

**Overlooked Considerations of Human Mobility: A Case Study of Labor Migration  
Between Tajikistan and Russia**

Shamshod Khuseynov

International Studies Senior Capstone Seminar

Denison University

Dr. Taku Suzuki

December 18, 2022

## **Abstract**

Economic circumstances often consume discourse on labor migration, while neglecting intermediate factors. Scholarship on human mobility often attributes labor migration solely to financial circumstances, ignoring other determinants of population movement. This paper strives to illuminate the role of additional elements in labor mobility by examining migration flows between Tajikistan and Russia. Since the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Russia has transformed into an economic necessity for Tajiks as individuals seek to move north to improve their financial standing. Although numbers illustrate the drastic nature of Tajik labor migration, they do not expose the specific determinants of population movement. However, this examination explores several under-studied factors that reveal labor mobility by synthesizing numerous forms of primary and secondary qualitative literature. The paper highlights the complex decision-making process of migrants by analyzing the implications of the individuals' level of Russian, obtaining citizenship, role and knowledge of entry barriers, and inadequate business connections that translate into flows between Tajikistan and Russia. Through the case study, the research depicts the hardships migrants across the world endure that force them to serve as the "ball" in this transnational game of tennis.

## **Preface and Acknowledgements**

This paper's concentration on Tajik labor migration would not be possible without the prospects provided to me by my parents who fall under the category of "labor migrants". Although they did not end up going to Russia, their journey in the US confirms many of the paper's findings. By moving abroad, they were able to offer me a better set of opportunities than I could ever imagine if we had stayed in Tajikistan. Their contribution and sacrifices allowed me to avoid hardships that many individuals my age come across when they have to make choices regarding their family's finances. This in turn fostered my passion about labor mobility and allowed me to create this paper that depicts the lives of those who are less fortunate and are forced to migrate to support their households.

I would also like to thank Kathleen Amiet for her peer editing help and Dr. Taku Suzuki, for facilitating this research and providing me with a holistic view of human mobility.

Shamshod Khuseynov

Granville, Ohio

December 18, 2022

## **Introduction**

The movement of people in search of resources is an inherent part of humanity. Migration stems from numerous factors, however, it primarily occurs to improve one's well-being. This can be observed by the search for jobs, education, economic/political benefits, and so on. However, just because an individual strives to resettle in another region, it does not imply that they will be successful as migration is closely associated with borders, laws, xenophobic sentiment, and other challenges that hinder international mobility. Recent migration patterns are characterized by the mass movement from the Global South to the Global North such as movement from Latin Americans to the US, Africans to Europe, and Central Asians to Russia. This examination investigates the case of Central Asia, focusing on Tajik labor migration flows to and from Russia.

Theoretical models divide migration into the functionalist and historical approaches, that view migration as a natural product of development and existing political and economic structures. Former studies fail to recognize that mobility is the result of factors than go beyond finances and incorporate social elements. Previous literature stresses the role of economics in migratory motives overlooking the impact of other intermediate factors. As a result, former studies primarily view migration as an activity generated from societal coercion, ignoring the voluntary choices made by migrants themselves. Additionally, many of the findings in theoretical models are outdated and do not consider new developments that fuel and/or constrain migratory decisions.

Similarly, to previous theoretical research, there is minimal research that demonstrates the humanity of Tajik labor migration and how individual factors lead to outward or return migration. This study aims to illustrate the gaps in existing studies, by integrating and analyzing

numerous factors that produce population movement between Tajikistan and Russia. By doing so the research illuminates the individual lives of labor migrants without letting statistics overshadow their human agency. The paper focuses on elements such as language, citizenship, entry barriers, and formal connections to show various dimensions that influence mobility. Each factor exposes the challenges migrants are exposed to and their means of maneuvering these obstacles. Examining language demonstrates the role of social skills in integration in the receiving country and its impact on chain and return migration. The notion of citizenship depicts the contribution of formal papers in reducing the costs of movement which has extensive implications for migrant networks. The interaction migrants face with entry constraints and deportation, indicates the level of consequences they may face in their migratory process. While social ties expose the futility of return migration in the absence of formal connections. By analyzing several individuals level factors and decision-making, the paper attempts to reveal the indicators behind population flows. The research intentionally features numerous attributes of human mobility to contribute to broader scholarship regarding the expansive and intricate nature of migration.

