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# THE EFFECT OF COVID-19 ON LABOUR MIGRATION IN THE CIS

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*This study responds to the need for measures to mitigate the effects of national actions to slow the spread of COVID-19. National responses are dynamic processes and thus an elusive, albeit important, object of study. The governments of most CIS countries acted promptly and decisively in countering the pandemic. The comprehensive measures have had a serious impact on citizens' mobility and employment situation. Among the affected are millions of migrants working in the CIS. This article offers a comparative analysis, followed by synthesis, of the negative effects of the COVID-19 pandemic as seen through the prism of employment and the situation of migrant workers in the CIS. Another focus is the restriction and support measures and how they have affected migrants. A range of qualitative and quantitative data was collated on the situation of migrant workers during COVID-19 restriction in the Russian Federation and across the CIS. The findings suggest that the lack of international coordination in tackling COVID-19 has complicated the situation of migrant workers, who suffer from the closure of borders and the absence of adequate social support. The article explores problems faced by migrant workers in the current crisis and proposes measures to alleviate them.*

## **Keywords:**

COVID-19, pandemic, CIS, migration flows, migrant workers, migrant crisis, remittances.

## **Introduction**

The beginning of 2020 witnessed an outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic. In the first months, the virus was confined to China, but later it spread to all continents, and the CIS countries were no exception.

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The tough restrictions aimed to control the spread of COVID-19 provoked a terrible crisis in the world economy, which had a profound effect on all aspects of everyday life, regardless of one's social standing and status. The main restrictions limited migration mobility since the state viewed minimising personal contacts as essential to control the spread of the virus. To the same end, borders were closed and all transport connections suspended [1]. These decisions have led to major changes in global migration processes since many states closed their borders without giving migrants and their own nationals a chance to leave the country or return home. The paralysis of many industries that traditionally employ migrants has resulted in mass layoffs. The workers have no money either to go home or to stay in the host country.

Approaches to managing migrant flows vary from state to state depending on how fast COVID-19 reached the country as well as on what contribution migration makes to the economy [1]. Since migrants have an important role in the economies of the source and host countries, both are responsible for managing migration flows. Migrants drive forward the economy of the host country, whereas the economy of the source country depends on migrant remittances to a considerable degree. When living conditions deteriorate, the health of citizens is threatened, and there is a pressing need for return migration, the country must provide them with such an opportunity.

This article analyses the effect of the COVID-19 pandemic on the situation of migrants in the CIS countries. It aims to identify negatives effects the restrictions have had on migrants, as well as to propose a way to handle the crisis, using existing support measures.

The CIS migration flows constitute two out of five major global migration corridors (Russia — Kazakhstan and Russia — Ukraine<sup>1</sup>) with a total migration turnover of 6m people.<sup>2</sup> The CIS pandemic-induced migration crisis is influencing both regional and global trends. It is affecting the world economy as well. The CIS may set a good example to third states faced with a COVID-19 migration crisis in solving the problems relating to migrant movements and status.

Since the pandemic is far from over, and the virus comes in waves, the restrictions are likely to be tightened and eased more than. This study offers guidelines for minimising the damage that the restrictions have caused to migrants. Such advice may be welcome in countries where migration has an important role in the economy, and any migration crisis has economic fallout [2].

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<sup>1</sup> Before the Ukrainian crisis erupted.

<sup>2</sup> Annual Report 2016, 2016, *The World Bank*. URL: <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/596391540568499043/worldbankannualreport2016.pdf> (accessed 11.07.2020).

## Information sources and theoretical approaches to research

The COVID-19 pandemic is a global phenomenon posing new socio-economic and demographic challenges. Few theoretical and methodological works may aid in providing a rationale for the effects of the pandemic, particularly those on mobility and the situation of labour migrants. Nor there is a single methodology for collecting statistical data on migrants facing difficulties in host, transit, and source countries. In most cases, data from information agencies, the media, and official spokespersons are used.

The article draws on investigations conducted by researchers and experts from international organisations and the CIS research institutes and universities in 2020. The contribution is based on scientific reports, research working papers, 2020 special issues of academic journals, and international organisations' reviews of migrant and labour market situation in the COVID-19 pandemic. The international organisations that have looked into the impact of the pandemic on mobility and the situation of migrants in the CIS are the United National Development Programme, the International Organisation for Migration (IOM),<sup>3</sup> the International Centre for Migration Policy Development [3], the International Labour Organisation (ILO) [6],<sup>4</sup> the United Nations Population Fund (UNPF), the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) [7],<sup>5</sup> the World Bank [8],<sup>6</sup> the Moscow Bureau for Human Rights, the Eurasian Economic Commission (EEC), and the Eurasian Development Bank (EDB). Russian research institutes and universities have also conducted empirical studies of the situation of labour and education migrants in the CIS. Among these are the Institute for Demographic Research of the Federal Centre of Theoretical and Applied Sociology of the Russian Academy of Sciences (FCTASRAS) [1; 4–8], the Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration [9], the Gaidar Institute for Economic Policy [10–12], and the Higher School of Economics and the Institute of Sociology of

<sup>3</sup> Combatting xenophobia is key to effective COVID-19 recovery. 2020, Press release, IOM, 22 May 2020. URL: [www.iom.int/news/combating-xenophobia-key-effective-covid-19-recovery](http://www.iom.int/news/combating-xenophobia-key-effective-covid-19-recovery) (accessed 11.07.2020); COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #40: Returning Migrants, 2020, IOM, 20 May 2020. URL: [www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/covid-19\\_analytical\\_snapshot\\_40\\_-\\_returning\\_migrants.pdf](http://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/covid-19_analytical_snapshot_40_-_returning_migrants.pdf) (accessed 11.07.2020).

<sup>4</sup> Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Recommendations for Policy-makers and Constituents, 2020, *ILO Policy Brief*, Geneva, April 2020. URL: [https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed\\_protect/-protrav/-migrant/documents/publication/wcms\\_743268.pdf](https://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed_protect/-protrav/-migrant/documents/publication/wcms_743268.pdf) (accessed 13.07.2020).

<sup>5</sup> Supporting livelihoods during the COVID-19 crisis: Closing the gaps in safety nets, 2020, *OECD*, 20 May 2020. URL: [https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=132\\_132985-hrr3dbjimj&title=Supporting-livelihoods-during-the-COVID-19\\_crisis%20oe.cd/il/30z](https://read.oecd-ilibrary.org/view/?ref=132_132985-hrr3dbjimj&title=Supporting-livelihoods-during-the-COVID-19_crisis%20oe.cd/il/30z). (accessed 15.07.2020).

<sup>6</sup> Potential responses to the COVID-19 outbreak in support of migrant workers. Living Paper Version 9, 2020, *World Bank Group*, June 2020. URL: <https://documents.worldbank.org/pt/publication/documents-reports/documentdetail/428451587390154689/potential-responses-to-the-covid-19-outbreak-in-support-of-migrant-workers-may-26-2020>. (accessed 13.07.2020).

the FCTASRAS [12]. A series of random sample surveys of labour migrants was carried out in spring 2020. Respondents were recruited via social media (Facebook and Vkontakte) and migrant organisations [13].<sup>7</sup>

The theoretical aspect of the study. At the beginning of the 21st century, globalisation, development of online communications, and progress of transport networks links caused a sharp increase in the number of both international migrants [14; 15] and transboundary transit migration flows [16]. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, migration was responsible for the rapid movement of large numbers of people. A vivid illustration is the migrant crisis of 2015 when Europe accepted about 1.1 m asylum seekers and refugees. In the pre-pandemic period, the development of virtual communication networks and transport modernisation were making migration control by nation-states ever less effective [44]. Migration flows were increasingly perceived by national governments as threats to security [17; 18]; securitisation of migration was being replaced by a closed-door policy [19]. EU initiatives to regain control over undocumented transit migration flows created a rift between member states and highlighted their differences in the vision of a migration policy and migration control [20].

Western European researchers have concluded investigations on changes in visa regimes over the past 50 years, and come to the conclusion that restrictions are ineffective — they have side effects, such as migration taking illegal forms, changing routes, and delays but do not make people abandon their plans [21; 22]. As border control becomes more stringent, migrants start to look for new ways to reach their country of destination. Thus, the geography of migration flows is constantly changing [15; 23].

