

# MIGRATION AND COVID-19: CHALLENGES AND POLICY RESPONSES IN KYRGYZSTAN



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COVID-19 carries significant social and economic consequences for Kyrgyzstan's migrants and their home communities. It deepens the existing vulnerabilities of migrants who are unable to return home and who do not have job security in host countries. COVID-19 also impacts the lives of internal migrants who have lost their jobs. The dependence of rural communities on remittances provides additional risks of unemployment and socio-economic inequality. The COVID-19 crisis once again demonstrates the lack of migration policy in Kyrgyzstan and the necessity of elaborating a multisectoral approach towards migrants and families who have been "left behind."

The theme of migration was not in the centre of elections in Kyrgyzstan, though embedded in discourse around it – whether we talk about the country's dependence from remittances, or whether we refer to the fact that not all migrants were able to vote in the 45 created centres abroad. We argue that considering the role which migration plays in Kyrgyzstan's economy and society, it is crucial to assess the impact of COVID-19 on migration and its policy responses.



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Migration is a part of everyday life for hundreds of thousands of Kyrgyzstan's citizens. People move internally from rural areas to Bishkek and Osh for long-term employment or temporary work, and many go to Russia, Kazakhstan, Turkey, and other countries. Kyrgyzstan is within the top five countries with the highest share of remittances in their gross domestic product (GDP) (Knomad 2019). The remittance inflows hovered around 30 percent of the country's GDP in 2012–2019, with USD 2.5 billion in remittances in 2019 (ADB and UNDP, p.10). Therefore, when, as a response to COVID-19, Kyrgyzstan temporarily closed its borders to many other countries in March for several months, the money transfers, which were the primary source of income for many families, dramatically decreased. Overall, the situation highlighted many other challenges which existed for Kyrgyz migrants and society before the pandemic.

In this paper, we look at the consequences of COVID-19 on Kyrgyzstan through a migration lens. We cover the period from March to August 2020 based on observations, four elite interviews, twelve interviews with migrants, and desk-based analysis. We argue, firstly, that the pandemic deepens the vulnerability of labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan in the most common destination, Russia. Secondly, we look at how COVID-19 saw a decrease in remittances, which has resulted in growing poverty, especially in rural areas. Then we address issues internal migrants face within Kyrgyzstan. Finally, we analyze the government and international organizations' responses to the negative impacts of the pandemic on migrants from Kyrgyzstan.

## The increasing vulnerability of labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan in Russia

Russia is the leading destination of labor migrants from Kyrgyzstan. The official statistics of the Russian Federal Service of Security, which collects data on border crossings, show that in 2019, over 959,000 citizens of Kyrgyzstan arrived in Russia, and the majority stated that their primary goal was work (557,000), business (41,000), or a private visit (265,000) (Rosstat 2019), which can include accompanying family members or people working informally who are unwilling to disclose the details of their employment. There is no information available on how many citizens of Kyrgyzstan were on the Russian territory when the pandemic started, but it can be confidently estimated that there were at least several hundred thousand.

COVID-19 has exacerbated existing issues that labor migrants regularly face in Russia, such as informal labor and discrimination. Despite some changes in the labor migration regulations, including the recent creation of a single labor market within the Eurasian Economic Union (EAEU), the embeddedness of informality in the Kyrgyz migrants' work experiences remains problematic (Kuznetsova and Round 2019). While Russia has regulatory frameworks surrounding migration, labor, and employment, employers far too often circumnavigate these frameworks with the tacit support of the state and its various actors. It leads to a lived experience where many migrants constantly worry about low wages, fear of detention by the police, lack of permanency in the workplace, underutilization of their skills, and no prospect of career progression or training.

COVID-19 prevention measures in Russia have included the closing of restaurants, non-food retail outlets, and many other urban service providers from March to the end of April (though this depends on the region), which impacted thousands of migrants working in the foodservice sector. The temporary limitation of mobility within and between cities affected other sectors. Though

there is no accurate data about the consequences of COVID-19 on migrants from Kyrgyzstan, we can expect similar trends that were highlighted by a Russian Presidential Academy of National Economy and Public Administration survey. It revealed that 40 percent of labor migrants became unemployed due to COVID-19, compared with 23 percent of surveyed Russian citizens. Additionally, 42 percent of migrants in Russia do not have any savings (Varshaver 2020). Considering the fact that informal labor is still prevalent in Russia, migrants working in this sector did not receive any compensation after losing their jobs (Sarkisyan and Raspopov 2020, Volkov 2020), placing many of them in debt as they struggled to pay rent and other bills (UN news 2020), which even resulted in evictions (BBC 2020).