## **Literature Review**

Migration is a complex intersectional concept that stems as well as impacts various facets of society. There are several agents and elements in play that can be identified as “macro”, “meso”, and “micro” factors. Macro factors revolve around broad political, geographic, and economic conditions and are independent of individuals’ control. Meso and micro-factors however are affiliated with individuals' choices and consider technology, migrant networks, education, religion, and personal willingness to move (Castelli, 2018). Both empirical and theoretical explanations seek to answer how these various elements interact and generate the

need for migration. Migration scholars have generally grouped theories into two main categories recognized as the functionalist and the historical structural approach. Functionalist theories see migration as a progressive phenomenon that contributes to the convergence of the global system. Whereas historical-structural theories view migration as a result of inequality between different regions which continue to diverge due to the hierarchal global order (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014, p. 27). Although these schools of thought vary in their explanations, they both recognize the crucial role of human mobility.

#### Push-pull Model

One of the most well-known functionalist theories is the push-pull model which considers migration a crucial aspect of development. This approach developed by Lee (1966) views migration as the interaction between factors that encourage people to leave their homes, factors that attract people to move to a particular destination, intervening obstacles, and personal considerations (p. 50). Push factors include “population growth, lack of economic opportunity, and political repression”, while pull factors revolve around the “demand for labor, availability of land, economic opportunity, and political freedom” (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014, p. 28). The notion of intervening obstacles refers primarily to physical barriers; however, environmental-related difficulties that hinder the initial step toward relocation are also included. Additionally, Lee (1966) considers personal matters that involve the emotional and familial aspects of migration (p. 51) These “plus” and “minus” indicators, in collaboration with intermediate challenges and personal circumstances combine to generate migration patterns and reveal the decision-making process of migrants.

#### Neoclassical Model

Another functionalist framework is the neoclassical approach which examines migration from an economic lens. Unlike the push-pull theory, the neoclassical framework focuses largely on economic gains and losses, claiming that financial circumstances are the leading justification for human mobility. More specifically, migration occurs from low-wage, labor-surplus regions to high-wage, labor-scarce regions (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014, p. 29). The differences in the supply and demand composition in the global labor market, reveal where migrants will head to maximize their financial gains. Theoretically, labor migration should prevail “until the gap in expected wages has been closed” (Massey et al., 1994, p. 701). This framework incorporates fundamental economic principles, by considering individuals as rational agents who are assumed to conduct a cost-benefit analysis to decide whether immigration will improve their economic standing. The neoclassical system views international migration as an economic activity that has similar implications as physical goods in the realm of supply, demand, and price (income), with the objective of achieving equilibrium once the quotas of laborers have been met.

#### Dependency and World Systems Theory

Historical structural approaches are best represented by the dependency and world systems theory that “emphasize the role of external relationships in the developmental process” (Shrum, 2001). Both frameworks concentrate on the macro picture of inequality and migration, by focusing on the dynamic between the developed and developing world. This perspective asserts there is an exploitative connection between rich and poor nations, due to the reliance generated by the capitalist economy of the world. There is a focus on the historical component of global development, that led to the creation of “haves” and “have nots”. World systems theory divides these nations into “core”, “semi-peripheral”, and “peripheral” states that cooperate in an exploitative matter to maintain resources at the top of the hierarchy, therefore “labor follows

where capital goes” (de Haas, 2008, p. 7). Proponents of these framework attribute migration as the result of global capitalism, but also a factor that fuels further disparity between the Global North and Global South. Consequently, labor mobility occurs due to the absence of resources in poor countries, however, migration further promulgates the economic standing of developed nations as the “core” attracts and utilizes cheap labor from the “peripheral states”. The reliance and survival needed for development among poor nations drive the dependency cycle, further stimulating migration.

