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Labour migration in Central Asia. Economic factors of influence

Abstract

The main hypothesis of our research is: low wages, low GDP per capita, and high unemployment are push motives for labour migration in Central Asia. By analyzing the available statistics, we did not find a correlation between these economic indicators and the number of labour emigrants. Also, a comparative analysis of the development trend of personal remittances of labour migrants and the dependence of the economy of Central Asian countries on these remittances was carried out. It is determined that the economies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are 30% dependent on the remittances of labour migrants, which in the World Bank rating for this indicator raises them to the first positions among other countries of the world.

Keywords: Emigration; Work Migration; Remittance; Central Asia; Kazakhstan; Uzbekistan; Tajikistan; Turkmenistan; Kyrgyz Republic

JEL Classification: F22; F24; J21; J61

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Трудова міграція в Центральній Азії. Економічні фактори впливу

Анотація. Головна гіпотеза нашого дослідження полягала в тому, що низька заробітна плата, низький показник ВВП на душу населення та високий рівень безробіття є ключовими мотивами для трудової міграції в країнах Центральної Азії. За допомогою аналізу доступних статистичних даних ми не виявили кореляції цих економічних показників із кількістю трудових емігрантів. Також проведено компаративний

аналіз тенденції розвитку особистих грошових переказів трудових мігрантів (ремітенцій) і залежності економік центральноазіатських країн від цих грошових надходжень. Детерміновано, що економіка Таджикистану й Киргизстану на 30% залежна від грошових надходжень трудових мігрантів, що в рейтингу Світового банку за даним показником піднімає їх на перші позиції серед інших країн світу.

Ключові слова: еміграція; трудова міграція; заробітна плата; грошові перекази; Центральна Азія; Казахстан; Узбекистан; Таджикистан; Туркменістан; Киргизстан.

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Трудовая миграция в Центральной Азии. Экономические факторы влияния

Аннотация. Главная гипотеза нашего исследования состояла в том, что низкая заработная плата, низкий показатель ВВП на душу населения и высокий уровень безработицы являются ключевыми мотивами для трудовой миграции в странах Центральной Азии. С помощью анализа доступных статистических данных мы не выявили корреляции этих экономических показателей с количеством трудовых эмигрантов. Также проведен компаративный анализ тенденции развития личных денежных переводов трудовых мигрантов и зависимости экономик центральноазиатских стран от этих денежных поступлений. Детерминировано, что экономика Таджикистана и Кыргызстана на 30% зависима от денежных поступлений трудовых мигрантов, что в рейтинге Всемирного банка по данному показателю поднимает их на первые позиции среди других стран мира.

Ключевые слова: эмиграция; трудовая миграция; заработная плата; личные денежные переводы; Центральная Азия; Казахстан; Узбекистан; Таджикистан; Туркменистан; Кыргызстан.

1. Introduction

Migration in the modern world has reached record levels. There were 272 million migrants in 2019 according to the United Nations. Everyone has different reasons for leaving their place of birth. Someone is not satisfied with the proposed salary, someone wants to get a better education and at the same time get to know other countries and cultures, and someone is forced to flee from government lawlessness, persecution, violation of all conceivable and inconceivable human rights because of the «wrong» colour skin, religion, sexual orientation or personal opinion. Some people succeed in emigrating using any convenient means of transport, and sometimes, at the same time not even noticing the crossing of the state border, as in the Schengen zone of the European Union, while others have to pay bribes to illegal carriers and risk their lives crossing seas on a rubber boat.

In our scientific article, we will focus our attention on the eleventh category out of eighteen that the UN proposes in the Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration - these are people who migrate for the purpose of work, in other words, labour migrants (United Nations, 1998). There were 164 million of them in the world in 2019.

The main purpose of our article will be to analyze the main economic indicators of Central Asian countries and compare their development trends with the volume of emigration. Can we unequivocally say that low wages, low GDP per capita or high unemployment correlate with the number of emigrants? Based on statistics from the United Nations, the International Organization for Migration, the World Bank, the United Nations Agency for Refugees, the Committee on Statistics of the Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics, the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment of the Population of the Republic of Tajikistan and the National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic, we will be able to answer the posed question. Since official data for Turkmenistan are provided in limited form, or they are not available at all, the analysis of emigration in this country has not been fully carried out.

2. Current trends in migration in Central Asia

Since the analysis of this scientific article is limited only to the category of labour migrant, it will be advisable to provide a definition of this concept in the first place.

According to the UN Recommendations on Statistics of International Migration (1998), a labour migrant is a foreigner with a residence permit in a beneficiary country for the purpose of carrying out economic activities, whose duration of stay is usually limited by the type of employment. This category includes temporary, seasonal, project workers and their family members with appropriate permits.

In the International Convention on the Protection of the Rights of All Migrant Workers and Members of Their Families, the term «migrant worker» means «*a person who is to be engaged, is engaged or has been engaged in a remunerated activity in a State of which he or she is not a national*» (United Nations, General Assembly, 1990). The same term is also used by the International Organization for Migration in its Dictionary of Migration (2019).

In the Law of the Republic of Kazakhstan on population migration with amendments and additions as of May 13, 2020, labour migration is characterized as follows: «*labour migration is the temporary movement of individuals from other states to the Republic of Kazakhstan and from the Republic of Kazakhstan, as well as within the state for implementation labour activity*».

