state-run housing and city services (жилищно-коммунальное хозяйство) or even agriculture.¹¹⁴

Many are leaving the traditional centres of migrant labour – Moscow, St. Petersburg and Yekaterinburg – for the Russian Far East.¹¹⁵ A Tajik government analyst says the proportion of workers going to Vladivostok and Khabarovsk, the major cities in the Far East, has increased from 3 to 15 per cent in 2009.¹¹⁶ Conditions there are worse than in the European part of Russia, but the flow is likely to continue once migrants establish networks of friends and family members in these regions.¹¹⁷ For the time being at least, many of those who earn around \$200-\$300 a month are likely to hang on.¹¹⁸ Though low, the monthly wage is easily four times what they would earn in menial work in their home countries.

D. THE PAST AND FUTURE: RACISM AND DYSFUNCTIONAL FAMILIES

1. Xenophobia and violence against migrants

Anti-migrant attitudes are spreading fast in Russian society. With little research on migrants’ contribution to the economy,¹¹⁹ public attention is focused on how much the country loses in unpaid taxes¹²⁰ and how much Central Asia benefits from remittances. In Russia, Central Asian migrants are subject to police harassment, violence from skinheads and racism. According to recent surveys, 47 per cent of respondents believe migrants spread crime and

¹⁰⁶ Crisis Group interviews, civic activist, Moscow, October 2009; local researcher, Dushanbe, November 2009.

¹⁰⁷ Khakimov and Mahmadbekov, op. cit., p. 74.

¹⁰⁸ Алмазбек Асанбаев, “Кыргызстанцы, работающие в России, предпочитают не рассказывать родственникам о тяжелой жизни гастарбайтеров” [Almazbek Asanbaev, “Kyrgyz working in Russia prefer not to tell their relatives about hardships of a gastarbeiter’s life”], 24.kg News Service, 24 August 2009, at www.24kg.org/community/61693-.html.

¹⁰⁹ Crisis Group interview, Uzbek migrant labourer, Almaty, December 2009. The interviewee did not wish to say how he was currently employed.

¹¹⁰ Crisis Group interviews, international official, Almaty, October 2009; civic activist, Dushanbe, November 2009.

¹¹¹ Crisis Group interview, international NGO representative, Almaty, October 2009.

¹¹² Patrick Taran, “The Impact of the Financial Crisis on Migrant Workers”, presentation at the ILO Tripartite Conference on Labour Migration for the Russia Federation and CIS Countries in Central Asia and the Caucasus, Moscow, 22-23 June 2009, at www.ilo.org/public/english/region/eurpro/moscow/projects/impact_fc_mw.pdf.

¹¹³ Crisis Group interviews, international NGO representative and international official, Almaty, October 2009.

¹¹⁴ Crisis Group interviews, government analyst, government official, Dushanbe, November 2009; NGO leaders, Moscow and Yekaterinburg, October 2009.

¹¹⁵ Crisis Group interviews, civic leader, local researcher, international official, Dushanbe, November 2009.

¹¹⁶ Crisis Group interview, government analyst, Dushanbe, November 2009.

¹¹⁷ Crisis Group interview, local migration expert, Dushanbe, November 2009.

¹¹⁸ Crisis Group interviews, local researcher, Dushanbe, November 2009; NGO leader, Moscow, October 2009.

¹¹⁹ Nataliya Voronina, “Russia: Outlook on Migration Policy Reform in Russia: Contemporary Challenges and Political Paradoxes”, in Roger Rodriguez, ed., *Migration Perspectives: Eastern Europe and Central Asia*, IOM, 2006, p. 90, at http://iom.ramdisk.net/iom/images/uploads/Website%20version%20Migration%20Perspectives%20eng%20protected_1169046292.pdf.