### Segmented Labor Market Theory

Like the previous model, the segmented labor market theory attributes migration to the global economic structure. Proponents of this theory perceive the historical economic evolution of the world as the primary architect of migration. With the wake of industrialization and the expansion of the capitalist market, came a system of inequality and exploitation. Once a hierarchy had been established, those on the lower end of the spectrum were forced to find ulterior methods to support their financial needs. Proponents of the segmented market theory claim that “demand for high- and low-skill-skilled laborers is structurally embedded in modern capitalist economies” (Castles, de Haas, & Miller, 2014, p. 35). Consequently, this gives rise to labor migration and a large influx of workers in the Global North. Due to their vast supply of wealth and resources, these developed nations constantly seek cheap migrant labor to carry out tasks in both upper and lower-sector jobs. Based on the way capitalism is designed, once hegemony has been established, there will be a permanent demand for low-skilled jobs, since it serves the interest of the leading economies to absorb migrants that will carry out production through cheaper means (Reich, Gordon, & Edwards, 1973, pp. 359- 365).



Although previous literature provides an effective foundation for research, there are various shortcomings as well as areas of study that prior research overlooks. Earlier scholarship, views migration through a nontemporal lens, therefore it “presents migration as a single action rather than a process... failing to account for changing motivations, altered circumstances or modified decisions en route” (de Haas, 2011, p. 929). Simultaneously, these models generate the assumption that migrants are aware of all the “pull” factors and benefits as well as the challenges present in the receiving country. However, this is often not the case as migration often occurs from rural regions where people tend to be less educated and aware of policies and norms abroad. Therefore, these models rely on expectations that unfold differently in the empirical sphere. Additionally, theoretical frameworks ranging from the push-pull model to segmented labor theory were produced decades ago, and therefore do not take into consideration modern developments. Earlier studies were unable to detect how the contemporary world would generate new changes that would drastically affect geographic mobility. These adjustments include the historical background between two countries that enforces labor migration and provides the instruments for the creation of migrant networks. In the case of Tajikistan and Russia, the rise and then fall of the Soviet Union was the catalyst of mass migration to Russia.

This paper directly examines the various factors that impact Tajik migrant labor to and from Russia while depicting the human agency and modern determinants that are overlooked by theoretical models. My research focus on micro and meso factors that migrants come across that affect their decision-making process. Unlike previous studies, my analysis illuminates the lives of individual migrants to portray their assessment of moving abroad. I incorporate an array of various determinants to demonstrate the extensive range of elements that individuals must consider before deciding to migrate or return to their country of origin.

## **Methodology**

In my research, I examined individual and community level structures of Tajik labor migration to understand the forces that generate flows between Russia and Tajikistan. I incorporated a plethora of literary sources to strengthen my argument and show how individuals interact with the various elements in their environment. The sources I looked at ranged from scholarly articles found on numerous databases to articles and I found through Twitter posts revealing the lives of labor migrants and the various social, environmental, and political challenges they face. The primary reason I utilized a wide range of sources was to grasp a solid understanding of the human agency involved in labor mobility. I collected information from various disciplines to show the extensive nature of the factors that lead to migration and highlighted specific properties that play an integral role in the decision-making process of migrant workers.

As an economics major, many of the sources that I found were tied to the social sciences and looked primarily into areas regarding income, education, social/ familial ties, and so on. Much of the research looked into voluntary labor migrants, without placing too much emphasis on asylum seekers and refugees. Additionally, although my research provides valuable insight into the lives of migrants without referring to them as statistical figures, my examination does not provide quantitative data to reveal the extent to which these factors impact human mobility. My examination focuses on illustrating the range of factors that migrants must consider before leaving their homes but does not depict numerical information to directly support the various determinants of migration.

## **Case Analysis**

History of Migration Between Russia and Tajikistan

In the contemporary era, it's difficult to mention Tajikistan, without discussing migration, remittances, and Russia. Due to the prevalence of all three, labor migration is an imperative part of Tajikistan and its economy. Yormirzoev (2017) attributes the initial catalyst of Tajik migration to the civil war that sparked after the fall of the Soviet Union. Ethnic conflict erupted in all regions of Tajikistan, in order to survive many found refuge in other post-Soviet states, primarily Russia. Even after the conclusion of the war relocation to Russia prevailed due to the drastic social and economic damage left by violence. Relocation abroad allowed for better living prospects and employment opportunities. The lack of proper wages in Tajikistan was substituted by remittances sent by men to their families as a form of household income. What initially started as a refugee crisis, has transitioned into a three-decade-long search for economic opportunities abroad.