From the proposed three definitions, we can see that a prerequisite for this status and its main difference from other categories of migrants is paid economic activity carried out in another state.

Since the 2000s, it is labour migration that has become the basis of the Eurasian migration system, relying on economic rather than identification and cultural-historical factors, as it was immediately after the collapse of the Soviet Union. Systemic family poverty, lack of jobs, corruption and nepotism in employment, low wages, large debts, lack of social guarantees are the main factors that stimulate the population (mostly young) of Central Asia to emigrate.

Another striking feature of the Central Asian emigration is the increase in the number of people moving to Russia for work purposes. According to individual indicators of the migration situation in the Russian Federation for January-June 2020 provided by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, the total number of people registered for migration in order to enter «work» from Central Asia was 1,166,410 people.

To analyze data on labour migration in Kazakhstan, it is necessary to use the statistics of the «recipient» countries, since the category of «labour migrant» is not distinguished in the general statistics of emigrants. The government of Kazakhstan still adheres to the principle that labour migration is not typical for their country.

According to the available data of the Committee on Statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan, the bulk of the emigration of the population in 2019 was sent to the Russian Federation - 30,277 people (Figure 1).

According to statistics published by the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, the number of migrants from Kazakhstan for the purpose of arriving to carry out only economic activity in the Russian Federation in 2019 amounted to 136,208 people. This trend is also increasing. As we can see, the data between the official statistics of the Republic of Kazakhstan and the Russian Federation differ significantly.

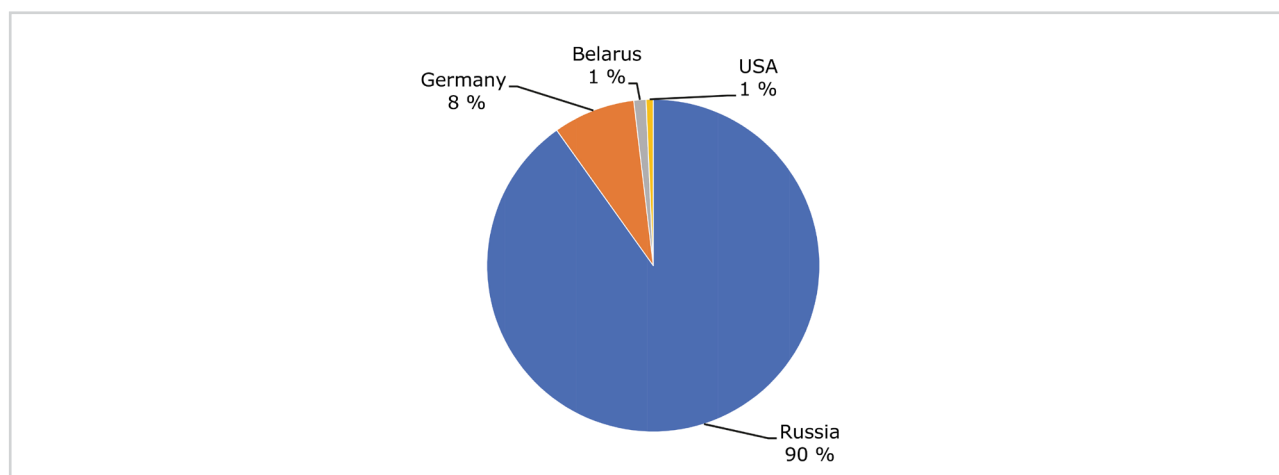


Figure 1:
Countries of emigration of Kazakhs in 2019

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data by Ministry of National Economy of the Republic of Kazakhstan. Committee on Statistics

The quarterly report of the Federal Agency for Employment of Germany published data on December 31, 2019, which indicates the number of labour migrants from Kazakhstan - 18,698 people.

Therefore, we can conclude that the statistics provided by the Kazakh side are not realistic and are significantly reduced. Migration and specifically labour migration in this country is represented on a larger scale and it is mainly directed to the Russian Federation.

In the Republic of Uzbekistan, the number of «recipient» countries receiving the majority of migrants is not as clear as in Kazakhstan. The most attractive countries for Uzbek emigration in 2019, according to the State Statistics Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan, were Kyrgyz Republic, Kazakhstan, Tajikistan, Russia and Turkey (Figure 2). However, it is difficult to say whether Kazakhstan is the end point of labour migration from Uzbekistan or partly only a transit country in the direction of Russia.