Traditionally considered in the context of globalisation and growing migration flows, migrations processes were viewed before the pandemic as a natural consequence of increasing mobility, technological innovation, and other related factors [24]. Although regional processes taking place within the global migration regime were believed to be multi-directional phenomena, they were seen as merely supporting the general trend [25]. Before the 2015 migrant crisis, migration-related health risks were a relatively marginal subject of research. These risks were associated with refugee camps and ecological conflicts and people escaping them [15]. These problems were localised to areas providing shelter for large numbers of displaced persons [26].

When analysing the impact of COVID-19 on migration mobility in the CIS, it is important to keep in mind the multiple factors and complexity of interconnections that have emerged since the borders of almost all states were closed and almost all kinds of passenger traffic were frozen across the globe.

A unique feature of the worldwide mobility crisis caused by the pandemic is that the threat to survival and the need for prompt decisions have brought na-

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<sup>7</sup> Ryazantsev, S.V. 2020, The Situation of Migrant Workers in Russia During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Results of a Sociological Study), *International Conference The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Migration Mobility*, Institute of Socio-Political Research of the Russian Academy of Sciences and MGIMO University, 27 April 2020, Moscow. URL: <http://испи.рф/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-migration-mobility/> (accessed 14.07.2020).

tion-states to the forefront of the fight, which consists partly of border closure and various forms of quarantine restrictions. At first, supranational associations, such as the EU, the UN, the OECD were not ready either to rise to the new challenges to personal and public security or to handle insecurity around economics, food, health, and the environment [27]. But, as the crisis progressed, these organisations started to work towards solidarity and international response to the pandemic [12].

Of course, economic crises affecting migration happened before COVID-19. The crisis of the early 1970s forced numerous migrants from Turkey and Southern Europe to settle in Western Europe. The financial crisis of 2008 was accompanied by mass return migration. In Russia and Ukraine, the refugee crisis of 2015 manifested itself differently than in the EU. Still, the problem of asylum-seekers was not a major focus of research in the CIS in the 2010s. Yet, in the west, asylum-seekers and the routes they use to reach the EU have long been the centre of scholarly attention [28; 29],<sup>8</sup> the more so when applications for protection are not considered any more due to the pandemic. Asylum-seekers keep arriving at the south of the EU; refugee quotas are causing growing tensions between the member states. The EU refugee discourse is an important part of western European literature [30], alongside that on undocumented migrants [28].

The political and academic discussion of possibilities to bring migrants back to their countries, which was sparked off by the refugee crisis, continue among the western scholars in the context of quarantine restrictions and the prevention of undocumented migration in different countries [31]. The state as an institute is the key player when it comes to the rule for entering and exiting the country or staying in it and the state in its legislation put criteria to decide who is an immigrant, who is a refugee, and who is an undocumented migrant [19]. Under lockdown, migrants can easily find themselves in an undocumented situation should entry and exit rules change and corresponding penalties be introduced.

A positive development is that large European host countries have chosen the way of so-called migration amnesty with different forms of liberalisation of residence permit. Kazakhstan and Russia have also liberalised migrant access to the labour market until the end of 2020. Remarkably, the idea of labour migrant amnesty has been entertained in Russia, which has a large undocumented migrant labour market, for quite some time. Nevertheless, a lack of trust in human rights bodies prevented it from ever becoming part of the migration policy. Only when the pandemic threatened national security, when desperate unemployed migrants, probably counted in millions, were to find themselves in a hopeless situation, the Russian government adopted unprecedented measures to liberalise the national migration law.

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<sup>8</sup> COVID-19 Analytical Snapshot #40: Returning Migrants, 2020, *International Organization for Migration*, Geneva, 20 May. URL: [www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/covid-19\\_analytical\\_snapshot\\_40\\_-\\_returning\\_migrants.pdf](http://www.iom.int/sites/default/files/documents/covid-19_analytical_snapshot_40_-_returning_migrants.pdf) (accessed 13.07.2020); Protecting migrant workers during the COVID-19 Pandemic: Recommendations for policymakers and constituents, 2020, *International Labour Organization*, Geneva, April. URL: [www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed\\_protect/-protrav/-migrant/documents/publication/wcms\\_743268.pdf](http://www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/-ed_protect/-protrav/-migrant/documents/publication/wcms_743268.pdf) (accessed 13.07.2020).

Russian researchers have stressed that previous migration crises faced by their country and the current one have entirely different causes. In 2008—2009 and 2015, the absolute number of labour migrants did not decline, but the ratio between those employed legally and illegally changed [32]. The reason for it was twofold: employees trying to economise by using undocumented labour [33] and the unsuccessful government policy on labour migration [11]. During previous crises, the governments of developed countries and Russia adopted discriminatory practices against migrants to protect the national labour market to the benefit of their citizens [34]. It has been stressed that the traditional populist line of conduct pursued by governments in crises — getting rid of migrants who do jobs that locals might want — is characteristic of both the west [35—37] and Russia [32]. The COVID-19 situation is different: the EU, Russia, and Kazakhstan are liberalising their migration policy [10—11]. Attempts to substitute Russians for migrant workers were not successful either in 2008—2010 or in 2014—2016, nor are they now.

Some researchers believe that the COVID-19 crisis has hit the non-manufacturing industries harder [38] than other sectors. Employment risks are maximal for the affected service industries: 10m people have lost their jobs [39]. Yet mobility restrictions have provoked a supply-side crisis in the labour market, whereas earlier crises led to a decline in demand for labour [39]. This crisis has brought about a serious labour shortage in the Russian labour market. The development of platform economies has dampened unemployment through the labour market covidisation [40; 41]. This also holds true for Russia. Migrants newly engaged in the sector are replacing pensioners and students, who have traditionally worked in the field [42].

The new situation necessitates a study of new aspects of migration. Special attention should be paid to how migrants are surviving the pandemic and how they re-integrate once having returned home. An important line of investigation is exploring approaches to cooperation between governments, NGOs, and affected migrants. Furthermore, there is a need to find ways to simplify both the stay in the host country and the return home. This article will analyse these issues as observed in the CIS.

## **Restrictions on mobility in the CIS**

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The post-Soviet region has enjoyed a visa-free regime for many years. Migrants move almost freely between the CIS countries, Ukraine, and Georgia (to some extent). Most labour migrants come to another CIS country to take advantage of simplified employment opportunities. The two leading host countries in the CIS are Russia and Kazakhstan. Beyond the region, most migrants seek employment in the EU [3]. Therefore, restrictions imposed by one country affect migration from or through other CIS countries.

Former Soviet republics trod on the path of restrictions as early as February 2020 (Georgia was the first). In late March, borders between all CIS countries, except for Belarus, were closed for both entry and exit. A state of emergency was declared in many of them (see Table 1).

Table 1

**Open/closed borders of CIS countries  
in the COVID-19 pandemic (till 1st of October 2020)**

Country	Date of border closure	Date of partial opening	Official situation as of the time of closure	Actual entry/exist situation as of 1 October 2020
Russia	18 March <sup>9</sup>	1 August <sup>10</sup>	The border was completely closed. Russian citizens stranded abroad could take government-chartered flights or return home on their own.	The border is partly closed. Leaving the country is possible via the Belarusian border if one has third-country citizenship or a residence permit. Foreign citizens and residence permit holders can leave the country by chartered flights.
Belarus	Never closed <sup>11</sup>	Never closed	The land air borders are open; citizens of Belarus and other states can enter and exit the country. Many use Belarus as a transit country when travelling between Russia and the west.	
Kazakhstan	16 March <sup>12</sup>	20 June <sup>13</sup>	The border was partly closed. All foreigners who had arrived in Kazakhstan earlier could leave the country as soon as flights were resumed.	Citizens of Kazakhstan and holders of residence permits can enter the country by government-chartered flights. Regular air connections are suspended.

<sup>9</sup> COVID-19. National and international travel, 2020, *The Government of the Russian Federation*. URL: <http://government.ru/rugovclassifier/891/events/> (accessed 04.08.2020).

<sup>10</sup> Media announce date of Russian borders' opening, 2020, *Rosbalt*. URL: <https://www.rosbalt.ru/russia/2020/08/01/1856622.html> (accessed 04.08.2020).

