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Comparison of the experience of Afghan refugees and Russian migrants in Tajikistan and ways of their integration

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

The author of this publication is Aziz Berdikulov, a researcher at the European Centre for Minority Issues (Germany). The brief reviews the current situation of refugees and analyses the potential threats that may result from the lack of effective measures to integrate refugees, “relocants” and other migrants. Refugees should not be seen as a threat but as a source of ideas and potential for the country’s development. The author has also formulated targeted recommendations for Tajikistan’s state bodies, non-governmental and international organisations.

SUMMARY

This brief argues that Tajikistan needs to address the refugee problem and develop programmes for their integration. There is a need to move away from viewing the refugee issue as a burden or threat in favour of the fact that refugees have potential and can contribute to the economy, society and development of the country. An example of this attitude is the way many Central Asian countries are attempting to integrate Russian re-locates into the labour market. With proper state support, refugees can become a source of new ideas, and knowledge, and provide new opportunities for trade, entrepreneurship and cultural exchange.

Of course, Tajikistan may lack the necessary expertise and resources to effectively integrate refugees and relocates. That is why support and cooperation with the international community are necessary conditions for developing programmes for successful integration and unlocking the potential of the resettled. International institutions and foreign countries can provide not only financial assistance, but also technical support, exchange of experience, and assistance in developing programmes and policies for refugee integration. Foreign countries have repeatedly made it clear that they are interested in seeing as many Afghan refugees as possible remain in Central Asia, so the Tajik authorities should take advantage of their position and request all necessary support.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations for the Republic of Tajikistan:

- ▶ The country's legislation on refugees needs to be reformed. In particular, regulations restricting refugees from choosing their place of residence should be removed. Guarantees on the provision of financial and other material assistance to refugees, at least for the initial period, should also be included.
- ▶ Establish programmes for the integration of refugees in conjunction with cultural, health, social protection and educational authorities. Particular attention should be paid to developing additional educational opportunities for refugees to facilitate their integration into Tajikistan's education system. Cooperate with civil society and international organisations to develop integration programmes for refugees and migrants.
- ▶ Facilitate voluntary migration of refugees to third countries by improving their skills, legal and financial literacy.
- ▶ Stop the arbitrary deportation of Afghans, given the threat to their lives and freedom.
- ▶ The rights of tenants should be reinforced to provide them with protection against unscrupulous landlords.
- ▶ Considerable attention should be paid to reforming the country's Internet sector. Consider state subsidies for infrastructure development, attracting donors, and reducing state monopoly and interference in the management of the Internet infrastructure.

For the Ministry of Education of the Republic of Tajikistan:

- ▶ Develop programmes to integrate children from refugee families into the educational system of the country. Form preparatory classes for refugee children to accelerate their learning of the Tajik language and alphabet for their further education in ordinary classes.
- ▶ Prepare transparent and efficient procedures for the recognition of refugees' diplomas and qualifications to facilitate their participation in Tajikistan's labour market.

For the Ministry of Culture of the Republic of Tajikistan:

- ▶ Organise events and programmes for cultural exchange between refugees and the local population (exhibitions, concerts, festivals, fairs).

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- ▶ Provide opportunities for refugees to participate in local cultural projects and other creative initiatives.
- ▶ Develop language support programmes for refugees and their learning of the Tajik language.
- ▶ Establish partnerships with NGOs and international organisations that have experience in working with refugees to develop programmes for the cultural integration of refugees.

For the Labour and Employment Agency of the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment of the Republic of Tajikistan:

- ▶ To establish courses on professional development and retraining for professionals among refugees for their further employment.
- ▶ In collaboration with law enforcement agencies, simplify the procedure for refugees to obtain the necessary status for them to work legally in Tajikistan.
- ▶ Provide refugees with access to information on vacancies and opportunities to improve their labour skills. Such access can be provided both through online resources and more traditional platforms such as information boards or newspaper advertisements.
- ▶ Establish cooperation with potential employers to create employment opportunities for refugees and “relocants”. Partners can include both public and private sector employers.

For the Border Guard Service of the Republic of Tajikistan:

- ▶ Organise training for staff on international standards on the protection of refugees’ and migrants’ rights, causes and procedures of migration to ensure legal and human treatment of refugees at checkpoints in border zones.
- ▶ Facilitate the safe arrival and registration of refugees, resettlers and “relocants”. This requires providing the relevant structures with the necessary expertise and equipment for fast and efficient document verification, in line with the principles of human rights protection.
- ▶ Ensure that the necessary humanitarian assistance is provided to refugees. Provide appropriate equipment and expertise for humanitarian assistance, especially to women, children and the elderly.
- ▶ Do not forcibly deport refugees from the country. In turn, provide assistance to

RECOMMENDATIONS

refugees planning to move to third countries.

For the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan:

- ▶ Establish partnerships with other structures and non-governmental organisations to ensure a comprehensive approach to the issue of refugees and migration.
- ▶ Ensure the protection and safety of refugees, especially women, children and the elderly. Particular attention should be paid to protection from violence and discrimination.
- ▶ Maintain dialogue between refugees and the local population in order to accelerate the integration of the refugees.
- ▶ Develop measures to ensure that refugees receive the documents necessary for their legal stay and employment in Tajikistan in an accelerated and transparent manner.

