What is the Potential of Tajik Diasporas in the Development of Tajikistan?

«Diasporas want to help, but they face many obstacles, so far the state builds its policy towards diasporas mainly in the framework of measures to support the loyalty of the authorities», – notes a political analyst Muslim Buriev, participant of CABAR.asia School of Analytics, in his article written specifically for the analytical platform CABAR.asia.

Summary of the article:

- Labor migrants come to the foreground when we speak about the economic development of Tajikistan in conjunction with the country’s citizens living abroad;
- The topic of clear policy building regarding diasporas in Tajikistan is not being raised now;
- In some cases, the state authorities perceived diaspora members as the possibility of selling shares of the Rogun hydropower plant and to increase loyalty to the government in general;
- The experience of Armenia in working with diasporas may be key for Tajikistan since there are common features in both cases.

In expert circles, the economic development of Tajikistan at this stage is increasingly associated with the activities of the country’s citizens living abroad. In particular, one of the most popular narratives is money transfer from labor migrants living and working in the territory of the Russian Federation. Their assistance for their home country is indeed of great importance, both economically and politically. However, it is worthwhile to look at other alternatives, not moving too far from engaging its citizens from the rest of the world in the development of its economy. Tajik diasporas from all over the world can represent such an alternative. This article will try to investigate what is the current policy towards the Tajik diasporas from other countries and how they can affect the development of Tajikistan.

Is there a policy towards diasporas?

The question of whether cooperation with diasporas should be among the priorities for the
states’ foreign policy began to be discussed since the end of the 1990s.[1] This period is decisive for the CIS countries, in the framework of the beginning of migration processes and the implementation of various programs for the return of compatriots after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Tajikistan is not an exception in this regard. Labor migrants come to the foreground when we speak about the economic development of Tajikistan in conjunction with the country’s citizens living abroad. Money that they transfer to their relatives in Tajikistan dive the state an opportunity to collect taxes and ensure GDP. In this case, the state acts as a beneficiary of financial flows from labor migrants. There is no need for any specific policies for such a format of cooperation with its fellow citizens living in other countries. On the other hand, it is fraught with the fact that the state can become directly dependent on the migration policy of the countries where labor migrants live. In this case, diasporas can act as an alternative source of potential that can be used for country development. But now, the topic of building a clear policy regarding diasporas is not being raised in Tajikistan. Why? The answer lies in the concept definition. If we compare diaspora with labor migrants, the first one is a more organized structure, with a common identity, which is expressed in the creation of various organizations, communities and media platforms.[2] Another important difference – among diaspora representatives there may be an idea of returning to the homeland, but in reality, this does not happen as often as among labor migrants. Diasporas are often integrated into the local community, they have citizenship of the country where they are located, but at the same time, they strive to preserve their language, culture, and traditions, as well as ties with their historic homeland. Often, diaspora representatives have a high labor qualification, which serves as the main thesis when discussing their potential to participate in the socio-economic development of their historic homeland. Such projects can be: the organization of migration flows within the country of origin, cross-border business initiatives, non-profit projects in the social sector and other ways of development.[3] Diaspora is a more complex and more independent object, but at the same time establishing effective links with such communities for has many prospects the state. However, no initiative of diaspora representatives, aimed at their homeland development, can take place without close cooperation with the state. At present, it is rather difficult to formulate the state policy of Tajikistan towards diasporas: there are no legislatively fixed programs and action plans. The prospects for deeper cooperation still exist, and the experience of other countries can help to understand them. What to compare with? It is difficult to fully compare the so-called successful practices of building close ties between the homeland and the diaspora with a similar situation in Tajikistan. Each country
What is the Potential of Tajik Diasporas in the Development of Tajikistan?

has different conditions, both historical and contemporary, but it is worth considering some points related to the institutionalization of relations with diasporas. An example from the CIS: the Ministry of Diasporas of the Republic of Armenia has been operating in Armenia since 2008. It is an institution that takes over the functions of communication and interaction with Armenian diasporas around the world. The programs of the ministry are implemented in various areas concerning the processes of Armenians’ integration in other countries, in particular, improve the knowledge of Armenian language among the young diaspora members, as well as perform various activities to preserve culture.