Since Tajikistan achieved autonomy in 1991, migrating flows to Russia can be categorized under three main flows: “in the first mass emigrations from Tajikistan, ethnic Russians, and highly skilled/ educated Tajikistanis fled to Russia, then younger, less highly skilled Tajikistanis who were still educated under the Soviet education system started to migrate, followed by today’s reality of very young migrants with poor educational backgrounds and lack of Russian language skills” (Terrelonge, 2016, p. 239). During the first few years after the collapse of communism, Russia had difficulty adequately managing the large inflows of people entering the country because in the past they were only familiar with internal migration. The federal government was unequipped in the field of international migration and had to address migrants of former USSR states who had to “be provided with social protection, including access to public medical care and education systems, habitation, social benefits, provision of pensions, etc” (Ivankhnyuk, 2009, p. 17). When looking at the exodus of Central Asian migrants entering

the country, the Russian government was forced to create policies that reflected its Soviet history. Incoming migrants were divided into “those of our kind” and “outsiders”. Those who had shared a Soviet upbringing were seen as more familiar and encountered an easier procedure when attempting to enter the country, while citizens of other nations were seen as foreigners and were not treated with the same hospitality (Ivankhnyuk, 2009, p. 15).

Regardless of national origin, immigrants in the early 1990s were well-educated individuals: “20% of immigrants were people with university degrees and another 35% were skilled specialists with professional school diplomas” (Vishnevsky, 2006, p. 313). In previous decades, immigration to Russia was a privilege and conducted by those who had skills and resources but were unable to utilize them in their sending country. Moving abroad made sense to the typical labor migrant and it took care of many of their family’s expenses. In 1999, the average monthly wage in Tajikistan was approximately 9 USD, however, the income of a seasonal migrant could add up to 600 USD per term covering household expenses for an entire year (Maksakova, 2002, p. 8). Due to the disproportionately better wage opportunities in Russia, moving North became a standard practice. In 2019, over 1.17 million works visas were issued to Tajiks in Russia, a 20% increase from the number of permits received in 2016, revealing the growing number of people who view Russia as the answer to their economic concerns (Khashimov et al., 2020).

#### Determinants of Labor Migration Flows in the Post-Soviet era

Expectation among people to migrate is so high that “one in four Tajikistani households is thought to have engaged at some point in migration to better its quality of life during the last decade” (World Bank, 2009, 2011, Jaupart, 2019). Therefore, migration has become ingrained in Tajik society as normal economic activity. Although migrants relocate to seek job opportunities

abroad, various elements affect migration flows and show how Tajiks interact with the challenges they come across. The following analysis represents the array of barriers and elements that migrants must consider such as language, ability to obtain citizenship, entry-barriers, and formal social ties in Tajikistan.

#### A. The Significance of the Russian Language

Knowledge of the Russian language is a significant component of population movement, as competency in the native tongue reveals how one might manage in Russia. Language serves as both a push and pull factor when migrants question going abroad. The push factor is identified as proficiency in the Russian language, while the pull factor is social acceptance in a foreign land. Mastery of Russian increases migrants' probability of succeeding in Russia. "Migrants choose Russia because most of them speak Russian and still have a shared feeling of belonging stemming from the Soviet period", those who were born in the Soviet period view Russia as a second home (Laruelle, 2013, p. 156). However, this is not the case for all Tajiks, especially younger generations and those who come from rural areas as the Russian language is not as crucial as it was three decades ago. Terrelonge (2016) states that although a grasp of the language is useful, the lack of Russian does not hinder migrants to move abroad, however it does heavily affect their journey and experience in the destination country (p. 230). A limited grasp of Russian implies a lack of job options and housing, a higher probability of harassment, unreliable material received through informal networks, and a reduced ability to assimilate into Russian society. Language became even more crucial in 2015, "when Russian authorities introduced a language requirement for foreigners applying for work permits" incorporating further hurdles to those attempting to move up the socio-economic ladder (Eurasianet, 2015).