<sup>11</sup> Lukashenko: Belarus not to close borders, 2020, *Izvestia newspaper*. URL: <https://iz.ru/1003527/2020-04-23/lukashenko-zaiavil-ob-otsutstvii-planov-zakryvat-granitsy-belorusii> (accessed 04.08.2020) (in Russ.).

<sup>12</sup> Kazakhstan to impose border crossing restrictions, 2020, *TASS*. URL: <https://tass.ru/mezhdunarodnaya-panorama/7985473> (accessed 05.08.2020) (in Russ.).

<sup>13</sup> When the Russian-Kazakhstani border will be opened in 2020, 2020, *Turister*. URL: <https://www.tourister.ru/world/asia/kazakhstan/publications/1202> (accessed 05.08.2020).



Table 1 continuation

Ukraine	27 March <sup>14</sup>	29 May <sup>15</sup>	The border was partly closed. Citizens of Ukraine stranded abroad had the right to come home.	It is possible to enter/leave the country over the land border. To cross the EU border one needs a Fit-to-Fly certificate and a purpose-of-entry document (travel is allowed for work purposes, taking care of elderly relatives, and medical procedures).
Moldova	17 March <sup>16</sup>	1 July <sup>17</sup>	The border was completely closed	Citizen of Romania can enter and leave the country over the land border.
Georgia	January 2020 <sup>18</sup>	Until 10 May <sup>20</sup>	The authorities closed the border with China as early as February. From 21 March, all international flights, including those to Russia and the EU, were suspended. Stringent quarantine restrictions were introduced despite the small number of cases. The restrictions were partly eased on 10 May	

<sup>14</sup> Coronavirus: Ukraine to close its border on 27 March, 2020, *Deutsche Welle*. URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/%D1%83%D0%BA%D1%80%D0%B8%D0%BD%D0%B0-27-%D0%BC%D0%B0%D1%80%D1%82%D0%B0-%D0%B7%D0%B0%D0%BA%D1%80%D1%8B%D0%B2%D0%B0%D0%B5%D1%82-%D0%B3%D1%80%D0%B0%D0%BD%D0%B8%D1%86%D1%83-%D0%B8%D0%B7-%D0%B7%D0%B0-%D0%BA%D0%BE%D1%80%D0%BE%D0%BD%D0%B0%D0%B2%D0%B8%D1%80%D1%83%D1%81%D0%B0/a-52932797> (accessed 06.08.2020).

<sup>15</sup> What countries have opened their borders to Ukrainians, 2020, *Unian*. URL: <https://www.unian.net/tourism/lifehacking/otkrytie-granic-v-mire-2020-kuda-mogut-poehat-ukraincy-spi-sok-stran-11029211.html> (accessed 06.08.2020).

<sup>16</sup> Moldova to close border to stop coronavirus, 2020, *Rossiyskaya gazeta*. URL: <https://rg.ru/2020/03/15/moldaviia-zakryvaet-granicu-iz-za-koronavirusa.html> (accessed 07.08.2020) (in Russ.).

<sup>17</sup> Willing to go abroad? Moldova's Ministry of Foreign Affairs informs of international pandemic rules. 2020, *Bălți independent portal*. URL: <https://esp.md/sobytiya/2020/06/28/hotite-vyehat-za-granicu-mid-moldovy-informiruet-kakie-pravila-ustanovili-raznye> (accessed 05.08.2020).

<sup>18</sup> When will Georgia open its borders to tourists? Latest updates, 2020, *Turister*. URL: <https://www.tourister.ru/publications/1209> (accessed 06.08.2020).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

End of Table 1

Armenia	16 March <sup>21</sup>	1 August <sup>22</sup>	The border was partly closed. All Armenian citizens and members of their families holding a residence permit were allowed to enter the country.	Foreign nationals and holders of residence permits could leave Armenia without any difficulty.
Kyrgyzstan	17 March <sup>23</sup>	15 June <sup>24</sup>	The border was completely closed	The border was partly closed. Citizens of Russia and Kyrgyzstan could enter the country. Transit via Kazakhstan was allowed.
Azerbaijan	5 April <sup>25</sup>	1 August <sup>26</sup>	The border was completely closed	
Turkmenistan	20 March <sup>27</sup>	10 June <sup>28</sup>	The border was completely closed	
Uzbekistan	16 March <sup>29</sup>	15 June <sup>30</sup>	The border was completely closed	
Tajikistan	10 April <sup>31</sup>	1 July <sup>32</sup>	The border was completely closed	

<sup>20</sup> Coronavirus: Armenian authorities extend state of emergency for one month, 2020, *RBC*. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/rbcfreenews/5ee3411b9a79472c2a10090d> (accessed 04.08.2020).

<sup>21</sup> When will countries open their borders: a simple chart, 2020, *Sputnik Armenia*. URL: <https://ru.armeniasputnik.am/infographics/20200601/23237578/Kogda-strany-otkroyut-granitsy-naglyadnyy-grafik.html> (accessed 07.08.2020).

<sup>22</sup> Kyrgyzia closes its borders, 2020, *Lenta.ru*. URL: <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/03/17/zakrylis/> (accessed 08.08.2020) (in Russ.).

<sup>23</sup> Kazakhstan opens checkpoints with Kyrgyzstan and China, 2020, *Zona*. URL: <https://zonakz.net/2020/06/15/kazaxstan-otkryl-punktly-propuska-na-granicax-s-kyrgyzstanom-i-kitaem/> (accessed 07.08.2020).

<sup>24</sup> Azerbaijan's borders stay open, 2020, *Sputnik Azerbaijan*. URL: <https://az.sputniknews.ru/azerbaijan/20200529/424064097/Azerbaydzhan-ostavil-svoi-granitsy-zakrytymi.html> (accessed 08.08.2020).

<sup>25</sup> Azerbaijan extends border closure, 2020, *Profi Travel*. URL: <https://profi.travel/news/47019/details> (accessed 08.08.2020).

<sup>26</sup> Coronavirus: Turkmenistan temporarily restricts border crossing, 2020, *RIA Novosti*. URL: <https://ria.ru/20200320/1568920983.html> (accessed 10.08.2020) (in Russ.).

<sup>27</sup> Opening of Turkmenian-Iranian border postponed from 1 to 10 June, 2020, *Regnum*. URL: <https://regnum.ru/news/2968811.html> (accessed 09.08.2020) (in Russ.).

<sup>28</sup> Uzbekistan closes its borders: the country goes into quarantine, 2020, *Sputnik Uzbekistan*. URL: <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/society/20200315/13678328/Uzbekistan-zakryvaet-granitsy-strana-perekhodit-na-rezhim-karantina.html> (accessed 08.08.2020).

<sup>29</sup> Uzbekistan's borders partly open starting from today, 2020, *Revizor*. URL: <https://www.revizor.ru/special-projects/revizor-travel/novosti/s-segodnyashnego-dnya-granitsy-uzbekistana-chastichno-otkryty/> (accessed 10.08.2020).

<sup>30</sup> Temporary procedure for international cargo deliveries by road, 2020, *The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Tajikistan*. URL: <https://mfa.tj/ru/main/view/5920/vremennyi-poryadok-regulirovaniya-mezhdunarodnykh-perevozok-gruzovym-avtomobilnym-transportom> (accessed 10.08.2020)

<sup>31</sup> Tajikistan is opening its borders after the coronavirus: where to fly? 2020, *Sputnik Tajikistan*. URL: <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/country/20200617/1031425974/tajikistan-vozobnovlyayet-aviasobshchenie-tri-gosudarstva.html> (accessed 09.08.2020).