¹²⁰ In 2006 Russia’s Federal Service for Migration (FSM) estimated a loss of \$8 billion annually in unpaid taxes from illegal migrants. Other sources state that labour migrants contribute between 6 and 10 per cent of Russia’s GDP (see “Russia Facing Demographic Challenges”, UNDP, p. 98; Khakimov and Mahmadbekov, op. cit., p. 36).

disease, 60 per cent see migrants as a terrorism threat.¹²¹ Negative sentiments are especially high in Moscow and St. Petersburg. Many Muscovites in residential districts with a high concentration of migrants fear their neighbourhoods will become ethnic ghettos and property values will decline.¹²² As 2009 drew to an end there were indications of a growing trend in Russian public opinion for limitations on the numbers of migrant labourers allowed in the country.¹²³

Russian media reinforce negative cultural stereotypes. Ravshan and Jumshut, two characters on a popular comedy show *Nasha Russia*¹²⁴ (Our Russia) provide an unflattering portrait of Tajik migrants – dumb, sneaky and speaking bad Russian. The portrayal caused friction in bilateral relations.¹²⁵ Relying on dubious and incomplete data, newspapers often accuse migrants of spreading crime and infectious diseases, in particular HIV/AIDS.¹²⁶

¹²¹ “Russia Facing Demographic Challenges”, UNDP, pp. 102-104.

¹²² Александр Колесниченко, Наталья Иванченко, Лариса Бочарова, Алина Милованова, Юлия Чернухина, Ксения Богнова и Галина Воробьева, “Места себе не находят. Почему мигранты не могут адаптироваться в России” [Alexander Kolesnichenko, Natalya Ivanchevko, Larisa Bocharova, Alina Milovanova, Yuliya Chernukhina, Ksenia Bognova, Galina Vorobyova, “Unable to fit in. Why migrants cannot adapt in Russia”], *Noviye Izvestia*, 6 October 2009, at www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1254894120; Евгения Супрычева, “Как изменят жизнь москвичей мусульманские магазины, фитнес-клубы и биржи труда” [Yevgeniya Suprycheva, “How Muslim stores, fitness clubs and labour exchanges will change Muscovites’ lives”], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 18 November 2009, at www.centrasia.ru/newsA.php?st=1258582020.

¹²³ In a poll published in December 2009 by the highly respected Levada Centre, 61 per cent of respondents said they favoured restrictions on the flow of foreigners into Russia. This was an increase of 9 per cent over the previous month. A majority of those polled in Moscow favoured limits. “Россияне о приезжих ‘нерусских национальностей’” [“Russians on the migrants of ‘non-Russian nationalities’”], Levada Centre, 7 December 2009, www.levada.ru/press/2009120704.html. The poll was conducted 20-23 November 2009.

¹²⁴ The show *Nasha Russia* (Our Russia) is a Russian version of a popular UK sitcom *Little Britain*. See a Ravshan and Jumshut skit on YouTube at www.youtube.com/watch?v=EB85TXCqOmA&feature=related.

¹²⁵ Мария Кольванова, Андрей Баранов и Павел Садков, “Таджики обиделись на ‘Нашу Russia’” [Maria Kolyvanova, Andrey Baranov and Pavel Sadkov, “Tajiks got offended at ‘Nasha Russia’”], *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, 2 October 2007, at www.kp.ru/daily/23977/74148/.

¹²⁶ “Мигранты из стран СНГ способствуют распространению ВИЧ-инфекции” [“Migrants from CIS countries facilitate the spread of HIV”], CA-News, 28 October 2009, at <http://ca-news.org/news/249081>. In reality, the rate of infectious diseases among migrants is much lower than some official

In truth, although the number of crimes committed by foreign workers has indeed increased, authorities say most are linked to violation of migration rules.¹²⁷

Xenophobic attitudes vary from petty harassment to violent crime. Some migration officials reportedly force Tajik migrants to add Russian -ov endings to their surnames, which many people have dropped in recent years.¹²⁸ Other violations are systemic. In Russia 27 per cent of migrants reported their passport confiscated by police or employers.¹²⁹ In Kazakhstan as well, passports are temporarily confiscated by police to extort a bride or by an employer to ensure complete obedience. “Many people I know have had their passports confiscated”, an Uzbek worker said. “Nobody dares say anything, though, because they were brought into the country illegally in the first place”.¹³⁰ Because many migrants do not know their rights, they would rather pay a bribe (even for a non-existent violation) than face the prospect of detention or passport confiscation by a police officer.¹³¹ Distrust of law enforcement authorities makes migrants reluctant to report crimes committed against them unless offences are extremely grave.