The Agency of Social Information suggested that the government should establish unemployment benefits for migrants, but it has not been considered (Gal'cheva et al. 2020). Moreover, Russian politicians and mass-media have fed into the criminalization discourse towards migrants. For example, the Deputy Chairman of the Security Council of Russia, Dmitry Medvedev, claimed that such massive unemployment creates “a breeding ground for crime” and called for a tightening of migration legislation (Trifonova 2020). This fed into discriminatory rhetoric produced by officials and mass media many years before COVID-19 towards migrants from Central Asia, portraying them as “criminals” and “diseased” (Round and Kuznetsova 2016).

There are some potential issues regarding access to health care among migrants from Kyrgyzstan as well. It is common among those who work in the informal sector that any period of illness will lead to dismissal and that a significant health event would be catastrophic since migrants are barred from accessing the Russian health care system. Some migrants purchase health insurance, but it is often too expensive for them to justify or they are tricked into making payments for worthless policies (see also, Demintseva and Kashnitsky 2016). Furthermore, overcrowded housing conditions, together with difficulties in self-isolating in case of COVID-19 “are likely to exacerbate the risk of infection for Central Asian labour migrants” (King and Zotova 2020).

## The unprecedented decrease in remittances can deepen poverty in Kyrgyzstan

COVID-19 has seriously affected remittances to Kyrgyzstan. The global drop in demand for oil resulted in a significant fall in its price, which in turn had a significant impact on Russia's economy, leading to a reduction in its labor market size. The situation in this market was aggravated by the de facto lockdown introduced in Russia and Kazakhstan at the end of March 2020, which meant fewer jobs for labor migrants were available, including those from Kyrgyzstan, and lower wages for those migrants who managed to retain jobs. Seasonal migrants who returned home for fall-winter 2019-2020 were locked in Kyrgyzstan while the borders closure. Also, as the UNDP stated, “while borders may remain closed for some time, the expected general decline in the incomes of the middle classes in neighboring countries and globally is also likely to be a key factor” (p. 10). The massive reduction of remittances to Kyrgyzstan (fig.1) in turn can result in a 4–5 percent decrease of GDP in Kyrgyzstan (ADB and UNDP 2020, 10).

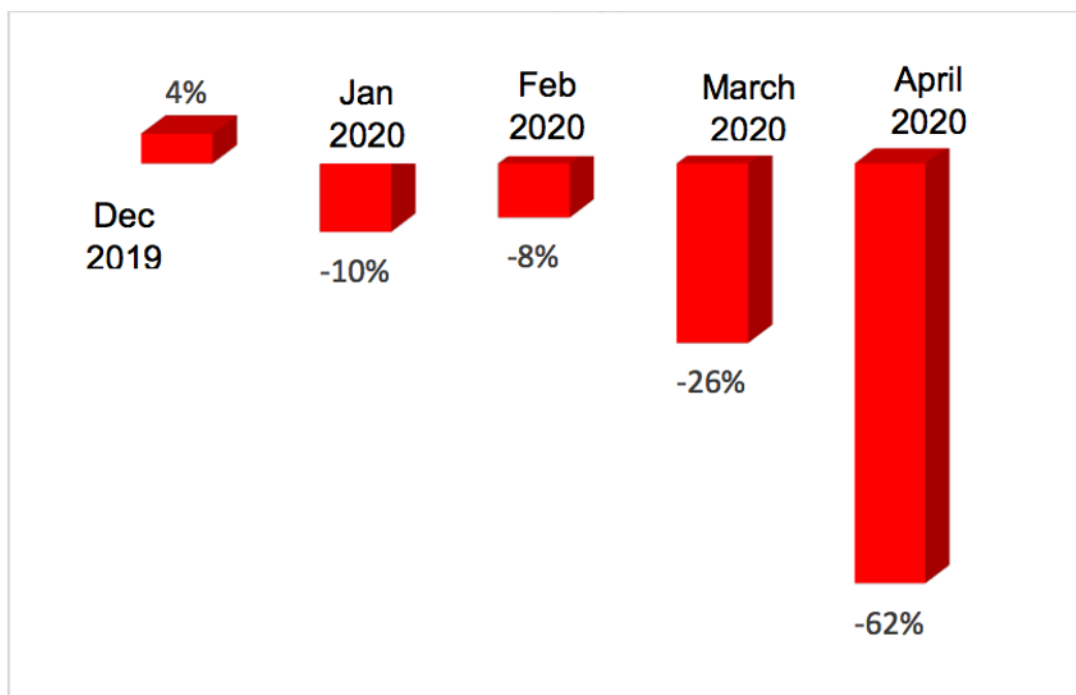


Figure 1: Year-on-Year Trends in Remittance Inflows into the Kyrgyz Republic (UNDP 2020, 61)