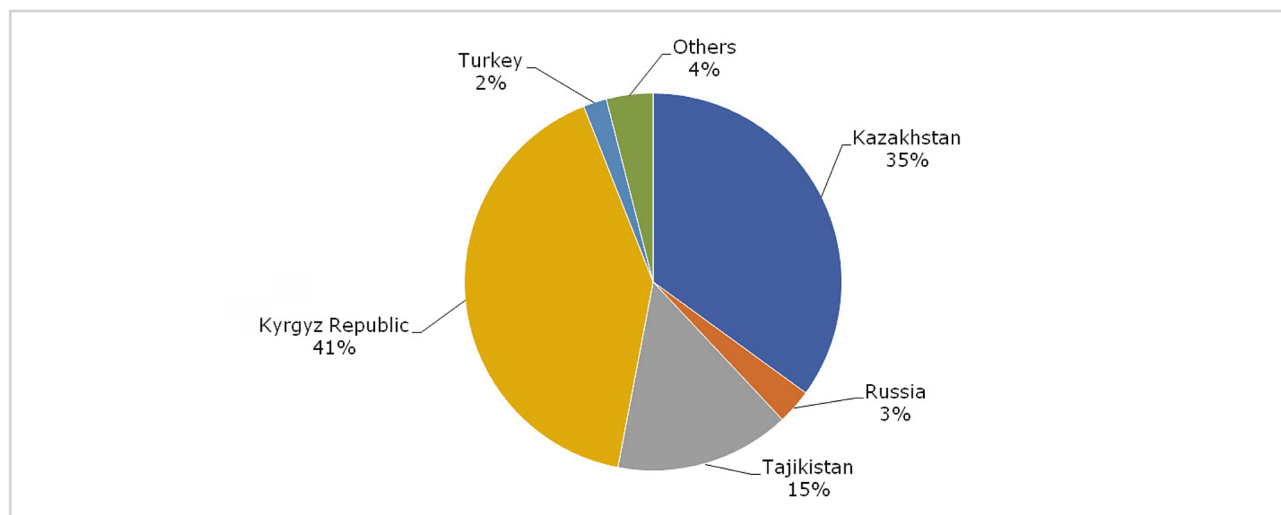


Figure 2:
Countries of emigration of Uzbeks in 2019

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data by The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics

In 2019, 3,452,500 people left Uzbekistan for the purpose of a «work» trip, mostly young men aged 31-55 (52%). The trend of this labour migration is growing in nature, and we can observe a sharp jump in 2019 (as far as it was in 2018 - 4.1 million people, in 2017 - 1.6 million people, in 2016 - 1.4 million people). Experts explain this situation by a real increase in the number of labour migrants leaving the country, a more truthful indication of the purpose of migration, as well as structural reforms since 2017, which affected both the statistical reporting system and attitudes towards labour migration in general.

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation indicates that according to data for January-December 2019, only in the Russian Federation 4,805,694 people were registered for migration, from which almost a half - 2,107,302 people - with the aim of work. With the total population in the country (33,278,673), the proportion of the emigrating part is simply enormous.

According to the received data, indicated in the press release on the results of the activities of the Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment of the Population of the Republic of Tajikistan for the first six months of 2019, the number of labour migrants amounted to 300,284 people, of which 260,125 were men and 40,159 were women. The main country of emigration and labour migration for citizens of Tajikistan is the Russian Federation. The number of labour migrants who went abroad compared to the same period in 2018 increased by 49,037 people, which represents 19% (Figure 3).

The number of citizens registered for migration according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation in January-December 2019 reached 2,754,915 people, from which 1,179,423 people were employed for labour. As we can see again, the statistics of the two official sources are fundamentally different from each other, which does not allow for a more accurate analysis.

The main sectors of the Russian economy in which labour migrants from Tajikistan work are: the service sector, construction, housing and communal services, industry, agriculture, logistics and others.

The State Migration Service under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic has published data on the number of citizens registered with migration registration by host country in 2019. The total number of such citizens is 735,000 people, 70% of whom are in the Russian Federation and 17% in the Republic of Kazakhstan (Figure 4).

The Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation indicates somewhat different data. In 2019, the number of citizens of the Republic of Kyrgyzstan registered for migration in the Russian Federation amounted to 1,055,458 people, of which 453,702 people were for the purpose of work.

It is not possible to make an assessment of emigration and labour migration of citizens of Turkmenistan according to the country's official data, since such data are not publicly available. The country's government prefers not to raise this topic and in every possible way to hinder this process as a whole. According to unofficial data, which were reported by the chairman of the regional public organization of Russian-Turkmen friendship «Compatriot» Maksat Saparmuradov, who headed the organization of Turkmen emigrants, which according to rough estimates, out of 5.5 million inhabitants, could remain up to 2 million. The main countries of emigration and labour migration of citizens of Turkmenistan are Turkey, Northern Cyprus, Russia, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (Osokin, 2018).

Turkey is an attractive country for the emigration of Turkmen not only because of the close language (Juza, 2019), but also because this host country provides an opportunity for citizens of Turkmenistan to enter without a visa for a period of 30 days. According to the Turkish Migration