The under-reporting of crimes against migrants creates a false perception that these crimes do not exist. Many police, especially among the rank and file, brush the issue off as media sensationalism or an NGO pet project.¹³²

claims. “Россия: Количество ВИЧ-инфицированных трудовых мигрантов составляет 0,3 процента от общего числа таких больных” [“Russia: The number of HIV-infected labour migrants is 0.3 per cent of the total number of all the infected”], Ferghana.ru, 29 October 2009, at www.ferghana.ru/news.php?id=13328&mode=snews.

¹²⁷ “Чье лицо у преступности”. ФМС России проанализировала правонарушения, совершенные с участием иностранцев” [“Whose face on crime”. Russia’s FMS analysed legal violations committed by migrants”], Russian Federal Migration Service, 21 July 2009, at www.fms.gov.ru/press/publications/news_detail.php?ID=29440; Алексей Старостин, “Россия: Экономический кризис толкает мигрантов из Центральной Азии на преступления” [Aleksey Starostin, “Russia: The economic crisis pushes migrants from Central Asia to commit crimes”], Ferghana.ru, 20 July 2009, at www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=6238.

¹²⁸ Crisis Group interview, civic activist, Dushanbe, November 2009.

¹²⁹ “Russia Facing Demographic Challenges”, UNDP, p. 100.

¹³⁰ Crisis Group interview, migrant worker, Almaty, December 2009.

¹³¹ Crisis Group interview, civic activist, Yekaterinburg, October 2009. Some 40 per cent of migrants in Kazakhstan, according to the ILO said they had been harassed by police at least once about their legal status. “Employment of Migrant Workers in the Informal Economy of Kazakhstan”, ILO, op. cit., p. 29.

¹³² Ibid.

However, in January-September 2009, 48 people were killed in racist attacks. In 2008 the toll reached 525 victims and 97 dead.¹³³ Although these statistics were low due to under-reporting, a hate crime watchdog in Russia noted a steady rise in racially motivated violence.¹³⁴ Kazakhstan usually fares better due to shared cultural and religious backgrounds, although police harassment is quite common.¹³⁵

2. Trouble at home

Families and communities at home bear the brunt of migration – women in particular. Traditionally patriarchal societies are suddenly emptied of men.¹³⁶ Wives have to take up male responsibilities in the household, without the authority or respect accorded men.¹³⁷ Many are left at the mercy of their husband's parents who receive his remittances.¹³⁸ Wives are often reportedly abused by returning spouses who resent finding their own status in the family diminished by their long absences. But very few women dare seek help.¹³⁹ Children of migrants grow up fatherless. The longer migrant men stay in Russia, the more likely they are to start a second family; when this happens the money gradually decreases.¹⁴⁰ Divorces by phone and text messages – saying *talloq* (divorce) three times is believed to annul a marriage – have be-

come so widespread that Tajik human rights groups are pressing authorities to outlaw the practice.¹⁴¹

Finally, inter-ethnic relations in Tajikistan may be under threat in the future. Having been harassed in Russia, many migrants are said to come back with deep antipathy for all Russians, affecting their attitude to the tiny Russian minority that lives in urban areas. Several observers mention that migrants resent how comfortable Russians feel in Dushanbe and how humiliated many of them felt in Moscow.¹⁴²

¹³³ Галина Кожевникова, “Радикальный национализм в России и противодействие ему в 2007 году” [Galina Kozhevnikova, “Radical nationalism in Russia and counter measures against it in 2007”], “Радикальный национализм в России и противодействие ему в 2008 году” [“Radical nationalism in Russia and counter measures against it in 2008”], Information and Analytical Centre “Sova”, at <http://xeno.sova-center.ru/29481C8/A91EC67> (2007); <http://xeno.sova-center.ru/29481C8/C84DCA7> (2008).