Recommendations for international organisations and civil society:

- ▶ Provide assistance to refugees to ensure that they have access to food, shelter, health care and education.
- ▶ Provide judicial and legal aid. Advocate regarding refugee status in Tajikistan and the necessary procedures and bureaucracy involved in the migration process.
- ▶ Support the Republic of Tajikistan and relevant state authorities in the integration of refugees into education and the labour market.
- ▶ Conduct intercultural learning and exchange activities. Such initiatives help to establish contacts among the local population and refugees and reduce social tensions.
- ▶ Develop measures to provide psychological support to refugees. Access to counselling and group psychological support sessions should be ensured.
- ▶ Raise awareness among refugees of their rights both in Tajikistan and internationally.
- ▶ Offer active cooperation to state structures to work together on programmes for the integration of refugees and other displaced persons.
- ▶ Report on how different countries assist and integrate refugees and consider the possibility of applying these practices in Tajikistan.
- ▶ Provide expert assistance to the Government of Tajikistan in analysing and reforming the country's refugee legislation.

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, Tajikistan has become a haven for two different groups of people who have fled their home countries. In the summer of 2021, thousands of Afghans crossed the Tajik border in an attempt to keep themselves and their families safe from the Taliban. For many Afghans, Tajikistan was a natural choice not only because of its geographic proximity but also because of its language, culture and religion.

After Russia invaded Ukraine in February 2022, hundreds of thousands of Russian citizens fled their country. In September 2022, even more Russians left the country after mobilisation was announced. Some of these “relocants” decided to go to Tajikistan. In favour of choosing Tajikistan were the visa-free regime, the widespread use of the Russian language, and a positive attitude towards Russia and the Soviet past.

Thus, with an approximate gap of one year, Tajikistan became a home, albeit temporary, for two groups of migrants - Afghan refugees and Russian “relocants”. However, there were significant differences in how these groups were received by the state and civil society. In addition, there are provisions in Tajik law that significantly limit the rights of refugees in the country. This will be discussed in this brief.

PART 1. AFGHAN REFUGEES IN TAJIKISTAN

When the Taliban took over power in Afghanistan in the summer of 2021, many Afghan citizens and their families were at risk of persecution. Employees of international organisations, human rights defenders, journalists and foreign university graduates were the first people the Taliban regime tried to eliminate. The complex interethnic situation in the country also influenced the decision to leave Afghanistan.

Due to the fact that the majority of Taliban belong to the Pashtun ethnic group, members of other minorities have decided to leave the country, fearing discrimination on the basis of nationality (often not unjustifiably). For the sake of convenience, the terms “Afghans” or “Afghan refugees” will be used in this material in relation to refugees from Afghanistan.

Thus, many Afghan refugees of Tajik nationality have chosen neighbouring Tajikistan as a natural place of refuge. Firstly, the two countries share a vast border, which could be crossed through several checkpoints. Second, Afghan refugees may have been attracted by the fact that Tajikistan is also Tajik-language and Islamic, which culturally may have created an impression of closeness between the two countries.

The Tajik authorities themselves have repeatedly declared the friendship and ties between the two nations. President Rahmon said during his address to the 76th session of the UN General Assembly that the “friendly and fraternal people” of Afghanistan did not deserve to be at the centre of a violent conflict again.

In the same year, the President noted that Afghanistan is “our closest neighbour, a friendly country with a common language, religion and culture”. In addition, the Tajik government has refused on principle to recognise the Taliban’s authority in Afghanistan, owing also to the fact that the Taliban have kept Afghan Tajiks out of the state administration.

President Rahmon has repeatedly [noted](#) that the Tajik government lost confidence in the Taliban after they failed to fulfil their promises to consider sharing power with all political actors in Afghanistan. The Tajik president estimates that Tajiks make up about 46 per cent of the total population in Afghanistan and that a new government in Afghanistan should be formed with the participation of all ethnic minorities in the country, in which Tajiks would be given a “dignified role”.

Among other things, the Taliban’s rise to power has influenced the growth of nationalist and ethnic-patriotic sentiments in Tajikistan. Some social media users have [expressed](#) their readiness to join the ranks of Tajik fighters battling the Taliban regime in Afghanistan’s Panjsher Gorge.

Representatives of the Democratic Party of Tajikistan, for instance, [called](#) the Taliban government’s actions a genocide of the Persian-speaking population of Afghanistan by international terrorists.

STATE AND PUBLIC REACTION

When it became clear that many Afghan refugees were planning to head to Tajikistan, at the end of July 2021, the Committee for Emergency Situations of Tajikistan [stated](#) that the country’s authorities could accommodate about 100,000 refugees at military training grounds close to the Afghan border. At the same time, there was news about a tent city located somewhere on the territory of the Khatlon region, which was visited by the Afghan ambassador.

Some 1,000 Afghan refugees were reportedly housed there, although official authorities [did not confirm](#) the existence of such a tent city. Soon after, the official rhetoric changed when Tajik Interior Minister Ramazon Rasulzoda noted that the country was not capable of hosting large numbers of refugees from Afghanistan. The Minister also expressed

frustration with the international community, which he believes does not provide sufficient support to Tajikistan.

At that time, more than 1,300 refugees from Afghanistan arrived in Gorno-Badakhshan Autonomous Oblast (GBAO). According to the regional leadership, the Afghans stayed in GBAO for about a week before returning home.