Kazakhstan declared a national state of emergency and imposed a curfew.<sup>32</sup> Ukraine<sup>33</sup> also declared a state of emergency, for one month at first and extended it later. Moldova imposed quarantine restrictions for 60 days.<sup>34</sup> Kyrgyzstan and Georgia declared a state of emergency in some regions and cities.<sup>35</sup> Armenia and Azerbaijan introduced special quarantine restrictions.<sup>36</sup> In Uzbekistan, quarantine restrictions varied in severity from region to region. In Russia, a hybrid regime was in effect, which would change its name over the two months. The first week of restrictions was called ‘non-working week; the second period, ‘self-isolation’ and ‘regional high alert state’ (the decision to declare it was made by regional authorities); at the beginning of May, the name changed to ‘restrictions regime’. Yet the measures taken in Moscow and St Petersburg, which seriously limited the basic freedoms of citizens (the stay home order, the national and international travel ban) were de facto a state of emergency. The government of Tajikistan closed the borders but denied that there were any coronavirus cases in the country; no measures were taken until 30 April.<sup>37</sup> Turkmenistan closed its border while denying the epidemic. The country was even going to hold a national football championship. The actual state of affairs in the country is unknown.<sup>38</sup> Belarus did not impose any restrictions, nor were there any entry/exit or international travel limitations. Passengers travelled in, through, and from the country in the pre-pandemic regime. Belarus became the main transit corridor to the EU for people from neighbouring CIS countries (Russia and Ukraine).<sup>39</sup>

Across the post-Soviet space, with the exception of Belarus, migration between (and sometimes within) countries was frozen. The government urged peo-

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<sup>32</sup> Quarantine in Kazakhstan to last until end of June, 2020, *Zakon.kz*. URL: [https://www.zakon.kz/5021739-karantinnye-mery-v-kazahstane.html?utm\\_source=web&utm\\_medium=newsv1&utm\\_campaign=notification](https://www.zakon.kz/5021739-karantinnye-mery-v-kazahstane.html?utm_source=web&utm_medium=newsv1&utm_campaign=notification) (accessed 18.07.2020).

<sup>33</sup> Coronavirus: Ukraine declared state of emergency for 30 day from 28 March to 24 April, 2020, *DW*. URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/в-украине-из-за-коронавируса-введен-режим-чрезвычайного-положения/a-52914514> (accessed 19.07.2020); Ukraine closes its border to foreign visitors from 17 March, 2020, *BBC*. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-51876682> (accessed 19.07.2020).

<sup>34</sup> Coronavirus: Moldova closes its border, 2020, *Ukrainian national news*, 15 March 2020. URL: <https://www.unn.com.ua/ru/news/1857908-moldova-zakrivaye-kordon-cherez-> (accessed 20.07.2020).

<sup>35</sup> Quarantine rules in Georgia, 2020, *Kavkazsky uzel*, 25 May 2020. URL: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/348370/> (accessed 21.07.2020).

<sup>36</sup> Quarantine rules in Armenia, 2020, *Kavkazsky uzel*, 15 May 2020. URL: <https://www.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/348360/> (accessed 21.07.2020); Coronavirus: Azerbaijan announces special quarantine, 2020, *Izvestiya*, 23.03.2020. URL: <https://iz.ru/990476/2020-03-23/v-azerbaidzhane-obiavlenn-spetsialnyi-karantin-iz-za-koronavirusa> (accessed 23.07.2020).

<sup>37</sup> Tajikistan closes its border to foreign visitors due to coronavirus, 2020, *Lenta.ru*, 10.04.2020. URL: <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/04/10/tadjikistan/> (accessed 25.07.2020).

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>39</sup> Coronavirus cases in Belarus hit record high, 2020, *Lenta.ru*, 25.04.2020. URL: <https://lenta.ru/news/2020/04/25/belovirus/> (accessed 25.07.2020).

ple to literally stay home and to observe social distancing. Society was plunged into isolation. Only after 11 May 2020, countries of the post-Soviet region started to ease domestic quarantine restrictions; border opening was discussed as well. On 16 March 2020, the European Commission also advised third-country nationals to refrain for 30 days from non-essential travel to the EU. Member states followed this recommendation.

Uncoordinated border closure and suspension of international passenger travel, especially that between the EU and countries that have a visa-free regime with the union (Ukraine, Moldova, Georgia) and between Russia, Kazakhstan, the countries of the Eurasian Union, and Central Asia, created a situation when hundreds of migrants heading home were stranded at airports and borders of host countries. Border checkpoints could not handle the large influx of people. Ukraine closed half checkpoints on its border with the EU. Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Turkmenistan simply closed the borders. The governments of all the countries tried to charter flights but could not cope with the huge number of those willing to return home.

Still, the official declaration of border closures often had little to do with the actual situation at checkpoints. This led to unrest at the borders of some CIS states. Many citizens and migrants had no access to verified information on how to cross the border because, officially, it remained closed.

As reported by the Institute for Demographic Research of the FCTAS RAS, about 32% of migrant respondents tried to return home but could not [4]. Not everyone was able to cross the border by car, bus, or a chartered flight.

The dearth of reliable information fuelled rumours about government-chartered flights and trains and makeshift camps at borders. Most speculations concerned the situation at the border between Russia and Kazakhstan. For example, in Orenburg, 157 citizens of Kyrgyzstan spent three days at the border. On 30 March 2020, 300 citizens of Uzbekistan and Kyrgyzstan, who could not fly out from Novosibirsk started a hunger strike; they had poor access to food, sanitation facilities, and medical care.<sup>40</sup> In Dagestan, more than 700 Azerbaijanis were stranded at the closed border with Azerbaijan. This contributed a lot to the uneasy coronavirus situation in the republic.<sup>41</sup>

Almost three thousand citizens of Uzbekistan spent several weeks till the mid of September in a camp near Rostov-on-Don. In squalid conditions, unable to cook food, they were waiting for the train, which carried about 1,000 people only in September. The next train was scheduled for the end of October.<sup>42</sup> At Ka-

<sup>40</sup> Citizens of Kyrgyzstan stranded at Novosibirsk airport due to coronavirus start hunger strike, 2020, *Meduza*. URL: <https://meduza.io/news/2020/03/30/grazhdane-kirgizii-na-dve-nedeli-zastrayavshie-v-aeroportu-novosibirska-iz-za-koronavirusa-ob-yavili-golodovku> (accessed 25.07.2020).

<sup>41</sup> Putin intervenes over Azerbaijani stranded at border in Dagestan, 2020, *Kavkazski uzel*. URL: <https://amp.kavkaz-uzel.eu/articles/349772/> (accessed 27.07.2020).

<sup>42</sup> Thousands of migrants waiting for train at makeshift camp near Rostov-on-Don, 2020, *BBC News*. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/topics/cxlx9qe9mn5t> (accessed 29.07.2020).

zakhstan's border with the Samara and Orenburg regions, citizens of Kyrgyzstan and Uzbekistan were waiting for a chance to leave at two makeshift camps for a month. More than 600 Tajiks were stranded at the border between Uzbekistan and Kazakhstan because of quarantine restrictions.<sup>43</sup> Finally, the IOM provided buses to bring them home.<sup>44</sup> Those who managed to return to Central Asia were placed in quarantine camp where they had to stay in deplorable conditions. In Uzbekistan, this provoked a riot at the O'rtasaryo 20,000-bed shipping container camp near Tashkent. The outrage was caused by the extension of quarantine from 14 to 30 days for some of its involuntary residents. People lived in fours in a room, and if one of them had the virus, longer quarantine duration applied to all the four.<sup>45</sup> The medical staff did not explain why isolation was organised that way.

Most Central Asian migrants stayed in host countries: 170,000 labour migrants remained in Kazakhstan. Only 73,000 migrants out of more than 1m working in Russia returned to Uzbekistan. Out of 600,000 Moldovan labour migrants in the EU and Russia, over 300,000 returned home.<sup>46</sup> Ukraine welcomed back 650,000 out of its 4–5m citizens working abroad.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, most migrants either could not return home or decided to wait out the pandemic in the host country.

Migration in the CIS is short-term by nature in most cases. Thus, travel restrictions were very traumatic for many migrants who left behind their families and households. The CIS migration follows a seasonal pattern: migrants have to obtain permits, which makes a longer stay in the host country impossible.

To investigate the situation of migrants in the CIS, the timeline of border closures and openings was studied for each country. Since the actual situation differed from official declarations, empirical materials were collected from the media; employees of the CIS countries' embassies and consulates in the Russian Federation were interviewed.