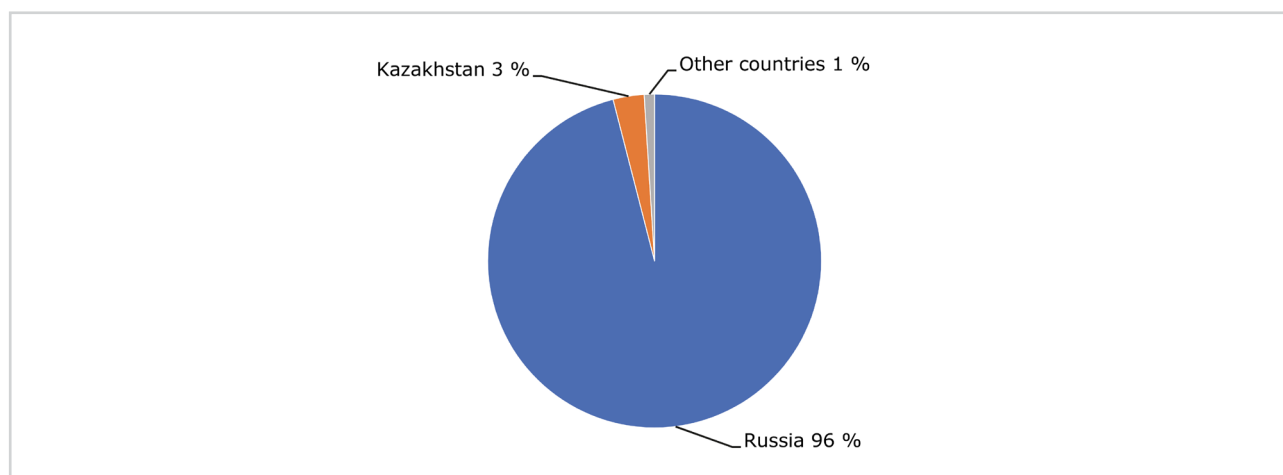


Figure 3:
Countries of emigration of Tajiks in the first half of 2019

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data by Ministry of Labour, Migration and Employment of the Population of the Republic of Tajikistan

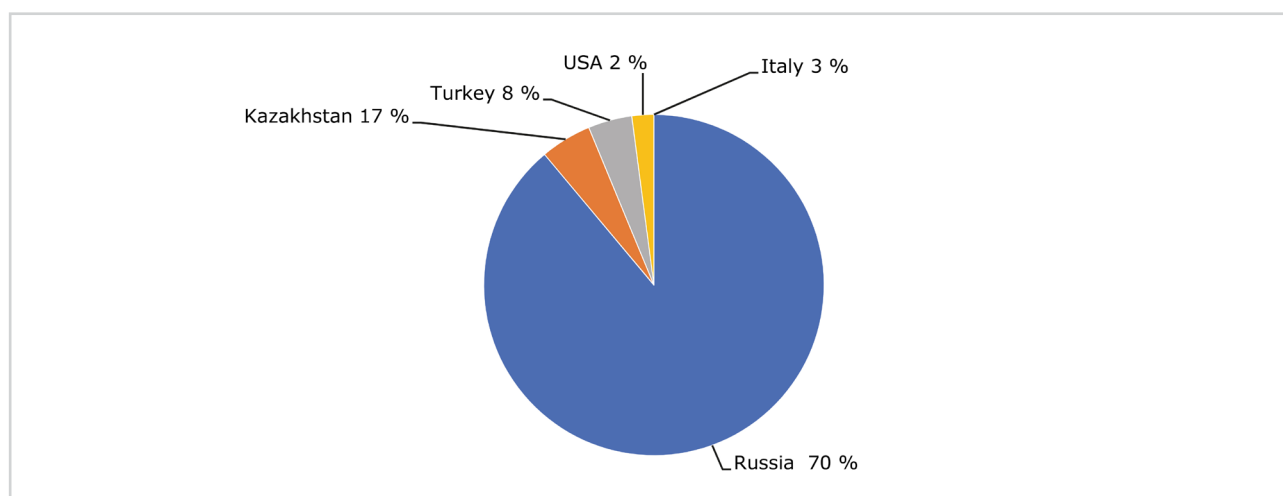


Figure 4:
Countries of emigration of the Kyrgyz in 2019

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data by State Migration Service under the Government of the Kyrgyz Republic

Service, in 2018 the number of arrivals of citizens of Turkmenistan reached 34,940 people and more than half of it were women (18,067). The trend of emigration of Turkmen to Turkey is growing, since 2017 when it was - 13,193 people, in 2016 - 5,908 and in 2015 - 4,840 people.

For comparison, according to the Ministry of Internal Affairs of the Russian Federation, the number of Turkmen citizens who arrived to the Russian Federation in 2019 amounted to 126,081 people and for the purpose of work - 4,813. Over the previous period, the numbers of migrants also only increased: for 2018 - 98,000 people (for work - 2,799) and 2017 - 74,225 people (for work - 1,951).

As we can see, despite the anti-constitutional and anti-democratic measures of obstacles to the free movement of citizens by the government of Turkmenistan, ranging from educational conversations, travel bans, blackmailing, trickery and ending with a direct ban on leaving and hindering boarding an aircraft during passport control, the level of emigration from Turkmenistan is growing.

3. Economic reasons for migration in Central Asia

The migration of humanity is a phenomenon as old as the world, but at the same time it does not lose its relevance. Many economists, lawyers, sociologists, culturologists, ecologists and other specialists point to different reasons for the constant migration of people. And of course those reasons play a significant role in a person's decision to leave his place of birth.

In this part of the article, we want to analyze the main economic indicators of the Central Asian countries in order to understand how they are related to emigration in general and labour migration in particular. The selected indicators for us are: the unemployment rate in the country, GDP per capita and average per capita nominal cash income of the population, or, in other words, the average monthly salary of the population. These three indicators are, in our opinion, ones of the most important from an economic point of view, motivating an individual to move to an another country.