Language mastery goes beyond just employment opportunities, it also affects treatment and integration in Russia. A poor experience in Russia leads to psychological effects on migrants abroad, reducing their time of stay due to the feeling of isolation and hostility from the native people. Many display signs of nostalgia and depression, as they find it difficult to adapt and socialize with those around them due to variations in cultural norms and physical appearance (Bakunina et al., 2020). Language is the primary connection Tajikistan has to its former historical union with Russia, therefore level of Russian will reveal how far one get outside of Tajikistan. If migrants are not able to fully take advantage of the resources in front of them due to their weak knowledge of Russian, they will face numerous challenges, and will either be forced to leave early or stay longer to earn money from their lower paying positions. This in return will affect flows to Tajikistan as well as chain migration to Russia because if migrants are not able to cushion the relocation process for relatives or other migrants, this will deter movement to Russia.

#### B. In Search of a Strategic Citizenship

“Strategic citizenship” is another term that floats around in discourse revolving around migration to Russia. There is a mass search for Russian citizenship among Tajiks who understand the importance the red passport carries over their black Tajik one and their endless attempt to obtain “strategic citizenship”. To labor migrants, the “Russian passport does not signify belonging to some political or territorial entity but rather embodies people’s desire to secure a certain set of opportunities” (Borisova, 2020, p. 830). Accumulating one passport or several passports is a tactical initiative toward changing political and economic conditions. Although there is a visa-free regime between Russia and Tajikistan labor migrants face other document-related challenges on arrival – residency permit (*propiska*), labor license (*trudovoi*

*patent*), and a work contract (Chudinovskikh & Denisenko, 2017). Entering the country is simple but to be able to reside and enjoy resources offered by the state is hard due to the large amount of documentation needed and their high associated costs. The papers are also meant to limit migrant mobility from one region to another as they are bound to the area that is stated in their documents. Failure to secure these documents forces a migrant to leave with no entry back to Russia for at least three months, in some cases the ban may last for a longer period of time (Sujud & Umarova, 2015). The duration of the ban has extensive effects on household income, as migrants lose their source of income, they have to reapply and repay to obtain similar documentation, and they have to cover travel expenses again if they wish to return to Russia.

The bureaucratic difficulties prevalent in the migratory system, serves as a drastic barrier for migrants as they are exploited through official fees and bribes to entice corrupt officials. (Agadjanian, Menjívar, & Zotova, 2017). Hofman (2021) claims that a Russian passport not only alleviates the role of documentation, but also enhances one's mobility in general. The possession of a red passport implies liberal movement between Tajikistan and Russia with limited suspicion, fewer financial costs, and reduced risk of expulsion. The idea of "one passport per family" is a belief many Tajik migrants have as it reduces costs for the entire family and simplifies the process for other family members if needed (Borisova, 2020, pp. 832-834). Depending on how this stage of migration unfolds, it will reveal how chain migration will transpire and the costs of being deported on future travel plans to Russia. To avoid additional issues and monetary expenses families employ all of their potential resources to obtain a red passport.

### C. Entry-Barriers and Re-entry

A three-month ban has substantial effects; however, some may experience entry barriers that have life-changing consequences. In the past decade, Russia has tightened its immigration

policies setting up an additional hurdle for immigrants who have several other challenges to face in order to travel to Russia. Zolotova and Cohen (2020) cite that “three-year entry bars were issued in Russia for migrants with a record of two or more administrative offenses, including an overstay of their time in the country, lack of residential registration or other documents, and traffic offenses” (p. 677). In the case of deportation, many lose the lives they have built in Russia and the resources they have accumulated over several months or years of work. Their financial situation drastically worsens as they lose their primary and/or only source of income to sustain themselves and their families. They return to a nation they left in the first place, forced to find employment in the absence of economic prospects (Maier, 2014). Those with children are forced to travel back to Tajikistan together, leaving behind the prospects of better education and upbringing for future generations.