For half the states, the official data matched the actual state of affairs. Seven countries out of 12 placed a total ban on transboundary travel. Many migrants did not have an opportunity to either leave the host country or return home because air and railway connections had been suspended. The only country to leave its borders open was Belarus. Thus, migrants in CIS countries were faced with a

<sup>43</sup> Tajiki migrants stranded between Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan, 2020, *Sputnik Tajikistan*. URL: <https://tj.sputniknews.ru/migration/20200316/1030885717/grajdane-tajikistan-zastryali-kazakhsta-uzbekistan.html> (accessed 29.07.2020).

<sup>44</sup> Three thousand dollars for infected foreign nationals, bogus call-outs, and akims in quarantine: chronicles of Central Asian response to coronavirus, 2020, *Fergana news*. URL: <https://fergana.site/articles/119393/> (accessed 29.07.2020).

<sup>45</sup> Uzbeks riot at quarantine camp, demand they be sent home, 2020, *Mediazona*. URL: <https://mediazona.ca/news/2020/07/10/quarantine-riot> (accessed 30.07.2020).

<sup>46</sup> Coronavirus delivers blow to Moldova's economy, 2020, *Deutsche Welle*. URL: <https://www.dw.com/ru/коронавирус-нанес-мощный-удар-по-молдавской-экономике-23042020-av-53226376> (accessed 30.07.2020).

<sup>47</sup> Ukraine to close its border to foreign visitors from 17 March, 2020, *BBC*. URL: <https://www.bbc.com/russian/news-51876682> (accessed 30.07.2020).

choice between staying in a foreign country and waiting for the restrictions to be lifted or trying to return home, often via third countries, without a chance of coming back until the pandemic is over.

The only available mode of international travel (if border crossing was allowed) was land transport. Citizens of some states were allowed to leave the country in case of emergency — to visit the funeral of a close relative or to receive urgent medical care abroad. In some cases to enter a western country, visitors in transit through Belarus had to have a Fit-to-Fly certificate.

### **Migration policies of the CIS countries in the COVID-19 pandemic**

To major host countries, Russia and Kazakhstan (they account for 90% of the CIS labour migrants) had to respond to the involuntary violation of the law by migrants when they overstay or were not able to get licence to work. That was inevitable since all immigration authorities no longer worked with applicants, and borders had been closed [4]. Russia and Kazakhstan liberalised their migration laws as regards the stay in the country and access to the labour market of foreign citizens during the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Kazakhstan* took specific measures to ease the situation of migrants amid isolation and border closure. A distinct feature of Kazakhstan's labour market is that private farmers and small businesses in border areas employ domestic workers from Uzbekistan. The issue of legal stay of migrants was widely discussed in the country before the pandemic. Kazakhstan's domestic labour market is mostly undocumented; only 13% of the workers have written contracts of employment [4].

On 22 March 2020, the National State of Emergency Commission under the President of Kazakhstan decided to extend visas and working permits for foreign citizens to 20 April 2020 and to prolong the length of stay for those who had arrived in Kazakhstan under visa-free agreements, which the state had concluded with 57 countries. Administrative penalties for overstaying were cancelled.<sup>48</sup>

The *Russian Federation* also tried to minimise risks of illegality for migrants in the pandemic. Presidential decree No. 274 of 18 April 2020<sup>49</sup> automatically extended the duration of labour licences, working permits, visas, residence permits, and registrations expiring from 15 March to 15 June 2020. During those months, migrants did not have to apply for the extension of any documents. The no-entry deportation and expulsion periods were suspended as well. Employers had the right to use migrant labour. An important novelty was the amendment to

<sup>48</sup> Kazakhstan to extend visa and working permits for foreign nationals to 20 April, 2020, *Forbes Kazakhstan*. URL: [https://forbes.kz/news/2020/03/22/newsid\\_221696](https://forbes.kz/news/2020/03/22/newsid_221696) (accessed 01.08.2020).

<sup>49</sup> On temporary measures to regulate the legal statuses of foreign nationals and stateless persons in the Russian Federation amid the spread of the novel coronavirus infection (COVID-19): Presidential decree of 18.04.2020 No. 274 (revised on 23.09.2020), 2020. URL: [https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_350638/](https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_350638/) (accessed 17.09.2020).

law 135-FZ On the Legal Status of Foreign Citizens, which lifted the restriction on extending labour licenseduration without exiting Russia.<sup>50</sup> Foreign nationals can extend their licenseswhile staying in Russia as long as they have to. The State Duma adopted amendments to federal law 109-FZ On Registration of Foreign Nationals and Stateless Persons in the Russian Federation of 18 July 2006.<sup>51</sup> On 7 September 2020, migrant registration procedures were further liberalised until 15 December 2020.<sup>52</sup>

On 16 September 2020, the Prime Minister of Russia, Mikhail Mishustin, announced the forthcoming simplification of obtaining ordinary private visas, as well as long-stay visas for close relatives of Russian nationals having different citizenship. This group of foreign nationals will be able to obtain a long-stay Russian visa based on a simple written application from a Russian citizen, and they no longer will have to leave the country every three months.<sup>53</sup> Similarly to most EU member states, the two major host countries of the CIS, Russia and Kazakhstan, liberalised the stay in the country and access to their labour markets for most migrants residing in the two states, regardless of the previous (documented or undocumented) status of such person. In effects, this meant amnesty for undocumented migrants.

### **The lockdown: the transformation of the CIS economies and labour markets**

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The COVID-19 pandemic caused a dramatic transformation in the labour market of the CIS countries. All the states had to impose transport and travel restrictions. They also shut down businesses in catering, services, construction, and commerce, i. e. the industries that traditionally employ labour migrants. The restrictions had a severe effect on the financial situation of those numerous migrants who had worked unofficially and could not expect redundancy pay. Most migrants lost their jobs without notice; some of them were denied their due wages. Early in July 2020, the situation in CIS labour markets was grim.

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<sup>50</sup> On amendments to article 133 of federal law On the Legal Status of Foreign Nationals in the Russian Federation: federal law of 24.04.2020 No. 135-FZ, 2020. URL: [https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_351148/](https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_351148/) (accessed 17.09.2020).

<sup>51</sup> On amendments to federal law On Registration of Foreign Nationals and Stateless Persons in the Russian Federation — federal law of 08.06.2020 No. 182-FZ, 2020. URL: [https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons\\_doc\\_LAW\\_354481/](https://www.consultant.ru/document/cons_doc_LAW_354481/) (accessed 17.09.2020).

<sup>52</sup> Migrants can register online using the Russian government services portal; the complicated procedure of cancelling registration at one address to obtain registration at a different one was abrogated; according to the new law, all migrants can register themselves and other migrants to the address of the property they own.

<sup>53</sup> Mishustin announces visa regime simplification for relatives from abroad, 2020, *Novaya gazeta*, 16.09.2020, availablr at: <https://novayagazeta.ru/news/2020/09/16/164306-mishustin-anonsiroval-uproschenie-vizovogo-rezhima-dlya-inostrannyh-rodstvennikov-rossiyan> (accessed 17.09.2020).

In *Russia*, about 54% of working migrants have lost their jobs. Once made redundant, even those who had an official job can no longer pay for accommodation, extend their patents and other documents, or send remittances back home. Overall, 32% of migrant have lost their sources of income [4].

Migrants working officially are entitled to sick pays from their employers. The failure of an employer to do so and discharging an employee instead is a violation of the Labour Code — the laid-off person has the right to go to court.<sup>54</sup> Those working unofficially found themselves in a difficult situation. Not protected by the Labour Code, they have serious difficulty with defending their rights to sick or redundancy pays. This group of migrants has become one of the most vulnerable in the pandemic.<sup>55</sup> The number of undocumented migrants in Russia is estimated at 2.5—3.4m people, most of them working in Moscow and St Petersburg and their environs [4]. Thus, the number of unemployed migrants could reach 1m as the pandemic struck.

As President Vladimir Putin stressed in his address of 11 May 2020, the epidemic left 1.4m Russians jobless.<sup>56</sup> The press office of Russia's Ministry of Labour spoke of 2.8m unemployed as early as June 2020. A survey conducted by the Levada Centre<sup>57</sup> in April 2020 shows that almost a third of Russian citizens from families with at least one employee was affected by pay cuts (33%), a fourth encountered salary delays (25%), and a fifth, lay-offs (26%). According to the survey, as early as August 2019, 64% of respondents (all of them Russian citizens), agreed that 'my relatives and acquaintances are ready to take jobs that are now done by migrants'. Another 44% believed that 'most migrants live better and have more money than my family and I do'. A deteriorating financial situation and bleak employment prospects of the local population may cause the idea of employment competition from migrants to fuel anti-migrant sentiment and social tension.<sup>58</sup> A possible growth in unemployment in Russia will further exacerbate the situation of CIS migrants residing in the country. Many of them will have to return home if this becomes possible.

