



Russia's Immigration Issues: Migrant Workers

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Map of Russia and its Central Asian neighbors to the south

Source: CAOCL

Since the downfall of the Soviet Union, in 1991, the Russian Federation has become one of the most important destinations for immigrants in the world, second only to the United States.¹ High unemployment and low wages in former Soviet countries are pushing millions of people to look for work in Russia. Migrant workers travel to Russia every year because of economic hardship in their own countries. These immigrants are largely from the Caucasus and Central Asia (Kyrgyzstan, Tajikistan and Uzbekistan). They go to Russia in search of work that they cannot find at home. Demographic realities, such as an aging workforce, mean that Russia needs these workers. However, Russian citizens worry that the influx will mean that immigrants will steal their jobs and increase crime. Despite the labor shortage in Russia, these migrant workers are not welcomed by the population.

Xenophobia—Xenophobia is anti-immigrant sentiment exhibited by host societies towards people, especially immigrants, from other cultural, ethnic, and religious backgrounds.²

Xenophobia in Russia is increasing, especially in urban areas. At a recent May Day celebration in Russia, participants shouted, "Russia is for Russians," "Glory to the Russians," and racist slogans, such as "get out, black dirt" – examples of the xenophobia faced by migrant workers who are largely Muslim.³ Moscow, and Putin, officially promote a message of tolerance, but tacitly support Russian ethnic nationalism by supporting the Russian Orthodox church and the idea that "Russia is for Russians, first and foremost."⁴

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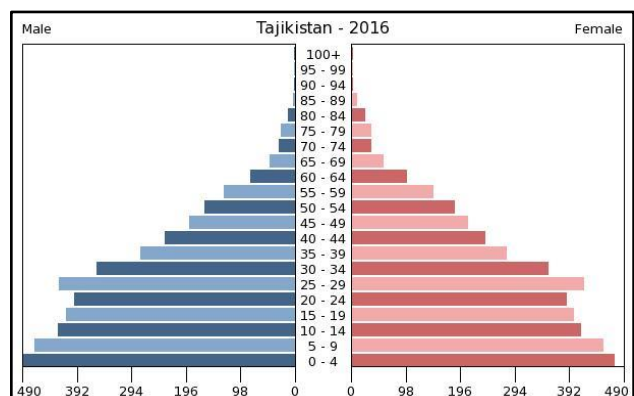
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While some analysts argue that xenophobia is prevalent in Russia, others argue that it is “migrantophobia” that is wide-spread.⁵ This is supported by the results of one 2017 survey in which four-fifths of Russians said the Kremlin “must limit” the flow of migrants and two-fifths believed migrants should live in “specially assigned areas.” Moreover, more than one in four Russians surveyed felt “irritation, dislike, or fear” specifically toward Central Asians.⁶ In 2013, during the mayoral election race, Mayor Sergei Soyarin stirred anti-immigrant sentiment when he said, “Moscow is a Russian city and it should remain that way. It is not Chinese, Tajik or Uzbek. People who speak Russian badly and who have a different culture are better off living in their own country.”⁷ Yet, as long as living standards in Russia are higher than in most parts of Central Asia, Kyrgyz and Tajiks will go there in search of work and a better future. Russia is suffering from an economic downturn due to lowered oil prices and western sanctions (**see previous RCLF minute**). Nevertheless, its economy is still healthier than in parts of Central Asia.

Russian citizens dislike the idea of more immigrants coming into their country even though the numbers show that they are helping the economy. This sentiment is so prevalent that a recent poll revealed that 67 percent of Russians surveyed say that the Russian government should limit immigration and 73 percent favor the deportation of those in Russia illegally.⁸ Still, there are demographic demands to be met. Russia’s population is predicted to shrink by 11 million people by 2050.⁹ Moreover, the great majority of those people will reside in urban areas, leaving the countryside wanting. For example, in 2018, the United Nations forecast that the current decline in Russia’s rural population would continue in the coming decades, from nearly 37 million now to just 22 million people in the countryside by 2050.¹⁰ Additionally, as of the 2010 Russian census, one in four Russian villages were home to only 10 or fewer residents, and over 20,000 villages simply have been abandoned altogether.¹¹ These demographic concerns are reflected in the population graphs below, which show the differences between Russia and a developing country like Tajikistan, where there is a youth bulge.¹²

Youth bulge—The youth bulge is commonly seen in countries where a large share of the population is made up of children and young adults who are not yet in the workforce.

