“Right now, we are at the beginning. Like during the previous crisis, the situation of migrants from Tajikistan is getting noticeably worse, and apparently, it will deteriorate further,” said Saodat Olimova, deputy director of Research Center “Sharq” (Dushanbe, Tajikistan) in an article written specifically for CABAR.

Negative developments in the Russian economy, Western sanctions, the fall in oil prices and the weakening of the ruble have led to a reduction in the number of labor migrants in Russia and to a wave of return migration in Tajikistan. Newspapers are full of headlines: “The Flight of Migrants from Russia: The Inflow Dropped by 70% in January,” “25% of Migrants will Leave Russia,” “Mass Exodus of Eigrants from Russia: The Ruble Exchange Rate and Fees for Tests are to Blame.” In Tajikistan, which strongly depends on labor migration and remittances, many wonder what will happen to Tajik labor migrants in Russia. How much will the amount of remittances decrease? Where will migrants returning home earn money, and how it will affect life in Tajikistan?

Trying to see into the future, I turned to the experience of the global crisis of 2008-2010. Then, the mass cutbacks and falling incomes also made part of the Tajik labor migrants leave Russia. The impact of the crisis was not limited to the emergence of return migration. The profile, life goals and strategies of Tajik migrants in Russia, the timing of their work and the territory of entry had changed. But is the current situation of labor migration a “repetition” of what happened before? Is it possible to predict the migration situation and to develop measures to mitigate and overcome difficulties, based on the experience of the recent global crisis?

To answer these questions, we need to focus on two complex problems: the first is the impact of the crisis on labor migration strategies that migrant workers and their families use in a crisis, qualities, knowledge and skills that are the most popular and useful during hard days, evaluation of the use of existing knowledge in the modern world.

The second problem is the question of how the current situation in Russia is similar to the crisis of 2008-2010, and what the differences between them are. If in 2008, the crisis was global, and its source was the US economy, and it came suddenly in Russia, the 2014 crisis was the result of the worsening economy that began in Russia in the second half of 2011. The effects of the deteriorating economic situation in the form of outflow of people and the growth of the export of capital were marked by the official statistics of the Russian Federation. So, according to Rosstat, the outflow of people to Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan began in 2012, increased in 2013 and reached a peak in 2014. [1] The number of
Tajik labor migrants in Russia has decreased by more than 100,000.

The relatively slow development of the current crisis has made it possible to take measures to protect the labor market in Russia and, at the same time, improve the efficiency of the economy at the expense of cheaper labor. In this connection, the migration legislation of the Russian Federation changed. In 2008, during the global crisis, the main instrument to protect the domestic labor market was to reduce the total Russian quota for foreign labor and deportation. In 2013, in connection with the stagnation of the Russian economy and in anticipation of “lean years,” the immigration legislation of the Russian Federation was subsequently tightening. Overall, in 2013 and 2014, 11 federal laws limiting immigration were adopted.

Thus, from January 1st 2015, all foreign nationals may enter the territory of Russia with only having a valid international passport. As from 1 January 2015, the law of the Russian Federation has replaced the quotas of migrant workers with the patent system. In addition, to be eligible for temporary residence in the Russian Federation, a patent and work permit, it is mandatory to pass three exams: a Russian language test, a Russian history test and a test on the basics of Russian legislation. On January 10, 2015, the new laws shall come into force, according to which those who stay illegally in the territory of the Russian Federation are banned from entering Russia for 10 years.

In general, we should recognize that changes in migration legislation of the Russian Federation in 2013-2014 not only focus on the fight against illegal migration and replenishment of Russian budget through fees from workers, but also on increasing the efficiency of the economy at the expense of cheaper labor in a situation of economic stagnation and growing crisis. An example of the previous crisis of 2008-2010 showed that the decrease in demand for labor allowed employers to reduce wages and, at the same time, contributed to the expansion of the informal labor market. [2] In addition, the reduction and delay of salaries, being forced to leave and the transition to the shadow labor market enabled Russian companies to adapt to the decline in business activity and the Russian labor market – to avoid large-scale unemployment and social conflicts [3].

Now, however, the measures taken by the Russian Federation not only contribute to forcing the labor migration “into the shadow,” but also to the reduction of the number of labor migrants, which could hinder Russian economy’s recovery from the crisis.
How does the crisis affect the migrants, and how do they try to cope with the situation? According to a study that we conducted in 2009, migrants have become the group most affected by the crisis – 87% of migrants reported that their lives have changed for the worse because of the crisis. The greatest changes have happened in wages: 40.3% of respondents reported on non-payment and underpayment. Direct reduction of 30-50%, as well as various fines, was widely practiced. In the construction industry, salary delay was also reported: 57.2% of construction workers reported that they did not receive wages for a period of 2 to 5 months [4]. According to a survey conducted by the Ministry of Labour of the RT, in March and April 2009, more than 70% of migrants who have returned home left Russia because of non-payment and/or salary delays [5].