In *Kazakhstan*, after a state of emergency had been declared, about 2m people lost their jobs. Over 12,000 entrepreneurs applied for government support,

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<sup>54</sup> 'Our savings will last a week: how migrants staying in Moscow are surviving self-isolation and quarantine, 2020, *Fergana*. URL: <https://fergana.site/articles/116812/> (accessed 17.09.2020).

<sup>55</sup> Doctors ask for insurance and registration. Who will help migrants wick with coronavirus and their roommates? 2020, *Fergana*. URL: <https://fergana.agency/articles/117247/?country=kz> (accessed 15.09.2020).

<sup>56</sup> Putin addressing the nation, 2020, *Youtube*. URL: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=owpG4fneHDM> (accessed 10.09.2020).

<sup>57</sup> The employment rate, 2020, *Levada Centre*. URL: <https://www.levada.ru/2020/05/19/ZANYATOST-NASELENIYA/> (accessed 14.08.2020).

<sup>58</sup> Form isolation to migration, 2020, *Levada Centre*. URL: <https://www.levada.ru/2020/06/04/OT-IZOLYATSII-K-MIGRATSII/> (accessed 19.07.2020).



80% of the representatives of small and medium businesses, services, and commerce. These two groups account for approximately half the country's working population.<sup>59</sup>

The government of *Tajikistan* closed the country's borders preventing hundreds of thousands of Tajik migrants from coming to Russia for seasonal work. The state was left without foreign currency since labour migration provides 80% of foreign currency inflow.<sup>60</sup>

In *Uzbekistan*, the spread of the COVID-19 virus has paralysed almost all industries of the economy. A survey conducted by the country's Central Bank says that 56% of respondents experienced a decline in household incomes, whereas 15% were left without any income whatsoever.<sup>61</sup>

*Kyrgyzstan's* economy fell sharply. The closure of the border stopped the flow of customers from Kazakhstan who account for a substantial proportion of sales in the country. Most of the country's population works for small and medium businesses. Kyrgyzstan had to appeal to international donors. The IMF has already pledged USD 120.9m to support the state.<sup>62</sup>

In *Ukraine*, the closure of borders has frozen traditional short-term circular migration to the EU and Russia. Ukrainians constitute a significant part of Poland's agricultural workforces (in 2018, 99% of all seasonal work permits were issued to Ukrainian nationals). About 12% of Ukrainian labour migrants whose permissions to take a job in Poland were expiring and who did not have a job at the time left the country before 1 April 2020 because of COVID-19 restrictions. Ukrainians residing in the Czech Republic and Italy, countries that do not share a common border with Ukraine, had serious difficulty in returning home. They had to cross several countries that had closed their border to foreign visitors. Ukrainian migrants are using transit corridors running through Belarus, Austria, Hungary, and Romania. Besides, they currently do not have a chance of coming back.

The lockdown created high shortage of agricultural workers in the western countries. The attempts of Germany, Austria, the UK, and Finland to bring in seasonal workers aboard chartered flights operated by a private Estonian airline succeeded only once. On 23 April 2020, the MAU airline made a flight carrying 200 Ukrainians to Finnish farms, although Finland was ready to welcome 14,000 Ukrainians for seasonal works. The government of Ukraine suspended

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<sup>59</sup> The coronacrisis in Central Asia: the economic consequences of the pandemic in Central Asia, 2020, *Central Asian Bureau for Analytical Reporting*. URL: <https://cabar.asia/ru/koronakrizis-v-tsentralnoj-azii-ekonomicheskie-posledstviya-pandemii/> (accessed 28.08.2020).

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

<sup>61</sup> Uzbek families buy less meet in the pandemic, 2020, *Sputnik Uzbekistan*. URL: <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/society/20200820/14809956/Koronavirus-v-Uzbekistane-glavnoe-na-20-avgusta.html> (accessed 05.09.2020).

<sup>62</sup> UNDP COVID-19 in the Kyrgyz Republic: Evaluating socioeconomic-effects, vulnerability, and policy responses, 2020, *United Nations in Kyrgyz Republic*, August 2020. URL: [https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/UNDP-ADB%2520SEIA\\_11%2520August%25202020%2520Rus.pdf](https://kyrgyzstan.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-08/UNDP-ADB%2520SEIA_11%2520August%25202020%2520Rus.pdf) (accessed 05.10.2020).

those flights, as stated by the Estonian ambassador to Ukraine, Kaimo Kuuusk.<sup>63</sup> Labour migrants became a matter for negotiation between the Ukrainian and EU authorities. The Ukrainian Prime Minister, Denis Shmygal, informed the EU ambassador to Ukraine, Matti Maasikas, that the country's government was ready to negotiate with European state willing to offer Ukrainians official seasonal jobs.<sup>64</sup> Based on the crisis scenario of coronavirus spread, Ukraine's Cabinet predicted in June that fewer than 50% of migrants would return their jobs abroad, and the unemployment rate would go up.<sup>65</sup>

### **Migrants under lockdown: hardships of survival**

In April 2020, the authors of this article worked on a random-sample survey carried out at the Institute for Demographic Research. Respondents were labour migrants of age 18 and over (717 people) recruited via social media (Facebook and VKontakte) and migrant organisations [13].<sup>66</sup> About 84% of respondents mentioned a loss or reduction in income; over half (65%) either lost their jobs (28%) or were furloughed (37%). Half the respondents (51%) were able to send remittances back home in April. The most serious problems encountered by migrants were the inability to pay for accommodation (64%), the lack of jobs (45%), not having enough money to buy food (43%), troubles with the police (20%), deplorable living conditions (11%), and not having enough money to pay for the patent (licence) (2%). About 1% of respondents said that they had tested positive for the coronavirus, and 3%, that their relatives and/or friends were sick with the infection [4].

Moreover, 32% of labour migrants who had arrived in Russia failed to obtain necessary permits (as calculated by the To Be Precise [Eсли Byt' Tochnym] project).<sup>67</sup> The Russian media discussed that, due to the pandemic, most labour migrants might switch to unofficial employment, and this would lead to wage dumping and increase xenophobia.

The number of calls to the hotline of the Tong Jahoni human rights organisation increased to 14,200 in March-April 2020, which is twice that in March-April

<sup>63</sup> Ukraine is Africa of many centuries ago, 2020, *News-Front INFO*. URL: <https://news-front.info/2020/05/03/ukraina-cze-afrika-prichem-mnogovekovej-davnosti/> (accessed 11.07.2020).

<sup>64</sup> EU countries welcome Ukrainians for work: Cabinet creates workgroup, 2020, *Inforesist*. URL: <https://inforesist.org/strany-es-massovo-priglasayut-ukrainczev-na-rabotu-v-kabmine-sozdali-rabochuyu-gruppu/> (accessed 13.09.2020).

<sup>65</sup> Cabinet to consider two post-pandemic scenarios for economy, 2020, *NV*. URL: <https://nv.ua/biz/economics/koronavirus-v-ukraine-kakie-posledstviya-dlya-ekonomiki-novosti-ukrainy-50094584.html> (accessed 07.09.2020).

<sup>66</sup> Ryazantsev, S. V. 2020, The Situation of Migrant Workers in Russia During the COVID-19 Pandemic (Results of a Sociological Study), *International Conference The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Migration Mobility*, Institute of Socio-Political Research of the Russian Academy of Sciences and MGIMO University, 27 April 2020, Moscow. URL: <http://испи.рф/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-migration-mobility/> (accessed 14.07.2020).

<sup>67</sup> From isolation to migration, 2020, *Levada Centre*. URL: <https://www.levada.ru/2020/06/04/OT-IZOLYATSII-K-MIGRATSII/> (accessed 10.08.2020).