Thanks to the government’s close work with diasporas, the latter acquired a clearer structure, and professional committees and associations began to be organized. The state involvement in the diasporas’ affairs contributed to a positive impact in the homeland. Armenians abroad together with the state Armenian structures implement charitable and civic projects within the homeland country through foundations. Individual projects are aimed at human potential developing and education quality, for example, UWC Dilijan College, “Tumo” Creative Technologies Centers (Yerevan, Gyumri, Dilijan, Stepanakert), “Ayb” School and FAST Foundation (Foundation for Armenian Science and Technology).

The experience of Armenia in working with diasporas may be key for Tajikistan since there are common features in both cases. Some Armenian citizens, the same as some Tajiks, temporarily leave for Russia to earn money and transfer to their families left in their homeland. The diasporas’ potential is also high, given that the majority of diasporas’ representatives, in both cases, have higher education and high qualifications in business, science, and arts.

If we develop an understanding of how high the potential of diasporas is and how important the role of state institutions in fulfillment of such potential, then it will be entirely possible to apply the Armenian experience. However, it is worth considering absolutely and irrespectively the internal structure of the Tajik diasporas and to understand how strong their ties with Tajikistan are at this stage.

**Tajik diaspora in Russia**

There are Tajik diasporas in many CIS countries. The most numerous live in Uzbekistan – 1 million 544 thousand people, in Russia – 200 thousand and in Kazakhstan – 31 thousand people. There is also a diaspora living in the United States – 72 thousand people. For several reasons, the Russian diaspora was chosen for more detailed consideration.

First of all, it should be pointed out that there are many associations and organizations in Russia founded by the Tajik diaspora representatives. It can be said that their structure is most pronounced compared with Tajik diasporas living in other countries. Russia has great political and economic importance for Tajikistan. Thus, it can be assumed that the diaspora
What is the Potential of Tajik Diasporas in the Development of Tajikistan?

living in Russia may represent an important cooperation subject for Tajikistan. And the last but not the least factor is the link between the Tajik diaspora and labor migrants, whose well-being is also one of the top priorities for Tajikistan.

It is quite difficult to determine the socio-cultural status of the Tajik diaspora in Russia. According to one of the new definitions of the term diaspora, it is indicated that its members may not necessarily be citizens who emigrated from their home country for a permanent residence but also involves people who are temporarily in the country. As for the diaspora that has the potential to assist in the development of Tajikistan, we still should focus on the so-called “core of the diaspora”[11]. This “core” includes Tajiks, who also have Russian citizenship, have higher education or even a scientific degree and high labor qualifications. They managed to mobilize their resources and use their skills for self-organization, gradually strengthening ties within the diaspora. At the same time, diasporas try to hold cultural events and engage in their activities young people and students from Tajikistan studying in Russia. The “core of the diaspora” acts as a “big brother”, providing support to its compatriots, including migrant workers.

Representatives of the Tajik diaspora, trying to fulfill their potential, began to form various NGOs in large cities of Russia since the beginning of the 1990s.[12] The diaspora members who have high professional qualifications, for example, doctors, businessmen or scientists are usually the leadership of such organizations. Labor migrants from Tajikistan, in their
What is the Potential of Tajik Diasporas in the Development of Tajikistan?

turn, represent the object of such NGOs’ activities, which provide various kinds of support to their compatriots in legal matters, employment, and housing. However, there are some difficulties in the work of such organizations. For example, the awareness of Tajik citizens staying in Russia about organizations of diasporas and their functions is limited, therefore the potential of these organizations cannot be fully implemented. Few labor migrants who may need assistance are aware of the existence of the created by the diaspora organizations. In this case, labor migrants continue to adhere to informal associations or to seek assistance from friends, relatives or among visitors of local mosques.

Certainly, the organizational potential of the Tajik diaspora in Russia is very high. But at the moment they act on their own, often overlapping charitable or cultural activities with their permanent job. Still, there is no common platform for cooperation of diasporas’ representatives from different cities of Russia. Such an initiative would help to coordinate their activities and determine the main priorities for the development of organizations in Russia and further for the joint projects’ implementation in Tajikistan.