Then-regional head Yodgor Faizov noted that during this time it became apparent that GBAO lacked the necessary infrastructure to accept and accommodate refugees and that the region's financial capacity was limited. Support from the Aga Khan Foundation and the local population has helped the Afghans. Faizov [emphasised](#) that GBAO can only act as a transit point for refugees, as the province is unable to provide employment opportunities and conditions for the social and economic integration of refugees.

In fact, much of the support and assistance to Afghan refugees has been provided by international organisations, public organisations and civil society while centralised state initiatives were absent.

For example, the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), the International Organisation for Migration (IOM) and the Soros Foundation, through their local partners, provided financial and food assistance to Afghan refugees.

Refugees [received](#) legal counselling, employment and education support, and access to health care, important in the midst of the coronavirus pandemic. There have been very few civic initiatives to support Afghan refugees.

One example is [Anahita Saymidinova](#), a journalist and activist from Tajikistan, who organised the transit of Afghan refugees (mostly female athletes, lawyers, police officers and activists) from Tajikistan to Canada and the United States.

In February 2022, it was announced that a multi-purpose shelter would be built in Khatlon province for refugees and Tajikistanis who have lost their homes. Funding for this construction again will have to be [provided](#) by international organisations.

However, the timeline for construction, as well as the extent to which Afghan refugees will be given access to the new shelter, has not been disclosed.

In total, according to official sources, about 15,000 refugees from Afghanistan had entered Tajikistan by October 2021. This is almost ten times less than the reported number of

refugees the official authorities were prepared to accept, but it is still higher than the total number of refugees entering the rest of Central Asia. the official authorities were prepared to accept, but it is still higher than the total number of refugees entering the rest of Central Asia. Saimumin Yatimov, chairman of Tajikistan’s State Committee for National Security, [said](#) that by the end of 2021, around 500-600 refugees from Afghanistan had attempted to cross the Tajik border, putting border guards and other security officials in an increased readiness state.

Tajikistan is leading in the number of Afghan refugees in Central Asia

For the period of 2021-2022

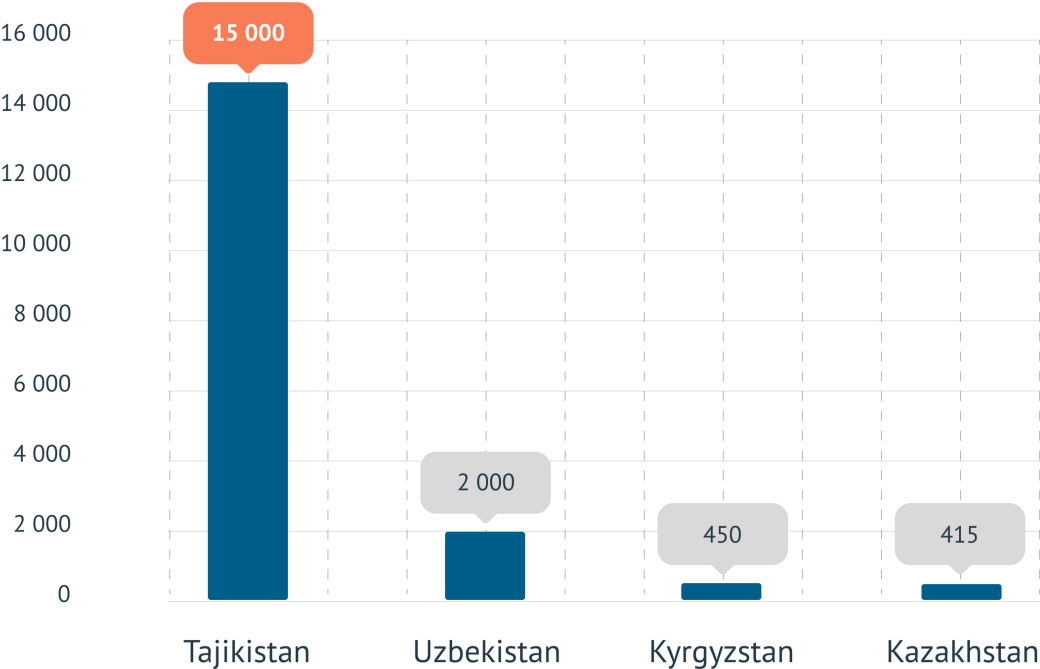


Chart: CABAR.asia. Source: EL.Kz, CABAR.asia, Deutsche Welle, Radio Ozodi

Chart 1: Tajikistan is leading in the number of Afghan refugees in Central Asia

Sources: [El.Kz](#), [CABAR.asia](#), [Deutsche Welle](#), [Radio Ozodi](#).

WHAT PROBLEMS HAVE EMERGED?

After the Afghan refugees did cross the border and settled in Tajikistan, they faced a number of challenges.

Many Afghans stated that they saw Tajikistan as a transit point where they could gather their strength, put the paperwork in order, and apply for asylum in the United States, Canada, and Western European countries. This is largely due to the fact that Tajikistan itself has a very high unemployment rate. In addition, it should be taken into account that the life of refugees is complicated by the restrictions imposed on them by Tajik legislation and bureaucracy.

Thus, Decree No. 325 of the Tajik government from 2000 [bans](#) refugees and asylum seekers in Dushanbe, Khujand, the whole of GBAO, Isfara, Qurgonteppa, Kulob and other major cities and districts of the country. In other words, refugees are deprived of access to economic opportunities and other advantages of Tajikistan's major cities, which negatively affects their economic conditions and prospects for integration into Tajik society.