2019 (5,500 calls). The key reasons why people contacted Tong Jahoni remained the same: arbitrary detention (up twofold, from 2.2 to 4.1 reported cases); seeking a legal consultation (up by 30%, from 2,100 to 2,700); solicitation of bribes by the police (up threefold, from 600 to 1,300); requests for humanitarian aid (nine in March-April 2019 and 1292 in the same months 2020; the fourth most popular reason).<sup>68</sup>

Trying to cut their expenses, most migrants are choosing the cheapest hostels that are not fit for isolation — each fourth migrant shares a room with four to eight other people (27%) [4]. Such living conditions make social distancing almost impossible and leave migrants exposed to the risk of infection.

The official policy on isolating infected migrants at hostels and the ban on going out even to buy groceries add to pandemic-induced problems. For instance, in a hostel in the village of Novosergievka in the Leningrad region, the police locked in 485 migrants, of which 123 were tested positive for COVID-19. As reported by Tong Jahoni NGO, over 30 migrant hostels in Moscow, each having hundreds of beds, have been quarantined. Human rights activists believe that the virus spreads not because of situation in hostels but because of the owners of the hostels and sometimes migrants themselves throwing the infected migrants out of hostels.<sup>69</sup>

The language barrier to communication with physicians is yet another problem. Doctors are helping migrants to recover from the coronavirus: they give away free medicine and admit migrants to the hospital when needed. Still, many migrants do not speak Russian well and cannot articulate clearly the ambulance crew how they feel, and there are cases when migrants have been denied emergency help and hospitalisation.<sup>70</sup>

The restrictions imposed in Russia have created administrative some situations that turned many law-abiding migrants into undocumented:

1) Russian migration services work was suspended from the end of March; it became impossible to extend the duration of a labour licenses, a residence permit, or any other document necessary for a migrant to legally stay in the country;

2) many migrants were not paid for the work they had already performed; nor did they receive any furlough payment when put in quarantine, although President Vladimir Putin demanded to do that in his address to the business community;<sup>71</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Chupik, V. 2020, The problems of migrants in Russia during self-isolation, *International conference The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Migration Mobility*, Institute of Socio-Political Research of the Russian Academy of Sciences and MGIMO University, 27 April 2020, Moscow. URL: <http://испи.рф/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-migration-mobility/> (accessed 10.08.2020).

<sup>69</sup> 'They threw me out when I got sick'. Hostels with COVID-19 cases are being closed, residents are left locked in, 2020, *Fergana*. URL: <https://fergana.site/articles/117910/> (accessed 09.07.2020).

<sup>70</sup> Doctors ask for insurance and registration, 2020, *Fergana*. URL: <https://fergana.ru/articles/117247/> (accessed 02.08.2020).

<sup>71</sup> 'I'd rather they pay wages than give me a bowl of soup'. How can large businesses and diaspora help stranded migrants? 2020, *Fergana*. URL: <https://fergana.plus/articles/117911/> (accessed 28.08.2020).

3) amendments were made to the Code of Administrative Offences concerning violations of quarantine restrictions. This led to a growing number of detentions of migrants by the police both in the streets and at places of residence. More detentions meant mass arrests, deportations, and placing migrants awaiting expulsion in special detention centres.

A lawyer from the Civic Assistance Committee NGO, Anna Gorodetskaya, calls these amendments, alongside fines levied on violators, illicit measures taken by the Russian authorities: 'Such measures are possible only in a state of emergency, which has not been declared'. Another lawyer, Tong Jahoni's Valentina Chupik adds more detail: 'If a state of emergency had been declared in Russia, the state would pay for food, accommodation, and the time out of employment'.<sup>72</sup> In reality, migrants had to bear all the expenses themselves.

### **The economic fallout of the lockdown in the source countries: the declining number of remittances**

The economic consequences of the pandemic cannot yet be fully evaluated. The restrictions imposed in Russia during the first wave of COVID19 caused the country's GDP to fall by 12%.<sup>73</sup> Ukraine's Cabinet expects investment and consumption to plummet, which will prevent the country from returning to pre-pandemic levels, whereas government deficit will continue to grow.<sup>74</sup> Data from the Statistical Committee of the CIS demonstrate that the economic performance of the second six months of 2020 was below that of the first six months of 2019 in constant prices: GDP decreased on average by 3–6%; investment, from 23% in Armenia to 2.7% in Belarus; retail, by 1.5–19%. In all CIS countries, consumer prices have risen.

The most substantial decline was that in passenger traffic, both internal and external. It dwindled by more than a third (to 64%). The passenger traffic figures and the number of passengers paint a vivid picture of how closed international borders and travel restrictions have affected migration flows. Table 2 shows quantitative data on the volume and dynamics of passenger traffic in the first half of 2020 compared to previous years. Investment is used as the primary indicator of national socio-economic development. A decrease in passenger traffic affects capital investment in the country and thus the economy as a whole.

<sup>72</sup> They threw me out when I got sick'. Hostels with COVID-19 cases are being closed, residents are left locked in, 2020, *Fergana*. URL: <https://fergana.site/articles/117910/> (accessed 28.08.2020).

<sup>73</sup> Putin named growing unemployment the greatest global problem, 2020, *RIA*. URL: <https://ria.ru/20200623/1573378512.html> (accessed 09.09.2020).

<sup>74</sup> Cabinet to consider two post-pandemic scenarios for economy, 2020, *NV*. URL: <https://nv.ua/biz/economics/koronavirus-v-ukraine-kakie-posledstviya-dlya-ekonomiki-novosti-ukrainy-50094584.html> (accessed 07.09.2020).

Table 2

## Passenger traffic and capital investment in the CIS

Country	Number of passengers carried			Passenger traffic			Capital investment (in constant prices)
	m people	First six months of 2020 to first six months of 2019, %	First six months of 2019 to first six months of 2018, %	bn passenger-kilometres	First six months of 2020 to first six months of 2019, %	First six months of 2019 to first six months of 2018, %	
Azerbaijan	602.0	73.7	101.9	9.5	70.4	99.0	97.3
Armenia	34.9	44.4	104.5	0.5	45.4	102.5	76.6
Belarus	541.6	85.3	99.97	7.5	70.0	106.1	98.6
Kazakhstan	4 737.7	54.5	101.3	54.4	52.7	98.7	97.1
Kyrgyzstan	156.3	50.2	101.1	2.6	50.2	99.9	85.2
Moldova	23.0	53.3	103.4	1.1	49.3	105.7	85.1
Russia	3 909.0	67.8	97.9	141.3	54.4	108.1	96.0
Tajikistan	290.2	90.8	111.8	3.5	79.8	101.9	95.4
Uzbekistan	1 348.2	103.2	102.2	30.8	100.6	103.7	87.2
Ukraine	547.9	55.2	94.9	18.6	41.9	105.7	65.1
CIS total	12 190.7	64.3	100.1	269.8	56.8	104.9	94.0

Source: Statistical Committee of the CIS. URL: <http://www.cisstat.org>.

Passenger traffic has substantially decreased since the outbreak of COVID-19, compared to previous years. Only Uzbekistan has improved its performance. On average the industry has fallen by 45–55% (Armenia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan, Moldova, Ukraine), which is a critical level. As to capital investment, no CIS country has reached the 2019 figures. This means that the restrictions have taken their toll on almost all industries that are connected, directly or indirectly, to migrant labour.

The situation in the labour market was very difficult for migrants themselves. The survey showed that migrants employed in services and construction were deprived of both means of subsistence and the chance to find a new job amid COVID-19 restrictions. The number of remittances that migrants send back to families has decreased as a result.<sup>75</sup> During peak restrictions, the number of remittances from Russia declined by over 50%. Migrants themselves were badly in need of money and could not count on wages.<sup>76</sup> A downward income trend has emerged in both source and host countries.

<sup>75</sup> Migrants from Central Asia living below the breadline need help, 2020, *UN*. URL: <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2020/05/1378202> (accessed 14.07.2020).

<sup>76</sup> COVID-19 pandemic: what will happen to migrants' incomes in Russia, 2020, *Sputnik Uzbekistan*. URL: <https://uz.sputniknews.ru/infographics/20200413/13914566/Pandemiya-COVID-19-chto-budet-s-dokhodami-migrantov-v-Rossii.html> (accessed 15.07.2020).