In such a situation, it is necessary to intensify the activities of Tajik diplomatic structures, for example. They may have a greater resource and information base, which may improve the link between labor migrants and the diaspora. Such an option may become a part of Tajikistan’s policy regarding its citizens abroad.

**Diasporas’ ties with Tajikistan**

In October 2018, there was a meeting in Dushanbe with the participation of the Tajik diaspora organizations and Tajik state structures’ representatives.[13] At the meeting, government institutions expressed interest in enhancing cooperation with the Tajik diasporas, on the eve of the 30th anniversary of the republic’s independence. However, here arises the question; what is this interest about? It is quite possible that narratives that maintain ties between Tajiks are connected not with the need for any kind of support in celebrating Independence Day, but rather in strengthening ties with diasporas for an effective holding the upcoming presidential elections in 2020.
What is the Potential of Tajik Diasporas in the Development of Tajikistan?

In previous years, the meetings of state structures’ representatives were often carried out, for example, in Russia and Ukraine. Diaspora’ members are perceived by the government as a possibility of selling shares of the Rogun hydropower station[14], and in general, to increase loyalty to the government among the Tajik diasporas’ members[15],[16].

Such an interest in supporting the understanding and acceptance of the current government among diasporas can be explained by their presence outside the Tajik information field. Thus, the state is trying to reduce the risks of ideological influence on them by the opposition or individuals who, for one reason or another, did not recognize Rahmon’s regime.

In this case, the diasporas act as an agent through which the Tajik authorities promote their declamation among the country citizens. The authorities also understand the fact that diasporas have certain financial potential. Despite the fact that diasporas participate in various meetings with Tajik state authorities, the cultural component of maintaining ties with their historic homeland is more characteristic for them. For example, there have been proposals to establish schools in
Russia with instruction in the Tajik language\[17\], which shows how important it is for them to preserve Tajik identity. As for the interest in participating in the development processes of Tajikistan, the majority of diasporas’ representatives see in this many obstacles. Although many declared that they would like to help their homeland in development issues, their concern is the level of corruption and inefficient bureaucracy in Tajikistan itself.\[18\]

The situation is rather complicated – the diasporas want to help, but they see a lot of obstacles, and the state is essentially building its policy towards diasporas only within the framework of measures to support loyalty to itself.

**Implications**

Tajik diasporas demonstrate a good level of organization. They devote their activities to the support of their compatriots who need advice, work, and housing. However, they operate separately from each other and connections between such organizations are very poorly developed. State authorities perceive diasporas as a mouthpiece for spreading their declamation, but the perception of them as a subject that has the potential for development assistance is not very pronounced.

The experience of other countries shows how possible the organization of diasporas with the help of state structures and how it can positively impact the effective output of diasporas in the form of investments into various projects for the development of their historic homeland. As for Armenia, such assistance of diasporas goes in combination with money transfers of labor migrants, as a result, the potential of Armenians living abroad is fully utilized at different levels. Therefore, such diversification of financial assistance of its fellow citizens is possible for Tajikistan.

In order to understand what steps can be taken for such diversification, it is necessary to understand the following:

- What areas of the economy or social sector may be interesting for diasporas’ representatives in the future for their involvement in development processes.
- Evaluate their financial potential at the moment by conducting an in-depth study with the provision of updated data, since the studies of international institutions are obsolete now.

In order to move towards closer cooperation with diasporas, it is possible to take the following measures:

- Mobilizing diplomatic structures to strengthen ties with diasporas.
- Assisting diasporas’ organizations to improve the information component, i.e. to make their activities more visible, thereby raising awareness among other citizens who are not aware of the existence of such organizations.
What is the Potential of Tajik Diasporas in the Development of Tajikistan?

- Create a permanent platform with the participation of diasporas’ representatives, NGOs, and international structures to support future cooperation networks.
- Conceive a clear national policy towards the Tajik diasporas in all countries, including Uzbekistan, Kazakhstan, Europe, and the USA.

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[3] Ibid.
[15] The meeting of the Ambassador of Tajikistan with compatriots, representatives of Tajik diasporas and
What is the Potential of Tajik Diasporas in the Development of Tajikistan?


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