Due to restrictions, most Afghans [live](#) in Vahdat, Rudaki, Hisor, or Shahrinav, where high demand has increased housing prices and reduced affordability. There are no such prohibitions in the laws of other Central Asian countries or the Russian Federation. For example, [Kyrgyzstan's Law on Refugees](#) states that persons who have applied for recognition as refugees have the right to free movement throughout Kyrgyzstan, except in areas that were already closed to foreigners.

The [Kazakhstan Law](#) on Refugees does not prohibit residency in any territory of the country. The Federal Law of the [Russian Federation](#) on Refugees also contains no provisions restricting refugees from settling.

Once they have found accommodation, refugees in Tajikistan are not eligible for financial allowance. The country's Law on Refugees No. 50 of 2002 [does not oblige](#) the government to provide financial support to refugees or asylum seekers. Therefore, Afghan refugees have to rely on their savings, relatives and projects of international and civil society organisations. As can be assumed, official employment for Afghan refugees in Tajikistan is also a difficulty.

It's no secret that the majority of the country's local population has difficulty

finding well-paid jobs and is therefore compelled to submit to labour migration. For example, in 2021, the [share of Tajik labour migrants](#) in Russia reached more than 2 million people — equal to one-fifth of the total population of Tajikistan.

In addition to the general difficulties associated with Tajikistan's low economic development, Afghan refugees have encountered issues in finding and obtaining employment for a number of other reasons. Firstly, due to the coronavirus pandemic, many enterprises and businesses have closed down in the country and the labour market has significantly shrunk. Secondly, in order to get a legal job, Afghan refugees need to obtain a certificate from the Afghan Ministry of Education and submit it to the Agency for Supervision in the Field of Education and Science in Tajikistan to have their educational documents recognised.

It is, of course, practically impossible to obtain such a [certificate](#) due to the current circumstances in Afghanistan. Some experts have their own views on the situation with the employment of refugees from Afghanistan. For example, Abdurahmon Qurbonov from the Centre for Strategic Studies under the President of Tajikistan said that Afghanistan's education system is different from Tajikistan's, and this does not guarantee automatic employment. According to him, the “brain drain” in Afghanistan began long ago, so there are no specialists among Afghan refugees who could be employed in Tajikistan.



Nevertheless, there have been cases where Afghan refugees have even created jobs or have been successfully employed in Tajikistan. For example, some Afghans work as teachers at the [Somoniyon School](#), which was established in 2000 by the Afghan Ministry of Education and the Afghan Embassy. The school's director, Nojia Zohiri, reported that nearly 400 children study and 27 teachers work at the school according to Afghan educational programmes. Some of the refugees with medical degrees [work](#) at the central hospital in Vahdat and provide medical aid to the population along with their Tajik colleagues. Afghan women open tailoring shops, provide wedding decoration services, work in beauty salons, and trade in local markets.

However, the biggest obstacle for Afghans is getting official refugee status. According to the procedure, this requires first finding accommodation and making an advance payment of up to one year, drawing up a rental agreement and then registering it at the local khukumat. The next step is to register oneself at the Ministry of Internal Affairs, which issues a so-called “green passport”, granting its holder the right to stay legally in Tajikistan.

In order to work legally in the country, a refugee must obtain a “red passport”, which is issued only after the applicant has been checked by the intelligence services. The “red passport” also entitles refugees to apply for asylum in third countries. By December 2021, the issuance of “red passports” was suspended without explanation. In addition, some refugees shared that they faced [extortion](#) by Interior Ministry officials, who asked for between USD 1,000 and USD 3,000 for issuing the documents.

International practice shows that it is necessary to facilitate the integration of refugees into society in order to reduce social tensions and improve the quality of life of refugees. Integration courses help migrants and refugees to familiarise themselves with the social order, learn languages, get acquainted with the cultural peculiarities of the host country, and provide a chance for refugees to become a participant in public life.

Furthermore, in some countries, the completion of integration programmes by refugees accelerates the process of obtaining a residence permit or citizenship, e.g. in Germany. Unfortunately, there are no integration courses for refugees in Tajikistan. Education as a form of integration into society in Tajikistan also remains practically inaccessible for refugees from Afghanistan. Despite the similarities between Tajik and Dari, Afghan children, who are used to writing in Arabic script, have [difficulties](#) with the transition to the Cyrillic alphabet.

A small number of volunteer and civic initiatives try to cover the needs of Afghan children, but this solution is hardly sustainable. As a result, the Afghan refugee community is isolated, which only reinforces negative stereotypes about them and reduces their chances of improving their social and economic situation.

According to the refugees, obtaining Tajik citizenship is an unattainable goal. So far, only 14 Afghans have obtained Tajik citizenship, said Abdul Musavvir Bahaduri, head of the Afghan NGO Orieno. All of them are university graduates who studied in Tajikistan during the Soviet era and received Tajik passports back in 1998.

By 2021, about 400 people had applied for Tajik citizenship and were still waiting for a response, according to Bahoduri. At the same time, the Law on Nationality of the Republic of Tajikistan No. 1208 of 2015 [stipulates](#) that stateless persons and foreign nationals have the right to apply for Tajik citizenship upon reaching 18 years of age and regardless of race, gender, language, education, and social and financial situation.