¹³⁴ Ibid.

¹³⁵ Crisis Group interviews, representatives of international donor organisations, Almaty, October 2009.

¹³⁶ Валерия Потоцкая, “Пусть мой папа будет рядом ...” [Valeria Pototskaya, “Let my dad be around”], 24.kg News Service, 28 May 2009, at www.24.kg/news-stall/51156-2009/05/28/114220.html.

¹³⁷ Тилав Расул-заде, “Таджикистан: От судьбы не уйдешь. А от злого мужа нужно бежать” [Tilav Rasul-Zade, “Tajikistan: You cannot run from fate, but you have to run away from an angry husband”], Ferghana.ru, 16 July 2009, at www.ferghana.ru/article.php?id=6234.

¹³⁸ Crisis Group interview, civic activist, Dushanbe, November 2009.

¹³⁹ Tilav Rasul-Zade, “Tajikistan: You cannot run from fate, but you have to run away from an angry husband”, op. cit.

¹⁴⁰ Crisis Group interviews, NGO leader and local expert on migration, Dushanbe, November 2009; civic leader, Moscow, October 2009.

¹⁴¹ Анора Саркорова, “Власти Душанбе хотят запретить разводы по телефону” [Anora Sarkorova, “Authorities in Dushanbe want to ban divorce over the phone”], BBC, 29 September 2009, at www.bbc.co.uk/russian/life/2009/09/090929_tajik_telephone_divorce.shtml.

¹⁴² Crisis Group interviews, civic leader, local expert on migration, Dushanbe, November 2009.

V. THE FUTURE

A. RADICALISATION OF MIGRANTS?

1. Political radicalisation at home

The theoretical worst-case scenario is clear but unlikely. Migrants, the most resolute and resilient members of their society, return home to destitution and unemployment and go onto the streets to call for political change. Opposition leaders have long dreamed of this, but it has not happened. In Kyrgyzstan a highly regarded migrant-linked party, Zamandash, came to prominence during the December 2007 parliamentary elections, gaining the respect even of some government officials. It was, however, excluded from the polls on what are widely believed to have been spurious grounds.¹⁴³ There were no protests.

Speaking before the economic crisis, a Tajik opposition leader described migrants as the “social group that could have changed things” had they stayed at home, “the most capable and, given the working conditions they face there, the most daring. The less active have remained behind”.¹⁴⁴ Organising them, however, has been impossible: they were, as another opposition leader says, “birds of passage” in Tajikistan.¹⁴⁵ Senior international officials in the region note that the authorities, particularly in Tajikistan, view their youth as “potential trouble makers” and watch their actions closely.¹⁴⁶ Another notes that while government policy emphasises employment at home, they are more than happy to see young people going abroad for work.¹⁴⁷

At the moment migrant labourers are waiting out the crisis and concentrating on finding work, not challenging their governments. The deciding factor will be whether the banking and construction sectors resume their dynamic economic status quo ante. If they do not, radicalisation of migrants cannot be ruled out.

2. Religious radicalisation

Radical Islamists, including both Hizb ut-Tahrir (HT) and the Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan (IMU),¹⁴⁸ are trying to recruit among migrant workers. Their success is hard to gauge, but HT has been successful in Central Asia as a whole, particularly Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan,¹⁴⁹ while the IMU is enjoying a modest resurgence across the region. Some observers argue that the migrants’ living conditions – fear of racist attacks, linguistic isolation, life in tightly knit, inward-looking communities – militate against recruitment. These factors could just as easily work to the advantage of adroit activists.