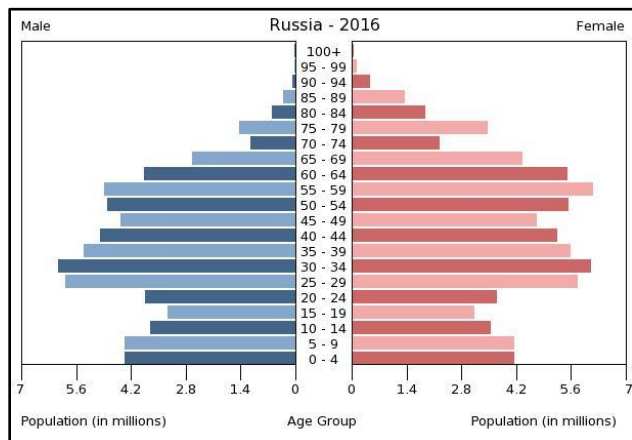


Source: CIA World Factbook

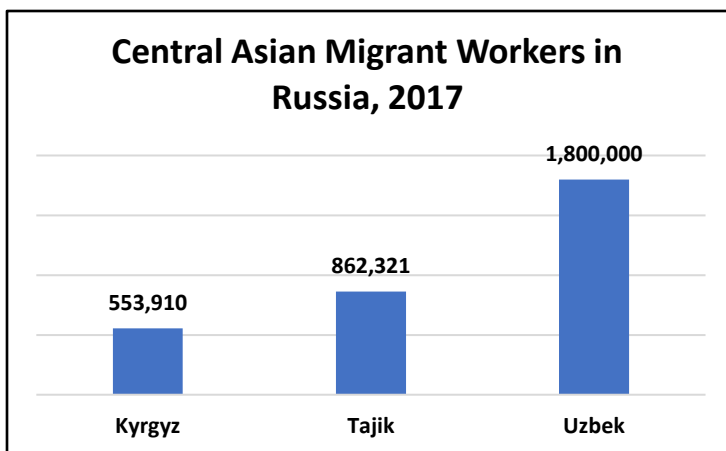
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These statistics demonstrate in hard numbers that Russia needs migrant workers to offset the country's demographic decline.¹³ The demographic realities of Russia's aging population, including a low birthrate, mean that its workforce is flagging.¹⁴ Russian officials estimate the country will lose 800,000 working-age people every year in the next 5 years.¹⁵ Migrant workers would fill the gaps.



Source: *World Bank*

There are between 10-12 million migrant workers in Russia in 2018.¹⁶ Only about 2 million of them are officially registered with the Russian government, while the others live and work in the shadow economy.¹⁷ The shadow economy is a grey zone in which people working illegally are paid under-the-table. A lack of official status exposes them to hazards, abuse, and corruption. In 2013, almost 80 percent of migrant workers in Russia worked in construction and

agriculture or as unskilled labor, for example, in the service industry, as drivers, cooks, nannies, or day laborers.¹⁸ They mostly do dirty, dangerous, and difficult jobs.¹⁹

The average migrant worker is a young male between 20-30 years old. They leave their families and move to Russia alone, taking a huge personal risk. Bureaucracy is cumbersome, and it is difficult for migrants to register and receive the proper documentation required by Russian law. Being undocumented means that migrants are vulnerable to employers who take advantage of immigrants because they can pay them lower wages. Also, migrant workers do not have access to health care or other social services. It is hard and unsafe to work illegally (without a work permit) so many try to become Russian citizens. But this means overcoming bureaucratic hurdles, which takes a long time and is expensive. Obtaining a work permit can take months; it requires days of standing in line at a government agency. These work permits costs on average \$450; those who work without papers are only paid an average of \$300 per month, making it difficult to save for the administrative fees. As of 2014, to gain citizenship, applicants must pass a Russian-language exam proving native-level proficiency. One also must come from or have relatives somewhere on the territory of the former Soviet Union. In addition, applicants must renounce their current citizenship. They must also apply for Russian citizenship in Russia, not at an embassy abroad.²⁰ Foreigners are obliged to register with the authorities within three days

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upon arrival at a new address. Experts argue that it is impossible for migrant workers to find affordable accommodation and get registered within such a short deadline.²¹

These people go to Russia because, despite the difficulties, its economy is healthier than in their neighboring home countries. According to the World Bank, in 2018, unemployment in Kyrgyzstan for males between age 15-24 is 12.9 percent; in Tajikistan it is 12.2 percent and in Uzbekistan 14 percent. Personal remittances of Kyrgyz laborers in Russia equaled more than \$1.6 billion, making up 35 percent of Kyrgyzstan's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2015. Similarly, in 2016, remittances made up 26 percent of Tajikistan's GDP.²² In 2017, the average monthly salary in Tajikistan was \$163,²³ while the average monthly salary in Russia was \$570.²⁴ Many of the migrant workers have connections in Russia, making it easier to find work and housing. Also, they speak some Russian (since it was the language of inter-ethnic communication in the Soviet Union).

Remittance—Money sent home by a foreign worker to his home country.

In recent years, the claim that immigrants take jobs from Russian citizens has become a central flashpoint in Russia's national immigration debate. Although low oil prices and sanctions are hurting the Russian economy, it remains wealthier than its neighbors and is therefore a magnet for immigrants. Kyrgyz, Tajiks, and Uzbeks travel to Russia in search of work because they cannot find economic opportunities at home. Even though Russia needs laborers, public sentiment is against having them. Anti-immigrant rhetoric resonates with the Russian public because there is hostility toward migrants who are looking for work while it endures an economic crisis.

¹ *Moscow's Little Kyrgyzstan* (Journeyman Pictures, 2017), <https://youtu.be/lVaqcE1NIU8>; "Facts about illegal Immigration in the US," Pew Research Center (April 27, 2017). Accessed June 14, 2018, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2017/04/27/5-facts-about-illegal-immigration-in-the-u-s/>

² Marina Kingsbury, "Beyond Attitudes: Russian Xenophobia as a Political Legitimation Tool," in *Migration and the Ukraine Crisis: A Two-Country Perspective*, Agnieszka Pikulicka-Wilczewska and Greta Uehling, eds. (Bristol, England: E-International Relations Publishing, 2017), 178-195. See also, Rogozin TV Ad "Let's Take out the Trash!" <https://youtu.be/vcXnUagdPw8>

³ David Trilling, "Nationalists Mark 'Russian May Day' in Moscow," *Eurasianet* (May 1, 2014). Accessed June 8, 2018, <https://eurasianet.org/s/nationalists-mark-russian-may-day-in-moscow>. Migrants from Ukraine and Belarus face the same bureaucratic challenges as other immigrants, but have an easier time in general because they are Eastern Orthodox Slavs.

⁴ "Putin on Immigration," *RT*, June 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CgNChZrWNmI>

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