Today, there is a similar situation. In late December, the chairman of the All-Russian Public Movement “Tajik Labor Migrants,” Karomat Sharipov, said that the total amount of money that was not paid to Tajik migrants in Russia was one billion rubles [6].

Furthermore, in a crisis, migrant workers are much more vulnerable to various forms of exploitation and abuse than the local population. There have increased the number and extent of political and administrative risks, the level of which depends on various conditions, including the level of corruption, crime, growth of nationalism, xenophobia, etc.

Shadow employment and exploitation of workers also increased, dramatically intensifying the vulnerability of migrants to trafficking, extortion and various types of fraud.

The crisis of 2008-2010 showed that the deterioration of working conditions and living conditions had a negative impact on the health of migrants. Employers have reduced the costs of health and safety expenses. On the other hand, migrants minimized their personal consumption and paid less attention to their own health.

Social well-being of migrants also deteriorated markedly. Among migrants, alienation and frustration have increased. This is partly due to the general deterioration of the social climate, but to a large extent, to the increased vulnerability of migrants, as well as the growth of xenophobia and discrimination. The most negative factor in the deterioration of social well-being of migrants has been the increased pressure on the part of law enforcement bodies. 81.1% of respondents noted the attitude of the police and the FMS
have become worse; 60.4% noted the worse attitudes of employers; 26.4% – the worsened relations with colleagues [4].

**Migrants’ response to the crisis. Strategies of migrants**

In response to the changes in life caused by the crisis, migrants were trying to adapt to the new situation and use a number of strategies. In 2008-2009, only 3.8% of migrants returned home immediately after losing their jobs. The rest remained in Russia, using several strategies: 46.6% found another job after being fired; 26.2% borrowed money to survive the crisis; 16.9% continued to work on new terms (at reduced wages and deteriorating working conditions); 6.2% waited for payment of wages and generally improving the situation; 1.5% went to other regions of the Russian Federation in search of work. [4]

Previous crisis has shown that the employment of migrants was difficult not so much due to the lack of jobs but more to changing attitudes towards foreign workers and protectionist measures for the protection of the labor market. For example, migrants wanted to get Russian citizenship without changing the nature of work and patterns of labor migration because of the requirement to have citizenship of the Russian Federation in order to work in Russia.

Assessing the professional mobility of migrants, we found that 41.2% were willing to radically change the type of activity. They agree to do any work, even if it involves the mastery of skills in the new field of employment. 41.2% reported that they would work according to their qualifications and did not plan to change the profession. 11.8% said they were willing to work in the same place for less money than earlier, and 5.9% agreed to the deterioration of working conditions. In the absence of suitable work 58.8% were willing to work for lower wages in any workplace; 29.4% will to look for a job in another work; 5.9% were going to look for a job in another region /country if the circumstances were unfavorable. [4] Experience has shown that only after the strategy they tried were unsuccessful, and savings and resources, including loans and help from relatives and friends, had been exhausted, migrants decided to return to their homeland.

Herein lies a major difference between the present situation and the previous crisis. If in 2009, the Tajik migrants stayed in Russia during the crisis, spending savings and hoping for the resumption of the work, now, under the influence of prohibitive legislation, fewer Tajik
migrants believe in the future of Russia and their participation in Russian employment market.

**Money remittances**

The difference between the two crises is also evident in the movement of money remittances. The experience of the previous crisis has shown that the flow of migrants’ money into Tajikistan reduces three or four months after the peak of the crisis in Russia. Thus, the wave of return migration began in December 2008, and a sizeable drop in remittances from Russia in RT occurred by May – June 2009. Overall, in 2009, the volume of remittances had declined by 31.3% compared to 2008 [7].

At present, the reduction of remittances is happening almost in parallel to the wave of return migration. The rate of decline had been slow in 2014. It was difficult to evaluate the real decline due to exchange rate fluctuations. If the first half of 2014, remittances fell by 2%, [8] by October 2014, remittances decreased by 6%. At the same time, in a number of commercial banks in RT, the drop in remittances by 15-17% was noted already in the first half of the year. The average amount of money transfers also decreased. Already in the first quarter of 2014, the average transaction size was $ 270 (compared to $ 310 a year earlier). Currently, experts point out that the volume of remittances to Tajikistan has decreased by 26-27%.

Assessing the decline in remittances, it is necessary to bear in mind the fact that, unlike the previous crisis, remittances to Tajikistan now come in Russian rubles and in goods that returning migrants are bringing from Russia. The fall of the ruble in December 2014 made the decrease in remittances particularly significant and, in addition, it forced migrants to “invest” in consumer goods, household appliances, construction tools and equipment, vehicles, etc. Buying activity of Tajik migrants in Russia was accompanied by a surge of dollar remittances back to Russia. In fact Tajik migrant workers supported the ruble exchange rate by their dollar translations.