However, as the situation with Afghan refugees shows, in reality, it is impossible to obtain Tajik citizenship.

In September 2022, information about the deportation of refugees back to Afghanistan began to appear. According to [official data](#), 32 refugees were deported back to their home country due to violations of the residency rules and other offences. Alternative sources reported the deportation of 100-200 refugees. UNHCR [has called](#) on the Tajik authorities to stop deporting refugees to Afghanistan, citing the enormous danger they face in their home country.

Refugees themselves shared that due to deportation incidents they live in fear and do not leave their homes as they do not want to return to the Taliban, from whom they fled in the first place. It has been reported that even refugees who were preparing to move to other countries from Tajikistan were among the deportees. UNHCR [stated](#) that it was unable to establish the pattern by which the Tajik authorities targeted refugees for deportation.

Forced deportation of refugees is against international norms and Tajik legislation. For example, [Tajikistan's Law on Refugees](#) No. 50 of 2002 states that work with asylum-seekers and refugees is based, inter alia, on the principles of non-discrimination, non-refoulement, family reunification and priority protection of the rights of vulnerable persons. Refugees are guaranteed that they will not be returned or expelled against their will to a place where their life or freedom may be threatened, but with the exception that such guarantees do not apply to refugees who are considered "for justifiable reasons to be a threat to the security of the country". At the same time, some refugees have decided to return voluntarily back to Afghanistan, as their attempts to settle in Tajikistan or to seek asylum in third countries have been fruitless.

In any case, it cannot be excluded that the Taliban will prosecute those who choose to return on their own or have been deported back to Afghanistan.

Tajik authorities have been cautious about refugees from the neighbouring country and the head of the SCNS, Saimumin Yatimov, [stated](#) back in 2021 that the situation in Afghanistan posed a real threat to Tajikistan and suggested that the Islamic religion could be used to destabilise the entire Central Asian region. He [linked](#) the influx of refugees to increased drug trafficking and smuggling of weapons and ammunition from Afghanistan. Allegedly, the Tajik security forces considered the possibility that militants and Taliban fighters could have entered the country along with the refugees, which could explain the protracted process of checking refugees by the security services before issuing "red passports" or deporting them. It should also be remembered that the bulk of refugees from Afghanistan arrived in the country during the height of the coronavirus pandemic when Tajikistan's

state borders were closed and border guards lacked the necessary infrastructure to conduct mass refugee tests, which affected the border posts' capacity.

It is becoming clear that there are a number of problems and difficulties in Tajikistan that put refugees arriving in the country in a less than favourable position. Part of these problems can be explained by the fact that Tajikistan as a country does not have much experience in receiving and integrating refugees, as it has not been a popular destination for resettlers. In addition, the national budget does not allow for the construction of infrastructure facilities for refugees or the development of national programmes to support and provide for refugees in the country.

However, it should be taken into account that there are already refugees living in Tajikistan and their situation needs to be improved. Otherwise, the lack of integration and effective refugee support programmes may result in serious threats to Tajik society. Here are some of them:

- 1** The lack of integration programmes can lead to the social exclusion of refugees and minimise interaction and cultural exchange between refugees and the local population. This in turn often leads to an increase in chauvinism and intolerant attitudes.
- 2** Due to the absence or lack of integration programmes as well as government support, refugees lose employment opportunities. They find themselves in an economically vulnerable situation and are forced to rely only on external assistance. The country then misses the opportunity to utilise the potential of refugees to strengthen its economy.
- 3** Social exclusion and lack of economic opportunities almost always lead to increased tensions and conflict situations. Mistrust among refugees and the local population can only be exacerbated against this background, and the isolation of refugees will only reinforce racism, xenophobia and social instability. Radicalisation may also increase among both refugees (due to exclusion from public life and lack of access to education and employment) and the local population (due to lack of contact with refugees).

Certainly, developing effective refugee integration programmes requires not only huge financial resources but also knowledge and skills. Tajikistan needs to familiarise itself with the best practices of countries in order to develop its refugee policy. For example, Germany is a country that from the mid-2010s to the present day has received a huge number of

refugees, first from Syria and Yemen, and then from Afghanistan and Ukraine. Tajikistan can learn from Germany's experience in integrating refugees, particularly in the areas of acceptance and accommodation, access to education and medical care, social support, labour market integration and, most importantly, cultural adaptation and social interaction. Certainly, Germany, unlike Tajikistan, has extensive economic and infrastructural resources to provide refugees with the necessary assistance. However, the Tajik government should intensify negotiations with the international community, whose representatives were interested in Tajikistan hosting more Afghan refugees. Such negotiations should emphasise that Tajikistan needs international support, both in terms of finance and expertise, in order for the country to be able to develop and implement effective programmes to integrate refugees and maintain stability in the country and the region.

PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

Upon arrival in Tajikistan, Afghan refugees faced a number of problems. In addition to the cumbersome procedure for obtaining official refugee status, they had no employment, state financial support, or access to adequate education and integration. Civil society and the public, except for individual cases, also did not provide substantial support to the refugees. It can be assumed that the decision of many Afghan refugees to resettle in Tajikistan was taken out of a sense of kinship. However, the Tajik population has not reciprocated the Afghans. Nevertheless, Tajikistan, despite the lack of support, funding and the general economic situation, received the largest number of refugees from Afghanistan among the Central Asian and post-Soviet states, which may have been done in the name of humanity and to accommodate people in times of emergency. However, it should not be ruled out that Tajik leaders may have been influenced by a sense of kinship with the Afghan people, especially given the references to kinship with the Afghan people by the President of Tajikistan.