Those who are banned for three years are added to Russia’s Federal Migration Service (FMS) electronic database, which by 2013 included the names of over 100,000 Tajik citizens who had been denied entry to Russia (Kluczewska, 2014, p. 8). With a population of nearly nine million in Tajikistan, banning several hundred thousand migrants undoubtedly has economic and social consequences for a majority of households. To provide an additional layer to this issue, many are not aware that they have acquired an entry ban on their status. Some migrants are issued to leave by the courts in Russia, while others may find out that they are not allowed back into Russia until they are in Tajikistan. A large portion of migrants “learn about their entry bars in airports, ticket offices, travel agencies, or by calling the International Organization for Migration (IOM) hotline in Tajikistan” (Bahovadinova 2016, Zotova and Cohen, 2020, p. 679). This is especially consequential as money plays an integral role in the decisions made by migrants. If they find out that they are unable to travel back to Russia, they have wasted money



on a ticket and other resources they would have used on their journey and destination. This sets many families back as the “breadwinner(s)” of the family are unable to resume the transfer of remittances, that helped improved the living situation of the family. This entry notice will serve more challenges to rural populations, who may a whole day to travel to Dushanbe to acquire a ticket to Russia, just to find out they are banned from continuing work in Russia (Najibullah, 2021). Aware of the long-term issues entry bars and deportation carry, many labor migrants many avoid going home for several years (Zotova and Cohen, 2020, p. 680). Consequently, this affects return migration, and prevents migrants from acquiring comfort from their families and relatives.

#### D. The Role of Influential Acquaintances in Return Migration

Although not common, long-term return migration does occur. Especially among those who are never able to fully assimilate into Russian society or have large families to take care of in their origin country. Some may experience forced migration back, but others may decide that they have accumulated enough income to go back. Tirado (2018) claims that “returning back home and resettling is also an enormous challenge for them because numerous men spend their hard-earned savings while attempting to find a good job or to start new businesses”. Therefore, return is unlikely for many migrants who choose to stay longer or indefinitely in Russia as money is the main driver of their mobility. Seeing their children and family is a cost they must weigh with working longer or investing that money into a business or better opportunities in Russia.

Many men who return with savings attempt to employ these funds to create businesses and generate sources of income. However, they soon realize resettlement is challenging as they have lost contact with many relative and friends while they were abroad (Babaev, 2018). In order

to effectively reintegrate themselves in Tajikistan and properly utilize their money from Russia they need the “protection of ‘influential’ relatives who might give them the necessary permits, utilities, or tax-exemption to keep these businesses profitably running” (Tirado, 2018). The need for the “other man” is crucial in starting a business as Tajikistan does not possess an equitable business environment but is rather facilitated by connections to important individuals and/or government officials. Scholars have referred to this concept as the “economies of favor” which stresses the use of social ties to obtain economic goods or services (Ledeneva; 1998, Makovicky, Nicolette and Henig, David, 2016, p. 3). It was initially observed during the decline of the USSR and has served as a way of conducting negotiations in the absence of a stable central government. As Tajik migrants return to the greet their families, they are faced with a different economic reality. Their hard-earned money is trivial in a system where there are substantial barriers to entry. Once their aspirations are crushed in their origin country, they reignite the cycle of economic migration to Russia.

## **Conclusion**

The migratory dynamic between Tajikistan and Russia illuminated in this paper depict the overlooked considerations of migrants, whose decisions diverge from standard theoretical models. The study indicated how Tajik individuals interact with several elements in their environment to generate the decision about moving abroad or returning to Tajikistan. The elements that were examined exposed the decision-making procedure of migrants who have vital costs and benefits to weigh before moving. Assessment of factors such as the knowledge of the Russian language, likelihood of citizenship obtainment, migrant’s age, and knowledge of entry barriers revealed how migrants attempt to maximize their benefits, which in turn generates labor mobility between Tajikistan and Russia. These components demonstrate the countless

interdependent parts of society that affect population movement and force migrants to make difficult choices. By analyzing several diverse indicators, the research contributed to shortcomings in current Tajik labor migration scholarship and theoretical frameworks that overlook the intricate and evolving nature of human mobility. Although the paper highlights several individual-level elements, there are a plethora of other factors such as gender, religion, and formal work that can be examined in future studies to strengthen the aspect of “humanness” behind labor migration that is often overshadowed by statistics.

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