First of all, let us analyze the ratio of migration of residents of Central Asian countries to the level of unemployment and the level of their salaries. The neoclassical theory of migration considers these economic factors to be the main causes of population migration, since migration is the result of geographical differences in the demand and supply of labour. A migrant is perceived as a rational individual, and for him or her higher wages and high demand in the labour market will be sufficient motives for labour migration.

Having analyzed the available statistics from the World Bank (Figure 5), we can conclude that the unemployment rate is not a factor influencing emigration for the population of Kazakhstan. From 2010 to 2019, the unemployment rate in this country had a stable trend and stood at about 5.2%. On the contrary, the level of emigration has gradually increased (Figure 6), from 2013 to 2018 the growth was 71% (from 24,384 to 41,800 people). In Uzbekistan, the unemployment

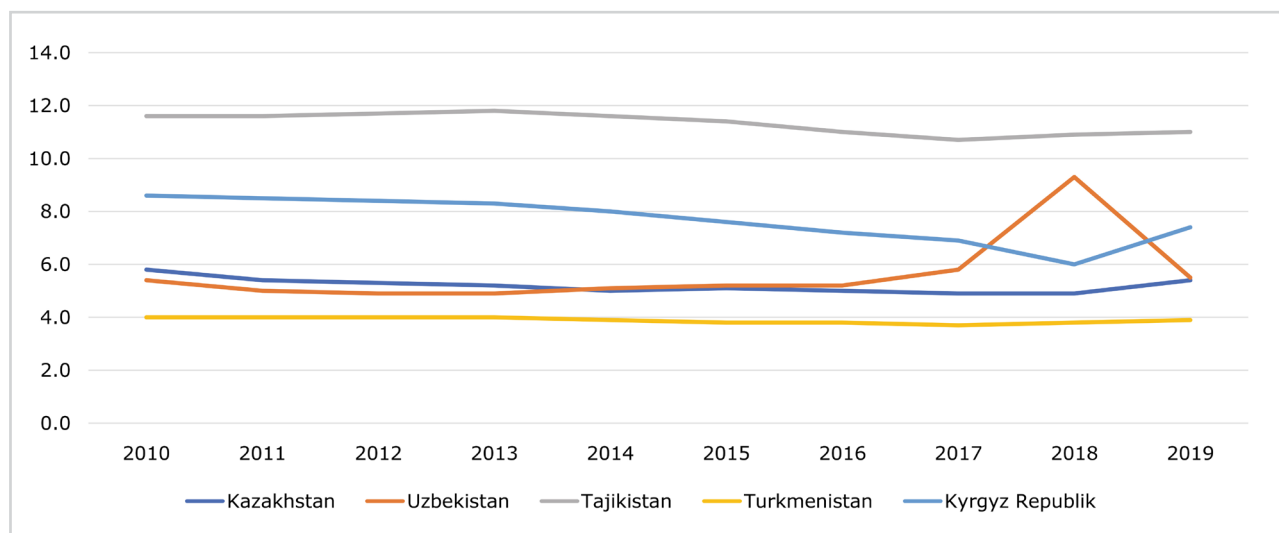


Figure 5:
 Unemployment rate in 2010-2019 (%)

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data by The World Bank

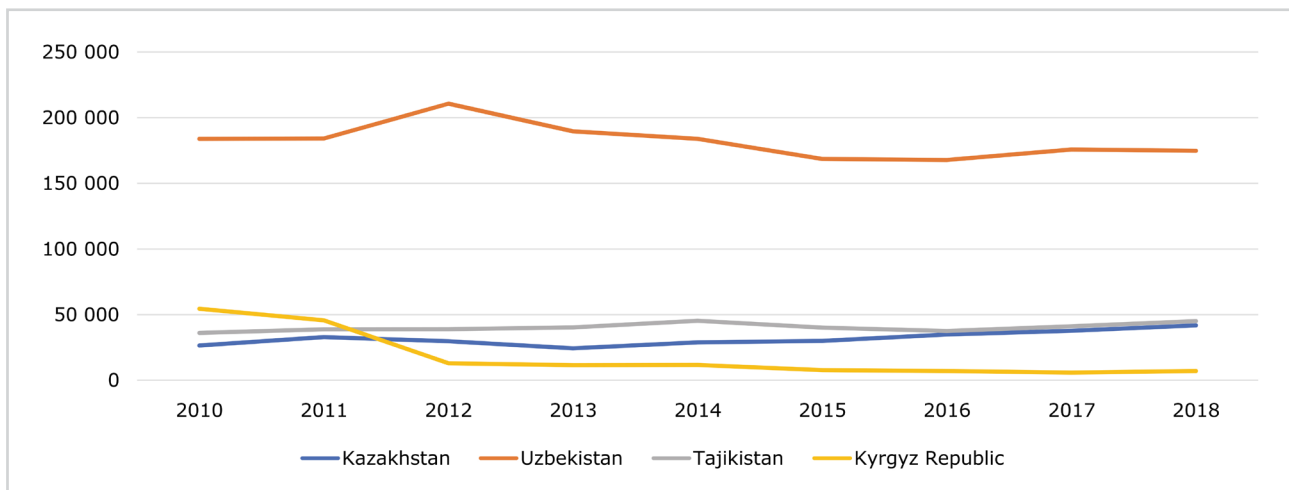


Figure 6:

The number of emigrants from Central Asia in 2010-2018

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data by The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics, Agency on Statistics under President of the Republic of Tajikistan, National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

rate is also stable at about 5% (excluding 9.3% unemployment in 2018), and the trend of emigration of the population either increases or decreases every year, therefore, the connection between the unemployment rate and emigration in Uzbekistan is also not confirmed. A similar situation can be traced in Tajikistan, where the unemployment rate from 2010 to 2019 changes by a maximum of 1% (about 11.3%), and the emigration rate increases and decreases regardless of this. Only in Kyrgyzstan there is a similar trend in the development of both the unemployment rate and the level of emigration. Both rates declined from 2010 to 2017, but in 2018 the unemployment rate fell another 0.9% and the emigration rate rose by 20%. As a result of comparing these data, we can state that the unemployment rate does not affect the level of emigration of the population of Central Asia for the analyzed period.

Indicator - the average monthly salary in terms of the local currency of each country per dollar at the current exchange rate tends to gradually and slightly increase (Figure 7). The only exception is Kazakhstan, when in 2015 there was an impressive jump down, wages dropped from 304 dollars to 224 dollars and subsequently gradually began to rise again. We cannot link this indicator with the level and tendency of emigration of the population of Central Asia, they are not in a two-way correlation.

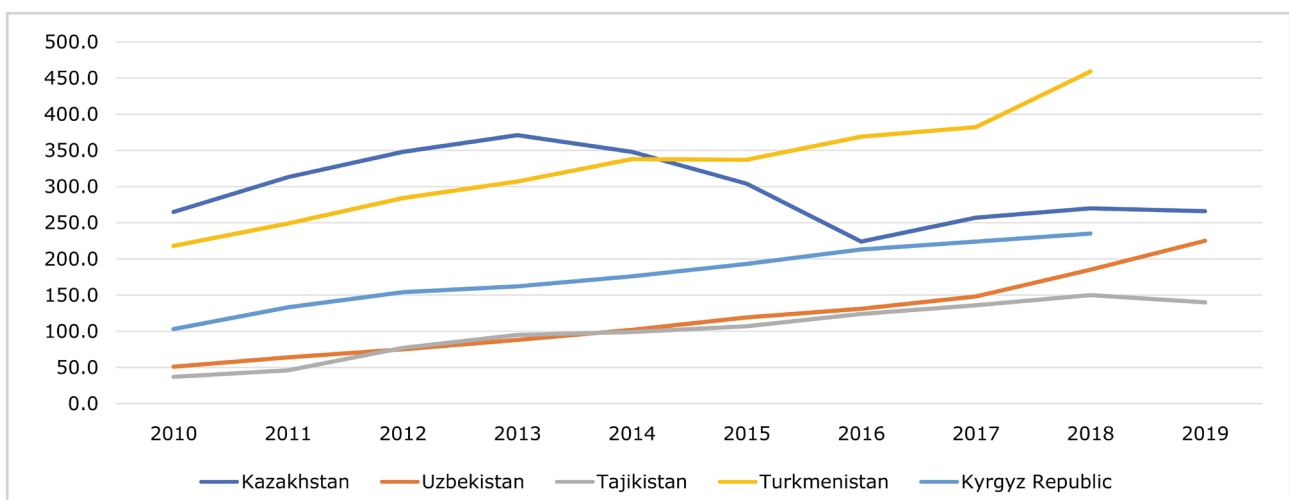


Figure 7:

Average per capita nominal cash income of the population, US dollars, in 2010-2018

Source: Compiled by the authors based on data by The State Committee of the Republic of Uzbekistan on Statistics, Agency on Statistics under President of the Republic of Tajikistan, The United Nations, National Statistical Committee of the Kyrgyz Republic

The third economic indicator that we will analyze in connection with the migration trend is GDP per capita. This indicator for the analyzed period in each country of Central Asia tends to be gradual, but growing. As we can see in Figure 8, the difference in GDP per capita between countries is colossal. The undisputed leader is Kazakhstan, which in 2019 reached the level of 11,518 dollars and in the same year in Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan this indicator was at the level of 1,121 dollars and 1,116 dollars. But despite the growth in GDP per capita in each country, the growth of emigration in the region, albeit uneven, continues from year to year. It is also unreliable to talk about the correlation of these two indicators.