A diaspora representative in Moscow says “non-traditional Islam”, including HT, is becoming popular among those who feel alienated and offended by the host society and their employers.¹⁵⁰ One specialist on migration says that migrant groups in Moscow and elsewhere are attractive targets to radical recruiters because they come from many regions. In one meeting, he said, ten migrants may come from five different places in Tajikistan.¹⁵¹ Both the Russian and Tajik security authorities are known to be monitoring migrant workers.¹⁵² In late 2009 Russian anti-terror police officers, working with their Tajik counterparts, detained three suspected IMU members who were wanted

¹⁴⁸ Despite its name the latter group has developed support across Central Asia and in some parts of Russia. Until recently based in north west Pakistan, it is committed to the establishment of an Islamic state in Central Asia by force of arms. Hizb ut-Tahrir, on the other hand, espouses political methods to attain its aim of creating a Muslim caliphate throughout the Islamic world, including Central Asia. For more information on both groups, see Crisis Group reporting: Asia Report N°176, *Women and Radicalisation in Kyrgyzstan*, 3 September 2009; Asia Briefing N°97, *Central Asia: Islamists in Prison*, 15 December 2009.

¹⁴⁹ The core HT appeal to Russian-speaking Muslims would probably sound highly appealing to some of Central Asia workers who have left home because of their own states’ inability to provide a livelihood: Islam is not just a religion like Christianity, but a “spiritual-intellectual doctrine, which is capable of resolving all man’s problems, whether or not he is a Muslim. Decisions emanating from Islam touch on all spheres of human activity, including the governance of a state in its legislative, economic and social aspects”. Translated from HT Russian language website: “Силловые структуры РФ поражены уровнем отклика мусульман на призыв Хизб-ут-Тahrir” [“Power structures of the RF are staggered by the level of response from Muslims to the call from Hizb ut-Tahrir”], Hizb ut-Tahrir, 23 October 2009, at www.hizb.org.ua/ru/izdaniya/zayavleniya/148-silovi-strukturi.html.

¹⁵⁰ Crisis Group interview, NGO activist, Moscow, October 2009.

¹⁵¹ Crisis Group interview, local expert on migration, Dushanbe, November 2009.

¹⁵² Crisis Group interviews, Dushanbe, November 2009.

¹⁴³ See Crisis Group Briefing, *Kyrgyzstan: A Deceptive Calm*, op. cit.

¹⁴⁴ Crisis Group interview, Alim Sherzamonov, Social Democratic party leader in Badakhshan, Khorog, 16 July 2008.

¹⁴⁵ Crisis Group Report, *Tajikistan: On the Road to Failure*, op. cit., p. 12.

¹⁴⁶ Crisis Group interview, international official, Dushanbe, October 2009.

¹⁴⁷ Crisis Group interview, international official, Dushanbe, November 2009.

in Tajikistan for extremist activities. They were allegedly conducting recruitment and “preparing fighters to participate in terrorist acts”. Those arrested reportedly included the IMU “emir” or military commander for Russia.¹⁵³

Moreover, for the small minority of young migrants who become interested in radical Islam, Russia offers fertile ground for research, and perhaps ideas. Between 10 and 15 per cent of Russia’s 140 million people are estimated to be practising Muslims. What was once a secessionist revolt in the North Caucasus has become an armed struggle for the creation of an Islamic state in the region, and radical Islamic beliefs have spread to other parts of the country. HT is banned in Russia, and security officials have reported arrests of HT activists in places far from the North Caucasus, including Bashkiria, Tatarstan, Chelyabinsk and Kurgan oblasts.¹⁵⁴ HT, meanwhile, insists that its influence is growing rapidly among Russian Muslims. A recent statement, in Russian, on its official Ukrainian website claimed that Russian authorities are “staggered by the way Muslims are joining in Hizb activities and the way that day after day the number of its supporters is growing and the call for a Caliphate is heard in various cities of the Russian Federation”.¹⁵⁵

Some international organisations are beginning to note possible security concerns because of the economic crisis. A study published by the OSCE in late 2009 on the impact of the crisis in labour migration from Kyrgyzstan, for example, noted that possible consequences included “an interest in politics” among the country’s currently politically inert population, and “the activation of the extremist religious organisation Hizb ut-Tahrir”.¹⁵⁶ Many Kyrgyz migrant workers, moreover, come from the south of the country, where HT and other groups are well entrenched.