The lack of programmes for integration and social interaction with refugees could threaten Tajikistan with increased social tensions, conflict situations and radicalisation. The government should develop programmes to integrate refugees into the public life of the country and use refugees' potential to strengthen its own economy in order to ensure Tajikistan's stable development, as well as to strengthen the social cohesiveness of the local population.

PART 2. RUSSIAN REFUGEES IN TAJIKISTAN

As the Russian invasion of Ukraine began in February 2022, many Russians began to leave their homeland. However, the largest outflow of people occurred when Vladimir Putin announced the partial military mobilisation in the Russian Federation in September 2022, when during one month alone, about 700,000 people left the country, most of whom were men. The term “relocants” began to be applied to Russians who left the country after the war began. Thus, many “relocants” entered Kazakhstan, as well as other Central Asian countries. In 2022, a total of 306 thousand Russian citizens entered Tajikistan, which is 212 % more than the figure for 2021. The flow of Russians travelling to Tajikistan has clearly increased, but it is impossible to reliably verify how many of them entered the country as tourists. The number of Russian tourists to Central Asian countries may have increased after a number of countries banned Russian citizens from entering their country.

However, it cannot be denied that among those who came to Tajikistan were Russian “relocants”, not tourists. Russians fleeing mobilisation were not stopped by soaring airfares or kilometre-long queues at land borders.

REASONS FOR MOVING TO TAJIKISTAN

Similar to Afghan refugees, it can be assumed that Russian “relocants” had certain reasons for moving to Tajikistan and Central Asia in particular. However, while Afghans apparently decided to flee to Tajikistan because of its proximity, as well as similar culture, language, religion and ethnic identity, Russian “relocants” had other reasons.

First, Russia and Tajikistan share a common Soviet past, which has significantly influenced the current state system. For example, Tajikistan is quite loyal to Moscow’s policies and in many ways supports them. The Soviet past has also influenced the way of life, which Russian migrants may have found familiar and not requiring adaptation. In addition, “relocants” could get an initial idea of the country due to the large number of migrants working throughout Russia.

Second, despite the diminishing role of Russian language in the region, it remains the common language of inter-ethnic communication, education, legislation and content consumption in Tajikistan. Russian television channels and Russian-language resources are popular in the country, and in Dushanbe and other major urban centres, one can easily communicate in the Russian language alone.

In 2022, number of Russians entered Tajikistan threefold compared to 2021

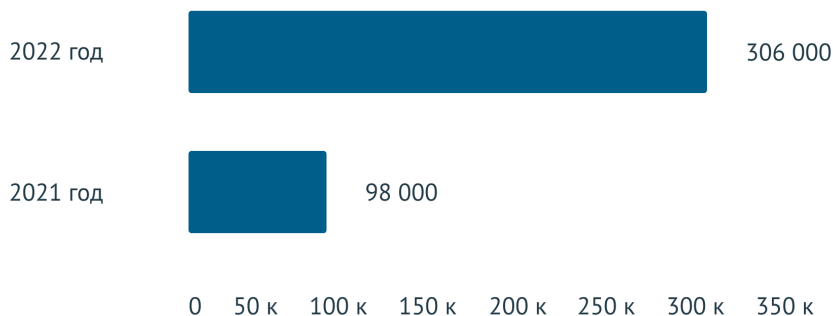


Chart: CABAR.asia. Source: Vostochnyj Ekspres 24

Chart 2: In 2022, the number of Russians entered Tajikistan threefold compared to 2021

Source: [Vostochnyj ekspres](#)

Third, Tajik legislation may have played a role in the choice of “relocants”. Often laws in the country are written with an eye on Russian legislation, and a person coming from Russia will not have much difficulty understanding the state of affairs regarding regulatory acts.

Last, but not least, it is quite easy for “relocants” and tourists from Russia to enter Tajikistan. There is an agreement between the countries on a visa-free regime and dual citizenship, and Russians only need to go through the registration procedure upon arrival in Tajikistan to ensure their legal stay in the country.

STATE AND PUBLIC REACTION

No special efforts have been made by the Tajik authorities to support and integrate “relocants”. For example, in [Uzbekistan](#), the government has developed programmes to attract Russian IT specialists to develop the local Internet structure. There were no similar initiatives in Tajikistan at the time of the arrival of “relocants”.

In October 2022, a [meeting](#) took place between the Tajik authorities and some “relocants”, during which it was said that the latter could stay in the country if favourable conditions were created for them. Many newcomers [complained](#) about the quality of the internet in Tajikistan, which is a key factor for most “relocants” working remotely. They doubted that they would be able to find decent jobs in Tajikistan and saw the country only as a transit point, like many Afghan refugees.

At first glance, the attitude of the Tajik authorities towards Afghan refugees and Russian migrants is quite similar in that there were no centralised programmes to receive and process large numbers of migrants in either case. However, if one assumes that in relation to Afghan refugees the government took a rather passive stance due to simple reluctance, lack of budgetary resources or lack of political will, then in the case of Russian “relocants” officials may have been motivated by different reasons.