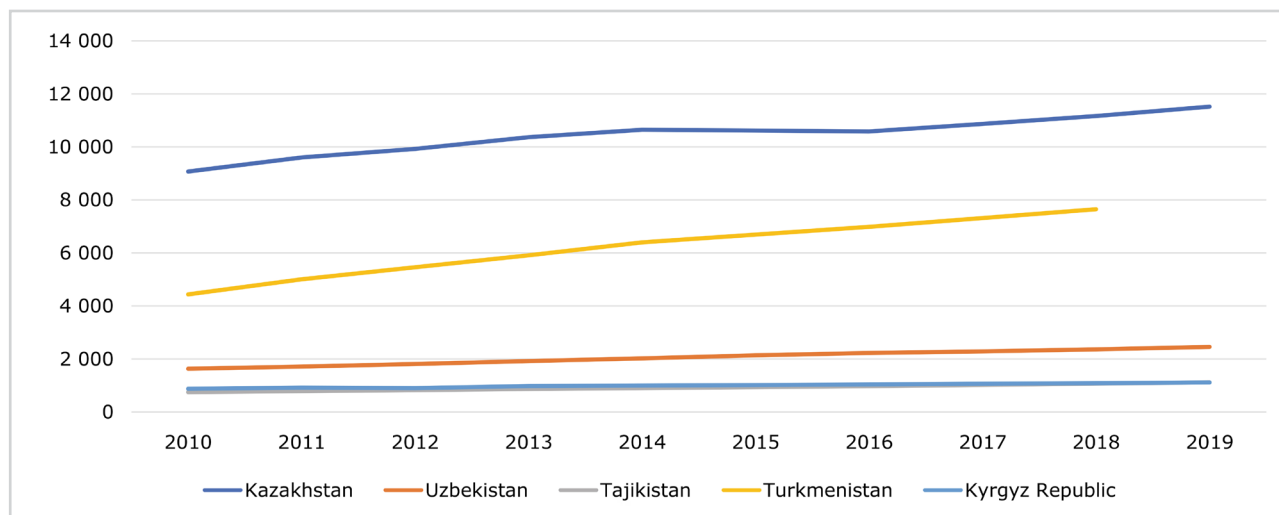


Figure 8:
GDP per capita, in US dollars, in 2010-2019
 Source: Compiled by the authors based on data by The World Bank

4. Personal remittances and their implications for Central Asia

Personal remittances, as part of a migrant's income, are intended to support the well-being of relatives, provide for their costs or invest in the country of origin (Lipková et al., 2011). Also, remittances have a great impact on the macroeconomic level: on the exchange rate, financial sector and budgetary receipts in the donor country.

The trend in the development of personal remittances to Central Asian countries over the period under study is not stable. The phases of growth and decline in the volume of remittances alternate, and also differ greatly depending on the country in the region (Figure 9).

Uzbekistan is the leader in money transfers in Central Asia. The volume of financial transfers ranges from USD 2.8 billion to USD 8.5 billion per year. A stable growth in the volume of funds was observed until 2014, in which the amount reached 6.8 billion dollars. In the next two years, the indicator slightly decreased due to the strong depreciation of the ruble in 2014-2015 and the economic crisis in the Russian Federation.¹

High rates of remittances are also typical for Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan. The highest indicator in Tajikistan was also achieved in 2013 - 3.7 billion dollars, after which there was a decline in this indicator. In Kyrgyzstan, the trend of this indicator had a more stable growth and reached its peak in 2018 at the level of USD 2.7 billion.

In Kazakhstan, personal remittances of migrants do not reach such volumes as in neighboring states, although they are generally growing in nature. The maximum that was transferred to the accounts of Kazakh families from their relatives from abroad was reached in 2018 - more than USD 619 million.

According to data published by the World Bank, the volume of remittances, despite the increase in the number of emigrants, in Turkmenistan decreased significantly. The indicator fell from the level of 40 million in 2013 to 1 million in 2019, in other words 40 times.

¹ According to the Central Bank of the Russian Federation, the price of 1 US dollar to 31.12. 2010 - 30.5 rubles, in 2011 - 32.2 rubles, in 2012 - 30.4 rubles, in 2013 - 32.7 rubles, in 2014 - 56.3 rubles, in 2015 - 72.9 rubles, in 2016 - 60.7 rubles, in 2017 - 57.6 rubles.

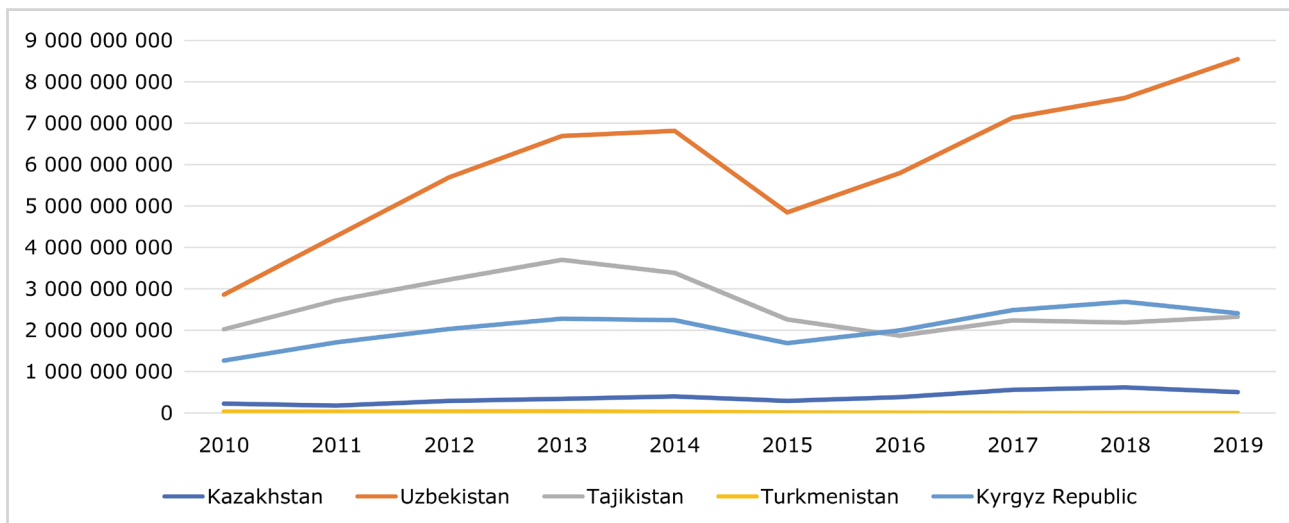


Figure 9:
Personal remittances received in current prices, in 2010-2019
 Source: Compiled by the authors based on data by The World Bank