¹⁵³ “В Москве задержаны активисты ИДУ” [“IMU activists detained in Moscow”], CA-News, 24 November 2009, at <http://ca-news.org/news/264931>.

¹⁵⁴ “Глава ФСБ заявил о предотвращении терактов в Сочи и Анапе” [“The head of the FSB has announced the prevention of terror acts in Sochi and Anapa”], Lenta.ru, 14 October 2008, at www.lenta.ru/news/2008/10/14/nak/.

¹⁵⁵ “Силловые структуры РФ поражены уровнем отклика мусульман на призыв Хизб-ут-Тахрир” [“Power structures of the RF are staggered by the level of response from Moslems to the call from Hizb ut-Tahrir”], Hizb ut-Tahrir, 23 October 2009, at www.hizb.org.ua/ru/izdaniya/zayavleniya/148-silovi-strukturi.html.

¹⁵⁶ Other possible consequences include an increase in crime, domestic violence and alcoholism. “Воздействие мирового экономического кризиса на трудовую миграцию из Кыргызстана в Россию” [“The impact of the world economic crisis on labour migration from Kyrgyzstan to Russia”], OSCE, op. cit.

B. LONG TERM: THE FLOW WILL CONTINUE

Regardless of economic crises, the flow of migrants will continue. None of the main labour exporters in Central Asia shows any real interest or ability in creating domestic employment for their people. And Russia’s medium- to long-term need for migrants is even more acute than Dushanbe’s or Bishkek’s eagerness to ship their people out. The official Russian statistics agency, Rosstat, predicts that between 2008 and 2025, Russia’s population will undergo a natural decline of 11 million. The number of working age Russians will shrink even faster – by approximately one million every year between 2011 and 2017. The impact on Russia’s industrial development will be enormous. It will need to continue attracting large numbers of foreign workers, or new citizens, in the years to come.¹⁵⁷

The financial crisis has provided an additional impetus for permanent migration to Russia.¹⁵⁸ An international expert says the Russian government has purposely cut the labour quota, so that migrants are forced to make a choice and settle permanently.¹⁵⁹ Many migrants also admit that it is much easier to get Russian citizenship once rather than renew a work permit repeatedly. A civic activist in Moscow says they are seeing a growth in fictitious marriages.¹⁶⁰ A local expert in Dushanbe stated that the bribe to submit documents for a soon-to-be-terminated expedited application for Russian citizenship reached \$3,000 in the summer of 2009. There are anecdotal reports that Russian officials press some applicants to renounce their Tajik citizenship as a condition to processing their petition.¹⁶¹

Many observers speculate that Tajiks who acquire citizenship now will not move to Russia permanently. Instead they will use it as a legal tool to obtain employment as Russian citizens not foreign labour migrants. Many do not wish to abandon Tajikistan, where extended families care

¹⁵⁷ “Russia Facing Demographic Challenges”, UNDP, at http://hdr.undp.org/en/reports/nationalreports/europethecis/russia/NHDR_Russia_2008_Eng.pdf. Kazakhstan does not encourage labour migrants from Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to settle down permanently. Instead the government has a program for ethnic Kazakhs (*oralmans*) in Mongolia and China to repatriate to their historic homeland.

¹⁵⁸ Crisis Group interview, senior international official, Dushanbe, November 2009.

¹⁵⁹ Crisis Group interview, senior international official, Almaty, October 2009.

¹⁶⁰ Crisis Group interview, civic activist, Yekaterinburg, October 2009.