For example, the authorities may have assumed that Russian citizens were much more financially secure and could navigate the country on their own. Many immigrants did not need to find jobs or free housing, which required minimal state intervention. After all, it can be assumed that the “relocants” themselves did not expect state support, unlike Afghan refugees who needed it because of their situation.

The most important difference compared to the reception of Afghan refugees is the support that the locals gave to the Russian migrants. Civil society quickly mobilised, coordinated and organised online counselling channels for the Russian arrivals. In groups on social networks and [online messengers](#) created by local activists, Tajiks offered assistance with finding accommodation, registration, opening bank accounts, connecting to the internet and acquiring local mobile numbers.

The Russians themselves [shared](#) that they were astonished by such a warm welcome from Tajik citizens. The Russians admitted that they knew nothing about Tajikistan before their arrival and that Tajiks in Russia were not always treated with sympathy, making them much more impressed by the friendliness and support they received in Tajikistan.

However, it cannot be said with absolute certainty that the reaction to the arrival of large numbers of Russians in Tajikistan and the region has been overwhelmingly positive. Throughout Central Asia, local residents expressed their concern and sometimes frustration.

For example, Russians were [blamed](#) for fleeing their country instead of trying to influence the Russian regime. It was feared that the migrants would demand special treatment, expect everyone to communicate in Russian and disrespect local culture, traditions and languages.

Others [saw](#) colonial thinking in the way local governments and residents relied on the skills of “relocants” to strengthen economies and develop countries, while the Russians themselves were blamed for imperialism and chauvinism towards Central Asians, including those in Russia. In addition, there have been [reports](#) of local residents losing rented accommodation that owners intended to rent to Russians for a higher fee, and of people losing jobs to newly arrived Russian specialists.

Tajik volunteers and activists claimed that they help Russians partly because they want them to develop a positive perception of the Tajik people. They hoped that Russians would then have a better attitude towards Tajiks and other Central Asians working in Russia.

However, some experts [feared](#) that such good-naturedness and hospitality could become a problem for the region - for example, people who support the war in Ukraine might accuse Tajikistan and other countries of hosting those “who do not want to fight for Russia”.

In this diversity of reactions, the position of Tajikistan’s local Russian minority remains unclear. Most of Tajikistan’s Russians and Russian speakers left the country during and after the civil war, but around [35,000 Russians](#) (or 0.5 per cent of the total population) lived in Tajikistan as of 2010.

It could have been assumed that a large number of Russians arriving in the country would give confidence to local Russians to protect and promote Russian and Russian-language education. In fact, [no statements](#) about “relocants”, the war or the Russian language were made by representatives of Tajikistan’s Russian minority.

It is possible that the Russian population in Tajikistan does not associate themselves to a large extent with Russians, and therefore did not feel a sense of belonging to the “relocants”. In addition, Tajikistan’s Russians may have refrained from making comments due to a reluctance to talk about the war in Ukraine and Russia, as well as fear of possible political persecution.

WHAT PROBLEMS HAVE EMERGED?

According to the “relocants” themselves, [difficulties](#) have arisen when trying to open accounts in Tajik banks, and are often related to bureaucratic procedures. For example, to open an account in a local bank in Tajikistan, a foreigner needs to purchase a SIM card, which in turn requires registration. In order to obtain registration, it is necessary to find temporary accommodation or stay in a hotel. It is also necessary to obtain a taxpayer identification number (TIN), for which it is necessary to prepare another package of documents and spend a considerable amount of time.

Underdevelopment of the Internet and online services was the main reason why “relocants” would not want to stay in Tajikistan for further residence. While locals have long experienced difficulties due to the slow, monopolised and expensive Internet connection in the country, this came as an unpleasant surprise to nonresidents. The fact that Russians were willing to consider a long-term stay in Tajikistan and

integration into the local labour market if quality Internet services were available indicates the importance of developing this sector. The backwardness of the Internet sphere is not the least reason for the low attractiveness of Tajikistan as a labour market. The reluctance of foreign specialists to work in Tajikistan is also influenced by the prevalence of corruption, swollen bureaucratic procedures, a limited market economy, and a high unemployment rate.

The increased demand for housing showed that local tenants were not protected and could end up on the street if the landlord decided to rent the flat at a favourable rate to other tenants. For thousands of students and incoming professionals, the situation became a major burden because they were unable to compete for housing with Russians who were willing to pay landlords who took advantage of the unprecedented demand.

Some locals did not like this attitude towards their compatriots and accused their fellow citizens of colonial worship of the Russians. In addition, there were fears that the increased number of Russian citizens in Central Asia would not go unnoticed by Moscow, which might well use Russian “relocants” to put pressure on the region or even as a pretext for territorial expansion.

! As in the case of Afghan refugees, state structures should develop initiatives to integrate “relocants” into Tajikistan’s public and economic spheres. First, close and systematic contact between locals and Russians can strengthen cultural exchange and reduce fears among locals that relocants see Tajikistan only as a former colony. Second, “relocants” do represent a huge human resource, and the Tajik government can benefit greatly from this for the economy and development of the country.

! Programmes should therefore be developed to attract “relocants” to the workplace, but this should be done with an eye to ensuring that local workers are not harmed by such initiatives, but rather strengthen their knowledge and acquire additional professional qualifications. Job creation for “relocants” should have a favourable impact on the state as a whole (e.g., contributing to the development of the internet sphere in the country), lead to the creation of new jobs for the Tajik population and strengthen their interaction not only at the professional but also at the social level.