**Migrant households in crisis**
Now the most important question is how the population of Tajikistan will cope with falling revenues caused by the crisis in Russia. We can assume that migrant households will use strategies that have proven effective in the previous crisis. A survey among heads of migrant households who stopped receiving transfers in the winter of 2008-2009 showed what sources of income they could survive on: 52.4% of households spent money and products produced on their farm, as well as accumulated savings. 19% borrowed money and sold property; 14.4% of households were living on the salary of members of the family – wife, brother, parents; 9.5% indicated their own sources of income, such as the sale of agricultural products, the provision of services (sewing, cleaning), etc., 4.8% of households in addition to their own income received assistance from relatives.[4]

Thus, the main adaptation strategy of migrant households in Tajikistan has been the expansion of agricultural production in farms and agriculture farmsteads. The bulk of the returning migrants during the crisis were engaged in agriculture. Land redistribution in favor of food crops and promotion of agriculture have become an important part of anti-crisis program of employment adopted by the Government of RT. In 2009, for the first time in the history of Tajikistan, a record grain harvest had been collected – more than 1 million tons, of which 70% was wheat. However, despite the success in agriculture, it has failed to provide full employment and welfare. In 2009, Tajikistan, the unemployment rate and the proportion of economically inactive population, the number of freelance employees and the number of unpaid work in households had increased. [9] As a result, households that had exhausted their opportunities in farmstead were forced to send more migrants to Russia than in the pre-crisis years. [10] The overwhelming majority of “newcomers” were young people.

Now, unlike the previous crisis, representatives of economic departments of Tajikistan recognize the risks associated with return migration and reduced remittances, and develop measures to mitigate the situation. Thus, the Migration service employs migrants who are denied entry to Russia for the construction of the Rogun hydropower plant. It is planned that in 2015, more than 300 small and medium-sized enterprises will open and provide part of the returning workers with jobs. Thus, the main objective is to develop local industry, construction and agricultural production. In the latter, local authorities play an important role, as they are involved in the redistribution of land in favor of returning migrants.

At the same time, it is clear that these measures are insufficient. The deteriorating situation of migrant households is evidenced by the fact that in December 2014, the number of
requests for immediate lump aid to the local authorities had doubled. (Local authorities provide a one-time aid in the amount of 300 TJS for extremely needy households. As a rule, the aid includes a bag of flour, 5 liters of vegetable oil, a little sugar and other food.)

Conclusions and recommendations

The impact of past crisis on migration was not a one-time occurrence. It was a process that involved several steps: first, overall production in Russia had stopped or reduced, and it led to the loss or reduction of migrant earnings, respectively, to the reduction in money transfers and to the returning migration wave. Then, when the economic difficulties associated with a decrease in remittances and the negative impact of the crisis started growing in Tajikistan, households, along with other measures to adapt to the crisis (agricultural expansion), were forced to send more migrants than usual abroad. More young people went to work in Russia together with their fathers. The crisis had contributed to the growth of shadow employment, thus increasing the vulnerability of Tajik migrants to various kinds of abuse. “Rejuvenation” of Tajik labor migration allowed the adaption to new conditions relatively easily, restoring the scale of migration and Tajikistan’s dependence on remittances.

Right now, we are at the beginning. Like during the previous crisis, the situation of migrants from Tajikistan is getting noticeably worse, and apparently, it will deteriorate further. They are forced to adhere to three basic strategies: 1) to obtain Russian citizenship using all possible ways, to get a job and in the future, to move to Russia; 2) to work and live in the “shadow”; 3) to return home because the work in Russia has lost any economic sense.

It is even more difficult to predict the position and behavior of households in the coming difficult year. Will home gardens, farms, leased land be able to feed the population of Tajikistan, and which measures will the government of Tajikistan undertake to adapt to the crisis?

Based on the experience of previous years, the following recommendations can be made: providing full support to agricultural production and, above all, to the development of the infrastructure of agribusiness: preferential agricultural loans, systems of storage, transportation, processing of agricultural products, trade and transportation, training of farmers. All this cannot be done without the development of small and medium-sized
businesses, so it is necessary to improve the business environment by simplifying the tax system and increasing the number of financial products available to small and medium-sized businesses, especially those working in the agricultural sector.

In addition to the expansion of employment area in Tajikistan, a painstaking work of state bodies of RT, civil society, the donor community and business structures are required to establish the cooperation and trust with their Russian counterparts in all structures involved in the management, control of migration, education and protection of migrants’ rights. This will help increase the benefits of migration and reduce its risks and costs, both for the migrants themselves, and for the sending and receiving societies. Labor migration could become one of the important tools that will enable our countries to cope with the crisis, although, apparently, migrant workers and members of their families will suffer more than others.

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The opinion of the author may not necessarily represent those of CABAR

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