¹⁶¹ Crisis Group interview, local expert on migration, Dushanbe, November 2009. Under a bilateral agreement, Tajiks who obtain Russian citizenship are not required to surrender their Tajik citizenship.

for their members in sickness and old age.¹⁶² This tradition may not last, however, and in the future Central Asians who have acquired dual citizenship may be faced with a painful choice. Many migrants' children will become more integrated in Russian society and pull their parents away from the ancestral homeland. Pensions in Russia, while not at all sufficient, are higher than symbolic payments in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. A total of 170,000 Kyrgyz and 79,000 Tajiks have received Russian citizenship since the countries' independence in 1991.¹⁶³

But Central Asia's real tragedy is that the people who are given citizenship are the most vigorous and best educated. In Kyrgyzstan, for example, a senior official admits that "mainly qualified teachers and doctors are leaving the country.... At the same time, we are experiencing labour shortages exactly in these fields".¹⁶⁴ The shortage of teachers, especially in foreign languages and hard sciences, is so severe in Tajikistan that high school students have to teach these subjects in lower grades. Russia, naturally enough, is looking for specific skills and for energetic young workers.¹⁶⁵

VI. CONCLUSION

The economic crisis has not produced an apocalyptic flood of angry radicalised migrants returning home to Central Asia. It will, however, continue to seriously strain the weakest countries in Central Asia. These have neither the governmental capacity nor the economic resilience to handle a large influx of returnees. What capacity they do have is, as government officials themselves admit, severely hampered by corruption. Though officials privately express satisfaction that no more than 25 or 30 per cent of migrants have returned home, they are also aware that this is hundreds of thousands more unemployed people in their countries. Some sources in the Central Asian banking sector noted that remittances, a powerful source of social stability, were still declining as 2009 came to an end.

Unrest cannot be ruled out in the future, but even without it, deep scars will remain. Without efforts to create functional economies, eradicate corruption and improve social services, Central Asian states will be at the mercy of the boom and bust cycles of their large neighbours. Unemployed migrants will be added to the long list of ripening problems in the region – from the disintegration of the Soviet-era infrastructure which now turns off lights and heating in much of Central Asia each winter, to growing concerns that events in Afghanistan will spur a growth of domestic Islamist radicalism. Government inaction may reinforce the Islamists' hand, as radical religious groups capitalise on migrants' social insecurity and isolation.

Without reforms, the lumpenisation of Central Asian societies will continue, as qualified, educated or simply determined and healthy younger members of the work force leave for Russia and Kazakhstan – and in the case of Russia take on that country's citizenship. Countries that have suffered a massive haemorrhage of the educated and the skilled since the Soviet Union collapsed cannot afford to lose any more if they wish to survive as viable independent states. Even seasonal migration is not without serious long-term effects in the sending countries. The removal of workers from the land is further diminishing agriculture; the removal of a parent from the family is leading to problem children and abused women. Efforts are urgently needed to address this.

It is hard to imagine these changes happening soon, however. The region's governments continue to be run by self-referential ruling elites who are more preoccupied with their own problems. Some hope for international handouts – and usually get them, despite the awareness among foreign governments and international bodies that these will be consumed by corrupt bureaucrats. The West's

¹⁶² Crisis Group interviews, local researcher, economist, Dushanbe, November 2009.

¹⁶³ Donis, "Aigul Ryskulova: 300,000 labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan are officially working in Russia", op. cit.; Crisis Group interview, local expert on migration, Dushanbe, November 2009. A domestic expert in Dushanbe says the real number in Tajikistan would be much higher if it accounted for thousands of ethnic Russians and many Tajiks who left for Russia during the civil war.

¹⁶⁴ Donis, "Aigul Ryskulova: 300,000 labour migrants from Kyrgyzstan are officially working in Russia", op. cit.

¹⁶⁵ A Russian migration officer, recently asked about citizen criteria for Central Asians, summed it up in a standard bureaucratic turn of phrase, "We just don't take anybody". (In Russian, "Случайных не берем".)

current and apparently short-term interest in Central Asia as a supply route for the Afghan war effort is likely to lessen further any desire to put pressure on local governments to reform. Fast, effective action is needed, but there is little prospect of that in sight.

Bishkek/Brussels, 5 January 2010

APPENDIX A

MAP OF CENTRAL ASIA



APPENDIX B

MAP OF RUSSIAN FEDERATION