PROVISIONAL CONCLUSION

It was much easier for Russian migrants to get to Tajikistan and settle there. For people desperate to leave Russia, Tajikistan became one of the natural destinations due to air connectivity and visa-free entry.

There were no programmes of state support for the reception of “relocants” by the Tajik authorities, also because they were not legally refugees. Civil society was much more active and numerous initiatives and movements supported “relocants”. At the same time, this all-encompassing support caused bewilderment among some citizens, who recalled that Tajiks and other Central Asians are never treated so favourably in Russia. However, this does not mean that Tajik authorities should not take steps to integrate “relocants”, who are a valuable resource and may possess valuable knowledge applicable to the development of the Tajik economy.

The arrival of “relocants” has also had a negative impact on local tenants and employees who have lost their housing or jobs due to the fact that Russian citizens have moved in and settled there. The “relocants” themselves noted that they viewed Tajikistan as a transit zone, and their long-term stay in the country primarily requires better and more accessible Internet and customer-oriented banking industry.

The main conclusion is that when implementing programmes to integrate and attract “relocants”, it should be ensured that there is no negative impact on the local population and that their rights are protected.

CONCLUSION

Throughout 2021 and 2022, Tajikistan became home, albeit temporarily, to two very different groups of internally displaced persons. Afghan refugees and migrants from Russia left their home countries because of threats to their security and persecution and decided to choose Tajikistan.

Admittedly, one cannot help but be flattered that Tajikistan has received a huge number of Afghan refugees and has, without exaggeration, ensured the safety of thousands of individuals and families. And Tajik civil society quickly coordinated to provide support to the Russian “relocants”.

However, after the entry of migrants into the territory of the country, it became clear that there are problems that limit the dignified residence and integration of refugees and

migrants into Tajik society and the state structure. For example, due to legal restrictions, Afghan (and potentially other) refugees are not allowed to settle in a vast number of towns in the country, which greatly reduces their chances of labour and social integration.

In addition, despite legislative guarantees, there are no programmes for refugee integration and socialisation, and few public initiatives are insufficient. As for the Russian “relocants”, their visit once again showed that Tajikistan needs to reform its Internet and banking sectors for the development and attraction of foreign specialists and investors.

The Tajik government needs to develop effective programmes for integration and social interaction with refugees and migrants. Otherwise, there is a high probability that resettlers may become sources of social tension and their increasing isolation may negatively affect social cohesion. Both refugees and “relocants” represent valuable human potential that can and should be utilised for the benefit of the country’s development. The development of such programmes requires the assistance of the international community and experts, and the Tajik authorities should seek help from foreign partners, who have repeatedly made it clear that they are interested in Tajikistan hosting as many refugees as possible. That is why it is necessary to involve foreign partners and ask for their support, taking into account their interests.

Naturally, the situations and problems of these two groups are radically different due to the social, financial and legal status of refugees and “relocants”. However, these problems have the same impact on the international image of the Republic of Tajikistan, on the country’s ability to attract international professionals, as well as on social unity, and therefore require the attention of the government and the pursuit of solutions.

Differences in the situation of Afghan refugees and the “relocants” from Russia include the following:

- ▶ **Legal status.** Afghans tried to obtain official refugee status in Tajikistan. The Russian “relocants” could in some ways be considered refugees, as they had left the country in search of asylum for fear of persecution or forced military service. However, within the formal rules and legal procedures, “relocants” were not refugees. They did not seek asylum or attempt to obtain refugee status and relied on their own financial means instead of state support. Due to the difference in legal status, Afghan refugees were legally prevented from settling in a large number of Tajik cities and districts, while “relocants” were free of their choice.

► There were practically no civil initiatives to help Afghan refugees. Russians could rely on numerous volunteers and activists who counselled “relocants” online and in person. Perhaps the locals viewed Russian citizens as “USSR compatriots” with whom they shared a common history. Afghans, on the other hand, despite the proximity of the country, as well as the similarity of language, some traditions and religion, were strangers. The fact that a large number of Tajik migrants work in Russia played an important role, and some local activists explained their support for the “relocants” with the idea that in the future when the Russians return home, they will contribute to changing attitudes towards migrants from Central Asia.

► Due to the large difference in the education system and lifestyle, Afghan refugees have difficulties integrating despite a similar language, and the lack of any public or private programmes has only exacerbated their isolation. Theoretically, Russians can integrate into Tajik society without great difficulties, also because of the rather large role of the Russian language, the presence of Russian media and education in Russian. In addition, a Russian national minority has lived in Tajikistan for generations, which if necessary can act as a “guide” for “relocants”, but there is no local Afghan minority in Tajikistan.

► Tajik authorities perceived some Afghan refugees as a threat to the country’s security and linked the increased smuggling of weapons and drugs to attempts by Afghan refugees to enter Tajik territory. There have been cases of deportation of Afghan refugees related to violations of law and order or rules of stay in the country, according to official sources.

Some similarities in the situation of Afghan refugees and “relocants” from Russia include the following:

► In both cases, there was no meaningful state support. Both refugees and “relocants” were on their own or were supported by civil society or international organisations.

► Both Afghan refugees and “relocants” mostly considered Tajikistan as a transit point. During their stay in the country, both groups planned to get their documents in order and decide where they could travel next.

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