The situation changed in June and July 2020, when the de facto lockdown in Russia was gradually phased out, and many migrants were able to go back to work. Migrants then tried compensating their households for the fall in remittances in the previous months. Overall, the remittances between January and July 2020, appeared to be 10 percent less than between January and July 2019 (data of the National Bank of the Kyrgyz Republic). This decline can have negative impacts on the welfare of households, especially in rural areas that traditionally have a higher rate of poverty and unemployment. According to the UNDP, remittances impacted the 11.1 percent reduction in the national poverty in 2019, which translates to 715,000 people being raised out of poverty (2020, 23–24). The pandemic and lockdown demonstrated the significance of informal work, which both communities of origin and emigrants depend on.

## “Agriculture, construction and taxi,” but will there be enough jobs in rural areas?

As one of the local government employers mentioned in an interview, “It is difficult now. It is impossible to go anywhere. Transfers have also fallen. It is difficult time. The state helps a little with food products. The only income is from agriculture, as all the other work, such as construction, taxi services are all up” (village Jany-Jer Ayil Aimak, Batken, Kyrgyzstan, April 21, 2020). Migrant households with diversified sources of income, such as from trade and agriculture in addition to remittances, are less concerned about their prospects for survival than households whose primary income is from remittances.

There is a stratum of returning migrants who before the pandemic had invested in agricultural developments such as horticulture and livestock. People in this group have a “safety net,” and they

do not plan to migrate again. Similarly, those who were able to accumulate some savings do not plan to migrate. As one of the informants who started a small construction business in Batken area mentioned, “Many of the migrants now cannot leave because of quarantine. For more than ten years I have been engaged in construction in the village. [...] I have a job, maybe those who are engaged in trade were affected. The state does not help us in any way. [...] Everything that I learned in Russia, I use here in a village at a construction site. If you work in the village, you can earn” (former migrant, Jashtyk village, Batken. April 15, 2020). However, our observations during fieldwork revealed that most of the families of labor migrants are concerned about the future and have high risks of poverty.

## Impacts on internal migrants

COVID-19 has also impacted internal migration in Kyrgyzstan. As the recent International Organization of Migration (IOM) research demonstrates, internal migrants who move mainly from rural areas to Bishkek and cities in Chui province make up 18 percent of the country’s population (IOMa 2020, 31). The search for economic stability is a primary push factor for internal migration, as is the case for the international migration as well, but other factors include the search for better infrastructure (including access to education and health care) and other family factors. Most of the internal migrants work informally, with only 29.1 percent having negotiated conditions of work “on paper.” It is the same with living conditions: 75.6 percent are not registered officially on a place of residence (IOMa 2020, 91). Even though internal migrants, including those who live in informal settlements, are diverse in terms of welfare, their dependence on informal income and remittances are additional factors of risk.

As journalists showed, children from one of the districts in Bishkek, Dordoi-1, where many internal migrants live informally, experienced under-nutrition during the lockdown as their parents were not able to work and provide adequate amounts of food (Khokhlova 2020, AZATTYQTV 2020). The fact that some of the parents or relatives of the residents of such informal settlements were locked down in Russia without any job due to the pandemic and were not able to help made the situation even worse.

## Government and international organizations’ responses

The main governmental stakeholder responsible for crisis management concerning migrants has been the Kyrgyz Republic Ministry of Foreign Affairs in cooperation with the Embassy of Kyrgyzstan in Russia. The Embassy formed a rapid response group consisting of employees of the State Migration Service of Kyrgyzstan (SMS), IOM, Ministry of Internal Affairs, and leaders of the Kyrgyz diaspora in Russia. However, none of these efforts seem to be reflected in the work of two governmental working groups, one on health, the other on the economy, which were set up by the government in the second half of January to prepare the country for the pandemic; nor in the donor-led/governmental groups working towards recovery planning (interviews with a representative of OSCE Mission in Kyrgyzstan, June 18, 2020).

The government’s primary response was to provide food and shelter to those who were in extreme need and to those stranded at Russian airports. IOM Kyrgyzstan distributed protective supplies: masks, gloves, antiseptics, and hot meals, and provided accommodation for 282 migrants stranded at Moscow and Novosibirsk airports (IOMb2020). The Kyrgyz government further declared the

establishment of an equivalent of over US\$188,000 (15 million KG soms) in order to support migrants abroad, out of which \$127,000 was transferred to Russia, and \$62,800 was for migrants in the United Arab Emirates (Azattyk 2020). Considering the high number of migrants from Kyrgyzstan in these countries, the amount was not able to cover all needed expenses. Some migrants in Russia criticized the poor quality of food provided as humanitarian aid, raising speculations about how the money could have been misused.