The funds received are most often invested by migrant families in the development of small businesses (bakeries, cafes, shops), in the purchase or renovation of housing, as well as to meet basic needs for food, consumer goods, education (Riazancev, 2016). From this we can conclude that personal remittances increase the demand for goods and services, therefore, contribute to an increase in the total volume of production in the country of origin of labour migrants (Lipková et al., 2011).

Some Central Asian states are characterized by a high share of remittances in the country's GNP. The statistical data in Figure 10 clearly demonstrate us that a consistently high rate (from 27% to 44%) of remittances in the country's production is achieved in Tajikistan. Also, we can observe no less high figures in Kyrgyzstan - from 25% to 33%. After Tonga, Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan, according to the World Bank for 2019, ranked second and third in the world ranking of countries in terms of the share of remittances in GNP. These data suggest that, on the one hand, migrant remittances play a very important role for the demand and investment of these countries, but on the other hand, they indicate a significant dependence of the economies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan on the remittances of their citizens working in host countries. In three other countries of the region, these indicators are much lower, and therefore it is not necessary to talk about the impact of personal remittances on the GNP of these countries.

5. Conclusions

«No one will be forgotten and excluded from the universal social progress» is the main principle in the 2030 Development Agenda proclaimed by the United Nations. Migrants, including labour

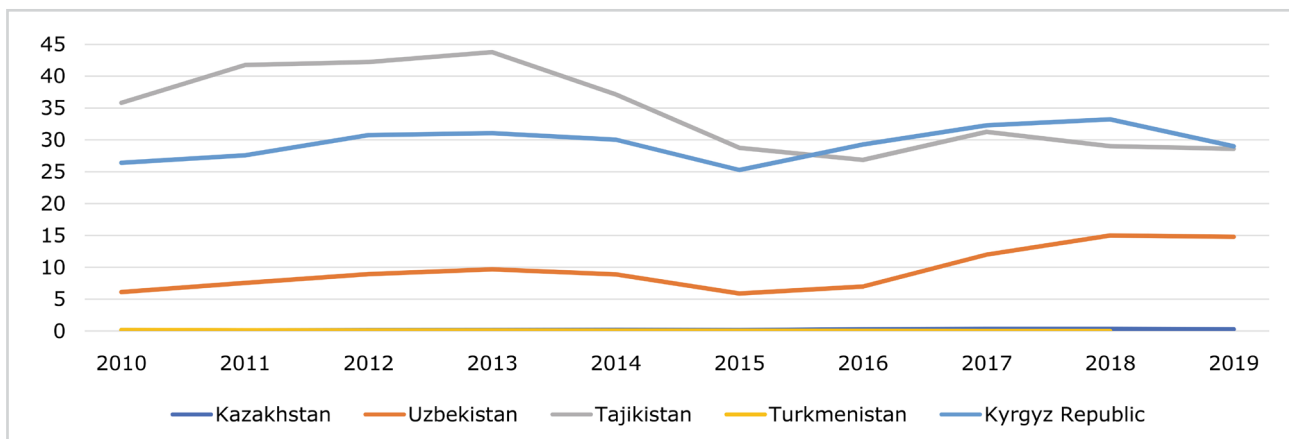


Figure 10:
Personal remittances in % of GNP, in 2010-2019
 Source: Compiled by the authors based on data by The World Bank

migrants, have not been forgotten either. «*Target 10.7 of the Agenda calls for to promote orderly, safe, legal and responsible migration and human mobility, including through the implementation of planned and well thought out migration policies. Other goals also include targets to combat human trafficking, reduce transaction costs when making remittances, and ensure student mobility*». Since the topic of migration in fact for a long period is very relevant for the region of Central Asia, but unfortunately for some countries it is at the same time closed, taboo and «embellished», we considered necessarily to emphasize it in this article to the set vector of the UN for the entire international community.

Of course, data on migration outflows are limited, which complicates the analysis on this topic and does not allow us to speak about the accuracy of the results. Despite this, we came to the following conclusions:

- 1) a decrease in the unemployment rate, an increase in average monthly wages and an increase in GDP per capita do not affect the trend of emigration from Central Asian countries;
- 2) the main migration corridor for residents of Central Asian countries remains the Russian Federation and, to a lesser extent, Kazakhstan;
- 3) the economies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan are highly dependent on the inflow of personal funds of labour migrants, which poses great risks to its stability;
- 4) restrictions, obstacles, prohibitions, blackmail are not effective and acceptable methods of controlling or curbing migration flows in a modern civilized legal state.

The desire of the population of Central Asia for labour migration demonstrates the great potential and competitiveness of this region on the world stage. With the competent distribution of all resources and the creation of more profitable and stable economic conditions, we will be able to talk about a decrease in the growth rate of emigration, not only de jure, but also de facto.

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