A sharp decrease in remittances pose an enormous challenge to source countries, such as Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan, whose citizens are employed primarily in Russia and Kazakhstan [7]. The economies of Tajikistan and Kyrgyzstan will bear the brunt: since 2010, remittances have steadily been over 25% of the countries' GDP, constituting a substantial component of their economies.<sup>77</sup> The negative economic background may contribute to greater social tensions and political instability in Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, and Kyrgyzstan. They can also cause unrest among migrants residing abroad. In Kyrgyzstan, this process started after the parliamentary election. Protesters stormed the building of the parliament, mass rallies followed, and a curfew was imposed on 12 October 2020 because of the unstable situation, threats to the lives, health, and security of citizens, and the need to restore public order.<sup>78</sup> A similar picture of political instability is observed in Belarus where protests have continued since the August presidential election.<sup>79</sup> The economic crisis has contributed to the political crisis in Azerbaijan and Armenia where battles over the disputed Nagorno-Karabakh region resumed resulting in heavy casualties on both sides. If these conflicts continue, Russia may become the destination for a large number of refugees.

The World Bank expects remittances to post-Soviet republics to fall by 28% amid the pandemic due to the economic crisis and isolation. This will deprive many vulnerable households of financial support. In 2019, about 76% of migrants registered in Russia for the first time came from Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan, and Ukraine. The total amount of remittances sent from Russia to CIS countries reached USD 12.9bn.<sup>80</sup> Dependence on remittances is very heavy at a regional and local level. In the Kyrgyz city of Osh, over 30% of households live on remittances.<sup>81</sup> In February-April 2020, this proportion decreased by 20—30%.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>77</sup> World Development Indicators (WDI). Global Financial Development, 2020, *The World Bank*. URL: <https://datacatalog.worldbank.org/remittance-inflows-gdp> (accessed 15.07.2020).

<sup>78</sup> Borisenko, L. 2020, Head of Kyrgyzstan reintroduces state of emergency in Bishkek, 2020, *Rossiyskaya gazeta*, 12.10.2020. URL: <https://rg.ru/2020/10/12/glava-kirgizii-povtorno-vvel-rezhim-chrezvychajnogo-polozheniia-v-bishkeke.html> (accessed 14.10.2020).

<sup>79</sup> The first day of 'national strike' in Belarus, 2020, *RBC*. URL: <https://www.rbc.ru/photoreport/26/10/2020/5f96ac279a79472f06268cd1> (accessed 30.10.2020).

<sup>80</sup> Form isolation to migration, 2020, *Levada Centre*. URL: <https://www.levada.ru/2020/06/04/OT-IZOLYATSII-K-MIGRATSII/> (accessed 08.07.2020).

<sup>81</sup> Ergeshbaev, U. 2020, The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on labour migration and the socio-economic situation in Kyrgyzstan, *International conference The Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Migration Mobility*, Institute of Socio-Political Research of the Russian Academy of Sciences and MGIMO University, 27 April 2020, Moscow. URL: <http://испи.рф/the-impact-of-the-covid-19-pandemic-on-migration-mobility/> (accessed 16.07.2020).

<sup>82</sup> Emerging Europe braces for sharp drop in remittances from foreign workers, 2020, *Emerging Europe*. URL: <https://emerging-europe.com/news/emerging-europe-braces-for-sharp-drop-in-remittances-from-foreign-workers/> (accessed 20.08.2020).

Moldova, Georgia, Armenia, and Ukraine are also running the risk of losing the substantial source of income that remittances are (they account for over 10% of the GDPs of these states).<sup>83</sup> On top of that, residents of source countries are not welcome to returned compatriots-migrants — there are fears that they will carry disease and cause stiffer competition for jobs.

## **Conclusion**

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Since it is still unclear when the COVID-19 pandemic will end and the restrictions are likely to hold up, many seasonal migrants unable to return home will become long-term migrants.

The pandemic has affected the world economy and migration, and CIS countries are no exception. The lockdown policy caused many migrants to lose their jobs and stable incomes almost at once. What makes the situation even worse is that they cannot return home to wait out the hard times. The closure of borders limited the mobility of migrants who found themselves stranded in a foreign country. In a difficult situation, sometimes without means of subsistence, many of them were physically locked in at hostels because of the virus or its threat. All this influenced adversely both source and host countries. For the former, the pandemic-induced crisis means the loss of a stable inflow of remittances, which account for significant proportions of their GDPs, and the return of hundreds of thousands of unemployed and probably sick citizens. For the latter, the negative consequences include the loss of cheap labour that will be difficult to recoup. An important factor is travel to both source and host countries becoming more expensive since any route involves multiple modes of transport, travel opportunities are few, and it is necessary to be tested for COVID-19 in both states. Migrants' behaviour has to change — they are faced with the choice between long-term migration or giving up working abroad and looking for a new way to earn a living.

Russia and Kazakhstan have substantially liberalised their migration laws giving migrants residing on its territory a chance to maintain legal status and access the labour market. As the data above show, many CIS countries have not gone to great length to minimise the risks of the migration crisis. Having closed their borders, some states deprived own migrants of any chance of returning home. The actual state of affairs differed much from official declarations, and this further aggravated the situation for migrants. Home countries were doing nothing to bring back their citizens, and host countries were not aiding foreign nationals in returning home; people were doing this one their own, often choosing paths of doubtful legality.

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<sup>83</sup> Emerging Europe braces for sharp drop in remittances from foreign workers, 2020, *Emerging Europe*. URL: <https://emerging-europe.com/news/emerging-europe-braces-for-sharp-drop-in-remittances-from-foreign-workers/> (accessed 20.08.2020).

The lack of coordination between home and host countries resulted in that thousands of migrants found themselves in deplorable conditions at makeshift camps or airports. Russia and Kazakhstan as the main destination countries for the CIS labour migrants aided migrants in extending the duration of documents and suspended legal punishments for the overstay.

Although there are no industry-specific data, it is safe to assume that some industries are in a desperate state because of coronavirus restrictions, whereas others are in need of migrant labour. Governments must help workers from shutdown businesses find employment with active businesses. Laid-off migrants must be able to apply for a work permit and stay in the country for a month or longer depending on the situation. All this has already been done in Italy and V4 countries.

We believe that the CIS states have to develop a package of measures to support migrants since the COVID-19 crisis has severely affected this social group. These measures should be aimed to:

- *simplify the extension of documents and work permits.* The restrictions make the search for a new job a long and arduous task. Migrants must have the right to stay in the country legally while looking for a job, focusing on new employment rather than getting paperwork in order. Apps used during the lockdown to manage the status of migrants can relieve migration services of part of their work after the restrictions are lifted;

- *formulate clear criteria for people eligible to cross the border.* Today, potential seasonal workers are experiencing problems with visa-free entry (nor can they obtain visas because consulates are closed);

- *create multi-language portals to disseminate coordinated information on the situation in the CIS* to quash rumour and prevent panic, which leads to the emergence of makeshift camps, riots, and migrants congregating at places that are not fit for accommodating people;

- *introduce the system of online job applications.* The digitalisation of traditional procedures and formalities will help fulfil the stay-at-home and physical distancing requirements. It will make the procedures swifter and more efficient for seasonal and domestic migrant workers;

- *assist migrants in returning home.* Regular chartered flights must be arranged by consulates of CIS countries. Borders must always stay open for the country's nationals willing to come home as well as for foreign citizens trying to leave the country;

- *introduce social safety nets.* Employers should not dismiss migrants as long as the restrictions are in effect since it will be very difficult to find a new job; the absence of income will put migrants on the edge of survival;

- *provide medical care.* In the current situation, many migrants were locked in at large hostels. This was very unsafe since the accommodation is shared by both infected and healthy people. Migrants with suspected COVID-19 must have access to medical care and safe lodging where they can self-isolate.



In the constantly changing situation and amid restrictions, it is impossible to minimise effectively risks faced by migrants. Yet if no action is taken, the economy will suffer, the crime rate will rise, and social tension will pile up in both source and host countries. Popular discontent with the economic situation in CIS countries may spark off conflicts within and between countries. These conflicts may be provoked to divert attention from the economy. In this case, refugees will replace migrants, and the complicated situation in the region will be further aggravated.

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