The main criticism of the government's reaction was its inability to organize transportation to migrants swiftly to Kyrgyzstan. The authorities tried to justify their "cold position" as there are "better chances" for employment for Kyrgyzstan's citizens in Russia in comparison to the challenging situation in their home country. As the Ambassador of Kyrgyzstan to Russia, Mr. Alikbek Dzhekshenkulov stated:

More than 60 percent of Kyrgyzstani citizens in Russia were unemployed during COVID-19. At the same time, there are jobs in construction. There are offers of employment in the Moscow region and other regions. The Russian economy is stronger and more stable than ours [Kyrgyzstan]. After quarantine, the economic crisis will continue around the world. I advised our countrymen to wait for the crisis here and not to go anywhere (Nurmatov 2020).

Nevertheless, the president and government of the Kyrgyz Republic issued an order to support the return of citizens residing abroad due to the temporary border closures, flight suspensions, and quarantines. They facilitated this through charter flights and bus transfers. As a result, by August 24, 35,469 Kyrgyzstani citizens returned from 21 regions of Russia (Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Russian Federation 2020). There were also flights organized to return from China, India, the United Arab Emirates, and some other countries. Citizens living abroad had to apply to the embassy, which formed lists for charter flights and gave priority to women and children. From August 27, 2020, Kyrgyzstani citizens who wished to leave Russia could freely buy flights themselves without applying for a waiting list. However, the primary advice for migrants in Russia was to stay there: the embassy emphasized that in the event that they return to Kyrgyzstan, they will not be able to go back to Russia as the borders are still closed (Embassy of the Kyrgyz Republic in the Russian Federation 2020).

Although migrant agency and mutual help are not the foci of our paper, it is important to mention their role in supporting migrants in host countries, as diasporas provided significant help to their fellow citizens impacted by COVID-19. For instance, many medical doctors and nurses of Kyrgyz origin residing in Russia and Turkey volunteered during the COVID-19 spike in Kyrgyzstan.

## Conclusion

The nexus of COVID-19 and migration in Kyrgyzstan reveals the following issues. Firstly, COVID-19 and its subsequent border restrictions and economic issues in host countries, as Russia's case demonstrates, deepens the vulnerability of Kyrgyz labor migrants who face unemployment, have difficulties in paying rent and accessing health care, and cannot return home. Secondly, the economic and social consequences of temporary border closures, and the decline of employment opportunities in host countries has resulted in decreasing remittances for many households who may need to turn to agricultural activities as a replacement for their lost incomes. This

replacement, in most cases, could be only partial, thus many run the risk of falling into poverty. Those migrants who are locked inside Kyrgyzstan have to look for temporary employment at home, increasing labor supply on their farms as well as in the domestic non-agricultural economy. This can increase unemployment in the country and deepen inequality. Thirdly, the pandemic highlights issues internal migrants in Kyrgyzstan face, especially those who live in informal settlements and have lost their only sources of income. Finally, government responses focused on the return some groups of migrants while international organizations provided humanitarian assistance to migrants in host countries. However, there was no assistance to families in Kyrgyzstan with family members stuck abroad, although it is a large portion of the population.

The COVID-19 crisis once again demonstrated problems caused by the lack of a formal migration policy in Kyrgyzstan. The State Migration Service was established at the end of 2015 as a result of the reorganization of the Ministry of Labor, Migration, and Youth, but there is still no migration policy in place (Murzakulova 2020). Existing migration management is still lacking intersectoral collaboration with returning labor migrants and their families, which is especially crucial in the context of COVID-19.

There is an urgent need for a coherent policy towards migration and migrants in Kyrgyzstan. This would involve close collaboration between the State Migration Service Ministry of Labor and Social Development, the Ministry of Health, and the Ministry of Economy, together with international organizations and NGOs. It is crucial that policies look at migration beyond the statistics of people crossing the border and remittances data, and elaborate relevant and effective mechanisms of support for families who are “left behind”: internal migrants and migrants who are unable to go abroad or come home. It is also vital that the Eurasian Economic Union engages with the social consequences of migration and provides not only the conditions for a single market but also delivers social security for migrants. Finally, it is necessary to reconsider rural development in Kyrgyzstan in order to give meaningful support for local small businesses and initiatives.

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